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Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names

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The process of naming is a transformative act that inherently imparts meaning, whether it be through the conscious use of a familiar historical or allegorical appellation or through the creation of a new word. Critics have often noted the importance of names and naming in African-American literature, but Debra Walker King's Deep Talk is the first methodological discussion of the process. In this original study, the author seeks out the discourses existing beneath the primary narratives of these literary texts by interpreting the significance of certain character names.

King explores what she calls the "metatext" of names, an interpretive realm where these chosen words offer up symbolic, metaphoric, and other meanings, often simultaneously. Literary names can thus revise and comment upon the surface action of a novel by giving voice to unspoken themes and events, a process known as "deep talk." Drawing on the work of Kristeva, Bakhtin, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., the author explains the interpretive guidelines necessary to read "deep talk" in African-American texts. She applies these guidelines to texts by Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Alice Walker, among others.

Perhaps most important, King reveals how the process of naming became a form of empowerment for African Americans, a way of both reclaiming black identity and resisting conventions of white society. Black men and women whose ancestors were stripped of their identity through the Middle Passage and during slavery embraced the incantatory power of names and have long used this power to defend themselves from the effects of racism, sexism, and classism.

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