

Writing B(I)ack:

The Call and Response of Black Literary Criticism

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It is "call and response" for these reasons. "Call" because black literary theory and criticism¹, like any emerging body of thought, announces itself, states and overstates its legitimacy. "Response" because black literary criticism was born in reaction — to the neglect or misunderstanding with which Western critics greeted black literature; to persistent stereotypes of blacks in literature by non-blacks; and to the felt political imperative to prove the human worth of black people by demonstrating the existence of a complex, rich body of black literature. Finally, it is "call and response" because the activity of black criticism is dialogic; as much as they speak to mainstream critics and to the literature itself, black critics speak to each other. Not only do they engage criticism that has gone before (this is the usual method of the critical industry) but they seem to write directly to their peers, anticipating a response. Especially at this point there is a sense of an ongoing debate; questions are followed by more questions.

There are two related "projects" of black criticism. The first is the uncovering and interrogation of stereotypes of black women and men in literature. This is the familiar text-to-text search for counterrevolutionary images that occurs just after any revolution in criticism. Since, like the various feminist and Marxist criticisms, black criticism is socially based, "correct" mimesis will always be a concern. The second aim is the development of a uniquely black critical language, a method or group of methods that, to use American critic Henry Louis Gates's term, pays attention to "textual specificity" ("Talkin'," 206). This involves a thorough and close reading of black literature and, as importantly, of black culture. Uniting these two goals of black criticism is the concept of

difference. Difference is also what generates the most complex debates within the field. Arguing that black American literature, for example, is intractably different from the literature of white America, and hence calls for different critical tools, leads one to the question of race² and the dangers of essentialism. This essay will explore these two branches of black literary criticism, and attempt to trace how black criticism develops its position among the web of existing critical theories and the black vernacular tradition.

Into the Art of Darkness: What to Do About Metaphors, and the Difference Difference Makes

in this great mass [Africa] numerous groups of savage languages form what at the first glance is a hopeless chaos. We need to throw the light of history upon this confusion of races and tongues.

— Lefèvre, "African Races and Languages," (155)

shaking that wildroot cream-oil on your knotty head, jackets buttoning up to your chin, so full of white man's words. Christ. God. Get up and scream at these people. Like scream meaningless shit in these hopeless faces.

— LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman*, (513)

If black literary criticism is primarily about finding a voice for what we call blackness, then it faces a problem with the language. If it calls out in the tongue of its colonizers (English and French mainly) must it use the inflection of colonization? Black critics, by their very activity of course, operate on the assumption that it is possible to talk about black literature and black experience in Western languages, but there is always a sense of what Kimberly Benston calls the "linguistic

marginality" of a transplanted group (152).

There are at least two consequences of such a marginality. The first, the one that has largely been superseded, is silence. The second is a willful misuse or subversion of the received language, a kind of double speech that Houston Baker locates in the black's recognition of dichotomies in Western culture as well as language:

*Recognizing the irony/absurdity of the disjunctions between the words (concepts) they were adopting and their own native concepts, as well as the disparity between the European's gift for civilization and the realities of the slave trade, Africans would scarcely have adopted in toto the meanings of their European exploiters. . . Africans were not completely bound, in other words, by the categories of European languages. They could engage, at will, in a process of semantic inversion. (Baker, *Journey*, 156)*

Africans, it seems, quickly grew adept at the sliding signifier trick. It has been suggested that black American writers (or the writers who make most use of the black American tradition) approach language from a slanted perspective, that parody and irony — "signifying" — are the tropes that allow the marginalized writer to write (see Gates, "Blackness"). In the same way that critics have found defamiliarization to be a technique that lines up with Marxist strategy, and non-linearity to be hospitable to a feminist literary practice, the true 'black' text is claimed to be parodic and elusive. This line of thought allows black critics to reclaim certain stereotypes of black (male) behaviour and find in them the source of critical models. The sly, smart-mouthed black man (from African trickster figures to Eddie Murphy) comes to personify the black creative use of language.



But not all black stories to transform. "Black" has been associated in Western culture with all that is evil and inhuman. Blackness is inextricably linked to violence, and darkness, to the world, the fearsome, the Other. Whether this Other is a paranoid hatred or the allure of the exotic, the black presence. Black, as conceived, is marginal to white, it is One might argue that "white" are only names; the abstract, the brown people into people. Its reasons and its reasons. Derrida has argued, that blackness has always privileged binary opposition over the need not reason long to determine which term is the pair.

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But not all black stereotypes are as easy to transform. "Black" has traditionally been associated in Western culture with all that is evil and inscrutable. Blackness is inextricably linked with darkness, and darkness means the underworld, the fearsome, unknowable Other. Whether this Other is the site of paranoid hatred or the transgressive allure of the exotic makes little difference. Black, as concept, is not merely marginal to white, it is its antithesis. One might argue that "black" and "white" are only names, but names are important³; the abstraction of pink and brown people into polar opposites had its reasons and its results. As Jacques Derrida has argued, Western metaphysics has always privileged one term in a binary opposition over the other; one need not reason long and hard to determine which term reigns in this pair.

It is only a small step from the subordination of the concept of blackness within a binary opposition to the subjugation of actual black people, and this is where the idea that black people are opposite to white people (and that there are such beings as "black" and "white" people) gains significance. James A. Snead has argued that Hegel's idea of the African "has an absolute

alterity to the European" (63). The demarcation of an opposite space for the black, the construction of race, begins with the European.

In Hélène Cixous' appropriation of Freud's famous "women are the dark continent" comment ("The Laugh of the Medusa," 877-78), in Pierre Vallières "white niggers of America," black is the colour of the oppressed. "Nigger" connotes the limit of otherness, all that is despised in that which is not oneself. With all of these negative associations attached to the idea of blackness in Western thought and literature, and with the firm connection between blackness and Africans, it begins to appear inevitable that Western literature be filled with images of filthy, evil blacks. As a black reading canonical literature, not sharing its equations of "fair" skin with purity, and "swarthy" features with guile, a certain amount of anthropological distancing is required. One — I — must step back and try to decipher the other messages in a given passage, distinct from the often obvious, blinding racism.

The cultural upsurge that accompanied the American civil rights protests of the 1960s — the Black Arts and Black Aesthetic movements — aimed to reverse the values given to "black" and "white". While they still worked on the assumption of fundamental racial differences, these movements attempted

to read "black" as positive rather than negative, presence rather than absence (see Brown, 367; Gates, "Blackness," 315). Of course this is largely a *reaction* to the problem, not its solution. This strategy of inverting previous hierarchies may ring of the feminist's reappropriation and celebration of traditional notions of the "feminine," and indeed there are many similarities between the goals of black critics and those of some feminist critics. Both begin from and must work through the idea of difference. In his assault on Western xenophobia, Gates connects ethnocentrism with logocentrism, by the same sort of process that coined the term "phallogocentrism" ("Jungle," 7). And both camps attempt to understand and decode stereotypes of themselves that have been propagated by the dominant culture.

Some of these stereotypes exist at the

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juncture of received ideas about blackness and about the feminine: the figure of the temptress or wanton woman, for example, is linked to the myth of black prurience; the "maternal instinct" is linked to the black's "instinctive feel" for the rhythms of nature. Black women in Western literature and visual art are thus imaged either as (large) intuitive mother figures, or as the human embodiment of animal sexuality. In both cases the physicality of the black woman is important; her body is the site of Western male projections of desire and repulsion. In fact, black women in Western art tend to be all body; there is a history of Western science's fascination with physiological differences between European and African women, particularly genital differences, that turns up in literature and painting as well (see Gilman).

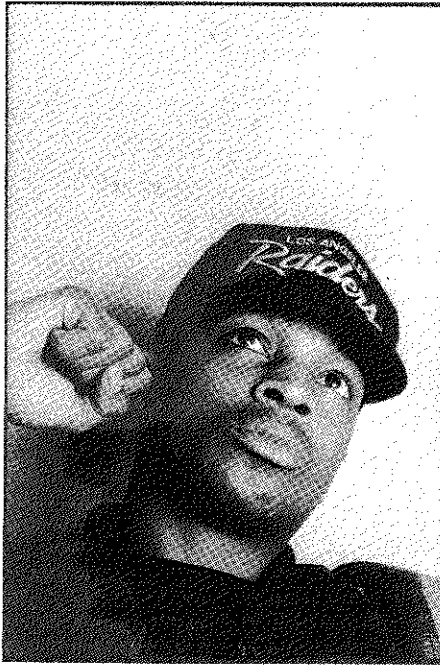
But black feminist criticism is not the uniting of black and feminist concerns. Instead it seems to have defined itself in resistance to both. Black feminist critics lay the blame against the black critical establishment that feminist critics have hurled at the mainstream establishment — charges of ignorance and exclusion.

Gates, who seems aware of these complaints, stumbles over another problem in trying to compensate. He commits a typological fallacy, placing the repression of woman in black literature within the paradigm of a 'larger' repression suffered by blacks at the hands of whites. In a brief analysis of Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* he writes: "Celie and Shug's omnipresent 'man,' of course, echoes the black tradition's epithet for the white power structure, 'the man'" ("Writing," 14). The ease of his "of course" marks his condescension; he constantly fits the resistance of black women's writing into the more general resistance of all blacks, not acknowledging that what black women are often resisting is oppression by black men. This is certainly the case in *The Colour Purple*. Also, Gates's canon-making is suspect, placing Ishmael Reed, a writer black feminist critic Barbara Smith has called a "notorious misogynist" (173), in a predominant position. The record of black African criticism fares no better; according to Katherine Frank it remains "almost an exclusively masculine domain" (35).

Everybody Say Yeah: Orality and the Myths of the Black Vernacular Tradition

The black rhetorical tropes subsumed under signifying would include 'marking', 'loud talking',

'specifying', 'testifying', 'calling out' (of one's name), 'sounding', 'rapping' and 'playing the dozens'
— Gates, "Blackness," (286)
*Supreme people who was born to talk,
And over sucker-MCs all day I walk.*
— Run-DMC, "Hollis Crew"



Chuck D. PUBLIC ENEMY Photo By Rick McGinnis

Black vernacular culture retains some of the characteristics of purely oral societies⁴. Walter Ong's description of "primary" oral cultures in *Orality and Literacy* touches on many aspects that have been attributed to black popular culture⁵. For example, Ong writes that "protracted orally based thought, even when not in formal verse, tends to be highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall, even physiologically" (34). Rhythm is a (sometimes dangerous) cliché of black culture, but it is an integral part of the black vernacular traditions, from American rap music to Jamaican 'toasting' to Ghanaian ceremonial poetry — so much so that there are virtually no forms of black oral performance in which music does not play a part⁶. Ong further suggests that oral culture is "agonistic"; from the *Iliad* to African epics, bragging and verbal putdowns are a part of oral-based literature. Apart from the realities of living in a hostile culture that make bragging almost a social imperative, rap's excesses of self-affirmation appear to have a root in oral culture generally. In black American vernacular culture the performer is inscribed quite clearly in the performance: rap music is about the rappers rapping before it is about anything else. There is a similar concern with the mechanics of the form. The typical rap follows the process of creative production: writing

the rap, delivering it, the response it receives.

There are other elements of black vernacular culture that aid in an understanding of its literature and criticism; Snead has cited repetition as one of the controlling principles, for example. He makes a distinction between European and African forms of repetition, noting that

in European culture, repetition must be seen to be not just circulation and flow but accumulation and growth. In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is 'there for you to pick it up when you come back to get it.' If there is a goal (Zweck) in such a culture it is always deferred; it continually 'cuts' back to the start. (67)

One thinks of African polyrhythmic music, or certain forms of jazz, or American go-go and house music as exemplifying this sort of repetition, where it seems that one can enter and leave the music at any point without disturbing its movement⁷. Snead shifts the emphasis of the traditional European idea that the African lives in the present with no care for the distant future; instead, the African is "always already there, or perhaps always there before, whereas the European is headed there or, better, not yet there" (63-64). Snead contends that twentieth-century Western culture is moving in the direction of black culture, toward an anti-progressive repetition, towards circularity and away from strict teleology (78).

Henry Gates has seized upon the trickster figure of black American folklore, the Signifying Monkey, as embodying elements of black culture important for the study of its literature. Not surprisingly, the Monkey shares some characteristics that Snead attributes to repetition. According to Gates the Signifying Monkey is "he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language — [he] is our trope for repetition and revision" ("Blackness," 286). Gates traces variants of the Signifying Monkey to Brazil, Cuba, throughout Africa, and to its origin in the Yoruba figure Esó-Elégbàra. Esó is a messenger of the gods (Gates parallels him to Hermes, partly in order to make the connection with hermeneutics), but his role is to disperse, not focus meaning: "Esó is the Black Interpreter, the Yoruba god of indeterminacy, the sheer plurality of meaning" (287).

Hence the black American activity known as signifying is only tangentially related to the semiotic sense. It is "a

rhetorical strategy un- information-giving. S the play and chain of on some supposedly signified" (287). Sign polysemous, and deli impudent⁸.

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Stealing Home: Appropriation and

...thieves that we are, filch your fine language, are, the names I have are false.

— Jean Genet, *The Black*

"Understand my rhyth lecture, and then you'll know run."

— Public Enemy, *MU TON*

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rhetorical strategy unengaged in information-giving. Signifying turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified" (287). Signifying is indirect, polysemous, and deliberately impudent⁸.

One can see how recent readings of black vernacular culture manage to align it smoothly with poststructuralist thought; the way Snead and Gates make it sound, the decentering, signifyin(g), "always already" world of black culture has just been waiting all this time for the Western mind to come around. As we shall see later, the connection between poststructuralism and the black vernacular is not an innocent one. But a poststructuralist stance does allow the black critic to link the black vernacular and formal traditions. Making use of oral culture loosens the rigidity of the 'literate' tradition as poststructuralism undermines previously unquestionable notions in 'serious' criticism.

**Stealing Home:
Appropriation and Transference**

...thieves that we are, we have tried to filch your fine language. Liars that we are, the names I have mentioned to you are false.

— Jean Genet, *The Blacks*

"Understand my rhythm- my pattern of lecture, and then you'll know why I'm on the run."

— Public Enemy, *MIUZI WEIGHS A TON*

Signification is a theory of reading that arises from Afro-American culture. . . I had to step outside my culture, had to defamiliarize the concept by translating it into a new mode of discourse, before I could see its potential in critical theory.

— Henry Louis Gates, "Blackness," 286

So the task of the contemporary black critic is to regain the vernacular culture — often lost in the process of 'education' — and speak to literature from that point of view. According to Baker this places the critic in league with the black writer. The critic provides a "thick description" of the literature (based in a study of the culture and politics that produced the work, in addition to rigorous textual analysis), aware that, in doing so he or she "both perceives, and half creates" the work (Journey, 164). This textual/contextual approach is also favoured by black

feminist critics (McDowell, 188-90).

For Baker the black difference in English-language literature is the distinct set of "semantic levels" underlying black culture's use of an adopted language (Journey, 157-63). Baker is not entirely clear on how this semantic difference works, but it seems to boil down to intentionality. The idea is that a black poet's work means (both connotes and intends) something different, even if it uses the same words in the same ways as the work of a white poet, for instance. This notion that black writers use language in a different, often subversive way provides a link with Gates's concept of the black text's "signifying," its playing of ironic pranks with the master tongue. Gates defines signifying, both a literary practice and a method of reading, in this way: "it is tropological; it is often characterized by pastiche; and, most crucially, it turns on repetition of formal structures, and their difference" ("Blackness," 285-86).

Both Gates and Baker appear to take the idea of a black linguistic specificity as a given. Gates's argument for his own critical practice places his specificity beside what he sees as the established limitations all critical schools impose on themselves. "Theories of criticism are text-specific: the New Critics tended to explicate the metaphysical poets, the structuralists certain forms of narrative" ("Talkin'," 207). But his dictum that the critic of black literature must "read the texts that comprise our literary tradition, [and] formulate (by reasoning from observed facts) useful principles of criticism from within that textual tradition" (207), as scientific as it sounds, does not follow from his discovery of textual specificity in other critical schools. Firstly, Gates overemphasizes what is admittedly a significant point: New Criticism did *tend* to work more with metaphysical poetry, but that is not nearly all it did; can Gates's theory of signification work with literature by non-blacks? More important is the question of deriving criticism from literature. While one can grant that New Criticism and metaphysical poetry, or structuralism and narrative are connected, would it not be reductive (or simply wrong) to say that one sprang from the other? This seems to be the process Gates is suggesting for black criticism, but in doing so he obscures some of his own biases. Based on the traditions of the trickster figure and signifying, Gates finds that a playful, parodic strain characterizes black literature — and on this he will found his criticism. But what he finds in black literature is already determined by his schooling and participation in the current poststructuralist climate

which valorizes play and indeterminacy and the self-reflexive text. Snead's proposal of repetition as a governing trope in black culture and Kimberly Benston's concern with naming and un-naming are similarly informed with current theory. All of this can easily take on an air of quick-step revisionism: 'well, black culture was deconstructing itself long before Derrida knew which end of a sign was up.'

An examination of the négritude movement of the 1940s provides some background for the contemporary black American debate in criticism, as well as perhaps teaching some lessons. Though the term "négritude" was coined by a Martinican poet, Aimé Césaire, it was developed as a philosophy by the Senegalese poet (and later head of state) Léopold Senghor. Like signifying, and Baker's blues matrix, it is founded upon black difference, though in this case the difference is deemed inherent, not merely cultural; Senghor finds the African perception of art to be based in "a sensitive participation in the reality which underlies the world, that is, in a surreality, or rather, in the vital forces which animate the world." (Fraser, 44-45). One can see in Senghor's conflation of the language of Parisian intellectuals with the traditions of African culture something of Gates's technique. But négritude is usually taken to be a failed effort at integrating black difference within the larger realm of all human experience (according to Fraser it never did catch on in English-speaking Africa), partly because of its indebtedness to French thought at the expense of African experience. Wole Soyinka criticized Senghor's négritude for being a liberal romanticization of Africa, praising Chinua Achebe's unselfconscious Africanness over Senghor's négritude (Fraser, 69-72). Theorizing the vernacular has its problems.

So what, if any theory is most profitably applied to black literature? Sunday Anozie's African structuralism has more or less been dismissed as possibly the most ill-fitting. Anozie commits what Anthony Appiah calls the "Naipul fallacy," attempting to understand Africa in wholly European terms (146)⁹. In fact, when they are not ignored, formalisms are rejected outright. Although Houston Baker criticizes the Black Arts and Black Aesthetic movements for a lack of analytical precision, for what he sees as a dependency on polemic and desire rather than careful investigation (*Journey*, 132-143), his own is not a scientific criticism. He is not, for example, above such polemical, even irksome techniques as deploying the term "whitemale" to refer to the dominating racial/sexual order ("Cali-

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ban"). It does have an emotional impact, but the term smears distinctions a little too easily.

Most black critics do retain a respect for rigorous textual analysis, but none would stop at the bounds of the text. Perhaps for the same reasons that they reject structuralism, black critics seem to have little use for psychoanalytic or Marxist methods: the taint of a dominant Western thought system is too strong. Black American feminist critics do appear to adopt feminist practices whole (although from the position of outsider) and add to them; their sisters in Africa pick and choose what is relevant to their concerns, "the historical/sociological, discovery/recovery and re-evaluative," according to Frank (43).

Even Henry Gates's "signifying" is ultimately in aid of what has been a restrictive practice in Western criticism — the construction of a canon Gates very much wants to create (or strengthen) a black literary tradition, and signifying is the criterion by which works will be judged. Gates places and judges Ralph Ellison by the degree to which he rewrites Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston by what she does with slave narratives, and Ishmael Reed by his revision of all of them. But to create a canon, in which these writers will take preeminent positions, is to follow an old, possibly irrelevant pattern. Gates is an academic critic; perhaps this is why he does not question the value of assimilating black literature into a Western framework. Assimilation of course presumes difference. In the end (and this is not that) it all comes down to difference. As I understand it the whole project of black criticism came into existence as a result of colonialism. Without colonialism, without slavery, such a thing as 'black' literary criticism would be a redundancy: African criticism would simply develop, as has Chinese criticism, for example, with its own literature as the universal model. No difference. But black criticism labours under the eternal presence of Western thought (perhaps a psychoanalytical approach, with an Oedipal drama at its centre, would benefit); debates about what is uniquely black can only occur where blacks are among non-blacks. It is from a position of resistance that such debates spring; in an Africa untouched by the West one might instead find heated debates about what is uniquely Yoruba, for instance. What we do with difference forms the crux of the debate: do we assimilate with the 'other', or do we barricade ourselves in ourselves?

This is the problem, in black and white. This is the problem with black and white.

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FOOTNOTES

1• When I use the term "black literary Criticism," or "black literary theory" I am referring primarily to the work of American and English-speaking African Blacks. My discussion of French-speaking African literary criticism is limited to "négritude". An examination of the criticism and theory of West Indian, Cuban, Brazillian, and other black literatures is beyond the scope of this paper. The project of black British cultural criticism (Stuart Hall, the *Framework*, and *Ten-8* writers, among others) does overlap to some degree with black literary criticism, though these writers are far less concerned with what Americans would call a text.

2• I will not place the word race in quotation marks as Gates ("Writing", "Talking") and Tzvetan Todorov have suggested because, although I believe it is important to point out how racial difference is *constructed*, I do not believe the concept can be discounted entirely. It persists as a mode of ordering: Gates in particular still works with an idea of "black" as being essentially different from "white" at the core of his writings. Although he wants to locate black criticism in *culturally* derived manifestations, he still refers to "black" or "white" authors and critics. This seems to connote something like race.

3• Whether the name is Negro, Negre, Nero, Negerou, or Schwartzter, the connection between people of African descent and the colour (and concept) black is always explicit. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, traces the derivation of Negro to the latin *nigrum* or *niger*, meaning black (*The Oxford English Dictionary*, v.7, 82).

4• Gates has pointed to the importance of voice even in the most literary of black literature. According to him "the figure of the voice in the text — of the talking book" first appeared in slave narratives as a scene of instruction for the slave ("Writing" 12). It is a metaphor that persists in contemporary black literature, representing, by the inscription of the voice, both the proof of rationality and the bond between speech and writing. (See also "Blackness", 296).

5• Ong takes pains to point out that his discussion of orality is based in a study

of primary oral cultures, those untouched by any form of writing. Black popular culture is of course not that, but as Irish or Russian literature make use of an oral *tradition*, so black literature and music draws upon cultural forms shaped by orality. As Ong points out, our access to pure orality is always clouded by our literate modes of thinking.

6• Robert Fraser stresses the interpenetration of music and oral verse, particularly in Ghanian *akpalu* (elegiac dirges) : "the *akpalu* is at once poem and song, dance and percussive fantasia" ("Oral" 10). In addition, Ewe, the language of the region, is a tonal language, "where pitch determines meaning" (13). Fraser also notes that the metre of African oral poetry is determined by the "master-drum" which accompanies the poem in performance.

Houston Baker has asserted that the blues, or what he calls "the blues matrix," is fundamentally tied to the American vernacular, almost that the blues *is* the American vernacular. But Baker's privileging of the blues is nostalgic: the blues song is an atrophied form, like European opera; we know that because we can discern its rules. Vernacular performance always changes.

7• Something that Beatrice Stegman has written (quoted in Katherine Frank's article) about the communality of African societies is reminiscent of Snead's idea of the ceaseless repetitive flow in black cultural forms. Stegman writes of African culture's "value of submergence rather than self-realization. In traditional African societies, the role of each citizen is to perpetuate the status quo, to assure continuity of the clan, to work within tradition" (46). Snead's system allows for more individual freedom (the participant can enter and exit at will) but the properties of the governing structure are the same.

8• Gates, in a Derridean turn, often spells the word "signifyin(g)," to connote both the linguistic and the black vernacular senses of the word. One might question his assumption that it is a mark of blackness to drop final Gs, but perhaps he means it to connote American colloquialism rather than as a black mark.

9• Appiah's somewhat barbed critique of Anozie dwells as much on the critic's inability to do anything with structuralism as it does with structuralism itself. It's true that despite all his syntagms and diagrams Anozie never seems to get the reader closer to the subject.

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