

622 American Literature

radically challenged multiple academic disciplines and art practices both internationally and nationally, Language poetry insisted on the formative powers of language itself. For many practitioners, poetry was poetics. We are now in a different time—a time in which further inquiry into the relationship between poetic form and poetics is needed.

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***The Ethics of Swagger: Prizewinning African American Novels, 1977–1993.* By Michael DeRel Hill. Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press. 2013. ix, 195 pp. Cloth, \$51.95; CD, \$14.95.**

***The Time Is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy.* By Nick Bromell. New York: Oxford Univ. Press. 2013. ix, 190 pp. Cloth, \$29.95; e-book available.**

What can the black experience teach us about the construction of community and the makeup of US democracy? Both Michael DeRel Hill and Nick Bromell return to this issue of cultural distinction by advancing new arguments about the value of African American culture today, as it becomes increasingly marketized. Hill chronicles the relationship between African American writers and the expectations of literary prize committees. He explains why blacks received more major literary awards in the seventeen years between 1977 and 1993 than in any other period of equal length. Bookended by Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, which won the National Book Critics Award, and Ernest Gaines's receipt of the same prize for *A Lesson before Dying*, as well as Morrison's Nobel Prize in Literature, the period "signaled the end of black writers' journey through insecurity toward autonomy" (5). Hill argues that it was the aesthetic choice of these writers to "shed anxieties regarding Eurocentric literary ideas" and excavate their literary traditions—a choice to "walk with . . . dignity," or to "swagger"—that ironically afforded them such a high number of prizes (1).

Hill spends most of his time drawing thematic connections between the work and the author's attitude toward prize-granting bodies. Mirroring Morrison's move from valuing "prestige" to investing in the "esteem" afforded by "black creative fellowship," in *Beloved* (1987), Paul D and Sethe initially "submit to white authority" but eventually turn to each other and their community for support (34–36). Likewise, Celie's reinterpretation of faith in *The Color Purple* (1982), and Rutherford's awareness of the African diaspora in *Middle Passage* (1990) reflect, respectively, Alice Walker and Charles Johnson's negotiation of their relationship to white mentors. Extending his study of black "communion" through Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*, which desexualizes "male-female interaction," at times Hill risks a forced comparison between an author's professional life and larger historical events (78).

The second half of Hill's book focuses less on the authors' response to a white gaze than on their recuperation of African American history. In the Great Migration plot of Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), Hill locates a resistance to the "cultural forgetfulness" implicit in the period's pathologization of "black city life" (95). Amid Reagan-era discourses, the writers "suggest that the ground on which black artists stand will be much more stable if they are aware of who stood there before them" (96). Hill traces the autobiographical turn of this awareness in John Edgar Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983) and *Philadelphia Fire* (1990). Wideman's address to his son Jacob (sentenced to life in prison) becomes for Hill an occasion to reflect on the failure of art to "reverse communal decline" (154). In one of his most insightful readings, Hill claims that in the very moments art fails to uplift community it can become a "crux of intimacy," the medium through which new ties may be built (164).

The development of community is no less important in Bromell's study, which uses a wide span of African American texts from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries (oral histories, slave narratives, novels, essays, autobiographies, and unpublished manuscripts) to show the centrality of faith, recognition, and dignity to democracy's success. Bromell argues that the "thinking [of black authors] originates in a standpoint, or perspective, profoundly different from that of white Americans and from much mainstream democratic theory" (2). Although beneath his historical sweep and his couplings of historically disparate texts is a defense of timeless principles ("eternal" or unachieved [148]), he insightfully historicizes his claims. In his analysis of Charles Chesnut's *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), he contextualizes the theme of social equality in the debates about the 1874 Civil Rights Act, which voiced the segregationist demand to choose one's company. In support of a relational form of democracy, Chesnut counters the right not to see a fellow citizen with the duty to acknowledge what is impossible to see, the unknowable regions of one's identity. Bromell traces the duty of citizens to accept their "margin[s] of unknowability" (65) in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962). Unlike Emerson who espoused a zero-sum choice between self-reliance and conformity, unlike Whitman who encouraged empathy but suppressed the value of unbridgeable differences, African American writers urge us to respect another's dignity by acknowledging experiences we can and cannot understand (like for Baldwin's Ida what it means "not to be black" or "to be a man" [74]). According to Bromell, these writers instruct their readers on how to hold existential similarities alongside historical differences.

Bromell finds African American texts equally instructive on the challenge of practicing democracy in the age of globalization. Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, and Malcolm X help Americans "balance their national with their nationless identity" (80) and thereby rethink democracy as a self-governing demos while we face the dominance of transnational markets. Avoiding the binary between cosmopolitanism and patriotism,

for which Bromell criticizes Martha Nussbaum and other political theorists, these writers envisioned a situated universalism, a “worldly citizenship” (100) intimately tied to local conditions. Douglass, for instance, from the vantage point of being a fugitive slave in England reminded Americans that the Founding Fathers wrote the Declaration of Independence in a nationless context. Bromell’s point is that the transnational ties these thinkers envisioned was experienced, not theoretical, a point that, for him, touts the contingency of narrative over the generality of theory.

Nowhere is Bromell’s analysis more trenchant than in his treatment of democratic “faith” (124). African American figures practiced a faith that held opposite circumstances in a dynamic tension, “the what was and what ought to be,” in the words of Civil Rights activist John Lewis (106). For Bromell, faith is a category flexible enough to encompass the paradoxical valuation of racial suffering: “honoring” it while “seeking to end it,” or positing it as the basis of “democratic knowledge” while respecting it as “utterly private” (121). From the latter comes, for example, DuBois’s dialectical faith: “a commitment by a finite being to *strive toward* the infinite, knowing all the while that the arrival there . . . is by definition impossible” (113). These figures add to the notion of contingent commitment espoused by white pragmatists the personal experience of “inevitable conflict and existential pain” (128). Bromell concludes with a charge to literary scholars that might be considered the final lesson of both his and Hill’s interpretive work: to practice “vision as well as critique” (151).

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***A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture.* By Raúl Coronado. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press. 2013. xviii, 555 pp. \$48.95.**

***Américo Paredes: Culture and Critique.* By José E. Limón. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press. 2012. xii, 235 pp. Cloth, \$36.85; paper, \$16.95.**

***Wild Tongues: Transnational Mexican Popular Culture.* By Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press. 2012. xx, 217 pp. Paper, \$16.95.**

Over the past two decades, scholarship about the US-Mexico border region has served as a point of departure for transnational Americanist work in many disciplines. These three studies provide a counterbalance to the former trend by returning to borderlands archives, canons, and fieldwork, both to invigorate and problematize the ways in which regionalist border studies enter into broader US Americanist, Latin Americanist, and transatlantic scholarship. With an emphasis on place- and community-based cultural production, these books provide complementary and richly textured perspectives on print culture, literature, folklore, performance, music, and mass media. Moreover, all