

# NOTES FROM THE MARGINS

By Hua Hsu

In 1934, Universal Pictures released “Imitation of Life,” an adaptation of Fanny Hurst’s best-selling novel about the unlikely kinship between a white widow and her black housekeeper. It was a critical and commercial success, though one imagines that audiences were drawn to it for different reasons. “Imitation of Life” was a notably early attempt to ground race relations in scenes of on-screen friendship; it was more everyday than epic, the type of movie that taught white audiences to love the black Americans in their midst—to see them as equals, at least within the sentimental economy of a tear-jerking melodrama. Perhaps this segment of the audience imagined redemption in the film’s arc of compassion and kindness.

It’s not that black audiences were unaccustomed to seeing themselves in the movies, it’s just that those roles were usually subservient, if not outwardly racist. “Imitation of Life” offered a chance to see Louise Beavers, a pioneering actress often limited to playing “mammy”-type characters, breathe life into the complex, conflicted Delilah. They went to see Fredi Washington as Delilah’s daughter, Peola, an incendiary spirit whose decision to “pass” as white hurts her mother to the core. These were roles with psychological depth. In the black press, critics treated the film as an occasion to meditate on racial progress. Writing in the Pittsburgh *Courier*, Bernice Patton admitted that there were sequences in the film “that will grieve my people.” But Patton shared the aspirations of many black moviegoers, who believed film to be a technological breakthrough that could help humanize them. “Don’t spoil your economic advantages and possibilities in the movies by intolerant criticism,” she wrote. “The picture gives them (white people) a more human understanding and love for the Negro.”

From Patton’s pragmatic, accommodating perspective, supporting “Imitation of Life” could produce material change. Fay M. Jackson, also writing in the *Courier*, noticed something deeper. She discussed Washington’s performance as Peola, fixing on a moment when she cries, “I want the same things other people enjoy”—a statement on her own choice to pass, but perhaps a desire for much more than that, too. What Patton felt might have rubbed against the bare intentions of the script, or how the majority of moviegoers approached Peola and her choice. Instead, Patton was writing for those who recognized a glimmer and a spark—who imagined the actress, Washington, looking past the camera, at the world beyond, giving voice to an impossible yearning.

I read about these reviews in “Returning the Gaze,” the historian Anna Everett’s genealogy of early twentieth century black film criticism. Everett pieces together a scattered history, one that’s often recalled through a few major turning points, like the press campaign against “Birth of a Nation,” or prominent writers and commentators, like Lester Walton or Sylvester Russell. But Everett sifts through black newspapers, magazines, and journals, scattered across cities and eras, for all the forgotten voices of early film criticism. These voices cohere around a set of questions that still frame the critic of color’s perspective: was any representation better than none at all? What responsibility did black performers and audiences have to one another? Art or commerce? What could movies, literature, or performance do that politics had failed to achieve? In other words: what could be demanded of culture?

A history of critics of color would be a history of horizons. That there have been so few books like Everett’s, focusing on forgotten newspaper writers rather than titans like James Baldwin or Stanley Crouch, signals

how scattered and unknown this genealogy of cultural criticism, written by and for people of color, remains. Cultural forms are always encoded with a kind of utopian impulse to reimagine the worlds that produced them. This is what makes art so hallowed and cherished—and why excuses are so often made for the people who produce it. The most generous criticism has always been a meditation on possibility, an attempt to trace the circumference of our imaginations. Perhaps this explains why those who take criticism seriously are perennially obsessed with questions of autonomy and integrity, whether it all amounts to little more than intellectualized fandom. Nowadays, criticism wouldn't exist without the basic service it provides the consumer—the thumbs up or down, the rating on a five-star scale. Yet it still, in these moments, models a way of thinking, friction against forces that seem inevitable, a possibility of refusal.

You can do what you want with this larger imperative to understand something ephemeral about the world by studying its forms of expression and creativity. Some champion the singer who is meaningful and obscure; others diagnose the forces that converge in the most popular blockbuster on the planet. Some fix on the grain and grit of the text itself, and nothing more; others mind context, larger juxtapositions across time and space. Terry Eagleton once remarked that modern European criticism “was born of a struggle against the absolutist state.” It was where people shared ideas, popular and not, and learned they could resist the tyranny of fixed authorities and centralized meanings, one book at a time. We want to believe that criticism exists somewhere beyond the pressures of profit or popular wisdom. How does this relationship change for the critic of color, conscious that they stand at a greater distance from the core and the canon?

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There's a story about Leonard Feather, one of the most influential jazz writers of the twentieth century, that captures some of the tensions I'm thinking about. Feather came from a wealthy family in England, and, in his twenties, he decided to devote his life to this form of black American music he accessed almost entirely through imported recordings. In fact, when Feather set sail for the United States in the thirties, he had only ever met one black person. (It was Louis Armstrong, who he met at a gig.) Upon arriving in New York, Feather's guide was another white jazz aficionado, John Hammond, the critic and record producer. They shared an enthusiasm for jazz that was out of step with their affluent upbringings, championing and helping legitimize a musical form many middle-class Americans found exotic, maybe even threatening.

The critic Gerald Early has argued that early white bandleaders weren't strictly “expropriators” profiting from black creativity while giving nothing back. As Early suggests, making jazz palatable to white consumers created economic opportunity. Yet there were limits to where these careers were located, particularly in relation to professional connoisseurs like Feather and Hammond. The early jazz critical establishment was rich, preppie, and often Ivy League-educated. A few years after introducing Feather to the lures of Harlem, Hammond would alienate much of the jazz establishment by attacking Duke Ellington's insufficiently radical politics in a “Down Beat” article titled “The Tragedy of Duke Ellington.” As Amiri Baraka later observed, jazz criticism began as a predominantly white pursuit in part because blacks who felt the “jazz impulse” could move “naturally into the music itself.” Writing about it presumed acculturation into a kind of refined, upper crust hierarchy, which meant that aspiring black writers “would be horrified by the very idea of writing about jazz.” So, it was Feather's history of jazz that would become canonical.

By the time Baraka began publishing criticism, jazz was in the throes of radical change. In his 1963 essay “Jazz and the White Critic,” he questioned how people could approach these innovations with such sociological detachment. Critics who loathed the music's freer, leftward turns seemed to deny the “psychological catalysts,” the dreams, aspirations, and frustrations, that might produce such sounds. “Nostalgia, lack of understanding or failure to see the validity of refined emotional statements which reflect the changing psyche of the Negro in opposition to what the critic might think the Negro ought to feel; all

these unfortunate failures have been built many times into a kind of critical stance or aesthetic.” (As Frank Kofsky, a white, Marxist critic and Baraka devotee, observed a few years later: “The easiest way to summarize the status quo in jazz is with the two words *white supremacy*.”)

It’s not that there were wrong reasons to love jazz. But white critics were defining the terms used to articulate that love. “People made bebop,” Baraka writes. “The question the critic must ask is: *why?*” What Baraka was demanding was a degree of self-reflexivity. White critics had been beneficiaries of inequities baked into the cultural economy; it was simply the natural order of things. Yet they were writing about a form of music born of a struggle against those privileges. And there were no structures to support and sustain a variety of critical conversations, particularly ones on the margins. In the fifties and sixties, the staff of “Down Beat,” one of the premier jazz publications, was predominantly white. In fact, its owner at the time was entirely ambivalent to jazz as a form of expression—he merely saw it as a profitable endeavor. Kofsky pointed out that when critics became “dependent for their livelihood on the recording industry” they were less inclined to report on the labor and exploitation happening behind the scenes at record labels or nightclubs.

There’s long been an anxiety between criticism and fandom, even though that desire to champion or advocate is what drew many of us in the first place. There have always been critics who believed that works of art could be appreciated as wholly self-contained embodiments of beauty and truth, and they’ve tried to establish critical practices that carried an air of disinterest. From this perspective, the artist’s identity or historical backdrop didn’t matter at all; serious art could be decoded and appreciated on its own terms. Questions of objectivity or universal truth often mean something different for a critic of color, who sees how positions shift and recalibrate, as acts of preserving authority. How do notions of genius serve some but diminish others? Does a celebration of the democratic possibility of pop culture obscure a darker machinery? What does it mean to absorb jazz, or immigrant writing, into the tapestry of “serious art” or a shared, American experience—and why do these gestures arise in moments when the nation seeks a mood of consensus?

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I remember browsing a collection of Asian American movement newspapers from the late sixties and seventies, and reading an unusual perspective on the martial arts star Bruce Lee. Lee was a path-breaking movie star whose on-screen heroics held special meaning to marginalized peoples around the world. But to this young Chinatown activist, Lee’s films could stand to be even more radical. Rather than hand-to-hand combat with lurid henchmen, this writer argued, Lee should wage war against the forces of imperialism. It spoke to a different kind of expectation than what most critics, eager to celebrate this new genre of action star, could possibly imagine.

The rise of popular music had helped American business understand marketplace diversity on a larger scale, a possibility captured by the so-called “Harvard Report” of 1972, which hailed the profits awaiting whoever tapped into the “soul music environment.” As Americans began to engage with an increasingly segmented market, a larger, more diverse pool of voices penetrated mainstream culture. But diversity meant something different to those seeking it than those who embodied it.

The historian Lawrence Jackson has written about how the interplay between writers and their critics migrated into the black literature of the forties and fifties, particularly when it came to questions of realism’s limitations, or how art could represent whiteness. As authors like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison rose to prominence, the publishing establishment needed critics capable of communicating their complexity to predominantly white, middle class readers. For elite academic institutions, or cultural outlets like “The New

Republic,” “Harper’s,” and “Partisan Review,” the presence of a few black voices seemed sufficient absolution for decades of neglect.

One of the ironies of diversity is how the eclecticism of an entire community is often reduced to a single popular author or pose. Throughout the sixties and seventies, critical perspectives flourished in the underground press, community newspapers, and scholarly journals. Most of these publications, like “Umbra,” “Black Dialogue,” “Black World,” and “Yardbird Reader,” are credited with establishing new canons and critical perspectives. Yet it’s almost impossible to access them, and to appreciate how individually forgotten voices collectively forged these new movements.

In the seventies and eighties, the rise of authors like Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Richard Rodriguez shook up the literary marketplace. The success of their works, which felt memoirish to audiences, even when that wasn’t the intention, was a recognition that audiences existed for writers who wanted to tell their own stories. But the rise of “ethnic autobiography” sometimes put critics of color in difficult positions, particularly in the case of Kingston and Rodriguez, whose most famous works expressed a conflicted relationship to identity politics. Their authority within the mainstream literary marketplace came from their difference. Was there still room for others, critics wondered, whose sense of difference didn’t match theirs? What many of these back-and-forth exchanges made visible was the larger economy of relations—the degree to which diversity should mean more than the anointment of singular voices.

In 1989, Maxine Hong Kingston published “Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book.” It’s about a Chinese American hippie named Wittman Ah Sing who spends over three-hundred pages inveigling everyone who crosses his path to be a part of a play he is writing. “I’m including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place,” he explains. At the end of Wittman’s trip, he stands on-stage, surrounded by everyone, the line between audience and performer erased. Nobody gets him. He holds up reviews from all the local newspapers. They celebrate Wittman’s strange, ambitious work, describing it as quintessentially Chinese—as a meeting of East and West. But that was never the point. It wasn’t a play—he was conjuring a community. “There is no East here,” he grouses. “West is meeting West. This was all West. This is the Journey *In* the West. I am so fucking offended.”

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When the Jamaican cultural critic Stuart Hall was young, he read William Wordsworth’s poem “Daffodils.” This was years before he ever saw a daffodil for himself. “In the back of my head are things that can’t be in the back of your head,” he told a British interviewer in 2007. “That part of me comes from a plantation, when you owned me. I was brought up to understand you, I read your literature, I knew ‘Daffodils’ by heart before I knew the name of a Jamaican flower. You don’t lose that, it becomes stronger.”

It’s a strange thing to realize that you were never meant to identify with the protagonist of nearly every book you were assigned to read as a child. Or perhaps you were, but with the tacit understanding that you would be forfeiting a piece of yourself. You realize that when you write, you will never address a single audience.

You are taught as an aspiring critic to specialize, and it’s impossible not to feel that your specialty, in the eyes of the market, is your difference. But then it comes from both sides—a responsibility that begins to feel rote, a desire not to be defined by that responsibility. There are glimmers of hope: in the eighties and nineties, the possibility of critics of color rising together, as cohorts, emerged at prominent outlets like the “Village Voice” and *Vibe*. They helped you rethink the possibilities of pronouns—of a collective “we.”

If there is a history of critics of color, it would find harmony in a thousand individual stories: when you are

asked to write about someone who you want to succeed on an intimate level; when you are reminded that people still believe in objectivity and universal truths. It's impossible to chronicle this history, only celebrate its aspirations, and treat its anxieties as real. It would be a history of underground papers lost to time, ideas that never gained the authority of print, fans who were never taught that their opinions counted as much as the ones they saw in print. It would hone in on those in back of the staff photo. It would feel like a cycle—accommodation and rebellion, the image we want to project to the mainstream versus our wildest dreams. And it would be a history of ambitions that seem so simple and basic, yet so paradoxically distant. To possess the same things other people enjoy, which is to see yourself in pages and song, and projected onto walls, laughing and carefree.

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