

**Cornel West, “Minority Discourse and the Pitfalls of Canon Formation”**  
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What does it mean to engage in canon formation at this historical moment? In what ways does the prevailing crisis in the humanities impede or enable new canon formations? And what role do the class and professional interests of the canonizers play in either the enlarging of a canon or the making of multiple, conflicting canons? I shall address these questions in the form of a critical self-inventory of my own intellectual activity as an Afro-American cultural critic. This self-inventory shall consist of three moments. First, I shall locate my own cultural criticism against a particular historical reading of the contemporary crisis in the humanities. Second, I shall examine my own deeply ambiguous intellectual sentiments regarding the process of canon formation now afoot in Afro-American literary criticism. And third, I shall put forward what I understand to be the appropriate role and function of oppositional cultural critics in regard to prevailing forms of canon formation in our time.

Any attempt to expand old canons or constitute new ones presupposes particular interpretations of the historical moment at which canonization is to take place. The major Western male literary canonizers of our century—T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, F. O. Matthiessen, Cleanth Brooks, Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams, and Paul de Man—all assumed specific interpretations of why their canonizing efforts were required and how these efforts could play a positive role. Contemporary literary critics remain too preoccupied with the fascinating and ingenious ways in which these canonizers reevaluated and readjusted the old canon. As a cultural critic, I would like to see more attention paid to the prevailing historical interpretations of the cultural crisis which

prompts, guides, and regulates the canonizing efforts. In this sense, attempts to revise or reconstitute literary canons rest upon prior—though often tacit—interpretive acts of rendering a canonical historical reading of the crisis that in part authorizes literary canons. So the first battle over literary canon formation has to do with one's historical interpretation of the crisis achieving canonical status.

For instance, the power of T. S. Eliot's canonizing efforts had as much to do with his canonical reading of the crisis of European civilization after the unprecedented carnage and dislocations of World War I as with his literary evaluations of the Metaphysicals and Dryden over Spenser and Milton or his nearly wholesale disapproval of Romantic and Victorian poetry. As the first moment of my own self-inventory as an Afro-American cultural critic, I focus not on the kinds of texts to choose for an enlargement of the old canon or the making of a new one but rather on a historical reading of the present-day crisis of American civilization, an aspiring canonical historical reading that shapes the way in which literary canon-formation itself ought to proceed and the kind of cultural archives that should constitute this formation. This reading is informed by a particular sense of history in which conflict, struggle, and contestation are prominent. It accents the complex interplay of rhetorical practices (and their effects, for example, rational persuasion and intellectual pleasure) and the operations of power and authority (and their effects, for example, subordination and resistance).

My historical reading of the present cultural crisis begins with a distinctive feature of the twentieth century: the decolonization of the Third World associated with the historical agency of those oppressed and exploited, devalued and degraded by European civilization. This interpretive point of entry is in no way exhaustive—it does not treat other significant aspects of our time—yet

neither is it merely arbitrary. Rather it is a world-historical process that has fundamentally changed not only our conceptions of ourselves and those constituted as "others" (non-Europeans, women, gays, lesbians) but, more important, our understanding of how we have constructed and do construct conceptions of ourselves and others as selves, subjects, and peoples. In short, the decolonization of the Third World has unleashed attitudes, values, sensibilities, and perspectives with which we have yet fully to come to terms.

More specifically, the decolonization process signaled the end of the European age—an age that extends from 1492 to 1945. The eclipse of European domination and the dwarfing of European populations enabled the intellectual activities of demystifying European cultural hegemony and of deconstructing European philosophical edifices. In other words, as the prolonged period of European self-confidence came to an end with the emergence of the United States as the major world power after World War II, the reverberations and ramifications of the decline of European civilization could be felt in the upper reaches of the WASP elite institutions of higher learning—including its humanistic disciplines. The emergence of the first major subcultures of American non-WASP intellectuals as exemplified by the so-called New York intellectuals, the abstract expressionists, and the bebop jazz artists constituted a major challenge to an American male WASP cultural elite loyal to an older and eroding European culture.

The first significant blow—a salutary one, I might add—was dealt when assimilated Jewish Americans entered the high echelons of the academy—especially Ivy league institutions. Lionel Trilling at Columbia, Oscar Handlin at Harvard, and John Blum at Yale initiated the slow but sure undoing of male WASP cultural homogeneity—that is, the snobbish gentility, tribal civility, and

institutional loyalty that circumscribed the relative consensus which rests upon the Arnoldian conception of culture and its concomitant canon. The genius of Lionel Trilling was to appropriate this conception for his own political and cultural purposes—thereby unraveling the old male WASP consensus yet erecting a new liberal academic consensus around the cold war anticommunist rendition of the values of complexity, difficulty, and modulation. In addition, the professionalization and specialization of teaching in the humanities that resulted from the postwar American economic boom promoted the close reading techniques of the New Critics—severed from their conservative and organicist anticapitalist (or anti-industrialist) ideology. Like Trilling's revisionist Arnoldian criticism, the New Critics' academic preoccupation with paradox, irony, and ambiguity both helped to canonize modernist literature and provided new readers of literary studies with a formal rigor and intellectual vigor which buttressed beleaguered humanist self-images in an expanding, technocentric culture. The new programs of American studies provided one of the few discursive spaces—especially for second generation immigrants with progressive sentiments—wherein critiques of the emerging liberal consensus could be put forward, and even this space was limited by the ebullient postwar American nationalism which partly fueled the new interdisciplinary endeavor and by the subsequent repressive atmosphere of McCarthyism, which discouraged explicit social criticism.

The sixties constitute the watershed period in my schematic sketch of our present cultural crisis. During that decade we witnessed the shattering of male WASP cultural homogeneity and the collapse of the short-lived liberal consensus. More pointedly, the inclusion of Afro-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, native Americans, and American women in the academy repoliticized literary studies in a way that went against the grain of the old male WASP cultural

hegemony and the new revisionist liberal consensus. This repoliticizing of the humanities yielded disorienting intellectual polemics and inescapable ideological polarization. These polemics and this polarization focused primarily on the limits, blindnesses, and exclusions of the prevailing forms of gentility, civility, and loyalty as well as the accompanying notions of culture and canonicity.

The radical and thorough questioning of male Euro-American cultural elites by Americans of color, American women, and New Left white males highlighted three crucial processes in the life of the country. First, the reception of the traveling theories from continental Europe—especially the work of the Frankfurt school and French Marxisms, structuralisms, and poststructuralisms. A distinctive feature of these theories was the degree to which they grappled with the devastation, decline, and decay of European civilization since the defeat of Fascism and the fall of the British and French empires in Asia and Africa. The American reception of these theories undoubtedly domesticated them for academic consumption. But the theories also internationalized American humanistic discourses so that they extended beyond the North Atlantic connection. For the first time, significant Latin American, African, and Asian writers figured visibly in academic literary studies.

The second noteworthy process accelerated by the struggles of the sixties was the recovery and revisioning of American history in light of those on its underside. Marxist histories, new social histories, women's histories, histories of peoples of color, gay and lesbian histories all made new demands of scholars in literary studies. Issues concerning texts in history and history in texts loomed large. The third process I shall note is the onslaught of forms of popular culture such as film and television on highbrow literate culture. American technology—under the aegis of capital—

transformed the cultural sphere and everyday life of people and thereby questioned the very place, presence, and power of the printed word. The establishmentarian response in the humanities was to accommodate the new social forces. In order to avoid divisive infighting within departments and to overcome the incommensurability of discourses among colleagues, ideologies of pluralism emerged to mediate clashing methods and perspectives in structurally fragmented departments. These ideologies served both to contain and often conceal irresolvable conflict and to ensure slots for ambitious and upwardly mobile young professors who were anxiety-ridden about their professional-managerial class status and fascinated with their bold, transgressive rhetoric, given their relative political impotence and inactivity. Needless to say, conservative spokespersons both inside and especially outside the academy lamented what they perceived as an "assault on the life of the mind" and made nostalgic calls for a return to older forms of consensus. Contemporary reflections on ideologies of canon formation take their place within this context of cultural heterogeneity, political struggle, and academic dissensus—a context which itself is a particular historical reading of our prevailing critical struggle for canonical status in the midst of the battle over literary canon formation.

Not surprisingly, attempts to justify and legitimate canon formation in Afro-American literary criticism are made in the name of pluralism. In our present historical context (with its highly limited options), these efforts are worthy of critical support. Yet I remain suspicious of them for two basic reasons. First, they tend to direct the energies of Afro-American critics toward scrutinizing and defending primarily Afro-American literary texts for a new or emerging canon and away from demystifying the already existing canon. The mere addition of Afro-American texts to the present

canon without any explicit and persuasive account of how this addition leads us to see the canon anew reveals the worst of academic pluralist ideology. Serious Afro-American literary canon formation cannot take place without a wholesome reconsideration of the canon already in place. This is so not because "existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them"—as T. S. Eliot posited in his influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Rather the interdependence of the canonical and noncanonical as well as the interplay of the old canonical texts and the new canonical ones again require us to examine the crucial role of our historical readings of the current crisis that acknowledges this interdependence and promotes this interplay. Mere preoccupation with Afro-American literary texts—already marginalized and ghettoized in literary studies—which leads toward a marginal and ghetto status in an enlarged canon or independent canon forecloses this broader examination of the present crisis and thereby precludes action to transform it.

This foreclosure is neither fortuitous nor accidental. Rather it is symptomatic of the class interests of Afro-American literary critics: they become the academic superintendents of a segment of an expanded canon or a separate canon. Such supervisory power over Afro-American literary culture—including its significant consulting activities and sometimes patronage relations to powerful white academic critics and publishers—not only ensures slots for black literary scholars in highly competitive English departments. More important, these slots are themselves held up as evidence for the success of prevailing ideologies of pluralism. Such talk of success masks the ever-growing power of universities over American literary culture and, more specifically the increasing authority of black literary professional managers over Afro-American literary practices and products. This authority

cannot but have a major impact on the kinds of literary texts produced—especially as Afro-American literary programs increasingly produce the people who write the texts. It is fortunate that Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and Ralph Ellison did not labor under such authority. In fact, I would go as far as to postulate that the glacier shift from an Afro-American literature of racial confrontation during the four decades of the forties to the seventies to one of cultural introspection in our time is linked in some complex and mediated way to the existential needs and accommodating values of the black and white literary professional-managerial classes who assess and promote most of this literature.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that literary studies would be better off without Afro-American literary critics or with fewer of them. Nor am I arguing that canon formation among Afro-American critics ought not to take place. Rather I am making three fundamental claims. First, that Afro-American canon formation regulated by an ideology of pluralism is more an emblem of the prevailing crisis in contemporary humanistic studies than a creative response to it. Second, that this activity—despite its limited positive effects, such as rendering visible Afro-American literary texts of high quality—principally reproduces and reinforces prevailing forms of cultural authority in our professionalized supervision of literary products. Third, that black inclusion into these forms of cultural authority—with black literary critics overseeing a black canon—primarily serves the class interests of Afro-American literary academic critics.

A brief glance at the history of Afro-American literary criticism—including its present state—bears out these claims. Like most black literate intellectual activity in the Western world and especially in the United States, Afro-American literary criticism has tended to take a defensive posture. That is, it has viewed itself as evidence of the humanity and intellectual capacity of black



people that are often questioned by the dominant culture. This posture is understandably shot through with self-doubts and inferiority anxieties. And it often has resulted in bloated and exorbitant claims about black literary achievement. In stark contrast to black artistic practices in homiletics and music, in which blacks' self-confidence abounds owing to the vitality of rich and varied indigenous traditions, black literary artists and critics have proclaimed a Harlem Renaissance that never took place, novelistic breakthroughs that amounted to poignant yet narrow mediums of social protest (for example, *Native Son*), and literary movements that consist of talented though disparate women writers with little more than their gender and color in common. Such defensive posturing overlooks and downplays the grand contributions of the major twentieth-century Afro-American literary artists—Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin (more his essays than his fiction), Toni Morrison, and Ishmael Reed. Such diminishment takes place because these authors arbitrarily get lumped with a group of black writers or associated with a particular theme in Afro-American intellectual history, which obscures their literary profundity and accents their less important aspects.

For instance, Toomer's ingenious modernist formal innovations and his chilling encounter with black southern culture in *Cane* are masked by associating him with the assertion of pride by the "new Negro" in the twenties. Ellison's existentialist blues novelistic practices, with their deep sources in Afro-American music, folklore, Western literary humanism, and American pluralist ideology, are concealed by subsuming him under a "post-Wright school of black writing." Baldwin's masterful and memorable essays that mix Jamesian prose with black sermonic rhythms are similarly treated. Toni Morrison's magic realist portrayal of forms of Afro-American cultural disruption and transformation links her more closely to contemporary Latin American literary treatments of the

arrested agency of colonized peoples than with American feminist preoccupations with self-fulfillment and sisterhood. Last, Ishmael Reed's bizarre and brilliant postmodernist stories & II well outside black literary lineages and genealogies. In short, it is difficult to imagine an Afro-American canon formation that does not domesticate and dilute the literary power and historical significance of these major figures.

Recent developments in Afro-American literary criticism that focus on the figurative language of the texts are indeed improvements over the flat content analyses, vague black aesthetic efforts, and political didacticism of earlier critics of Afro-American literature. Yet this new black formalism—under whose auspices Afro-American literary canon formation will more than likely take place—overreacts to the limits of the older approaches and thereby captures only select rhetorical features of texts while dehistoricizing their form and content. It ignores the way in which issues of power, political struggle, and cultural identity are inscribed within the formal structures of texts and thereby misses the implicit historical readings of the crisis that circumscribes the texts and to which the texts inescapably and subtly respond.

This new formalism goes even farther astray when it attempts, in the words of critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to "turn to the Black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literature . . . It goes farther astray because it proceeds on the dubious notion that theories of criticism must be developed from literature itself—be it vernacular, oral, or highbrow literature. To put it crudely, this notion rests upon a fetishism of literature—a religious belief in the magical powers of a glorified set of particular cultural archives somehow autonomous and disconnected from other social practices. Must film criticism develop only from film itself? Must jazz criticism emerge

only from jazz itself? One set of distinctive cultural archives must never be reducible or intelligible in terms of another set of cultural archives—including criticism itself. Yet it is impossible to grasp the complexity and multidimensionality of a specific set of artistic practices without relating it to other broader cultural and political practices at a given historical moment. In this sense, the move Afro-American literary critics have made from a preoccupation with Northrop Frye's myth structuralism (with its assumption of the autonomy of the literary universe) and Paul de Man's rigorous deconstructive criticism (with its guiding notion of the self-reflexive and self-contradictory rhetorics of literary texts) to the signifying activity of dynamic black vernacular literature is but a displacement of one kind of formalism for another; it is but a shift from Euro-American elitist formalism to Afro-American populist formalism, and it continues to resist viewing political conflict and cultural contestation within the forms themselves.

The appropriate role and function of opposition cultural critics regarding current forms of canon formation is threefold. First, we must no longer be literary critics who presume that our cultivated gaze on literary objects—the reified objects of our compartmentalized and professionalized disciplines—yields solely or principally judgments about the literary properties of these objects. There is indeed an inescapable evaluative dimension to any valid cultural criticism. Yet the literary objects upon which we focus are themselves cultural responses to specific crises in particular historical moments. Because these crises and moments must themselves be mediated through textual constructs, the literary objects we examine are never merely literary, and attempts to see them as such constitute a dehistoricizing and depoliticizing of literary texts that should be scrutinized for their

ideological content, role, and function. In this sense, canon formations that invoke the sole criterion of form—be it of the elitist or populist variety—are suspect.

Second, as cultural critics attuned to political conflict and struggle inscribed within the rhetorical enactments of texts, we should relate such conflict and struggle to larger institutional and structural battles occurring in and across societies, cultures, and economies. This means that knowledge of sophisticated versions of historiography and refined perspectives of social theory are indispensable for a serious cultural critic. In other words—like the cultural critics of old—we must simply know much more than a professional literary critical training provides. The key here is not mere interdisciplinary work that traverses existing boundaries of disciplines but rather the more demanding efforts of pursuing dedisciplinizing modes of knowing that call into question the very boundaries of the disciplines themselves.

Finally, cultural critics should promote types of canon formation that serve as strategic weapons in the contemporary battle over how best to respond to the current crisis in one's society and culture. This view does not entail a crude, unidimensional, instrumental approach to literature; it simply acknowledges that so-called noninstrumental approaches are themselves always already implicated in the raging battle in one's society and culture. The fundamental question is not how one's canon can transcend this battle but rather how old or new canons, enlarged or conflicting canons, guide particular historical interpretations of this battle and enable individual and collective action within it. I simply hope that as canon formation proceeds among Afro-American cultural critics and others we can try to avoid as much as possible the pitfalls I have sketched.