Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa

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taken. With interesting readings of Black hypermasculinity and Black emasculation in works by Jewish authors, for instance, Goffman uncovers a fascinating strand of Black-Jewish imaginative relations that is drenched in concerns about and shape larger debates on manhood and sexuality. Goffman has a good eye for detail and has gone beyond the obvious in this book. It makes a real contribution to our understanding of how African Americans and Jews have used each other—most of all to commit significant acts of self-definition.

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In his earlier work, White on Black: Contemporary Literature About Africa (1992), Gruesser identified as the primary convention of Africanist writing by Anglo Americans the tendency to depict "Africans as lagging behind Westerners in terms of moral, intellectual, and/or material development." In Black on Black, the companion volume to White on Black, Gruesser considers the way that nineteenth- and twentieth-century African-American authors have reacted both to this dominant, myopic view of Africa and to the concept of Ethiopianism, "the teleological and uniquely African-American view of history" that was inspired by the biblical verse "Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God." Beginning with a discussion of evangelist Maria Stewart’s 1833 endorsement of a cyclical view of history that positioned African Americans as a chosen people destined to return Africa to former glory and concluding with Alice Walker’s resounding rejection of this schema in her novel The Color Purple (1982), Gruesser chronicles, in a detailed and convincing manner, the evolution of black American literary responses to the consequences of the African Diaspora.

If any one prominent literary figure stands out in Gruesser’s study as an embodiment of this evolution, it would be W. E. B. Du Bois, whose
early writings, most notably the 1897 article "The Conservation of Races," reflected what Gruesser terms "African-American exceptionalism," the belief that US blacks, by virtue of their schooling in Western politics and technology, were best positioned to reclaim for Africa its legacy as an influential and sovereign land. However, by 1936, with the fall of Ethiopia to the Italians, Du Bois asserted "the interconnectedness of black American and African-American freedom," by denouncing even the most benevolent, Afro-centered colonialism, a view that he would expand upon in 1961, when he admitted that while "American Negroes of former generations had always calculated that when Africa was ready for freedom, American Negroes would be ready to lead them [...] the event was quite the opposite. Indeed, it now seems that Africans may have to show American Negroes the way to freedom." Gruesser privileges Du Bois's decision to eschew Ethiopianism, a philosophy that he feels placed a barrier between African-American artists and the contemporary Africa that they sought to depict.

Ultimately, Gruesser singles out Melvin Tolson's Libretto for the Republic of Liberia (1953) and Lorraine Hansberry's Les Blancs (1965) as the most successful African-American representations of Africa, precisely because their authors chose to incorporate "African methods to tell an African story." Gruesser argues that this type of generic hybridity is best suited to "revise the dominant discourse" on Africa and to create a complex, anticolonial treatment of Africa. Thus, Tolson's interweaving of "modernist techniques most often associated with T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland" and African proverbs and parables adds a richness and a verisimilitude to Tolson's poetic record of Liberia's tribal heritage, colonial struggles, and postcolonial future. In a similar manner, Gruesser praises Les Blancs because of Hansberry's decision to rewrite, in dramatic form, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, "making the falsehood at the heart of the missionary impulse on the continent a central theme, and like Tolson before her," using conventions of African folklore and African music to tell a uniquely African story.

Gruesser's detailed study, which also includes a thorough explication of the works of lesser known African-American writers such as Sutton Griggs, John E. Bruce, Shirley Graham, and George Schuyler, sets the stage for further scholarly work on African-American depictions of Africa. Gruesser devotes one chapter to post-1950s authors, enabling
Americas

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In *Up from Bondage*, Dale Peterson, Professor of Russian at Amherst College, takes a new approach to what has traditionally been called comparative literature. Using a Bakhtinian model both to explain his material and to structure his discussion, he offers an analysis of Russian and African-American nationalisms. He does this through close readings of literary and cultural texts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His approach uses Bakhtin to create, in effect, dialogue between the two groups and to suggest the multiple perspectives within each one. At the end of the book he discusses the importance of contestation rather than consonance of voices in the Russian theorist’s work, a point he emphasizes throughout the work in showing how Russian and African-American writers have sought to define a notion of ethnic “soul” as the basis of group identity.

He justifies bringing these two groups together in part on the basis of the considerable similarities in their efforts at self-definition. And behind these efforts is a shared sense of being marginalized by Western civilization. Both have been seen as outside the rationalist tradition and thus outside the only history that really matters. Literary artists and intellectuals have responded to this situation, over several generations, by reframing the meaning of the ethnic “nation.”