

WORK CITED

Miller, J. Hillis. "An Open Letter to Professor Jon Wiener." *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*. Ed. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1989.

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Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds. *Slavery and the Literary Imagination: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1987*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. pp. xiii, 172. \$22.95; \$9.95 pb.

Had this collection, the thirteenth in the new series from the English Institute, been published, say, fifteen years ago, it would probably have contained four essays on various features of Harriet Beecher Stowe's work, maybe one on Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a modernist quasi-slave narrative, maybe another on Faulkner and the revisioning of the discourses of the slave trade, and perhaps, if the editors had been daring, an essay on a slave narrative itself (and, more than likely, that would have been the very unrepresentative Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*). It is almost fortunate that such a collection would not have been imaginable fifteen years ago, because the collection Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad have brought together now, preparing the way for the scholarship in African-American studies in the 1990s, represents the best of a new attitude towards what is helpfully called "Slavery and the Literary Imagination."

Instead of the assortment of essays I imagined in the scenario above, this collection contains seven essays, all but one of which deal with African-American writers. Moreover, the one exception, Carolyn Karcher's study of Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic* (1867), is in fact an examination of the imaginative limitations suffered by even so thoroughly engaged an abolitionist as was Child. It is an essay that is not a counterpoint to the rest of the series, but very much participates in the general trajectory of the collection. And that general trajectory is primarily aimed at tracing potential origins and describing moments of revisionist energies.

Two of the essays are interested in establishing the beginnings of the African-American literary tradition in the discourses surrounding the institution of slavery and the experiences of ex-slaves. The volume starts off with James Olney's essay which examines Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845) and Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901) as the constitutional texts of the "founding fathers" of another American discourse, that of the "Afro-American nation" (8). In the

same vein, William Andrews's essay traces the origins of African-American literary realism in the discursive shifts from Douglass's "pragmatic" antebellum "romantic individualism" (63) to Washington's "Tuskegee realism" (73) to the "deconstructive acts" of those novels which "reappropriate the signifying potential of black reality" (76), beginning with Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912). Both essays help recover the grounds of style, ideological and mimetic, obtaining for African-American discourse before the Harlem Renaissance; as such, both will be of value even to students not substantially interested in anything before Wright or Hurston.

The other four essays discuss the ways that the discourses and experiences of "slavery" helped shape the twentieth-century African-American literary landscape. Arnold Rampersad's essay on W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is a discerning examination of how Du Bois attempted simultaneously to demonstrate the "obsolescence of the slave narrative as a paradigm for Afro-American experience" (106) and yet to assert the importance of remembering the "peculiar institution" which was the first encounter of the souls of black folks to the soullessness of American capitalism. In this attempt Du Bois established the grounds for the tension to be found so frequently in contemporary African-American novelists — what Toni Morrison, in a series of essays, interviews, and novels, has called the "artistic inner tension" ("Conversation" 585) between "national amnesia" ("Pain" 68) and the "deliberate act of remembering" ("Memory" 385) or, a function of what, in *Beloved*, she termed "rememory" (36).

In an essay applying the theoretical matrices she had so wonderfully developed in her earlier study of nineteenth-century Black women writers, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby discusses the ways that the social system of slavery assumes the position of a "pre-text to all Afro-American texts" (126) as an historical-social condition able to explain contemporary political-social dislocations and inequities. Her readings of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, and Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* are helpful not only for distinguishing the various forms of the "historical novel" — forms including the novels of "memory," of "orality," and of "slave rebellion" (128) — but also, and more significantly, for locating the sociopolitical contexts of each re-emergence of the historical novel of slavery. In its own turn, Carby's essay will become a valuable pre-text to future studies of the political contexts of the current proliferation of historical novels of slavery and neo-slavery.

Deborah McDowell's essay on Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* is a fuller, but complementary, study to Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's essay on the same novel in *Changing Our Own Words*. McDowell studies the play of voice and script, of past and present, in Williams's novel of an escaped slave narrating her story to her son for her grandchildren to possess. McDowell's paper, like Henderson's, makes an important contribution to literary studies because its reading strategy is comprised of an involved marriage between theories of literary systems and practices of social intervention. Her essay fulfills what Carby has re-defined as the duality of meaning in "representation" — as aesthetic act and as political act (*Reconstructing* 164).

The place in Williams's novel where McDowell locates the play of history and the force of language is the body of the ex-slave Dessa. Dessa's body, we are told, is marked by the system that denies her humanity. There is a "history writ about her privates" (154) that speaks volumes about how slave women were made to become the embodiments of the sadistic imagination of male slave owners and were also made the texts of property rights. The body of the slave woman, in Williams's novel, becomes both body and text, owned in itself and also possessed of the potential for perpetuating the system of slavery through the legal code of *partus sequitur ventrem*. Williams's powerful sentence — "That part of the past lay sealed in the scars between her thighs" (*Dessa* 58) — evokes the sense of a different *écriture féminine*, a story not of *jouissance* but of the fundamental pain of becoming bodily commodified and possessing the bodily potential for continued commodification. The black female slave, as Hortense Spillers noted in her "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," is made to occupy the place of the "vestibular" — the "principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world" (76).

It is very much the question of the body and its place within or beyond discursive realms that makes Spillers's essay in this volume the most interesting and most searching of the collection. Its significance does not lie simply in its being yet one more brilliant piece in Spillers's ongoing redefinition of the discontinuities of black literary tradition — although it certainly is that. Rather what makes this article most significant, for me and, I think, for those who have been following the crucial debate about the place of literary theory in the discussion of African-American letters, is its author's meditation on the tensions between what we may call the contending matrices of discursive fields and of experiential realms. That is, Spillers's essay here touches upon the foremost question raised in the current debate in African-American literary studies: whether to appropriate foreign or to invent native critical structures. It is a question that has fairly directed Spillers's critical inquiry since about 1984 and one I hope

will be at the forefront of her forthcoming book, *In the Flesh: A Situation for Feminist Inquiry*.

In her essay in this collection, a study of Ishmael Reed's strategies for "signifyin(g)" on Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Spillers articulates the choice between accepting "slavery" as a "textualized and discursive field of practice" having no "point of absolute and indisputable origin" (29) on the one hand, and accepting slavery as "an actual experience, or sequences of experiential actualities" on the other (50). In the end, Spillers neither reduces the problem in order to make an easy choice nor denies the complexity of its political issue in order to dislocate the poles of discourse and experience. What she does is bring to the fore the issue of critical *desire*, an issue we often hide or circumscribe in our ruminations on the politics of interpretation. In a beautifully written meditation on the act of reading, Spillers does not deny her own authorial presence and personality. Slavery as either discourse or as historical experience, or as a mixed product of both, is not something Spillers "wants to experience as a reader" (33) — or, we may surmise, as a critic, as an African-American woman, as living testimony to at least one "point of origin" for the institution of her study. She leaves one with a sense of what it means to read what is really one's own; she also leaves one with a sense of what other fluid signifiers come into play in any act of reading. As she notes, "After *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one needs a drink" (33).

Had this been the volume I imagined at the outset, many who would have read the essays on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* should probably have followed Spillers to the liquor cabinet. Fortunately, for this reader, this collection of essays is tonic enough. And it is nice to note that the novel that would conceivably have dominated a collection on "slavery and the literary imagination" fifteen years ago is now studied only as part of the fodder for Reed's "signifyin(g)" imagination. This is a collection of essays that will well serve many fields of inquiry; but mostly, *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* is going to prove a pivotal text in African-American cultural studies.

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Frederic S. Colwell. *Rivermen: A Romantic Iconography of the River and the Source*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989. pp. 220. \$29.95.

The subtitle bears scrutiny. *Rivermen* is "romantic" in more than its subject matter: the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, and some of their mates at the helm. In its often lyrical style, in its interest in the "confluence of myth and psychology" (186), and in its own *pothos* or *sehnsucht* the book runs deeply with the Romantic stream. As the reference to *sehnsucht* or intense longing for harmony in being (Colwell's reference, see 154) hints, Colwell's depiction of romantic rivermen, their river journeys, and their quests, failed or otherwise, for the headwaters and sources is iconic; he blends his modulation with the vocal streams of the romantic verse he explicates. What Colwell draws for us are pictures of sacred places and the poets who seek them. The river is the "feeding source" (Wordsworth's description of Imagination in Book 14 of the 1850 *Prelude* 1. 193) of the poet's song, and to find this source is to take a journey both historical and psychological, both in time and out of time. In the course of the book, Colwell travels from Wordsworth's Derwent to the Nile on which the Witch of Atlas floats, and his book re-enacts the rite of passage he so sedulously and learnedly describes.

Before the traveller's log begins, we have a "Prologue," in which Colwell sets the tone of what is to follow. In setting out ancient attitudes to water, he draws upon voices from East and West; Thales, Pindar, the *Puranas*, Heraclitus, Saint Francis, and Mircea Eliade all speak of water's creative and generative power in the first paragraph. It goes without saying, perhaps, that the spirit of God is figured as water in both the Old and New Testaments. God speaks and the waters part, eventually forming not only oceans but also lakes and rivers and streams and springs. Like all things which are divided, water seeks to reunite with its beginnings, and thus from the beginning of a river's life, it seeks its own deep beginning in the parental ocean from which it once came. The cycle is unending, and in