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Civil Rights Literature: A Canonless Genre

"What makes the black man think of himself as only an internal United States issue is just a catch-phrase, two words, 'civil rights.' How is the black man going to get "civil rights" before first he wins his *human rights*?"

-Malcolm X, from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (177)

Dismissing civil rights as a "catch-phrase" or slogan, Malcolm X recasts the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s as a constructed device--a tool of the state and subsequently, a distraction from the real fight for human equality. In this quote, civil and human rights are distinct entities, with civil rights obscuring the absence of human rights. Published in 1964, when the President signed the Civil Rights Act into law, Malcolm's autobiography represents radical critique of not only the Movement's message, but also the forces which fostered it in the first place. With the newly enacted laws, the issue of civil rights, already compromised by its alienation from the larger scope of human rights, becomes a legal code with finite boundaries. The Movement ceases to move. And with that immobilization, civil rights literature suffers the terrible blow of being consigned to a particular moment in time with a beginning, middle and apparent end.

This is the official narrative of civil rights literature in America. The same triumphalist narratives and martyred heroes which characterize the movement as direct opposition to the state's authority become the ironic means by which the majority culture absorbs the movement

and strips it of its connections to everyday people and events. This illustrates one of the major problems with certain forms of resistance literature which utilize propaganda techniques. The myths of heroism on an epic scale are more easily placed within the master narrative--the national story. A further complication is civil rights literature's troubled context within the study of literature itself. Does the civil rights genre fall under African-American literature? Is it a distinctly American genre? Is civil rights literature even a genre? Any literary genre which locates its foundation in politicized cultural issues affronts the more traditional canons and risks critical inquiry as to its relevance beyond the contrived borders of history.

In terms of historical memory, civil rights literature appears to be a dormant force, residing uneasily in the national myth of a man with a dream and a woman on a bus. In his article "Fiction for the Purposes of History", scholar Richard Slotkin describes a national myth as "a fundamental cultural process which enable...societies to maintain their cultural cohesion through time and change" (Slotkin 228). An act of maintenance, a myth provides "cohesion" to the state through its simplistic form and readily identifiable cultural markers. This is counterproductive for the aims of civil rights authors, who employ myths to rally people to the cause of social justice. Fortunately, civil rights authors well-versed in the tools of oppression recognize the common rhetorical strategy and seek to unseat these myths from the moors of memorialization.

This paper will explore the strategies of civil rights authors through the filter of literary critiques of their works to expose the continued relevance of civil rights literature to the cause of social justice and its problematic relationship within the study of literature in general.

Contemporary civil rights literature responds to its containment in statute books by deconstructing the myths of historical memory, expanding the movement's influence to include social issues not based in legal jargon (while at the same time exposing the prejudice which

informs that jargon), and creating counter-myths to refute the state's current position as the sole arbiter of progress.

In Malcolm X's distinction between civil and human rights, he problematizes the strategy of civil rights literature of the 50s and 60s, which chooses to narrow the focus of social justice to the framework of equal access and voting rights. While other activists sought progress through the measured steps of the legal system, Malcolm rejects the strategy. In his refusal to 'play the game', Malcolm ensures his position in the national myth as a polarizing figure, a violent radical.

In "Reading a 'Closet Screenplay': Hollywood, James Baldwin's Malcolms and the Threat of Historical Irrelevance", scholar Brian Norman focuses on Baldwin's screenplay, which chronicles Malcolm's life as "a kaleidoscopic history of moving parts" (105). Baldwin manipulates the "willful amnesia" (Norman 104) of American history by presenting a "scenario [of] multiple versions of Malcolm X that exist inextricably" (Norman 109). According to Norman, Baldwin's aim is to "impel the reader/viewer to locate Malcolm as a project or idea, not necessarily as the hero of a biopic" (111). Locating Malcolm as an idea, as opposed to the hero or villain of the master narrative, challenges the audience to confront the racial concepts which Malcolm espouses on their own terms. Norman asserts that "Baldwin endlessly defers any ultimate meaning of Malcolm's story" (113) which results in a "transformative, disorienting history with multiple Malcolms existing at once" (113). As a narrative of resistance, Baldwin's play directly undermines any attempt to isolate Malcolm's life and activism into a rigid, historical document.

Besides martyrs, civil rights writers also destabilize the accepted geographical focus of the Civil Rights Movement. In his 2001 novel, *Bombingham*, author Anthony Grooms questions the accepted historical memory of 1960s Birmingham, Alabama. The story's protagonist, a

soldier in the Vietnam War, cannot articulate the violence and destruction of the bombings and marches in his hometown, which other characters view through the romantic lens of wins and losses. Scholar Christopher Mettress' article, "Making Civil Rights Harder: Literature, Memory, and the Black Freedom Struggle" offers an interesting juxtaposition of Grooms' novel with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1964 memoir *Why We Can't Wait*. Mettress focuses on the differing narrative strategies of Grooms and King to illustrate "...that Grooms' novel operates as an "alternative civil rights narrative" which challenges the moral clarity of King's paean to the resilience of democratic liberalism" which makes it "harder to celebrate the movement as a natural progression of American values" (140). It's worth noting that while King's strategy involves a simplification of the movement to achieve his rhetorical ends, Grooms' strategy works to complicate that simplification. Both writers seek similar connections with their respective audiences, but the times in which they write directly affect what technique is utilized. Mettress' examination of two civil rights texts in conversation provides compelling evidence for the continued relevance of civil rights literature in both the construction and deconstruction of historical memories.

Post-1960s civil rights literature also constructs the Civil Rights Movement's relevance to other movements, such as feminism. Intertwining gender and racial struggles pulls apart civil rights literature's state-favored, tightly scripted narrative in favor of the greater dimension of social justice. Equality, established on paper, still remains an elusive reality. In the 1976 novel *Meridian*, which "affirms blackness and African American heritage" (Hendrickson 113), author Alice Walker positions the Civil Rights Movement in the context of its fallout to Black Nationalism in the late 1960s. In her critical analysis, "Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement", scholar Roberta Hendrickson describes the dilemma

of Walker's main character, Meridian, as "a struggle with the ideal of nonviolence" (114). Hendrickson also depicts Meridian "as a martyr for her people's freedom" (115) who eventually identifies herself as "a daughter of Harriet Tubman, a woman who frees herself and tries to free her people" (119). Walker ties Meridian's attempts at martyrdom with gender. Hendrickson writes that "she [Meridian] must give up her sexuality" as "Walker's novel suggests that women must choose one [quest] or the other [romance]" (119). Rather than a heroic narrative built around a strong male character, Walker re-envisioned the prototype Civil Rights activist as a woman, caught between supporting and being subordinated by black men. Hendrickson writes, "*Meridian* is what Walker would later call a "womanist" novel: it combines the black consciousness and feminist consciousness that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement... the word "womanist" giv[ing] equal importance to race and to gender" (113). As a "womanist" novel, *Meridian* also blurs distinctions between movements. Walker presents the two "consciousnesses" as inseparable from each other. Her novel, gifted with hindsight, reconnects the Civil Rights Movement to everyday people and everyday realities, in particular, the role of women and the limited influence of laws in ending social oppression.

Further critique of the judiciary's role in social oppression surfaces in Toni Morrison's 1998 novel, *Paradise*. Morrison relegates the Civil Rights Movement to a background influence in this allegorical re-working of the paradise myth. Building on the ideas of segregation, Morrison's novel features an all-black town called Ruby, which attempts to use law to enforce self-segregation as the answer to white oppression. Scholar Richard L. Schur's "Locating Paradise in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory" illustrates how this 'paradise' "is the direct product of the juridical discourse on equality and freedom that enabled and limited the changes of the civil rights movements" (280). The town's decision to

self-segregate, to remove itself from white oppression, is exacerbated by the presence of a nearby convent. According to Schur, Morrison complicates Ruby's role as a utopian ideal with characters "who are running from that very legal order [and] bring it with them unconsciously as psychic scars and emotional wounds" (280). In *Paradise*, laws cannot undo the damage caused by oppression because those same laws "may have enabled the injustice in the first place and continue to establish the conditions for racial hierarchy" (Schur 286). Morrison breaks from the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement in favor of critical race theory, which is the contemporary civil rights author's best shot at "destroying whiteness idealized and the illusory utopia of a multicultural society without conflict" (Schur 294). In the process of deconstructing this utopia, Morrison makes way for the possibility of an "earthly paradise" (Schur 279), a counter-myth to the illusion of a color-blind society.

By filtering this examination of major civil rights writers through the scholarly work which analyzes their texts, it is possible to expose the strategies of current civil rights authors and the manner in which such texts interact with literary studies. These critical essays demonstrate civil rights literature's ability to intersect disciplines of law and history within literary criticism. In the previous examples, each scholar bases his or her work in texts which revisit the American Civil Rights Movement, which in turn legitimizes claims that civil rights literature specifically targets American (predominantly African-American) issues of inequality. By placing civil rights literature in the context of American literature and then refining it further under African-American literature, the full global scope of this particular genre suffers an injustice akin to the marginalized citizens who people its narratives. In other words, civil rights literature, as a genre, is compromised through its close association (some might say definition) with African-American literature. Some scholars question its relevance to capital L literature and

whether many of its narrative techniques (documentary, testimonial, memoir, political speeches, etc.) even qualify as genuine literary strategies.

To legitimate civil rights literature's place within literary studies, the artificial borders of canons, time periods, and nationalities must prove permeable. These constructs should be associated as tools of the masters. Though they offer organizational benefits, these structural frameworks align literature with the state (and its standardized history) to the detriment of genres which actively question the role of the state in their advocacy of social justice. Literature is best understood within its cultural context, however binding literary movements through time periods and/or nationalities favors the state. Just like national myths, traditional literary canons overwhelmingly benefit the master narrative. Civil rights literature, therefore, requires a different matrix for literary study.

By opening up the study of civil rights literature to a global context, which can readily encompass racial, gender, sexuality, and political issues, the genre can promote social justice movements in concert with each other, which thwarts historical memory's isolating grip. Unlike other genres rooted in the commonalities of form or class or nationality, civil rights literature binds together the works of resistance writers through a text's relevance to its ultimate aim: social justice. Social justice, and its seemingly elusive goal of human equality, permeates through all of the cracks in the machinery of oppressive states—even the states which appear open and free. Civil rights literature, as a genre and as a source of literary study, defies consignment to the framework of history.

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