ForeWord Reviews

South of Tradition: Essays on African American Literature
Trudier Harris-Lopez
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For too long, the canon of Southern literary studies was almost exclusively white, while scholars examining the African American literary tradition virtually ignored the importance of regional geography. In her previous work, Harris-Lopez has helped to change that, especially with her editorial work on widely used anthologies. As the holder of an endowed chair at the University of North Carolina who has written or edited more than a dozen books, Harris-Lopez has shaped the study of African American literature, insisting upon the importance of the intersection of African American literature and Southern literature.

Readers who pick up this pioneering scholar's newest book and, based upon its title, hope to see a study of Southern African American writers will be disappointed, however. The title is more metaphoric than geographic, and refers to Harris-Lopez's method of looking beyond the traditional subjects of study. In the twelve essays collected here, she examines lesser-read African American authors such as Raymond Andrews and Henry Dumas, and up-and-coming authors such as Randall Kenan. When she does approach the more canonical authors like Ralph Ellison and Alice Walker, she examines less studied works (such as Ellison's posthumously published Juneteenth) or offers unusual takes on the over-studied (such as the humor in Walker's The Color Purple).

Perhaps the best essay is Harris-Lopez's reading of the works of Raymond Andrews, a talented writer who committed suicide just on the verge of gaining a wider readership. Like Faulkner with Yoknapatawpha County, Andrews created a mythical landscape in his fiction, but unlike Faulkner's, the focus of Andrews's fiction is the area's black population. His creation, Appalachee, Georgia, is populated with a large cast of unforgettable characters, many of whom live in conditions not far removed from slavery. As Andrews chronicles their struggles from 1918 to 1963 (when his novels are set) he "manages nevertheless to transcend the limitations upon human spirit that the corresponding limitations upon human activity would warrant." Harris-Lopez's essay makes clear what a great talent was lost when Andrews died.

Every essay in this collection is worth reading for those interested in the authors discussed, but this collection will not be remembered as the author's best work. The essays are good examples of well-written, jargon-free criticism. However, they gain little by being read as

a group. In her introduction, Harris-Lopez writes, “these essays are little parts of my mind that I am sending happily on their way.” This is the collection’s greatest weakness: it lacks a grand, unifying vision. However, having all the essays gathered under one cover may introduce some readers to authors they would not have discovered if the essays had been published separately in academic journals. And perhaps that alone is justification enough for bringing them together here.

Erik Bledsoe