theories and methodologies

Merely Reading

KINOHI NISHIKAWA

RECENT STATISTICS ON AFRICAN AMERICAN READERS OUTLINE DISTINCT TRENDS THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO RECONCILE WITH EACH OTHER. On the one hand, standardized tests of high school reading proficiency show that African Americans are falling further behind students in every other racial and ethnic group. The National Assessment of Educational Progress "report card" on reading claims that "Black twelfth-graders scored lower in 2013 than in 1992," when the assessment began, while "the White-Black score gap widened" over that period ("Top Stories"). On the other hand, the Pew Research Center, in a survey published in 2014, reveals that a notably high percentage of African American adults are book readers. Pew's statistics show that when it comes to having read at least one book in the past year, there are more black readers than white or Hispanic readers (81% versus 76% and 67%, respectively) and that African Americans have read more e-books, audiobooks, and books in print than any other group ("E-Reading").

The apparent contradiction between these statistics—trailing in proficiency yet thriving in general book reading—is explained by what Janice Radway calls "variable literacies," or "the varied kinds of literate behaviors that people really engage in" within determinate contexts or scenes of reading (50). These trends can coexist, in other words, because reading takes different forms and means different things across the many spaces and situations of everyday life. Hence, how reading is measured in each study is specific to a particular form or function of literacy. The institutional metric of reading proficiency, for example, is grounded not only in schooling but also in standardized testing; thus, its outcomes are likely to reflect structural inequalities in the United States educational system. By contrast, Pew's emphasis on the diverse tools used for media consumption accounts for a broader range of African American reading practices; its results encompass informal literate behaviors that take place beyond the orbit of schooling.

These domains of reading experience coexist in relative autonomy; no cause-effect relation binds them to each other. Even so, a

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roiling debate about their presumed points of overlap has animated literary, academic, and educational circles in recent years. At the center of the debate lie the popular novels known as urban, street, or hip-hop fiction. Consisting of equal parts crime thriller and modern romance, these books adapt "authentic" inner-city experiences and turn them into propulsive stories about the lives and loves of hustlers, drug dealers, prostitutes, and pimps. The genre's early success, in the 1990s, was facilitated by Vickie Stringer and Teri Woods, black entrepreneurs who decided to publish and distribute their own work after having been rejected by countless editors. The books had to be produced on the cheap, and typos and misspellings were rife. Yet urban fiction built an enormous fan base precisely because it had bypassed the New York publishing industry; crudeness in production lent it the experiential credibility readers craved. It was only a matter of time until this underground reputation became urban fiction's selling point. Within a few years, Stringer and Woods had made enough money to start their own publishing companies, and the editors who had once rejected their manuscripts now followed their lead, setting up imprints devoted to African American romance and crime writing.

The controversy over urban fiction is not just about the graphic and often lurid content of these books; it is concerned more fundamentally with the form and function of African American literacy in the twenty-first century. People base their positions on what they make of the fact that blacks' mass book reading encroaches on and thereby throws into question the practices and protocols of reading for edification. This clash of reading practices is said to pit "younger audiences influenced more by TV, music videos and hip-hop culture [against] their Civil Rights Era-raised, Black Arts Movement-nurtured, Toni Morrison-worshipping parents" (Venable 24). The generational divide as described here is synonymous with a difference in perspective on black literacy's historical function as a vehicle for self-actualization and collective uplift. Exemplified by Frederick Douglass's account of learning to read in defiance of his master in the 1845 *Narrative*, this function has tied personal narratives of improvement to a larger narrative of resisting systems of oppression that rely, in part, on controlling African Americans' access to literacy.[1] So it is that even one person's gaining knowledge (i.e., power) by reading or learning how to read often has symbolized a collective blow against racist oppression. Black literacy, in this regard, carries with it the weight of extraordinary expectation.

Against this backdrop, the controversy focuses on whether readers' preoccupation with urban fiction is symbolic of black literacy's triumph or downfall in the twenty-first century. Defenders and detractors alike see their position reflected in the social utility of black literacy; for that reason, both stake their claims on what is presumably good for the entire black community. In what follows, I examine the motivating factors behind as well as constitutive limits of these positions in the debate. First I discuss democratizers who, by representing mass book reading as a corollary to social movement, advocate upending cultural hierarchies and bringing urban fiction into the classroom. I then consider cultural gatekeepers who bemoan mass book reading as a kind of rampant false consciousness, one that sells a birthright to the edifying properties of literary fiction for a mess of cheap-thrills pottage. Noting how democratizers and gatekeepers overlook the role played by variable literacies in everyday life, I turn, finally, to a position between them that values urban fiction in those spaces and situations that are friendly to its consumption. This position neither seeks institutional legitimacy for urban fiction nor pretends it does anything but entertain. I characterize the position as merely reading.

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I begin with democratizers since their stated investment in urban fiction extends the historical function of black literacy to its conceptual limit. Articulating a version of the "at least they're reading" defense, critics such as Gerald Early legitimate urban fiction in spite of itself: that is, regardless of the fact that these are "trashy, poorly written novels," they are inherently significant because urban fiction has "democratized and broadened the reach and content of African-American literature" (Early). In this formulation, the fact of a mass African American reading public is self-validating, constituting its own evidence of urban fiction's contributions to literary tradition. Crucially, that evidence has nothing to do with standards of judgment or with any determination of aesthetic quality. Instead it comes down to numbers: more readers are taken to mean more "voices" heard and more "experiences" represented in literary culture. Thus, in Early's estimation, urban fiction fulfills a latent wish in African American literature for books and people, literary form and mass taste, to coincide in perfect harmony. Reorienting literary history around the idea of populist fulfillment, Early contends that African American literature has achieved "maturity" only in producing novels "by black people for black people" on a mass scale.

The implications of Early's argument can be seen more clearly in the way other democratizers use urban fiction as a prompt for reconceiving library services and literacy pedagogy directed toward underprivileged groups. Researchers in these fields construe urban fiction's popularity as a tolerable good because, like Early, they define the value of black literacy in strictly quantitative terms. Yet many of their suggestions for community engagement and curricular reform unwittingly validate the worst assumptions about the genre's readership. For instance, a guide aimed at introducing librarians to young readers' preferences in urban fiction features a ratings system whereby gun and pepper symbols "indicate the levels of violence and sexuality present in a book" (Honig xvi). In another case, Marc Lamont Hill, Biany Pérez, and Decoteau J. Irby advance a set of classroom recommendations wherein English teachers are encouraged to make urban fiction's "[p]oor grammar, weak sentence structures, and improper word usage" part of their lesson plan. Their advice? Have students "closely read and edit texts for grammar, syntax, style, and factual consistency," and, where necessary, ask students to "act as 'censors' by editing texts that contain offensive language" (78, 79).

Taken together, the critical and practical defenses of urban fiction are animated by a crude valorization of the popular. Conceding institutional authority to the abstract ideal of reading in numbers means recognizing, engaging with, and even teaching to popular literary interests. Yet, as the examples above suggest, when democratizers ask institutions of learning to harmonize with expressions of mass consumption, the result at once devalues the role of education in civic life and encases readers in the amber of their presumed taste. What ends up happening, in other words, is that those who claim to speak for the entire black community end up embracing their own fantasied simulacrum of "the people." Woods discloses as much when she refers to her early self-publishing operation as a "small Harriet Tubman, Underground Railroad way of selling books" (xiii), thereby bestowing on it the hard-won, undisputed legitimacy of the African American freedom struggle. Thin invocations of that struggle infuse Woods's perception of her influence, as she claims to introduce kids to their "first journey on paper," to stand up for generations "who weren't allowed to go to school because they were made to pick cotton as small children," and to speak out for "a people who were supposed to be forgotten, swept under a rug, put in a box—better yet a cell—never to have a voice, never to cry out, and never able

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to speak out against the injustice we live in, see, experience in our everyday life just because of our demographics" (xiii, xiv, xi). This aggrandizing self-portrait demonstrates that there is something perverse, finally, in the notion that drawing attention to mass taste is an act of meaningful social change.

The mistake, according to cultural gatekeepers, inheres in the fact that the market value of mass book reading offers a limited, even biased, representation of contemporary black life. Urban fiction, they suggest, in no way fulfills the needs of or prospects for a robust African American literary culture. Nick Chiles's 2006 op-ed in the *New York Times*, "Their Eyes Were Reading Smut," is the best-known articulation of this side of the debate. An award-winning journalist and then editor in chief of the upscale travel magazine *Odyssey Couleur*, Chiles recounts visiting a Borders bookstore in Lithonia, Georgia, and being scandalized by what he found in the "African-American Literature" section. From a distance he was greeted with "one of the largest collections of books by black authors . . . outside an independent black bookstore." On closer inspection, however, Chiles was confronted with "lurid book jackets displaying all forms of brown flesh, usually half-naked and in some erotic pose, often accompanied by guns and other symbols of criminal life." Overwhelmed by the scene, Chiles likens the designated retail space to a "pornography shop" and frets over the idea that such "smut is being produced by and for my people." Thus finding himself radically alienated from the masses, Chiles ends by appealing to publishers, who he says have the "responsibility to balance street lit with more quality writing" so that readers will not be left "parched" in the desert of contemporary black fiction.

Chiles is often singled out for wearing his taste on his sleeve. Early's important defense of urban fiction pivots on his polemic, and one senses Woods has Chiles in mind when she writes of those "nonbelievers" who dismiss her work (xiii). Yet he is anything but an outlier. While strong academic critiques of urban fiction are rare,[2] commentators in the broader realm of African American literary culture undermine the genre's appeal by advocating reading against bad taste. Two voices in this vein are Terry McMillan and Omar Tyree, authors who repudiate urban fiction as a debased version of their 1990s middle-class romances. According to McMillan, contemporary urban books "glorify violence and hatred and self-hatred," feature "gratuitous" sex, and "are poorly written and unedited." In her judgment, they reflect badly on the black community as a whole: "we've struggled too long and too hard to try to be decent people and treat each other with a lot more respect and dignity. And these books just fall so short of it" (qtd. in Juanita). Tyree echoes this sentiment, bemoaning popular writers "who seem stuck on the same topics of yesterday" and whose portrayals of hustling, drug dealing, and doing time distract readers "from forward-thinking ideas . . . and any other progressive material" (xiv). Tyree would rather see more books that help black people "*dream* again of leaving the hood" (xv).

Like democratizers, cultural gatekeepers see themselves as the inheritors of black literacy's historical function. For gatekeepers, however, following in those footsteps means rejecting urban fiction's representations of the inner-city lumpen proletariat. The reason, as the media pundit Juan Williams argues, is that such representations promote not only racial stereotypes but also racial false consciousness: "These stories do not reflect reality in most of black America. We now have the largest black middle class in American history and even a black president. But stories about hard-working, educated black people are not the ones portrayed in books by black people for black people. The losers here are young, poor minorities who think that short-term pleasure and violence are glamorous and the way to the top." Of course, this bird's-

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eye view of false consciousness is only viable because Williams gets to say what is real for black people and what is not. In this he is no more convincing a spokesperson than Woods. Because while it is surely a mistake to categorize urban fiction as an educative, socially useful instrument, it is just as surely a mistake to limit black reading to ostensibly edifying, uplifting fare. In both camps, literacy is held up as a uniform practice whose every individual exercise has implications for the entire black community. Missing in these accounts is the possibility that reading free of such an expectation could be a valued practice in its own right.

This is where merely reading comes into play. Whatever its deficiencies, urban fiction gives readers the interior pleasures of escapist fantasy. Like all genre fiction, it aims to cultivate affective attachments to narrative formulas. The character types and plot clichés on which urban fiction relies satisfy because they are predictable. And the purported authenticity of these narratives is a function not of the reader encountering documentary truth but of her feeling as though she has heard the story before. If urban fiction can be appreciated for these qualities, then the idea of black literacy may be expanded to include literate behaviors that are nothing but intensely personal, amounting to getting lost in a book. While these acts of what I call merely reading do not lend themselves to social instrumentalization, they do sustain the imaginative faculties of countless individuals. For example, when Williams recounts spying the "shy, overweight security guard" in his office building, a "working-class 30-ish black woman," reading an urban novel during her shift, his impulse is to make her feel self-conscious and ashamed, despite his observation that the book "must be good" to have commanded her attention completely. What the cultural gatekeeper cannot apprehend is how the security guard's act of merely reading, captured in "the intense look on her face" as she turns the pages, grants her imaginative respite from the monotony of her job, a way of passing the time. When she finally admits to Williams that she was reading "one of *those* books," she does not echo his critical judgment so much as hint at a pleasure indifferent to his prying eyes.

In decoupling social utility from black literacy, merely reading affords different ways of incorporating urban fiction into the rhythms of everyday life. To take another example, a black female undergraduate at Temple University confesses, "You have to read boring (and sometimes plotless) literature for class. Sometimes it's refreshing to read a cool hip-hop/urban novel. It's wonderful to live vicariously through the characters as you get through study groups and all-nighters in the library" (qtd. in Stovall 57). The value of this reflection lies in how the student delineates merely reading urban fiction, a choice, from having to read "literature for class," a responsibility; she makes no mistake about what each practice requires and affords. Even more revealing, she separates merely reading from the kind of intense study she associates with doing work (such as pulling "all-nighters") in the library. Negotiating these distinctions with aplomb, the student's account of her variable literate behaviors shows that she approaches reading not through the lens of utility but through the framework of time: institutionally recognized work (and, yes, "serious" reading) demands slogging, while urban fiction can be merely read during a lull, a break, or time off. The latter is no less important because of that: it facilitates getting through the day, providing uncomplicated pleasure alongside rigorous study.

As I have described it here, merely reading cannot be subjected so easily to institutional judgment since its exercise is most felicitous on the margins of or totally outside institutional legitimation. Thus, we should talk about the objects of merely reading in variable terms. An approach to such objects is modeled, for me, in Richard Hoggart's

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influential study *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). As Hoggart takes account of the rise of "sex-and-violence novels" in postwar Britain, he struggles to keep in check his own withering view of them. But at a critical moment in his analysis he withholds judgment and reads these lowbrow books generously: "it seems to me, when I try to appreciate the nature of the power this writing has, that the effect on a reader is likely to be much more inward, to be more a matter of fantasies than of action. This kind of literature, in fact, seems to be the most advanced form so far produced of that more general group of writings which provide sensation-without-commitment" (221). Albeit brief, Hoggart's reparative gesture outlines the noninstitutional habitations of self that may be opened up by merely reading. Turning inward, cultivating a rich fantasy life, and delighting in pure, irrelevant feeling: these are the pleasures of reading not as a vehicle for anything but as an end in itself. It would make little sense to judge such raw pleasures as aesthetic artifacts or to use them as prompts for social change.

If merely reading's predominant affect is "sensation-without-commitment," then the popularity of urban fiction signals ever more creative and dynamic uses for black literacy in the twenty-first century. Reading during a break from work highlights the importance of reading for interior joy. Free of educative or edifying expectations, this reading practice constitutes imaginative time and space in readers' minds, maybe even when leisure is elusive in their everyday lives. Moreover, because merely reading is adjustable to its surroundings and supple in its execution, it is compatible with serious reading and other literate behaviors. The Temple student thus models for me what it might look like to bring together the statistics that began this essay in their unified variability. Indeed, what if becoming proficient and enjoying a book were not seen as mutually exclusive processes or as one and the same task but as autonomous outcomes of a reading day? The point then would be to cultivate variable literate behaviors as part of a well-rounded reading life. Under this happy condition, black literacy would be gainfully reoriented around the idea that there is a time and place to read everything.

Notes

1. Black literacy's historical function is surveyed in Holt and in Salvino, though both remind us that literacy by itself cannot guarantee personal or collective freedom. In their accounts, literacy is a tactic of, but not an endpoint for, black social movement. Royster and McHenry, meanwhile, move beyond Douglass's example and show how the collective struggle for black literacy was spurred by black women's social, artistic, and educational organizing.

2. Warren offers a persuasive critique not of urban fiction per se but of the ways in which Chiles and Early categorize the genre as part of the African American literary tradition (110–17).

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