Cultural Tools and Literary Criticism: The Place of Culture in the Assessment of African-American Literature

Babacar Dieng

Cultural Tools and Literary Criticism: The Place of Culture in the Assessment of African-American Literature

Introduction

A panoramic survey of the pronouncements of African-American critics and artists on African-American literary criticism shows a continuous dissatisfaction with the ways African-American literature is evaluated. Since its earliest literary productions, African-American literature seems to have suffered not only from harsh criticism resulting from subjective factors and the critics' failure to grasp its full significance, but its progress has also been strewn with resistance. The variety of critical responses to Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* illustrate these issues. On the one hand, Voltaire who was living in England at the time when Wheatley released her work, wrote, in a letter to a friend, in 1774, that she was the composer of very good English verse. On the other hand, Thomas Jefferson "declared that her verse was beneath the dignity of criticism" (Hart 712). Today, scholars have excavated the complexities of Wheatley's work and shown its richness. Later on, Richard Wright complained that critics from the dominant culture did not offer Negro writers serious criticism. Still in the same vein, the label "protest literature" dismissed the literary value of an important number of works by African-American writers. Finally, some critics argued that "there is no black aesthetics, for there is no white aesthetics" (Gayle 92). Houston Baker implicitly takes critics to

task when he remarks that "the search for structural relationship in any literal text [...] entails a knowledge of the full cultural discourse that provides a context" (196). Echoing Baker's plea in her article "Miss-Trained or Untrained? Jackleg Critics and African American Literature" (1995), Trudier Harris argues that an objective, honest and honorable evaluation of works by African-American writers requires an immersion into their culture and materials. Harris considers that, regardless of their race, scholars who want to study African-American Literature must train themselves and acquire the tools necessary to explore the field (462). Other scholars such as Toni Morrison have also complained the critical approaches to African-American creative writing.

Today, in the context of a multicultural American society, the affirmation of cultural specificity is considered as a threat to political stability because any categorization built around race suggests power relations (Fabi 21). For example, Ambush considers that August Wilson's promotion of black art in his keynote address "The Ground on Which I Stand," provoked seismic reactions among some Whites, even though African Americans welcomed warmly his affirmation of a culturally-rooted and enlightening black theater. Robert Burnstein—a critic, and one of the most ardent detractors of August Wilson—not only depicted him as an old fashioned black man promoting the separation of races, but he also disagrees with Wilson about the function and purpose of art and the criteria by which art should be evaluated (580-81). That is to say, that some critics believe "black art" should be submitted to universal evaluation criteria, without regards to its cultural uniqueness and Blacks should join an "assimilated American aesthetic melting pot." These critics' position echo Georges

Schuyler's contention that black art could not develop in America.

These issues raise a certain number of questions. First, is there a distinctive African-American literary tradition that has continued to prosper, despite the test of hybridity and integration? How should literary critics evaluate it to better grasp the literary practices and theories embedded in it? What would be the usefulness of cultural evaluation in the assessment of African-American writers' achievements? We will try to answer these questions in this article, which argues that, while we cannot defend the applicability of special standards of evaluation to African American literature, knowledge of the full cultural discourse and "aesthetics" surrounding the development of its body of works would certainly help better grasp their significance. Basing our argument on literary theories and discourses, we will show that, despite the test of integration, there seems to be a perpetuation of a certain tradition drawing inspiration and heavy influences from African-American culture and implementing so-called "black aesthetics." Then, using two representative works by African-American artists, James Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues* and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, we will illustrate how culture informs content and form in African-American literature and, therefore, constitutes a fruitful method to apprehend the literary dimension of such body of works.

Since the Harlem Renaissance, African American aesthetic theorists have been engaged in the task of formulating a "black aesthetics" not only answering the needs and aspirations of black people, but also drawing heavily from their cultural heritage in their endeavors to reach beauty. Although some of these theorists may have been guilty of essentializing their culture, and despite the differences of views among

them, there seems to be a pattern stipulating that black art should not only be beautiful, but also enlightening for the black community and make use of African-American culture. Black art therefore affirms black culture and supports and guides the African-American community in its process of self-definition and its quest for freedom. In "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), which constitutes one of the earliest pronouncements of black aesthetics and the role of the black writer, Dubois argues that Beauty cannot be separated from Truth and Right, that "all art is propaganda and ever must be," and that it is the responsibility of the black artist to help his people "gain the right to enjoy and love" (22). Thus, for Dubois, "the writer must be his brother's and sister's keeper" and art should be functional. Dubois was also the first to encourage the "Negro" writer to draw inspiration from his or her culture in his or her attempts to reach beauty. Already, at the turn of the century, W. E .B. Du Bois had promulgated, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the use of African-American folklore in creative writing.

Later on, in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, African-American artists such as Langston Hughes, in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," advocated the development of a functional art informed by a great presence of Afro-American culture as a form of artistic expression. Opposing Schuyler's view that dismissed African American racial and literary heritage, Hughes defended the existence of a distinctive African-American folklore, from which the Negro writer must draw his inspirations. Hughes particularly refers to the spirituals, jazz and blues, and language. For him, the Negro artist must stand on top of the racial mountain and represent the different facets of his community: its beauty as well as its ugliness. The Harlem Renaissance initiated the development of a self-conscious form of Negro art inspired by the jazz, the blues, the sermonic

tradition, and the Negro spirituals, among other forms of affirmation of African-American cultural heritage. The writings of Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen and Jean Toomer testify to this overwhelming presence of the cultural motif in the crafting of creative works.

Richard Wright, in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), advocates a similar use of African-American folklore and cultural heritage. Wright argues that the Negro writer must draw inspiration from his life to find materials that would enable him to create a meaningful picture of the world. For him, African-American literature should not be "conspicuous ornamentation or simply the voice of the educated Negro pleading for justice" (83). It should rather be a functional literature, internal to the lives of the masses insofar as it will address their sufferings and aspirations, as well as guide them in their daily living. Wright thinks that the culture originating from the Negro Church and the folklore that mold out the African-American of difficult conditions and inhumane conditions, and enabled him to achieve the most complex and indigenous expressions such as the blues, spirituals and folk tales, should be deepened and continued by the Negro writer, striving for original expressions if he wants to achieve his purpose. Thus for Wright, the Negro writer that wants to be in tune with his people should exploit the cultural channels that convey the racial wisdom of black people; that is, the culture stemming from the Negro Church and folklore.

As the growth of black aesthetics was buttressed by the context of oppression and marginalization of the African Americans, the improvement of their social and political status gradually eroded the ideological foundations and political radicalism of black art, which partly justifies Schuyler's doubts. As Houston Baker Jr. explains in "Generational Shifts and the

Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature," "the dominant critical perspective on African American Literature during the late 1950s and early 1960s might be called the poetics of integrationism" (180). After Baker, Wright epitomizes this new ideological orientation influenced by the impending wave of integration, marked by the proclamation of the death of segregation. After the Supreme Court's decision in Brown *vs.* Board of Education (1954), in which the Court ruled the unconstitutionality of the doctrine "separate but equal," the ideological orientation advocated by Richard Wright was to consider African-American Literature as a segment of American Literature. In Wright's perspective, the ruling of the Supreme Court would guarantee a future equality between the races and a common experience. In turn, "this equality of social experience w[ould] translate in the literary domain as a homogeneity of represented experience" (180).

Other radical voices of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes shared this new euphoria of the post-1954 era. In his address to the First Conference of Negro Writers (1959), Langston Hughes advises the younger writer "to be […] writer first, colored second. That means losing nothing of [his] racial identity […]. In the great sense of the word […] good art transcends land, race, or nationality, and color drops away. If [he is] a good writer, in the end neither blackness nor whiteness makes a difference to the readers" (quoted in Fabi 124). Even if Hughes closes his address with the sarcastic remark that a white writer has more opportunities to be successful, the integrationist stance is apparent in his words.

However, even if this integrationist wave lasted a while, the disillusionment of the 1960s gave rise to the Militant Black Arts Movement and the consolidation of Black Aesthetics. As a matter of fact, the integrationist poetics were followed by a

period of intense nationalism, as Baker rightly notes in "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature." The 1960s played a determinant role in supporting the development of black art. The deconstructionists—Baraka, Larry Neal, Henderson and Addison Gayle—advocated an "integral unity of culture, politics and art" (Neale 91).

The Black Arts Movements of the 1960s further consolidated this development of Negro Art in America. In line with Dubois, Hughes and Wright, the Black Arts Movements offered a general framework representing the main components of "black aesthetics." As Baraka explains:

> Black Arts is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black power concept. Thus, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of western cultural aesthetics. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology. (quoted in Baker 184)

Baraka's words not only posit the functionality and ideological positioning of black aesthetics, but also reveal a postcolonial desire to devise a new table of rules that would support the affirmation of African-American culture. Larry Neal, another theoretician of the Black Art movement, states that Black Aesthetics is broader than African-American cultural tradition, for it "encompasses all useable elements of Third World culture. The motive behind the Black Aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world" (Ervin 124).

Larry Neal's words reveal the political, ideological, and cultural motivations of the Black Aesthetics. On the one hand, there was a desire to resist the hegemony of the dominant culture, and on the other, there was a vibrant need to create a

new set of rules for not only evaluating black art, but also ensuring that African-American culture is valorized in African-American artistic productions. This central use of cultural symbols as tools of destruction of Western proscriptive symbols during the Black Art Movement also appears in Addison Gayle Jr.'s essay entitled "Cultural Strangulation. Black Literature and the White Aesthetic." In this essay, she posits the postcolonial impulse that supported the development of a black aesthetics in America, an aesthetics that would devise a new set of proscriptive symbols of beauty in a context of cultural strangulation of the works of black people and an inappropriateness of the symbols set up by the dominant culture.

Baraka, Neale and Gayle envisioned a committed art that would be primarily addressed to Blacks and the Third World. The Black Arts Movement, as Carolyn F. Gerald notes in "The Black Writer and His Role," has been instrumental in changing the role of the black writer as image-maker. Though the exploitation of the past and the reversal of Western mythology and symbolism, the black writer "destroys the zero and the negative image-myths" of the black community by "turning them inside out" (85). This reversal of Western mythology contributed largely to the valorization of African-American culture through its central use in art. African and African American heritage became aesthetic and political tools. For example, the African oral tradition, African world-views, black music, and black language became central motifs in African American fiction and poetry. Thus, despite the test of integration, a tradition inspired by African-American culture and which wants art to be functional continued to exist. It is true that the radicalism of the 1960s faded a little bit with integration and cultural hybridity; black writers of the post-1960s era however continued to focus on their community and draw inspiration from

their racial heritage. The post-reconstructionist years gave birth to a literature focusing on the challenges the African Americans faced in their daily lives. For example, issues of identity, self, adjustment to the urban environment, family, and children become more and more central in literary representations by black writers.

Nevertheless, the use of African-American culture as an index for creation continued to strive. The works black women writers of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s—Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, etc.—illustrate a central use of African-American culture in literary craft. These specific characteristics—inherited from the 1960s—of their literary works contributed to the growing popularity of African-American culture and art and to the fame of black artists.

Other black artists perpetuated the cultural tradition in a less visible way. Artists such as Cornelius Eady illustrate an attempt to evolve in a third space where, however, black aesthetics continues to prosper. Cornelius Eady rejects the prescription that his art should focus on race, but African-American culture informs his art. Cornelius Eady reserves his right to represent in his poems preoccupations different from race and color because he is "also an American, a New Yorker, a husband, a son, a husband, a jazz fan, a musician, a college professor, a friend" (454). Cornelius Eady's words instantiate not only the product of the process of cultural hybridity, but also his views illustrate that the progressive integration of African Americans into mainstream American life renders the definition of black artist more complex.

However, his position shows that even if the political and ideological commitment of black artists to their race differs, African-American culture continues to form a significant part of their craft. In most of his poems, Eady celebrates the blues

singer. As for Ishmael Reed, he perpetuates a black aesthetic tradition when he defines himself as a folklorist who defamiliarizes black aesthetics forms.

One can assume that a tradition continues to exist in the twentieth and twenty-first century, for most black artists still possess "a historical sense," that is their artistic productions incorporate features pertaining to Black Art. In his definition of tradition, T. S. Elliot theorizes that a tradition exists as long as a writer produces literary works with a historical sense, that is, when the writer does not simply write "with his own generation in his bones," but with a feeling that a specific form of literature is part of and exists simultaneously with his experience (quoted in Said 4). A tradition exists in African-American literature. Indeed, African-American writers continue to be influenced by the aesthetic and ideological principles elaborated by their ancestors. The rhythms and cadences influence of rap music inform the works of many young black poets, which shows how music continues to be an index. In addition, since famous contemporary artists, such as August Wilson and Toni Morrison, despite their popularity, perpetuate some of the most significant characteristic features of Black Art—its functionality and its use of African-American culture—, one can assume that a tradition continues to exist. For example, in "The Ground on Which I Stand," August Wilson explains that, for him, race matters because it is the most significant entity of somebody's personality. August Wilson asserts that he is heavily influenced by the activism of the 1960s, because he grew up in the years of glory of the Black Power Movement.

Consequently, August Wilson remains very committed to the advancement of black people and the affirmation and preservation of his cultural heritage. August Wilson envisions his art as a continuation of the slave quarters' art—an art not

designed to entertain white society, but rather an art that "feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity" (3). Although August Wilson does not deny the influence of Greek and American dramatists, he considers himself as part of the self-defined tradition initiated by the precursors of the Black Arts Movement towards whom he is very grateful. Wilson's position is clearly stated in his words when he says: "the brilliant explosion of black arts and letters of the 1960s remains, for me, the hallmark and the signpost that points the way to our contemporary work on the same ground" (3). August Wilson shares many similarities with Toni Morrison, as far as their views on the function of art and their desires to promote their culture through art are concerned.

Despite the fact that she has been adopted by mainstream American society, Toni Morrison forms part of the black aesthetics tradition that grew up during the Harlem Renaissance and was consolidated in the 1960s. In Morrison's view, the novel has always served the political interests of the class that wrote it, and her writings aim at performing the same role for the black community, especially in a context where the black community has lost the therapeutic support of music and storytelling. In this context, Morrison considers that "another form has to take that place, and it seems to [her] that the novel is needed by African Americans now in a way that it was not needed before" (199). Like August Wilson, Morrison does not consider that art should merely entertain. For Morrison, art should be beautiful, but it should also work, that is, it should raise issues and help the community find answers to them. Morrison also belongs to a black aesthetic tradition, as she attempts to instill in her work specific African American cultural elements, such as the techniques of storytelling and

the power of the sermonic tradition. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” (1984), she explains how she attempts to give a black quality to her texts. Her texts illustrate her struggles to make her words gain the oral fluidity of the storyteller’s language and how she tries to draw the audience into the telling of the story by call/response strategies similar to the preacher's sermon. These characteristics of Black Art can be perceived in her most recent work, *Love*, a novel that illustrates her preoccupation to deal with issues confronting her community and to make use of the richness of her culture.

Going from the survey of the literary theories and practices that buttressed the development of African-American literature from the earliest productions to more recent ones, one can notice recurrent trends: African-American literature has always been functional, committed and full of cultural motifs. Many African-American writers attempt to implement an aesthetics heavily drawing from their culture. Consequently, we can consider that applying a cultural evaluation could be a useful tool to measure their artistic achievement and fully grasp the complexity of their craft. To better make the case for the need to complement the use of universal parameters with cultural evaluation, we are going to move away from the abstract world of literary criticism and theory to illustrate more concretely, through textual analysis of James Baldwin’s *Sonny’s Blues* and Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee,* how culture informs content and, therefore, constitutes a helpful tool of evaluation.

In James Baldwin’s *Sonny’s Blues*, knowledge of the full cultural discourse informing the text enables a more fruitful evaluation of the aesthetic and literary tools the writer employs in the crafting of the narrative. To better grasp our argument, it is necessary to show the characteristics of the jazz and the blues before illustrating how they apply to the narrative of our

focus. In "A Blues View of Life (Literature and the Blues Vision)," Powell defines the jazz and the blues as "a story of dreadful rift in experience" (287). He reinforces this definition when he says that it is often the story of "a melancholy ditty about hard times, a lost love, or some other misfortune" (289). Eleanor W. Traylor also theorizes on an analogy between the writer and the blues performer, based on the fact that they both tell the experiences of black people and attempt to reorder the chaos of their lives. She also explains that a blues composition is characterized by improvisations or riffings, that is, departures from the melodic line enabling the musicians to tell the experience in its different facets (Traylor 285).

Sonny's Blues, as the title explicitly announces, is composed like a blues melody. The narrative tells the story of black youth's sufferings in a racist and oppressive society. Like the blues melody, the narrative of *Sonny's Blues* gives a tale of the excruciating experience of the African-American youth in an oppressively destructive American society. The chronotope of the project posits in time and space the oppressiveness of the social space: it is space where history repeats itself generation after generation. The internal narrator tells the story of his brother's downfall; however, a deeper reading of the text reveals that the narrative posits over several generations the paradigmatic lack of safe sociopolitical and economic space for black people, through a series of analepses, that is, the return to past events.

The frame narrative opens *in media res* with the news of Sonny's arrest for drug abuse, which serves as an electroshock that prods the development of the alienated narrator's critical consciousness. The first sign of the narrator's rising awareness of the determinism of the social, political and economic environment on black youth lies in the fact that he es-

tablishes a parallel between Sonny and the schoolboys when he was their age. His analytic mind understands that these kids use heroin in the restrooms to escape from the limitedness and barriers of their world—a world whose darkness stands in binary opposition with the light in the white people's world that they see in movies (Baldwin 9). Later on, the narrator makes other returns to past events—complete analepses—to illustrate, through the embedded narrative of his uncle's murder by drunken white people, that the social space has always been dangerous for black youth. The use of narrative anachronies or improvisations enables the narrative to cover more than three generations and demonstrates that the American social space has always been a site of destruction of the black youth. The words of the narrator's father corroborate this view when he exclaims: "Safe, hell! Ain't no place for kids, nor nobody" (16).

Other elements illustrating that the blues influences the crafting of "Sonny's Blues" reside in the organization and movements of the narrative. It also reproduces in its organization the rhythms and movements of a blues composition. In the blues performance, one musician establishes the melodic line, then plays the melody in collaboration with other musicians who, through their improvisations or riffings, help him develop "the experience of the melody in any and every way that the experience of the melody or theme can be heard or perceived" (Traylor 286). If we hypothesize that the melodic line equals what Gerard Genette terms "first order" narrative in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, thus assuming that narrative anachronies are forms of improvisations, we can argue that the blues does inform the narrative structure of "Sonny's Blues."

The narrative voices in "Sonny's Blues" are organized in the same way as the blues performance: the narrator opens the story by establishing the "first order narrative" or melodic line, but he continues the narration with the assistance of Isabel and his parents. The voices of Isabel and his parents not only constitute improvisations because they are analeptic narrations departing from the "first order narrative" to recount past events, but they also enable the reader to hear or perceive the lack of safe social space for black youth, on several temporal positions and in different places. Isabel, the narrator's father, and the narrator's mother represent, therefore, the other musicians helping the narrator in the telling of his story or the performance of his melody.

It is necessary to study the blues performance that closes the text to better perceive how the narrative of *Sonny's Blues* resembles a jazz/blues composition. In the performance, Cherokee establishes the melodic line, holds the other musicians back, gives them the floor, and steps in to remind them that they are playing the blues (32-3). The narrator of the story controls the delivery of the story in the same way. First, the narrator holds back Isabel's voice in the narrative by reporting her words. Second, the narrator steps back to let the voices of his parents take control of the narrative. Unlike Isabel's words, the words of his father and of his mother are told in the direct speech, thus assuming a greater presence in the story. However, all these voices participates in the narrator's agenda, which is to show, through generations, the "darkness" of the African American social, political, and economic space. As this passage characterized by the discordant mixture of subsequent, simultaneous and predictive narrations reads, "the darkness outside is what old folks have been talking about. It's what they have come from. It's what they endure. The child

knows that they won't talk any more about what's happened to them, he'll know too soon what's going to happen to him" (Baldwin 17). The improvisations of the other voices mainly participate in the subsequent narration; that is, using past events to show that, since slavery days, black people have been living in this darkness "outside."

As Roach points out, historically, jazz and blues music have represented forms of expression of the black people's pain and sufferings in their process of self-definition (113). *Sonny's Blues* largely reinforces this assertion. The narrator performs the same function as the jazz/blues performer. Indeed, Baldwin utilizes this form in the literary representation of the oppression of African Americans in a society that denied them access to the same rights as their white counterparts, creating a destructive feeling of rage that made black youth seek relief in drugs. The jazz/blues influences in *Sonny's Blue*s are not limited to the theme and form, for they can also be identified in the narrative structure. The narrator also controls the delivery of the story in the same way the jazz musician does. He establishes the "first order narrative," or melodic line, and arranges the improvisations or anachronies into a melody. "Sonny's Blues" major characteristic lies in the anachronies in the narrative and the use of tenses—anachronies imitating the discordance of the improvisations in the jazz/blues composition.

Another text sustaining the usefulness of the cultural tool in the evaluation of African-American texts is Margaret Walker's *Jubilee,* because its structure and content are saturated with the leitmotif of music.[1] The title of the novel is drawn from

[1] For a fuller illustration of the presence of the spirituals and its aesthetic function in *Jubilee,* see Babacar Dieng's *Reclaiming History: A study of the Emerging Postcolonial Consciousness in Mid-Century Novels of the African Diaspora*.

a traditional spiritual, "Jubilee." The three parts and fifty-eight chapters of the narrative open with epigraphs, which are either slave secular or religious songs, or Civil War songs. Additionally, Walker weaves songs into the fabric of the narrative and the characters' discourse. James Spears, in "Black Folk Elements in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*," establishes a link between the form and the content of the text, when he points out that the lines of the song used as the novel's title "signify chronologically a motif in the novel: the anticipated and approaching emancipation of the slaves" (14).

He also argues that the epigraphs opening the three parts and fifty-eight chapters of the narrative organize Walker's historical novel structurally and thematically. The motif of the children of Israel conveyed in the song opening part two and three—"Mine eyes have seen the Glory" and "Forty years in the Wilderness"—helps Walker organize the parts into a coherent story. As he notes, "together with the chapter titles, two of which parallel the bondage of children of Israel in Egypt, these epigraphs also help establish the thematic organization of the novel" (14). I share Spears' view as the musical structure of the novel dictates the development of themes in the parts and chapters of the narrative. To provide one illustration, the song, "Swing Low," used as epigraph relates to the theme of Sis Hetta's death, in chapter one. "Go Down Moses" relates to the theme of the slaves' oppression, in chapter two; "When Israel was in Egypt land," focalizes the slaves' precarious conditions of life and work in Dutton's plantation. A similar relationship can be argued for the remaining chapters.

Eleanor W. Traylor, in "Music as Theme: The Blues Mode in the Works of Margaret Walker," draws attention to the role of music in the aesthetic and narrative design of the novel. Indeed, Traylor compares the celebrant of the novel to a sing-

er whose songs articulate progressive stages in her life, and in which the personal story of Vyry merges with the history of the slave community. More significantly, Traylor points out that music represents a key strategy in any further reading of *Jubilee*, because it has served as an index for the writer and should constitute a tool in any further reading of the text (513). Traylor is right. In fact, far from being mere organizational devices and simple markers of shifts in themes, time, and space, these songs also form part of the narrative discourse. Their meanings fuse with the content of the narrative to provide a better understanding of the slaves' thoughts and attitudes, thereby illuminating their incipient political consciousness and revolutionary spirit.

To provide a concrete example, Chapter Sixteen, a segment that focalizes Vyry's trials and tribulations in her attempts to build a family, opens with the song "My way's cloudy, Lawdy, my way's cloudy…" One variation of this neo-spiritual[2] in John Wesley Work's *Folk Song of the American Negro* (1969) reads:

> Oh, bretheren, my way, my way's cloudy, my / way, Oh send one angel down, Oh! Bretheren, my way, / my way's cloudy, my way, Oh send one angel down. / There's fire in the east and fire in the west, send one angel down, and / fire among the Methodist, O send one angel down. / missed the soul he thought he had, O send one angel down. / the promised land I'm bound to go, O send one angel down. Lord has come to set us free, O send one angel down (231).

The first four stanzas of the song express with pathos the poet's distressful situation, figuratively symbolized by the clouds

[2] Louise Ayres Garnett, Zora Neale Husrton, and Harry Miller have classified this song in the group of neo-spirituals (Lovell 465-66).

and the fire in the east and the west and among the Methodists. The poet is surrounded by trouble.

The situation of the poet reflects with relevance that of Vyry's in the narrative. As a matter of fact, Vyry goes through moments of extreme trials in her life. Her project to live in matrimony with Ware falls short as a result of John Dutton's refusal to grant her the right to marry Randall Ware, because that means he would have set her free. Then, Vyry finds out that the mysterious white stranger who came to the Big House is transacting her sale. To top it all, Vyry's attempt to have Randall buy her out through the white abolitionist, Quayles, fails as a result of Willie's inadvertently giving the secret message instead of his pass to a white patroller. This series of unfortunate circumstances make Vyry, like the poet, extremely distressed. The song is thus not merely a decorative wrapping but a motif which merges with the text to represent Vyry's tortured consciousness. The song represents a text that projects Vyry's, and by extension the slave community's, ontological attitude and resilience in the face of adversity. Indeed, the two last stanzas illustrate that although the poet in the song is momentarily distressed, he or she maintains a strong ground of hope and is convinced that this situation is just momentary. Figuratively, as Lovell notes in *Black Song*, "clouds come, but the promise is that they will not remain" (266). The poet's strong ground of hope in these moments of trial is further signified in the line "the promised land I'm bound to go," and his or her conviction that faith will overcome despite the reign of evil, figuratively referred to as that of Satan. This strength in moments of trials, the strong ground of hope and the fortitude of the poet are prominent characteristics of Vyry's ontological attitude in the narrative. Vyry, as noted earlier, stands as a product of the slave culture, a symbol of the spiritual triumph

of the enslaved people over their conditions of servitude. In spite of the numerous obstacles she faces, she never loses her conviction that she will one day be free as a bird. She prays, perseveres, and endures and ultimately fulfills her dream of building a family and leading her life in the Promised Land, after several years in the wilderness. The motif of music thus not only helps the narrative capture with effect the slaves' consciousness, but also supports the effective description of the slaves' ontology and resilience, which, as noted earlier constitutes an important part of Walker's project.

Margaret Walker also figuratively revisits the circumstances of the composition of the slaves' songs to better illustrate the slaves' psychology of resistance. Walker's ideological discourse of debunking the myth of the slaves' acquiescence by revealing the rebelliousness and resistance characteristic of the African American slaves is also conveyed through songs, vestiges of the African-American spirit of resistance, she molds into the characters' speech. Brother Ezekiel's sermon to his flock during the Rising Glory Baptist Church's meetings, in chapter three, exemplifies the subtle incorporation of the motif of music in the characters' discourse to account for the slaves' resistance. In chapter three, Walker inserts the content of the emblematic song "Go Down Moses" in Ezekiel's sermon. The words of the song read: "When Israel was in Egypt land— / Let my people go. / Oppressed so hard they could not stand— /Let my people go." This song, attributed to Harriet Tubman, carries the voices of the resisting slave subjects. Indeed, "Go down, Moses" is "direct statement all the way. It does not employ the undercurrent symbolism of Steal Away to Jesus and other such poems… It says flatly that Moses freed these slaves boldly and justly because slavery is wrong. It clearly projects the principles of this experience to

the entire world: "[w]herever men are held in bondage, they must and shall be freed" (Lovell 326). More significantly, as Lovell further observes, the line "let my people go" is "one of the great freedom declarations of literature and history" (327).

In the narrative, Walker utilizes this song, whose language and cadences are particularly suitable for a sermon, to illustrate the slaves' revolutionary spirit, thereby further buttressing the narrative's discursive content. The organization of "Go Down, Moses" particularly fits the sermonic tradition as it allows a unique interaction between the preacher and the audience. "The song," as Lovell points out with relevance, "is organized so that in each stanza the leader intones the first line, the chorus pronounces the second line, the leader returns with the third line, the chorus with the fourth, and both deliver refrain" (327). Walker inserts the lines of this revolutionary song into Brother Ezekiel's sermon to commemorate the slaves' resistance. In the secret sites of the swamps, Ezekiel, like the revolutionary Tubman and Nat Turner, uses the story of Moses leading the children out of Israel to proclaim that slavery was wrong, to admonish his flock to have faith and conviction, but more significantly, to signal that Revolution would happen and liberate them. Note that there has to be one form of revolution for freedom to happen. Whereas this symbolic song introduces the theme of oppression in chapter two, where it is used as an epigraph, in Chapter Three, it is a site commemorating the slaves' glorious resistance. By giving new purpose to this commemorative song through the call and response of Ezekiel's sermon, the narrative reclaims the slaves' refusal to bend their backs to oppression and the declaration of their rights and aspirations to freedom. Thus, given the central function of music in the novel's development, its use in reconstructive history, and its discursive performance in

the text, one can say that "knowledge of the full cultural discourse that provides a context" is necessary to measure the aesthetic and literary achievement of Margaret Walker in *Jubilee*.

Conclusion

George Schuyler's pessimism about the development of black art in America was intellectually grounded, for cultural hybridity and integration have eroded black aesthetics and affected black art. Indeed, the political engagement associated with black art has been eroded in a context of melting pot, in which race literature may not be acceptable. Nevertheless, the continuous impact of black aesthetic principles elaborated by theorists of the Black Arts Movement also constitutes a strong argument opposing Schuyler's fears; it goes without saying that the use of African-American culture in artistic productions initiated by black aesthetics continues. Today, more than ever, what is termed "black aesthetics"—I label here the influence of culture in African-American literature—should be taken into consideration, along with universal criteria used to assess the accomplishment of African-American writers. Not only would taking into account the influence of culture on form and content enable critics to understand the complexity of the impressive number of works that black writers have produced in the past, but it would also help better grasp their literariness. The above study of two representative texts—James Baldwin's *Sonny Blues* and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* — pleads in favor of utilizing a cultural evaluation to unearth the aesthetic and literary practices embedded in African-American literature. In a nutshell, African-American culture constitutes an important index in the crafting of these two works and

helps understand their literariness, narrative techniques, form, content and ideological discourses.

Babacar Dieng[3]

Works Cited

Ambush, Benny Sato. "Culture Wars." *African American Review*. 31. 4, Winter 1997, 579-86.

Baldwin, James. "Sonny's Blues." *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986.

Baker, Houston A Jr. "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature." *African American Literary Theory*. Ed. Winston Napier, New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Baldwin, James. "The Creative Process." *African American Literary Theory*. Ed. Winston Napier, New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Fabi, Gullia M. *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*. Chicago: University Press of Illinois, 2001.

Gayle, Addison Jr. "Cultural Strangulation. Black Literature and the White Aesthetic." *African-American Literary Theory*. Ed. Winston Napier, New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Gerald, Carolyn F. "The Black Writer and His Role." *African American Literary Theory*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Harris, Trudier. "Miss-Trained or Untrained? Jackleg Critics and African American Literature." Ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin. *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000,* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Hart, James D., ed. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*. Sixth Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Lovell, John. *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1972.

[3] Babacar Dieng, Ph.D., Maître-assistant Associé, UFR Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Section Langues, Littératures et Civilisations du Monde Anglophone, Université Gaston Berger, Saint-Louis (Senegal).

Miller, E. Ethelbert. “An Interview with Cornelius Eady” Ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin. *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000,* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Morrison, Toni. “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”. Ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin. *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000,* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Neal, Larry. “The Black Arts Movement”. Ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin. *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

----------. “Self-Reflections on the Black Aesthetic”. *African American Literary Theory*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York: University Press, 2000.

Powell, Richard J. “The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism”. *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. Ed. Hazel A. Ervin. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Roach, Max. “Jazz.” *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. Ed. Hazel A. Ervin. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Spears, James E. “Black Folk Elements in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*.” *Mississippi Folklore Register* 14.1, 1980, 13-19.

Traylor, Eleanor W. “A Blues View of Life (Literature and the Blues Vision)”. *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. Ed. Hazel A. Ervin, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

----------. “Music as Theme: The Blues Mode in the Works of Margaret Walker.”*Black Women Writers. A Critical Evaluation* (1950-1980). Ed. Mari Evans. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1984. 511-25.

Walker, Margaret. *Jubilee*. 1966. New York: Bantam Books, 1967.

Wilson, August. “The Ground on Which I Stand.” *Callaloo* 20.3 (1998) 493-503.

Wintz, Carry, ed. *The Harlem Renaissance 1920-1940. The Politics and Aesthetics of “New Negro” Literature*, New York: Garland, 1996.

Wright, Richard. “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” Ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin. *African-American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.