
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit contributions for publication and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal discourages footnotes and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

African and African American Literature

To the Editor:

In his introduction to the special issue on African and African American Literature (105 [1990]: 11–22), Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has written an inspiring and optimistic analysis of our part of the profession at the end of the 1980s. However, he depicts the current situation in terms that are far too sanguine, and he lets the profession off much too easily.

Having entered the field of African American literature during the first of the historical periods Gates defines, the 1960s, and continued in it to the present, I cannot suppress the thought that history is all too capable of repeating itself unless certain basic attitudes change. The 1960s saw a great surge of interest in what were then termed “black” authors. Several series of lost African American works appeared, many of them in inexpensive paperback editions that could be used in the classroom. Prestigious journals printed articles on African American authors for the first time. A chosen few of these authors even began to appear in nonsegregated territory for the first time—in general anthologies of American literature.

But tokenism remains a serious problem to this day, and two contradictory statements in Gates’s introduction call attention to one of the root causes. Gates states that there is “keen competition” for “talented job candidates” in the fields of African and African American literature (19), but he also acknowledges that he wrote forty-nine letters of recommendation for “one talented white job candidate in African literature; all forty-nine applications were unsuccessful” (12).

In areas that the profession takes seriously, factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender are overlooked. When institutions are more interested in window dressing than in quality, those factors become nearly the sole criteria. When was the last time an institution insisted on hiring a recent immigrant from England to teach courses in British literature? Yet it is obvious from the experience of Gates’s colleague that in our field a job announcement for a position in African literature might as well include a color chip such as one uses to pick out paint: match this or be darker and we’ll be interested in talking with you.

Would a department in search of a professor specializing in Victorian fiction make any such distinction? It would not. It would seek out the best qualified applicant it could find.

In the African American field, however, institutions have not progressed beyond the thinking of the 1960s. A novel of that period, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1969), by Sam Greenlee, illustrates that attitude nicely. The protagonist, Dan Freeman, is hired by the CIA, not because he will make an excellent agent, though he is well qualified, but because the agency needs a visible token black to sit by the door and be seen by visitors.

Existing federal laws, now being enforced, protect us from our enemies on the right. What we must now learn to do is to protect ourselves from our friends who are slightly left of center. The white groupies who flocked into my black literature classes in the sixties have now grown up. Many seem to be running prestigious educational institutions.

But their enthusiasm is still artificial, and their influence is more negative than they realize.

African American writers have contributed some of the most telling pages in our national literature. They do not need special pleading, but they need to be read fairly and given a chance in the classroom by all of us. As long as they are taught *only* in segregated courses, *only* by African American teachers, they will not become a part of the experience of all the teachers and all the students of American literature.

Only when a large cross section of the profession is exposed to this literature and becomes sincerely convinced of its intrinsic merit can we sit back and congratulate ourselves. To involve the whole profession, we must welcome women and men of all races and treat the research and teaching of these texts like the serious business that it is.

The special issue of *PMLA* is a wonderful positive step, but Gates notes that previously only three articles in the field of African American literature had ever appeared in the journal. It will be interesting to see how many appear in general issues during the next hundred years.

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To the Editor:

I am compelled to respond to Henry Louis Gates's introduction to the African and African American special issue. The Division of Black American Literature and Culture hardly emerged from Cambridge. Though even Darwin T. Turner had failed, despite quite conscientious efforts, to establish African and Afro-American literature as part of one unified body in the MLA during the institution of the current format for divisions, African literature readily secured a division for itself. While the African preference was well in place, the study of indigenous black literature was relegated to the Discussion Group on Afro-American Literature. By 1981, bolstered by Chester J. Fontenot, Jr., and others, the discussion group moved to become a division. After a proposal was petitioned in 1982, the new division began official operation in 1983.

Crucial to the application were many letters of support from African Americanists of all persuasions, notably from Turner, who provided a handwritten history and appeal; Houston Baker, who wrote a long letter on Penn stationery; William Andrews, who stood by the idea; and Kenneth Kinnamon, who gave general support. Joseph N. Weixlmann, Jr., the conscientious editor of *Black American Literature Forum*, was receptive to the request that the journal become the official organ of the body. Several years later Jerry Ward and others would formalize the arrangement within the MLA hierarchy. Though Henry Louis Gates would not appear on the centennial program in New York in 1983—and would not indeed become influential in the association until 1986—Houston Baker graciously volunteered to appear in a session entitled The Legacy of George E. Kent, hence honoring the only black scholar to be valued in this way.

Besides Kent, who is omitted from the Gates canon of twenty-five meritorious scholars, I would document the importance

of traditional Americanists (Thadious Davis and Kenny J. Williams) who have pioneered diverse opportunities for blacks; extremely productive black women (Barbara Christian, Valerie Smith, Frances Smith Foster, Nellie Y. McKay, and Trudier Harris) who have seized their own intellectual independence from any prescribed school such as that of structuralism and poststructuralism; and Europeans as well as Euro-Americanists (Jean Wagner, Barbara Johnson, Phyllis Klotman, John Riley, and Michel Fabre), who have sought to authenticate black literature on its own terms.

I point to the professional contributions of Hammett Worthington-Smith and Arlene Clift, who paved the way for the division as we now know it, and R. Victoria Arana and Joyce Joyce, well-respected scholars who have hosted receptions for the division in Washington—first in 1984, the year immediately following the inception of the body, and once more in 1989. Though several friends have called to express absolute incredulity at one more omission from the voices empowered by Gates, I insist that he has every academic freedom to canonize the critics he values. Here it will suffice to say that the invisible man appeared on the MLA program fourteen times in the last decade; wrote and revised the proposal for the division; wrote and revised the proposal of the only black-author society ever to achieve allied-organization status; and wrote or edited several books reviewed well at home and abroad. Gates, in tone and idea, on the contrary, introduces an edited text of *PMLA* that would displace the performed voicing of black America within the MLA itself. His rhetorical strategy skillfully revoices the quest for the Euro-American audience on its own terms, reminding us perhaps of my superb white student who proposed once that the classic distinction between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois was that the former insisted on giving the world what it wanted whereas the latter intended to give it what it needed.

The Gates solution—as proposed by classical rhetoric—is to speak within the language that now has democratic favor, hence reinforcing the idiom already imprisoning our thought. The abandonment of “quotas,” he says, has facilitated the admission of women to “*heretofore elite male institutions*” (my italics; 13). Simultaneously, the “acceptance” of black literature in the States has “improved dramatically” since 1985—all of this now happily verified by the “continuous searches” (my italics) for junior and senior professors of African American, African, or postcolonial literatures. While African Americanists (but surely not white Africanists) are commonly competed for nationally (his partial fiction reads), institutions do mistakenly conflate the issues of affirmative action and true excellence in black studies.

It is the profoundly reactionary subtext of the Gates position that is so troubling. His arbitrarily imposed bifurcation of textuality and history reduces the very process of textual speaking—the *being* of textuality—to the impotent parameters of merely inscribed and signified forms. But the literary body is anthropomorphic, partaking of not only its own verbal world but its own life; this is the reason that Coleridge's use of the term *organic* was so apropos not only in the suggestion of a structural relation of interwoven strands but in the vitality (*the essence*) of literary art.