

WERNER SOLLORS, *African American Writing: A Literary Approach* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple U P, 2016), 296 pp.

*African American Writing*, Werner Sollors's latest book, commands attention for a variety of reasons: as a compilation of previously published essays, it brings to light within the covers of one single book the astounding scope, learning, and depth of Sollors's scholarship in the field at hand. *AAW* begins with an essay on eighteenth-century slave narrator Olaudah Equiano and ends two centuries later with a discussion of African American writing in the age of an Obama presidency. Some of the essays originally appeared as introductions to critical editions, such as the Norton critical edition of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and Du Bois's *Autobiography* by Oxford University Press; others were contributions to publications with rather limited circulation, as in the case of Sollors's riveting account of African American intellectuals and Europe between the two World Wars, which was first published as part of a special issue of an academic series by the University of Tours (GRAAT) and dedicated to the late Michel Fabre. One essay, on LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman*, was taken from Sollors's first book *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism"* (1978), a pathbreaking study of Baraka's metamorphosis from Beat to black poet based on Sollors's dissertation at the Freie Universität Berlin; not only does this early monograph on Baraka stand out as a major achievement in the criticism of African American literature as 'American' literature, it also paved the way for the exceptional career of a German scholar of African American studies at two Ivy League universities, Columbia and Harvard.

Taken together, the twelve essays assembled here cover a large, impressive body of African American texts, both well and lesser known: from Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and Charles Chesnut's plantation stories, to modernist novels such as Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Richard Wright's *Native Son*; from programmatic essays (by Wright and Hurston) and a discussion of the influence of anthropology and sociology on African American writing, to Du Bois's ambiguous account of his visit to Germany in 1936 and, finally, a survey of contemporary black literary responses to the notion of interracial kinship

and a post-racial society (both concepts have been widely discussed after Obama's inauguration as the nation's first black president). The essays also display Sollors's unique approach to African American writing, i. e., his attempt to understand the text under scrutiny as part of a larger transnational American modernist tradition without eclipsing its ethnic cultural specificity. This tendency is particularly apparent in a chapter on Jean Toomer's *Cane*, in my opinion the brilliant centerpiece of the collection. Subtitled "Modernism and Race in Interwar America," it sets out to delineate the myriad ways in which African American writing between the two World Wars has tapped into modernist techniques and mind-sets. *Cane*, Sollors argues, "makes its readers self-conscious to let them yearn for a fresher and fuller look at the world" (71). In doing so, it addresses a larger philosophical question underlying much of American literature, from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne to Henry Roth and Ralph Ellison, namely, the possibility of having both full knowledge and self-knowledge in the modern world: "In pursuing this question in the United States, Toomer also searched for a more cosmic understanding of the wholeness of a polyvocal America as it was once sung by Walt Whitman and now proclaimed by Waldo Frank" (71).

Informed by the demand of his close friend Waldo Frank that American writers should study the influence and disappearance of ethnic cultural expressions in the U.S. as integral parts of their own 'American' experience, Toomer articulates in *Cane* the modernist obsession with fragmentation and the quest for wholeness by way of a passing from the rural world of the South to the Northern cities, especially Washington and Chicago. As Sollors elucidates, the modern urban world of these cities left African Americans not only uprooted but unable to ever go back to peasantry, to nature. The answer to this dilemma could not lie in a return to traditional values; rather it meant to go on and find viable answers in new forms of creation and thereby "move forward the project of modernism itself" (71). What I found particularly fascinating in Sollors's reading of Toomer's formally and thematically experimental novel (but also of other writers of the same era, for example Charles Chesnut and W.E.B. Du Bois) is that it glaringly foregrounds the urgency of these modernist black texts for contemporary read-

ers. In his late collection of aphorisms, *Essentials* (1931), Toomer invokes his belonging to the only 'pure' race extant, i. e., the human race, and he does so in a language that clearly speaks to contemporary concerns about ideological constructs such as racial, gender and class distinctions:

I am of no particular race. I am of the human race, a man at large in the human world, preparing a new race.

I am of no specific region. I am of the earth.

I am of no particular class. I am of the human class, preparing a new class.

I am neither male nor female nor in-between.

I am of sex, with male differentiations.

I am of no special field, I am of the field of being. (81-82)

Toomer's striking 'planetary' identification ties in with later phenomenological assumptions about the place of humans in an increasingly man-made world, as in the writings of Merleau-Ponty or Charles Jonson; it also raises questions about the nature-culture divide which has come under attack by both poststructuralism and ecocriticism alike. Finally, it serves to back up Toomer's notion of America as encompassing people of various ethnic backgrounds rather than merely 'white' Americans. Though clearly in conflict with the dominant American self-description of his time, his increasing emphasis on 'Americanness' as essentially a process of creolization has been, as Sollors convincingly claims, Toomer's outstanding and lasting contribution to modern literature.

In their formal approaches to African American literary texts, *AAW* ranges from archive-driven, bio-historical assessments of a writer's ambiguous stances, as in the case of Du Bois's trip to Nazi Germany in 1936, to meticulous semiotic analysis in the chapter on Wright and Hurston. Whatever take on a specific writer or

period Sollors chooses, his exploration of the depth and scope of African American writing is always on target, always well-founded, and always informed by a rare infatuation with literature as both individual achievement and cultural expression. While navigating a highly contested and highly politicized field of critical inquiry, Sollors reads African American literature, to retool Ezra Pound's definition of the good reader in his *ABC of Reading*, "with an open mind." As a collection of essays previously published between 1978 to 2011, *AAW* also sheds light on Sollors's lingering interest in the themes and ideas expressed in his path-breaking studies *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent American Culture* (1986), *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1997), *Ethnic Modernism* (2008), and, finally, *The Temptation of Despair: Tales of the 1940* (2014) which could be read as a continuation and extension of the writers discussed in chapter five, "African American Intellectuals and Europe between the Two World Wars." Evidently, what interests Sollors most is not the exotism of the cultural fringe. Rather, his lasting contribution to the field of African American literature has been to expose and study the many interracial, cross-cultural, and frequently transnational relationships that have continued to shape this important corpus of American literature. The love and erudition that Sollors brings to these texts have been outstanding. If both have garnered for him the respect and recognition of American Studies scholars worldwide, the twelve essays collected in *African American Writing* provide ample proof to the originality and critical ingenuity of their author. They also go to show how Sollors's transatlantic perspective has changed our perception of African American literature as it were.

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