

HOW TO READ AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

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*Post-Civil Rights Fiction
and the Task of Interpretation*

How to Read African American Literature offers a series of provocations to unsettle the predominant assumptions readers make when encountering post-Civil Rights black fiction. Foregrounding the large body of literature and criticism that grapples with legacies of the slave past, Aida Levy-Hussen's argument develops on two levels: as a textual analysis of black historical fiction, and as a critical examination of the reading practices that characterize the scholarship of our time.

Drawing on psychoanalysis, memory studies, and feminist and queer theory, Levy-Hussen examines how works by Toni Morrison, David Bradley, Octavia Butler, Charles Johnson, and others represent and mediate social injury and collective grief. In the criticism that surrounds these novels, she identifies two major interpretive approaches: "therapeutic reading" (premised on the assurance that literary confrontations with historical trauma will enable psychic healing in the present), and "prohibitive reading" (anchored in the belief that fictions of returning to the past are dangerous and to be avoided). Levy-Hussen argues that these norms have become overly restrictive, standing in the way of a more supple method of interpretation that recognizes and attends to the indirect, unexpected, inconsistent, and opaque workings of historical fantasy and desire. Moving beyond the question of whether literature must heal or abandon historical wounds, Levy-Hussen proposes new ways to read African American literature now.

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For students of literature, African American Studies, and American Studies, *How to Read African American Literature* offers an overview and original interpretation of the themes, forms, and critical practices that characterize contemporary black literary studies. Foregrounding the large, influential body of literature and criticism that grapples with legacies of the slave past, the book is organized by two central questions: How and why does such a voluminous modern literature turn its attention to the history of slavery? And, how has the rise of black historical fiction come to shape critical desires, habits, and expectations within the field of African American Studies? Through engaging readings of canonical and non-canonical novels and the scholarly discourse that surrounds them, readers will gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between present-day political disaffection and literary fantasies of the past. They will see how psychoanalysis, memory studies, and feminist and queer theory illuminate both the operations of trauma and desire *within* a textual world, and the formative effects of trauma and desire on readerly expectations about what a textual encounter can or should provide. Identifying the limits and costs of today's dominant interpretive practices, this richly theoretical yet accessibly written book makes a case for rethinking the terms and stakes of reading post-Civil Rights era African American literature.

INTRODUCTION

SUMMARY

Since the final decades of the twentieth century, the theme of historical memory has emerged as the defining preoccupation of African American literature and literary criticism. The 1970s, eighties, and nineties saw the rise of an acclaimed sub-genre of African American literature, retroactively named the contemporary narrative of slavery; and by the turn of the millennium, historical fiction was widely recognized as *the* dominant mode of post-Civil Rights black writing. Opening with a discussion of the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's commentary on her approach to writing historical fiction, the introduction provides a preliminary sketch of the state of the field of African American literary studies. According to this sketch, the field's "historical turn" occurs as a complex grief response to the premature decline of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The political, civic, and psychic dismantling of this movement is experienced as a loss that re-activates prior, unredeemed losses, lending new urgency and emotional proximity to narrations of the history of slavery. But, if some critics welcome and reiterate the historical turn, insisting upon its moral and psychological necessity, then others lambast it, portraying the desire for historical return as impossible and dangerous. The introduction glosses both of these critical perspectives—naming them *therapeutic reading* and *prohibitive reading* respectively—and posits a modified psychoanalytic approach as an alternative hermeneutic that affords unique resources for reading African American literature. The introduction also identifies for later consideration (in chapter three) an understudied archive of contemporaneous, anti-historical black fiction.

CHAPTER ONE

AGAINST PROHIBITIVE READING (ON TRAUMA)

SUMMARY

Chapter One introduces the literary historical phenomenon of the contemporary narrative of slavery through close readings of several representative texts, as well as essays and books by their most ardent critics. The novels examined—Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Jazz*, David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*, and Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits*—invoke clinical and humanistic descriptions of traumatic memory when they depict contemporary fantasies of returning to and repairing the slave past. By reading fiction alongside theoretical literature on trauma, the chapter reveals an elaborate structure of historical desire at work in contemporary narratives of slavery. In them, the promise of historical return and redemption is unmistakably foreclosed, even as the desire for return persists, and indeed, powers the novels’ various plot progressions. Such an understanding of contemporary narratives of slavery defies accusations levied against them by an interpretive orientation the author calls prohibitive reading. According to its proponents: 1.) contemporary narratives of slavery hold out an impossible promise of historical redemption, and 2.) we must turn away from black historical fiction to put the past behind us. In addition to contesting the particular interpretations that prohibitive reading yields, Chapter One shows how prohibitive reading is itself ironically bound up with traumatic modes of memory and desire. Finding symptomatic traces of traumatic memory in critical texts that seek to disavow the racial past, the chapter proposes that a pervasive sense of loss powers not only the contemporary narrative of slavery, but also, the criticism that ostensibly renounces this genre’s psychological structure and historical attachments.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. According to proponents of prohibitive reading, what is dangerous about historical fiction, and how would we best address such dangers? What can prohibitive reading teach us, and how does it threaten to limit our critical perspective?
2. Why have scholars in African American Studies traditionally resisted the use of psychoanalytic methods? How do you think we should weigh their credible reservations against the kinds of thinking that psychoanalysis uniquely makes possible?
3. Does literature bear responsibility for the truthful representation of history? Where, if at all, should we draw the boundaries of creative license when considering historical fiction?

CHAPTER ONE

AGAINST PROHIBITIVE READING (ON TRAUMA)

4. How is Kenan's representation of intergenerational trauma in *A Visitation of Spirits* different from Morrison's depiction of traumatic time in *Beloved*? Are the two models of trauma mutually exclusive?

CHAPTER TWO

FOR CONTRADICTION (ON MASOCHISM)

SUMMARY

Chapter Two begins with the difficult truth that literary fantasies of reparative return to the slave past—though often interpreted as fantasies of gaining freedom—necessarily entail the pursuit of pain or self-injury. In other words, we cannot extricate the desire to redeem the slave past from the desire to re-experience historical suffering. Instead of regarding the re-inscription of pain as a sign that contemporary narratives of slavery are bad for their readers (as a proponent of prohibitive reading would say), this chapter turns to theories of masochism to discern how African American literature navigates this uncomfortable paradox. On what terms, if at all, may we imagine painful fantasies of inhabiting slavery as liberating or empowering? Although the concept of masochism originated as a psychopathological category, naming a maladaptive approach to managing desire, a growing body of feminist and queer theorists have sought to re-conceptualize masochism as a promising, or even therapeutic strategy for managing traumatic memory. Reflecting the author's own mixed feelings about masochism's alternatively espoused potential to re-inscribe pain or liberate us from it, this chapter unfolds as a double-voiced, thick description of the ways in which masochism operates within contemporary black fantasies of history and identity. The political philosopher Wendy Brown and the literary critics Elizabeth Freeman and Darieck Scott provide the major theoretical coordinates for this chapter. With and against their seemingly incompatible treatments of masochism, the chapter reads and re-reads two contemporary narratives of slavery: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Describe the conceptualizations of masochism offered by Freud, Brown, Freeman, and Scott. Which do you find most compelling? Does sympathy for one preclude openness to others?
2. What kinds of therapeutic potential and what kinds of risks attend acts of reclaiming, reenacting, or rejecting one's shame, debasement, or objectification?
3. Do you agree with Octavia Butler's claim that responsible living in the present requires us to know *and feel* ancestral suffering?
4. In *Corregidora*, Jones's protagonist tells us that we cannot adequately address the historical trauma of slavery without looking into the domain of the sexual. What is the basis for this claim? What are the analytical limits of non-sexual theories of masochism?

CHAPTER THREE

THE MISSING ARCHIVE (ON DEPRESSION)

SUMMARY

Chapter Three begins with the claim that many contemporary narratives of slavery minimize or deny the forms and objects of grief that characterize black life in the present. By contrast, this chapter identifies several contemporaneous texts—Andrea Lee’s *Sarah Phillips*, James Alan McPherson’s “Elbow Room,” and Alice Randall’s *Rebel Yell*—that decenter slavery as a thematic concern to foreground more proximate sources of collective racial grief, such as the loss of black political leadership, the end of the sixties and the spirit of white liberal backlash, and the rise of black conservatism. Although critically acclaimed, *Sarah Phillips*, “Elbow Room” and *Rebel Yell* are remarkable for their relative neglect by scholars of African American literature. Indeed, the author argues that this “missing archive” contains those stories that black historical fiction *cannot* claim, the stories whose disavowal marks the boundary of today’s African Americanist literary/critical hegemony. To illuminate the narrative structure of these primary texts, the novels and short story are read alongside psychoanalytic theories of melancholia and theories of depression derived from affect theory. Acknowledging despair while retreating from the dramatic scale of trauma, such modes of conceptualizing racial grief are essential to understanding the psychic economy of post-Civil Rights black psychic life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Theories of trauma and theories of melancholia offer different narratives about how loss is incorporated into the self and experienced over time. Compare and contrast these models of grief, and consider how they map on to different accounts of African American history.
2. How and why does the chapter read *Sarah Phillips*—the story of an escapist, apolitical, elite expatriate—as an allegory for post-Civil Rights black feeling? What should we make, more generally, of the alienation and exceptionality of each protagonist studied in this chapter?
3. How and in what sense does the chapter arrive at the conclusion that contemporary narratives of slavery which are ostensibly driven by trauma may *also* be read as a melancholic oeuvre?

CHAPTER FOUR

READING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE NOW

SUMMARY

Chapter Four synthesizes and applies the findings of the preceding chapters through readings of Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. Analyses of these meta-fictional and meta-historical novels yield a temporally intricate genealogy of the contemporary narrative of slavery, and offer new models for envisioning the psychic life of African American literature.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. In what ways does *Oxherding Tale* complicate received understandings of black historical fiction? How does it invoke and pay homage to the contemporary narrative of slavery, and how does it critique and subvert this influential genre?
2. How does *Paradise* identify and address gendered aspects of narrating trauma, memory, and desire?
3. Compare and contrast the images of epiphany in which the two novels culminate. What is revealed in these scenes? How, if at all, do these revelations re-orient us toward the primary texts examined in Chapter One?
4. What would it look like to use this chapter as a model for literary interpretation? Extract the chapter's basic interpretive principles, and apply them to your analysis of another work of black historical fiction.

POSTSCRIPT

SUMMARY

The postscript reviews current debates over how to read African American literature, this time reflecting on them in the context of black formal writing's origins under duress of racism and political exigency. It reviews the arc of the book's argument alongside shifting understandings of African American literature's responsibility to black political advancement. Finally, it reiterates the book's investment in the study of black interiority, and in psychoanalysis as a tool for pursuing such study.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What historical, political, and psychological factors have contributed to the proliferation of black historical fiction over the last fifty years? What is at stake in current debates about the function and value of contemporary narratives of slavery? What do we miss when we confine our critical practice to the frame of therapeutic/prohibitive reading?
2. Although this book focuses first on racial history, memory, and identification, how does it also address the social and psychic effects of intersecting identity categories, such as gender and sexuality?
3. What are the payoffs of using psychoanalysis to interpret African American literature, and what are its limitations?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Select and read an antebellum slave narrative, paying special attention to how the text imagines and positions its implied reader. (How is the reader to imagine her role in relation to the text? With whom, if anyone, are we meant to identify? What are we intended to learn? How are we intended to transform?) Then, compare and contrast the readerly experiences designed by antebellum slave narratives and contemporary narratives of slavery.
- In addition to the literary historical phenomenon of the contemporary narrative of slavery, representations of the slave past have proliferated in recent films, art installations, and musical productions. Investigate a non-literary, contemporary representation of slavery and consider whether (and if so, how, and to what degree) notions of therapeutic and prohibitive reading can help us to understand your object of study and the critical discourse that surrounds it.

POSTSCRIPT

- Read a contemporary narrative of slavery that is not discussed in this book, and think about whether it fits into the literary genealogy offered here, and if so, how.
- Research essays and interviews in which contemporary African American authors discuss their motives and strategies for writing historical fiction. Does authorial intention correspond to your own analysis of how a given novel works?