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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

READING GREG TATE'S CRITICISM is like joining a conversation already in progress. His writing is fast on the eye and fast on the ear, full of play and delight in language for its own sake. At the same time, Tate knows writing isn't talk. "DisCOINTELPRO"—his term for "a form of record industry sabotage dubbed 'disco'"—would never work around a table but it stops you dead in a line of prose.

Since his work on music, art, politics—an ongoing argument with his colleagues, culture-makers, himself, and the eclectic weather—began appearing in *The Village Voice* in 1981, Tate has built up a head of steam that's allowed him to blow past more borders and plant more theses in his signature lists than a lot of writers manage in their books. When "Brian Wallis laments that there's never been a serious study of the relationship of black culture to institutionalized art," Tate answers back "like don't nobody know that since Cubism, black culture and Western modernism have been confused for concepts! Elitist cousins; that since bebop's impact on Abstract Expressionism and the Beats, black modernism has been confused with white alienation and social deviance; that since Duke Ellington compared Picasso to Miles Davis, black genius has been confused with the formal exhaustion of Western art; that since Norman Mailer wrote 'The White Negro,' black cool has been mistaken for a figment of white heterosexual anxiety . . . that since Ornette Coleman called Jimi Hendrix's 'Star Spangled Banner' the most beautiful since Tocsanini's, the power to impose cultural democracy has fallen into the hands of stage designers."

It still bothers me, though, that Tate's 1985 proclamation of his "dream magazine," *I Signify—The Journal of Afro-American Semiotics*, was apparently just a riff albeit one a lot of people might envy. Reading Tate, you realize he could take any form—academic quarterly, fanzine, street flyer—and it would, in the discourse Tate is creating, make perfect sense.

—*Greil Marcus*

GREG TATE

I didn't know I was a cultural critic until I began to be described as one. I never liked being described as a music critic even when that was all I wrote about, the musician in me adhering to Keith Jarrett's belief that only adequate criticism of a piece of music is another piece of music. What inspired me to write criticism wasn't music so much as other works of music criticism—LeRoi Jones, Stanley Crouch, Sir Lleh-ell Funkadelia, and Barry Michael Cooper being the prime motivators here. In that sense I've always thought of myself as a writer first. I'm not above thinking of a critic as just another asshole with an opinion, but I'll grant that asshole much more prestige if they can craft smart funky sentences.

What makes cultural criticism rewarding sounds amounts of money you can make doing it (an in-joke here for those who can't tell) is the arguments it provokes you to have with yourself about other critics. At its worst, this can produce journalism of the most incestuous, self-centered, juvenile stripe. At its best, though, acrimonious assault can serve as an insightful vehicle. I used to get juiced writing about Miles Davis' electric period because I thought mainstream jazz critics were incapable of hearing it properly. So every amorous sentence I wrote in defense of this music was also a tacit attack on those I termed the "jazz police."

But language itself and the pleasures of invention it offered were always more inspirational to me than playin' the dozens on my critical brethren. (The sistren never caused me grief.) I came to criticism from poetry, where I had determined that the job of the poets was to reinvent the language every time they wrote. I did my first critical pieces in that spirit. I saw every album review as an opportunity to translate the thing into Gregspeak. The highest compliment you could pay me in those days of a decade ago was that what I wrote was comparable to music, be it jazz, hiphop, metal, or whatever.

The joys of prosaic synesthesia might have remained enough had I not discovered post-Structuralist critical theory. One day I picked up a book by Fredric Jameson and thought Damn, this is like some weird science fiction about Marxist esthetics. I was with it simply because the language was so wacky, not because of what it deconstructed about power/class relations in Western literature. I went on to read Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and the rest of the frogman crew, not because they were battling the academy but because they were such dope essayists. Though I eventually realized that they were critiquing white tribal mythology from the inside the way black cultural nationalists had been doing from the outside, what drew me into the realm of their deconstructivist thoughts was the fact that they could let all theoretical gonzo flow like a Rimbaud riverboat. As I matured in my social thinking and concerns I certainly returned to them for sustenance and ammunition, but the pleasures of their texts rather than their philosophizin' (to use one of my Memphis-bred momma's favorite terms) around social progress was clearly the impetus.

Even in writing about this stuff as literary reviews, half the fun was in seeing what kind of twisted sentences of my own I could wrangle from deconstructing the deconstructivists. It wasn't until I discovered the work of Hal Foster and Cornel West that I realized how the frogman crew's formidable interventions into Western philosophy's hidden collusions with class oppression and colonialism provided a missile site for gutting white supremacy's intellectual catechisms and cabals.

At this stage of the game I still consider myself a writer who indulges in critical essays and theorizing, but for the purpose more of engaging in the major moral, political, and cultural dialogues of our time than of appraising the value of artists' work in the consumer marketplace and in the destitute (and mythical) marketplace of ideas. I am also more interested in the people behind the work, what makes them sweat, vulnerable, anxious, and driven to do what they do, than in the work itself. I've got to be hyped about the work to be interested in the artist, but in conversation I'm less concerned with their esthetics than with what life experiences provoked their artistic obsessions. I find myself most fascinated by folk who are umbilically connected to their work by some neurotic personal issue that in translation joins in with the debates around race, class, power, and identity going on in our time.

In this sense I find myself drawn less to musicians and more and more to black folks working in the avant-garde or experimental theater, folks like George C. Wolfe, Anna Deveare Smith, Garth Fagan, Suzan-Lori Parks, Laurie Carlos, and Oyamo. These people's work has a scalding, shameless spiritual nakedness about it that serves up transgression and redemption in the same breath, same as jazz and blues used to do. Black music has since become too commodified and mythologized really to serve as a channel for bucket-of-blood soul sessions. And traditional black theater has degenerated, through a legacy of posing and fear, into steering clear of those areas of black psychology and history that are unsettling and indecipherable. In this sense, black folks' collective anxieties around alienation issues and personal revelation is high among the remaining psychological legacies of slavery we have to overcome. The experimental black theater is where that rally is situated now.

I'm frequently asked if I feel alienated from a black audience because I write for white-owned publications rather than black-owned ones. The answer to that is negative. I'm helped considerably both by living in Harlem and by knowing that a large percentage of the readership of my principal outlet, *The Village Voice*, is black, but even if I did write regularly for a black publication I wouldn't depend solely on it for my work for communicating with other black people. On the other hand, I also know that when I do think of an ideal reader for my work it's usually of people not unlike myself—postfunkateers well read in literature and cultural theory, conversant with black politics of the last four hundred years, visually literate, musically eclectic, and as at ease with themselves in Watts as they are in Paris. If I reach one person like that out there, the rest don't matter.

Greg Tate recently published Flybop in the Buttermilk: Essays in Contemporary America, *New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.*

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