

## Postmodernism, Traditional Cultural Forms, and African American Subjectivity

In the West, a notion we must divide because the European West is not the American West, people of African descent have always already been defined as Other. They are represented in an unequal, restrictive white-black binary opposition that defines whites as normative and superior and represents blacks as primitive, as deviant, as devalued Other, and/or more recently as the same.<sup>1</sup> The African American, to use the words of Madhu Dubey, is represented as “the negative term against which modern norms of body, identity, reason, or culture are defined and propped up” (“Contemporary African American Fiction” 158). He exists, to use the words of British psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, “to contain unwanted destructiveness in the oppressor who insists at the same time that the [African American] be like a fecal entity that is so odious that it cannot be recognized, except if and when it is out of sight, and finally eliminated” (Said, *Freud* 6). As the less powerful negative term of the binary, the African American is “socialized in such a way that [he] cannot trust [his] own ‘consciousness’” (Sylvia Wynter qtd. in Thomas, “Proud-Flesh Inter/Views” 2), which in many ways is the same as the normative consciousness. This means that since the middle-class puritan white norm—which is a space of difference that I am representing singularly—defines him negatively, he can also define himself in negative terms. Historically, how has the African American dealt with this predicament? How does he psychologically and socially

liberate himself from this binary? Does or can he offer a different kind of subjectivity?<sup>2</sup>

There have always been African American social and political movements, individuals, scholars, black studies, and cultural forms that have resisted and/or countered this negative representation of the African American. These resisting entities seek to maintain sanity for African Americans through the insistence that the African American self exists even as the normative American society seeks to deny or eliminate it. Therefore, despite the fact that some African American movements, individuals, and scholars seek freedom by defining the African American as being the same as the middle-class puritan American norm and thereby reproduce the binary, I am interested in a different notion of (African American) freedom and subjectivity, one that is different from but equal to the middle-class American norm, one that knows the Other. Therefore, I am not just concerned with the African American flipping the white-black binary opposition and being defined/constructed as better than or the same as the middle-class puritan American norm, as a fixed and ontological subject in the modern sense. Flipping the binary means that the modern African American subject participates in violence similar to the mainstream hierarchy. This modern binary-constructed African American subjectivity does not or cannot know or empathize with the Other.

In her discussion of postmodernism in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon argues that the self-Other binary opposition belongs to what she calls a modern moment and that perhaps it has outlived its effectiveness. "The modernist concept of a single and alienated otherness is challenged by the postmodern questioning of binaries that conceal hierarchies (self/other)" (61). Binary oppositions, which are at the foundation of Western metaphysics in terms of how we define meaning, are inherently violent in their reduction or devaluation of their lower halves. The logic of binary oppositions is the logic of domination and subordination. Instead of binary oppositions, Hutcheon suggests that it is more useful to think of difference and the chaining movement of signifiers (originating in Ferdinand

de Saussure's insights and developed further by Jacques Derrida) that describes not only the movement of meaning constitution within language but also self-constitution. "Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion" (61). With difference, we can define situations, events, and subjectivities not in terms of binary logic and violent hierarchies but instead in terms of differences, without hierarchies.

In focusing on a different kind of (African American) subject, one that escapes the violence and repression of rational, linear, Eurocentric Enlightenment reason, I am most concerned with how African American individuals, scholars, and cultural forms define American/African American history (social real) and African American subjectivity or self-constitution in certain postmodern terms, as a new set of terms. I am concerned with a subjectivity or an *I* that has many selves, that is not an individual with definite limits that separate him or her from the Other, not a form of knowledge, but instead is a chaining movement of signifiers, a network of contextual, partial, contradictory, and shifting identifications. It is a subjectivity that is multiple because the individual is traversed by alterity and in so being is the very place of difference(s). It is a subjectivity, to quote Felix Guattari in *Soft Subversions*, that "establishes itself . . . in a complex relation to the other, mother, father, family, caste [race and ethnic] relation, class struggles, in short all levels of social interaction" (269), thereby having relations to people outside of itself.

I am concerned with an African American subjectivity whose existence is presented in the form of the mystery, which encompasses everything in life that is still unknown to us, or in the form of the open that is always out of reach. It is a subjectivity that is incomplete, that is processes, that is always becoming. Finally, and more important, in a multicultural cosmopolitan America,<sup>3</sup> I am concerned with a subjectivity that presupposes a certain heteronomy, that is, a certain acceptance of the law of the Other, of difference. It recognizes the exteriority of the Other, cohabitating and co-existing with subjects of different worth without hierarchy. Eschewing hierarchy, it presupposes neither servitude nor

subjugation of the Other but instead presupposes a *knowing* of or an empathy with the Other.

But first, I want to discuss African American subjectivity within the context of the white-black binary opposition. Within the logic of this binary, the normative middle-class puritan American consciousness that the African American buys into is the same regime of power/knowledge (consciousness) that defines him or her as deviant. "The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worth while," writes Carter G. Woodson in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, "depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples" (5–6). In addition, this white-black binary opposition exists within what Sylvia Wynter calls "the logic of a formulation of a [Western Christian middle-class] general order of existence; and this [order] is elaborated by intellectuals, whether theologians or shamans or ourselves" (qtd. in Thomas, "ProudFlesh Inter/Views" 19). To maintain its hegemony, this unbalanced white-black binary as a discourse needs secondary institutions to reproduce normative America, to reinforce what Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* calls the "enunciation" that it wants to make about the African American (64–65).

Within the middle-class puritan American norm, the identity of the African American as a socially recognized deviant individual is only possible within the practices of this discourse, this power/knowledge network. E. Franklin Frazier writes in "The Failure of the Negro Intellectual" that "Under the slavery regime and for nearly a century since emancipation everything in American society has stamped the Negro as subhuman, as a member of an inferior race that had not achieved even the first steps in civilization" (64). From the American colonialists and legal slavery in the seventeenth century to the racial ideologies of the eighteenth century to Jim Crow laws and the eugenics, genetics, and hereditary arguments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the normative American regime of power/

knowledge, which was reinforced by the law, the courts, the educational institutions, the medical profession, the political system, the canon of American literature, and social and cultural practices and institutions, generated this particular representation of the African American. "Most of the history books and courses in American institutions of higher learning," writes Edward L. Cox, "either failed to mention blacks or did so in a most unfavorable light" (460). Historically, the African American has been defined as negative.

As the negative terms of the white-black hierarchy, the African American's body—the African American's identity, subjectivity, and history—was/is enmeshed in the West's construction of the African American as "deviant," as devalued Other, as victim, which is a space of isolation, of doom. The African American exists in an internal colonized space. But this "deviant" representation of African Americans contains "within [it] the frozen essence that condemns them to servitude and punishment," which America "sees as [its] present fate." This representation also "point[s] prophetically towards a whole series of implied developments that [its current and] later history disclose[] . . . , despite the radical severity" of the representation (Said, *Freud* 26). American and African American scholars and writers keep returning to this particular reduced representation of the African American, which gives it "its antinomian force, the intensity and power wrapped inside its [images], which demand an equal and opposite response" (26). And in the grip of this dehumanizing, racist representation, the individuals, social and political movements, and scholars revisit and push beyond it, "as history itself transforms even the most unyielding stasis into process and a search for greater clarity, relief, resolution or denial" (26). The return allows them to produce their own bodies of knowledge, to point prophetically toward a series of developments that challenge this reduced representation of the African American.

In the first implied development that history later discloses, as Albert Memmi argues in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, those who have been colonized seek freedom by rejecting self and race because they have been negatively defined by the colonizer and by embracing and assimilating

the colonizer's values. "By this step, which actually presupposes admiration for the colonizer, one can infer approval of colonization," or of the logic of the white-black binary (121). According to Memmi, the "crushing of the colonized is included among the colonizer's values"; as such, "[r]ejection of self and love of another are common to all candidates for assimilation" or, rather, common to all who want to buy into normalcy (121). Because they have access to social mobility, middle-class African Americans "strive to assimilate the virtues of the [mainstream] bourgeoisie in the assumption that by doing so they can lift themselves into a higher social sphere" (Wright, "Blueprint" 316). In having access to and in performing certain white values, they think they can socially and culturally pass for white.

Because they have been stigmatized, negatively marked, "denied opportunities for development" and advancement because they are black, middle-class or aspiring middle-class African Americans, the vocal group within African American communities, feel that this stigma is something they do not deserve, that their actions and behaviors are, in fact, exemplary. To gain respect, to erase the barrier of stigma, middle-class African Americans feel that they must "not only 'normify' their own conduct but also . . . clean up [purify] the conduct of others [African Americans] in the group" (Goffman 108). To "achieve acceptance in American life," argues E. Franklin Frazier, middle-class African Americans must "slough off everything that is reminiscent of its Negro origin and its Negro folk background" ("Failure" 56). They must deny, subordinate, or attenuate their historical and cultural differences, their otherness: the blues and working-class and subaltern African American cultures, the legacies of slavery, the historical struggles that define them, the experiences of internal colonialism, legal segregation, and second-class citizenship.

Equally as important, this means that to achieve the semblance of acceptance by mainstream society, middle-class African Americans must define subaltern and working-class blacks not as different, complex human beings who have agency but instead as a (pathological) problem to be solved, or to be made the same. Here, middle-class African

Americans are reproducing within black communities the same violent self-Other hierarchy that they contest in normative America. Finally, to achieve their goal of becoming the same as the middle-class puritan white norm, many middle-class or aspiring middle-class African Americans, who are terrified of falling into the negation of non-middle classness, devised a supporting discourse, the racial uplift narrative, with secondary social, political, educational, and literary organizations and apparatuses to seek sameness/equality.

Still operating within binary logic, the objective and success of these uplift institutions and practices are the transformation of the African American from his subaltern, "deviant" status to the values and definitions of the middle-class puritan white norm. The uplift canonical literature, writes Richard Wright in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," "became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice" (316). But this uplift narrative or unequal, restrictive binary system psychologically entraps middle-class and aspiring middle-class African Americans. They become immobilized, erasing and/or suppressing aspects of themselves or their complex existence. A binary opposition, argues Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, "teaches us nothing about the nature of that which is thought to be opposed" (205). When the "difference" of African Americans is read as opposition, African Americans are "deprived of [their] peculiar thickness in which [their] positivity is affirmed" (205). They take the form of an empty opposition.

For those African Americans who are successful in becoming the same culturally and socially as the middle-class puritan white norm—in acquiring middle-class American education, values, manners, taste, jobs, and definitions, in passing—what emerges is an African American experience that is, to use the words of Hélène Cixous, "inside without being inside" (*White Ink* 170). They escape traditional black communities, black folk cultures, the historical experience of black struggles, and black modern traditions, becoming "more exposed to the contempt and discrimination of the white world" (Frazier, "Failure" 56). But middle-class

blacks are not able to enter into that which they “had been admitted,” living in “the exclusion,” without it becoming a home (Cixous, *White Ink* 170). As the Other who wants to be the same as the middle-class white norm, middle-class African Americans reach a blockage, for they are the Other “in a hierarchically organized relationship in which the same is what rules, names, defines, and assigns ‘its’ other” (Cixous and Clément, *Newly Born Woman* 71). Therefore, they experience themselves in self-alienating terms. Because they are so defensive about the middle-class white norm, the tension, the power, the spirit, the desire, and the complexity of middle-class African Americans’ lives, manifested in their differences, their otherness, are still latent, still colonized, still frozen and untapped. The higher up the social ladder you go, argues Gilles Deleuze in *Negotiations*, “the less scope there is for the expression of desire” (19). Therefore, middle-class blacks become spiritually, emotionally, and/or intellectually deprived, obstructed, and muzzled.

Because these middle-class or aspiring middle-class African Americans share many of the same values, definitions, and assumptions as the middle-class puritan white norm and because these particular middle-class African Americans share the same truth and knowledge (or consciousness) as the white norm—despite the fact that this truth and knowledge define their otherness as deviant or that this middle-class white norm has historically, until recently, “justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching” (Woodson 5)—the middle-class white norm rewards them with jobs, educational and political opportunities, and a certain social capital. The middle-class white norm anoints them to represent the race, viewing them as “exceptional” blacks and thereby condemning all other African Americans. America needs the “exceptional” black, argues Sylvia Wynter, “to prove that all the Blacks in prison are right to be there” (qtd. in Thomas, “ProudFlesh Inter/Views” 14), that blacks who are different deserve to be unsuccessful. These assimilating African Americans deal, survive, and participate in America not on their own terms but instead on America’s terms.

But as middle-class and aspiring middle-class African Americans are seeking freedom by becoming the same as the mainstream white norm, subaltern and other African Americans who do not have or want access to the abstract structures of civil society, who do not want to pass, who are "cut off from the lines of mobility," who exist "outside . . . the vectors of upward, downward, sideward, [and] backward mobility" (Spivak, "Subaltern Talk" 288–89) resist, with many practicing difference, not with hierarchal opposition. These African Americans seek freedom, agency, and identity through social and political movements and in their own indigenous/traditional cultural, social, and religious practices such as the blues, jazz, spirituals, Voodoo, black folk culture, working-class culture, etc., which are unsymbolized, fluid spaces in the American order. They develop a rapport with their unconscious, which is not stereotyped by the middle-class American norm, unleashing their latent/colonized tension, energy, spirit, and power. They revive themselves; cover their vital forces; accept their hybridity, differences, intermixture, and creolization; and dare to be themselves. Their existence contradicts and therefore is a relief from America's unyielding desire to construct them as the same, as negative or as primitive Other.

Historically, as a second implied development that history later discloses about the violent representation of the African American as deviant, there have always been American and African American intellectuals and activists—many of whom are tied to African American-based social and political movements—who resist the West's takeover of the world through its control of knowledge and information, who demand an opposite response, and who return to and deconstruct the West's devalued construction of the African American. Maria Stewart, Frederick Douglass, William Lord Garrison, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, the Salem Massachusetts Female Antislavery Society, and the slave abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century resisted slavery, gender oppression, and the representation of the African American as nonhuman. The first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the Marcus Garvey movement that resisted the middle-class American norm and offered

an Afrocentric perspective on the world. These decades also witnessed the emergence of civil and human rights organizations such as A. Philip Randolph and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), C. L. R. James and Paul Robeson and the Black Communist Left, Roy Wilkins and the NAACP, Dorothy Heights and the Congress of Negro Women, Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), Claudia Jones and Louise Thompson and the National Negro Congress (NNC) and the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), Nannie Burroughs and the National Association of Wage Earners, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and Whitney Young and the National Urban League, all of which fought successfully to overturn or pass laws to support African American social equality. The legal arm of these civil rights organizations, particularly the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, used the courts to challenge Jim Crow and segregation laws that barred African Americans from participation in normative/mainstream institutions and practices such as education at white colleges and universities, equality in the workplace and in housing, and access to electoral politics.

In the 1960s, Ella Baker and Bob Moses and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Power movement (with such leaders as H. Rap Brown, Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael, Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, and others), the Cultural Nationalist movement (with such leaders as Ron Karenga, Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Toni Cade Bambara, and others), the Black Muslims (including early Malcolm X), and the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) again resisted the West's control of knowledge and Enlightenment reason and equated black progress and humanity with nation building, Afrocentric education, and women's liberation. Their existence confronts and gives greater clarity to America's denial of black humanity and agency.

These organizations, movements, and individuals achieved enormous feats and had a transformative effect on American society. Certainly we must give credit and praise to them for bravery and courage in challenging hegemonic

American racial, political, economic, and educational structures and apparatuses that excluded women and people of color. But we must also recognize and acknowledge that these organizations and movements, particularly the more prominent male-centered ones, reproduced the same or versions of the same violent hierarchies, subordinations, and repressions within black communities as in mainstream American society. In many instances, these were corporatist movements and organizations with leaders and rigid rules and regulations. They tended to impose their norms and standards from the top down, according to a model of absolute authority. In addition, flipping the binary, they established a hierarchal self-Other relationship with other African Americans and/or non-African Americans. For example, as we rightfully sing the praise of these civil rights organizations and movements for successfully advocating the vote and first-class citizenship for African Americans, we must also examine how in structurally reproducing mainstream American and Enlightenment patriarchal, heterosexual, middle-class, Christian practices and values, they also subordinated and repressed women, homosexuals, non-Christians, and non-middle-class taste and values. Here we are talking about how the male-centered leadership of the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Black Power movement, Black Cultural Nationalists, the SCLC, the Black Communist Left, and Black Muslims denied equality to women in their movements and organizations. African American women were denied access to leadership roles and positions in many of these organizations. The Christian and capitalist leaning of the NAACP and the National Urban League caused them to promote Christianity and capitalism and to exclude Islam, socialism, and Voodoo.

The patriarchal, heterosexual, Christian biases of many of these organizations cause them, on the one hand, to demand respectability and social acceptance for middle-class, heterosexual, Christian African Americans and, on the other hand, to deny or ignore the social acceptance of subaltern African Americans such as jazz and blues practitioners, working-class urban dwellers, and the urban and rural illiterate outsider. Bayard Rustin, one of the architects of

the 1963 March on Washington, and James Baldwin, the novelist and civil rights spokesman, were denied prominent places on the march's platform because they were or were suspected of being homosexuals. Subaltern and working-class blacks who did not advocate the Protestant work ethic were viewed not as complex individuals with their own cultures and distinct subjectivities but instead as (pathological) problems to be solved.

The middle-class, racial uplift, Christian narrative that, on the one hand, validates and provides cultural capital to the canonical texts of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Booker T. Washington, Ralph Ellison, etc., also, on the other hand, subordinates or ignores blues- and jazz-influenced texts such as Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, Arna Bontemps's *God Sends Sunday*, Rudolph Fisher's *The Walls of Jericho*, and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. This racial uplift narrative also excludes Voodoo texts such as Fisher's *The Conjure Man Dies*, Don Belton's *Almost Midnight*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Mary Monroe's *The Upper Room*, and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. This epistemic violence—the same kind of epistemic violence practiced when whites exclude or subordinate blacks and others socially and politically—is quite evident in the practices of many of these male-centered civil and human rights organizations and movements. Therefore, although these organizations and movements were instrumental in the transformation of American society and the economic, social, and political predicament of the African American, they also practice the logic of domination and subordination. They do not offer the kind of politics necessary for a postmodern, multicultural, cosmopolitan American society, which would require an alliance politics that eschews single-group identity politics or movement. These organizations and movements also would have to equally engage multiple political identities and movements and a conflicting set of social, economic, religious, sexual, gender, and racial/ethnic positions.

Also, as a third implied development in the historic representation of the African American as deviant, as primitive Other, there is a long tradition in African American scholarship that studies and examines the life, history, and

experience of the African American, returning to, exposing/opposing, and pushing beyond this representation of the African American. This tradition creates counterhegemonic bodies of knowledge that challenge America's historiography, its claims of universalism, and its definition of civilization, and defines the African American with history, agency, and a distinct subjectivity. The tradition begins with George Washington Williams's *History of the Negro Race* (1882), William T. Alexander's *History of the Colored Race in America* (1887), Harold M. Taver's *The Negro in the History of the United States* (1905), Benjamin Brawley's *A Short History of the American Negro* (1913), and Willis D. Weatherford's *The Negro from Africa to America* (1924) and includes among others Anna Julia Cooper (*A Voice From the South*), W. E. B. Du Bois (*What the Negro Wants*), feminist Pan-Africanists Amy Jacques Garvey and Shirley Graham Du Bois, the sociologists E. Franklin Frazier and Charles S. Johnson, and historians Carter G. Woodson, John Hope Franklin, and Lerone Bennett.

Using current postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, psychoanalytical, African American cultural, and feminist theories (and the issues of otherness, difference, heterogeneity, violent hierarchies, hybridity, etc.), I dust off and/or reopen and rethink the works of some of these past scholarly figures to liberate their potentialities from restrictive, partial, and indeed erroneous interpretations or to dramatize latencies in their work, making them relevant to today as forerunners of African American studies. Specifically, as intellectuals in the margins of the racially and socially hierarchically organized United States, Cooper, Du Bois, Frazier, Johnson, and Woodson were defined negatively by the mainstream society. They endured earth-shattering racial and gender experiences; were sensitive to and tormented by the injustice, the violence, and the real and symbolic murders; attended America's and Europe's best graduate universities; and traveled between two cultures. These experiences informed their historical and sociological research. I will focus on these five scholars for several reasons: because they offer alternative bodies of knowledge, perspectives, and representations of African Americans; because their works

reconfigure the American symbolic order to include the African American and other excluded groups into the national political, social, philosophical, and literary rituals and narratives and to signify a new way to create an "American" subjectivity; because in their scholarship they think in terms of difference rather than in binary oppositions; and, finally, because they show traces of plural, multiple, and polyphonic African American subjectivities and/or genders that empathize with or know and acknowledge the Other.

The postmodern dynamics of contemporary American society, which advocates differences and nonhierarchies rather than binary oppositions, allow me, as someone from a different historical period and a different cultural background, to reread Anna Julia Cooper to instigate new thought, to illuminate the present. Without the kind of intellectual, institutional, and financial support received by her black male scholarly peers, Cooper—feminist, educator, scholar, activist, theorist, cosmopolitan, historian, and visionary— theorizes and remaps an American society where there are strong ethnic, racial, and gender differences without hierarchy. Through her writings (particularly *A Voice From the South*, a collection of essays and speeches written between 1886 and 1892), the black women's club movement, and community organizations, she rejects a patriarchal American social norm and education that control/devalue the black and the Indian and deny/subordinate the subjectivity of women, particularly black women. She defines her current (1880s) patriarchal capitalist norm as "when internecine war, originated through [the Euro-American] man's love of gain and his determination to subordinate national interests and black men's rights alike to considerations of personal profit and loss, was drenching our country with its own best blood" (128–29). With power to create a social, economic, and gendered hierarchy, the Euro-American male (in the 1880s and 1890s) serves his interest, totally subordinating women, the working class, and people of color. Race and gender blindness might keep a culture alive but also keeps it unhealthy.

Indicting the United States for having divided human beings into hierarchies of races and genders that reduced and dehumanized the subordinates and echoing what I

interpret as certain postmodern and poststructural feminist sentiments, the biracial and bicultural Cooper proposes an American symbolic order that equally includes America's racially and sexually diverse and conflicting voices.<sup>4</sup> In *A Voice From the South*, reverberating against Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The Hermetic Book of Nature*, which advocates antagonisms and therefore hierarchies among different social forces rather than oppositions and harmony, Cooper writes that "*equilibrium, not repression among conflicting forces is the condition of natural harmony, of permanent progress, and of universal freedom*" (160). The concept of the symbolic order was conceived in the 1950s by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was concerned with reconceptualizing Western society into a unified and coherent social system. He elaborates a system according to which everything in the human world is structured "in accordance with the symbols which have emerged" (*Seminars* 29). This system is comprised of social, cultural, and linguistic symbolic networks. The symbolic order, according to the Lacanian scholar Jane Gallop, is "the register of language, social exchange, and radical subjectivity" (59). As the defining context for the self, it determines the "order of the subject" (Lacan, *Ecrits* ix). Individuals are transformed into signs and operated within a system of symbolic exchange. The symbolic is comprised of signifiers "extended into a generalized definition: differential elements, in themselves without meaning, which acquire value only in their mutual relations, and forming a closed order" (ix).

In devising his symbolic order, Lacan is not saying that everything is reducible to the symbolic but instead is saying that once symbols have appeared, they will be ordered, or structured, in accordance with those symbols and the laws of the symbolic, including the unconscious and human subjectivity. Lacan conceived of the symbolic order as a totalizing concept in the sense that it marks the limits of the human universe. As signs, we are locked within what Lacan calls a circuit of discourse.

It is the discourse of the circuit in which I am integrated. I am one of its links. It is the discourse of

my father . . . in so far as my father made mistakes which I am condemned to reproduce. . . . I am condemned to reproduce them because I am obliged to pick up again the discourse he bequeathed to me, not simply because I am his son, but because one can't stop the chain of discourse, and it is precisely my duty to transmit it in its aberrant form to someone else. . . . [T]his discourse produces a small circuit in which an entire family, an entire coterie, an entire camp, an entire nation or half of the world will be caught. (*Seminars* 89–90)

We are born into this circuit of discourse, which marks us before our birth and after our death. To be fully human, Lacan concludes, we are subjected to this symbolic order.

Although spoken universally and totally, Lacan's circuit of discourse/symbolic order does not occupy all the space available in the social. Rather, it represents those social, literary, psychoanalytic, political, media, religious, and economic discourses (and mythologies) that have the power to have their symbols and signs appear and enunciate. From the above quote and due to Lacan's statement that the child/subject accepts the father's name, Lacan's symbolic order is inherently phallogentric and Eurocentric in its structure of concepts. It is structured according to the law of the Eurocentric father, repressing and excluding the representation of the feminine and the non-European Other, who are the unacknowledged unconscious of Western culture. Depriving women and the non-European of "the fulfillment of their desire, of the 'fullness' of pleasure," argues Luce Irigaray, "the [Eurocentric] father introduces them, or reintroduces them, to the exigencies of the symbolization of desire through language, that is, to the necessity that desire pass by way of demand" (*This Sex* 63). Women and non-Europeans, even when they are visible within the symbolic order, are perceived as the absence and negation of the Eurocentric masculine norm. They are excluded from complex representation.

Arguing that the first settlers in the United States were racially mixed or plural with multiple circuits of discourse,

the theorist and cosmopolitan Cooper in *A Voice From the South*, positing poststructural latencies that she might not have been fully aware of, reconfigures what Lacan would later call the symbolic order to include “the variety and warfare of the elements of [American] civilization, . . . [a] stable equilibrium of opposition” (160, 164), thereby signifying irreducible differences and a new way to name American subjectivity. She wants the variety and the conflicting political, social, economic, philosophical, psychoanalytical, gender, sexual, and literary symbols and signs of women, African Americans, American Indians, along with the symbols and signs of Euro-American males, to be equally represented in the American symbolic order. “Hence no one is or can be supreme. All interests must be consulted, all claims conciliated where a hundred free forces are lustily clamoring for recognition and each wrestling mightily for the mastery, individual tyrannies must inevitably be chiseled down, individual prejudices either obliterated or concealed” (164). According to Cooper, the remapped American symbolic order becomes an alliance between all subjects who share with each other, advocating a politics of equal respect for all. “Cooper,” writes Janice W. Fernheimer, “works at the level of first premises to redefine American culture entirely. Cooper thus not only makes space for African Americans [and American Indians] on their own terms, but also legitimates their centrality and necessity to the nation’s well-being” (289). As Jean-Francois Lyotard would argue almost seventy years later in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Cooper, in 1892, echoing Francois Guizot’s belief that difference benefits the nation,<sup>5</sup> is arguing for the abandonment of a centralized, rational (grand) narrative; for the abandonment of the whole edifice of patriarchal Euro-American humanism, which has proven incapable of going beyond its own limitations of vision; and for embracing a vision of the world (America) in which multiple incompatible discourses or language games (Wittgenstein) flourish alongside each other. As Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida were to do, Cooper proposes an unregulated freedom of pure difference. The heterogeneity of language games leads to a multiplicity of justice.

In *A Voice From the South* (1892), Cooper, echoing the current discussion about the violence involved in the self-Other binary opposition, critiques/deconstructs classic binary oppositions such as Western–non-Western, men–women, strong–weak, male–female, white–black, white–Indian, and upper class–lower class that are constructed by the Euro-American patriarchal order and permeate society’s social, political, religious, and economical institutions and practices. These binaries are not separate and equal or what Jacques Derrida in *Positions* calls “the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*.” Rather, they comprise a “violent hierarchy” where “one of the two terms governs the other . . . , or has the upper hand” (41), and the lower half is defined in a reduced way. This lower half has been denied distinct subjectivity and full representation in the symbolic.

Understanding the obstacles and potentials confronting women and the oppressed in the United States, Cooper rewrites the center, undermining hierarchies and repositioning the Other—Woman, the African American, and the American Indian. Through education, she wants Woman, who traditionally takes the lead in transmitting the rules and laws of heteropatriarchy, to take the lead in transforming the American symbolic order for all Americans equally. The source of this responsibility comes from the potentialities of Christianity and the feudal system, “not on the fruition we now enjoy, but springs rather from the possibilities and promise that are inherent in the system” (12). It is the responsibility of women, argues Cooper in *A Voice From the South*, to use their energies to undermine these binaries and to initiate reconfiguration, thereby tapping into the inherent promises and possibilities of Christianity, “broadening, humanizing, and civilizing her native land” (116) and bringing to women “the same code of morality, the same standard of purity, as men” (17). Cooper argues that Jesus Christ “throughout his life and in his death . . . has given to men a rule and guide for the estimation of woman as an equal” (18).

In addition, long before French and American feminists such as Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, and others of the 1960s and 1970s sought the first trace of women’s oppression in

the West, Cooper, who was denied opportunities because she was a woman, in 1892 traces the violent man-woman hierarchy in the West to the “barbarian brawn and brutality” in fifth-century Europe, which permitted “no feminine modification” (53). European heteropatriarchy repressed its feminine, which could teach “it to be pitiful, to love mercy, to succor the weak and care for the lowly” (51). It did not value or nurture empathy for the Other. Cooper attacks the patriarchal American symbolic order’s “one-sided masculine definition” of Woman, which argues that if women are given an education and equality, “there would be an end forever to their sewing on buttons and embroidering slippers” (49, 50–51).

Believing that societal transformation comes not from the collective, which is artificial and is too quickly constructed, but instead from the individual, by putting influence on subjective structures, the feminist Cooper in *A Voice From the South* redefines Woman as one of the “vital elements of its [society’s] regeneration and progress” not because she is “better or stronger or wiser than man but from the nature of the case, because it is she who must first form the man by directing the earliest impulses of his character” (21). Therefore, the visionary Cooper believes that in socializing, raising, and teaching the young, it is Woman’s responsibility to deconstruct society’s hierarchal self-Other binary order, which is at the foundation of Western metaphysics:

Woman should not, even by inference, or for the sake of argument, seem to disparage what is weak. For woman’s cause is the cause of the weak; and when all the weak shall have received their due consideration, then woman will have her “rights,” and the Indian will have his rights, and the Negro will have his rights, and all the strong will have learned at last to deal justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly; and our land will have been taught the secret of universal courtesy. (117)

Although she wants Woman to take the lead, Cooper also wants man to empathize with the Other, to “be a father,

a brother, a friend to every weak, struggling unshielded girl" (32). In a cosmopolitan sense, Cooper wants America/the world to replace the violent hierarchy with difference, without hierarchy, and she wants Woman to take the lead. In many instances, in having "[t]he philosophic mind see[] that its own 'rights' are the rights of humanity," Cooper is insinuating that through education the female self can angle toward or empathize with the Other, the poor and the oppressed, which is the mark of being alive.

Likewise, deconstructing the unbalanced white man–black man and black man–black woman binary oppositions, Cooper in *A Voice From the South* argues that the white man, who cannot put himself in the dark man's place, exists in a violent hierarchy with the black man, who provokes "ceaseless harangues . . . but [is] little understood and seldom consulted" (i). Even Christian white men do not recognize black men, do not invite them "to take part in their deliberations" (37). Therefore, Cooper wants to overturn this white man–black man binary, arguing for the black man to speak for and represent himself. Although he is the lower half of the white male–black male binary, the black male becomes the upper half of the black male–black woman binary. But the black male, argues Cooper, does not "represent the race" and "can never be regarded as identical with or representative of the whole" (30). He cannot "fully and adequately . . . reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman" (iii). Therefore, the black woman should equally speak for and represent herself.

In *A Voice From the South*, Cooper undermines other classic Western hierarchies. She unearths the white woman–black woman binary by arguing for the "radical amelioration of womankind, reverence for woman as woman regardless of rank, wealth, or culture," which comes from "the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (14). She advocates not oppositions but rather the acceptance of differences and mutual recognition among women. Rejecting the selection of successful upper-middle-class men to represent the race, Cooper dismantles the upper class–lower class binary, asking that the poor be considered as different but equal, visualizing an American society where all groups and individuals are