

Introduction

In his 1988 book *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970*, novelist and critic Charles R. Johnson presents a new definition of African American literature. Unlike the cultural, intellectual, and political rhetoric of racial uplift in previous eras of US history, contemporary African American literature represents “a fiction of increasing artistic and intellectual growth, one that enables us as a people – as a culture – to move from narrow complaint to broad celebration.” This movement from “narrow complaint to broad celebration” corresponds with the broader cultural shift in the post-Civil Rights era in the United States from overt protests (such as the antiwar, feminist, and gay liberation movements) to pluralistic consensus. Declarations of “postracialism,” emerging especially during Barack Obama’s election to United States President in 2008, coincide with intellectual questions about the nature and function of African American literature in an age when the categories of race and ethnicity, in particular, are no longer immutable and absolute – when, as Johnson puts it, the focus on achievement has overtaken the need for protest during the contemporary turn of American literature and culture.

The economic and political changes that have occurred across the United States and the world since the 1970s partially explain this recent turn. In various ways, the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s, the “culture wars” of the 1990s, and the “War on Terror” following the September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, all abetted a partisan movement to the political right. Conservative culture warriors in the 1980s and 1990s employed 1960s-style public, grassroots protest to bemoan the evils of what they believed to be permissive liberalism and advocate particular social and political changes to suit their interests.

If multiculturalism and diversity became lightning rods of an increasing, almost insurmountable, partisan divide, the doctrines also reflect the cultural reality of the United States at the turn of the new millennium. By 2010, Hispanic Americans had surpassed African Americans as the largest non-white population in the country. Latin Americans and Asian Americans emerged as the fastest growing non-white groups in the country. These statistics arrive half a century after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, which overturned discriminatory immigration policy. With the onset of globalization, the final decades of the twentieth century also saw an upsurge in immigration. For the first time in the country’s history, the 2000 Census allowed Americans to self-report their multiracial ancestry. But diversity had not been limited to race. Pluralism came to include sexual preference and gender definition, aspects of identities punctuated by the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which ushered in the modern Gay Liberation Movement, and the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic, which highlighted the deep-seated homophobia even among those seeking to understand the disease. By 2004, when Massachusetts became the first state to legalize gay marriage, a reinvigorated gay rights movement was forcing US

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love,
Nettie

Next one, fat, dated two months later, say,



