

introduction

The perceptions in this issue are both White and Black. The color of the perceptions may coincide with the race of the author, or it may not, but both Black and White authors have contributed. Some might consider the preceding information irrelevant, arguing that scholarship is dedicated to raceless ideals called “knowledge” and “truth.” But there are many truths, and this issue is premised upon the historical knowledge that the United States has long exhibited opposed traditions of White truth and Black truth. White truth reminisced about the genteel plantation; Black truth remembered with pride the Reverend Nat Turner. Any scholarly investigation of Afro-America begins by acknowledging an institutionalized, dominant White culture which has caricatured and perverted Afro-American history, ignored or misinterpreted Black literature and denigrated Black culture generally. This is not cited to imply that any of the following essays are “racist,” although some may consider them so and prove them to be. It is cited to indicate that the only purpose of this special *Journal* number is to contribute to the present re-assessment of Afro-American culture.

There has also been a general editorial belief that an American Studies journal is a particularly appropriate place for such a group of essays to appear because, like Black Studies, American Studies customarily ignores the traditional borders between disciplines, and considers evidence from whatever source seems relevant. Our editors were a little disappointed to see that the more than forty essays submitted for this special issue were almost all methodologically conservative; the published results reflect this—an observation that is not a commentary on the quality of the essays printed. Yet we had hoped to see new topics broached, new procedures tried out. We would have liked to see an attempt at an adequate definition of how music orders and alters Black culture, at the problem of Black response to the media, and perhaps some exciting quantitative approaches to the problem of culture and/or sub-culture. And we would have liked for someone to try to formulate a new theory of the function of literature in a culture which survives and triumphs against great odds.

So the essays following, “interdisciplinary” though they are, do not

contribute new investigative methods. This hardly suggests they are without value. One of the special characteristics of the issue is to illustrate how frequently scholarship about Black America, even when separating itself into issues of art and society, attempts ultimately to postulate group behavior patterns. This tendency has both good and bad effects. On the one hand it abstracts the Black man in the interests of theory; on the other it causes him to lose his individuality amidst the generalizations. Professors Katzman, Walters and Muraskin are concerned with the social being—as slave, Mason, journalist and reader. Professors Gayle, Tatham, and Margolies are interested in written art, and they implicitly assume that the artist expresses the thoughts of the inarticulate while simultaneously affecting behavior through the articulation. With different evidence, the former group makes similar assumptions; they believe that individual behavior results from the institutions one is informed by, belongs to or is oppressed by. What intrigues here is that all are in some way searching for causes of Black behavior; each is ultimately trying to explain how and why Black America is unique.

Such attempts are bound to be controversial, and ideological polarities are much in evidence in the four essays addressed to aesthetic issues. Addison Gayle and Edward Margolies simply do not agree about the assumptions one brings to Afro-American literature. Each has given detailed expression to his views elsewhere, but it is useful to notice how Campbell Tatham's article glosses the controversy. Tatham correctly points out that there is a double order of aesthetics applied to Black literature. One is oriented in Western civilization's faith in rational analysis and is predominantly concerned with craftsmanship. The other is anti-Western, fascinated with the magic in the creative process, and interested in the role of literature as a social and political force. (Gayle labels the former aesthetic "assimilationist" and the latter "nationalist.") Margolies believes that one way art should be judged is according to the rational consistency of its images; he suggests that Black artists become aesthetically inadequate when they fail to shape the traditional primitive image assigned to Black Americans into a series of new images achieving a more logical form. Gayle's plea is for a Black aesthetic based on the facts of Afro-American life and expressive of Langston Hughes' ideal—"to express our individual dark skinned selves"—an ideal the writers of the Harlem Renaissance failed to realize. Consistency of image and form are less important here than the ideological purpose and the effect on the group consciousness of the aesthetic experience, and the emphasis is generally upon the experience rather than the artifact. Tatham mediates this controversy by suggesting that both aesthetics can have a place in the analysis of Afro-American art so long as one's critical premises and literary intentions are clear.

Tatham's attempt at mediation is aimed at the most troubling aesthetic issue in Afro-American literary studies today, and is part of a

general re-examination of the role of the Western, so-called "Humanistic" tradition. Literature has been usually assumed by Western civilization to speak to the "universal human condition," but many Black intellectuals now reject the idea of literature as a cultural expression of "universal" knowledge. Arguing that universality has been used to impose static aesthetic prescriptions upon the artist so that he will serve the interests of an idealistic "humanism" never actually manifest in Western civilization, Black Nationalist aestheticians (some cited by Tatham) argue for a literature of flux, created according to, in the words of James T. Stewart, a "dialectic of change." This controversy has also generated a painstaking re-assessment of the "New Criticism," for when Tatham suggests that the "aspirations" of the writer are relevant to his created effort, he is questioning the presumed inviolability of the aesthetic effort as object—as an artifact ready for dissection. Even though the theories of the "New Criticism" have long been under scrutiny, they are still predominant in the American literature classroom, and the aesthetic dispute discussed here is likely to have an important effect on the pedagogical assumptions informing the teaching of literature in the 1970's.

Interestingly, George Ehrlich's article on the Afro-American visual arts passes over this same issue by flatly stating that they are a part of the Western tradition. Ehrlich addresses himself to how and where the study of Afro-American art can fit into the present academic curriculum and he discusses many of the problems that attend its cataloging and study. His implied assertion that Afro-American art has not yet assumed status as a formal body of knowledge is also controversial, and those who seek an opposing view might consult the work of Robert Farris Thompson. The controversy that Ehrlich does not address (and this is not criticism since it is peripheral to his purpose) is the present uncertainty about the nature of the Afro-American academic effort. Many Black Studies programs are designed to challenge traditional academic forms as well as the usual academic subject matter. A Black Studies program closely allied to the Black community, for instance, has much less need for the curriculum structures and formal categorization that Professor Ehrlich ponders. In sum, the articles on a Black aesthetic both challenge and articulate the major controversy current among aestheticians, and both sides of the issue are forcefully represented.

Also in the realm of controversy is the exchange between William Toll and John Bracey, Jr. over Harold Cruse's seminal *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Their differences are well expressed and it seems superfluous to expand the dialogue into a conference with any additional commentary. Cruse's brilliant book raises so many issues compelling further investigation that it will stimulate a generation of scholarship (just as it has already produced violently partisan reviews). Any journal issue entitled "Perceptions of Black America" and published in 1970

should significantly acknowledge its importance and this exchange is designed to do so.

David Katzman's findings in his study of Michigan slavery also relate to several longstanding debates. Slavery in Michigan apparently produced a different type of slave than in the South, and this knowledge should affect theories about the shaping nature of slavery as an institution. One thinks of the dispute over whether or not American slavery resulted in a "sambo" personality. His data suggests also that economic and social determinants, rather than individual personal oppression, are the primary factors in molding slave personality, and it raises the question of whether the historical precedent of Indian slavery significantly altered the nature of the peculiar institution.

"Slavery in Michigan" postulates the theory that the study of Northern slavery enables the historian to isolate influences on Southern slavery, and this theoretical concern with isolating influences is central to Ronald Walters' study of "The Negro Press and the Image of Success." Implicit to Walters' method is a belief that the middle class values of the Black press can be isolated in rhetorical analysis and expressed as a determining factor in Afro-American thought. His findings cause one to think about the general relationship of class functions to racial issues. Many White and Black Americans maintained a faith in business in the twenties that was not really destroyed during the depression, thereby illustrating the tenacity and apparent racelessness of a national business mythology. The idea of success, the image of the self-made man, the preponderant belief in "individualism" have been significant factors in the growth of the Afro-American community, and it is precisely these "middle-class" values that are most heavily under attack by both Black and White radicals today. The function and effect of class ideology within Afro-America has been studied often, but its precise nature is still somewhat uncertain, a fact that Walters reminds us of at the same time that he contributes new knowledge to the class equation.

Professor Muraskin attempts to shed more light on this same matter with his essay on the Black Masonic fraternity. The emphasis on property, work, thrift, cleanliness and patriotism in the Masons has had very little study, yet these values have had ambiguous effects for the Black community as a whole and the Black bourgeoisie in particular. Masonry provides the Black American with a unique history that helps in the maintenance of a special identity; it has traditionally offered a paradigm for the Afro-American conception of self, a substitute for the racist propaganda that others would have Blacks believe about themselves. But as usual when such substitutions only duplicate White institutions, the attempt to accommodate the model to the facts of Afro-American life becomes exceedingly difficult. Thus, the exposure of Masonic inadequacies for the Black community emphasizes once again the need for Black institutions to be responsive to Black facts of life, and incidentally

stresses the need for further study of the entire fraternal function. Ralph Ellison, for instance, has recently argued that lodge ceremonies abstracted to their basic elements reveal rituals important to the basic dramaturgy of Afro-American culture. Muraskin is primarily interested in documents rather than drama, but his findings point to the cultural health found in Black Power and Black Consciousness movements, and in a totally unintended way, supports Gayle's plea for a Black aesthetic responsive to the needs of Black America.

So all of this, together with Robert Corrigan's valuable checklist of Afro-American fiction constitutes the special *Journal* number. Perhaps one final word should be said about the modesty of the effort. This issue is offered in full knowledge that it is unlikely to affect national policy or eradicate American racism. It is a limited, academic effort. The arguments presented and the facts accumulated are part of an effort to contribute, in a small way, to a greater knowledge of Afro-American life. The Blackness or Whiteness of the truths expressed here must await the judgment of time; the editors and authors have only tried to serve that ideal of formal inquiry called scholarship.

Robert Hemenway