

Reviews



Amid the Fall, Dreaming of Eden: Du Bois, King, Malcolm X, and Emancipatory Composition, Bradford T. Stull (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. 144 pages).

Reviewed by Shirley Wilson Logan, University of Maryland

When Audre Lorde observed that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, she was arguing that to work against various forms of oppression, we must not employ the tactics of the oppressors; we must develop new ones. Advancing a theory of emancipatory composition, Bradford Stull suggests in *Amid the Fall* that those who wish to write a discourse of emancipation must use the oppressor's linguistic tools ("America's cultural vocabulary") but that they must use them radically.

Stull chooses the term *composition* over the term *literacy* to highlight intentionality and process. *Composition* resonates, as well, with a sense of agency not heard in *discourse*, the term I find myself using synonymously throughout this review. He borrows the term *emancipatory* from the literacy theories of Henry Giroux and others but expands its meaning to incorporate an explicit, theorized approach to the teaching of emancipatory composition, one that takes into account a range of subjectivities. Acknowledging that racism is one of many forms of oppression in need of compositional liberation, Stull focuses on the "problem" of race, he says, because it emerged out of American slavery, a foundational American institution. His examples suggest that this "race problem" is experienced primarily by African Americans, who are "unique because no other oppressed group has been enslaved in America," implying that it is not a problem for those who are invisibly raced as white. Thus, to demonstrate this "problem," he includes the oft-cited story of Cornel West trying to catch a taxicab in New York City and another in which a white policeman called him "nigger." The remaining examples concern the reluctance of a midwestern university to hire an African

American as chancellor; differences in the topics of conversation between residents of the University of Chicago's Hyde Park community and the residents of Chicago's south side; and racist jokes told in Malcolm X's history class. Granted, these examples are meant to be representative of a larger problem, but I could not help wishing that Stull had provided salient examples of racism's systemic and ongoing damage to ordinary black people rather than focusing on the plights of two middle-class black men, Cornel West and a college chancellor. Or maybe the difficulty is that examples need to be provided in the first place.

The author studies the emancipatory compositions of W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X because he believes them to be "among the most important rhetoricians of the twentieth century" and because all three influenced the civil rights, anti-war, and separatist social movements through their contributions to the discourse on these subjects. It would be difficult to argue with these choices, given the "twentieth century" qualifier; still, it is hard to think of emancipatory compositions with respect to race in America without at least a footnote reference to such nineteenth-century intellectuals as Frederick Douglass on abolition and human rights or Ida B. Wells on anti-lynching and suffrage.

Stull identifies four theo-political tropes in these rhetors' emancipatory compositions: the Fall, the Orient, Africa, and Eden. Alluding on one level to the biblical fall of Adam and Eve, the trope of the Fall also suggests various manifestations of societal evils. To demonstrate the prevalence of this trope in the American context, Stull draws examples from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, poet Mary Fell, popular culture, and finally Kenneth Burke. From Burke, he derives three subcategories—"Babel," "division of property," and "violence"—upon which to develop his analysis. Exploring the theme of Babel in Malcolm X's autobiography and speeches, Stull points to the writer's struggle to increase his own linguistic storehouse and his recognition that difference resides in world views as well as language. Stull suggests that Malcolm X appropriated Standard American English (SAE) in order to overcome the limitations of Babel and speak to dominant culture. For support, he cites Malcolm X's oft-quoted statement, "You have to be able to speak a man's language in order to make him get the point." Limiting his analysis of Du Bois to his writings in the *Crisis*, the organ of the NAACP, Stull finds allusion to Babel in Du Bois' discussion of meanings of the word *negro*, stating that he "appeals to the American rhetorical heritage." Perhaps Stull might have complicated the assump-

tions inherent in a phrase that reifies such a heritage. Who can claim this heritage and who established it? Stull does later observe that Du Bois steps outside of this heritage in order to question it, but the solution seems to be to choose another language: French. King, according to Stull, finds a solution to Babel in the Judeo-Christian tradition and in the belief that this tradition contains within it elements of a universal language reaching a broad audience. Stull observes that all three writers cite economic deprivation and violence as further evidence of fallen America. Given that most African peoples were brought to America as property, it is not surprising that "division of property" emerges as a trope of emancipatory composition. Stull reiterates some of the economic inequities these writers' works address, adding examples from Spike Lee's movie *Do the Right Thing* perhaps to convince contemporary readers that such inequities still exist.

The second emancipatory trope, the Orient, manifests itself in the ways in which Du Bois, King, and Malcolm X remind their audiences of the parallel and frequently intersecting incidents of oppression of African and Asian peoples; all three writers acknowledge a close kinship of oppression among peoples of color worldwide. Stull defends his use of the term *Orient*—with its concurrent images of alien other, wise person, and backward people—as being particularly comprehensive. He asserts that *Orient* can include Egypt as well as Japan and can serve to remind us of how the West reductively composed this vast territory. Having myself been trained out of using the descriptor *Oriental*, it was disconcerting to find it here. Using a phrase such as "Eastern culture(s)" may have been a more effective way to remind readers of this tendency, especially since, at least in the examples provided, the three writers never use *Orient* and seem always to refer to specific geographical locations—Japan, China, India (Calcutta and Bombay), and Vietnam—even if stereotypically. As in his earlier demonstration of a racist America, Stull provides more than enough examples of stereotypical perceptions of the Orient, including examples from the movies *The Next Karate Kid* and *City of Hope*, Isabel Allende's novel *The Infinite Plan*, and E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*. One wonders whether, by offering so much wide-ranging evidence that Eastern culture is misunderstood, the author imagines a fairly naive audience.

Stull seems particularly eager to account for his inclusion of Africa as a trope of emancipatory rhetoric: "They [extremists] might wonder why I, who profess parochially American inclinations, who is a conservative, would include this term, would demand that Americans who

would be literate know Africa and its web of associations. Africa, after all, necessarily leads to a condemnation of the American republic.” Unless the point of emancipatory composition is to make those to whom it appeals feel comfortable, eliciting such a reaction would seem to be all the more reason why Africa should be included. Later in this chapter, Stull makes the strong point that this national vocabulary *is* a site of contention, in opposition to E.D. Hirsch’s assertion that it is rather “an instrument of communication among diverse cultures.” This is a point well worth remembering especially at places in the text where such terms as “American culture” are used unproblematically. In order to illustrate that Africa has dual images in America (monstrous/noble and suffering), the author gives the example of a student enrolled in a writing class who, in spite of poor performance, received the admiration of his peers because he was studying to become a Muslim and wore an African icon around his neck (“publicly composing Africa on his own body”). The author sees this dress and behavior as a way of demonizing America and sanctifying Africa. It may in fact represent the student’s attempt to construct a positive self-image, or, as Stull states, it could merely be an “aestheticized piece of jewelry”—or a bit of both. At any rate, Stull observes that given the student’s gesture, this classroom might have served as a site of discussion of emancipatory composition. Fully elaborated examples from the film *Legends of the Fall* are offered as evidence of the various ways in which America composes a savage Africa. Stull sees Spike Lee’s film *School Daze* as another example of this opposition, with the fraternity men on one side and the “young radicals” who protest South African apartheid on the other. My sense is that the film is more complicated in that the frat brothers probably also oppose apartheid and that the young radicals in African clothing also desire financial success. The movie has less to do with Africa than with ways of surviving in America. Stull also notes that in their compositions of Africa, the three writers seem to appropriate the cause of a suffering Africa only as a means of pleading for suffering African America, rather than out of concern for African liberation. He suggests that Malcolm X tries to offset in his later speeches a prior belief in the “myth” that blacks were the first humans from whom all other peoples were derived. In view of the fact that for many, then and now, this is not considered myth, perhaps the author could have qualified this characterization. Even Du Bois, later quoted as claiming Ethiopia the “All-mother of men,” would himself seem to subscribe to this belief, one the author characterizes as a “radical vision.”

Malcolm X’s speech “After the Bombing” provides ample evidence

of this emancipatory trope. In it, he highlights the ways in which negative images of Africa have affected African Americans, and in another speech he composes an Africa that Americans can model emancipation after. Stull observes that King viewed blacks in America as having greater economic potential and that he concentrated, along with Du Bois, on only portraying Africa’s positive images. Du Bois’ pan-Africanist writings are invoked to remind the reader that Du Bois’ Africa would serve as a center for worldwide negotiations.

Stull’s chapter on Eden is his most astute. Eden, the last of the carefully ordered tropes, marks desire. All three writers describe Eden as a nonexistent ideal. Stull suggests that the socioeconomic privilege of Du Bois and King resulted in a more positive perspective from which to envision Eden than did Malcolm X’s disruptive life experiences. Malcolm X’s Eden took shape as a separatist black Africa of economic and political empowerment. In the pages of the *Crisis*, Du Bois draws on his experience of parts of America to compose his Eden—Oberlin, Ohio, Seattle, and the American Northwest—but he ultimately argues for the “Edenic potential” of Africa. King, however, never viewed Africa as an Edenic alternative. In his “I Have a Dream” speech, for example, he envisions an Eden firmly rooted in American principles but growing beyond its walls and out into an unknown paradise resonating with images of the second coming. In short, Stull outlines these three writers’ differing responses to an oppressive America and in the process captures some of the essential differences in their worldviews, linking those differences to biography.

Stull’s final chapter reiterates the point made in the first—that emancipatory composition must be crafted in the “familiar language of the community only to transform it.” Thus, he positions his argument between the political right of William Bennett and E.D. Hirsch and the political left of Ray Browne, Henry Giroux, Arthur Neal, Barbara Hernstein Smith, and others. According to Stull, the Right would frown upon this discourse because it is a discourse that condemns America as racist and looks to Africa for solutions; the Left would reject the notion of a common set of theo-political tropes as an attempt to standardize a nonexistent common cultural knowledge. Stull counters that we both receive and shape literacy and culture and that even those who reject the notion of cultural literacy allude to common knowledge in their writing. So here at the end, Stull pulls us back into the cultural literacy debate—or maybe we were in the midst of it all the time. The issue here, it seems, is not that we allude to things “out there” in the construct called “culture” but that we recognize those referents, along with their freighted meanings, and know

them for the ways in which they have promoted the goals of oppression. If the Fall, the Orient, Africa, and Eden are the theo-political tropes of emancipatory composition, we all helped to make them so. Now, as Audre Lorde understood, this is a tricky rhetorical move: to appropriate the oppressor's tools—which are also our tools—ever mindful of the work they have done in the past, and apply them to the task of emancipation. For Stull, to accomplish this is to “Be conservative. Be extreme. Be radical,” all at the same time.

Although Stull's purpose was not to write a history of black intellectual thought, perhaps more context could have been included here. To what extent were these texts in conversation with other contemporaneous emancipatory discourses? How might these three authors' writings have been influenced by those of intellectuals like Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, Booker T. Washington, Alexander Crummell, James Baldwin, Paul Robeson, or Ralph Ellison? There is also a troubling absence of discussion about the contributions of women, either as primary or secondary sources. Women like Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, and Toni Morrison have had much to say about the challenges of emancipation. Such coverage may be too much to expect of one volume, but, given the assumed naiveté of the readers (as evidenced by the kinds of examples offered), I worry that many will come away thinking that these were three exceptional rather than representative black thinkers. But perhaps such inclusion could be the challenge of subsequent projects.

Stull has produced valuable scholarship that engages in a close reading of the work these rhetors perform through their compositions. It says to readers, “Pay attention to these writers for what they have to say rather than because they are marked in a certain way.” It is one of the few rhetorical studies of Du Bois' writing in the *Crisis*, all of which were produced after the 1903 publication of his influential *Souls of Black Folk*. It considers less well-known texts of Malcolm X, and it even offers new ways to approach Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech by considering it in relation to some of his other writings. It also represents an important contribution to rhetorical theory in that it has implications for understanding the kinds of rhetorical strategies available as means of persuasion for those responding to a common exigence, even when those rhetors respond under differing circumstances. It implies a genre called “emancipatory composition” with its own set of *topoi*. Further, its tightly constructed organization models a certain kind of rhetorical analysis. Students of composition theory and pedagogy will appreciate its jargon-

free description of the composing strategies of three intellectuals writing from the margins. The examples of the four theo-political tropes drawn from popular culture make the theory more accessible and point to practices that can be imported into the writing classroom. For these and other reasons, I intend to use it as a recommended text next spring in a seminar in applied rhetoric, and I will certainly use it the next time I teach composition theory. It points us in the right direction as we continue our efforts to understand how effective compositions use the master's tools to do their work. Stull and Audre Lorde may, in fact, both be right.

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Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women, Jacqueline Jones Royster (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2000. 352 pages).

Reviewed by Juanita Rodgers Comfort, Old Dominion University

Traces of a Stream is an exceptional starting point for scholars who wish to examine the literate practices of African American women. Not only is it a striking effort to redefine a theory and methodology for engaging rhetoric as a cultural study, it is also a valuable attempt to reclaim the intellectual traditions of a group that historically has not been regarded by mainstream critics as intellectually or socially significant. Jacqueline Royster explains that her book's theme emerged from the discovery that African American women have experienced a long history of literacy and intellectualism, extending back beyond their presence in this country to their ancestral roots in West Africa. Speaking of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that have relegated these women to the margins of society, she writes, “Periodically . . . these women have managed to break out from containments seeking to enclose them. Periodically, their talents have flowed past the barriers, reconstituted themselves, and become noticeable as ‘traces of a stream.’”

She divides her study into three interwoven parts which examine rhetorical, historical, and ideological perspectives on the literate practices of a group that she calls elite nineteenth-century African American women, products of “an era during which the shift in educational opportunity after the Civil War gave rise for the first time to the development of a cadre of well-educated women.” She uses the descriptor “elite” not merely to highlight socioeconomic privilege but also—per-