CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

APPROACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE, HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND CRITICISM POLYCENTRICALLY

In the United States, the African American is constituted in a white/black binary of signification that defines whites as normative and superior and that represents blacks as victim, as inferior, as devalued Other, or, since the 1960s, as the Same as whites. This binary, which can be traced to the European Renaissance, is reproduced and reinforced not only by mainstream American society but also by the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift and its literary and historical extensions: the canon of African American literature and the classic African American historical emancipatory narrative. Elite/middle-class Christian African Americans have always been at the helm of this mission. They believe that it is their responsibility to socialize and educate all African Americans to be the Same as the dominant white society, thereby making them worthy of acceptance by whites. What mainstream America and the African American mission of racial uplift advocate is social equality: they want African Americans to have the same freedom as white Americans. But what do they mean by social equality? Equal access to goods and services? Equal opportunities for all Americans? The acceptance of all Americans and African Americans in their own diversity and complexities? The acceptance of differences? Since mainstream America, the African American sociopolitical mission, and the classic historical narrative all focus on social parity and not on cultural diversity and tolerance of African American differences, one has to assume that social equality means making the African American the Same as some normative American

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ideal. Thus, the primary function of the mission is to protest those societal forces and institutions that prevent the African American from achieving equality.

But in their move to protest racism and to refute the negative image of the African American constructed by the binary and in their emphasis on defining the African American in terms of some idealized American norm, African Americans intent on racial uplift have established a hierarchy within African America, thereby reducing African American differences to a singular formation. Establishing a binary of self and others—where the elite/middle-class African American is the center/norm—elite/middle-class African Americans fail to engage and appreciate African American differences, the rich cultural diversity and approaches to life that comprise American/African American life. Here, I am talking not only about elite/middle-class Christian African Americans but also about jazz/blues African Americans, Voodoo African Americans, existentialist African Americans, postmodern African Americans, working-class African Americans, subaltern African Americans, modern African Americans, and urban swinging African Americans. Within the white/black binary and the sociopolitical mission of racial uplift, the African American is represented only in terms of his or her experience of racism. All other identities are excluded. The binary, however, until recently, was never questioned.

There are at least two implications in not asking fundamental questions about the unequal white/black binary system. First, asking for social equality in a binary system that structurally defines and represents the African American as inferior, as victim, as devalued Other, or as the Same entraps African American critics and historians inside that system. Second, to simply ask for social equality, to aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself (the unequal white/black binary system), is to define the African American within the values and conventions of that binary. It is to resubject the African American to this unequal system and to continue the representation of the African American either as the devalued Other (victim) or as the Same (the white male norm). My concern in this book is to challenge the forms and nature of the white/black binary system, to challenge the contemporary play of powers and power relations. These challenges become prerequisites for moving toward a genuine modification/representation of the African American in literature, history, and criticism. My objective is to eschew the binary and to speak equally of African American differences, to examine and discuss African Americans in terms of their own distinctions and traditions, to engage the polyvalent nature of African American literature, history, and criticism. But, theoretically, how does one speak a language and present a narrative or vision that belies the white/black binary, disputing the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift, the classic African American historical emancipatory narrative, and the canon of African American literature with all their exclusions and systematized hierarchies? How does one speak equally of differences?

To arrive at a language and a theoretical concept that can envision differences, I turn to the idea of polycentrism, the principle of advocating the exis-

tence of independent centers of power within a singular political, cultural, or economic system. What I see in those constructions of Western, American, and African American literature, history, and criticism that eschew systematized hierarchies, that resist the framing of American/African American life around the unequal white/black binary, and that allow for racial and cultural differences is a more relational and radical approach. Polycentrism, states Walter Laqueur in *Polycentrism*, is a term that was coined by Palmiro Togliatti, who led the Italian Communist Party from 1927 until his death in August 1964 (2). After Joseph Stalin's death, according to Laqueur, polycentrism was used to describe the growth of independence among states and parties within the Communist/Socialist camp, and the emergence of one real and several potential rival centers to the Soviet Union (2). Polycentrism was used a second time by the internationally renowned Marxist economist Samir Amin. In *Empire of Chaos*, Amin takes the concept of polycentrism and applies it to the international world capitalist economy after World War II. In *Delinking*, Amin argues that the new globalization, which happened after World War II, with Japan and China emerging as economic powerhouses, set in motion the disintegration of auto-centered economies of the West (32).

What is common to these uses of polycentrism is a situation in which differences cannot be accommodated adequately in a hierarchical system that privileges a center with a subordinated periphery. Through repression and violence, differences in these instances are denied their logic and validity. The spread of Communism and the great objective differences in the methods and conditions of other countries made a centralized, homogeneous concept of Communism ineffective and repressive. The logic of events and the very dynamic of Communist parties and states propelled them in different directions. Likewise, Amin thinks that the national, auto-centered economic system, which was concentrated in Europe and the United States, cannot account for developing capitalistic economies in the rest of the world. Therefore, the world must become more polycentric to account for these other developing capitalistic economies. Polycentrism gives Laqueur and Amin the language, categories, and vision to talk about differences without getting into the issues of hierarchy, value, center/periphery, and superiority/inferiority. It gives them the concepts to discuss systems that are different but equal within a common framework or ground.

I want to use the concept of 'polycentrism' to envision an American/African American literature, criticism, and history that possess differences, but I do not want to get into the issue of privileging certain definitions, values, and tastes over others. Most, if not all, African Americans have racism, Otherization, and devaluation in common. But—due to class, skin color, geographical location, education, and other sets of conditions—they experience them differently, and they consequently develop/devise different methods, communities, and cosmologies, or have different sets of conditions, for defining and representing their social reality. Polycentrism gives me the theoretical basis to discuss and engage these different African American communities and traditions. It allows me to

envision/construct a reading of American/African American life in which relations have many dynamic cultural, historical, critical, and literary locations, many possible vantage points, rather than a center/norm and peripheries.

Polycentrism has less to do with canons, artifacts, and representations than with the communities "behind" the canons and artifacts, which are much more diverse than the canons indicate. A polycentric approach concerns the dispersing of power, the empowering of the disempowered, and the reconfiguration of subordinating institutions, texts, traditions, and discourses. It assumes changes, not just in images but in power relations. A polycentric approach, according to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, thinks and imagines "from the margins," seeing minoritarian and repressed spaces, traditions, and communities, as well as marginalized groups within minoritarian communities, not as "interest groups" to be "added on" to a preexisting "nucleus, but rather as active, generative participants at the very core of a shared, conflictual" history (48). A polycentric approach to American/African American history and literature engages critically the entire notion of a white or black center/canon. It challenges the construction of a canon of African American literature that privileges select African American texts and ignores or marginalizes others.

In this sense, a polycentric approach reconceptualizes American/African American literature, criticism, and history by focusing on the power relations between and among the different cultural communities and movements. It links together minoritarian—or once repressed and subordinated traditions, canons, and theoretical concepts—with sanctioned traditions and canons within both America and African America, challenging the hierarchies that make some literary texts, concepts of history, or ways of life "minor" and others "major" and "normative." A polycentric approach allows me to subject the "mutual relations" between the various traditions within America and African America to the "varying imperatives of their own internal development and to chart the 'reciprocal adjustment'" among all American/African American communities (*Delinking* xii).

Of course, a polycentric approach to American/African American literature calls into question our concept of literature: it requires us to reconfigure it. In *Marxism and Literature,* Raymond Williams argues that in its modern form the concept of "literature" did not emerge earlier than the eighteenth century and was not fully developed until the nineteenth century, despite the fact that the conditions for its emergence had been developing since the Renaissance (46). According to Williams, the word *itself* came into English use only in the fourteenth century, following French and Latin precedents. The idea of "literature" was often "close to the sense of modern literacy, which was not in the language until the late nineteenth century" (47). As a new category, the concept of literature first shifted "from 'learning' to 'taste' or 'sensibility' as a criterion defining literary qualities; second, [there was] an increasing specialization of literature to 'creative' or 'imaginative' works; third, [there was] a development of the concept of 'tradition' within national terms, resulting in the more effective definition of 'a national literature'" (48). Today, American literature, including African Amer-

ican literature, operates as a "national literature." It is usually defined as the canonical genres of writing.

But, as John Guillory argues forcefully in *Cultural Capital*, this concept of 'literature' privileges the "cultural capital of the old bourgeoisie, a form of capital increasingly marginal to the social function of the present educational system" (x). America has evolved into a diverse, heterogeneous population with the power/cultural capital to demand different notions of literature and different aesthetic values. The presence of this diverse population shows the limitations of the traditional concept of literature. From this perspective, the issue of "canonicity" seems less important than the historical crisis of literature, since it is this crisis—the long-term decline in the cultural capital of literature—that has given rise to the canon debate (x). Guillory argues that it is the institution—the school or university—that is the "historical site of evaluative acts" and that "subordinates specific values expressed in works to the social functions and institutional aims of the school itself. It is only when presented as *canonical*, as the cultural capital of the school, that individual literary works can be made to serve the school's social function of regulating access to these forms of capital" (269).

But out of the canon debate there also emerges the question of aesthetic value, something that Marxist and black aesthetic critics, despite their professed political engagement and radicalism, have failed to engage. Until this debate, the universality of aesthetic perception was restricted to certain hegemonic individuals and social groups. Within mainstream American and African American criticisms, those groups or individuals with power and cultural capital determined the community's aesthetic perception and values. They also determined which literary texts would receive cultural capital, which would stay in print, and which would be "made to serve the school's social function of regulating access to. . . . forms of capital." The critique of the canon enabled a "privileged perspective upon the entire discourse of value, and it was thus the means by which that discourse. . . . could be opened to an antifoundational or relativist reorientation. The new relativist discourse of value could then be turned against the historical discourse of aesthetics, removing once and for all its axiological props" (Guillory 272).

Rejecting the universality of aesthetic value and arguing for a relativist, politically useful aesthetic, Tony Bennett writes:

> The political utility of discourses of value, operating via the construction of an ideal of personality to which broadly based social aspirations can be articulated, is unquestionable. There is, however, no reason to suppose that such discourses must be hitched up to the sphere of universality in order to secure their effectivity. To the contrary, given the configuration of today's political struggles, it is highly unlikely that an ideal of personality might be forged that would be equal service in the multiple, intersecting but, equally, non-coincident foci of struggle constituted by black, gay, feminist, socialist and, in some contexts, national liberation politics. In particular conjunctures, to be sure, an ideal of personality may be forged which serves to integrate—but always temporarily—such forces

> into a provisional unity. But, this is not the basis for a generalizable and univer-
> salisable (sic) cultural politics. (44)

Given the presence of emergent racial, cultural, class, social, gender, and sexual groups and individuals who protest their exclusion from a hegemonic American "ideal of personality" and thereby simultaneously advocate their own individual aesthetic tastes, a universal aesthetics proves impossible.

The critique of aesthetics always assumes what Guillory calls a concept of value grounded in the notion of a "valuing community" or communities. But the "valuing community" can also reinstate a kind of "local subjective universality" (277), especially if it assumes that it has homogeneous experiences, beliefs, or values. White male advocates of New Criticism before their rise to hegemony in the 1940s, African American racial uplift critics, Alain Locke's New Negro critics, American feminist critics, black aesthetic critics, queer theorists, Mexican American cultural nationalist critics, and Marxist critics question and actively oppose the claims of "necessity" and "naturalness" made for the conditions and perspectives of the dominant society, "pointing out the existence of other conditions, namely those relevant to their lives, and other perspectives, namely their own" (B. H. Smith 181). But these marginal critics also adhere to concepts of value grounded in the notion of a valuing community. All reinscribe a kind of universality in their aesthetic values. Like the dominant society, they repress differences within their valuing communities. "When someone or some group of people insist(s) on the *objective* necessity or propriety of their own social, political, or moral judgments and actions, and deny the *contingency* of the conditions and perspectives from which those judgments and actions proceed," argues Barbara Herrnstein Smith in *Contingencies of Value*, "it must be—and always is—a move to assign dominant status to the *particular* conditions and perspectives that happen to be relevant to or favored by that person, group, or class; it must be—and always is—simultaneously a move to deny the existence and relevancy, and to suppress the claims, of *other* conditions and perspectives" (181).

As Smith points out, there are certain purely conventional "norms and standards (like units of measurement, or safety standards)" that are functionally "unconditional and universal" and may thus be called "contingently absolute" or "contingently objective" (182). But as far as culture is concerned, Smith argues that "a community is never totally homogeneous, that its boundaries and borders are never altogether self-evident, that we cannot assume in advance that certain differences among its members are negligible or irrelevant, and that the conditions that produced the relative unconditionality, local universality, and contingent objectivity are themselves neither fixed forever nor totally stable now" (182). Smith rejects the notion of community as the epistemological ground of value.

Of course, the problem here is that it is impossible to conceive of a valuing community or an identity community without recourse to local universalization of its values. Individuals from such communities—the European and American communities I discuss in chapter 2, the African American community

I discuss in chapters 3 and 4, the gay community I discuss in chapter 9, and some of the various individual writers discussed in the other chapters who represent various American/African American valuing communities and traditions—once they constitute these communities socially, politically, and aesthetically, seldom refrain from policing differences within them. They want to define their community's difference from other communities; therefore, they project their concept of 'social identity' into an ideal of homogeneity. Echoing and reinforcing this same sentiment, Fawzia Afzal-Khan in *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel* argues that "the writer, by unconsciously (or, often consciously) attempting to validate himself and his group in the face of what he perceives as an antagonistic other, ends up confining himself to the limited, and limiting, economic and sociopolitical interests of its class or group" (2).

But if we accept, as Smith argues, that "*each of us* is a member of many, shifting communities, each of which establishes, for *each* of its members, multiple social identities, multiple principles of identification with other people, and accordingly, a collage or grab-bag of allegiances, beliefs, and sets of motives" (168), then we are forced to question, accept provisionally, or perhaps even abandon our traditional notion of community. "The grounding of value in discrete communities," argues Guillory, "inaugurates a contradictory practice which moves back and forth between making separatist and universalist claims" (279). But just as no individual writer is unequivocally the member of only one community, neither is any cultural object the bearer of the values of only one community.

Of course, as I argue against a homogeneous American/African American community and a universal aesthetic, my aim is not to abandon aesthetics and values completely. "The dismissal of aesthetics, as the discourse of 'universal' value believed to suppress differences," argues Guillory, "has thus had the paradoxical effect of removing the basis for apprehending the work of art as the objectification not of subjects or communities but of the relations between subjects, or the relations between groups" (282). The value of a cultural object can least of all be expressed as having effect "solely within the limits of particular valuing communities" (282). Smith writes:

> [A] verbal judgment of "*the* value" of some entity—for example, an art work, a work of literature, or any other kind of object, event, text, or utterance— cannot be a judgment of any independently determined or, as we say, "objective" property of that entity. As we have seen, however, what it can be . . . is a judgment of that entity's *contingent* value: that is, the speaker's observation or estimation of the entity will figure in the economy of some limited population of subjects under some limited set of conditions. (94)

Individual critics, observers, or writers thus construct the community.

An individual observer who defines the African American community according to the aims and politics of the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift will value a literary text according to how it figures in the limited, elite/middle-class Christian set of conditions. He or she will not define an

African American existentialist, blues, or swing text as figuring in that community's economy and, therefore, will not impute it with any value or cultural capital. Of course, the crucial questions are: Does this individual observer define his or her values/aesthetics universally? Contingently? Does he or she realize that these values/aesthetics are restricted to a "limited population of subjects" under some "limited set of conditions"? Because the African American community is not homogeneous ("its borders and boundaries are not altogether self-evident") and because African Americans have multiple social identities, the same individual observer, or another individual observer from a different segment of the community, can equally adopt, or have a different social identity and so find value in an existentialist, blues, or swing literary text, or respond to these features in a racial uplift canonical text. In this instance, value no longer has a "socially determined function" but "the potential infinity of individual uses" (Guillory 295). For example, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, depending on which sector of the African American community is observing, can be defined as a Voodoo, a jazz, a detective, or a postmodern text. Because individuals from the same or different segments of the African American community can construct and grant value to that community differently, a text can belong to several communities. All values are contingent and their price/worth is determined by the market's cultural capital. With this nonfoundational and relativist approach to valuing cultural objects or literary texts, I can impute cultural capital to texts from all the various traditions in African American literature. Taking a polycentric approach to the literature, I can speak of different African American texts as having contingent value, without getting into the issue of hierarchy, superiority, and inferiority.

Finally, the crisis in the traditional concept of literature, which has been accompanied by a change in cultural capital as other African American communities demand other types of literatures or expressive forms, allows us to engage different African American aesthetics and cultural imaginaries. Given the demand for African American readings—not only in the traditional novel but also in autobiography, romance, detective fiction, mysteries, science fiction, popular fiction, experimental fiction, poetry, and the essay—we have to devise a definition of literature that will incorporate, engage, and assess all of these African American expressive forms equally.

This issue of differences also plagues African American history. How does one speak of differences within the classic African American historical emancipatory narrative? Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* provides a language and theoretical concepts for discussing American/African American history polycentrically:

> For many years now historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods, as if, beneath the shifts and changes of political events, they were trying to reveal the stable, almost indestructible system of checks and balances, the irreversible processes, the constant readjustments, the underlying tendencies

that gather force, and are then suddenly reversed after centuries of continuity, the movements of accumulations and slow saturation, the great silent, motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events. (3)

These historians are looking for links that can be made between disparate events, for how a causal succession can be established between them, and for the continuity or overall significance these links possess. In short, these historians are looking to "define a totality" (3).

But Foucault supersedes this traditional approach to history, which asks for links, causality, and totality, with a general approach to history, which asks "questions of another type: Which strata should be isolated from others? What types of series should be established? What criteria of periodization should be adopted for each of them? What system of relations (hierarchy, dominance, stratification, universal determination, circular causality) may be established? And in what large-scale chronological table may distinct series of events be determined?" There is something dispersed, decentered, and polycentric about Foucault's notion of general history. Extending this polycentric approach to other disciplines such as literature, science, and philosophy, Foucault wants not to define the totality in these disciplines but to "detect the incidence of interruptions" (4).

In taking a polycentric approach to American/African American literature and history in this book, I eschew historical narratives and an African American literary canon whose focus/center is on racial oppression exclusively, and so challenge the African American sociopolitical mission of racial uplift, that is, the journey of the African American from the colonized subaltern to the values and definitions of mainstream society. I destabilize and, therefore, place into flux the two halves of the white/black binary, thereby unleashing American/African American differences. The relative term *Other* is the obverse of *normal*. Thus, normalizing the *Other* must come through an essential rupture of the white/black binary and other hierarchical hierarchized systems.

In this book, I approach American/African American history and literature by focusing on the various literatures, critical practices, lifestyles, aesthetic forms, cultural imaginaries, and theoretical definitions of life within a range of American/African American communities. And I do not position the once marginal communities and traditions as "interest groups" to be added on to a "preexisting nucleus" (Shohat and Stam 48). This means examining the history and literature of subaltern African Americans, of jazz/blues artists, and Voodoo practitioners, none of which are particularly Christian or middle class. A polycentric approach also allows me to include an examination of African American radical individualism, existentialism, postmodernism, and urban survivalism, which are a part of African American life that is different from mainstream norms and conventions and cannot be engaged, examined, and discussed adequately and positively in the white/black binary or within the historical narrative that posits a quest for social equality.

I turn to Charles Wright's *The Messenger,* to the early novels of John Wideman, and to Robert Boles's *Curling* and *The People One Knows* to discern how the extreme subjectivity of their existentialism renders obsolete such master narratives as the mission of racial uplift. I examine the novels of Robert Deane Pharr and Cyrus Colter, and Nathan Heard's *Howard Street*, which are nonhumanistic, non–middle class, non–Protestant work ethic, and non–Freudian, and examine how they explore survivalism as a theoretical system that challenges through its very existence the positioning of the African American within Enlightenment moral codes. I turn to William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer*, which explores how the instinctive Thoreauvian concept of 'radical individualism' disrupts the notion of a unified African American valuing community and posits a social space where the African American exists as a non–victim. I examine Clarence Major's blues novel, *Dirty Bird Blues*, which constructs a representation of the African American as affirmative, existential, individual, vibrant and different. I turn to James Earl Hardy's *B-Boy Blues* to discuss sexual fluidity as a way of disrupting the heterosexual/homosexual regime that defines sexuality in the West. Finally, I turn to Don Belton's *Almost Midnight,* which uses Voodoo as a different theoretical conception to define African American life and history. I engage all of these different African American texts without the need to exclude or repress any as "negligible or irrelevant" or to establish a hierarchy among them.

Finally, I want to explain why I focus only on African American male writers. First, since the 1970s, emerging feminist criticism and women's studies have created the scholarly space for most previously excluded African American women writers to gain validation and critical attention. Although the 1960s movement and African American studies gave validation and critical attention to certain canonical texts by both men and women, there is no social or literary movement to garner critical attention for existential, Voodoo, blues, and urban subaltern literary texts by African American male writers. They are simply neglected. Second, as a variety of critics and historians have emphasized, black masculinity has occupied a particularly problematic place in American literature and culture. The very essence of racism in the United States required the bestilization or animalization of the African American male, which led both American and African American authors such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and others to treat African American men as pacific or passive, to define them according to the definitions and values of the middle–class American norm, or to depict them in some other romantic guise. But, many African American male writers found alternative ways to represent and to examine black masculinity—though their portrayals have often been misread or ignored. Although there are some black women texts that could be configured into my overall theme of African American differences, I want to focus on the various ways African American male writers represent and examine black masculinity. Third, and more important, I want to explore the condition of pos-

sibility for an African American male—or any individual who has been defined historically as devalued Other—in the West, despite every effort to define him as devalued Other, to define himself as a subject with agency. Finally, despite the fact the I focus on African American male writers, I employ throughout this book, to use the words of bell hooks, "a feminist analysis that will address the issue of how to construct a life-sustaining black masculinity that does not have its roots in patriarchal phallocentrism" (*black looks,* 111).