LITERATURE: THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

Citation metadata

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Date: Fall 2009
From: Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources(Vol. 30, Issue 4)
Publisher: University of Wisconsin System
Document Type: Article
Length: 2,364 words

Main content

Article Preview:


This reference provides concise yet indepth coverage of African American women's literature from the nineteenth century to the present. One in a series of "companions" on topics such as the African American novel and the Harlem Renaissance, this volume follows a format similar to that of other works in the series, with a chronology, a section on historical context, and a section on genres.

Each of the two main sections covers several broad areas of the literature. Part I, "History, Contexts, and Criticism," includes chapters on four historical periods of the literature: the early years of African American women's literature, primarily the nineteenth century; the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s; and the contemporary period, with one chapter on contemporary writers and another on African American feminist theories and literary criticism. Part II, "Genre, Gender, and Race," discusses specific genres--the "slave" or "emancipatory" narrative, autobiography, novels, poetry, performing arts, children's and young adult literature, essays, the short story, and, finally, popular fiction--exploring the characteristics of each and the relevance of African American women's writings in each to the ongoing struggles of resistance to and liberation from racial and gender oppressions. Some authors, such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Ntozake Shange, to mention just a few, are discussed in both the historical and the genre sections.

Editors Angelyn Mitchell, associate professor of English and African American Studies at Georgetown University and founder of its African American Studies Program, and Danille K. Taylor, dean of humanities and professor of English at Dillard University, state that The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature "chronicles, interprets, and maps the African American woman's literary tradition and its critical tradition" (p.6). They did not intend this resource to be a comprehensive history of African American women's literature, but "rather ... to offer guidance in reading and studying African American women's writing ... and [to] reveal the plurality and multiplicity of this writing" (p.7). Despite this disclaimer, however, the comprehensiveness of this resource is impressive. The fifteen contributors were obviously selected because of their expertise and breadth of knowledge. Madhu Dubey, for example, who wrote the chapter on novels, is the author of Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic, and Cheryl Wall, who wrote the chapter on the Harlem Renaissance, is the author of Women of the Harlem Renaissance.

Part I carefully probes the social, political, and cultural contexts of various historical periods and the challenges the authors faced by being positioned at the intersection of race and gender discrimination. These historical chapters also provide detailed coverage of less-known and better-known authors of each period. Similarly, the chapters about literary genres discuss the complex cultural and political factors that influenced women to write in a particular genre or challenged their access to the genre. Contributors frequently mention the project...

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