

An Introduction:
***Is There Race in This Writing?
African American Fiction Today***



Keith Byerman

Focus Editor

It used to be easy. Twenty years ago, when I was a young faculty member at a large university, a senior colleague said of my African American fiction course: "But of course what you teach isn't really literature at all; it's sociology." And everyone, including me, understood what she meant, whether we agreed or not. Richard Wright didn't write novels; he wrote protest tracts in narrative form. James Baldwin wrote essays with fictional characters in them. Even Ralph Ellison was really making a case for integration as his invisible man spoke for us "on the lower frequencies." Cultural nationalists produced nothing but ideological diatribes, often attacking Baldwin and Ellison for not being sufficiently political or sociological.

But then it started getting strange. Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major, and others started publishing bizarre, experimental works that refused to be tales of either victimization or heroism. Alice Walker and Ernest Gaines presented folk voices that could not be reduced to "darky talk." Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones told deeply disturbing stories of the lives of black women. John Edgar Wideman sounded like high modernists and Leon Forrest like a highly original blend of jazz improvisation and James Joyce. The neat little racial pigeonhole of black fiction did not simply fill up; it exploded.

Today it is virtually impossible to say what African American fiction is. Some writers, such as Albert Murray and Percival Everett, reject any sort of racial/ethnic labeling of their work, not because they want to "be white," but because such qualifiers

say nothing useful about what they do. Even those writers who recognize race as part of their literary identity, including Morrison and Wideman, do not feel that that identity necessarily leads to a particular set of rules for what black writers should do in constructing their narratives. Texts do not have to affirm "the race," they do not have to be critical-realist in technique, and they do not have to focus on black-white relationships.

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The result is that African American fictionists are everywhere, writing science fiction, detective stories, social satire, historical fiction, fictive personal memoirs, romances; traditional realistic, "magical realist," modernist, postmodernist novels; tales of ghosts, incest, charlatans, Santa Claus, and middle-class suburbia. If it has ever been possible to talk about African American fiction as a homogeneous, ideologically-based body of work, it certainly is not possible any more. The real question is whether the category "African American" names anything meaningful in contemporary writing. Of course, as editor of this focus and as a professor of African American literature, I have to pretend that it does. At least nobody's accusing me of teaching sociology any more.

Keith Byerman is Professor of English and Women's Studies at Indiana State University and associate editor of African American Review.