

THE POLITICS OF LITERARY THEORY

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Structures do not take to the streets.

— *Blackboard at the Sorbonne, May 1968*

When I was an undergraduate and later a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, in the sixties and seventies, I remember students carrying placards citing nineteenth-century American writers in support of various forms of social protest and civil disobedience. “If the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him,” these placards said, citing Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “American Scholar.” “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison”, they said, in imitation of Thoreau’s act of civil disobedience in “Resistance to Civil Government.” “Unscrew the locks from their doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs! “they shouted in unison with Whitman’s revolutionary cry in “Song of Myself.”¹ While the New Critical orthodoxy of the post-World War II period still reigned – even in the halls of the University of California – there was a group of Americanists there, including Henry Nash Smith, Larzer Ziff, and Norman Grabo, who continued to emphasize the social and historical contexts of literature, and who taught us, following F. O. Matthiessen, the “essentially critical nature of American literature.”² But that was then, and this is now.

Now, under the pressure of various poststructuralist, feminist, and new historicist approaches, those placards might read “Down with Phallogocentrism,” “Death to the Author and the Subject,” “La Raza Does Not Exist”. Now, the critical emphasis is on the troubling complicity and

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overriding social conservatism of even our most seemingly oppositional and resistant writers, including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville. Under the influence, in particular, of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and other poststructuralist theorists, these new approaches to American literature have tended to reify and transhistoricize structures of internal and external power, as all acts of social resistance are always and already absorbed, contained, and neutralized within what Sacvan Bercovitch calls the American "Ritual of Consensus," "a web spun out of scriptural myth and liberal ideology that allowed virtually no avenue of escape." Or, as Walter Benn Michaels says of putatively oppositional American writers and critics, it is wrong "to think of the culture you live in as the object of your affections; you don't like or dislike it, you exist in it, and the things you like and dislike exist in it too."³

What concerns me about these new approaches to literary and cultural studies is not that they are not legitimate and, as some have argued, liberating. Indeed, my own work has been energized and enabled by feminist, new historicist, and poststructuralist methodologies. **What** concerns me, however, is that just at the moment when women, gays, blacks, Chicanos, and other ethnic groups have begun to discover that they do have and have had a literature, a voice, an identity, a history, a representation, poststructuralist theory has arrived to call into question the very notions of self, authorship, voice, and, indeed, representation itself. What concerns me, too, is that the poststructuralist emphasis on power and containment has given way to a certain **totalizing fatalism** in the study of American culture, a fatalism that leaves little room for contradiction, difference, conflict, agency, or resistance. Not surprisingly, this fatalism corresponds with the political quietism and social **inactivism** of the last two decades in the United States. There is an increasing gap between "radical" theory and radical political practice.⁴ Indeed, as we enact our "radical" approaches within the walls of the academy, social conditions appear to be getting worse rather than better in the United States.

The rise of theory in the classroom has been accompanied in the public sphere in the United States with rising unemployment, crime, drug addiction, and homelessness, and an ever rising deficit. There is an increasing division between the very rich and the very poor. More women and children live in poverty now than ever before in American history; and the United States is still the most violent country in the western industrial world. There is a health care crisis, a child care crisis, and we are in danger of losing abortion rights and civil rights legislation. Racism, anti-semitism, sexism, and

homophobia are also on the rise. In fact, for all the talk about multiculturalism and the nonexistence of race, we have moved toward a *de facto* system of what Douglass Massey and Nancy A. Denton call American Apartheid.⁵ And the silence and lack of funding that has accompanied the AIDS epidemic in the United States is leading to a virtual genocide being committed against persons who have had the misfortune to contract the AIDS virus.

And thus, as we enact our “radical” theories and deconstructive readings within the academy, I find myself increasingly concerned about the question of the exact political investment and precise political project and practical consequences of poststructuralist theory. As Michael Warner asks in a critique of Judith Butler’s post-identity performance theory from the point of view of AIDS activism: “What politics follows if heterosexuality already inevitably seems to do what we want it to do – that is, fail?”⁶ I wish that I could promise a solution to the problem of the relationship between radical theory and radical political practice – or more specifically to the problem of agency, subjectivity, and resistance – in the short space of these lectures. What I would like to do is to begin by raising several questions about the theory and practice of American literature and studies in the United States, and then focus in the brief space of these lectures on at least one or two of them.

My large question has to do with the relationship between minority discourses and poststructuralist theory in the study of American literature and culture. I would like to pose the question of the subject, authorship, experience, and representation as these questions have been posed by poststructuralist theory and as they might be said to relate to the study of ethnic, gay, and women’s literature. I would also like to raise the question of the historicity of European, and specifically French theory. That is, rather than granting theory and theorists a kind of transcendent status outside the realm of historical struggle, I would like to seek to locate the work of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, for example, within a particular context of cultural and social struggle in France. I would also like to raise the question of why at a particular moment in American cultural and social history, a particular kind of theory – associated primarily with the work of Derrida and Foucault in France – entered the American academy and American criticism with such force, intensity, and appeal. I would like to consider the questions poststructuralist theory raises about the problem and possibility of agency, subjectivity, and resistance, particularly as these questions relate to and are being addressed by minority discourses in the United States. And finally, I

would like to question current paradigms of American literature and American Studies, paradigms that encourage a separatist and atomized model of literary and cultural studies in which whites do whites, men do men, women do women, blacks do blacks, latinos do latinos, and there is very little dialogue between or cultural encounter beyond these relatively fixed ethnic and gender bounds. I would like, that is, to call for a reconceptualization of American literary and cultural studies as a field of comparative studies – a radically comparative field of cultural encounter, dialogue, and exchange in which American literature(s) and culture(s) would be studied not only, as in the traditional model of comparative literature, in relation to literature outside the United States, but in relation to the multiple and different cultures that have constituted the history and literary history of the United States.

(I) THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

“What difference does it make who is speaking?” Michel Foucault asks in his influential 1969 essay “Qu’est-ce un auteur?” (“What Is an Author?”), expressing indifference to the question of authorship and traditional bourgeois notions of literature as a form of self-expression.⁷ In “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference it Makes,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., would appear to respond to Foucault’s “indifference” by representing the ‘difference’ black writing makes as a sign of black humanity that challenges the received order of Western culture and inscribes a specifically black literary and critical tradition of its own.⁸ Rather than posing poststructuralist theory and minority discourses in the United States as a polarity, however, I would like to begin by suggesting their intersection. Like the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and other social protest movements of the sixties and seventies, the deconstructive and poststructuralist theories of Derrida and Foucault must be understood in the context of the imperial narratives of the West, the decolonization of the Third World, and the ensuing crisis in liberalism, history, and representation that has marked the twentieth century, especially the post-World War II period. There is, I would argue, an historical conjunction between the turn toward poststructuralist theory in the seventies in the American academy and the demands of traditionally marginalized cultures to be heard, made visible, and represented in the canon, the curriculum, American criticism, and American literary, social, and cultural history. In fact, although their work is not usually represented as “grand theory,” it was the assault on the American academy and the canon by blacks, Chicanos, women, and other marginalized

groups that helped to lay ground for the reception of deconstruction, Derrida, and other poststructuralist theorists by calling into question the hegemony of the white masculine subject and traditional constructions of western, and specifically American history and literary history.

Having said this, however, one must at the same time remain fully cognizant of the embattled, though nevertheless less productive and interactive relationship between European poststructuralist theory and the practice of ethnic, gay, and women's studies in the United States. The problem, of course, is that in the eyes of some, the poststructuralist critique of the humanist subject and traditional notions of presence, voice, experience, and representation would appear to (re)consign women, gays, and other minorities to silence and invisibility at the very moment when they are seeking to constitute themselves as legitimate subjects in history. Whereas Foucault can dismiss the questions of identity, subjectivity, and authorship as matters of indifference, to blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, women, gays, and other minority scholars in the United States, questions of identity, authorship, presence, and voice are still at the very center of their work. In *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (1991), for example, the Chicano scholars Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar present their collection as an assertion of "the four hundred years of Mexican-mestizo presence in our borderlands" that needs to be taken into account in "future models of 'American' culture and reconstructions of 'American' literary history."⁹ And in "Assaying the Gold: Or, Contesting the Ground of Asian American Literature," Asian-American critic Shirley Lim challenges text-centered approaches to ethnic studies, suggesting that "textual analysis is less significant than the process of recuperating and reconstructing ethnic and cultural identity."⁹

This apparent split between the deauthorizing, deconstructive, and more philosophical project of poststructuralist theory and the reconstructive, constitutive, and specifically political project of ethnic, gay, and women's studies in the United States has led to a resistance to theory, or at least a challenge to its white male heterosexist and Eurocentric terms, among some of those most marginalized and excluded in traditional accounts of American culture and in the academy. "The 'poststructuralist sensibility' does not apply to Black American literary works," argues Joyce A. Joyce in "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism." Critical of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, and other black critics "immersed in poststructuralist critical theory," Joyce argues for the political engagement of black critics and writers – "that we give 'presence' to the text, that we deal

with the question of values,” and that we recognize that “the literary critical activity is not free of personality and history, as the deconstructionist would argue.”¹⁰ Barbara Christian is similarly critical of what she calls ‘The Race for Theory,’ particularly as it has led to the silencing of “people of color, feminists, radical critics, creative writers, who have struggled for much longer than a decade to make their voices, their various voices, heard.” “The race for theory,” she observes, “has silenced many of us to the extent that some of us feel we can no longer discuss our own literature, while others have developed intense writing blocks and are puzzled by the incomprehensibility of the language set adrift in literary circles.”¹¹

Arnold Krupat, on the other hand, argues that the poststructuralist challenge to traditional notions of author, voice, text, and representation has actually opened the possibilities for reading and interpreting Native American literature. But in *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (1989) he, too, finds himself in the self-contradictory position of having to apologize for referring to “writers whom I have cited as **speaking**,” acknowledging that he knows “the writer is never present and that nonpresence cannot literally speak.” “It is no accident that those of us who work with hitherto marginalized material,” he observes, “show a certain reluctance to give up the voice in favor of the text as recently defined.”¹²

In a 1989 dialogue between Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Nancy K. Miller, Miller expresses a similar self-consciousness about using the term woman. “It has become a positive embarrassment to talk about women. At the 1985 conference on feminist theory at the Pembroke Center I gave my paper ‘Changing the Subject,’ which ended with the words, ‘I hope we are becoming women.’ Denise Riley, who has become one of the strongest voices of the current anti-essentialism, got up and declared – speaking, as I understand it, from a neo-Marxist position--that I was taking us backward into the past and that the worst thing we could be was women.”¹³ In fact, the category “woman” has become so problematic that Tania Modleski has ironically entitled her recent book *Feminism Without Women*.¹⁴ Given the equally problematic and, as Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have argued, fictive and metaphoric status of “race,”¹⁵ we might also begin to think of Black Studies without Blacks, Chicano Studies without Chicanos, or even I suppose, White American Studies without Whites, although white scholars in the United States – and indeed in Western Europe – tend to look upon themselves as **the** race rather than a race, and thus not a race at all.

What these women and minority scholars suggest is the ways that poststructuralist theory, for all its challenge to western hegemonic forms, is

functioning for some as a new form of intellectual colonization that puts down the uprisings of women, gays, blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, and other minorities by silencing and deauthorizing their claims to a voice, a presence, and a representation in American literature and culture. Although poststructuralist theory might not in and of itself have a politics – or at least a single politics – it has become for some a new form of western hegemony with real political and material effects, one of which, as Joyce, Christian, Miller, Modleski, Krupat, and others suggest, is to silence and deligitimize women, blacks, and other minority subjects, authors, and critics in the American academy. In the words of Barbara Christian: “Theory has become a commodity which helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions – worse, whether we are heard at all.”¹⁶

The irony is that amid the steady proclamations of the death of the author and the subject by a select group of white male European and primarily French theorists, this same group of white male theorists has risen to fill the vacuum left by the death of the western author and subject. Nobody appears to be questioning the constitution of Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault as authors and subjects; in fact, their status as authors, or what Foucault calls “founders of discursivity,” is very much intact as their names circulate and recirculate as a new form of cultural capital in American criticism and the academy. Moreover, while there has been an increasing emphasis over the last decade on historicizing the values and products of culture that were formerly assumed as natural and self-evidente, to my knowledge there has been little attempt to historicize theory itself, or the particular interests and political agendas of the triumvirate of white male French critics – Derrida, Foucault, Lacan – who have come to dominate literary and cultural studies in the American academy over the last two decades.

Although the political movements of blacks, Chicanos, women, and other marginalized groups in the sixties and seventies might be said to have provided the practical grounds for poststructuralist theory by challenging the white male heterosexual subject of western and specifically American liberal ideology, as it has taken hold in American criticism and the academy, poststructuralist theory has also worked simultaneously to erode, or at least to challenge, the political grounds of these movements by deconstructing the very notions of self, identity, experience, and community that have been deployed as the base of an effective and collective political resistance. It cannot be entirely coincidental, for example, that Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan and the poststructuralist question of the subject and the author took hold in the American academy at the very same moment when women, blacks,

and other minorities were asking for a place and a presence for women and other minority subjects and authors in the academy, the canon, the curriculum, and American literary, social, and cultural history. In fact, it is at least worth noting that Jacques Derrida gave his influential lecture, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" at The Johns Hopkins University in 1966, and that Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (1968) and Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1969) were published and began to receive a particularly sympathetic response in the American academy in the same years as the publication of Le Roi Jones and Larry Neal's anthology *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968) and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), books that played a constitutive role in the emergence of Black Studies and Women's Studies in the United States.¹⁷

Nor is it a coincidence that, led by Derrida and the Yale critics--Geoffrey Hartman, Paul De Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Harold Bloom--deconstructive criticism became a bastion for the pursuit of a kind of neoformalist discourse analysis at the very moment when ethnic minorities, women, and gays were arguing for the relation among writing, race, sexuality, experience, and history, and asking for a reconceptualization of texts not as mere sign systems for the "game" of semiotic decoding but as forms of political action, power, and resistance.¹⁸ As Geoffrey Hartman says in the Preface to *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979), a collection assembled as a kind of "manifesto" of the new critical practice of Derrida and the Yale critics, the volume does not challenge "the great texts of our literature" but rather seeks to affirm the power of the critic. In fact, Hartman avows the essentially conservative and New Critical terms of deconstructive theory as it was institutionalized and disseminated by the Yale critics. "Deconstructive criticism does not present itself as a novel enterprise," he writes. "There is, perhaps, more of a relentless focus on certain questions, and a new rigor when it comes to the practice of close reading."¹⁹ With its resolutely textual focus and its formalist emphasis on generating new and rigorously close readings of a selection of white western male canonical texts, deconstructive criticism, like New Criticism, continued to keep history and politics at bay. Its retreat from the demands of latinos, gays, women, and other minorities for a representation and a voice in the canon, the curriculum, and the critical tradition seems, at times, quite explicit. "My instincts are strongly preservative and conservative," wrote J. Hillis Miller in "The Function of Historical Study at the Present Time." "I believe in the established canon of English and American literature and in the validity of the concept of privileged texts. I think it is more important to read Spenser, Shakespeare, or

Milton than to read Borges in translation, or even, to say the truth, to read Virginia Woolf.”²⁰

Even in the putatively more radical and “politicized” form of the new historicism, which became associated with Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Benn Michaels, and the *Representations* group at Berkeley in the early eighties, poststructuralist theory was institutionalized and disseminated as a kind of “left formalism,” which, in challenging notions of the subject, authorship, agency, and resistance, has also tended to marginalize and delegitimize the concerns of women, blacks, and other minorities.²¹ Like Derrida, who divided his time between Johns Hopkins, Yale, and Paris during the seventies, the presence of Michel Foucault as a guest lecturer on the Berkeley campus in the late seventies and eighties before his death in 1984, had a catalyzing effect on the group of scholars, including Greenblatt, Michaels, and Catherine Gallagher, who published the first issue of *Representations* in 1982, the same year that Greenblatt used the term “the new historicism” in an issue of *Genre* on “The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance” to characterize a collection of essays linked by a common concern with literary works as “fields of force” that erode both the old historical and the New Critical distinction between “artistic production and other kinds of social production.” “Certainly,” he later wrote in an attempt to “situate” the “new historicism” as “practice rather than a doctrine,” “the presence of Michel Foucault on the Berkeley campus for extended visits during the last five or six years of his life, and more generally the influence in America of European (and especially French) anthropological and social theorists, has helped to shape my own literary critical practice.”²²

But while the “historical” influence of the more politically active and savvy Foucault at Berkeley might be read as a reaction against the ahistoricity not only of the New Criticism, but of Derrida, the Yale Critics, and deconstructive theory, as Foucault’s work has been translated and disseminated in the American academy, it has tended to underwrite rather than to counter the ahistoricity of American critical practice. Foucault’s emphasis on the analysis of texts, discourses, structures, and intertextual homologies has, like deconstruction, found receptive ground in the essentially New Critical protocols of the American academy. Moreover, in a specifically American cultural studies context, Foucault’s emphasis, especially in *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, on power, knowledge, and containment has found receptive ground in the critique of “liberal absolutism,” American consensus, and containment already articulated in the Cold War period by Richard Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition*

(1948) and Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) and later by Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* (1979) and *The Rites of Assent* (1993).²³

Whereas in his later work, Foucault moved toward an increasing emphasis on practice over theory, as he sought to articulate the ethical grounds of resistance, and what he called, in his last work, *Le souci de soi* (the care or practice of self), in the United States, the emphasis has been on the more totalized vision of power, subjection, and containment in Foucault's early work. If in France, Foucault's theoretical analysis of the structures of discourse, knowledge, and power was never entirely separate from specific acts of political intervention in the interest of revolutionary social change, in the United States, Foucault's theories have underwritten a kind of post-Vietnam era battle fatigue and retreat into privacy and ahistoricity that seems oddly aligned with the years of political reaction and Reagan/Bush conservatism in which it – and they – came to power.

Ironically, then, for all its emphasis on a new historicism, by equating textuality with reality and then decoding and demystifying texts as a form of radical subversion, the new historicism, like deconstruction, has remained relatively removed from the material conditions of race, class, and gender struggle, and ultimately, from the materiality of history itself. In fact, the emphasis over the last decade not only among deconstructionists and new historicists, but also among Marxists, feminists, African-Americanists, cultural studies critics, and others on language and textuality as the site of political struggle has led to an increasing political quietism in the American academy as “radical” textual analyses become a kind of substitute for or retreat from political action and responsibility in the public sphere. The New Right may in fact have very little to fear from so called “tenured radicals,” for, as the virtual silence of American intellectuals in response to the Gulf War suggests, while we carry on the revolution on the level of language and the text, there is an increasing gap between radical theory and radical practice, and an increasing isolation of American academics – radical or otherwise – from the public sphere and, yes, real history.

(II) “WHAT IS AN AUTHOR?”

“Race only posed itself as an urgent issue to me in the last couple of years,” Jane Gallop observed in 1989. “I didn't feel the necessity of discussing race until I had moved myself out of a French poststructural orbit

and began talking about American feminist literary criticism.”²⁴ I would like to use Gallop’s comment as a way of framing a discussion of the ways certain forms of poststructuralist theory erase and are in some sense in a different “orbit” from the question of race as it has been and as it continues to be at the very center of political and cultural struggles in the United States. While assumptions about the death of the author and the subject as residual forms of bourgeois individualism have become commonplace among literary theorists in the United States, no one has considered the particular historical interests and assumptions in which the essays of Barthes and Foucault on the death of the author are embedded and their precise relation – or lack of relation – to the question of race as it is being posed in the United States.

Both essays are, in fact, grounded in the ethnocentric assumptions of two white male French critics who themselves enjoyed – and indeed could take for granted – all the privileges of subjectivity and authorship. Drawing on the work of a select group of white male modernists – Beckett, Mallarmé, Proust, Flaubert, and the particular engagements of a formalist and neo-classical French literary tradition, both essays announce, indeed, proclaim that the author is dead. “In France”, asserts Barthes, “Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person. . . . For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author.” “The author’s disappearance” has been “since Mallarmé” “a constantly recurring event,” writes Foucault, echoing Barthes.²⁵ “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost” (142), says Barthes, and thus: “The fact is (or it follows) that writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’ (as the Classics would say)” (145). “We can say,” asserts, Foucault, once again echoing Barthes, “that today’s writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression.” It is “exteriority,” “a game” of signifiers, “a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears” (102). Both link modern notions of the author with the tradition of Western and specifically capitalist individualism. The author is “a modern figure,” says Barthes, “emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation and emphasizing the prestige of the individual” (142-43; emphasis added). “Since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property,” writes Foucault, once again echoing Barthes (119). For Barthes as for Foucault the author represents a limit to the free circulation of writing. “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing,”

says Barthes (147). And, once again echoing Barthes, Foucault asserts his desire to “reexamine the privileges of the subject,” arguing that authors reduce “the great danger with which fiction threatens or world.” “The author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (117; 119; emphasis added).

Read together these two key texts in the poststructuralist articulation of a writing freed from authorship, personal history, expression, and representation interface with and mirror each other in a kind of white ethnocentric echolalia. Much of what they say about the social construction of authorship is culture and even country specific. In the United States, authorship – romantic, individualist, bourgeois, or otherwise – has never enjoyed the status and prestige it had in Europe, and especially in France, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, only a few years before Foucault published “Qu’est-ce un auteur?” his book *Les mots et les choses* (1966); *The Order of Things*, 1970) became a bestseller in France after he was featured in *L'Express*, the French equivalent of *Time* magazine, as “MICHEL FOUCAULT,” the author of “THE GREATEST REVOLUTION SINCE EXISTENTIALISM.”²⁶ Although Barthes and Foucault proclaim the death of the author, the names of a few canonical white male authors (all French) – Flaubert, Mallarmé, Valéry, Proust –continue to circulate in their texts as sources of origin and authority.

But who exactly is this we and us and our who speaks so imperially and is constituted as an absolute assenting reader in the work of Barthes and Foucault? “The text is henceforth made and read in such a way that at all levels the author is dead,” asserts Barthes, but his passive and agentless grammatical construction masks the fact that Barthes is in fact generalizing into a universal fact the aesthetic assumptions of an elite group of French modernist writers and readers. Who makes and reads the text in such a way that “at all levels the author is dead?” For whom exactly is the author dead? And what precisely is the evidence beyond the fact of pure assertion, an absolute and totalizing assertion newly freed it would seem from the “limits” of an empirical tradition of proof and demonstration.

The fact is that as homosexual authors who would have had difficulty rising through the French academic system as gay philosophers, both Barthes and Foucault had a personal and historical interest in proclaiming the neutrality of writing as the “oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost.” (Barthes 142) Foucault

did not want his work “taken as talk about a potentially sequesterable minority,” says his friend Leo Bersani,²⁷ a comment that suggests the ways anonymity becomes for Foucault a means of masking his homosexuality and thus maintaining his unambiguous status as an author who speaks for everybody, not just a “sequesterable” group of gay men – a position that ends by normalizing heterosexuality as the voice of the non-sequesterable majority. Foucault’s philosophical insistence on a writing “freed” “from the dimension of expression” (102) also contradicts his actual political practice as a member of France’s Gauche Prolétarienne, an ultra-left group that undertook, as one of its activities, the organization of a “Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons” (Prison Information Group), which actively solicited statements from prisoners documenting the inhumane conditions of the French prison system. Obviously, in the case of prisoners bearing witness to the harsh conditions of the French penal system, it matters very much, for the purposes of political resistance, who is speaking and that this speech is neither a “game” of signifiers nor a sequence of freely circulating fictions.

The contradiction between Foucault’s philosophical theory and his actual political – and sexual – practice suggests the similarly problematic relation between poststructuralist theory and minority discourses in the United States. How, for example, are the assumptions of Barthes and Foucault about the privileges of authorship and subjectivity related to black writers and authors in the United States who could assume neither what Barthes calls ‘the prestige of the individual’ (143) nor what Foucault calls the “privileges of the subject” (119); who were in fact themselves constituted as “private property,” denied access to the “privileges” of reading and writing, and who were commonly regarded as incapable of imaginative or creative work. How does the poststructuralist notion of the death of the author relate to women, gays, blacks, and other minorities critics in the United States who are engaged in the work of what Richard Yarborough calls “literary archaeology”, of discovering, resurrecting interpreting, and keeping in circulation previously “dead” writers and texts, and for whom ethnic and minority authors are just beginning to live?

In questioning the assumptions of Barthes, Foucault, and other poststructuralist theorists about the death of the author and the subject, I do not mean to question their potentially emancipatory critique of traditional constructions of authorship and subjectivity and their in fact very important and productive idea that the emergence of modern authorship as a kind of private property in texts represents what Foucault calls a “privileged moment of individualization” that corresponds with the rise of western capitalism

(101) What I do mean to question is the extent to which this white western male narrative of the rise of individualism and authorship might be said to encompass or account for the cultural and social histories of women, lower class men, and people of color who were not accorded either the “prestige of the individual” or “the privileges of the subject” within western systems of power and representation. What the ideological readings of Barthes, Foucault, and other poststructuralist, Marxist, or new historicist readings of history do not sufficiently account for are the different and historically situated meanings self-ownership, individualism, writing, and authorship might have for women, blacks, and others who could assume neither the “prestige of the individual” nor “the privileges of the subject” that become the grounds for a single, totalizing, and (re)colonizing reading of history as subjection to capitalist ideology. In other words, against Foucault’s indifference, I would argue that it matters very much who is speaking, about what, from which particular social, historical, and political location.

Historically women, blacks, and other minorities in Anglo-European countries have not been burdened with too much individualism, subjectivity, identity, or authorship. On the contrary, they have struggled against a lack of self, identity, intelligence, and being in the representations of privileged white men. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., observes: “Deprived of formal recognition of their subjectivity in Western arts and letters, in jurisprudence, and in all that signals full citizenship, African-Americans sought the permanence of the book to write their rhetorical selves into language. I write therefore I am.”²⁸ For those traditionally deprived of voice, presence, and self-representation in the cultural productions of white men, what Foucault calls “the game” “of rediscovering the author” “since literary anonymity is intolerable” has quite a different meaning and “anonymity is intolerable” for quite a different reason than it would be to white men who have had access to print, publication, and the privileges of authorship. If to Barthes, Foucault, and other poststructuralist theorists the “author” represents a limit that reduces and impedes “the great danger” of freely circulating fictions, for minority writers, it is precisely the authentication or “discovery” of the fact that a text was written by a person of color that can constitute the greatest danger to white western male hegemony by challenging the freely circulating racial fictions in which western systems of knowledge, power, and dominance are grounded.

Barthes’s (post)modern notion of writing as “the oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost” (142) might be set in dialectical relation with the tradition of black autobiography, and the slave narrative in particular, where it is precisely in and through

writing that the black author seeks to give voice, identity, and rhetorical presence to the black subject made invisible and silenced by Western history and culture. Although Barthes, like Foucault, represents writing as “the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin” (142), both locate the “origin” of the death of the author in the “voice” of Mallarmé, perhaps thinking of his words in the essay “Variations sur un sujet” (1895-96; Variations on a Subject): “The pure work involves the disappearance of the poet’s voice, ceding the initiative to the words mobilized by the clash of their disparity; they illuminate one another in reciprocal reflections like a virtual trail of sparks on gem stones, replacing the breathing perceptible in the old lyric inspiration or the personal, enthusiastic direction of the phrase.”²⁹ Like T. S. Eliot’s assertion that “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium” in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919).³⁰ Mallarmé’s aestheticized notion of art as a “pure work” of language freed from the voice, personality, and history of the poet represents the classic statement of the formalist, and essentially neoclassical, reaction against the “old lyric inspiration or the personal, enthusiastic direction” of Romantic art; and it is to this modernist tradition of reaction against the Romantic cult of the author in France that the essays of Barthes and Foucault belong.³¹

But how might this universalizing narrative of literary history that begins with the death of the author (in France) and moves toward a theoretical conceptualization of art as linguistic play (in France) be altered if we were to set Mallarmé’s notion of the “disappearance of the poet’s voice” in dialogic relation with the “voice” and “origin” of W. E. B. Du Bois, writing only a few years later in the preface to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903): “Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.....**I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil**” (emphasis added).³² Against Mallarmé’s notion of a “pure work” of art in which the “poet’s voice” disappears, Du Bois asserts his flesh and bone presence, not as a private, transcendent, or alienated author, but as a black speaking subject who gives voice and meaning to the collective history and struggles of his people. Against Barthes’s essentially aestheticized and privatized notion of writing as intransitive, as the play of language without origin or object, Du Bois articulates the notion of a transitive art that has political designs in and on the reader and the world. Like those black authors who precede and follow him in the tradition of black autobiography in the United States, Du Bois writes a kind of resistance literature, seeking to bear witness to the the

“struggles of the massed millions of Black peasantry” who live “within the Veil” in the interest of bringing about a material transformation in the historical conditions of black people’s lives.

To read the writing of Du Bois and others engaged in the work of raising “the Veil” on “the deeper recesses” of black American history, in Mallarméan, modernist, or postmodernist terms as no more than gem-like configurations of words mirroring words risks making the “lived experience,” historical struggles, and cultural intervention and creation of blacks seem at best merely symbolic and discursive and at worst obsolete.³³ Although race and gender may be discursive constructions, they are constructions that have had, and continue to have, real material and historical effects. And it is precisely the real material violence and oppression of race and gender ideologies that the discourse theories of Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and other poststructuralist theorists and critics seem too willing to bracket in their emphasis on the discursive and nonreferential structures of language.³⁴

NOTES

01. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Selected Writings of Emerson*, ed. Donald Mc Quade (New York, 1981), 63; Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York, 1966), 233; Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself, in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold Blodgett (New York, 1973), 52.
02. F. O. Matthiessen, *From the Heart of Europe* (New York, 1949), 57.
03. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York, 1993), 56. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley, 1987), 18.
04. For comments on the gap between “radical” theory and radical political practice, see Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago, 1979); Edward Said, “Travelling Theory,” *Raritan* 1 (Winter 1982): 41-67; Carolyn Porter, “Are We Being Historical Yet?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 87 (1988): 743-80; Annette Kolodny, “Respectability Is Eroding the Revolutionary Potential of Feminist Criticism,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4 May 1988, A 52; Cornel West and Bell Hooks, *Breaking Bread: : Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston 1991).
05. Douglas Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, 1993).
06. Michael Warner, “From Queer to Eternity,” *Voice Literary Supplement*, June, 1992, 19.

07. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" ("Qu'est-ce un auteur?") 1969) Trans. Josue V. Harari, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York 1984), 120.
08. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 1-20. See also, "Criticism in the Jungle," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York 1984), 1-24; *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York, 1987); *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York, 1988).
09. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar, "Introduction: Criticism in the Borderlands," in *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, ed Héctor Calderon and José David Saldívar (Durham, 1991), 7. Shirley Lim, "Assaying the Gold: Or, Contesting the Ground of Asian American Literature," *New Literary History*, 24: 150.
10. Joyce A. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* (1986), 341-42, 337; "'Who the Cap Fit': Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates," *New Literary History* (1986), 378.
11. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14 (Spring 1988), 53.
12. Arnold Krupat, *For Those Who Came After: A Study of Native American Autobiography* (Berkeley, 1985), 1-27; *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley, 1989), 19, 20.
13. Jane Gallop, Marianne Hirsch, and Nancy K. Miller, "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York, 1990), 351-52.
14. Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York, 1991).
15. Gates, "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," 4; Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race, " *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (Autumn 1985), 35. See also, Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York 1986); Walter Benn Michaels, "Race Into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 655-85.
16. Christian, "The Race for Theory," 52.
17. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, Trans. Alan Bass (1967); Chicago, 1978), 278-93; Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1968), in *Image-Music-Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), 142-48; Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 101-120; LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York, 1968); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City 1969).

- 18 For studies of the relation between deconstruction and the New Criticism, see, Gerald Graff, **Literature Against Itself**; Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London, 1980); William Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies* (Baltimore, 1984).
19. Geoffrey Hartman, Preface, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom, Paul De Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, J. Hillis Miller. (New York, 1979), vi, viii.
20. J. Hillis Miller, "The Fuction of Criticism at the Present Time," *ADE Bulletin* 62 (Sep.-Nov. 1979), 12.
21. Catherine Gallagher uses the term "left formalism" to characterize the new historicism in "Marxism and the New Historicism," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York, 1989), 44.
22. Stephen Greenblatt, "Introduction," *Genre* (1982), 6; "Toward a Poetics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser, 1.
23. Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, 1978).
24. "Criticizing Feminist Criticism," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, 363.
25. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 143; Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 119. Subsequent citations will appear in the text.
26. Cited in James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York, 1993), 148-49.
27. Interview with Leo Bersani, cited in James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 256.
28. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Hungry Icon: Langston Hughes Rides a Blue Note," *Voice Literary Supplement* (July 1989), 8. In recent years, writes the black community organizer Sheila Radford-Hill, black women have been "profoundly immobilized" by a "deep-seated rupture in the structure of self-identity that black women have experienced." In "Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change," in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington, 1986), 164.
29. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Variations sur un sujet," In *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris, 1945), 366.
30. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London, 1920), 50.
31. In "What Was an Author?," *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 229-257. Molly Nesbit locates the essays of Barthes and Foucault on the death of the author in the context of debates about copyright law in France. In this context, she argues, Barthes's position was actually conservative in comparison with a

group of writers and artists who were eager to harness the new technology in the interest of an expanded notion of cultural production.

32. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics* (New York, 1965), 209.
33. See also Toni Morrison's comment on the importance of bearing witness to "the barbarity visited upon my people" and the "complicated psychic power one had to exercise to resist devastation", in "Rediscovering Black History," *New York Times Magazine*, 11 Aug. 1974, 16, 17.
34. In "The Straight Mind," Monique Wittig argues that "When we use the overgeneralizing term 'ideology' to designate all the discourses of the dominating group, we relegate these discourses to the domain of Irreal Ideas, we forget the material (physical) violence that they directly do to the oppressed people." In *Feminist Studies* (Summer 1980), 106. See also, R. Radhakrisnan's observation that Derrida's "'gestural' or 'citational' mode of invoking socio-political or historical reality and refusing to take it seriously," in "Racism's Last Word," *Critical Inquiry* (1985), 290-999, is "in the context of apartheid" "at best effete, at worst, seriously objectionable." In "Ethnic Identity and Post-Structuralist Differance."