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Glenda Carpio & Werner Sollors, eds., *African American Literary Studies: New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges. Amerikastudien/ American Studies*, vol. 55, n°4, 2010

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- 1 This special issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies* edited by Glenda Carpio and Werner Sollors offers an embarrassment of riches. First and foremost, the reader discovers an exceptional gathering of hitherto unknown primary sources: five short stories by Zora Neale Hurston, two of her previously unpublished letters as well as new texts by Jamaica Kincaid and Ishmael Reed are printed here for the first time. The volume also includes several scholarly articles casting new perspectives on the Harlem Renaissance and/or envisaging new directions and new challenges in African American Literary Studies.
- 2 Findings are usually the fruit of chance and the discovery of the Hurston short stories is no exception. Glenda Carpio and Werner Sollors chanced upon the documents while perusing microfilms in search of original material for their course on Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright at Harvard University in 2010. They came upon “The Book of Harlem”, “Monkey Junk” and “The Back Room” (all found in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1927). The other two stories, “The Country in the Woman” (1927) and “She Rock” (1933) had been detected by M. Genevieve West who introduces the two short stories in this issue. None of the five pieces were included in *The Complete Stories of Zora Neale Hurston* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr in 1996.
- 3 The surprise of the editors was twofold since these rediscovered stories bring out an unfamiliar aspect of the Harlem Renaissance author—the urban Zora. Here is Carpio and Sollors’ comment:

The stories were set in the New York City of the Harlem Renaissance; they reminded us less of the canonical Hurston than of authors like Rudolph Fisher and Nella Larsen, who are more closely associated with stories of migration from the country to the city and with sophisticated novels of manners in urban settings.

- 4 In “The Book of Harlem”, “Monkey Junk” and “She Rock”, the spunky clash between urban language and mock biblical tone, between the sacred and the profane, between the serious and the humorous evokes the role and voice of the African American folk preacher confronted with the urban environment. “The Country in the Woman” is a vivid and humorous portrayal of the shift in male/female relations after the Black migration to the North. Of the five stories, “The Back Room” is the most unexpected. Here is a short excerpt:

West 139th street at ten p.m. Rich fur wraps tripping up the steps of the well furnished home in the two hundred block. Sedans, coaches, coupes, roadsters. Inside fine gowns and tuxedos, marcel waves and glitter. People who seemed to belong to every race on earth—Harlem’s upper class had gathered there her beauty and chivalry.

- 5 One would be hard put to recognize in these lines the Southern folk writer and author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As the editors suggest, “Zora Neale Hurston also could have become *the* Harlem novelist of the 1920s.”
- 6 The two hitherto unpublished letters, addressed respectively to Robert Redfield (1936) and Alan Lomax (1937), evince Hurston’s Janus-faced personality. In the 1936 letter, the writer-anthropologist expresses her enthusiasm for the rich material that remains to be unearthed and collected in the West Indies. A year later, Zora, “the mudslinging word warrior” writes a blistering letter to Alan Lomax, the famous folklorist.
- 7 In “America”, an autobiographical essay prompted by the newly published Hurston stories, Kincaid confesses her mixed feelings—dislike and admiration—for the Harlem Renaissance writer. Reflecting on American and African American literature, she concludes that “there simply is nothing more American than the African American”.
- 8 The critical articles included in this issue complement the “New Texts” section and position themselves within the ongoing debate on the future of *African American Literary Studies*. Daphne Brooks’ path-breaking article on Zora Neale Hurston’s sonic performances analyses the writer’s vocal recordings as archival and ethnographic endeavors. In ““Black Renaissance”: A Brief History of the Concept,” Ernest Julius Mitchell II traces the shifts in terminology from “Negro Renaissance” to “Harlem Renaissance” and, more recently, to “Black Renaissance” (1919 through the early 1970s). The author implies that the term “Black Renaissance” conceives the artistic movement as both international and interracial.
- 9 Frank Mehring’s contribution, “The Visual Harlem Renaissance; or, Winold Reiss in Mexico”, throws light on the German American artist whose disappointment with the United States led him to move to Mexico, his *Promised Land* (“Mexico Diary” 1920). Upon his return, he was asked by Alain Locke to illustrate *The New Negro* (1925). Mehring argues that Reiss’ stylistic development during the Harlem Renaissance bears the mark of his transatlantic and Latin American detours.
- 10 Kenneth Warren’s short provocative piece entitled “On What Was African American Literature?” considers that the Civil Rights Movement’s relative success “eroded the real basis of representation that had been African American literature’s *raison d’être*.” Having pronounced the demise of African American literature (with Morrison’s *The*

Bluest Eye, 1974 as the last work written in this tradition), Warren does not discuss the paths taken by African American writers in the past few decades. One possible direction is suggested in Beatty's recent novel *Slumberland* (2008), which grafts African American history onto Germany, before and after reunification. George Blaustein's "Flight to Germany: Paul Beatty, the Color Line, and the Berlin Wall" ultimately looks at "the structural affinities" between Warren's question, "what was African American literature?" and a more general one: "what was American literature?"

- 11 Building on recent developments in African American Literary Studies, George Hutchinson's "American Transnationalism and the Romance of Race" advocates the adoption of an international perspective that would transcend the North American assumptions on race, while retaining the national framing of culture as an important parameter. Hutchinson discusses McKay's *Banjo*, Cape Verdean-American identity, the emergence of Afro-Deutsch identity in the late 20th century, and a memoir by Anita Reynolds whose life in Europe and Morocco between 1928 and 1940 was instrumental in shaping her views on race.
- 12 The richness and the variety of this special issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* are ample proof of the vitality of African American Literary Studies on both sides of the Atlantic. As for the recent Zora Neale Hurston findings, they are an incentive for scholars to do "some more digging in her garden"—as well as in other writers' secret gardens.

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Thèmes : Recensions

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