

Beyond the analysis of literature in the formation of ethnic identity, however, is Martin's carefully crafted biographical information concerning the development of her course at the high school level in Australia. It is a lesson from which we can all learn in developing ethnic content in our own classes and courses. Indeed, Martin shows what obstacles stand before us while demonstrating that the roadblocks are surmountable.

Scholarly endeavors such as Martin's must be used as tools for analyzing and bringing forth the vital reservoir of spiritual and intellectual power of racial minorities throughout the recently colonized world, for the significance of self-esteem in the formation of a positive ethnic identity is paramount. Anything less than the full development of ethnic artists in academic circles can only serve as a dilution and camouflage for that which we call ethnic studies.

James H. Williams
California State Polytechnic University

**Literature of Oppression:
A Critique of "African and Pacific Literature"
Mary Sisney**

Kristine Martin states that "the literature which has developed over the past thirty years in Africa and over the past ten in the Pacific mirrors their shared experiences and outlook." Black Americans have also lived in a society controlled by whites. They have also been portrayed as uncivilized, culturally deprived, less-than-second-class citizens. And black Americans have also felt "bitterness, frustration, and longing." It is not surprising, therefore, that black American literature has many of the characteristics Martin found in African and South Pacific literature.

Like the writers of the newly independent African and Pacific nations, such post-Civil War black writers as Charles Chesnutt, Paul Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson were intent upon redefining black identity. Their major characters were doctors, teachers, and talented musicians. This emphasis upon the black middle class — "the talented tenth" — was an attempt to demonstrate that former slaves could succeed in a white world. Perhaps more important, it was also an attempt to erase, or at least to neutralize, the Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page images of shiftless black buffoons, dominant in late nineteenth century American literature.¹

After World War I and the “Great Migration,” black American writers saw some of the same changes in values that Chinua Achebe describes in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*. Blacks moved from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial one. The changes that occurred as a result of this migration are described in such works as Rudolph Fisher’s “Miss Cynthia,” a story about a Southern black woman who goes to Harlem and discovers that her grandson has left the church for the theater. Miss Cynthia’s grandson drives a fancy car and wears expensive suits, but many of the blacks who went North found the same poverty and oppression that they had left “down home.”

The “literature of oppression” is a term coined by William Burke to describe black fiction. The term is also applicable to the works discussed by Martin. As Burke explains:

It may be, in fact, that the most serious aspect of our racial crisis is the denial of cultural identity to black people . . . Indeed, the comments from the creators and conservers of black culture—her artists and critics—indicate that a primary concern for them is the establishment of a visible culture, including the representation of the experience of black people in this country and its meaning to them in fictional and factual terms.²

These concerns are similar to those of the African and Pacific writers who, in reaction to “a threat upon a people’s existence,” have attempted to “provide a focus, a means by which people can identify themselves as members of a group.” These are the inevitable concerns of any “literature of oppression,” wherever it is written.

NOTES

¹See Robert Bone’s *Down Home* (New York: Putnam, 1975, 13-18) for a discussion of “the plantation school” of writers. Interestingly, Herman Melville’s portrayal of black slaves in *Benito Cereno* is similar to his treatment of the Marquesans in *Typee*.

²William Burke. *Modern Black Fiction and the Literature of Oppression*. Ph.D. Dissertation. (Eugene: University of Oregon, 1971) 3.