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activist sentiments: reading black women in the nineteenth century

P. Gabrielle Foreman, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2009, 255pp.,
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eroticism, spirituality, and resistance in black women's writings

Donna Aza Weir-Soley, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2009, 274pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-8130-3377-8, US\$69.95 (Hbk)

The rich intellectual legacy of Black Feminist Criticism lives on in widely diverse scholarly works that testify to the continued centrality and vitality of this critical approach.

Activist Sentiments is an excellent case in point. P. Gabrielle Foreman analyses the literary and activist work of African American women intellectuals from 1859 to the 1890s, focusing on well-known authors (such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson and Frances E. Harper) and lesser known ones, such as Victoria Earle Matthews and Amelia E. Johnson.

The historical specificity of the topic should not deceive us as to the broad literary, critical and methodological relevance of Foreman's study, or to the pleasures it has in store for scholars and interested readers. The characterising feature of *Activist Sentiments* is the compelling way in which it offers 'interpretive models that help ground close readings in newly examined historical contexts and original research', bringing to life 'the complex genealogies, tropes, and interventions of Black nineteenth-century sentimental—and simultaneously political—literary production' (p. 3). In order to do this, Foreman mobilises her impressive primary and archival research by integrating it smoothly into her close readings of individual works. For instance, she analyses the politics of naming in Harper's *Iola Leroy*, where homonymic associations 'link the novel with previous and contemporaneous struggles for Black freedom and full citizenship rights', augmenting its 'interpretative possibilities ... and representativeness' (p. 90). History emerges as the living context that black women writers were trying to shape according to their vision of greater social justice, and her discussion of the narrative figurations of a 'dynamic history in the making' (p. 92) opens new vistas on the formal complexity of these works and 'enlivens an understanding of [their] readership and reception history' (p. 141). Foreman's own analysis is enlivened by an engaging prose style where scholarly precision is enriched by a love for language that illuminates the nuances of her argument.

Foreman articulates interpretive tools that are grounded in her close readings of specific texts and are informed by her command of critical debates. Her notion of 'histotextuality', for instance, is a particularly fecund concept that illuminates the novelistic correlations with specific historical references. She introduces readers to a fascinating world of literary, historical, cultural and intellectual associations that enhance our understanding, as well as our appreciation, of the literary value and beauty of these works. What Foreman argues about the writers she studies is true also for her own work. The amount of histotextual knowledge one brings to her book creates different reading experiences, and the pleasure of her activist engagement with literature, language, history and criticism captures both scholars and interested readers.

Readers of *Activist Sentiments* are not allowed to remain passive, and our participation is stimulated in particularly evocative ways in 'Coda: On burials and exhumations'. Here, Foreman brings the past forcefully into our present. As she tells the story of how a historical landmark like Laurel Cemetery, 'the premier gravesite in Black Baltimore from its founding in 1852 until the 1940s, was dug up after a land-grab coup by white business and city leaders' (p. 174), she reflects on the continuing history of marginalisation of black women's lives, and also on the political significance of scholarly decisions, reminding us that the social justice her authors worked for is still a largely unrealised goal. In the best tradition of Black Feminist Criticism, scholarly rigour meets ethical, professional and activist concerns, leaving readers empowered with a sense of continuity and responsibility that reminds us 'of what cannot be buried when we pledge to preserve what's come before so we can continue to persevere' (p. 176).

The contemporary period takes centre stage in Donna Aza Weir-Soley's *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women's Writings*. Her 'primary intervention', she writes, 'is to argue for the relational ways in which culturally diverse black women writers signal the presence of an African-based spirituality in their works while highlighting the liberating quest for a mutually constitutive sexuality, a necessary corollary to a fully developed spirituality in the search for a self-directed, counterhegemonic sense of agency and wholeness representing a unitary subjectivity' (pp. 5–6). Her concern with the past and present exploitation of black women frames the volume, which is divided into five chapters. In Chapter 1, Weir-Soley offers a brief overview of the negative stereotypes that have historically surrounded black women in the New World, noting that the 'downside' of the attempts to counter such denigrating images was to create 'a climate of sexual repression and silence surrounding the subject of black female sexuality' (p. 17). In Chapter 2, she zooms in on Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which she describes as a novel that 'revolutionized the depiction of black female sexuality in African American literature' (p. 39) by providing 'the first successful literary model to consciously reinscribe the erotic as a source of agency and transformation for black women'

(p. 41). The following chapters are devoted to works by three of Hurston's diasporic 'literary daughters' (pp. 77–78): Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; Opal Palmer Adisa's *It Begins with Tears*; and Edwige Dandicat's *The Farming of Bones*.

Weir-Soley addresses complex issues that deserve great scholarly attention. She focuses, for instance, on the impact of African cosmology on black women's literature. She describes her own approach by noticing that previous critics have not 'fully interrogated the complex array of spiritual symbols ... that allude to an alternate interpretation fully grounded in diasporic literacy' (p. 87). If in this and other instances her critical goals are stated explicitly and repeatedly, the analysis that should bear them out is not always equally clear or convincing, especially because key concepts, such as spirituality, are not defined with the kind of analytical attention that characterises, for instance, Judylyn Ryan's *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* (2005), a volume that Weir-Soley cites and that has influenced her own approach to religious syncretism. Her thematic readings of the individual works under examination would also have benefited from greater interpretive depth. For instance, while stating that there are 'definitive intertextual connections between Hurston and her successor, Toni Morrison' (p. 8), her discussion in Chapter 3 mentions a few rather general thematic similarities.

In her understandable enthusiasm for how 'Hurston left her literary daughters a blueprint for writing about an independent black female character who is not afraid to express sexual desire' (p. 43), Weir-Soley seems to offer a more prescriptive blueprint of her own, marginalising those writers and works that do not fit into her celebration of 'a liberating poetics of eroticism' (p. 226). She seems a bit too hasty in announcing Nella Larsen's 'failure to accurately render a truly sexual black woman' (p. 34), leaving the reader to wonder what 'truly sexual' means. Whereas Hurston's 'Janie is clearly not tragic' (p. 55), Helga Crane clearly is, but Larsen's complex representation of her heroine can hardly be dismissed simply by stating that Helga's sexual repression is 'self-imposed' (p. 29) or by supposing that 'Larsen's critique lacked "bite" ... because she was one of her community's privileged few' (p. 30). Similarly, her conclusion that the 'inauthentic ... contrived ending' of *Plum Bun* 'undermines every political intervention she [Jessie Fauset] attempts' (p. 36) and her brief references to writers such as DuBois and Locke betray a limited familiarity with their works and with recent scholarship on them. The portrait of Zora in DuBois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), for example, complicates the picture of a supposed 'indefinite moratorium placed on sexual expression in writing for blacks of both sexes' (p. 24) in the early twentieth century.

From this perspective, Weir-Soley's book points to broad literary historical concerns, including the need to problematise long-standing assumptions on early black writing and to ground the study of contemporary African-American literature in a fuller understanding of the continuities, as well as the differences,

between the pre- and post-Harlem Renaissance period. Foreman's archival research and interpretive insights represent crucial stepping stones in this direction.

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