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Contemporary African American Literature

**TOWARD THE THEORETICAL
PRACTICE OF CONCEPTUAL
LIBERATION: USING AN
AFRICANA STUDIES APPROACH
TO READING AFRICAN
AMERICAN LITERARY TEXTS**

GREG CARR AND DANA A. WILLIAMS

Africana Studies is an academic extension of what Cedric Robinson has called “The Black Radical Tradition.” This tradition is notable for emerging out of a pre-existing constellation of African intellectual work, shaped by millennia of subsequent migration, adaptation, and improvisation. Through the central acts of translation and recovery,¹ Africana Studies seeks to theorize out of long-view genealogies of African intellectual work. This process has been captured with striking impact by the writer and translator Ayi Kwei Armah, both in his fictional texts *Two Thousand Seasons* (1972), *KMT: In the House of Life* (2002), *Osiris Rising* (1995), and in his memoir/historiography *The Eloquence of the Scribes* (2006). Armah and other key theoreticians have set themselves the task of intentionally linking that series of migrations, adaptations, and improvisations from the origins of humanity to the present, integrating wave after wave of challenges and solutions to the problems of African human existence as a series of interlinked episodes, of which the period of enslavement and colonialism is a very recent and very temporary set of moments.

The key factor in assuming both this task and the intellectual posture that grounds it is the deliberate embrace of “long-view” memory: the same type of broad envisioning of the human experience that has long informed the intellectual posture of other societies (including the West) as an ideational construct. In fact, the truncation of the time/space

coordinates of memory—the amputation of memory as a consequence of the failure of educational institutions designed in part to reinscribe those memories as a critical element of equipping Africans to negotiate their futures on their terms—presents a theoretical crisis that the academic field and discipline of Africana Studies has set out purposely to engage and correct. The term “Africana,” then, should be used in the academic context of “Africana Studies” as a term that describes the creation of methods that fully integrate the study of people (Africans and African-descended communities), geography (Africa as well as any physical place populated by Africans), and culture (concepts, practices, and materials that Africans have created to live and to interact with themselves, others, and their environments).²

Any study of African people that does not begin with the recognition of and systematic reconnections to both the concept of African cultural identities and the specific, lived demonstration of them will only continue to erase Africans as full human beings and actors in world history. Indeed, among the most important questions to consider in any study of the human experience are the following:

- Who are the people being studied? Where did they come from, and how did they come to the experience being studied?
- How do people view themselves, their origins, and their world in any given time and place?
- How do people organize and govern themselves around common goals? How do they make decisions, resolve disputes, recognize authority, interact with others, and establish common tastes and styles, etc.?
- How do people use the materials and tools available to them to shape their physical environment?
- How do people remember what they have done, and how do they pass those memories to future generations?
- What have people created to express their thoughts and emotions to themselves and others?

Arguably, these questions are, or should be, present regardless of the people being studied. Scholars of the African experience in the United States and elsewhere must ask these questions as a continuing process of tracing and re-tracing the African experience from its origins in Africa to

the present. It also allows us to see African American contributions to the formation of “American identity” and other geographically local identity formations without reducing the person, people, texts, practices, and/or narratives to only the sum of those contributions. Approaching the African experience in the creation, evolution, and continuing reconfiguration of the United States requires seeing African American life as both an extension of African experiences and as contributions to the multinational society and culture that is the United States. Such an approach exposes the reader to the rich connections, differences, and shades of distinction among Africans across time and space.

The time between the beginning of documented settled human societies in Africa to the present is roughly approximate to twenty four times the period between Columbus’s Atlantic voyages and the present. The study of African people, however, is usually restricted to their experiences in European colonies, a time frame covering less than one thirtieth of the period of human history for which some type of record exists. Even though some mention is usually made of “preslavery” or “precolonial” Africa, the emphasized experience is the “modern” period, so named because of a framework that connects its institutions and cultures to “classical” and “medieval” Europe.

Most scholarship on the African American experience follows this narrative framework, outlining a “black” experience that shadows the themes that mirror the goals, objectives, systems, and narratives of European/United States history. This framework sees the African American experience only as it contributes to a United States narrative that begins with the establishment of “New World” European colonies and then connects the establishment of an independent United States to Manifest Destiny, the Civil War/Reconstruction, and finally to the emergence of the United States as a hemispheric and world power.

The African American experience is much more complex than the experience contained in this narrative frame. In fact, the continuing attitudes of many if not most African Americans toward United States domestic and foreign policy cannot be understood without recognizing the distinct experiences, worldviews, and perspectives of United States citizenry of African descent. The conceptual categories outlined throughout the rest of this chapter allow scholars to organize African experiences in the United States in ways that take them out of any particular narrative structure, thereby prompting them to raise the underlying questions

of how Africans looked at and experienced their worlds through time and space. Reading texts and experiences using these categories encourages students to ask differently prioritized questions about the subjects covered in coursework. These types of questions prompted by utilizing the Africana Studies Conceptual Category approach will make visible the choices made by the preparers of the course lessons, textbooks, anthologies, and teaching materials around what elements of Africana life to emphasize. The answers to most of the questions raised under each category will not be found in the text of the lesson or the textbook: they will require speculation and further research on the part of both student and teacher, the “extended learning” and “higher order” goal of classroom work.

CATEGORIES OF HUMAN INSTITUTIONS

While we can imagine an endless variety of approaches to organizing human culture and experiences, using the conceptual categories discussed below satisfies a threshold requirement of translating and recovering African experiences as part of a discipline-oriented Africana Studies approach to producing new knowledge about these experiences. A graphic depiction of the Conceptual Categories in a form that could be replicated for the classroom in an effort to have students consider the categories as a contrastive ensemble is included below:

Social Structure	Governance Structure	Ways of Knowing	Science and Technology	Movement and Memory	Cultural Meaning Making
What is/are the social structure(s) in place for the people discussed?	How did the Africans organize themselves during this period?	What kinds of systems did African peoples develop to explain their existence and how did they use those systems to address fundamental issues of living?	What types of devices were developed to shape nature and human relationships with animals and each other during this period and how did it affect Africans and others?	How did/do Africans remember this experience?	What specific music, art, dance, and/or literature/oratory did Africans create during this period?

SOCIAL STRUCTURES

“What was the social, economic, political, and/or cultural environment that Africans found themselves living under during the period under study?” Scholars and students asking this question are required to develop their ability to recognize the various types of social relations that African people found themselves in with regard to other Africans as well as with non-Africans. For example: any topic involving African people in the United States involves the emergence of an economic system that stressed capitalism, democracy, and Western-style Christianity. The various regional and local approaches to this system form the social structures under which African people lived as distinct from any ideas they had and/or developed about either the system or their engagement with it.

From the beginning of the United States national project, African people were positioned in a social structure that interacted with them as either chattel property or quasi-property—what most historians would call “free blacks.” At no time prior to the end of the United States Civil War did any Africans attain the federal status of United States citizen. After the United States Civil War, the reinscription of unequal race relations created a situation that remains unresolved: the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of full citizenship status of African people is still a subject of open debate, both within and without African American communities.

Africana Studies approaches to examining contemporary texts and practices begin with the varied physical environment of Africa, emptying into an enumeration of the range of social structures that Africans designed in these various regional contexts from prehistory through the modern era. Enumerating these African-derived structures as the exclusive structures that gave contour to their governance structures prior to their encounters with non-Africans allows the scholar to distinguish between these structures and the social structures that developed in the wake of African interaction with others that arose as a consequence of what became known as both the Arab and European (read: Atlantic) trade in material and human commodities.³ Scholars and students can now consider the texts and practices of African people in the specific context of emerging social structures under which Africans in West At-

lantic societies lived and continue to live in increasing complex ways, as well as their varying status within them.

GOVERNANCE

“What sets of common rules and/or understandings did Africans create to internally regulate their lives in the situation under study?” The historian Jan Vansina has written that all common societies create forms of governance to unite different communities into a larger whole. He goes on to say that such a whole will presuppose common goals, legitimacy based on a common worldview, a framework for resolving individual and social ills, and common leadership as well as common cultural tastes.⁴ Teachers utilizing an Africana Studies approach to investigating narratives must encourage students to search texts and learning materials for the varying sets of rules created, adapted, and encoded by African people to guide relations among themselves. What were the social units and customs created by Africans to manage their daily affairs and life activities, as well as those that emerged to govern how they interacted with non-Africans?

Arguably, most narratives on African Americans (fictional and non-fictional) have focused largely on the last category. As a result, students of African American history have become adept at equating how African people interacted with Whites with how they governed themselves, rather than distinguishing between the first conceptual category (Social Structures) and the second (Governance). Unlike questions raised under the category of Social Structures, questions under the Governance category will never move to focus on the external forces that govern African American life at any moment. As a result, the first and, by far, the longest period of African existence will see a convergence of these first two categories as long as African life is studied within a wholly African geographical, political, economic, and cultural context. The differences between Social Structure and Governance will focus on different types of African systems as they come into contact with each other. For example: how did the expansion of the “empire-style” governance systems represented by Ghana, Mali, Songhai, etc., differ from and or impact the lives and governance systems of those not previously subject to them?

How, for example, in the formation of Vodun in Haiti, did the type of governance structures incorporated by various Yoruba people help organize the conceptual contributions of Fon, Dahomey, and Akan Africans in a more systematic way reflective of the first group's orientation toward large-group, urban, and larger territorial arcs?

The historical period of most relevance regarding questions that focus on African encounters with Arabs and Europeans prior to and during the enslavement periods witnesses the occasion of the first major splits between "African" and "non-African" "races," cultures, social structures, etc. Africana Studies—anchored questions of texts, practices and narratives that emerge from this period forward require students to continue to look for evidence of internal governance among Africans, whereas most disciplinary studies of Africans do not stress—and many do not explicitly identify—unbroken genealogies of internal mechanisms for regulating "Black communities" as governance systems, however small, discrete, "subaltern," and/or peripheral to the seemingly dominant social structure in which they are retained, adapted, and utilized to order the private spaces of African life.

WAYS OF KNOWING/SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT

"What kinds of systems did African peoples develop to explain their existence, and how did they use those systems to address fundamental issues of living?" Making students aware that Africans developed their own systems of thinking about reality enables students to ask how Africans in the United States have retained elements of their African identities while adapting new experiences and cultures to the challenge of living. It also enables scholars and teachers to reorient their intellectual work in this regard to a methodology and method freed from the first-order question of whether or not these ways of knowing/epistemologies exist and, if so, whether or not they retain some explanatory force distinct from other cultural geographies or modalities.

Typical contemporary discussions of African American thought usually include discussions of African ways of knowing or systems of thought in specific references to "religion," "philosophy," "worldview," and/or related categories. Scholars and students oriented toward this Africana Studies approach should be encouraged, however, to question how Afri-

cans' ideas about themselves, the world, and the universe influenced every aspect of their lives and experiences, whether or not this question is addressed in a specific subject. Examples of African ways of knowing include but are not limited to: sacred written, oral, or material texts; systems of divination; creation stories; ideas about what is beautiful and/or good; ideas about life and death; and ways of understanding human beings relationships to each other and to nature, among other subjects. Importantly, students must be encouraged to search textbooks and learning materials to see how Africans continued to use their extended, adapted, and improvised worldviews to make sense of their struggles for self-determination. For example: A question might be conceived that leverages adapted African ideas about mass participation growing out of the Afro-Christian orientation of Mississippians, Alabamians, Georgians, Louisianans, etc., that envisions the so-called "Civil Rights movement" as the Africanization of contemporary American ideas about citizenship and participation.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

"What types of ideas about how nature works (science) did people develop, and/or what devices (technology) did people create to shape their natural, animal, and human environments?" Answers to this question will differ depending on the people being studied and the material circumstances that require the application of creative intelligences emerging from attitudes about nature and the human being; scholars should think about and students must be encouraged to identify how Africans expressed ideas about relationships between culture, science, and technology.

At the onset of human life on Earth, initially African uses of science and technology preceded and set templates for subsequent human innovations, including the creation of tools for hunting and gathering, animal domestication and husbandry, and the creation of sedentary societies organized around agriculture. Investigation of texts and practices that involve ongoing African technological adaptations should explore the appearance of this subject, from classical African hydraulic science and technology to subsequent innovations in transportation, food storage, and preservation, mineral extraction, and architecture, among other

subjects. Any narrative involving African people will likely feature some dimension of science and technology that could be investigated as a part of the integration of this category into the overall arc of inquiry. Such a process would introduce technological creations from multiple cultural sources, from the intervention of maritime technology from outside of Africa as well as the merging of African and non-African technologies in fields such as agriculture and warfare.

MOVEMENT AND MEMORY

This conceptual category asks the question, “how did Africans during the moment being studied preserve memories of where they had been and what they had experienced, and how did they pass these memories to future generations?” This subject is often reduced in scholarship to studies of written documents such as “slave narratives,” “folk tales,” or other categories similarly associated with history.

Scholars, teachers, and students utilizing an Africana Studies approach must be encouraged, however, to expand their ideas about memory to include any and all ways of communicating ideas about the past to future generations. Germaine subjects include searching for narrative traces of how Africans created architecture, writing systems, music, art, and oral narratives to preserve individual and group memory across Africa. Subsequent lessons give examples of how Africans began to see themselves as members of cultural—and, with the onset of enslavement, racial and subsequently class (and even gender)—groups, and how their memories of their experiences differed from the memories constructed by other groups about who Africans were. Narratives dealing with the experience of enslavement, for example, contain language describing how African people remember the stages of their capture and deportation from Africa as well as their slow process of building life and memory in the various countries of the West Atlantic.

CULTURAL MEANING MAKING

Closely related to the category on Movement and Memory, this conceptual category asks the question, “What specific types of music, art, dance,

and/or narratives did Africans create during the period under study?” Unlike their search for answers under the previous category, scholars and students should be encouraged to do two things: search for examples of African cultural production for the periods and subjects under consideration and provide contemporary examples of Africana cultural texts and practices that demonstrate elements of African meaning-making.

The work of scholars such as Yvonne Daniel and Robert Farris Thompson outlines and explains cultural elements that are found in some form in most if not all African cultural systems as they diverge and develop across time and space.⁵ Searching texts, practices, and narratives for historical and contemporary evidence of these elements will allow students to recognize the ongoing Africana in their contemporary lives as well as in the lives of the many countries in and outside of Africa where Africans currently reside. This exercise will reinforce the relevance of historical memory related to specific figures, events, and ideas in the African American experience by connecting them to the cultural production of the majority of Africans in the place and during the period under study. It also places the ideas and contribution of social, economic, political, and/or cultural elites—usually the most visible to communication networks beyond the African American community—in a more appropriate and less outsized representative context. This last objective lies at the center of the field and discipline of Africana Studies, the first and only academic field born directly out of mass protest, community organizing, and the leveraging of political and cultural capital for structural and institutionalized academic space in the Western academy.

In order to achieve the methodological objectives of Africana Studies contained in the questions that undergird the Conceptual Categories approach, scholars, teachers, and students must leverage the social, political, and cultural capital that attend the production of African narratives, texts, and practices to discern intellectual connections and engagements necessary to widen the tributaries flowing from African contributions to human knowledge and advancement.

From its inception, African American literature has been concerned foremost with ideas of liberation. Much of the early literature that made its way to print, in fact, was published for the express purpose of supporting the abolitionist cause. Even after slavery was abolished, African American writers were interested in a psychological and social liberation; and in more contemporary times through the present moment, a

considerable class of African American writers actively engages the idea of historical liberation—in other words, the liberation of diasporic African experiences from history’s falsities. More often than not, the central conflict in this contemporary African American historical fiction turns on the tension between a member of the African American community, who serves as a representative narrating central consciousness, and the white community, which serves as the implied antagonist. This subgenre of African American literature poses a basic question: *what happens when an outsider tells the story?* A crucial question that emerges from the above outlined conceptual categories and extends that basic question is: *what happens when an outsider also influences our ways of reading, knowing, and being?*

The attempt to use these conceptual categories to read a contemporary African American text is not without its challenges—the impetus to offer an Africana Studies reading (using the conceptual categories as the incubator for such a pursuit) of African American literary texts without consideration of and engagement with the full range of Africana Studies methodologies is a seductive (and potentially reductive) one. Yet, the dormant possibilities potentially made manifest by situating the two distinct disciplines (literary study as the discipline in the case of African American literature) beside each other are perhaps among African American literature’s few sources of meaningful liberation.

That African American literature and its correlative critical gaze stand in need of liberation (particularly as it relates to its tenuous relationship with mainstream Western theory) is at least part of the point Sandra Adell makes in “The Crisis in Black American Literary Criticism and Postmodern Cures of Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.”⁶ While Adell focuses her critique on Baker and Gates specifically, the point she makes—that “the current crisis in the critical reading of twentieth-century Afro-American writing has been deepened by certain philosophical and epistemological paradoxes arising from the incompleteness and inconsistencies of formal networks of principles such as the ones posited by . . . Baker . . . and . . . Gates” (523–24)—applies more broadly to the limitations of contemporary African American literary criticism that continue to plague the field even today. She argues convincingly that while Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Tradition* and Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory*

of *Afro-American Literary Criticism* both seek to generate theories of reading that emerge from and draw upon African American expressive culture and its traditions and that, correspondingly, differ meaningfully from traditional American (and perhaps Western) theoretical concepts, “both appropriate and marshal formidable epistemologies from structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction in order to make certain truth claims on behalf of the [African American] tradition” (525). As she makes clear, their appropriations are not problematic; in the sense that the obsession with contemporary literary criticism has undeniable roots in efforts to quell rising interest in ethnic literatures in general and African American literature in particular, their mastery of theory was quite the unexpected coup. Their appropriations do, however, reveal in full view the paradox, if not impossibility, of generating frameworks that emerge from within the culture but that assume the posture and structural (re)semblance of traditional epistemologies. In short, Baker’s invocation of Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and Hayden White and their epistemological assumptions about archeology and ideology and Gates’s Hegelian conceptualization of chiasmus to bring together hermeneutics as the Yoruban Esu and rhetoric as the diasporic trickster, she argues, set into motion the collapse of their version of blackness into itself, even as the noble goal is to recover and reveal African American expressive culture.⁷ Finally, in the essay’s penultimate paragraph, she observes that while both texts

fall short of their emancipatory goal of freeing Afro-American literature from the hegemony of Eurocentric discourses, both studies bring into sharp relief what can best be described as a nostalgia for tradition. For to summon tradition . . . by reconstructing it, is to search for an authority, that of the tradition itself. Such an enterprise . . . is inherently conservative. Something is always conserved; something always remains the Same. This is what makes the role of the black critic or anyone else concerned with advancing certain emancipatory ideas particularly burdensome (538).

Adell’s observation, I contend, is a sort of rhetorical/epistemological paradox itself since its recognition of the desire or nostalgia for tradition is wholly accurate, while its assumptions about the emancipatory potential of the summoning and reconstruction of tradition are marred by its epistemological conception of the very notion of tradition, which must

be (and is not for her) informed by the long-view genealogies of African peoples outlined above. Similarly, the recognition that advancing emancipatory ideas is burdensome is indisputably adept; but the burden is not tradition's assertion of an authority or its tendency to conserve an idea. Instead, the burden is to recover tradition (and by extension its authority) at its point of genesis and then to sustain (or conserve) that tradition's ways of being and knowing in any and all attempts to generate sound theory about the tradition's progeny in all its cultural manifestations.

Again, the temptation to impress a superficial "Africana Studies reading" upon African American literary texts (logical though it seems to those less aware of the former's underlying disciplinary assumptions, methodologies, and objectives—assumptions, methodologies, and objectives that are in direct and purposeful opposition to those in literary studies) is one that must be suppressed. What reading African American literary texts (those that lend themselves to such readings) through the lens of these conceptual categories can achieve here, however, and with much greater success in the future if done deliberately and with great care is the emancipatory goal to which African American literature has perpetually committed itself as a tradition.

EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE NORMATIVE CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES

In many regards, the application of the Africana Studies normative conceptual categories is most revealing when applied to early texts written by continental Africans in America. One such author might be Phillis Wheatley, whose *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) identifies the author as "Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant of Mr. John Wheatley of Boston, in New England." Literary scholars consistently celebrate Wheatley's achievements on the basis of her identity as an enslaved person. If she were indeed simply a "slave girl," if such a person can exist (Linda Brent notwithstanding), her abilities might be rightly viewed as exceptional, difficult to believe. The eighteen so-called "noble citizens" who encircled her to affirm her abilities would be justifiable. But

Wheatley was not simply a “slave girl.” When we consider her identity on Africana terms, she becomes a young Senegambian, who likely had no less than three tongues, her native Wolof, Arabic, and Fulani.⁸ And if she was taken from a part of the country where trade was common, she would have known even more dialects. If she had friends with parents from neighboring communities who spoke other dialects, she would have known those too.

Perhaps because of the limitations related to African American literature’s alliance with a mainstream discipline, little scholarship on Wheatley considers her African heritage in any meaningful way.⁹ Repeatedly, she is the “shining example of Negro genius” (Brawley in Flanzbaum 72), not Fatu, named after the Prophet’s daughter, not her siblings’ sister, not her peer’s playmates, not the average Senegambian child fluent in multiple tongues and, by her culture’s standards, far from illiterate. If we consider Wheatley in the context of continental Africa, she is the daughter of the first peoples to produce and preserve meaning through inscription; she is not an anomaly.

A cursory reading of “On Being Brought from Africa to America” using merely the first three categories makes the point here. When we consider the first category, social structures, we ask: *what social structures inform the text*—slavery and religion as intertwined institutions are readily apparent. The second category concerns self-governance, so we ask: *what rules govern the way Wheatley relates to others; and how does she orchestrate her social movement in light of her social structures*—slavery and its religious justification? With this question, we must be careful to consider the rules as Wheatley establishes them for herself, not as her enslavers establish them because the responses are very different based on whose rules we consider. Her rules of self-governance, as her letters to fellow Africans and her marriage to a man whom many saw as beneath her reveal, make clear that she does indeed create a social network independent of the one established for her by the Wheatleys. One rule that governs her movement is her memory of and fidelity to Africa, a fidelity that not only her letters but also much of her poetry supports. One can see how this complicates traditional readings of the poem, which suggests that she is grateful for the so-called “mercy” that brought her to America. Queries about her rules of self-governance, then, lead us to investigations

of the black community of which she was a part and, minimally, of their religious beliefs and ideological positions on slavery as a capitalist (rather than religious or moral) institution.

The third category, ways of knowing, requires us to ask: *what ideas about the nature, purpose, function, and process of existence and being could Wheatley have accessed to develop explanations of the world into which she was thrust?* How might she have used this newly developed but no less informed way of knowing to address issues related to her living in this period? When we consider the region from which she was likely taken, we must consider the probability that she and her family were Muslims. If this is true, we can assume that even as a seven year old, her consciousness was very much informed by a distinctly continental-African religious background. How then would a young woman who has been converted to Christianity but wrought with the memory of Muslim sensibilities have interpreted the word *pagan*? How would the fact that this same young girl knew Latin influence that interpretation further? Finally, how might she interpret Christianity as an alternate way of thinking about the nature, purpose, function, and process of existence and being to develop an explanation of her new world? The categories encourage if not implore us to consider as a possibility that Wheatley saw Christianity as an accretive religion that drew from traditions much older than itself. Under these terms, her seeming religious devotion is not to Christianity exclusively but rather to a broadly informed system of divination. Under these terms, too, her reference to Africa in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” as a “pagan land” refers not to its godlessness but rather to an awareness and acceptance of a much longer arc of religious traditions. *Pagan*, as Wheatley likely knows, does not have one accepted, static meaning. So she likely chooses the word purposefully and ironically (as indicated by her use of italics for the word in the poem) to refer to the religion from which early Christianity drew its rituals and to its use during the Roman Empire to mean *civilian*, or a non-military person, in which case her land is one of peace and civility. Such a reading heightens the irony that the end of the poem presents—a reminder that Negroes can be angels too.

In short, the normative conceptual categories, as pedagogical imperative, demand new ways of reading and new sets of questions. No

longer can we ask simply if and why Phillis Wheatley's poetry forced America, as represented by her panel of judges, to read anew, in the sense that her poetry demanded reconsiderations of the African's intellectual capacity. We can no longer simply consider her use of Latin to complicate and code her double-voiced poetry. Rather, we must read the text through language and cultural systems grounded in a politics of memory and translation germane to both Africana Studies and African American literary studies.

READING LALITA TADEMY'S *RED RIVER*: THE NORMATIVE CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL FICTION

Many of the earliest authors of "African American" literature remember Africa and invoke distinctly African cultural and historical experiences in their writing, assuring a useful reserve of material to facilitate textual readings using the conceptual categories. Yet, it is historical fiction in contemporary African American literature that likely benefits most from the application of the conceptual categories since contemporary texts require students to recreate from whole cloth the cultural and historical experiences the texts engage. Lalita Tademy's *Red River* (2007), set alternately before 1873 and after 1873 (through 1937), fictionalizes the massacre of 150 African Americans in Colfax, Louisiana. The novel seeks to correct the story and its misrepresentation by a marker that reads "On this site occurred the Colfax Riot in which three white and 150 negroes were slain. This event on April 13, 1873 marked the end of carpetbag misrule in the South" and by a "massive marble obelisk memorial almost twelve feet high dedicated to the three white men who died on that day" (416–17). The memorial is "Erected to the Memory of the Heroes of Stephen Decatur Parish, James West Hadnot, and Sidney Harris Who Fell in the Colfax Riot Fighting for White Supremacy, April 13, 1873" (417).¹⁰ From its opening lines to its final ones, the novel complicates ideas of history and tradition. It is the tradition and history of white supremacy that informs the markers, and it is the tradition and history of self and race pride that fuels the black community's resistance to this ill-begotten supremacy. A reading

of *Red River* through the conceptual framework offers a culturally based pedagogy that begins to address the limitations of history and tradition and emancipates the narrative from its oppressive discourses.

The novel's prologue warns the reader that "This is not a story to go down easy. . . . don't nobody want to talk about the scary time. Don't nobody want to remember even now, decades removed. . . . I don't hold with that point of view. . . . All I do now is remember and pray the story don't get lost forever. . . ." (Tademy 1). In this regard, the novel is concerned with the use of memory to negotiate, challenge, and generate varied levels of discourse and explanation, despite (or perhaps because of) the silence around the experience and legacy it narrates.

The first category calls for consideration of the social structure that undergirds the text. Students should readily recognize that *Red River's* narrative is multilayered, moving back and forth between the past and the present. So, they should be encouraged to consider how the social structure is similarly multifaceted. On one level, the experiences of the novel's characters are informed by the failure of Reconstruction; and on another, they are informed by the legacy of the black townspeople's attempt to "keep the courthouse" until Federal troops come (which never do) to ensure that the newly elected Republicans are allowed to govern in the majority black parish. On yet another level, the novel's social structure is informed by the period of enslavement; and that period too, has layers, recalling slavery before, during, and after the Civil War. Accordingly, students should be encouraged to consider each of these layers before they attempt to answer the questions *who are the people in the novel, where did they come from and when, and how did they come to the experience the novel explores?*

Considerations should minimally include the social, economic, political, and cultural environment that informs each of the layers. What is the circumstance of Reconstruction? How do Republicanism and carpetbaggers influence the novel's milieu? Why is segregation the rule of the day? Why do some whites side with the black townspeople? How do American ideas about land ownership influence the characters' choices and why? Why do the black townspeople risk their lives to vote? Why do they equate Reconstruction with citizenship and manhood? How do regional (north and central Louisiana) and local (Franklin and neighboring parishes) realities inform the social structure? How is the local so-

cial structure different from the other social structures invoked in the narrative? An in-depth engagement with this category also requires students to research or to be made aware of the social structure of the African communities from which the black townspeople might have conscious or unconscious memory. Students are then able to identify how these social structures have been maintained and adapted (and in some instances integrated into American society), and this awareness makes clear the distinction between an externally imposed social structure and an internally generated system of governance.

Questions related to the second category, governance, consider the common rules Africans created to structure and guide their communities internally. Students should identify rules that guide the way the black townspeople interact with each other. They should consider internal governance among families that know each other well and then among families who have only a passing familiarity with one another (taking some note of how negligible the distinction is in terms of behaviors, especially in moments of crisis). Students should be prompted to ponder things like why Hansom Brisco, upon his first encounter with Israel and Lucy Smith, convinces them to allow Hansom and his wife to take the infant Noby Smith (whom Israel and Lucy have resolved will die before the day's end) to see if Noby's life can be saved; and why Israel and Lucy agree to it. What undergirds Hanson's statement to Israel after the Briscoes have nursed Noby back to full health: "He's your son, always be yours, but they belong to all of us. . . . We can't spare a single one. I be watching this boy, not only for health for what use he put it to" (23). Why are the townspeople who are unwilling to participate in the efforts to "keep the courthouse" willing to risk their safety by providing shelter to those in danger once the massacre begins? Why do the men of the town insist on starting their own black freemason lodge? What are the implications of and what is the context for this institutionalization of community?

Notably, one of the novel's most crucial metanarratives—the practice of "shouting out" one's name—makes clear the ways self-governance can influence adaptability to or rejection of the social structure. Sam Tadem, one of the town's revered defenders, remembers the one time he saw his father before emancipation. The night before Sam's father runs away (he is to be sold the next day), he tries to persuade his family to run

with him. When Sam's mother refuses to go or to allow his father to take Sam and his brother, his father tells his sons the story his father told him. As the narration makes clear, his memory of and commitment to self-governance inform his rejection of the oppressive social structure. He passes this memory, which invokes Africa, on to his children, thereby influencing their ways of knowing, our third category. Imploring his sons to stretch out their hands, he tells them,

"Spread your fingers apart far as they go. . . . It's like your arm the river, and your fingers the smaller rivers running to the sea. The big one the river Nile. Bigger than any river you ever see. We come from the part with the little rivers, call the Nile Delta. Alexandria in Egypt, and Egypt in Africa. That where you from. Not this place. . . ."

"We got a name, a family name. My father tell me, and now I tell you."
 "Our real name Ta-ta-mee." (105–106)

Careful attention to the enslaved community's interaction one with another and in contrast to its interaction with whites, in short, reveals the ways the enslaved adapted to their social structure by recalling their pre-enslavement existence to create for themselves rules of self-governance that allowed them to retain their ways of knowing even in the most difficult of circumstances.

The third category—ways of knowing/systems of thought—connects with the governance category in prompting students to consider how the characters' ideas about themselves and their world impact their daily lives and experiences. In addition to the previously discussed transmission of naming and memory, important to the ways of knowing, governance, cultural meaning-making, and movement and memory categories, the question of the significance of education is raised by the ways of knowing category. Why is formal education—having a school and reading in particular—so important to the black community in *Red River*, and how does the community imagine that education will impact their lives? How does informal education, passed down from elders to apprentices in this community, reveal an understanding of humans' relation to the world that is distinct from the beliefs of the white community and that dictates the community's actions with its members and those outside of it? What worldview undergirds their quests for and achievement of self-determination? If their insistence that it be the black men

of Colfax (not the whites or the carpetbaggers) who defend the town is driven by an improvised world view that reaches back farther than slavery, what are the sources of this worldview? How or at what points does the novel begin to unravel Polly's claim in the prologue that "There [sic] a special way of seeing come with age and distance, a kind of knowing how things happen even without knowing why. Seeing what show up one or two generations removed, from a father to a son or grandson, like repeating threads weaving through the same bolt of cloth" (4)?

Interestingly, this "special way of seeing" and "kind of knowing how things happen" in the novel extends to the fourth category where students seek to uncover what ideas the narrative reveals about characters' awareness of how nature works. When Noby asks Israel "How long to Easter, Papa," for instance, students should note that Israel does not provide Noby with calendar dates. Rather, Israel responds: "Go look at that pecan tree, tell me what you see" (14). When Noby assesses the size of the leaves as the size of his thumbnail, Israel informs Noby that "Spring don't come to Louisiana till the pecan trees leaf out, leaves at least big as the quarter dollar we got buried in the backyard. . . . Easter come about the same time. We got almost three weeks till it safe to plant new in the garden, otherwise late frost likely come and steal up all our labor" (14). Students will likely recognize Noby's awareness of nature and his surroundings as both learned and intuited and equally of practical and cultural/political import. When Noby hears his father say that the white men are gathering at Summerfield Springs and that no one knows what they are planning, Noby, determined "to be a part of what the colored Colfax men are doing" (59), knows that "a nine-year-old colored boy by himself can slip in and out of places none of the men in the courthouse can" (59). The narrator reveals:

Noby has always been good at course-plotting, as his father taught him, interpreting the clues offered by the sun, stars, or moon, observing wild-life and vegetation, monitoring where moss grows on trees or how the mistletoe drapes. His sense of direction is keen and specific, and once he travels a path, the most obscure landmark is implanted in his head from that day forward (59).

He reaches Summerfield Springs undetected, hears the white men's plan, and returns to the courthouse to warn the black men of the ensuing at-

tack. Here, students should contemplate what the novel reveals about the relation of nature to the cultural and political. Students might also consider the novel's commentary on hunting, noting that Jackson Tademys prefers to trap rather than to shoot his prey, while his brother Green, who accidentally shoots and kills himself while hunting, consistently shoots his prey at first sight. Some attention should also be given to the technologies used for warfare in the novel, so students should consider minimally how technology influences the outcome of the massacre and how the black community relies on nature to survive in the years following the massacre. Does the novel suggest that there is any point in distinguishing between nature and technology?

The fifth category, movement and memory, implores students to search for textual markers such as architecture and/or written and oral inscriptions that reveal the preservation of memory. Students will likely note that the most notable architecture in the novel is the obelisk that memorializes the three white men who were killed. What they must take even greater care to note, however, is the fact that the obelisk has origins in Egypt, which is where the Tademys, through memory handed down orally, trace their African origins. Students' awareness of the African origins of the obelisk, coupled with their consideration of the novel's references to black and white freemasons, will prompt them to note the relation of architecture and inscriptions of memory. The obelisk, they will discover, is one of many architectural achievements of Egyptian influence that inspires cemetery memorials in the nineteenth century. This awareness will also, no doubt, complicate the novel's commentary on movement and memory, causing students to query why the whites publically perform movement and memory, while the black community does so privately and ambiguously? When their manhood is threatened, the Tademys men shout out their African family name in a private ritual inspired by Sam's father's concession that while he can only whisper the family name on the night he runs away, "one day [Sam and his brother] gonna shout it out so everybody hear, and your children gonna shout it so they remember who they is. . . . You got strong, free, fighter's blood in you . . . and when you make your own sons, teach them to shout out they name like they know who they is" (107). The basis of the ritual is their Egyptian ancestry (their lineage as descendants of peoples phonetically called "Ta-ta-mee" from the Nile delta), yet the one public inscription

of Egyptian memory (the obelisk) is confined to white freemasons who are undoubtedly unaware of its African origins. This irony alone will encourage students to recover African culture and to see how its integration into Western societies requires higher order thinking to access revelations about movement and memory.

The final category, cultural meaning making, requires students to search the text for examples of African cultural production (music, art, dance, narrative, etc.) that demonstrate how characters make meaning that is distinctly African in a particular temporal/spatial experience. What ongoing extensions of African cultural life are present? How does the shouting out of the Tademy name mirror or extend the African ring-shout? How have the religious practices narrated in the novel been modified to reflect African culture? This category might inspire students to consider McCully's oratory about his "voting hat," a brown fedora with a "phoenix" feather in the brim. When Sam teases McCully that the feather "come from one of the birds common as dirt around here," (32), McCully chides: "You showing a terrible failure of imagination. This here a rare feather from the phoenix bird what lived in the desert for five hundred years, go up in flames, and raise itself up brand-new from the ashes" (32). McCully makes his own meaning for the hat: "I wear it the day we vote them men in, and I keep on wearing it till they take up the office for good. Just like this here phoenix feather, we gonna get stronger and stronger and rise from the ashes where we been" (32). Sam accepts McCully's lore about the hat, and he accepts the hat and its meaning from McCully just before he dies protecting the courthouse. Sam then passes the hat to his son Jackson, who accepts it along with the challenge of uplifting the race; Jackson passes it on to his grandson Ted, who knows it only as his GrandJack's "funeral hat" until Jackson tells him about McCully (who is also Ted's great-grandfather), the phoenix (Ted rightly calls it a heron feather), and the responsibility that comes along with possession of the hat. Bequeathing the hat to Ted, Jackson, just before he "consume[s] himself with the selfishness of dying," tells Ted:

"This not a gift. . . . This hat a responsibility. Names of men you never gonna know lay buried in the ground for you. Can't change the past, but don't mean you not in somebody's debt. This hat mean no matter how much time pass, no matter how dark it seem, you not allowed to turn your face to the wall, throw up your hands, forget. . . ."

“Your day coming, and when it does, it be clear to you. . . . A man sometime don’t know who he is until somebody expect something from him. We all expecting in abundance. Don’t disappoint.” (408)

Ultimately, the text itself becomes an African cultural production, exploring memory to give voice to meaning-making systems the black people in Colfax create before and after the massacre that is memorialized by the whites as a “riot.” As Sam and Polly note: “Words matter in how people see, how they gonna remember. Easter Sunday 1873 be the Colfax Massacre, not the Colfax Riot, and the only shame be we didn’t get the parish power to the hands of the Republicans” (209).

Polly warns us from the beginning that the story “won’t go down easy.” Using the categories to enhance traditional readings of the novel inevitably encourages and requires students to move beyond first order thinking as it relates to the novel to complicate our ways of thinking, reading, and being and, ultimately, to liberate the text from the limitations of the noteworthy and historical but decidedly hegemonic discourses such as lynching, masculinity, white supremacy, and citizenship that it engages. Notably, the novel does not provide the answers to the questions raised when reading it through the lens of the categories. Nor should it; rather, the novel, like all good literature, should provoke inquiry, incite curiosity, inspire new thinking. It is our task as readers—as teachers and learners—to bring to the text an approach to reading African American literature that is committed to avoiding the philosophical and epistemological paradoxes that plague traditional African American literary criticism. Such an approach must begin and end with underlying assumptions that emerge from and privilege the ways of being and knowing that characterize and reflect the people and experience being studied as revealed by the long arc of their history. As *Red River* and so many African American texts unveil, reading our literary cultural heritage in light of memory and of the genealogical heritage of historical and cultural experiences matters. Such readings will undoubtedly render fully visible, for the keen eye and introspective student, principles, practices, and rules that lend themselves wholly not only to fertile advances in African American literary criticism and pedagogy but also to rewarding revelations about the African American text’s interminable ability to negotiate, control, and generate multiple levels of discourse that are both regenerative and liberating.

NOTES

1. See Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, (New York: Basic, 2008).

2. This critical point identifies the line of demarcation between Africana Studies as an academic discipline and the other academic fields and disciplines. Much of the work currently categorized under the title “Africana, Black, and/or African American Studies” is in fact a potpourri of scholarship that has only the subject matter—African people, experiences, texts, and/or practices—in common. For two generations, scholars trained and training graduate students in the field and discipline of Africana Studies have struggled to establish and maintain autonomous disciplinary spaces for this work. This essay serves in part to suggest one possible approach to both establishing a disciplinary approach to the field and engaging in interdisciplinary work with other fields. On the subject of Africana Studies, disciplinarity and the distinction between what is and is not representative of the field and discipline, see Carr, “What Black Studies is Not: Moving From Crisis to Liberation in Africana Intellectual Work” (Donald Smith Distinguished Lecture at Baruch College, New York, December 6, 2010).

3. David Levering Lewis notes that in a 1906 research proposal to the Carnegie Institution of Washington, DC, W. E. B. Du Bois outlines a substantially similar project of separating African life and experience from a reduction to the social structures that Africans encountered during enslavement. Lewis writes that Du Bois proposed that Carnegie fund a multyear research project that would begin with historical studies of Africa before adding an analysis of the period of United States enslavement and the systems of postbellum education, economics, and politics before adding a comparative study of enslavement throughout the Western Hemisphere and in Africa. This enumeration of social structures would have been accompanied by a simultaneous consideration of racial types, intermixtures, and, critically, “ethnic and cultural variations on the African continent” and would culminate with “sociological studies intended to consolidate, classify, and derive ‘scientific’ generalizations” (242–243).

4. See Vansina’s *How Societies are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

5. See Daniel’s *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005) and Thompson’s *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984).

6. Adell’s comments should be considered amid the myriad of responses to the post “Reconstruction of Instruction” moment in African American literary criticism. Key among these conversations are the dialogic exchange between Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Joyce Ann Joyce in *New Literary History* (the Winter 1987 issue), among others; Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory” and Michael Awkward’s response to Christian in “Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism”; and most recently Reggie Scott Young’s “Theoretical Influences and Experimental Influences: Ernest J. Gaines and Recent Critical Approaches to the Study of African American Fiction.”

7. Adell argues of Gates especially: “the more the black theorist writes in the interest of blackness, the greater his Euro-centrism reveals itself to be. . . . [Esu and the Signifying Monkey] are de-Africanized, as it were, and in Gates’ version, they ‘speak’

like transmogrifications of all the hermeneutical (Esu) and rhetorical (Signifying Monkey) paradigms post-structuralism has made ready-at-hand for him" (534).

8. See Carole A. Parks's "Report on a Poetry Festival," *Black World* 23.4 (February 1974): 92–97.

9. Recent criticism that seeks to defend what seems to be a reluctance on Wheatley's part to be critical of slavery fails in this regard as well. Walt Nott, for instance, argues in "From 'Uncultivated Barbarian' to 'Poetical Genius': The Public Presence of Phillis Wheatley" that Wheatley's "symbolic transformation in the eyes of contemporary white Anglo-American culture from 'Barbarian' to 'Genius' suggests her successful crafting of a public persona" (22). While he celebrates her ability to craft a public self, he fails completely to consider her existence beyond the immediate context of the eighteenth century and its public discourse. Again, in Wheatley's defense, R. Lynn Matson, in "Phillis Wheatley—Soul Sister?," an article published at the height of "corrective," pro-Wheatley scholarship, seeks to deconstruct longstanding and prevailing arguments that Wheatley can be condemned for "failing to espouse in any way the plight of her race" (222). But Matson does not attempt to construct Wheatley as a "Soul Sister" by reconstructing her as a continental African first and foremost. Instead, Matson argues for Wheatley's affinity to blackness on the basis of her written correspondence, or, her letters. Indeed, some of the letters are revealing in this regard. And while the points Matson makes are valid, she depends on the letters, not Wheatley's poetry, as the source from which we are to make the case for the racial readings of the poet. A reading of her poetry using the conceptual categories allows her poetry to accomplish this as, if not more, effectively.

10. Both markers still stand in Colfax, Louisiana, the first at the courthouse and the second at the cemetery. As Tademiy writes in the Author's Note, her visit to the courthouse was initially to research her father's family history. Only after seeing the marker and then the memorial and hearing her aunt's curt confirmation ("Our people were there. . . . Some got out, and some didn't") does the incident that ultimately shapes the narrative inspire parallel research and provide the lens through which to narrate her father's family history.

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