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Black Truth in Literacy

“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.” This quote by Ida B. Wells encompasses her life’s work. A life’s work that, like many other African-American writers and activists of the antebellum, Jim-Crow, and post Jim-Crow periods; cost her her property, reputation, and comfort. The light of truth was conveyed by the underprivileged through literacy, which was no easy feat in a society that censored and diminished the worth of their creations. African-Americans employed tactics to overcome obstacles and get published so that their messages came across in peaceful ways. Ida B. Wells and Toni Morrison are among the many writers who navigated the bounds society tried to keep them confined in, and faced double the criticism because of their sex.

The dominance of the elite extended over into literacy and art far beyond the times of slavery, as publishers and patrons censored and regulated black creation for the purpose of profit and to maintain the status quo. Prior to the Harlem Renaissance, black culture had not been given recognition or a platform. It was something new to many in the United states, and became an avante-garde that struck mass curiosity into people. Under this new found cognizance, many patrons who advocated black art had ulterior motives for doing so. Hiding behind the scenes as “supportive” figures for artists who had no one else to confide in for connections and financial support, many patrons manipulated and coerced their associates into doing what they wanted them to do. Lack of diversity in the industry left artists with no choice but to depend on primitive patrons. In the article “Whose Renaissance was it really: Black Art Patronage of the 1920s and 1930s,” Rodney Trapp examines the role of the “primitivist” and “humanist” patron in the outcome of art and in the lives of the artists. For the most part, primitive patrons held a lowly view of African-Americans as they viewed them as “exotic” people that could be taken advantage of. They opposed the meddling of politics in art because the display of black life would be more profitable. They essentially re-wrote art by dictating what was allowed and what was not. Charlotte Oswald Mason was a popular sponsor who worked with big names like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston (Trapp, 95). She blackmailed and manipulated those she worked with. They were so much under her control that they even had to “...Read certain books, listen to a particular kind of music, attend specific plays and even escort Ms. Mason to certain social events” (Trapp, 96). Humanists on the other hand, held a genuine agenda of improving lives socially, financially, and politically. They never tried to censor anything and encouraged artists to raise awareness on racial issues, something primitivists opposed.

Even white writers with the noble intention of shifting the way blacks were presented in art and literature were met with criticism and censorship. White playwright Eugene O’Neill challenged the status quo by trying to understand the black worldview and did his part in ceasing the stereotypical presentation of blacks in plays. His plays were about and featured actual minority characters instead of the typical white actor in blackface. Misrepresentation was very common as “Up until the 1910s, theatrical productions portrayed the black character as the “Brute Negro,” thus associating blackness and extreme physical violence” (Bastard, 2). Toni Morrison would later be subject to similar criticism. Two of O’Neill’s plays that exhibit this attempt at being more inclusive are “The Emperor Jones” and “All Gods Chillun Got Wings.” They are not outwardly political but more secretive. This was a tactic used in an attempt to avoid backlash. O’Neill understood that “If you [will] restrain the propaganda purpose to the selection of the life to be portrayed and then let that life live itself without comment, it does your trick” (Bastard, 13). Strict regulation in the 1920s by the play jury kept playwrights of all races from fully expressing their ideas as well as social and political stances. Interestingly, O’Neill’s theatrical productions were received well by most whites but not minority audiences. He was however, threatened by the KKK and other theatres for “inappropriate” content, particularly one scene where a white woman kisses a black man’s hand (Bastard, 4). One conjecture we can make is that minorities were so used to their culture being used. But unlike many of his cohorts, I believe that O’Neill had a genuine wish to understand the minority worldliness. He had good intent and possessed an admiration of the black motif but perhaps could not understand it completely to create something that blacks would be able to relate to. Although he could not reach the desired level of consciousness, he still inspired others and furthered the careers of many actors.

The creation of Black owned newspapers that catered to the black audience was a driving and recurring method of advocacy and protest. The emergence and distribution of black newspapers were undoubtedly crucial in the fight for equal rights. Some of the most popular periodicals of the Jim-Crow era were *The Chicago Defender,* *The California Eagle,* and *The Norfolk Journal and Guide* (Lewis)*.* Each had their own noble missions, albeit similar, and most were not solely political. *The Chicago Defender* was different from others because “The tone of the paper was militiant and referrerd to African Americans, not as ‘black’ or ‘negro’ but as ‘the race’” (Lewis). I think this would have sparked pride and motivation in the reader. It was more intense in its content and approach as it also showed pictures of lynchings and violence. Graphic photos captured the reality of the world around and would have likely triggered an emotional response, prompting people to take action. Some key issues newspapers went through included gaining advertisers, lack of funding, and inefficient circulation (Teresa). Robert S. Abott, founder of *The Chicago Defender*, struggled getting his newspaper printed and had to borrow a kitchen to do so. But the hard work paid off as it eventually became successful and widely circulated. Like previously discussed playwright Eugene O’neill, newspapers opposed the stereotypical presentation of blacks. It is evident that newspapers were invested in the representation and advancement of the community from the job listings, advice columns and focus on police brutality, stereotypical representation, and workplace discrimination. An interesting connection made to these newspapers is to that of “black twitter,” as discussed by Carries Teresa in “The Jim Crow-era Black Press: of and for its Readership.” When you scroll around black twitter, there are cultural influences and largely common interests within the community.

The reflection of intersectionality is evident in the experiences of black female writers, who have historically been targeted by their male counterparts for stepping out of the appropriate female “sphere” into a male dominated field, and thus endured a higher degree of difficulty getting published and being taken seriously. The subjugation over women writers has caused them self-doubt, fear, and reluctance to continue their craft. Tactics they used to counter this include the use of pseudonyms and hitting back at criticism with analytical, graceful responses. In the article “The Evolution of Female Writers: An Exploration of their Issues and Concerns from the 19th Century to Today,” Samantha Howell discusses the targeting of women in literacy and the room for improvement we can make in the current age. A recurring tactic I have come across is that of using a pseudonym to conceal the feminine identity and appeal to male readers. Pen names gave writers courage and comfort. Contemporary writers like JK Rowling and James Tiptee have used them to appeal to male readers. It was actually Rowling’s publisher's idea for her to use the pseudonym. And Tiptee, whose real name is Alice Bradley Sheldo, used a pseudonym to get published in the science fiction genre, which has a fanbase of mostly men (Howell). Why would men be less likely to pick up a book if it is by a female writer? It must have to do with this genre in particular. When you look up “science fiction authors,” only men show up. Perhaps there is a relatability aspect to it, and audiences might assume that a woman will not have the same genuine interest and knowledge of this genre.

African-American writer Ida B. Wells navigated the industry in an area of the United States with an especially high rate of hate crime. Racially charged violence encapsulated the Jim-Crow South. Wells’ investment in the issues of inequality and the cases of lynchings throughout the South were deeply personal since her family had been affected by racism and she personally knew a victim of a lyching. This is enough to enrage most people. She was community-minded and selfless to her core. The foundation of many groups for black community and advancement can be attributed to her, like a black Kindergarten and women’s club (Biography). She was a consistent newspaper contributor who worked relentlessly to bring awareness to and deter these lynchings. Like many other female writers in the past and present, she used a pseudonym at one point to protect herself. The repercussions she received for her work were more severe than that of post Jim-Crow writers; such as death threats, destruction of property, and being run out of town (Biography). These were methods of intimidation used in an attempt to silence Wells. But she was steadfast and continued her work. Many blacks turned to established blacks for support and to build community. Ferdinand Barnett and Frederick Douglass were experienced writers who were part of her support group.

As a post Jim-Crow writer, Toni Morrison received criticism revolving around the gender and race of the characters she portrayed in her novels. Her methods of navigation only differed slightly from Wells’. Morrison rose to prominence in the 70s and 80s for her novels which focus on the reality of black lives in America. There is a particular interview which struck a chord with me. In it, an inquiry was posed to Morrison regarding why she does not write about whites, and whether he has plans to stop writing about race. She gave an introspective and analytical response to a question that I believe may have been innocent but distasteful. It’s as if her work was nitpicked for anything people could find. Morrison revealed that although she could write about whites, she does not see why it would be necessary (Morrison, 2012). She also asserts that this was not a legitimate question, has nothing to do with the literary imagination, and is purely sociological (Morrison, 2012). Would any writer be okay with questions like this? It is like saying, “I don’t find your work worthy enough as it is” and “White people would make this story interesting.” It is disconcerting because it shows the double-standard that is ingrained in literacy. It seemed socially acceptable to ask a black writer a question of this nature, but would not be able to ask the same question to anyone else. Society perceived literacy centered around white characters as inherently more valuable, desirable, and somehow higher level. This situation reinforces the concept of literacy as white property. The notable lack of understanding between the interviewer and Morrison can be attributed to their backgrounds. Because of her sex, race, and the period she grew up in, her life experiences were vastly different from his.

Questions and criticism of Morrison’s work on gender have also been directed to her. She has been asked about her writing on men. Perhaps because people think that women do not possess enough worldliness to write outside of their sex. In an insightful interview with Kathy Neudstadt for Bryn Mar College, Morrison offers dialogue on the intricacies of her life's work and her perception of herself as a writer. In response to how she is able to write about diverse characters, Morrison believes there is no barrier in writing about the opposite gender or sex as long as you can relate to something. She believes it is “Just a question of perception” and relates this to the question of race that is a source of disconcertment for her (Neustadt). Focusing on the similarities rather than the differences between us is a significant aspect of writing. A pertinent example of someone who has exhibited this well is caucasian writer Nadine Gardiner “[Who] writes about black people with such astounding sensibilities and sensitivity - not patronizing, not romantic, just real” (Neustandt). Interestingly, Morrison reveals that she has not always thought of herself as a writer, which perhaps stems from outside criticism of the many facets of her writing.

The challenges of getting published have evolved through the years and the influence of race is still pertinent and debated. It is important to understand the process writers go through prior to and while getting published. Many are unaware of the complicated, often year long process involving a plethora of professionals. One of the highlights of the process is working with a commissioning editor. Editors play a crucial role as they execute multiple functions like proofreading, spreading word, and developing a bond with the writer.There has been a considerable shift through the years in the nature of publishers and how they interact with their clients. I was inspired by Penguin Random House’s mission of “supporting writers and talent” as well as “caring and believing” in authors. They are intent on helping them nurture their talent because they understand the intimacy and hardships of writing. For a manuscript to be approved, there are usually one or two board meetings consisting of company executives, presidents, sales, marketing, editorial representatives, etc. who vote on a decision. They take into account things like profitability and the distinction of the work being presented. Getting your work noticed amongst that of so many other writers is a challenge, and it is not uncommon for writers to be rejected multiple times. Given the amount of people involved in both the approval and production process, it’s highly unlikely that race is a factor in difficulty getting published in 2020.

The shifts of struggle surrounding literacy and publishing in the jim crow period and onward are significant in understanding minority and women writers experiences. Some of the tactics employed by minorities in navigating the industry included: forming connections with support groups and established authors, using pseudonyms, responding back to criticism, and creating and contributing to periodicals. Ida B. Wells and Toni Morrison are two of the many inspirational figures whose long, hard careers created fruitful progress in a prejudice society. Wells’ criticism and struggles were harsher than Morrisons because of the time period in which she grew up, as she paved the way for her successors. As women, they undoubtedly endured harsher backlash for their work than men did.

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