

DOKTORI ÉRTEKEZÉS TÉZISEI

Harry Edward Bailey

REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN WRITING



DE Bölcsészettudományi Kar
2008

Témavezető:
Dr. Virágos Zsolt

I. Aims of the study

The dissertation explores portrayals of black religious experience in four nineteenth-century African American novels, *Our Nig* by Harriet E. Wilson, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts, *Iola Leroy* by Frances E. W. Harper, and *Contending Forces* by Pauline E. Hopkins. The four texts were chosen because they present a broad chronological perspective on the nineteenth century: the first two are antebellum texts from the 1850s that received extremely limited or no circulation at the time, while the second two were written a generation after the abolition of slavery in the 1890s. All four are also widely recognized today as incorporating elements from two genres: the white-authored domestic novel and the black-authored but often white-sponsored slave narrative, both highly popular genres in mid-nineteenth century America.

One underlying assumption informing the research undertaken is that the four authors borrowed, at least to some degree, from generic conventions regarding religion in the domestic novel and the slave narrative. The ideological implications of these generic conventions, however, may well be at cross purposes to the situation the author is trying to depict, caused potentially by differences in race, class, and gender. Additionally, it is clear that literary genres alone do not determine portrayals of religious belief, but that both personal and social factors play a role in their constructions. The authors' personal beliefs are left mostly aside in this study, in part because so little is known about two of the authors (Wilson and Crafts), and instead a theory on African American religion is applied in order to examine the texts from a religious or spiritual point of view. In contrast to critics such as Houston A. Baker, who sees the religion in the later two novels as imitative of white Christianity and thus assimilationist in nature, I maintain that a definably different, African American spirituality is evident in all four texts.

The dissertation examines how religious views help shape a text and, in turn, how the religion portrayed is itself shaped by social forces and the use of borrowed literary motifs. The question this study asks is to what extent do 1) adherence to generic conventions, 2) an African American worldview, and 3) historical factors such as involuntary servitude and racial oppression influence the portrayals of religion in these four texts.

II. Methodology

The study is comparative in approach and employs close readings of the four texts plus other representative works from the two genres in order to illuminate differences and similarities. The two chapters dealing with genre each begin with a treatment of the ideological implications of how religious belief is portrayed in the respective genres, moving on afterwards to analyze each text against these findings. The chapter on the domestic novel relies primarily on Nina Baym's definition of "woman's fiction," but also draws on other critics to assess the uses to which religion is put in the genre. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* are among the representative texts used as a basis of comparison. In the slave narrative chapter an even broader array of texts, including two of Frederick Douglass's autobiographies as well as Henry Bibb's, are used as sample texts.

The dissertation also takes an historical approach, since I see both the respective authors and their texts as historically produced and culturally determined. The texts are historical in the sense that they were shaped by the contemporary literary genres their authors used as models and they reflect the historical circumstances of African Americans in the nineteenth century. The experience of involuntary servitude—be it as an indentured servant (*Our Nig*), a chattel slave (*The Bondwoman's Narrative*, *Iola Leroy*), or a victim of legalized racial oppression (*Contending Forces*)—helps configure how religious experience is portrayed. Additionally, they are culturally determined by borrowing from a white American genre (the domestic novel), following strategies aimed at white readers (slave narratives), and incorporating a presumed African worldview. This last factor indicates a bicultural aspect to African American religion and is addressed in the third chapter.

To examine the texts from an African American religious perspective, Theophus Smith's theory of "conjuring culture" is employed. Since Smith's ideas are developed in a multidisciplinary fashion but with emphasis on religious studies, I first develop his ideas in order to clarify what exactly a "literary-conjuration" strategy is before applying the thesis strategy to the four texts. Smith also uses Rene Girard's theories on violence, religion, and culture to develop his ideas; here, I use Girard's theories in the second half of the chapter on religion to approach the texts from a second, more general religious studies perspective. Many of the phenomena Girard describes in his theories find analogies in the African American experience of chattel slavery and legally defined second-class citizenship in North America, thus making his ideas relevant for this study. Smith and Girard make it possible to examine

religious portrayals from two perspectives: first, what is specifically African American about the portrayals, and second, what differences exist in the Christian interpretations between the black novels and the broader, white American society. For this purpose, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the best-selling novel in nineteenth-century America, serves as a representative text.

In the final chapter, the use of specific religious configurations is compared in the four novels and the two genres. While the first two chapters focused on ideological aspects of religion, this chapter returns to the two genres to look at the choice and implementation of specific motifs.

III. Major findings

Using an analysis of religious belief in the domestic novel, the present study maintains that the protagonist's religious conversion in Wilson's presumably novelized autobiography, *Our Nig*, is feigned. While numerous critics (William Andrews, Kimberly A. C. Wilson) believe the conversion to be genuine, internal evidence in the text suggests that it is never fully realized. Examples from the domestic novel illustrate how piety could be used to call sympathy for the protagonist, and I maintain that this is the case here. Some critics have claimed that Frado's turn away from religion in the latter half of the text constitutes an indictment of Christianity and organized religion for its tacit support of racism and oppression. Such a view, however, ignores the central role religion plays in the novel, its use in demonstrating Mrs. Belmont's hypocrisy, and its *re-appearance* at the close of the novel in situations which solicit reader sympathy. Use of conventions brought in from the slave narrative, namely the use of appended letters and the concessions to white readers' expectations about black religious behavior in these letters, provides additional evidence to support the assertion that the conversion fails. Portrayals of religious belief in *Our Nig* are borrowed from the two genres in order to coerce sympathy and the contradictions in their implementation are suggestive of an artistic failure on Wilson's part rather than a critic of religious ideologies.

In another aspect, *Our Nig* also reflects back on the domestic novel and sheds light on a latent conflation of religious and erotic passions. Frado's thinly disguised crush on the ill son, James, who is also her spiritual mentor, comes together with her quest to believe in Jesus, thus revealing, it is argued, that erotic desire in domestic fiction is suppressed by religious belief.

Given its relatively recent publication, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* has received comparatively little critical attention, a situation this study tries to help change. Apparently written just a few years before the Civil War began, the manuscript fuses elements from the gothic and domestic novels with the slave narrative; here, one of the findings about the text regards its interpretation as a domestic novel. I read the many households the protagonist encounters as domestic tableaux, all variations on a scene of a—supposed—domestic idyll with very similar character constellations. The degree of tranquility and happiness the husband and wife live in varies according to the moral choices they make in reconciling slavery and religious belief. Each tableau presents the protagonist with the option of how she could reconcile the demands of the world with the dictates of her religion and the consequences of these decisions. In the end, the decision she makes to escape demonstrates the power of religious belief in maintaining a sense of self in the face of racial oppression. Encountering each of these households, however, is part of the decision-making process; only through visiting each of them can she choose and be rewarded with the stereotypical idyll of the domestic novel, a peaceful cottage, marriage with a benign, benevolent minister/husband, and a circle of friends and family.

Regarding the slave narrative, the dissertation proposes adding portrayals of religious belief to the list of authenticating devices the genre employs. Such authenticating strategies were built into many abolitionist-sponsored slave narratives in order to convince the white readers of the text's reliability. This was necessary to serve the genre's propagandistic intent: to be convinced to join the anti-slavery cause, readers had to be assured that what they were reading was not fiction or exaggeration but fact. Made suspicious by Southern propaganda or his own racial prejudices, the reader did not bring the same willing suspension of disbelief to the text as he would to fiction, but had to be persuaded of its reliability through testimonials by reliable white personalities, documentary evidence such as bills of sale, specific names, dates and places, and, I would add, portrayals of what a white reader would deem is authentic black religious behavior. This play to the ideology of racial romanticism—the belief that blacks are naturally religious and would make even better Christians than whites—finds its way into these four novels.

The addition of religious beliefs to the authenticity devices is not based on any particular case of a pretended profession of Christianity nor is it meant to call into question the validity of religious portrayals in the slave narratives in general. But while religious belief remains a highly personal matter for any individual, there can be little doubt that it could be crafted to meet the readers' expectations by toning down one aspect or playing up another.

Given their status as fiction and thus freed from the specific obligations of the slave narratives' propagandistic intent, the four novels tend to take greater liberties with this authenticating convention. The study finds, however, that they did so with differing degrees of success. The most successful are *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and *Contending Forces*, which both incorporate stereotypical images of blacks as superstitious, beliefs widely held in nineteenth-century America and referred to as well in slave narratives. The former novel exploits this image as a literary device but leaves it unreconciled with the same character's devout Christian faith, while the latter novel seizes upon the image only to subvert it later on. Here, Hopkins at first encourages the reader to laugh at a character, Dr. Peters, in one of the novel's subplots, as a superstitious "hoodoo" practitioner, only to reveal this behavior later as a mask that is exploited for the practical goal of survival. By contrast, a group of white Christian Scientists are shown to be gullibly believing in a faith cure that Dr. Peters treats as little more than superstition and wishful thinking.

Our Nig and *Iola Leroy* emerge as less skillful at integrating this authenticating device, the play to romantic racialism. Harriet Wilson's novel makes little attempt to subvert the strategy, employing it instead to its original purpose of encouraging reader trust in the text and sympathy for the narrator. Wilson even embeds romantic racialism into another slave narrative authenticating device, the closing testimonial letters meant to substantiate the narrator's claim to reliability. Internal evidence in the letters, however, suggests that the letters may be fictionalized as well. Frances Harper, on the other hand, never clearly disassociates any of the characters in *Iola Leroy* from romantic racist attitudes. While this device is typically aimed at white readers, romantic racist concepts are espoused by black characters in all-black settings so that this attitude appears to be internalized. This represents evidence that critics who claim black religion in these novels is imitative of white beliefs do have a point, yet examination of the texts from religious studies perspectives points in the opposite direction.

The chapter on religion approaches the texts from two different, although interrelated, points of view, both of which suggest a spiritual implication to the figure of the near-white mulatta. Taking Theophus Smith's theory of "conjuring culture," I develop the concept of a "literary-conjuration strategy" that he briefly suggests but never fully elaborates. The key element I add is that of a *conjuration catharsis*, the idea that the writer is attempting to evoke a catharsis in the reader that will result in an empathetic reaction. This is achieved by creating "aesthetic distance" in the reader, with the text vacillating between perspectives so the reader has "the simultaneous and equal experience of being both participant and observer"

(Scheff). This function is represented in the four novels by the near-white mulatta, whose white appearance but identification with the black race is managed by the authors to create a cathartic reaction in the white reader that overcomes the racial barrier to empathy. The distinctiveness of the near-white mulatta is underscored by comparison with mulattas created by white authors, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who invariably mark the character's racial difference in her appearance. By contrast, black-authored near-white mulattas, in particular Harper's and Hopkins's, are indistinguishable from white women. However, this does not constitute an assimilationist approach or an acceptance of white standards of beauty, but rather is an expression of a residual African worldview that has been transformed into an African American spirituality. In this sense, this study aligns itself more closely to Hazel Carby's positive reinterpretation of the mulatta as "an expression of the relationship between the races" and against the negative valuation begun by Sterling A. Brown, who first identified and named the motif of the Tragic Mulatto, seeing behind it a white-inspired character and a concession to white readers.

On the other side, the mulattas in the four novels are linked together by Rene Girard's ideas on mimeticism and mimetic desire. The latter term refers to what Girard claims is the origin of our desire: we seek to acquire objects not because of any intrinsic value they may possess but simply because someone else desires it too. Such forms of desire inevitably lead to conflict, which cultures keep in check through a series of hierarchical distinctions that allow a society to regulate who gets what. When such distinctions are erased, a mimetic conflict ensues as the violence otherwise held back is unleashed, stopped again only by a common act of violence directed against an agreed-upon victim. This scapegoat effect, he believes was institutionalized by primitive religions in order to control violence and survives today in various forms, although much weakened since the advent of Christianity, which has supposedly revealed how it functions.

Girard's ideas are certainly not the only theory on the origin of religion, nor are they without skeptics; nonetheless, I chose them because they offer an intriguing means of understanding the role of the near-white mulatta. The mulatta becomes not only an expression of an African American conjunctive way of thinking, of being both black and white, both of and not of the community, but she becomes a sign of mimetic desire and of an impending mimetic crisis. In each of the four novels she signifies, through her skin color and racial allegiance, some aspect of a loss of distinctions that threatens the stability of a household or community. In *Iola Leroy* she comes to an explicit understanding of how mimetic desire operates. In *Our Nig* and *Contending Forces*, the loss of distinctions the mulatta represents

turns her into a scapegoat, subjected to ritualized violence and attempts to physically darken her skin in order to restore a hierarchical order in the home or society. Additionally, in *The Bondwoman's Narrative* descriptions of households and celebrations all reflect similar attempts to structure the environment in order to prevent a mimetic crisis from being unleashed. In other words, mimetic desire is represented not just by the character of the mulatta, but also manifests itself in a variety of other aspects throughout the texts.

Applying Girard's theories also helps distinguish the Christianity practiced by the blacks in the novels from that of their persecutors. The former bears greater resemblance to Girard's interpretation of early Christianity and tends to seek ways of avoiding mimetic conflict. The most thorough in this aspect is *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, where the protagonist lives out Jesus's injunction to turn the other cheek and the Pauline commandments for slaves to obey their masters. Yet despite this apparent demand for passivity and acquiescence, none of the protagonists allow themselves to be martyred; the Passion of Jesus is understood as the revelation of the scapegoat and not as an example to be followed literally. This stands in distinction to Stowe's Uncle Tom, who takes non-violence to the extreme of submitting to his own death. The power of Christianity for the black authors is that it offers a recipe for survival and not a glorification of dying. In contrast, the persecutors in the black novels are shown as engaging in rites that resemble pre-Christian attempts to channel human violence by seeking out agreed-upon victims.

In regard to the biblical configurations examined, two main findings emerge. The first concerns the suffering servant, which in the domestic novel results in the production of Jesus as a separate, though invisible, character, while in the black novels the analogies between the story of Jesus and the protagonist's own suffering allow her to directly fulfill the role of suffering servant. Jesus as an independent figure is less apparent in these novels because the protagonist herself can play the role. The most explicit example is Sappho Clark in *Contending Forces* where she is figuratively re-born on Easter Sunday. Her redemption is that of all black women as they overcome the social stigma of having been sexually abused in the course of racial oppression. In the white domestic novel, on the other hand, the suffering endured by the protagonist is frequently depicted as part of the process of submitting to, rather than the overcoming of, social attitudes; her goal is learning to integrate herself into society.

The second configuration is the wilderness experience, which is drawn primarily from the slave narrative. The study concludes, however, that the slave narrative's Canaan of freedom in the North or in Canada is reconfigured into the domestic novel's Promised Land of domestic bliss. Partly this is the result of blending the two genres together and, in the case

of *Our Nig* and its Northern setting, the lack of any geographic sanctuary. In the two later novels, this is also necessitated by the postwar context and the contemporary goal of unifying blacks in the face of racial oppression and across geographic and class boundaries. The shift over time from an individual to a group orientation is evident in the four novels and is an extension of the antebellum slave narrative's own incorporation of the biblical wilderness motif in the late 1840s and 1850s. When it was adopted into the antebellum narratives, this configuration was usually focused on the individual and seldom applied to the larger racial group. The journey through the wilderness is also reinterpreted in the black novels to account for the different experiences, based on gender, from the heavily male-oriented slave narratives.

In the final analysis, the dissertation concludes that the four novels do not reflexively imitate white religious beliefs but, at various points, incorporate elements from the two other genres in ways that subvert the original ideological implications of these genres that targeted a white readership. *Our Nig*'s attempt to integrate these portrayals of religious belief unchanged from their original context points to the need to account for the differing racial context of the black novel. Additionally, the dissimilar use of the near-white mulatta in these novels and white-authored fiction such as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the portrayals of mimetic desire and strategies for avoiding mimetic crisis suggest an underlying African American approach to religion and African American spirituality. Of the many ways to understand the meaning of religion for any individual or group—as escapism, as providing a sense of self-esteem, as holding out hope for revenge, as giving meaning to one's existence, as an explanation for suffering, or other interpretation—these novels suggest religion was understood as a recipe for survival. Indeed, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* shows that the passive acquiescence that twentieth and twenty-first century critics often attack Christianity for could also be an extremely effective tool for realizing self-dignity and liberating oneself in this world.

IV. Related Publications

- Bailey, Ted. 2003. "Conjuring Sentimentality: Exploring the Origins of the African American Sentimental Novel." *HUSSE Papers 2003*. Conference proceedings from HUSSE 6, January 2003. 159-64.
- Bailey, Ted. 2005. "Revitalizing People(s): The Handsome Lake Religion and the Indian Shaker Church." *BAS: British and American Studies* 11: 35-47.

Awaiting Publication

- Bailey, Ted. 2009. "The Servant in the Wilderness: Biblical Configurations, Race, and Genre." *Eger Journal of American Studies*. 18 pp.
- Bailey, Ted. 2009. "Genre and the Self: Identity in Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*." *Publicationes Universitatis Miskolciensis, Sectio Philosophica*. 15 pp.