

Black Culture

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Abstract

The migration of blacks in North America through slavery became united. The population of blacks passed down a tradition of artist through art to native born citizens. The art tradition involved telling stories to each generation in black families. The black culture elevated by tradition created hope to determine their personal freedom to escape from poverty of enslavement and to establish a way of life through tradition. A way of personal freedoms was through getting a good education that led to a better foundation and a better way of life.

Keywords: Black culture, African-American tradition

1. Introduction

African-American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. It begins with the works of such late 18th-century writers as Phillis Wheatley. Before the high point of slave narratives, African-American literature was dominated by autobiographical spiritual narratives. African-American literature reached early high points with slave narratives of the nineteenth century. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a time of flowering of literature and the arts. Writers of African-American literature have been recognized by the highest awards, including the Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison. Among the themes and issues explored in this literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, and equality. African-American writing has tended to incorporate oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues, or rap.^[1]

As African Americans' place in American society has changed over the centuries, so, has the focus of African-American literature. Before the American Civil War, the literature primarily consisted of memoirs by people who had escaped from slavery; the genre of slave narratives included accounts of life under slavery and the path of justice and redemption to freedom. There was an early distinction between the literature of freed slaves and the literature of free blacks who had been born in the North. Free blacks had to express their oppression in a different narrative form. Free blacks in the North often spoke out against slavery and racial injustices using the spiritual narrative.

African-American literature has both been influenced by the great African diasporic heritage^[7] and shaped it in many countries. It has been created within the larger realm of post-colonial literature, although scholars distinguish between the two, saying that "African American literature differs from most post-colonial literature in that it is written by members of a minority community who reside within a nation of vast wealth and economic power."^[8]

African-American oral culture is rich in poetry, including spirituals, gospel music, blues, and rap. This oral poetry also appears in the African-American tradition of Christian sermons, which make use of deliberate repetition, cadence, and alliteration. African-American literature—especially written poetry, but also prose—has a strong tradition of incorporating all of these forms of oral poetry.^[9] These characteristics do not occur in all works by African-American writers.

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Some scholars resist using Western literary theory to analyze African-American literature. As the Harvard literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. said, "My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without."^[10] One trope common to African-American literature is Signification. Gates claims that signifying "is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, and also hyperbole and litotes, and metalepsis."^[11] Signification also refers to the way in which African-American "authors read and critique other African American texts in an act of rhetorical self-definition"^[12]

2. Refuting the dominant literary culture

Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subject to racist attitudes. This experience inspired some Black writers, at least during the early years of African-American literature, to prove they were the equals of European-American authors. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr, has said, "it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters as this urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions they were bearers of an inferior culture."^[45]

By refuting the claims of the dominant culture, African-American writers were also attempting to subvert the literary and power traditions of the United States. Some scholars assert that writing has traditionally been seen as "something defined by the dominant culture as a white male activity."^[45] This means that, in American society, literary acceptance has traditionally been intimately tied in with the very power dynamics which perpetrated such evils as racial discrimination. By borrowing from and incorporating the non-written oral traditions and folk life of the African diaspora, African-American literature broke "the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power."^[46] In producing their own literature, African Americans were able to establish their own literary traditions devoid of the white intellectual filter. This view of African-American literature as a tool in the struggle for Black political and cultural liberation has been stated for decades, perhaps most famously by W. E. B. Du Bois.^[47]

3. Existing both inside and outside American literature

According to Joanne Gabbin, a professor, African-American literature exists both inside and outside American literature. "Somehow African American literature has been relegated to a different level, outside American literature, yet it is an integral part," she says.^[48] She bases her theory in the experience of Black people in the United States. Even though African Americans have long claimed an American identity, during most of United States history they were not accepted as full citizens and were actively discriminated against. As a result, they were part of America while also outside it.

Similarly, African-American literature is within the framework of a larger American literature, but it also is independent. As a result, new styles of storytelling and unique voices have been created in relative isolation. The benefit of this is that these new styles and voices can leave their isolation and help revitalize the larger literary world (McKay, 2004). This artistic pattern has held true with many aspects of African American culture over the last century, with jazz and hip hop being just two artistic examples that developed in isolation within the Black community before reaching a larger audience and eventually revitalizing American culture.

4. African American criticism

African-American culture is rooted in Africa. It is a blend of chiefly sub-Saharan African and Sahelean cultures. Although slavery greatly restricted the ability of Americans of African descent to practice their cultural traditions, many practices, values, and beliefs survived and over time have modified or blended with white culture and other cultures such as that of Native Americans. There are some facets of African-American culture that were accentuated by the slavery period. The result is a unique and dynamic culture that has had and continues to have a profound impact on mainstream American culture, as well as the culture of the broader world.

Elaborate rituals and ceremonies were a significant part of African Culture. West Africans believed that spirits dwelled in their surrounding nature. From this disposition, they treated their surroundings with mindful care. Africans also believed spiritual life source existed after death. They believed that ancestors in this spiritual realm could then mediate between the supreme creator and the living. Honor and prayer was displayed to these "ancient ones", the spirit of those past. West Africans also believed in spiritual possession.^[1]

For many years African-American culture developed separately from European-American culture, both because of slavery and the persistence of racial discrimination in America, as well as African-American slave descendants' desire to create and maintain their own traditions. Today, African-American culture has become a significant part of American culture and yet, at the same time, remains a distinct cultural body.^[6]

5. Oral tradition

Slaveholders limited or prohibited education of enslaved African Americans because they feared it might empower their chattel and inspire or enable emancipatory ambitions. In the United States, the legislation that denied slaves formal education likely contributed to their maintaining a strong oral tradition, a common feature of indigenous African cultures.^[9] African-based oral traditions became the primary means of preserving history, mores, and other cultural information among the people. This was consistent with the griot practices of oral history in many African and other cultures that did not rely on the written word. Many of these cultural elements have been passed from generation to generation through storytelling. The folktales provided African Americans the opportunity to inspire and educate one another.^[9]

6. Discussion

African American culture often developed separately from mainstream American culture because of African Americans' desire to practice their own traditions, as well as the persistence of racial segregation in America. Consequently African American culture has become a significant part of American culture and yet, at the same time, remains a distinct culture apart from it.

From the earliest days of slavery, slave owners sought to exercise control over their slaves by attempting to strip them of their African culture. The physical isolation and societal marginalization of African slaves and, later, of their free

progeny, however, actually facilitated the retention of significant elements of traditional culture among Africans in the New World generally, and in the U.S. in particular. Slave owners deliberately tried to repress political organization in order to deal with the many slave rebellions that took place in the southern United States, Brazil, Haiti, and the Dutch Guyanas.

In turn, African American culture has had a pervasive, transformative impact on myriad elements of mainstream American culture, among them language, music, dance, religion, cuisine, and agriculture. This process of mutual creative exchange is called creolization. Over time, the culture of African slaves and their descendants has been ubiquitous in its impact on not only the dominant American culture, but on world culture as well.

7. Conclusion

African-American neighborhoods are types of ethnic enclaves found in many cities in the United States. The formation of African-American neighborhoods is closely linked to the history of segregation in the United States, either through formal laws, or as a product of social norms. Despite this, African-American neighborhoods have played an important role in the development of nearly all aspects of both African-American culture and broader American culture.

Although slavery greatly restricted the ability of Africans in America to practice their cultural traditions, many practices, values and beliefs survived and over time have incorporated elements of European American culture. There are even certain facets of African American culture that were brought into being or made more prominent as a result of slavery; an example of this is how drumming became used as a means of communication and establishing a community identity during that time. The result is a dynamic, creative culture that has had and continues to have a profound impact on mainstream American culture and on world culture as well. After Emancipation, these uniquely African American traditions continued to grow. They developed into distinctive traditions in music, art, literature, religion, food, holidays, amongst others. While for some time sociologists, such as Gunnar Myrdal and Patrick Moynihan, believed that African Americans had lost most cultural ties with Africa, anthropological field research by Melville Hersovits and others demonstrated that there is a continuum of African traditions among Africans in the New World from the West Indies to the United States. The greatest influence of African cultural practices on European cultures is found below the Mason-Dixon in the southeastern United States, especially in the Carolinas among the Gullah people and in Louisiana.

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