

Izabella Penier

Reflections on reading and teaching contemporary African American prose

Społeczeństwo. Edukacja. Język 2, 141-150

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.

REFLEKSJE NAD CZYTANIEM I NAUCZANIEM WSPÓŁCZESNEJ PROZY AFRO-AMERYKAŃSKIEJ

REFLECTIONS ON READING AND TEACHING CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN PROSE

Streszczenie

Niniejszy esej ma na celu zaprezentowanie zmian, jakie w ostatnich dekadach zaszły w metodologii badań nad literaturą afro-amerykańską, na przykładzie badań własnych autorki dotyczących w szczególności pisarek tak zwanego Drugiego Amerykańskiego Renesansu, których powieści począwszy od lat osiemdziesiątych cieszą się ogromnym zainteresowaniem w amerykańskich kręgach czytelniczych. Autorka opisuje jak, teoria Czarnego Atlantyku sformułowana przez brytyjskiego badacza Paula Gilroya oraz inne teorie postkolonialne, które mają coraz większy wpływ na badaczy zajmujących się literaturą murzyńską w USA, doprowadziły do zrewidowania jej dotychczasowych założeń badawczych oraz pozwoliły jej spojrzeć bardziej krytycznie nie tylko na swoje dotychczasowe publikacje ale również na same powieści będące przedmiotem jej badań. Esei ukazuje więc jak teoria wpływa na naszą percepcję i interpretację literatury oraz, w konsekwencji, również na nasze praktyki dydaktyczne.

Słowa kluczowe: współczesna kobieca proza afro-amerykańska, czarnoskóra krytyka literacka, nacjonalizm kulturowy, teorie naród-i-płeć, badania nad kulturą brytyjską, nauczanie prozy afro-amerykańskiej

Abstract

The aim of this essay is to present an overview of shifting paradigms in Black Studies. I will critically look back on my own research on African American women writers of the so-called Second American Renaissance in an effort to determine to what extent theory can alter interpretation, and how theoretical position can 'rewrite' or 'transform' the books we read and analyze. I will show that my engagement with diasporic and post-colonial theories has enabled me a more polemical formulation of contemporary Afro-American women's prose. I will also analyze how my experience with applying different literary and cultural theories and criticism impacted on my teaching of black American literature and literature in general.

Keywords: contemporary African American female writing, black literary criticism, cultural nationalism, nation-and-gender theories, British cultural studies, teaching African American prose

About 20 years ago, when I was a student of English Philology Department, reading, interpreting and studying literature seemed to be a fairly straightforward and uncomplicated activity. As students we were taught, among other things, courses on poetics and canons of

English and American literature. During our classes we discussed with our teachers the social and historical contexts of the works of literature and authors' lives and intentions. Sometimes we set out to explore the language and rhetoric of the texts that we were analyzing to get a fuller taste of their eternal aesthetic beauty. The canons, which we conscientiously read through, contained all the great literature in English – novels, short stories, poems and essays that presumably expressed universal truths about human condition. At least that was what we believed in. Like Dr Samuel Johnson, an eighteenth-century poet, writer and literary critic, we thought that literature can make the world better, that it will instruct us in the art of living. Though complex theories of literary criticism had already been enunciated and debated in the in the academia, we were outsiders to these heated arguments. We made our first steps into the realm of English literature in the same way as our colleagues a few decades earlier, when, as David H. Richter observes, “it was generally assumed that literary works at their best were supreme and universal expressions of the human spirit and that students were to read these profound works to broaden and deepen their humanity” (2000, 2). Reading literature meant getting access to universal and general truths about human existence, and that did not demand from us – students – any special expertise. In brief, the whole process of reading literature seemed to be very unequivocal and commonsensical.

When I started my PhD course in the late 1990s and started to think about my dissertation, I was instantly confronted by my supervisor with questions regarding methodology and theory. I was repeatedly asked about “praxes” or “paradigms,” which were terms completely alien to me. To be asked such incomprehensible questions was for me a nasty shock that brutally jolted me into an awareness that theory is not a rarefied specialization and the preserve of philosophers, but a must for every competent literary critic. Reading through the secondary sources for my dissertation, I was endlessly challenged by theoretical elaborations of the books I was interested in, referring me to various academic disciplines that I had never thought of as relevant to my field of study. I was forced to abandon my old habits of reading texts for the sake of new practices that, more often than not, required from me at least some knowledge of philosophy, sociology or linguistics.

My dissertation was devoted to African American fiction, which at the end of the 20th century was an extremely popular and relatively new area of studies due to the “opening” of the American canon, which had taken place a little bit earlier in the 1980s. My study was titled *Magical Realism in Literary Quest for Afro-American Identity*, and it discussed four writers of the so-called “Second African American Renaissance,” which is a term describing an exceptional flowering of talent among Black American writers in the last decades of the 20th century. My study included chapters on three novels – Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* and a collection of short stories – Randall Kenan’s *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*. In four lengthy chapters I analyzed creative uses to which Black American writers put magical realism, a mode of writing popularized in Latin America. In keeping with Roberto González Echevarría, an influential Latin American critic, I argued that there are two versions of magical realism epistemological, that is concerned with questions of knowledge, and ontological, that is concerned with questions of being. In the first category, the marvels stem from the observer’s vision, while in the second the land and reality are marvelous. For the purposes of my study, the second type of magical realism was of utmost importance. I contended that it was directed against the Euro-American rational worldview, and that it criticized claims to universality of Euro-American philosophical systems. This mythic or folkloric type of magical realism, I argued, helped to create or re-invent Black identity, which was antithetical to the identity of the modern white Euro-American mainstream culture.

Regarding the writers' varying perspectives, I decided to divide my study into two sections. I began by discussing *Mama Day* and two stories from Randall Kenan's collection. In those works of fiction the Afro-American rural community was the major subject matter, the corollary of which was the authors' interest in folklore and orality. In my discussion of these two writers, I attempted to clarify how they recover a traditional African cultural identity by means of magical realist devices, such as ontological subversion of Western rationality and formal and linguistic subversion of white mainstream canonical conventions. The novels discussed in the second section – *Tar Baby* and *Praisesong for the Widow* – were united by a cluster of interrelated issues that could be expressed in this way: how can a culturally uprooted African American individual, cut off from the ancestral past and rural community, reconstruct his or her identity in the multiracial and multicultural reality of modern America? In that section African American community and folklore faded into the background, and the tradition of oral storytelling, native African cosmology and its sustaining myths were ostensibly absent from the protagonists' lives. That, I claimed, caused the characters' profound confusion and identity crisis. Therefore, these novels primarily dealt with the main characters' quests for psychic integrity and cultural authenticity. My argument was that what pointed to the novels' literary affiliations with magical realism was the authors' belief that a truly meaningful identity can be achieved only through resuscitating myth and ritual, which reestablished the bonds between individuals and the Afro-American community's ancestral belief system. Thus, in the case of all four writers, my focus was on magical realist narrative strategies of identity construction. In brief, I claimed that magical realism had powerful ideological dimensions. I believed it could overturn the dichotomy between Western civilization imbued with centuries of culture (and therefore perceived as superior) and the indigenous Afro-American culture, based on a totally different cosmology, and unjustly considered "primitive" and evolving on a lower plane of cultural refinement.

As can be seen from this short synopsis, my new critical self-awareness did not go too far. I worked within the framework of black critical theory that strove to define the essence of African American culture, the black cultural difference and the black aesthetics, which was presumably embedded in folkloric and vernacular tradition. This tradition looked at the ways in which African-derived folklore, mythology and folktales informed the literature of the African American diaspora. In accordance with the principles laid out by black critics, such as for example Henry Louis Gates Jr., I analyzed basic thematic concerns of my primary sources, such as history, myth and the relationship between the individual and community, which determined the concept of cultural identity. I also scrupulously catalogued and described formal characteristics of the black tradition such as revision, call-and-response pattern or vernacular language.¹

Unfortunately, I also unthinkingly endorsed the ideological agenda of the novels, short stories and essays that I read. I accepted without reservation, moral judgments of black writers and critics. This was the trap I fell for; the lure, to which I unwittingly succumbed. The most symptomatic example of my gullibility was my discussion of the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* – Jadine, which I would like to briefly summarize here to illustrate better the point I want to make.

Jadine is a beautiful twenty-five-year-old orphaned "yellow woman," brought up by her uncle and aunt, with a generous help of their affluent white employers Valerian and Margaret Childs. She is pictured an example of a black middle-class person permanently

¹ Literary revisionism is retelling of history or another narrative with substantial alternations to show an alternative point of view. Call-and-response is a spontaneous verbal exchange between the speaker and listeners in African cultures (in church, public meetings, rituals, etc.). Vernacular language is, in other words, a dialect.

exposed to and assimilated to Western culture and its values. Educated in Paris in the history of European art, she identifies with Western civilization and sees nothing for herself in the African culture, which is a part of her heritage. From her perspective, "Picasso is better than an Itumba Mask" (Morrison, 62), and all the African art she has come across is rather mediocre and amateurish.

Morrison shows Jadine in a very unsympathetic manner. Jadine is so proud of her own individualistic, cultivated identity and of her refined taste that, we are led to believe, it blinds her to the predatory quality of white civilization. She openly admires her benefactor Valerian for his intellectual superiority and masculine power, and, as the narrator disapprovingly comments, she is "basking in the cold light that came from one of the killers of the world [Valerian]" (Morrison, 174).

Jadine leads a cosmopolitan lifestyle and considers herself a citizen of the world. Sent to boarding schools early in her life, she has no place she could call home. When asked where she is from, she gives names of three cities: Baltimore, Philadelphia and Paris, declaring in this way, without any regret, her rootlessness. She is a modern liberated woman who feels well in metropolises of the Western world. But Morrison wants to make a point of her belief that a vital part of a person's identity is a meaningful and profound relation with a place one can call home. Therefore Jadine is presented as a person who is incomplete, whose sense of self seems to have been eroded by dislocation. Moreover, as a person of mixed racial heritage, Jadine is characterized as an unassertive young woman always bracing herself against a possibility of racial discrimination. As an assimilated colored woman with middle class aspirations, she desires acceptance into the white society. Yet the thought that others may not accept the self she has become makes her feel increasingly more and more isolated and insecure. That is why she feels lonely and confused in spite of her success as a model and her degree in art history.

Morrison confronts Jadine's sense of herself with other black characters' views of her. They are mostly females whose identities are "authentic," stable and firmly rooted in black culture, which Jadine so resoundingly rejects. These "truly black" women have more personal integrity, moral-fiber and clout than Jadine, and they successfully defy her and constantly disrupt her image of herself. She is deeply shocked when in a Paris supermarket an African woman spits at her for no reason. The image of the woman, "that mother/sister/she, a tall transcendent beauty with skin like tar," her body wrapped in a "canary yellow dress" (Morrison, 38) keeps haunting her long after the incident. She is upset by the powerful look of contempt in the woman's eyes and by her outrageous gesture. Faced with the contrast between the woman and herself, Jadine feels her own inadequacy, her lack of authenticity and strength. The narrator comments that "the woman had made [Jadine] feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic" (Morrison, 40).

Much of the action of the novel focuses on the attempts of various "substitute" mothers to bring Jadine back to the fold and to teach her what proper black female identity should look like. These women seem to be wise black mothers, grandmothers and sisters to whom Morrison's novel is dedicated. There are, for example, "the swamp women" who try to reclaim Jadine as their daughter. They appear in the novel personified as trees in a scene, in which Jadine is trying to get out of a tropical jungle, where, according to a black legend, mythical black Africans live. The trees are described as having female identities, while she is a "runaway child restored to them but fighting to get away from them, their exceptional femaleness" (Morrison, 155). Although "they were first delighted when they saw her, the girl's desperate struggle to be something different than they were" makes them "quiet," "arrogant" and "mindful of their value" (TB 266).

Then there are also "night women" who also want to teach Jadine a lesson. In a room, which reminds her of "a cave, a grave, the dark womb of the earth" (Morrison, 225), Jadine

is again put in the position of a prodigal daughter confronted by foster mothers, angry and demanding attention. They visit her in her dreams, and Jadine comes to conclusion that:

the night women were not merely against her [. . .], not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked to become and choke it off with their loose tits. (Morrison, 225)

She sees the night women as “the mamas who seduced [her black lover Son] and were trying to lay claim on her” (Morrison, 157). From the woman in yellow, to the women in the trees and the night women, all black women in the novel question Jadine’s womanhood. Since she refuses to be their “daughter” and distances herself from them, Jadine is so goaded by these ghastly mothers that she dreams repeatedly about the woman in yellow and other black women holding their breasts out to her.

Jadine’s final “teacher” is her working-class lover Son, who is a black criminal unapologetically hostile towards all things white. Despite the differences in class, education and outlook on matters of race, they try a life together in busy New York and in Son’s home in a little village in the American South (where Jadine is haunted by the night women). Though Jadine and Son remain in a very intimate relationship, they are at the same time deeply and painfully separated by their various preconceived ideas about identity. For Son, Jadine is a tar baby² trying to trap him into assimilation with the respectable white culture. For Jadine, life with Son turns out to be a “cultural throwback” (Morrison, 237). She fears that Son will suck her down into a murky black world, where she will lose her individualistic identity, in which she has invested so much. Finally, their relationship winds down to a total deadlock: “Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (Morrison, 231) In the end, Jadine runs away from Son to her previous life in Paris. She perceives her escape as a refusal to social degradation, which life with Son would, in her opinion, entail. Jadine’s *bildung* ends in a failure, and in consequence she is condemned as a woman who, in words of another black female protagonist, has “forgotten her ancient properties” (Morrison, 263).

Morrison obviously favors black Son over Jadine, who is pictured as a social-climber – snobbish, demanding and white-oriented. Jadine is put down as traitor of her race because she wants to be a middle class person, and she wants to “make it” in the white world. Son, by contrast, symbolizes the resisting black culture that tenaciously refuses to submit to the domination of white civilization and tries to rescue Jadine from “the blinding awe” she has for Valerian and everything that his “head-of-a-coin” profile³ represents. He fails because, we readers are told, Jadine is a “Yalla,” and “it’s hard for them [yellow women] not to be white people, most never make it. Yallas don’t come to being black natural-like. They have to choose and most don’t choose it” (Morrison, 266).

Morrison who intelligently argues Jadine’s worldview, does not refrain from passing an implicit judgment on Jadine. She does it by contrasting Jadine’s worldview with Son’s, the African woman’s, swamp and night women’s or other black characters from different rural backgrounds, whose identities are deeply and securely rooted in their community’s cosmology. Jadine’s system of values is circumscribed because, as Barbara Christian puts it,

² Tar baby is a fictional character from African American folklore stories about Uncle Remus and Br’er Rabbit. Tar baby is a doll made of tar and used by Br’er Fox (who stands for the white man) to entrap (who stands for the black man).

³ The image of “head-of-a-coin” profile refers to Valerian’s multiple businesses that exploit both people and nature.

“in her search for self she becomes selfish; in her desire for power, she loses essential parts of herself. Thus Morrison has moved a full circle from Pecola [the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, an earlier novel by Morrison], who is destroyed by the community, to Jadine, who destroys any relationship to community in herself” (Morrison, 242).

Needless to say, my assessment of Jadine was equally harsh, with the effect that one of the referees of my dissertation observed that my attitude towards the materials I study should be less judgmental and also a bit less militant. Today I look at this character quite differently, and my opinions about black writers promoting an essentialized vision of Black culture is far more skeptical. I feel deep sympathy for Jadine, despised, spat on and manipulated just because she wanted to be someone else, other than her “people” thought appropriate or acceptable. I see it more clearly now that her black lover Son, who before meeting Jadine had killed his wife, is not subject to any sort of social ostracism, though his “crimes” against the black community are more serious than Jadine’s. On the contrary, he is treated with compassion by the narrator and other characters in the novel. He is a man, who has *not* forgotten his ancient properties, who reveres his black heritage and passionately hates the corrupt white culture. We are supposed to keep our fingers crossed so that he does not fall for a trap laid for him by the tar baby Jadine.

My change of heart regarding this and other novels taught me not to take anything for granted, as I used to, and not to go where the writer or the narrator wants to lead me. I am no longer what Umberto Eco might call a “model reader” – that is a reader who abides by the rules of the novels (magical realist or others). Now I am more mindful of Jonathan Culler’s (1992) distinction between “understanding,” which means interpreting a text in a way that it calls for, and “overstanding,” which means asking questions and making inferences the text did not pose. I have come to believe that this latter, more polemical, strategy of reading is far more rewarding and incisive. Why? If reading can broaden our minds, then theories can broaden our readings. After I completed my PhD course and my dissertation, I made yet another belated intellectual discovery. I came across various theoretical practices, which focused on gender and sought to dismantle ethnocentricity and cultural nationalism. That was the moment when I started to question the wisdom of my previous critical assertions and realized that paradigms are never permanent, that they sometimes break down, whereby the field of scholarship moves onto new uncharted territory, where new paradigms, methodologies and interpretations are established. What was at stake in case of my research on African American literature was how to view the essence of black culture.

Postcolonial studies, British cultural studies and studies about the Black Diaspora, in particular Paul Gilroy’s seminal monograph *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) supplied me with a new set of ideas and research tools to make sense of African American fiction. The theories of hybridity, relation, syncretism, and diaspora⁴ elaborated by various streams of postcolonial thought, which appeared in the 1990s, challenged African American particularism and its tendency to impose on all black people similar goals and aspirations. They questioned traditionally humanistic approaches, that favored “authentic” cultures and “rooted” identities. These approaches were condemned by the post-colonial scholars as too restrictive and totalizing. Postcolonial critics, such as Edward Said or Homi Bhabha, have also alerted me to the fact that, as a matter of fact, there are no cultural essences, and that all cultures are fluid and always in the process of becoming something

⁴ Hybridity refers to an identity of a person, who is racially and culturally mixed. A similar term is relational identity, which is an idiosyncratic identity that comes to being as a result of relations between divergent cultures. Cultural syncretism is the combining of beliefs and cultural practices of different cultures, which leads to the emergence of a new culture. Diaspora is dispersed racial, national or ethnic population such as blacks, Poles or Jews.

new. Their books⁵ published at around the same time as Paul Gilroy's put across similar new and revolutionary conceptualizations of culture and identity. They argued that the contact between cultures is amorphous and leads to cultural transformation and hybridization of identity. The intersection of cultures was perceived and presented as an interactive process, bi-directional and based on dialogue. The postcolonial criticism has helped me to see dangers and risks associated with the elevation of one socially acceptable model of cultural identity, which is based on the separateness and cultural purity of a particular ethnic group. That new anti-essentialist approach to African literary studies has changed my outlook on black culture and on such characters as Jadine. I think that now on the onset of the 21st century, as a result of migration, there are more and more such cosmopolitan diasporic women as Jadine, whose loss of home and a sense of belonging are no longer viewed as a curse but an asset.

Thanks to these postcolonial theories, it has become clear to me that Afro-American culture, like the cultures of other ethnic minorities in the USA, is ethnocentric and based on cultural nationalism. It has also dawned on me that African American particularism is a part and parcel of larger problem related to American multiculturalism. The dominating ideology of multiculturalism in the USA is grounded in the valorization of ethnicity through the propagation of cultural separateness and plurality. Such a model of a multicultural society is based on confrontations between rival ethnic groups and cultural essences. The major task and aim of each ethnic group is the affirmation of its cultural heritage by searching for mystical antecedents and cultivating connections with them, celebrating ethnocentric aesthetics, and underscoring the valor of folklore. The need to accentuate one's cultural authenticity and distinctiveness is supposed to constitute an alternative to the mainstream American culture.

Another of branch of postcolonial studies that has turned out to be useful in my revisionist readings of black authors of the Second African American Renaissance were the so-called gender-and-nation studies, which focus on the role of women in the construction and maintenance of national identity. Feminist researchers of nations and nationalism have called into question the authoritative approach to female figures in literature and public discourses, both within postcolonial nations and multiethnic societies, such as the American society. In this society, each ethnic group, including black Americans, treats women as the repository of cultural essence, which is very useful to redraw boundaries of their own ethnic group.

All these critical methodologies have helped me to re-conceptualize the history of African American Second Renaissance in literature and criticism. I realized that Afro-American paradigms concerning the subjectivity and gender are an effect of the emancipation movements of the previous century (such as the Black Civil Rights, Black Art, Black Power movements), when Afro-American studies became consolidated and recognized as an independent academic research discipline. During that period of struggle against institutional racism, the attitudes of black society became very radical. Consequently Afro-Americans set for themselves, as the fundamental aim, the rejection of white culture and validation of Afro-American culture, as a culture possessing its own ideas and forms of aesthetic expression. The apotheosis of black identity rooted in African tradition and cosmology was essential to this project, and the construction of black women as homogenized and essentialized members of the African American society served at that time to eliminate internal differentiation. Such a policy seemed necessary if the black society was to remain distinct from the American mainstream culture and other ethnic minorities.

Presenting black women as symbolic mothers and guardians of the African cultural heritage was a cornerstone of Afro-American discourse of cultural separatism. Black American authors of the Second Renaissance, the ones I discussed in my PhD dissertation and others, played a pivotal role in the creation of Afro-American cultural nationalism, due to the

⁵ Homi Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. 1994. Edward Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. 1993.

special mission which they ascribed to women. My reflection on feminist researchers into nation and nationalism, has led me to the conclusion that many recognized Afro-American writers, such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, or Paule Marshall validated the cultural identity of black women by normative and ideological presentations of their female characters. In their novels dark-skinned women were presented as icons and “bearers” of the mystical African essence and aesthetics, as for example Toni Morrison’s “culture bearing” black women. As the symbolic mothers of the Afro-American “people/nation,” they were responsible for the cultural construction of the community. Their mission was to maintain and pass on to the next generation the Black cultural and aesthetic tradition. In this way they construed the genealogy of their “people” and maintained and passed on the heritage of black culture. This approach to the social role of women in affirming Afro-American tradition has led to the valorization of the archetype of black mothers (such as the night women or swamp women), and the marginalization and condemnation of other models of Black womanhood, such as those represented by Jadine.

My research today is strongly informed by divergent postcolonial theories which do not celebrate historical roots and connections as a means to reify rigid forms of national and gender identity. If I were to critically engage again with the writers of the Second Afro-American Renaissance, I would rather claim that their works fit black women in the ideological corset of cultural particularism, that they partake in the consolidation of Afro-American cultural nationalism, through their use of the idealized and essentialized images of the black woman. I would argue in favor of female characters like Jadine and support cosmopolitan or hybrid model of female identity, as an alternative to the modeled of “rooted,” and stable national identity, fetishised by Black American cultural nationalism. I would propose that the oppositional discourse of black cultural essentialism, expressed in the iconoclastic image of the black mother as the guardian of national culture, leads to the consolidation of hitherto existing hierarchies of gender, culture, and race. I firmly believe that nowadays Afro-American particularism, with its restrictive vision of gender and national identity, conflicts with the cosmopolitan nature of the world order, growing in strength as a result of migration and globalization.

Now that I am more familiar with different theories of literature, I often reflect on the volt-face in my reading of African American writers and on the relation between our methodology and reception of the texts we read. I am more sensitive to the fact that theory can alter our interpretations, and, to quote Selden out of context, that “a theoretical position [can] ‘rewrite’ or ‘transform’ its object of study” (Selden, 8). And do ideological approaches to literature manipulate texts or shed meaning on them? Can a theory actually shape our worldview, our political agenda and our identity politics? My experience with reading, writing and teaching black American literature shows that theory can have a far-reaching impact. In my case, postcolonial theories of culture, gender, nationalism and identity have enabled me a more polemical formulation of contemporary Afro-American women’s prose and criticism. The research on black literature and culture that I plan to carry in the future will focus on achieving the following goals: the validation of new identitarian policies that go beyond the confines of ethnicity and race; the analysis of heterogeneity and pluralism within the black society; dismantling the affirmations of indigenous identity, and the valorization of a new modes of interaction and cultural exchange between African Americans and other members of the black Atlantic diaspora.

As a more experienced teacher and researcher I cannot help but wonder how deeply theories can affect our understanding of literary works. In fact it has become evident to me that we readers are formed morally and intellectually by the critical texts that we read and the values they put across. My research into African American literature and all the shifting perspectives it involved brought it home to me that literature can function as a stabilizing

force for the culture from which it stems, but theory can be a transformative power that can destabilize and deconstruct (to use Jacques Derrida's expression) the traditional values and structures of that culture. In a society of westernized blacks in ? danger of assimilation, most of the much-celebrated canonical black literature has, to my mind, (you probably need a verb here?)the politically coercive role of a socializing its members. The defense of the black essence that contains the system of values that can oppose the dominant culture, carried out by mainstream black writers and researchers for a long time sanctioned and legitimized reading practices that emphasized the distinctiveness and the exceptional character of the black aesthetic tradition. But the emergence of new postcolonial paradigms has challenged the fetishization of the black culture and the iconization of black women. These emergent praxes have turned black literature into a battleground where struggle for identity and most fundamental truths about culture is now taking place.

What I learned from my experience as a student and researcher of black literature is that theory is a form of cognition. Every theory presupposes a certain use of literature. Writing and interpreting is a form of politics, it is inseparable from a wider social relations among social groups their leaders and representatives, spokespersons i.e. writers and audiences. Theories and knowledge are not "disinterested" – each theoretical praxis serves specific interests and purposes – it strives to empower some social groups sometimes at the expense of others. Each form of criticism defines its object of analysis differently, has different values and goals and different strategies of achieving them. Therefore we are now aware of the fact that reading is a political activity because "a theory, whatever it may be, represents an ideological – if not expressly political – attitude," and "no critical theory – whatever – escapes the specificity of value and ideology [. . .]" (Gates, 176). Every competent and serious critic of literature is aware now of how all forms of literary criticism are in fact strategies geared towards validating different cultural and political positions.

What bearing has this truism on the ways we carry on as academics? The literary theory, in its various guises, emerged in the 1960s and gained momentum in the late 1970s and early 1980s when there was an enormous proliferation of learned journals, textbooks and conferences dedicated to theoretical issues. Though at the end of the century some critics predicted that the force behind theorizing will dwindle, this has not happened. The new critical awareness that has come to being as a result of the previous century's lively discussions finds its vent in new theoretical conferences and journals that remold our experience of reading and teaching all literature, not only English, American or black. In Western universities many undergraduate degree programmes are still launched and theoretical debates continue to spawn countless numbers of MAs. A similar process is also occurring in Polish universities and schools of higher education, albeit on a bit smaller scale.

As critics of literature we have gained enormously from the proliferation of literary theories. The extensive use of a great plurality of theoretical methodologies has expanded our consciousness and made us question our received or preconceived ideas about constructing meaning in literary texts and about the world we live in. We have become more conscious of the fact that reading is not an impartial innocent activity; literature is not a window on the world; language is not a transparent and neutral medium, and, finally, that all cultures are constructs in a constant flux rather than fixed essences to be revered. A serious engagement with theories of literature has awakened?? us to the presence of ideology in every text – once we have rejected the idea that writing, reading and interpreting literature is a spontaneous act, we no longer take for granted the empiricism of prose or the candor of poetry, and that is a good thing. Theory has made us more self-reflexive and our critical methods more incisive.

But our students still seem to be oblivious of all these exciting changes. Students in general are bored with theory. Many of them feel tempted to stick to conventional ways of interpreting literature, and such a dismissal of theory seriously impairs, in my opinion, their

reception of the texts that we teach. To renounce these new developments in literary criticism is to remain an outsider to the world of *belle lettres*, not to mention the fact that it entails remaining enmeshed in old false illusions that writing and reading literature is a simple act, whereby the author puts a meaning in the text, which we readers are encouraged to discover. This a model of reading that still seems to dominate in Polish secondary schools. Therefore as teachers of literature at schools of higher education and supervisors of BA and MA dissertations we experience sometimes insurmountable difficulties in breaking down our students' resistance to theory. I think that our ultimate goal should be to encourage our students "to theorize [their] own practice" because only by doing that can they "enfranchise [themselves] in the constituency of cultural politics" (Selden, 8).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.
2. Christian, Barbara. 1985. "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction." *Conjuring. Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*. Eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
3. Culler, Jonathan. 1992. "In Defense of Overinterpretation." *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Ed. Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
4. Eco, Umberto. 1996. "The Author and His Interpreters." Lecture at The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America. http://www.themodernword.com/eco/eco_author.html (25.06.2013)
5. Gates, Henry Louis Jr. 2000. "Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition: from the Seen to the Told." *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*. Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.
6. González Echevarría, Roberto. "Isla a su vuelo fugitiva: Carpentier y el realismo mágico." *Revista Iberoamericana* 40, 86 (1974): 35.
7. Kenan, Randall. *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
8. Marshall, Paule. *Praisesong for the Widow*. New York: Plume Books, 1983.
9. Morrison, Toni. 1981. *Tar Baby*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
10. Naylor, Gloria. 1988. *Mama Day*. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, INC.
11. Penier, Izabella. 2008. *Magical Realism in Literary Quest for Afro-American Identity*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Ekonomiczno Humanistycznej w Łodzi.
12. Richter, David H. 2000. *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*. Boston & New York: Bedford/St. Martin's.
13. Said, Edward. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf/Random House.
14. Selden R., Widdowson P. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Third Edition. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester Wheat Sheaf, 1993.