

## Blackness and Biopower: Unveiling the Tactics of Biopolitics in Select Afro-American Poetry

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**Abstract:** The paper entitled “Blackness and Biopower: Unveiling the Tactics of Biopolitics in Select Afro-American Poetry” is an attempt to explore the ideological underpinnings of biopower acting on the black body with reference to selected poems of Afro-American literature. The Afro-Americans had an anxiety to embody or represent authentic black identity. History provides ample testimony to prove the regulation of the Afro-Americans through an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of their bodies and exerting control over them. This praxis of biopower is a tactics to politicise the black body. Foucault talks about the exercise of sovereign power over the biological life of man and the creation of a biopolitical body. Thus, the exercise of power transforms a territorial state into a state of population. According to Agamben, it is the basic separation of “bare life”; the form of existence reduced to biological functions. Afro-American poetry is an artefact of slavery and racial discrimination and the black poets are not free to choose any theme as long as their experience in the United States compels them to pay tribute to the power of oppression. Therefore the selected poems offer the key which exposes the ways by which power penetrates the subjects’ very bodies and forms of life. The paper, thus, tries to unveil the tactics of biopolitics that subjugated the Afro-Americans in the vortex of blackness.

**Key Words:** blackness, biopolitics, Afro-Americans, identity, body, language...

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The concept of body is one of the most important theoretical concerns in the contemporary academia. It is being seen and analyzed at different levels and new meanings are imprinted on it. It is indeed the central agency of a living being where one exercises various means to strive forward. Colour is indeed a poignant marker of one’s identity. Thus the colour of one’s body also becomes a physical trait that marks his/her identity. In that way, blackness has also become a marker of identity. It is a racial character. Black identity, for Fanon, is marked by self-division. “The white man is sealed in his whiteness; the black man

in his blackness” (Fanon 9). A black man’s identity is defined in negative terms by those in a position of power. He is forced to see himself not as a human subject, but an object, a peculiarity at the mercy of a group that identifies him as inferior, less than fully human, placed at the mercy of their definitions and representations. Frantz Fanon argues that what a black man wants to be is to become a white man. This pathological desire is forced on the black people by white colonisation and European culture. Colonialism, slavery and the other means by which the West dominates the rest of the world have given rise to social practices, discourses and ideologies that attempt to justify oppression while establishing global standards of value. “White men consider themselves superior to black men”(10). History proves that those who were in power tried to subjugate the black people and imposed racial inferiority over them. Thus there happened an attempt to politicise the body.

Biopower (*biopouvoir* in French), a term coined by French social theorist Michel Foucault, relates to the practice of modern nation states and their regulation of their subjects through “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations”(Foucault 140). For Foucault, biopower is a means of power for constituting people as a large group. It refers to the control of human bodies through state discipline. Initially imposed from outside whose source remains elusive to further investigation both by the social sciences and the humanities, modern power, according to Foucault's analysis, becomes encoded into social practices as well as human behaviour as the human subject gradually acquiesces to subtle regulations and expectations for the social order. Foucault elaborates further in his lecture courses on biopower entitled *Security, Territory, Population* delivered at the Collège de France between January and April 1978:

By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general

strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower. (1)

Through biopolitics, biopower is exercised to bring about a generalized disciplinary society and thereby imposing regulatory controls over the subjects. The body is conceived of as an informational network rather than a physical substrate or an anatomical machine. It was necessary to supplement the analysis of biopolitical mechanisms with an examination of the modes of subjectivation.

Giorgio Agamben in his work *Homo Sacer* presents the figure of a Roman outlaw who is included the juridical order through exclusion. Agamben also draws the distinction between voice and language by arguing that man's acquisition of language is a result of letting his voice proper to his bare life been taken away. "There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 8). In investigating the current relation between human life and state power, Agamben finds many of the answers in the political writings of Aristotle and the legal theory of Rome. Greeks have got two names for life. For them, biological life is called "zoe" and political life is called "bios". According to Agamben, the simple bare life can be transformed to qualified life through politics. Aristotle says that man is an animal born to life, but existing with regard to the good life which can be achieved through politics. The bare life can be transformed into good life through political participation. Thus politics becomes the space where one translates the bare life to good life. So we can understand that the state plays a pivotal role in providing its people the ways by which they can achieve a qualified life. Foucault in his *History of Sexuality- Volume I*, discusses the process by which natural life is included in the mechanisms and calculations of state power. Foucault points out the concrete ways by which

power penetrates subjects' very bodies and forms of life. He shows the passage of state from a territorial state to a state of population. Thus there comes into being the exercise of sovereign power over the biological life of man. Therefore, sovereignty determines what and who to be incorporated into the political body and thus politics is turned into bio-politics. Hannah Arendt also analysed the process that brings man gradually to occupy the very centre of the political scene of modernity. For her, the decadence of political realm in modern society is because of the primacy given to natural life over political life. But if the politics itself is vitiated, the result will be concentration camps and marginalization. This kind of a marginalization through politics can be seen in the life of the Afro-Americans. The production of a biopolitical body, that is the change from "zoe" to "bios" is an original activity of the sovereign power. Thus life is protected and an authority is established. The subjugation of the Afro-Americans and the racial inferiority inflicted up on their black bodies is an account of such a disciplinary control achieved by biopower. It created a group of docile beings through a series of hegemonic techniques.

The Afro-Americans had an anxiety to embody or represent authentic black identity. The Afro-American poets therefore faced the danger of only performing blackness, rather than exploring the infinite permutations of their lived experience and creative imagination as black people. There was also the danger of becoming isolated from varieties of experience outside our own particular frame of reference. Richard Wright in his 1957 essay, "The Literature of the Negro in the United States" notes that the blackness of black poetry fluctuates with the harshness or indifference with which black people have been treated politically, legally, and socially within their history in the United States. For him, "Negro literature" is an artefact of slavery and racial discrimination and that black poets are not free to choose any theme as long as their experience in the United States compels them to pay tribute to the power of oppression. Like the white worker, the Negro is a victim of the

capitalist structure of our society. This situation reveals to him his close ties quite apart from the colour of his skin with certain classes of Europeans who, like him, are oppressed; it incites him to imagine a privilege-less society in which skin pigmentation will be considered a mere fluke. The circumstances under which this oppression exists may vary according to historical and geographical conditions. The Western culture has integrated the techniques of subjective individualisation with the procedures of objective totalization. Thus a political double mind is developed through biopolitics.

Afro-American poetry attempts to contest the European notion of the 'other' imposed on the black people as a result of colonialism. For the Afro-Americans, poetry became a tool to assert their black identity and their black consciousness. Their poetry exposed the vitiated power politics of the whites and the imposed racial inferiority. The assertion of somewhat like a totalitarian power that tried to tie up the blacks to the shackles of bare life. The images, symbols and other figurative tools employed by the Afro-American poets show a marked difference from the European writers and these figurations in a way expose how the black identity has been deteriorated by Europeans through their writings. Afro-American poetry is the aesthetic chronicle of a race and a struggle to find a meaning in their existence is evident in Afro-American poetry from the eighteenth century itself. They have built an aesthetic tradition that affirms them, using a language and literary models adapted to meet their cultural purposes.

W. E. B. DuBois is a significant figure among the Afro-American poets who was the leader of the Niagara Movement and a spokesman for the dark people of Africa and the world. He was the first to celebrate the beauty of blackness in his "The Song of the Smoke". The poem portrays that the Smoke King who is also much more than just one person as the poem refers to the sorrows of many different people. In general, the Smoke King represents

the sorrows of the Afro-American community and its struggle to gain civil rights. DuBois celebrates blackness and further writes:

I am cursing ruddy morn,  
I am hearsing hearts unborn:  
Souls unto me are as stars in a night,  
I whiten my black men—I blacken my white!  
What's the hue of a hide to a man in his might? (36-40)

The choice of the symbol of smoke by DuBois for the Negro is significant because it carves a large number of images; it demolishes white. It is uncontrollable and amorphous. The title refers simply to Afro-Americans and is well symbolized by the Smoke King. Smoke itself is black and it represents the Afro-American population. The Smoke King and black refer to the African American community as a whole. References to suffering such as “Shedding the blood of bloodless crimes” embody the many difficulties African Americans faced throughout American history. Furthermore, lines such as “I am whirling home to God” have a slightly more literal meaning as they depict how African Americans kept faith of improving their status in society by staying close to god. Lastly, the reference to God at night and Hell in white show how African Americans only felt at piece and or joyful when they were with each other, but horrible whenever they were forced to do things for Caucasian men. The role played by power in asserting inferiority and exerting control is evident from the lines of the poem.

Phillis Wheatley was the first black poet in America to publish a book. The four heroic couplets that constitute Wheatley's “On Being Brought from Africa to America” delve deeply into the psyche of the young African American slave narrator who attempts to come to terms with her being torn from her native African soil and being forcibly relocated to colonial America. In the first quatrain, the speaker's “mercy” was the underlying factor that took her

from her home, her “Pagan land,” and brought her to a world centred upon redemption. The result of her resettlement, the narrator says, was her becoming aware “That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too.” This resulting understanding, no doubt, echoes the rationalization that many who brought slaves to the new world used to vindicate their actions.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”  
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train. (5-8)

The concluding quatrain presents Wheatley’s meditation to a new realm, in which the narrator places herself and her race into context with the views of those who eventually enslaved them. The speaker says that some people scorn the African races, saying that their dark skin is a mark of inferiority or perhaps even evil; the ‘diabolic die’ refers to a taint by the devil. The poem concludes with a strong command for Christians to remember that Blacks can also become spiritual and educated and that they are just as worthy of a place in society and in heaven as whites. The poem acts as a mouthpiece that testifies the creation of a state of population by the assertion of power.

Countee Cullen is an Afro-American poet of genteel tradition. In his famous poem “From the Black Tower”, the poet, through a series of symbols expresses determination to resist exploitation. He asserts the need to resist social inferiority. The poet projects a brilliant colour splash of black, white and red on the canvas with symbols like buds, light, and darkness and bleeding heart’s agonizing wounds. The following lines of the sestet illustrate the images,

And there are buds that cannot bloom at all  
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;  
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,

And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds. (11-14)

These images indicate the loss of human values, the “abject and mute” victim of an unjust social system. Perhaps this destruction of the human spirit is the “more subtle brute” of which the poet speaks. It is in the sestet that the poem itself blossoms into full-blown dark beauty. With the skill of an impressionistic painter, the poet juxtaposes black and white into a canvas of brilliant contrasts. The night is pictured as being beautiful because it is dark, a welcome relief from the stark whiteness of the stars. The final couplet combines the beautiful and sheltering concept of darkness with the basic symbol of futile planting. The poet now splashes a shocking red onto his black and white canvas. The dark becomes not only a shelter for developing buds, but also a place to conceal gaping wounds. Thus Cullen’s poem becomes an assertion of Negritude and emphasises that the black identity is indeed a shelter for the developing black people and a means of concealing their wounds.

“To the White Friends” is a good example of poetry about the tension and trouble in relationships by Claude McKay. In the poem Claude McKay discusses relationship that exists between the whites and blacks in America. He says that the whites are treating his people very poorly, and that he is just as capable of doing the terrible things that they do to him. He will not do these malicious things, however, because God has shown him a light, giving him hope for a new, better life. He writes:

Be not deceived, for every deed you do

I could match--out-match: am I not Africa's son,

Black of that black land where black deeds are done? (5-7)

The poet further says that Almighty, which can be surmised as God, told the narrator’s soul that he should take a stand in this ignorant world. McKay is trying to say that God placed the Black people on this earth in order to prove the worth of their existence. They are meant to be more worthy than the white people and they just needed to shine. Instead of being in the



shadow, they need to take leadership and overcome the White people. Thus the poem asserts the worth of the Black people and the superiority of insight given to them by the celestial power. This poem also shows that it is those who in power determine what and who to be incorporated in the political body. The Whites included the blacks in a form of inferior exclusion.

Langston Hughes, indisputably the poet laureate of Harlem, was the most experimental and versatile poet of the New Negro Renaissance. His poem "As I Grew Older" contains a narrative about struggle and empowerment. The speaker recalls a dream he had long ago and had nearly forgotten, but now he can see it ahead of him once more. This is fairly straightforward symbolism where the speaker represents all African Americans who had to relinquish their dreams due to the pervasive discrimination and persecution in early 20th century American society. A wall of injustice rises up to gradually block the sunlight. It does not mean that the dream ceases to exist and the speaker simply cannot see it anymore. He further writes:

My hands!  
My dark hands!  
Break through the wall!  
Find my dream!  
Help me to shatter this darkness,  
To smash this night,  
To break this shadow  
Into a thousand lights of sun,  
Into a thousand whirling dreams  
Of sun! (20-29)

Hughes deliberately uses the symbol of a shadow as a way to actualize his character's blackness, because the speaker's race is the barrier that is keeping him from achieving his dream. As the poem progresses, though, the speaker's listlessness and apathy turns into determination and vigour, creating a shift of energy. Hughes uses this violent language to show that the speaker is suddenly empowered and feels no equivocation or anxiety about what he must do. The concluding image is fantastic, as the speaker imagines the shadow breaking apart into thousands of fragments of sunlight. The largely affirmative tone of the second half of the poem seems to suggest that even if he fails, there is spiritual value in possessing the self-realization to grasp for a dream that might be out of reach. The angst for liberation inherent in the poem showcases the politicization of the black body in an aura of subjugation. Thus biopolitics here, becomes an instrument of marginalization.

The poems taken for the study clearly indicate the tactics played by biopolitics in marginalising and subjugating a race in history. Those who had power used the hegemonic weapon to wound the skin of the oppressed. It was indeed similar to totalitarianism where the state assumes and integrates the natural life of individuals into its very centre by the process of totalization. Thus we can say that the history of Afro-Americans is a key that unlocks the vicious game played by biopolitics in sidelining a race

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