

## An Essay: *The Music of Invisibility*



**Gabrielle Daniels**

When I have had a particularly good day working on my novel, I like to reassure myself, in some quiet moment, that it is all worth my while, despite what some relatives think about my not getting a real job. Between researching 19th and early 20th century Louisiana history, folk medicine from Opelousas Parish, and the history of the Spiritual Church, I read other, published black authors to reinforce faith as well as interest, from contemporaries to critics. I'm constantly looking for something to surprise or challenge me about depictions of the black self, and invariably I find them. I like to see myself, or what I could be, and even what I am not. Sometimes I like to think, however grandly, that I am part of a tradition of American writing, that I too have something to offer, if not to the black reading public as well as the larger community, then to myself.

At the same time, I also try not to focus too closely on my ongoing and continuing exchanges with the literary marketplace, which includes submitting my work to agents, presenting my finished chapters to editors of literary magazines, and reading about how American writing is being promoted and sold. It can be depressing and daunting, especially for a first writer, especially when the bottom line these days is marketability. Popularity or critical recognition means little if the book doesn't fly off the shelves or make it onto someone's top ten. As Wesley Brown put it in *The Darktown Strutters*, it's not enough to be good or great, you have to think up a gimmick. A book can be edited to the standards of another book's success, or to what others believe would work best for the reading public—not just as a labor of love or appreciation for the author's vision. Because some writers are now able to skip criticism due to reader recognition and interest, the lack of a tight editorial hand bringing up short any tendency to overwrite can lessen any respect gained from earlier moments.

Why do Americans continue to read fiction by black writers? I would like to think

they continue to read to know who we are, not just to buy a bestseller.

Earlier, it was to find out what we were protesting about; later, it was to show solidarity with a cultural movement. Recently, it was to understand why black women were, deservedly, angry.

Whether there was enjoyment to be had in reading the books, or pleasure in recognizing one's self in a character or two, seemed to be a side-issue rarely delved into, even in book reviews. These books have been controversial in their time. Yet I've usually liked what I've read overall or found something or someone to like in those novels or fiction I believed had ultimately failed. They were and could be masterful, humorous as well as stridently polemical. Some even had literary caliber.

Some readers and critics never saw through to these aspects. At the slightest mention of color, the idea was perceived to be rammed down their throats. Like earlier critics who claimed that color was the single denominator permeating all American life and culture, these people also saw no possibility that color could be one of many effective themes in fiction, that color could be backgrounded and accentuated for other themes touching on human interaction. Moreover, as long as there are distinctions about color, there will still be discussions about color. There wasn't a possibility that an African American work of fiction could be, in the truest sign of its elemental breadth and viability, reinterpreted and revived for new students and audiences. Color was a one-note topic. Color was not literary or serious or art.

Today, Black writing no longer seems limited to the rise and fall of literary movements. I can see this in the *Essence* magazine book list, where literary fiction vies with mysteries, romances, and speculative fiction in a horse race for number one. Yet one rather static perception remains of black literature: while it could be good, it is not to be taken seriously because of its

narrow focus—to confront color is to be bored, or to stave off confrontation with life. This is what I felt when I read over the names of several young fiction writers whom *The New Yorker* magazine believed were the writers to watch as we cross into the next century in its annual Fiction Issue.

I have nothing negative to say about Edwidge Danticat or her work. She was photographed together with some of the other designees; they looked like a group from MTV's *Real World*. She is a formidable writer. But her presence underscored a glaring omission. Danticat is a naturalized American black woman. She was born in Haiti. Hers is an immigrant experience, not that of a black American who was born and acculturated in the United States. And while the black immigrant experience in America has yet to be thoroughly mined, it was as if *The New Yorker* was saying that black American writers offer nothing new to the public, and that the public in turn is justified in not having to deal with them. In effect, blacks have written themselves into a racial box from which there is no escape; they cannot imagine themselves minus color identity and into the 21st century. The audience, in response, should be turning to reading about other experiences, which thankfully say little about the same old thing.

Others have also opined that the new editor, David Remnick, simply forgot the first rule in any situation—CYA—and rushed to find any black face that would do. If so, this is no mere accident, as Mary Corey's recent book on the magazine, *The World through a Monocle*, chronicles about the downside of an otherwise distinguished record. Remnick's particular ascendancy has been celebrated from the pages of *The New York Times*' business section as a welcome break from the celebrity-driven editorship of Tina Brown. Brown drastically cut back on publishing fiction during her regime, preferring to rely on special theme issues to take up the slack, while incurring the everlasting enmity of the old guard.

Since Remnick's arrival, he has added more fiction; however, the world of black fiction has seemingly dried up. The 1999 Fiction Issue failed, not only because it erased contemporary

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black American literary achievement, depended brazenly on youth draw, or did not draw a respectable audience. It failed because Remnick—and his fiction editor Bill Buford—did not present work that truly measured up to the high bar—the “magazine of culture” that Remnick visualizes. (Whose culture the financially-troubled magazine will ultimately reflect remains to be seen.) Moreover, none of the writers appeared to be over 30; and youth does not always suggest maturity of vision or, in light of the fickleness of trends and the publishing companies, presage literary staying power.

Why should any black writer or critic care a fig about what *The New Yorker* chooses to promote? Because it not only calls itself a magazine of high culture, but THE American magazine of high culture. Black writers, last time I checked, are Americans, regardless of the same old thing we are used to like a second, invisible skin: exclusion. I'd like to remind Remnick that the roots of the original *New Yorker* could be found in the Jazz Age when downtown, including the members of the Round Table who founded and wrote for the magazine, came to observe and imitate what uptown was producing in the clubs, speakeasies, theatres, interracial receptions, and dances of the time. In effect, black creativity helped create the high culture he so espouses.

And while Remnick maintains in the *Times* article that he has not yet found “our” Mark Twain of the waning or new century, I suggest that he should begin, like “my” Twain, taking notes from the source: black people, from whom Huck Finn found his voice. Focusing on a spectrum of age rather than youth might have balanced his presentation. I would have nominated writers like Gayl Jones, whose personal travails broke out in headlines and became the stuff of novels. Jones has reentered the literary scene with *The Healing* and *Mosquito*; both novels are a triumph not only of her still potent skills, but also

of writing even with the near-fatal disapproval of her mate. Or J. California Cooper, who has written very quietly and consistently, the kinds of hopeful, affirming, simple stories and novels that are neither mawkish nor sappy with characters like the Doras, Mlee, and Always. And Reginald McKnight, while not as prolific as Cooper, nevertheless has alternately challenged the romantic notion of Africa in *I Get On The Bus* and traversed the shadings and fissures of the racial divide in *White Boys*.

Like I said, I like to see myself, even in the 21st century. It helps me keep the faith. But the foundations of a new cultural age are not necessarily built on what has worked or pleased others before. It's built on the courage of those who break through, expand, and ultimately renew.

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