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RACIALISED URBANITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The notion of urbanity as the expression of a peculiarly modern form of urban consciousness – the projection of an urban mode of being and self-awareness of what it means to be a citizen in a rapidly changing urban polis – has been the subject of much critical analysis.

Material and methods. When writing this article, the following research methods were used: literature review on the subject and its critical analysis (works of Robert E. Park, Richard Lehan, Amiri Baraka, A. Robert Lee and et al.).

Results and their discussion. The meanings of urbanity are manifold. It refers to the evolution of civic consciousness and responsibility and stresses the importance of the life of the mind, in terms of everyday customs, artistic endeavour, human communication and philosophy, in the construction of what it means to live in the city [1, p. 14]. It is also crucially dependent on the idea of the coming together of strangers who construct the city through social interaction that is not based on kinship or group membership.

In modern and post-modern literature, the city is an almost universal setting. However, it could hardly be argued that every modern or post-modern text with a city setting qualifies as urban literature by virtue of that setting. In critical discourse on urban literature, scholars tend to focus on one of two literary elements as central to the identification of a text as urban literature. On one hand, scholars such as Richard Lehan, Mary-Ann Caws, and David Seed tend to view the city setting as central to the identification of a text as urban literature. On the other hand, scholars such as Diane Levy and Michael Jaye and Ann Watts tend to view character as central to the identification of a text as urban literature. Both views and approaches are valid in their fundamental basis: obviously, a text cannot be considered urban without the presence of the city, yet at the same time, “urban” is an adjective denoting someone or something as “being” of the city.

What urban literary works have in common is that they reflect the discursive heteroglossia that resonates in the texture of each city, at the core

of which lies an ultimate otherness on the personal, social, cultural and political levels that permeates and determines the modern city dweller's everyday experience [1, p. 28].

There is an experiential difference between the European city and the American city: "In Europe, the city had to define itself against its medieval origins and the transformation from feudalism; in America, against the wilderness and the frontier experience". [2, p. 18].

Since the eighteenth century, the city and the African-American have had a unique relationship, particularly with the northern city. The "marginal" position of black authors has disappeared on the book market in the United States, but the themes of alienation and anger will not vanish as readily from their works. Instead of integration into the literary and artistic mainstream, black writers and artists wanted, especially since the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, to arrive at their "own" forms of literary expression which would have direct relevance for their lives. They wished to answer the question of their relationship to white mainstream culture by implementing a multicultural strategy: their literature is not that of assimilation, but in many ways that of establishing difference, separatism, and cultural resistance [3, p. 10].

While one of the central drives in classic literature has been a nearly reflexive desire to move away from the complexity and supposed corruption of cities toward idealized non-urban settings such as Cooper's West, Thoreau's woods, Melville's seas, Whitman's open road, and Twain's river, very often the opposite has been true in African-American letters [3, p. 11]. To be sure, many important black texts such as Washington's "Up from Slavery" express a deep suspicion of city life, but the main tradition of black American literature has been persistently pro-urban in vision. "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass", for example, portrays the rural South as a plantation culture intent on exploiting and then destroying black people, but it envisions the city as a place of deliverance.

Much important African-American literature which has emerged since the Depression has also been largely urban in character. Although never hesitant to criticize the negative aspects of American city life, it has only rarely suggested that pastoral alternatives to the city exist for black people. This large and significant body of literature, moreover, contains some surprising celebrations of city life. For example, James Baldwin's best fiction is rooted in New York, a place of extraordinary beauty as well as pain.

Amiri Baraka's essay "Black Literature and the Afro-American Nation: The Urban Voice" argues that, from the Harlem Renaissance onward, black literature has been "urban shaped," producing a uniquely "black urban consciousness." While careful not to gloss over the problems of black people in American cities, he predicts that the setting for black liberation will be the city [4, p. 139].

One way to explain this surprisingly positive image of the city in African-American literature is to examine the historical experience of black people in America. From the very outset, black people were denied imaginative access to a pre-urban homeland in Africa because the institution of slavery did everything possible to stamp out the memory of that world. And the actual experience of slaves in America did not permit them the luxury of romantically imagining the non-urban settings which are so mythically prominent in the fictions of Cooper, Melville, and Twain.

The city, therefore, has been a crucial symbol in black literature and that literature has been remarkable for the rich variety of ways it has used urban settings and themes. Because of this, the city in African-American literature resists any simple categorizations and neat generalizations. A. Robert Lee, in discussing literary portraits of Harlem, stresses this important point: “The only fact about Harlem ... may be its intractability, its undiminished refusal to be accommodated by any single explanation. That, one supposes and readily celebrates, accounts for why there have been so many Harlems on the mind-be they expressed in the novel or in any of the abundant other forms inspired by the enduring black First City of America” [5, p. 83].

Conclusion. The city has been-and continues to be-a live subject for black American writers, inspiring a rich diversity of literary visions of the city as it is captured by black writers from different times, places, backgrounds, and angles of perception. For example, the predominantly hopeful images of the city contained in slave narratives contrast sharply with later naturalistic accounts of urban reality expressed in novels. And even when black writers living in similar time periods focus on the same city, they often develop radically different literary visions of that city.

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