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Book Reviews/ Poems

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Books

Sterling Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition

By Joanne V. Gabbin, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 245 pp.

Reviewed by Eugenia Collier

Joanne Gabbin's *Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition* is a major contribution to scholarship not only about a poet/critic/scholar/liar* who is a cornerstone of our literary heritage, but also about the aesthetic tradition which is the wellspring of our art.

This work began as a dissertation at the University of Chicago, directed by the noted scholar George E. Kent, whose own works have opened doorways of perception. Now published as a part of Greenwood Press' series *Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies*, this book is important to any study of Black American literature and culture, including (and perhaps especially) the culture of the folk.

The Greenwood series, of which Gabbin's book is the 86th work, sets out to fill, in some measure, the gap in knowledge about the culture of Black people. The series advisors, John Blassingame and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., write of the series, "Often inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural, it seeks to address not only the complexities of the cultural and aesthetic confrontation of Black cultures with non-Black ones, but also the nature and func-

tion of African and Afro-American arts and letters themselves."

In this context, Joanne Gabbin's study is vital. For Sterling Brown, in his works and in his own self, has made contributions to our literature, our culture, our collective *being* which are yet incalculable. Only in recent years has the value of Sterling Brown begun to be recognized.

More often than not, the prodigies acclaimed in their own times are unremembered in future generations, having con-



tributed little of historical value other than what conformed to the short-sighted values of their times. A contribution which addresses the future must often age, must often wait for assessment by those long unborn when the work began.

Sterling Brown's work is just beginning in recent years to be appreciated and thus to come in for serious critical analyses. It is good that, in his eighties, he is around to witness this assessment. Gabbin's book is the first full-length analysis.

The book title informs the reader immediately of the cultural significance of Sterling Brown — as a vital part of the building of the Black aesthetic tradition. Gabbin's basic assumption in this work, then, is that there *is* such a tradition and that a major writer must be considered in the light of his taking from and giving to this tradition. Such an assumption is far from a foregone conclusion in the study of Black art.

Many of us — critics and artists alike — consider ourselves American writers/critics/whatever who happen (incidentally) to be Black rather than as Black people who happen to be Americans. Most of our writing and criticism is based on that kind of

thinking. Joanne Gabbin asserts immediately and repeatedly the relevance of the nuclear culture which informs our individual and collective selves and provides the grounding of our art.

Gabbin appropriately places Sterling Brown in the American tradition as well. She shows the influence of Western literary ancestors upon his perceptions — Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and others. She discusses the influence of such American writers as Walt Whitman, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Robert Frost, and Carl Sandburg in their portrayal of the ordinary folk, even the apparent losers who were ultimately the winners because they have not only survived but also preserved and deepened their humanity. The techniques of the Imagists — the compression of language into firm and far-reaching images — and the refinement of dialect into poetry, as exemplified by Irish playwright John Millington Synge, all were among the ingredients of Brown's art, as Gabbin aptly points out, noting also that these elements were congruous with the folk life which he observed and in which he partook so deeply.

Gabbin's analysis of the work begins with the man himself. After an introduction which reviews the existing scholarship on Brown, she begins a series of biographical chapters. "The Literary Upbringing of Sterling A. Brown" discusses the forces, literary and personal, which shaped the perceptions of the young Brown — the father who had once known slavery, the mother who taught him to love poetry, the intellectual atmosphere of the home which hosted such greats as Frederick Douglass, the fine education, the stimulating times in which he grew. In this chapter, we see the start of his pathway as poet, and the development of his critical convictions.

"The Howard Years: The Intellectual Milieu and Brown's Legacy" is a chapter particularly gripping for those of us at the university, for it recaptures the early Howard of Alain Locke, Ernest Just, Kelly Miller, Benjamin Brawley, and Mordecai Johnson — and all the other luminaries who made Howard University great. This chapter shows how Brown's creativity came to fruition and how he passed the flame to his students.

"Sterling A. Brown and the Federal Writers' Project" brings to light a little-studied phase of Brown's work, his serv-

ing as the Project's national editor of Negro Affairs, 1936 to 1940.

The personal and literary biography of these three chapters provides a vital context for the next three chapters, which provide close textual analysis of the works. "The Influences of the Folk Tradition" is an excellent study which emphasizes Brown's lifelong interest in this tradition and the flow of works which have proceeded from his devotion. The remaining two chapters are in-depth analyses of Brown's poetry and criticism. Altogether, the book covers virtually every relevant aspect of Brown's life and work.

Joanne Gabbin, a fine scholar, has managed her material expertly. The organization described above is the optimum method of facilitating an understanding of this important man. It permits easy flow from biography to textual analysis, both of which are essential. Most important, Gabbin has searched out information and read extensively about Sterling Brown and about everything she deemed relevant to his work.

Her search was apparently tireless. She cites not only articles, books, dissertations, and theses, but also interviews, unpublished materials by Brown and others (even a student's paper on Brown), taped speeches, and every avenue of scholarship imaginable. (I noted with interest that a great deal of her material came from the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities at Howard and mourned again the fact that — for whatever reasons — the Institute was discontinued.) She herself conducted numerous interviews.

It is obvious that, from the beginning, she made it a part of her research to establish and maintain a warm personal relationship with Professor Brown and those who were important to him. The warmth shines through her work but does not lessen the degree of distance which she maintains for a fair assessment.

That assessment is summarized in the introduction. Among Brown's contributions, Gabbin cites these:

As a poet, Brown's most significant achievement is his subtle adaptation of song forms, especially the blues, to the literature. . . . Brown naturalizes Black dialect and captures the inflection, the timbre, the racial sound of the vernacular. . . . Brown's poetry is also a testament to the continuity of Black expression. . . .

One of Brown's earliest and most stunning contributions to critical thought is his assertion that politics and polemics have everything to do with the way an oppressed group is portrayed. . . . Sterling Brown is also a guardian of the images, values, history, and ethos of Black people. Stressing the importance of ethnic memory and the ethical stance, he affirms the folk tradition as the wellspring of original, imaginative, and traditional values. . . . A forerunner, Brown has

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prepared the way for the resurgence of interest in Black literature and studies witnessed during the last two decades.

Joanne Gabbin refers to this work as a seeding. All scholarly works are seeds from which one hopes that further works will grow. This work is particularly significant for the following reasons:

First: It is now time to know and appreciate the contribution of Sterling Brown. His literary works have had time to ripen, to pass to new generations, to stand for assessment — not for adulation.

As Gabbin points out, it is ironic that Brown, who has made so mighty a contribution, should have been so little studied. Not until 1973 was an extensive study of his poetry available to American scholars, after French scholar Jean Wagner's book *Black Poets of the United States* (1950) was translated into English and published here. However, despite Wagner's thorough research, his work shows deficiencies in basic understanding due to cultural differences.

Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1974), as Gabbin points out, views Brown's poetry in the context of his (Henderson's) approach to Black poetry in terms of deep psychological responses with Black speech and music as referents.

An important essay by Charles H. Rowell, "Sterling Brown and the Afro-American Folk Tradition," (1974: *Studies in the Literary Imagination*), recognized

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. . . And the Film



Following Joanne Gabbin's invaluable book, Poet Laureate and Professor Emeritus Sterling Brown was celebrated again — this time on film.

"After Winter: Sterling Brown," an hour-long color film by award-winning film director Haile Gerima and a crew of communications students at Howard University, premiered on November 1 before an overflow audience at the university.

Gerima's film lets its illustrious subject take the viewer on a journey laden with literary landmarks and historical anecdotes. Those already familiar with Professor Brown's work can gain more satisfaction from this film. And those who have not yet been touched by the poet's words can derive new insights by observing and listening to a master artist at work.

With America's premier music of jazz and blues and the visual juxtapositioning of historical and contemporary photographs as a background, Gerima captures his subject at home in Washington, D. C., and at various venues on campus and in the city. Professor Brown's words explode on film as he shares his poetry, his politics, his philosophy, and his experiences.

Three years in the making, "After Winter" is an important film aimed at immortalizing aspects of the poet's vast contributions to the culture and literary tradition of Black America.

Without a doubt, this film can be of great value not only to scholars and students but also to the general public.

In the words of filmmaker Gerima, Sterling Brown "represents some aspect of our history." Indeed, an aspect that must be preserved and passed on to future generations.

—The Editor

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the importance both of the tradition itself and of Brown's contributions to it.

The reprint of Brown's *Southern Road* in 1975, with an insightful introduction by Sterling Stuckey, and most of all, the publication of Brown's collected poems in 1980, edited by Michael Harper, opened the way to serious studies of Brown's poetry. Gabbin's work — which began long before then — is both a culmination of these studies and a basis for future works.

32 A second reason for the importance of this book is Gabbin's common sense approach to literary analysis. A great deal of modern criticism is a mishmash of esoteric gobbledegook, an intellectual incest committed by an elite coterie who write for each other, since nobody else can understand their work. Gabbin writes in a lucid, interesting style, covering all the bases and hitting the exact balance between form and meaning, individual genius and tradition, scholarly distance and human warmth. The book is a model for critics of the future.

A third significance of this book is Gabbin's excellent discussion of the folk culture as groundwork for conscious art, as observed in the works of Sterling Brown. Current criticism of Black literature, for the most part, ignores this stream which nourishes the essence of our creativity. Any serious Black writer must, whether he/she is aware of it or not, call upon a pool of experience which extends back in time beyond the individual life, beyond even the pestilential slave ships, back into the roots of our sunny continent — a tradition which we share with Black people everywhere.

Gabbin does not, of course, articulate any such belief. But she does recognize the existence and the importance of a Black aesthetic tradition. In a time when critics are, for the most part, placing Black American writing firmly into a Euro-American mold, a major work which asserts the vitality of this tradition is greatly needed.

Generations hence will study the works of Sterling Brown and will seek definition in the Black aesthetic tradition. Joanne Gabbin's book will be in the forefront of these studies. □

The reviewer is an associate professor of English at Howard University.

*"Liar" here means raconteur, a skilled teller of tales. Sterling Brown once claimed to be the best liar at Howard University.

Poems

Vespers for Eight

Dedicated to: Drake Koka; Ranwedze Nengwekhulu; Saths Cooper; Bokwe Mafuna; Steve Biko; Nyameko Pityana; Strini Moodley; Terry Modisane.

Flung far into oblivion
By the frightened forces of darkness.
Removed from the arena of influence
On eager minds seeking direction.
Damned into a perpetual twilight,
And forever threatened with abysmal
night.
Like a lighthouse on a rocky sea,
Whose guiding light none can see —
The work of fiendish pirates,
Who murdered the lighthouse-keeper,
That the Black ship may flounder.
Eight bright beacons snuffed out
By ruthless buccaneers.
Cursed into eternal silence
By the high priests of evil;
Eight ebony trumpets
Barred from the holy band
That plays a lofty note.
Coerced to play no more
The inspiring song of freedom.
Forever bound to the limbo of silence . . .
Yet the haunting sound,
That speaks of power,
Shall forever be heard;
Still the bold chant,
That demands solidarity,
Shall forever wail —
A phantom voice in the night,
That gives an earnest promise
Of boundless liberation.

Fanyana Mazibuko
Soweto, South Africa

What Would America Say?

What would America say?
Will she talk about her offspring
Who had helped redevelop and renew
Their cousins in Europe and Asia
And Africa and Latin America?
Will she recite her Whitman-son
And Longfellow-son and McKay-son
And all her other sons
As well as her Bradstreet-daughter
And Dickinson-daughter and Giovanni-
daughter?
What would America say?
Will she talk about the slaves,
The discrimination, the wars, the riots,
the abuses,
That tore her fledgling sons and
daughters
Away from her womb prematurely
And brother killing brother,
Sister killing sister,
That could only make a mother sorrow
and cry
And beg for an end?
America would probably say — she's
tired.

Eric Robinson
Washington, D.C.