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### Review Of "The African American Short Story 1970 To 1990: A Collection Of Critical Essays" By W. Karrer And B. Puschmann-Nalenz

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The African American Short Story 1970 to 1990: A Collection of Critical Essays*. by Wolfgang Karrer and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz

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This tapestry of forms and experiences documents the energy, depth, strength, and connectedness of a global chorus of black writers. The collective voices provide a resounding counterpoint to the prevailing conservative ideologies in that critical liberatory epoch.

Who would have thought it? Enterprising critical predecessors like W. D. Howells, Janheinz Jahn, Robert Bone, or Jean Wagner notwithstanding, who—a quarter of a century ago—would have dared declare the African American short story the sole/soul salvation of a vital Eurocentric tradition? Who would have surmised that African American writers would figure forth to preserve a Western literary form from the ravages of “extreme commodification of all human relations,” from its transmutation into “postmodernist parody and self deconstruction”?

Such a notable claim lies at the heart of this little volume of fourteen original essays, a text whose more modest aims include filling a gap in classrooms and seminars as well as serving as a guide to teachers and students anywhere, one must assume, in the Western world—something of a syllabus sans walls. What is more, as an announced inaugural exercise in filling a “critical void,” the editors promise a sequel. I find most impressive the editors’ estimable objective of trying, as Europeans, to learn “how to overcome [their] Eurocentric ways of perceiving and thinking.” To this end, they have resolved to initiate their provocative challenge through critical assessments of African American short stories written between 1970 and 1990. Still, as the editors modestly acknowledge, and we must readily agree, the challenge to alter old critical habits is no less daunting on either side the Atlantic.

Readers familiar with *The Black American Short Story in the 20th Century* (1977) edited by Peter Bruck and *The Afro-American Novel since 1960* (1982) edited by Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer will quickly recognize the format of the work in question. It includes a two-part introduction that provides a general survey of the African American short story and selected anthologies. This is followed by a set of original interpretative essays covering “major trends and authors of the last two decades” filtered through fourteen chosen tales. The general body of critical essays opens with a Puschmann-Nalenz analysis of Ann Petry’s “Mother Africa” (1971) and concludes with Karrer’s analysis of John McCluskey’s “Lush Life” (1990). While Bruck is absent from this recent compilation, Klaus Ensslen, who crafted a major essay for one of the earlier works, is favored with essays about stories by Toni Cade Bambara (“Gorilla My Love” [1972]) and J. California Cooper (“When Life Begins” [1986]). With Puschmann-Nalenz and Karrer each adding, respectively, analyses of Ann Shockley’s “The World of Rosie Polk” (1987) and Gayl Jones’s “Asylum” (1977), three contributors account for some forty percent of the chronological collection. But, inspired by the revelatory disclosures of the editors, I find the opening statements of *The African American Short Story* most beguiling.

The two-part introduction to this volume is at once provocative and vexing. Both segments are richly allusive and resonate with a combined sense of critical breadth and economy of style from which the qualities of a well-ordered syl-

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Wolfgang Karrer and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz, eds. *The African American Short Story 1970 to 1990: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Amsterdam: B. R. Grüner, 1993. 226 pp. \$23.50.

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labus emerge. Karrer's essay in particular ("The History and Signifying Intertextuality of the African American Short Story") provides the broad landscaping of critical history that serves as the underpinning of the text's entirety. Taking generous leads from Robert Bone's generational framework in *Down Home: Origins of the Afro-American Short Story*, Karrer extends Bone's discourse from the mid-1950s (the point at which Bone leaves off in his 1985 revised edition) to 1990. This salutary nod to Bone, however, does not fail to address the limits of the model or the depth of debt to the Eurocentric tradition. But even as Karrer proposes fresh ideological foundations for the two decades, he seems self-consciously aware of the incipient irony of language and allusions that impede the best of intentions, whether referring to "repoliticized writing" of the sixties or the "quest for community" represented, in his view, by many of the stories under discussion in the collection. Shedding Eurocentric thinking is a trial.

Karrer cogently notes, for instance, that the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s had less impact on the African American short story than on other genres. The consequent effect of this view, however, is the attenuation of the movement Larry Neal once described as the era of "radical reordering" by enclosing it within a 1954-1975 time frame tentatively titled "The Age of Baldwin—The Existentialist Mode." This broader alignment, it appears, is not intended to dismiss or diminish the impact of the Black Arts Movement; rather, Karrer contends that the "theoretical shift from Black Aesthetics to the now dominant paradigm of myth criticism did not go along with a similar shift in short story writing." He is not wrong in his view. Nonetheless, this broadening perception manages to obscure the profoundly mythic folklore of Henry Dumas, whose short story "Fon," for example, was published in *Black Fire* (1968)—the anthology edited by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal—and whose collection of short stories *Ark of Bones* was later published posthumously to spectacular reviews. As we know, Dumas has long since earned deep admiration from writers (Toni Morrison calls him "an absolute genius") and from critics (Baraka has noted that, "despite his mythological elegance and deep signification, [he] was part of the wave of African American writers at the forefront of the '60s Black Arts Movement"). Dumas took seriously his personal call to use Black cultural materials in devising his aesthetic.

Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz chooses two avenues of approach to her part of the critical introduction, "Presentation in Prefaces and the Process of Canonization." Her stated purpose of evaluating "the self-interpretation of African American authors and editors of short story anthologies" by reading a dozen selected prefaces seems plausible, but it proves to be too conveniently restrictive and variously problematical. To begin with, the limits of Puschmann-Nalenz's evaluation (from 1971 to 1990) is reductive in the way it dodges discussions of antecedent critical anthologies by once-authoritative voices such as Sterling Brown, Arthur Davis, Saunders Redding, and Darwin Turner. Where, one wonders, are the editorial insights of the Black Arts and Black Power Movements voiced in *Black Fire* or the critical perspectives from Abraham Chapman's *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature* (1968) or James Emanuel and Theodore Gross's views in *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America* (1968)? These were staple academic texts during the late sixties and early seventies, as subsequent editors and short story writers knew. But Puschmann-Nalenz's structural frame relegates them to the realm of "assimilationist"—her category for African American writers and critics prior to 1975—and, whether intentionally or not, dismisses their relevance to her purpose.

Closer investigation of the past could have revealed, for example, that my anthology *From the Roots: Short Stories by Black Americans* was in fact pub-

lished in 1970 and not in 1973. Strictly speaking, then, *From the Roots* resides outside the strictures of her scheme to evaluate anthologies between 1971 and 1990. In any case, it should have been noted that the work was originally published by Dodd, Mead (and not Harper & Row) as an academic textbook meant to teach a generally unfamiliar body of literature. Puschmann-Nalenz can be forgiven for not realizing that *From the Roots* and *What We Must See* (1971), edited by Orde Coombs, emerged from the same New York house that published the full body of Paul Laurence Dunbar's works; however, she need not have ranged farther than the 1970 anthology for this knowledge.

Rather, she chooses to express personal astonishment that in 1970 the turn-of-the-century dialect affected in much of Dunbar's writing and Charles W. Chesnutt's conjure tales could be associated with minstrelsy by black as well as white Americans. No doubt Ishmael Reed, for his part, would be amused by the omission of the "metaphysical" number from the title of his anthology *19 Necromancers from Now* (1970), but it is disturbing that she identifies William Melvin Kelley's unsparing little satiric novel *dem* as the collective title for "four novellas published in 1967." *dem*, of course, was published that year as Kelley's third novel; *Dancers on the Shore* (1962) was his collection of short stories. Such confusions transform into irony when Puschmann-Nalenz recalls Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s rebuke of "prominent critics" like Todorov and Sartre as "racialist" because "they were too little familiar with the African heritage of the literature they claimed to interpret . . ."

As if to affirm the difficulty of overcoming what the editors refer to as "Euro-American standards set by the dominant discourse," Puschmann-Nalenz lets drop an all-too-familiar judgment when she archly proclaims Terry McMillan's introduction to *Breaking Ice* (1990) more wanting in "level[s] of abstraction" than Mary Helen Washington's introduction to *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975/1990). In her discussion of the canon debate, she claims that until the late seventies African American literature "had remained *assimilationist in a very peculiar way*" (my italics) and that critical methodology had been "lagging behind," but that African American literature has since emerged to assume an "innate quality" of "blackness" or "Africanness" as the "cultural dominant" and that its critical counterpart has "progressed" and closed the "gap in time." These are profoundly resonant expressions to be sure, but they loom largely unexplored in these pages.

Without question, over the past decade and a half or so, African American literature and criticism (notably by women) have emerged from a seeming quiescence to excite international interest in the trade market as well as the academy. But even as the representations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., on the cover of this text graphically indicate, African Americans—writers and otherwise—do not hold monolithic views of objects or objectives. In the absence of clarifying standards by which measures can be made, I remain suspicious about notions of "progress" and "time-lags." Are students to assume that the body of African American writing suddenly burst forth from retarded development into the mainstream of postmodernist critical being? And if so how, pray tell, is it to escape the very ravages of extreme commodification, postmodernist parody, and self-deconstruction remarked by Karrer? Are those who dare venture outside this new "mainstream" (say, into sociological methodology and topicality) hereafter to be thought of as re-entering the unsavory realm Puschmann-Nalenz characterizes as a ghetto? The jury, I think, may still be out on this one.

The fourteen essays themselves must be praised for their probing and thought-provoking approaches to the chosen stories. With individual notes, documentation, and bibliography, each essay serves as a working specimen of a critical approach and companion piece for further thematic study of each writer.

The Klaus Ensslen appraisals of J. California Cooper's "When Life Begins" and Toni Cade Bambara's "Gorilla, My Love," along with Wolfgang Karrer's essay on John McCluskey's "Lush Life," are especially praiseworthy and rewarding. Ultimately, this is an upbeat anthology, enriching of the genre and optimistic about the broader body of African American literature. It has, too, all the semblances of a well-assembled syllabus for an upper-level group of undergraduates. I will leave any larger claims to the future.

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Emilia Viotti da Costa. *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. 400 pp. \$17.95.

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Historians of the Caribbean have long been familiar with the general contours of the 1823 slave revolt in Demerara and the martyrdom of Reverend John Smith. The present volume adds significantly to our understanding of the tensions that were present in this then-recently acquired British colony at a crucial period of its socioeconomic development and at a time when slavery was facing increased assaults from within as well as outside the Caribbean. Emilia da Costa draws on the vast trove of material available from the trial records, on correspondence between missionaries in Demerara and their colleagues and superiors in Britain, and on official government reports to provide us with the most

comprehensive and nuanced treatment to date of an important phase of the colony's history.

Despite the limits suggested by the title, da Costa's beautifully crafted book treats more than the uprising in August 1823 of several thousand slaves in Demerara. It is more fittingly an examination of slave society as a whole, with major emphasis on missionary activity over a thirty-year period as a stimulus for the revolt. The author presents a sophisticated analysis of the major tensions that this burgeoning slave-based plantation society experienced in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, as planter impulses ran counter to both the slaves' natural wish for freedom and Imperial imperatives for amelioration. The major players were the planters, slaves, and missionaries. Always in the background, however, were the local officials, whose duty it was to implement policies sent out from Britain and to administer this multiethnic colony with due though unequal regard to the often competing interests of planters and slaves.

da Costa highlights the degree of dissatisfaction that the slavery issue in its overseas possessions evoked in Great Britain. A major component of this growing anti-slavery sentiment was a broadly based petition movement that sought to influence both popular opinion and Parliamentary votes. At one level, slavery aroused strong emotions among a British working class that was beginning to develop a radical sense of self-identity and a notion of the universal brotherhood of the working man. At another level, however, was an anti-slavery sentiment firmly grounded in the British nonconformist evangelical movement. Of the various groups that actively promoted this credo of equality and saw slavery as abhorrent, the actions of the London Missionary Society most profoundly affected the hastening of the final dénouement. With their emphasis on missionary work, the LMS sent to Demerara a number of individuals whose behavior touched off the sequence of events that culminated in the revolt of 1823.