

Afro-Caribbean Women's Literature and Early American Literature. Edited by Latoya Jefferson-James. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022. Pp. 236. \$100.00 hardcover. \$45.00 e-book.)

Editor Latoya Jefferson-James and the contributors to this volume undertake the vital task of reexamining Black women's writings from a diasporic perspective. Positioning eighteenth-century Black poet Phillis Wheatley as a literary progenitor, the volume illuminates a transnational and transhistorical community of Black women writers that emerges over two and a half centuries. The aim of the volume, as Jefferson-James explains in the volume's preface and introduction, is to illuminate an intellectual and political tradition that connects Black women writing in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century United States to Black women writers in the Caribbean. These writers, Jefferson-James argues, "considered their writing as work in service of general racial uplift and as the creation of what they called a 'nobler womanhood' for Black women specifically" (x). That is to say, the nature of Black women's writing was communal and liberatory. In this way, the volume harkens back to the 1990s and early 2000s, especially the work of Katherine Clay Bassard, Carla Peterson, Joycelyn Moody, and others who discussed the importance of community in Black women's literary production. This volume extends those conversations with a specific emphasis on the diasporic that weaves together the writing projects of diasporic Black women across the centuries.

In addition to the preface and introduction by Jefferson-James, the book consists of eleven essays from nine contributors and a conclusion in which Jefferson-James discusses strategies for teaching Black women's literature in trans-historical and trans-geographical ways. The first six essays all address African American women writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These essays are most remarkable for their insistence that we pay more attention to noncanonical Black women writers and texts, while also reconsidering what we think we know about the canonical ones. Among the more innovative interventions in this section of the volume is Jefferson-James's argument that fiction was a primary tool

through which Ida B. Wells-Barnett and other Black women in the late nineteenth century challenged respectability politics. She puts Wells-Barnett in dialogue with Gertrude Mossell and Victoria Earle Matthews to assert that “these women articulated an alternative vision of womanhood and stressed the importance of fiction and creative writing” to do so (12).

Contributions from Shubhanku Kochar and Regis Fox highlight the importance of Black women playwrights and early African American theater. Kochar and Fox argue that drama was a central medium through which Black women engaged political discourses centered on Black subjectivity, including the concept of the “New Negro.” Fox offers an especially innovative reading of Shirley Graham’s one-act play *It’s Mornin’* to illuminate how representations of madness, or “playing crazy” worked “both to constrain and to free Black women” (83). Essays by Verner Mitchell and Tajanae Barnes focus on canonical writers, Pauline Hopkins and Frances E.W. Harper, and provide against-the-grain readings of their texts. Specifically, Mitchell provides a biographical reconsideration of Hopkins to argue for her importance as a literary pioneer. Barnes reads Harper’s influential *Iola Leroy* as a novel about passing for Black, linking it to twenty-first-century conversations about trans-racialism. Barnes argues that passing exists on multiple registers in the novel—a double passing—through which Harper seeks to disrupt the “tragic mulatto” trope. This section of the volume ends with another contribution from Jefferson-James in which she argues for a reexamination of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* within the tradition of Black literacy narratives to emphasize the importance of education in Black women’s accounts of their subjectivities.

The second group of five essays address twentieth-century Afro-Caribbean women writers with a particular focus on how they resisted, theorized, and/or re-imagined subjectivity in post-colonial spaces. Specifically, Jacinth Howard provides a Black feminist reading of Karen Lord’s speculative fiction, arguing that it unseats the white male figure typically centered in science fiction. Alison D. Ligon examines Merle Hodge’s popular *Crick Crack, Monkey* and argues that Hodge’s coming-of-age story “created a transformative space that not only

broadened the Caribbean bildungsroman but also made way for the emergence of novels by other Caribbean women writers" (139). Joyce White examines another coming-of-age narrative, Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*, but insists the novel is much more than a bildungsroman. It is important to note, White argues, the movement of the novel's central character into communal spaces centered on African healing practices. "Healing," White argues, "is an act, a transformation" that makes "Africana diasporic bodies" whole (148). Alexandria Smith provides an especially intriguing reading of Michelle Cliff's *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* that asks readers to suspend skepticism about autobiographical accuracy in the text and instead see Cliff's personal references as part of a larger rhetorical strategy "central to the critiques of colonial knowledge production and identity construction" (162). In particular, Cliff employs what Smith calls "sensual worldmaking," which is "a style of Black feminist self-oriented narrative writing that uses embodied, sensuous experiences as the basis of its theorizations and critiques" (164). The final essay in this section is a second contribution from Ligon that focuses on the young adult fiction of Edwidge Danticat, with a particular emphasis on representations of Black girlhood.

While many of the essays spend too much time summarizing familiar historical narratives and literary traditions before presenting their critical interventions, the volume addresses an admirable variety of texts written by Black women in the United States and the Caribbean, illuminating the tradition's breadth and depth. Still, it should be noted that the volume does not offer a comprehensive or exhaustive take on the subject. Indeed, no single book can do that. Rather, the volume, as Jefferson-James notes in the introduction, is a conversation-starter. Each essay illustrates the vastness and richness of the literary production of African American and Afro-Caribbean women writers.

If this volume is, as Jefferson-James anticipates, the first of several editions, the follow-up efforts might do well to further elaborate some of the central claims. For example, one of the volume's more intriguing assertions is the idea that Hurston, in particular, "serves as a segue from the Harlem Renaissance

to the beginning of the explosion of creativity in the Black Caribbean” (6). None of the essays actually addresses Hurston as this kind of mediating figure. That oversight speaks to a larger question that the volume does not answer. What exactly is gained by reading contemporary Caribbean women writers within the context of earlier African American women’s literature, and vice versa? Several of the essays gesture toward pedagogy with references to the challenges of teaching these texts, and Jefferson-James’s conclusion discusses the value of pairing Toni Morrison with early African American literature. A second iteration of this project might address teaching more fully by providing, for example, full lesson plans and assessment strategies. Overall, this is a good volume that would be especially useful secondary reading in undergraduate classrooms.

Cassander L. Smith is an associate professor of English at the University of Alabama. Her teaching and research focus on representations of Black Africans in early Atlantic literature.

Cotton Mather’s Spanish Lessons: A Story of Language, Race, and Belonging in the Early Americas. By Kirsten Silva Gruesz. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022. Pp. 336. \$35.00 hardcover.)

Kirsten Silva Gruesz’s multilayered and interdisciplinary book accomplishes something quite difficult. It manages to tell us new things about Cotton Mather and, along the way, connects the intellectual as well as physical histories of New England with the larger Atlantic and hemispheric worlds of Early America. Gruesz carefully revisits the well-trudged historiography of Puritan New England, but by focusing on the creation, production, circulation, and complications of Mather’s 1690 tract *La Fe del Christiano* (*The Faith of the Christian*), she crafts a new narrative about race and ideas, as well as practices, of belonging, with deep and explicit implications for Latina/o/x history today.

The book is interested in Cotton Mather: his family, background, education, and experiences, as well as in the Spanish