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Carole Anne Taylor. *The Tragedy and Comedy of Resistance: Reading Modernity Through Black Women's Fiction*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. 280p.

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Carole Ann Taylor, Professor and Chair of English at Bates College, embarks on an ambitious and heartfelt project in *The Tragedy and Comedy of Resistance*, moving marginalized Black Women's writing into the center of critical theory and then using its precepts to reconstitute modernist literary theory. In a footnote, Taylor reveals that this project represents a kind of personal quest, one that grew out of her concern for her own positioning as a white female critic in relation to texts authored by Black Women. As she records, when she realized that she had "interpretative responses" to texts by black women writers that felt "validated by textual evidence" but did not "negotiate either intercultural debate about what is hurtful or not to black women as readers or about what aspects of texts particularly positioned readers foreground," she was impelled to discover how Euro-American critical theory produced this kind of dislocation from real experience. What is significant about this work is that it is both Taylor's sense as a reader and her experience as a respected academic inform this work, one that explores the interplay of genre, critical theory, and cultural practice.

The wide scope of her project is illustrated by her prologue. In it, she sweeps through most categories of critical theory about genre. Moving from traditional theorists of comedy and tragedy (Northrup Fye), to conservatives (Alisdair MacIntyre) who locate comedy in the existing social order, to liberals (Michelle Gellrich) who locate their theories in the individual, to transgressives (Mikhail Bakhtin) who acknowledge worldly power but do not challenge it, Taylor demonstrates that these theories cannot encompass an ideology of resistance and struggle. The source of Euro-American theory's failure, according to Taylor, is that theory generally takes a liberal position, which believes that "being an enlightened spectator" is enough. Ultimately, the postmodern critic's position is "I do not want to be hated, hurt or killed. If I only get it right, I can show compassion at least. I can avoid being hated, hurt or killed, and still keep what I have" (210). This fact, Taylor contends, defines a theoretical paradox since resistance to and struggle against ideology is, by necessity, central to most Black Women's writing.

In contradistinction to critical academic theory, then, Taylor posits that a theory of resistance and a balanced wholeness may be found in the writings of Black Women authors. Tracing her argument through the works of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor, Taylor finds a theory of storytelling that embeds critical,

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relational, and social principles. The writings of Black Women share an understanding of the intertwined social process of tragedy and comedy such that the tragedy requires a “witnessing” of the great wrongs implicit in all social interaction while the comedy relief of shared laughter ultimately coexists with the deep understanding of that tragedy.

Having described the marginalized, Taylor demonstrates how the constructions of critical theory further exclude the marginalized through an analysis of several important works in the postmodern canon that internalize “Modernism’s apartheid.” In the case of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom*, both the post-structural and historical poles of modern critical theory (when read through the literary lens of Morrison’s *Beloved*) avoid the actual tragedy of the novel: “the inability to act upon a felt humanity.” Similarly, her reading of Gertrude Stein’s “Melanctha” draws together both the critic’s inability to interrogate the invisibility of the work’s racial discourse and Stein’s own literary subjectivity. Taylor makes an interesting choice by closing this section with a discussion of the anthropological works of Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*. In this final chapter, Taylor balances Hurston’s sensitivity about her own racial and ethnographic positioning with the complexities of Hurston’s conflicted otherness, a situation that causes what Taylor calls a “modal skid.”

Taylor’s epilogue summarizes her cogent argument and evaluates the critical possibilities of change. For Taylor, without expanding the borders of the canon, we not only lose sight of valuable work but we also create the permanent existence of an other which can always be seen and always, like Hamlet’s ghost, shows what is beneath: we do not gain by ignoring what is clearly before us. ✱