H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Amy K. Levin. *Africanism and Authenticity in African-American Women's Novels.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003. ii + 208 pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2631-2.

Reviewed by Babacar M'Baye

Published on H-USA (March, 2004)

Gendered Africanisms: New Perspectives on Black Women in Africa and in the Diaspora

Amy K. Levin's *Africanism and Authenticity in African-American Women's Novels* makes outstanding contributions to the promising scholarship on the relations between African-American intellectuals and Africa. Combining the methods of cultural anthropology, literary criticism, and intellectual history, Levin analyzes a variety of African influences in the writings of Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Jamaica Kincaid, where they serve as metaphors of the cultural and social resistance of the women of the Black Diaspora. The word "Africanism" refers to African influences in the cultures of blacks of the New World (p. 5).

Levin's book contributes to works such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), Joseph E. Holloway's *Africanism in American Culture* (1990), Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1984), and Patricia Jones-Jackson's *When Roots Die* (1987), all of which she credits for helping Americans become aware of the Africanisms in African-American culture (pp. 5-6). However, Levin does not mention Melville J. Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1940), which pioneered the study of Africanisms in American anthropology by being the first book to document salient African elements in African-American language, worldviews, folklore, and religion (pp. 29-30).[1] Also, other works which Levin does not mention, such as Marion Kraft's *The African Continuum and Contemporary African American Writers: Their Literary Presence and Ancestral Past* (1995), Therese E. Higgins's *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2001), and Keith Cartwright's *Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and Gothic Tales* (2002), have examined African elements in African-American literature.

Despite her failure to include the above recent works on Black Atlantic Studies, Levin's *Africanism* is, however, pivotal, since it expands the narrow ways in which the relations between African-American and African cultures are often

explored. First, she validates the role of black women in the Diaspora and in Africa as carriers of traditions of resistance and survival. Widening the definition of the term "tradition" in order to include "what is black and female" (p. 7), Levin identifies in the writings of Naylor, Morrison, Walker, and Kincaid discrete images of female identity that invoke the spirituality and strength of women in African iconography. Levin writes: "Each of the four authors uses Africanisms in ways that are appropriate to her aesthetic and thematic goals. In Naylor's *Mama Day*, the community of Willow Springs reflects the values and power relations evident in West African women's societies. Allusions to Africa are indirect and appear through metonyms and metaphors. Moreover, despite their contiguity, Naylor emphasizes the underlying dissimilarities between island and mainland cultures. In stressing the essential otherness of Willow Springs, Naylor implies that these differences reflect the conflicts between those who value their African heritage and those who desire to be assimilated into American culture" (p. 20).

By including "what is black and female" in Pan-African cultures (p. 7), Levin gives new meaning to the word "Africanism," associating it with a theory of "Gendered Africanism," which is a study of the tradition of black women intellectuals who appropriate the status of leaders and priestesses of African mothers in order to resist oppression. Levin states: "Often these magical qualities and heritages are particularly evident in female characters who are leaders, many of whom possess special skills for healing the spirit or body" (p. 7). Levin's use of African women's iconography as a basis for her study of African-American culture fits with Paul E. Lovejoy's Africanist approach to the study of the Black Diaspora. In his introduction to *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery* (2000), Lovejoy encourages a methodology which traces the struggle of blacks of the Diaspora to Africa and "compares the processes of history that affected enslaved Africans in the Americas with the experiences of those who remained in Africa" (p. 2). [2] Yet, Levin's guiding theory is indebted to Houston Baker's concept of "a journey back," which describes the spiritual voyage to Africa of early black intellectuals such as Olaudah Equiano and Phillis Wheatley.[3] Reconstructing Baker's theory, Levin invents the notion of "a circular journey" which she explains as follows: "This work presents a circular journey as it follows the experiences of women from Africa to America and back. What remains distinctive in both parts of the book is the attention paid to the importance of female traditions and their role in the creation of African-American women's culture. That this task inevitably involves complex issues of mediation and appropriation is not surprising, given the history of violation and silencing that has influenced the lives of so many African-American women" (pp. 23-24).

Documenting the journey, Levin identifies and examines a spatial and rhetorical tradition in which black women of the Diaspora appropriate the independence and resistance of African mothers in order to reclaim their position in racist and sexist environments in the West. Thus, interpreting Naylor's *Mama Day* (1989), Levin perceives a parallel between the status of the women in the novel and that of women in the Sande societies of Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast. *Mama Day* is a novel about Miranda Day and her niece Ophelia (Cocoa) Day, two black women of Willow Springs, an island located between South Carolina and Georgia. Using her power of conjurer, Ruby, a root doctor who competes with Mama Day, casts a spell on Ophelia. As a condition for her niece's recovery, Mama Day asks George, Ophelia's lover, to abandon his city lifestyle and live according to the traditional ways of Willow Spring. George satisfies Mama's demand and dies before Ophelia fully regains strength. According to Levin, the plot of *Mama Day* reflects a metaphor of maternity which is analogous to that of motherhood in Sande society. Levin writes, "A summary of the duties of the Sande *Sowei*, or leader, reveals deep-

er similarities between her position and Mama Day's role in her community. The ***Sowei*** is a powerful woman who is elected to office. Much of her power is directly attributable to her knowledge of society secrets from which other members are excluded. Another distinguishing feature is the ***Sowei***'s mastery of society's practices. She knows its techniques of healing, she dances in its rituals, and she wears the black ***Sowo*** mask, the embodiment and articulation of the society's ideals" (p. 32).

Another symbolism that links the female community in ***Mama Day*** with that of Sande society is the significance of hair braiding and conjuring (p. 33). In Sande society, "offering to plait another woman's hair is a way of asking her to become your friend. A beautiful, distinctive style is considered a gift of love" (p. 33). Yet "conjurers commonly use strands of hair in various of their 'routines' designed to harm the person from whom the strands have been taken ... a belief common in Africa and among some blacks in the Americas" (p. 33).

Later, Levin discusses Naylor's ***The Men of Brewster Place*** (1998), which "explores what happens to men who are separated from their roots, while suggesting that initiations into racism, humiliation, and violence replace more traditional rituals of manhood" (p. 43). As a follow-up to ***The Women of Brewster Place***, published in 1992, ***The Men of Brewster Place*** is the story of seven men who recollect the better lives they had before they were separated from their wives. These men, including Morton, Brother Jerome, Rev. Morland T. Woods, Eugene, C.C. Baker, Basil, and Abshu, maintain a strong sense of community and friendship despite the identity crisis that confronts them. Levin explains: "Eugene's erratic behavior toward his wife is explained when readers learn that he is gay; his struggle comes out of the gap between 'everything I [Eugene] believed a man should be' and his homosexuality.... C.C. Baker, an antagonist in ***The Women of Brewster Place***, kills his brother on orders from a drug lord known as the Man.... Brother Jerome, named after the Biblical scholar, may be developmentally impaired, but he is able to make his 'piano tell any story that he wanted'" (p. 44).

The quotation shows that the men of Brewster Place are able to invent new identities despite the under-current of insecurity and prejudice that overwhelms them. Their condition reflects the paradox of colonized black men who are verbally creative despite oppression, an irony which, as Levin shows in her characterization of Jerome, "has a certain appropriateness, since African males were often regarded as childlike by the European colonizers who 'civilized' them, and it is Jerome's simplicity that allows him to tell stories" (p. 44). It is a pity, though, that Levin does not discuss a comparable paradox in twentieth-century African literature where one finds black male characters that are creative despite neo-colonization and identity crisis.

Another analogous metaphor that Levin perceives in African-American and African women's cultures is the "liminality" or "doubleness" of the women. Inspired by the conception of duality in Gates's ***The Signifying Monkey*** and Baker's ***Blues, Ideology, and African-American Literature*** (1984), Levin defines liminality as the capacity to survive in two elements (or worlds) (p. 48). One example of liminality is the double lives of characters such as Pecola Breedlove, Claudia, Frieda, and Cholly Breedlove in Toni Morrison's ***The Bluest Eye***, who negotiate the spaces in-between the black and white communities from which they are excluded (p. 55). Comparing the female community in ***The Bluest Eye*** with that of the Gelede society of Nigeria, Levin notices an absence of the power and leadership of West African women (p. 55). This absence shows that Morrison, like Naylor, draws attention to the negative consequence of disconnection from ancestors. "The absence or presence of an ancestor determines the success of the protagonists. For the ancestor is not only wise; he or she

values racial connection, racial memory over individual fulfillment" (p. 54).

Additionally, Levin's monograph expands the scholarship on the relations between the Diaspora and Africa by conveying the viewpoint of black women writers on Africa and Africanism. Levin's book adds to works such as John Cullen Gruesser's *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African-American Writing about Africa* (2000) or Robert Coles's *Black Writers Abroad: A Study of Black American Writers in Europe and Africa* (1999) that have discussed the relations between twentieth-century African-American writers and Africa mainly in the context of black travel writing. Unlike these works, which Levin does not mention, Levin's book is exceptional because it defines Africanism as a concept that describes at the same time African-American retention of and theories about Africa. Levin writes: "African influences may be a continuing visible force in the lives of contemporary women, as well as a powerful legacy. At the same time, Walker's method of using Africanisms differs significantly from what we have seen in works by Naylor, Morrison, and Kincaid. Walker's approach appears more direct and deliberate, since she sets important parts of her novels in Africa itself. Instead of dealing with transmission through obeah, voodoo, Gullah, family rites, and folklore, Walker increasingly tells stories about African women and African Americans who travel to Africa. Thus, in discussions of Walker's texts, the term *Africanism* takes on another meaning. In earlier chapters, the term referred primarily to continuations of African traditions in the United States; here, the term primarily alludes to an African-American's perspective on or interpretation of African culture *in situ*. The difference in the two uses of the term raises critical questions about Africanism and authenticity" (p. 97).

One of these issues is the "authentic" or original form that each black intellectual's vision of Africa takes due to the oral and hybrid nature of African traditions. "Because of the indirect transmission of traditional influences and the unwritten history of many African women, these writers must combine imagination, (re)memory, and knowledge in representing Africa" (p. 21). The rewriting of African history from a personal perspective is what Levin calls "ghostwriting," which is a process of adaptation in which both the black author or critic brings his/her voice and perspective to the study of the past (pp. 130-131). One example of ghostwriting is Toni Morrison's ***Beloved*** (1987) which reconstructs the genre of slave narratives by ending the silencing and miscaricature of black characters, inserting itself in the storytelling process and referring to the continuing presence of an African heritage (p. 131). As evidence of Morrison's hybrid concept of culture, Levin refers to the scene in ***Beloved*** where the character of Baby Suggs exorcises the ghost of slavery's past in a clearing that symbolizes a liminal space where African medicine, African-American folk beliefs, and European religion intermingle. This fusion of black and white cultures corroborates Morrison's theory in ***Playing in the Dark*** (1992) that the African-American "character is used to limn out and enforce the invention of Whiteness" (p. 133).

Focusing on Walker, Levin represents the author's vision of Africa as unique because unlike Naylor whose characters "live in America and are influenced by an African past prior to the diaspora, Walker uses a synchronous approach that allows her to explore what happens when characters who continue to live by rural African values are transplanted into American culture" (p. 98). In ***The Color Purple*** (1982), Walker imagines Africa as a fatherland where the African-American woman finds sisters who are confronted by similar colonialist and sexist oppression. Evidently, Levin's interpretation conveys the unsubstantiated Western feminist bias that African women are exploited and relegated to inhuman conditions. Levin states: "Walker's depiction of rural African society does present the practice of female excision as evidence of rampant sexism that sup-

pressed women's physical pleasure for fear that it might disrupt the economy of power relations. And she is concerned about the stereotypes. The problem is not one of intent, but of readership as well" (p. 169). This quotation imposes a feminist agenda on Walker's writings in an attempt to exempt the author from the accusation of prejudice. Although, the "'image of Africa as the dark continent' is largely the creation of white male imperialists," as Levin purports, this image is often reinforced by Western intellectuals, black or white, who often miscomprehend the real experiences of African women (p. 169).

On the other hand, Levin develops pertinent arguments in her analysis of *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989). Here, Levin says: "Africa is the site of a series of dream memories, a prelapsarian world disrupted by an awareness of racial difference, a desire for territory, and the coming of white men" (p. 99). This reading of *The Temple* as a place for spiritual wholeness which is corrupted by European imperialism resonates with Du Bois's account in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, first published in 1920, of the vicious effects of imperialism in Africa. "The indictment of Africa against Europe is grave. For four hundred years white Europe was the chief support of that trade in human beings which first and last robbed black Africa of a hundred million human beings, transformed the face of her social life, overthrew organized government, distorted ancient industry, and snuffed out the lights of cultural development."[4]

In her discussion of Jamaica Kincaid's work, Levin says that the author appropriates the spirituality and mobility of women in African iconography in order to resist the social fragmentation that racism and colonialism create in the Black Diaspora. In Kincaid's novels, "Men take and abandon multiple wives and mistresses as imperialists possess nations. Mothers and mother figures suppress their African and indigenous heritages, only to internalize European cultural norms" (p. 80). One example of Africanism is Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother* (1997), where the author appropriates the Sande woman's ability to transform herself and cross into a world free of male interference. Levin discusses one episode in Kincaid's *Autobiography* that "recapitulates the Sande traditions of female initiates rising from the water and male interlopers in women's spaces being destroyed. From a Yoruba perspective, the women in the water may also be seen as incarnations of the goddess Osun, though Osun is not ordinarily a force of destruction of men" (p. 83). The ability of Kincaid's women to transform themselves and resist male dominance suggests the spiritual power and agency of black women. This power is evident in Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985), where the characters of Annie and her mother resist racism, sexism, and colonial subjugation in England by creating a personal space in which Africanism and European culture are intertwined. "Even as they represent a world where women work obeah and root medicine, they also become enforcers of an alien tradition. The small spaces with which they are associated represent the way opposing worldviews trap them" (p. 89).

Africanism is a groundbreaking work that examines the resistance and spiritual survival of women in the Black Diaspora and in Africa. The book expands the scope and significance of Black Atlantic scholarship by providing a fertile concept of Africanism that reflects the unique manner in which each black woman intellectual of the Diaspora envisions Africa. In their writings, intellectuals such as Naylor, Walker, Morrison, Kincaid, and others bring their own perspectives on the struggle of their community for freedom. Levin's book, however, suffers from its failure to analyze the struggle of women and men in postcolonial Africa, especially in twentieth-century African literature. Also, the book fails to mention or give credit to major works about the relations between African-Americans and Africa. Yet, despite these limitations, Levin's book is pioneering because it centers on the importance of black women in the

study of cultural and historical connections between Africa and the Diaspora.

Notes

[1]. Robert Baron, "Amalgams and Mosaics, Syncretisms and Reinterpretations: Reading Herskovits and Contemporary Creolists for Metaphors of Creolization," *Journal of American Folklore* 116 (1959): pp. 88-115; Eric R. Wolf, "Melville J. Herskovits," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 4 (July 1963): pp. 480-481; and August Meier, "The Triumph of Melville J. Herskovits," *Reviews in American History* 6, no. 1 (March 1978): pp. 21-28.

[2]. Douglas B. Chambers, "Tracing Igbo into the African Diaspora," in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 55; and Lillian Ashcraft-Eason, "'She Voluntarily Hath Come': A Gambian Woman Trader in Colonial Georgia in the Eighteenth Century," in *Identity in the Shadow of Slavery*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 217.

[3]. Houston Baker, *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 2-3.

[4]. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil.* (Mineoloa: Dover Publications, 1999), p. 33.