Swagger’s Afterlife

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As a cohort, the Black Archivists possess excellent balance. They were all born between 1931 and 1950; thus, the life experiences of the oldest and the youngest members are separated by a generation.¹ Age is not the only factor that produces this group’s diversity. One writer spends her childhood in the South and another splits his formative years between Dixie and the Bay area; one is from the East Coast, while four have Midwestern roots.² Finally, gender falls out roughly even: four men, three women. Although any of these attributes—age gaps, varied geographic hailing, and gender difference—could promote fracture, the Black Archivists allow their variety to strengthen them. They believe views of African American writing as acrimonious and confound white expectations with range rather than unanimity. Needing to locate cultural moorings during America’s post–civil rights era, the Black Archivists achieve the ethics

1. David Bradley and Gloria Naylor were both born in 1950 while Ernest Gaines and Toni Morrison were born in 1933 and 1931 respectively. John Edgar Wideman was born in 1941, three years before Alice Walker (1944) and seven in front of Charles Johnson (1948).

2. Alice Walker and Ernest Gaines spend formative years in Georgia and Louisiana respectively. Gaines leaves the South and lands in California while Walker goes to New York to finish college. By contrast, John Edgar Wideman and Gloria Naylor mature within the urban spheres of Pittsburgh and New York. For college, he goes to Philadelphia, Iowa City, and Oxford. She stays in the Big Apple. Completing this composite, David Bradley, Toni Morrison, and Charles Johnson—a trio of Midwesterners—grow up respectively in Bedford, Pennsylvania; Lorain, Ohio; and Evanston, Illinois. Bradley and Johnson stay in the region for college; however, Morrison attends Howard University in Washington, DC, and Cornell University in Ithaca, NY.
of swagger through individuated yet principled representations of their tribe. Their accomplishments institutionalize the study of black literature and expand the literary options for subsequent black writers. This conclusion considers the impact of these developments.

Ronald A. T. Judy argues that a Yale symposium in 1977 signaled a key moment in the academic study of African American literature. Contending that this symposium used “Afro-American canon formation” to challenge prevailing models of “American cultural history,” he concludes that there black literary criticism reconstructed its instruction (2). Judy echoed Houston A. Baker, Jr., who suggested that Yale was where the “newly emergent” experiment with “poststructuralist” theory discovered black writing (xvi). At the moment that the Yale symposium convened, the MLA Division on Black Literature and Culture did not exist. Negro American Literature Forum had been published since 1967, MELUS first met in 1974, and the NEH summer seminars convened by Darwin T. Turner flourished, but the heyday of black literature’s entry into academia was yet to come. While commentators such as Deborah McDowell note that slave narratives served as the earliest guinea pigs in the critical experiments that led to this heyday, as “the race for theory” intensified, black novels gained popularity as analytical targets.

3. My phrasing here borrows an idea from Toni Morrison’s “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” in which she stated, “There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it” (What 56). Her sentiment overlooks just how successful the Black Archivists were in producing the kind of epoch that she mourned as post.

4. Houston A. Baker talks about the Yale scene, if not this symposium, in the revised edition of Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture (1990). Noting “the generational shift in black literary criticism,” he observes that the “project of such analysts as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Robert Stepto was grounded in a newly emergent project in literary theory. This project was specifically poststructuralist; it had its origins in Paris, but its United States supporters were legion at Yale” (xvi). For a brief, incisive treatment, see Maurice Wallace’s “Print, Prosthesis, (Im)Personation: Morrison’s Jazz and the Limits of Literary History” (2008).

5. The MLA, or Modern Language Association, is a leading professional organization connected to the academic study of literature. Organized around a structure of divisions, the MLA lacked a division devoted to black literature until the early 1980s. SallyAnn Ferguson observed, “R. Baxter Miller attended [the 1982 MLA Convention] and solicited signatures to help found” the Black Literature division (543). The Black Literature division was ratified in 1983.


7. My phrasing takes its cue from Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory” (1988), an essay that offers trenchant observations regarding academia, black literature, and interpretive expectations.
development led to the Black Archivists’ crucial role in the institutionalization of African American literature.

During the 1980s, academic fashion demanded that tenure-seekers perform theoretically aware literary analyses. Scholars who studied black literature were often forced to juggle their commitments to interpreting neglected texts and their need to endorse difficult ones. This was true across all genres, but the trend was especially acute in the study of the novel. Beginning with Robert Stepto’s *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979), expectations for analyses that incorporated avant-garde literary theory heightened. Critics of the African American novel noted these expectations, and repeatedly their articles, book chapters, and monographs used works from the Black Archivist canon to cut their critical teeth. Suggesting this trend, consider a few examples: Jane Campbell’s *Mythic Black Fiction: The Transformation of History* (1986), Valerie Smith’s *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (1987), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988). If prizewinning black novelists fed this tributary of academic study, then they also contributed their own literary commentaries.

Charles Johnson’s study *Being and Race* and Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) are the most obvious examples of the Black Archivists’ forays into literary criticism; however, John Edgar Wideman and Alice Walker both write influential essays about black literature that reflect not only a thorough grasp of literary history but also an impressive understanding of literary theory. In some ways, the Black Archivists’ analytical competencies reflect their encounters with colleges and universities as both students and employees. Unlike the towering novelists of the indignant generation, the Black Archivists were all college educated. In addition, many of them earned advanced degrees including Masters in English, Masters in Fine Arts, and, in the case of Charles Johnson, a PhD in philosophy. These folks were creatures of higher education environments, and their entrée into white elite

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9. Lawrence Jackson uses “indignant generation” to describe black writers whose careers crested between 1934 and 1960. When I speak of novelists who lack an undergraduate degree, I refer to Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, and James Baldwin. The most accomplished female novelists, Ann Petry and Paule Marshall, were college graduates.
spaces not only exposed them to African and African American studies but also heightened their comfort with questioning received wisdom. In addition to studying at colleges and universities, the Black Archivists also instructed at them.

As early as the mid-1950s, Toni Morrison taught at Texas Southern University and then moved on to Howard University. Her career included stints at Yale, SUNY-Albany, and Bard. When she accepted the Robert F. Goheen professorship at Princeton, she became the first black woman to occupy a named chair at an Ivy League institution. Morrison’s experience proves the rule among the Black Archivists. Wideman taught at Penn, Amherst, and Brown. Johnson recently retired after more than thirty years at the University of Washington. Alice Walker has held teaching positions at more than twenty schools, and David Bradley, who worked at Temple University, has taught at the University of Oregon since 2003. In part, these realities reflect the sort of shifts that Mark McGurl chronicles in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009), but for black novelists it also means that they were more than ever in direct conversation with the folks who interpreted their work. This contact yielded diverse results among them a deep investment in the academic profile of black literature.

From editing and teaching to reviewing and completing scholarship, the Black Archivists promoted the cause of black fiction.10 This promotion and the professional networks that it established convinced black novelists to risk greater autonomy in their writing. When their risks yielded fruit, they—in modest numbers—achieved enough renown to participate in the mainstream prize-granting system.11 This blend of independence and assimilation seemingly would have resulted in continued black prizewinning during the last decade of the twentieth

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11. I have already discussed Gloria Naylor’s efforts on the National Book Award selection committee. By the 1990s, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Ernest Gaines, and John Edgar Wideman were all in demand as judges for literary awards. These writers rarely joined a black majority in their service on these committees; nonetheless, their presences signal an important development.
century and the first twelve years of the twenty-first. Notwithstanding such expectations, it should be noted that the only major literary prizes to go to a black novelist since 1993 have been Edward P. Jones’s 2004 Pulitzer and National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Known World* and Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 National Book Award for *Salvage the Bones* (2011). This development indicates that 1977 to 1993 constituted a singular epoch for the black novel. With the rise of post-soul/post-black novelists such as Trey Ellis, Martha Southgate, Shay Youngblood, Paul Beatty, Colson Whitehead, April Sinclair, Mat Johnson, Alice Randall, and Jeffrey Renard Allen, the Black Archivists’ unique legacy can be explored.

In George Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum* (1988), there is a vignette entitled “The Last Mama on the Couch Play.” This irreverent send-up of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) signaled that a younger generation of African American dramatists was no longer averse to lampooning the hang-ups, the aesthetics, or even the ethics of their elders. Wolfe’s statements dealt with the stage, but arguably the manifesto of this attitude was written by a novelist, Trey Ellis. In his 1989 essay “The New Black Aesthetic,” Ellis identified a group of young black “cultural mulatto[s]” who were all born after 1960 and tasked with carving out a worldview and an artistic outlook that would capture the precise realities of their suspension between white and black worlds (235). Eventually linked to the post-soul aesthetic, this group becomes the most direct inheritor of both the thematic and aesthetic achievements of the Black Archivists and of the labors that this group made to make both earlier black writers’ and their own works agents of light in what they felt to be a dark world. Of this group, Bertram Ashe has stated, “Many post-soul writers critique the events or the mindset of the Civil Rights Movement in their fiction . . . and it is important . . . that these writers have no lived, adult experience with that movement” (611). The post-soul writer

12. In 2010, Jones also received the PEN/Malamud in recognition of his achievements in the short story.

13. Darryl Dickson-Carr asserts that “post-soul” gained currency as a “way of describing the works emerging from the generation of writers that were born during or after the Civil Rights/Black Power eras or who reached personal and artistic maturity from the late 1970s forward. [Post-Soul] is virtually synonymous with the new black aesthetic that author Trey Ellis outlines in his 1989 *Callaloo* essay of the same name” (190). Although the term post-black was not immediately applied to late twentieth- and early twenty-first century African American culture, with Barack Obama’s presidency and other pressures impelling America toward a post-racial future, there is a growing tendency to view the literature of this moment as both post-soul and post-black. For a thoughtful overview, see Bertram D. Ashe’s “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction” (2007).
constructs the civil rights movement as a distortion; its period and priorities cloud the understanding of a thoroughly pluralistic world. 14 Contrasting the Black Archivists’ belief that the civil rights struggle clarified their art, the younger generation’s outlook dramatizes conflicts about contemporary black fiction. Their freedom gains its force from their elders’ ethics of swagger.

Often focusing on theme and representational strategy, recent studies decry the homogeneity of black literature and argue for more elastic literary canons. These books revive old debates, and with regard to African American novels, they raise the prickly question of whether such a thing does or should exist. At the heart of their analyses, there is a fear that scholars of black literature are politically motivated to overlook nuances in favor of facile solidarity. While it may be true that earlier cultural movements thus distorted blackness, the Black Archivists suggest that from the rural to the urban, from the poor to the rich, and from the experimental to the conventional, fictional accounts of African American identity manifest distinctness even as they coalesce around signature moments. Such coalescence attained full expression in the works of the Black Archivists, and this group inclined American literary prize grantors toward a more complex engagement with blackness. This feat and this simultaneity held broad significance.

Major prizes symbolize one yardstick of artistic command, and their uneasy place in the Black Archivists’ minds reflects a conundrum with inter- and intraracial dimensions. All of the Black Archivists spent formative years in black environments; however, each of them also attended majority white institutions for either undergraduate or graduate education. While the writers’ experiences on these campuses were varied, one commonality was exposure to Eurocentric curriculums. This exposure fuelled cosmopolitan outlooks and hybrid aesthetics, and it clarified the significance of black culture’s home spaces. By addressing the stress of balancing these factors while retaining artistic authority, the Black Archivists and their novels spoke eloquently about democratic possibil-

14. Jeffrey R. Allen, a budding black writer, captures the post-soul outlook: “African Americans have always been cultural mulattos, but when you have a new generation of black writers who don’t see race in the same way, the racial landscape is transformed. The other thing here is that, frankly, people are tired of writing about how badly white folks are treating us. Where can you go from there? I mean, hasn’t that all been said?” (Antonucci). Paul Taylor’s “Post-Black, Old Black” (2007) provides a less binary discussion of the post-black/post-soul notion. While his insights are compelling, the fact that they are needed points to the intensity of this black intergenerational conflict. Stuart Hall prophesied these types of conflicts in his 1993 essay “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?”.
ity and black citizenship. Their achievements and the controversies they aroused also exposed gaps in the nation’s meritocracy discourse. With these developments, they provoked and participated anew in America’s soul-searching.

The Black Archivists were not crusaders. Their determination to chronicle the signature themes that informed twentieth-century blackness—slavery, segregation, the Great Migration, and the urban blight—arose from a simple wish to see themselves and their people reflected in art. Despite these motives, the Black Archivists refused to eschew the textures that characterized African American experience. They spoke as novelists who strived to “preserve the uniqueness of the African American sensibility, establish a sense of communal independence, and participate in the American mainstream on [their] terms” (Bryant 179). With moral daring and stylistic flair, they amplified the country’s vision. They did so because they discovered the ethics of swagger. When, in a post-Vietnam moment, black culture was called to account by both civil rights elders and mainstream society, the Black Archivists produced prize-winning, game-changing fictions. In doing so, they consolidated a black artistry that neither abdicated nor lamented its protean contours.
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