

# African American Writers and Classical Tradition

Patrice Rankine


*Comparative Literature*

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sledgehammers at the Berlin Wall, the historic process was reduced to a set of images.

Clover's strength as an author is his ability to describe his sources, which is an important skill in any written work that draws on music videos and songs as historic texts. Clover demonstrates his talent best in his analysis of Nirvana in the chapter "Negative Creep." In retracing Nirvana's intellectual and musical genealogy, Clover convincingly argues that the band's contribution to American music derived from their ability to create an aural representation of teenage self-loathing and introspection.

However, this book has difficulty going beyond the examination of sources toward developing a cohesive and clear argument. Part of the problem is the organization of the book into two sections, which stifles any attempt to connect the argument to the texts. When his book does turn toward argument, Clover spends a great deal of time assessing and responding to the theses of theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin, and Francis Fukuyama, rather than developing his own contribution to the discourse. The author limits his argument further by selecting music texts that, with the exception of the six pages devoted to the German group Scorpions, are mostly from British and American bands. If one is to answer questions surrounding the relationship of the music to the moment, then it is necessary to look beyond the existing theoretical discourse and its reliance on English-language recordings. The need for expanding the sources of popular music to include non-English-language recordings is especially true when the historic events being analyzed take place in Germany, former Soviet states, and China.

Amy Absher  
University of Washington

*African American Writers and Classical Tradition.* William W. Cook and James Tatum. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Before reading this book, I believed that jazz, Ralph Ellison, and ancient Greek literature had nothing in common. Yet jazz is the central metaphor that drives *African American Writers and Classical Tradition*. The authors compare themselves to musicians—Tatum provides the

words and Cook the music—and present eclectic riffs on several African-American authors, including Rita Dove, Fran Ross, Ishmael Reed, George Schuyler, Ralph Ellison, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, and Phyllis Wheatley. Within these biographical sketches, Cook and Tatum explore the persistent influence of Greek and Roman literature and ideas upon African-American writings. As they argue, “a basic theme throughout is the changing American reception of Greek and Latin literature, especially as it was inflected by American racial politics and the accessibility of classical learning and literature to African Americans” (1).

As Cook and Tatum demonstrate, African-American authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used classical allusions as displays of erudition. During these earlier centuries, writers were combating a popular belief that ex-slaves had no souls and would not benefit from an elite classical education; in this era, the majority saw a classical education as a demonstration of moral worth, as well as a signifier of elite cultural status (since it denoted the luxury of leisure time). By the mid-twentieth century, African-American authors began to use Greek and Latin literature for a different purpose. Many writers now use classical myths and references to enrich their works and allude to the previous generations of African-American writers who prioritized the classical tradition. Yet these authors also mix classical and African myths, as well as African-American folktale to complicate current “western” literary conventions. Ishmael Reed, for example, plays with earlier literary models and the classical tradition, since “African communal ethic carries straight from the church into jazz, where a solo turn is permitted, and the musician always knows how to end a star turn by folding back into the ensemble from which he emerged” (279). Reed “upsets received notions of artistic excellence, elevating so-called folk or popular culture to an eminence typically reserved for high culture” (279). It is the interplay, then, between popular culture and the classical tradition that is a focus of this book.

Cook and Tatum arrange their work chronologically and carefully trace the importance of Greek and Roman texts in the works of the authors in question. In the end, this study is primarily literary rather than cultural. More emphasis on the big picture, on the political and cultural dimensions of the use of classics, would have been useful. Cook and Tatum do this well in the case of Rita Dove’s “Arrow,” a two-page poem about the late William Arrowsmith’s ill-conceived decision to

use African-American dialect to indicate the slave roles in his translation of the *Peace* by the ancient Greek comic playwright Aristophanes.

Nevertheless, as the title indicates, the authors see the classical tradition as a lingering melody in many African-American writings. According to Cook and Tatum, African-American writers will continue to combine sources in unique ways to create a newer tradition with “their versions of ancient Greece and Rome” (374).

Monica Florence  
College of Wooster

*Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture.* Alice Echols. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010.

In the thirty years since it supposedly died, disco music and its culture have remained fodder for anecdotes about a forgettable decade in US history and popular culture. Seeking to erase that legacy, historian, and former disco DJ Alice Echols effectively examines the development and trajectory of disco in *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*. Echols argues through the well-known images of disco that the genre and its culture reshaped American life by empowering various groups despite political and social backlash in the 1970s. While conceptions about disco remain rooted in films like *Saturday Night Fever* and phrases like “Disco Sucks,” Echols uncovers how the genre remained a core component of popular music beyond the 1970s as performers blended genres to create hybrids and attract wide audiences.

Echols divides her study of disco and popular music in the 1970s into six chapters, with an introduction and epilogue serving to define her approach to the subject as an “interpretive history,” including autobiographical elements from her time as a DJ in grad school (xxvi). A loose chronological organization weaves the chapters nearly seamlessly, and each section describes a different component to disco culture before discussing how it is interwoven with the next.

Echols demonstrates how disco and its performers tuned into the rearrangement of the political and sexual spheres of Americans. Echols

African-American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. It begins with the works of such late 18th-century writers as Phillis Wheatley. Before the high point of slave narratives, African-American literature was dominated by autobiographical spiritual narratives. The genre known as slave narratives in the 19th century were accounts by people who had generally escaped from slavery, about their journeys to freedom and ways they claimed their African American literature, in Cook and Tatum's view, developed through the occasional accidental negligence of those who would suppress what Du Bois called "the souls of black folk" and through the courage of a select few of those folk. Wheatley's master John Wheatley, in the "authenticating preface" to her poems, stressed that she wrote them for her "Amusement" in "her leisure moments".<sup>1</sup> Classical influence shows up in surprising places. Du Bois used arguments about liberal education from Cicero's *Pro Archia Poeta* to convince dirt-poor black families in rural Tennessee to let their children sit in school and read books.<sup>2</sup> By William W. Cook and James Tatum. University of Chicago Press. 464pp, \$29.00 ISBN 9780226789965. African American Writers and the Classical Tradition by William W. Cook and James Tatum. Monica Florence. Loading Preview. Sorry, preview is currently unavailable. You can download the paper by clicking the button above. Download pdf. [Close](#).