

EMILY BERNARD &
ERIK GLEIBERMANN

On Racially Conscious Literary Criticism

EDITOR'S NOTE:

JOURNALISM, IT IS OFTEN SAID, is the first draft of history. If then, by extension, book reviews become the first draft of literary history, we need to ask serious questions about what's at stake, what interests are involved, and who does the writing. On Thursday, March 24, at the annual conference of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs in Philadelphia, Erik Gleibermann convened and participated in a discussion with these questions in mind—focusing, in particular, on racially conscious (and racially ignorant) literary reviewing with his two panelists, Emily Bernard and David Mura. Given the urgency of this topic as well as the quality of their discussion, the *Massachusetts Review* asked these three writers to continue their conversation in our pages, an offer they graciously accepted. Below, Gleibermann and Bernard recap and develop some of the salient issues they addressed in Philadelphia, and David Mura reflects on his own experience as both a reviewer and the subject of reviews.

ERIK GLEIBERMANN: I loved what you said in our panel in March about the misreading of Zora Neale Hurston by Richard Wright. I think this situation offers a deep example of questions that come up around criticism and identity. Here you had one of the premier Black male writers of the twentieth century from the South critiquing a Black woman writer from the South, and the real question is whether he was even qualified to do it.

EMILY BERNARD: If we are reviewed cruelly or incorrectly, it can have devastating consequences. A voice like Hurston's was ignored for decades until it was revived. We are too silent, and we use words that are harmful and do rhetorical violence, particularly Black people to

each other. As a parent, I want my children to be safe. But I also want them to use words as killing tools at times, as Hurston says. We just have to aim them correctly. Sometimes all we have is a sharp rejoinder.

EG: I'm thinking about George Floyd. What are we doing as a country? It's pretty depressing. Today I was reading a *New York Times* article about the street art that has faded and been taken away, in Minneapolis and other places.

What I'm interested in is doing the right work in a sustainable way, not mere gestures. If liberal whites, or whoever, are motivated simply by their passion, in a way that's dangerous, because the passion is going to fade. That's part of how privilege works: the fire is not under our ass. If my work is going to be sustainable, it has to come from a deeper place. That's my worldview. For me, a commitment to looking at race literary criticism means doing racial justice work, just like the political work on police shootings, or on the racism that drives shootings like Buffalo and other places. It's not simply a question of choosing a particular author who moves me; it's about my relationship to myself as a critic. It's a definition of my literary worldview. I don't even want to be pitting world literature versus American literature or literature by people of color or the African American literary tradition. Or yes, actually, I do want to be thinking about that tradition, but not as some separate realm that I am now going to enter. African American literature is my literature. Except that my position in relation to it is different than yours. But if I don't see it as in some way mine, it's going to be difficult to sustain that work over my lifetime.

EB: I remember something James Baldwin said. He said he refused to surrender to cynicism because that meant you considered life an academic affair. I love that. And I believe that. Sometimes our passions and our hope are willed into being because you can't get mired in cynicism. I don't want to have a scientific view of life. That leads us into dangerous areas. In my life, passion has been instrumental in guiding me.

When I first encountered *Nigger Heaven*, the title of Carl Van Vechten's infamous 1926 novel, I was horrified, disgusted, and intrigued. When the word was first spoken by my parents, it was spoken only with the thunderous weight of history. So, how dare he use it in a title? But the feeling of being intrigued also stayed with me and kept me interested in Van Vechten's life for many years. The real question is

what are we willing to risk, and what is the truth that we are willing to die for? And I think it must begin with passion.

EG: What keeps you going as an academic writing about racial issues? I say “as an academic” because we’re having a dialogue where our differences as writers are highlighted. As a writer of book reviews, for me it’s fun when a book is coming out: I get a galley, I immerse myself in it, I write about it, and then it’s done. I get to see it up online a few weeks later. Then I move on to the next book. As a journalist, I have this luxury.

I think of academics as being in it for the long haul on projects. People aren’t necessarily going to read your work right away. What gives you the fire, the energy, to keep you going writing about racial issues that are really painful, particularly when there doesn’t seem to be a lot of hope?

EB: I don’t see myself as purely an academic. Recently I published an essay in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* on Hurston and the problems she had with Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Alain Locke. My ambition is always to make my work useful for a wider audience. I think that old academic model—where success is intimately related to writing things that are inaccessible to large audiences—is dying out. But creative writing is also my native tongue. Regardless of the audience and the vocabulary, I am motivated by trying to create connections between people, by generating compassionate points of view when it comes to complex and uncomfortable topics.

EB: I think it’s a social justice question. Because if we are trying to move people emotionally and politically in our writing, why, as an academic, would I pursue a rarefied audience? If I am being selective about my audience, it’s not a democratic approach.

EG: I do agree with you about breaking down the false distinction between journalism and academic writing, on both sides. Today there’s more room for me as a journalist to use footnotes and for academics to write in first-person and with passion, as you do. You’re a great model for that. Not long after *Black Is the Body* came out, I was in the San Francisco airport and I saw it on the front table in the bookstore. I was excited, because it meant you were reaching a mass audience. I

want all of us who are writing about race and social justice to reach for wide audiences.

EB: I don't review books I don't like anymore. Though I do respect other reviewers who take a different approach. For instance, when Myriam Gurba wrote her review of *American Dirt*, we loved it because she told the truth. But it doesn't make me happy to write a negative review. I did write a review of Thomas Chatterton Williams's autobiography for *Harper's*. He knows how to wield a pen, and I reviewed it because he is a beautiful writer. But I disagreed with a lot of his positions on a lot of issues.

EG: How did differences between the two of you shape your approach? You're a Black woman and an American (and Thomas Chatterton Williams now lives in Paris), but also generationally, since he's quite a bit younger? Did you think about those sorts of differences as you wrote the review and also, did you think about them because the venue was *Harper's*?

EB: *Harper's* gave me some space, a few thousand words. I came to it as someone who has studied the African American literary tradition, and I saw how his book worked within that tradition. Even his grand rejection of Blackness is very Black. But I wouldn't want to review someone negatively—not a writer I respect—if I think it would hurt them or their career in some way. As I said in the review, I can't wait to see what Chatterton Williams writes next.

EG: I go through a personal struggle at times. I ask, *Should I even be reviewing this?* My latest project, which I'll be writing for *Oprah Daily*, has to do with fiction by Afro-Dominican women. This essay is about race, gender, language, and nationality. So, I have to ask myself, since I don't find myself in direct relation to these identities (though I am a Spanish speaker), what does it mean for me to do this piece and to do it in a venue where the predominant audience is women?

I should probably explain: it's not like I just had an idea to write about Afro-Dominican women. A new book was coming out called *Neruda on the Park*; it was by a writer I'd never heard of, because it's her first book, Cleyvis Natera. Naima Coster wrote *Halsey Street* in 2018. Both stories take place in New York neighborhoods: *Halsey Street* is in

Bed-Stuy, and *Neruda on the Park* is basically in Washington Heights. I got the idea that there was an important story there, and I wanted to talk to the authors about the relationship of their identity as Dominican women to the neighborhoods they grew up in—and also to the Dominican Republic—which is present in the books, but more remote.

So this is a shared project. They'll talk about the things they want to talk about. I love being part of an ongoing process of reflection, trying to do pieces that honor the subject. As you said, I don't want to write a negative review. I wouldn't have done this if I didn't feel good about these writers. It's celebrating them, but it's also pushing them to think about what they are doing in a broader way.

I'm grateful that publications like *Oprah Daily* are saying they want to hear my voice, as part of a chorus of voices. If white people are not writing about these kinds of books, if publications were saying we need only people of color to be writing about people of color, that would impoverish the conversation, because ours is an interracial society. I say interracial, not multiracial, because we are in a relationship, whether that relationship is violent, as we see right now after the Buffalo massacre, or constructive.

EB: I'm reminded of Joel, Amy, and Arthur Spingarn who were Jews and played an integral role in the cultural revolution of the Harlem Renaissance. I think Arthur was a lawyer for the NAACP. But when it was important for white people to step back, he stepped back. He was there, present, and he did not step back complaining, or sheepishly inching away. He understood the changing time, and he knew that it wasn't about him, but also that he still had something to contribute. Sometimes white people need to get off the stage. You don't have wait to be told. You can read the room. And it doesn't have to be a verdict on who you are, asking did you overstep? To me, he's a great model.

EG: Yes, I need to think about stepping back. I want my voice in writing reviews of writers of color, but do I need my voice to be front and center? I'm not an editor making these calls. But I also need to be conscious that on certain platforms, writers of color are not getting the opportunity they deserve. Maybe I should not be the frontline reviewer if I'm writing for *The Times*, *The Post* or NPR. But I also don't think I should hold back, because if they give me the review, I am going to take it.

EB: Why do you have to make a rule? Why do you have to step back now? You're allowed to be ambitious. You're allowed to pursue the thing that's calling you.

EG: I just need to be conscious of the power around literary criticism. I can't walk around blind, saying I'm going to put my name in for this review or that one. Someone who I didn't feel right reviewing was Akwaeke Emezi, in part because they have really emphasized their audience as being Black and queer. It wasn't some logical thing. I just felt it was a place to step back.

EB: I would step back from that too. But I'm sure we'll sometimes get it wrong too. I'm doing a short, meditative biography of Audre Lorde. It has evolved from an essay I did in *The New Republic*. But I had a moment where I thought, Is there a queer Black woman writer who should take this space? And then I thought, But I love Audre Lorde too. You have to let the reader make up their mind. Just put it out there.

EG: As a Black woman writing a review of another Black woman, if you're writing for a highly visible platform, do you feel pressure, especially if she is someone coming up and not established? I think this is an issue that is not being spoken about as much as it could be. If I have issues with the text, I don't write those reviews.

EB: I love taking book reviews and dedicating time to support under-sung writers. There are brilliant essayists out there who not enough people are talking about. Some of them have books with tiny little presses, but they're breaking the world open.