Autobiography and the Black Intellectual Tradition

In *Life, Culture and Education on the Academic Plantation: Womanist Thought and Perspective*, Dierdre Glenn Paul, Chairperson of Reading and Educational Media in the College of Education at Montclair State University, presents eight loosely related essays on topics ranging from her experiences as a black woman in academia to new forms of epistemology to the use of rap music in urban classrooms as a means of promoting literacy and reading skills. The essays are not arranged in “any specific preordained order,” nor are they meant to be read in “a linear fashion.” She hopes the resulting “discontinuity” will further the book’s “transformative agenda,” an agenda that will change the ways and increase the complexity with which its readers understand the world (p. xi). The collection concludes with three critiques/responses from academics within the field of education.

Glenn Paul’s agenda is revolutionary. As a radical intellectual she is in search of a “liberatory pedagogy” (p. 3) and a non-racist, democratic educational system from elementary through graduate school environments. She is also a self-described “Black woman living in a racially schizophrenic society, a single mother, a former public school teacher, a teacher educator, and an emerging intellectual” (p. xi), and it is from these multiple, overlapping identities and experiences that she writes. Taken together, the essays combine to illustrate the author’s personal journey and political education within an autobiographical framework. This framework allows the author to critique contemporary education and popular culture from the firm foundation of her own encounters and struggles with America’s racist and sexist cultures and institutions. The essays succeed in weaving the personal and the political in consideration of such disparate but interrelated issues as border transgressions, the politics of language, plural identities, radical pedagogies, black English, and scholarly writers’ access and accountability to their non-academic audience.

Each chapter combines a personal life issue with an examination of its theoretical implications for womanist and antiracist social change. For instance, her search for day care for her young child provides insight into the practical issues and obstacles of single motherhood which then leads to a discussion of what the author calls “Black maternal epistemology” (p. 65), or the knowledge construction and decision-making processes of black mothers in a racist, sexist, and violent society. Another chapter, “The Electronic Auction Block,” grows out of the author’s reaction to an episode of *The Jerry Springer Show* with all its exploitation and denigration of the black female body. The commodification of the black body certainly is not new but it has been transformed, she argues, into a “new racism” (p. 73) by twenty-first-century media, new discourses of oppression, and even more subtle media images pressed into service to control and demonize minority populations in the United States” (p. 75).
Beverly M. Gordon of Ohio State University, one of the three respondents at the end of the book, comments that "there are two books here. One ... is a scholarly critique of people of color in American education," and the other "an ongoing spiritual journey through life" (p. 112). Her critique implies that Glenn Paul is unsuccessful at the book’s most basic level—that of weaving together the personal and the political, the individual experience with the larger, more complex considerations of community, society, and intellectual life. As Glenn Paul freely acknowledges, the book is repetitive and difficult to follow. Gordon is correct in her assessment that “[m]any sections of the book read like stream of consciousness” (p. 112). More frustrating is the number of intriguing ideas, theories, and intellectual contexts that the author mentions in passing but does not explore in the depth they deserve. On the other hand, it is worth approaching this book as the author intends, as an experimental form of scholarly writing and personal reflection, an attempt to make sense of her obligations both as an educator to those she teaches and to herself in the complicated and shifting context of her many identities.

Glenn Paul refers to herself throughout as “an emerging intellectual” (p. xi) working to reclaim the black intellectual tradition lost to racism and to situate herself within that tradition. It is here that one of the book’s greatest potentials lies. The work can be read profitably in the context of the history of black intellectual innovations and forms in twentieth-century America. Glenn Paul needs to make clearer the connections between her own work and that on which it so clearly builds. Such connections would situate her in an ongoing tradition, further her project of rescuing black intellectuals from historical oblivion, and allow her to make her own contributions and thereby further advance the tradition of which she is a part.

For example, her debt to and place in the intellectual history of womanism is clear. She devotes considerable space to establishing the usefulness of the concept (coined by Alice Walker in 1983) in critiquing the racism found in white second- and third-wave feminism. Glenn Paul defines a womanist as “a Black feminist or feminist of color; committed to survival and wholeness of people, male and female; and wanting to know more and in greater depth than is ‘good’ for one” (p. 2). Her book falls within this tradition. The book relies, too, on other scholars writing from womanist perspectives—the ideas of bell hooks, Angela Davis, Hazel Carby, and Audre Lorde guide Glenn Paul’s analysis at crucial points. But she stops short of examining the tradition in detail or in exploring contributions to and changes in the tradition since the term was first used more than twenty years ago. In what ways does Life, Culture and Education on the Academic Plantation advance and make new contributions to the tradition of black female intellectual thought? Is womanism as useful a concept as it was a generation ago? As an emerging intellectual, Glenn Paul is in a fine position to offer a fuller discussion of this one important aspect of the black intellectual tradition.

Similarly, Glenn Paul makes intriguing claims about the contributions of such leading black intellectuals as W. E. B. DuBois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Carter Woodson without fully developing her ideas or providing evidence. In one case, she uses the term “liberatory pedagogy to protest the fact that Paulo Freire’s well-known notion of ‘critical pedagogy’ had really been championed forty to fifty years earlier by W.E.B. DuBois and African American historian and educator, Carter Woodson” (p. 3). She continues:

“While I do not begrudge nor minimize Freire’s impact or influence, I consciously note the way in which White educators in the United States have been much more open to such ideas when they are produced outside of the United States rather than deal with collective racism, its historical legacy, and the sustained negation of Black intellectuals and Black epistemology that have come to pass within the borders of the United States.” (pp. 3-4)

There is ample evidence to make this case and to credit Woodson with original critiques of the kind of education white oppressors furnished blacks throughout the twentieth century, but the author does not do so.[1]

Perhaps the most obvious black intellectual tradition in which Glenn Paul’s work can be fruitfully understood is the history of black autobiography and the many ways in which African Americans have used personal narrative to assert identity and selfhood and to promote a political agenda—a transformative agenda much like the one Glenn Paul seeks to provide. As V. P. Franklin notes, “African American intellectuals and artists ... wrote their autobiographies with the political and social circumstances for African Americans in mind, and used their personal experiences as a mirror to reflect that larger social context for African Americans ... these African American intellectuals used the autobiographical form to examine ideological issues.”[2] This is Glenn Paul’s approach and project exactly; it would both help the reader and further her own ends for her to make the point explicitly.
Perhaps these suggestions take Glenn Paul in a scholarly direction she does not wish to pursue but, as Gordon comments, *Life, Culture and Education on the Academic Plantation* is a "'work' in progress" (p. 115) and historical context may be one of the strands Glenn Paul needs to further develop her innovative approach to writing and her transformative political/educational agenda.

Notes

[1]. See Carter Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, in which he writes: "The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples." Carter Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Philadelphia: Hakim’s Publications, 1933), p. xii.


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