Foreword

WERNER SOLLORS

Jeffrey B. Ferguson, remembered as an Amherst College professor of mythical charisma and as the smart editor of the sourcebook *The Harlem Renaissance: A Brief History with Documents*, is best known for his long-standing engagement with the iconoclastic satirist George Schuyler. *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* was a magnificent, meticulously researched, and paradigm-changing book, putting Schuyler at the very center of American and African American Studies. It forced the reader to take a fresh look at Schuyler's essays, his *Pittsburgh Courier* columns, and his novel *Black No More* and to question the lens of "race melodrama" through which so much American cultural history and storytelling has been filtered. Ferguson was attracted to Schuyler's "uncompromising skepticism" and to his sharp recognition of the "ludicrous and outlandish in American race relations." As Ferguson put it, in all the books he had read, "nothing came close to the irreverent force of Schuyler's satire." That irreverent force revealed the absurdities of the Jim Crow regime, under which "blacks felt themselves vulnerable to the desires of even the sickest whites." But Schuyler's satire, Ferguson argued convincingly

and cogently, also reveals the absurdities of much thinking that has gone into “solving” the “race problem.”

What would thinking about “race relations” be like if Schuyler’s relentless questioning were heeded? How could the “bifurcating effects” of racial melodrama, the common, popular, and well-intentioned forms of sentimental heroization and victimization, be avoided in literary and in scholarly narratives?

Contemplation of such questions led Ferguson to the present more general new project, *Race and the Rhetoric of Resistance*, a critical examination of the fixtures of popular and scholarly discourse about blacks. Black Studies started out with a goal of correcting the clichés and omissions of American Studies. Ferguson takes this process one step further in also examining the often unquestioned clichés and commonplaces in African American Studies. The manifesto-like opening essay stakes his claims: “The broad and diverse discourse on African Americans has yielded many books, but only two basic stories: those of suffering and resistance. Whether through exaggeration, understatement, denial, or intricate combination, all others derive from these two.” The lens immediately widens onto broader questions that should undergird any notions of suffering and resistance: “Can meaning or wisdom come from suffering? Or is suffering the permanent enemy of the free life? Does suffering contain its own transcendence? Or can it be justified only as means to the attainment of tangible worldly goods such as money, status, or political power?”

In “Freedom, Equality, Race,” he questions the progressive mode in the many “from / to” narratives that abound in scholarship and commentary: from slavery to freedom and equality, from racial thinking to the expectation that racial distinctions would soon disappear. He notes the paradox that

the Enlightenment “handed down most of the reasons to believe in race along with the justifications for despising and resisting it.” And he endorses Nathan Huggins’s assessment that what is needed, yet difficult to arrive at, is a “new narrative.” In “A Blue Note on Black American Literary Criticism and the Blues” he takes a critical and deeply ironic view of the blues when understood as a cultural “matrix” for black literature and a site for resistance. Drawing on Albert Murray and Kenneth Burke, he instead finds that “the blues does not so much complain about the events of this life as it reports them, but in an artistic form that privileges improvisation and the potential for creative endeavor to reshape emotion.” And “for the sake of sheer fun” he quotes lavishly and interprets blues texts like Lucille Bogan’s “Shave ‘Em Dry” that would seem to challenge conventional wisdom. In his lecture “Of Mr. W.E.B. Du Bois and Others” he distills various features of Du Bois’s lasting legacy only to note, in contrasting Du Bois and Mahatma Gandhi, that Du Bois “needed to conceive of the slave, and of his segregated and much abused descendants, ultimately as contenders for power in order to imagine them achieving a place of honor and dignity in American society.” What Ferguson found missing in this conception was “the sincere admission of vulnerability” that “stands behind the deepest human strength.”

Ferguson goes deeper than any other literary or cultural critic in teasing out the ironies that have surrounded notions of race and racial cultural production in America. One further irony is that in order to highlight some of the past and current conundrums and blind spots of thinking about race, he draws on classic American Studies concepts and texts, including Ralph Waldo Emerson’s distinction between the party of memory and the party of hope, Alexis de Tocqueville’s notions of American democracy and the races of

America, Lionel Trilling's distinction between sincerity and authenticity, and Edmund Morgan's demonstration of the interconnectedness of American slavery and American freedom. Furthermore, Ferguson offers a path toward a philosophical understanding of the race complex and the human condition by drawing on Rousseau and Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt and Tzvetan Todorov, as well as on Max Scheler's notion of resentment. Thus he can detect in major works in the African American tradition what he calls the "broad boulevard of Western thought."

Elegant and often aphoristic, these memorable essays amount to a serious, principled critique of common popular and scholarly notions of racial difference. They also convey their author's sense of humor, warmth, and grace. He completed them between 2008 and 2013, but they resonate at a later time when race has once again taken on a crucial urgency in American life. Ferguson meant to complement these chapters by additional work, of which "Notes on Escape" is an unfinished example. He hoped to address other "major manifestations of resistant thought and activity in African American history," including violence, transgression, and subversion. And he planned an epilogue that would "reach for a deeper synthesis of the book's main themes, involving tragedy, vulnerability, and freedom." Sketching the broader vision he had for the whole undertaking, he wrote compellingly: "More than strength, human beings have common cause in our weakness, susceptibility, and mutual dependence. Ethics begins with the condition of the slave, the prisoner, the peon, and with the one who suffers for no reason. The only resistance worth supporting is the one that reduces the salience of force in our lives, not the one that celebrates it." His long illness, which he valiantly fought and to which he succumbed on March 11, 2018, prevented him from

completing this project, yet as George Hutchinson shows in the afterword to this volume, “the essays collected here form a coherent argument.” Jeffrey B. Ferguson’s *Race and the Rhetoric of Resistance* is the result of critical thinking by a truly free mind, and it is hoped that this book will inspire others to engage with and to extend the work that he started.

Race and the Rhetoric of Resistance