

treasures that are being proclaimed now by enlightened critics of American writing.

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**H. Nigel Thomas. *From Folklore to Fiction: A Study of Folk Heroes and Rituals in the Black American Novel. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 118.* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) xii, 200 pp. \$37.95.**

The complex and important relationship between African American folklore and African American literature is the focus of this thoughtful, well-written book. Many African American writers have drawn from folklore, and Thomas sets out to demonstrate--by analyzing specific examples--some of the traditions that have developed in the use of folklore in African American writing.

Thomas provides a fine introduction to the principal forms of African American folklore. From tricksters to preachers, from verbal lore to musical lore, from religious lore to secular lore, Thomas covers a wide range of essential themes in a succinct and informative manner. This section would make a good general introduction for beginning students in African American folklore or culture.

Thomas then turns to an exploration of the ways in which literary characters invoke the qualities of folk characters. There is a chapter on such archetypal characters as the folk preacher and the "bad nigger," and another on the trickster. A long chapter is devoted to rituals, with special attention on blues and folk sermons. As Thomas puts it, "No other aspect of Afro-American reality is as potent as the ritual. It is inevitable, then, that in works where the characters embody very definite traits from black American legendary heroes, Afro-American rituals also abound, for the one complements the other." The development of the dramatic treatment of rituals in literature is discussed, and some important and interesting parallels (as well as contrasts) are drawn between such rituals as blues performances and sermons.

In each chapter Thomas takes the reader from early (in some cases nineteenth century) to modern approaches, documenting the shift from the rather direct and somewhat "clumsy" uses of folklore in early writings to the highly sophisticated, politically informed symbolism of current works. He argues that African American writers have always had to operate within a European American context. The trick was always to balance the (often conflicting) demands of publishers and audiences. Early writers, for example, were probably pushed by

publishers into utilizing folklore “buffoonery” in their novels. This created a situation in which the writer’s challenge became to satisfy these external audiences without sacrificing either dignity or artistic merit. (It is interesting to note that there were similar pressures on African American musicians to conform to white stereotypes.) A major shift appears to have occurred in the nineteen-thirties or forties. From the nineteen-forties onward, folk materials were used more sparingly. Rather than “incorporate all the characteristics of a given folk hero” into their novels, authors began instead to use bits and pieces of folk material as “catalysts” for the works they were creating. As Thomas puts it, folklore became “absorbed into realism.” Or, in some cases, into symbolism and/or politics.

This is a fascinating book, providing insight into the complex relationships between African American folklore ritual and literature. It is recommended highly.

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**Richard H. Thompson. *Theories of Ethnicity: A Critical Appraisal*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989) 206pp., \$45.00.**

This work is a systematic attempt to identify certain major theories that govern our discourse and analyses of issues pertaining to ethnicity and race. Sociobiology, primordialism, assimilationism, world-system theory and neo-Marxism are among the theories included.

In examining each of these, Thompson provides what he called an “internalist critique.” That is, he sought to criticize each of the theories internally on its own grounds. He made it clear that his aim was not to engage in any critical analysis by appealing to some external standard that may be established by comparing one theory with another.

In the epilogue, Thompson offers his own theory of race and ethnicity by reacting to the world-system theory, of which Sidney Wilhelm is representative. Wilhelm enlarged Marxism in ways to account for race, ethnicity and racism. In keeping with the views of Wilhelm and certain other neo-Marxists, Thompson argues for the primacy of economic factors, especially those that pertain to modes of production. He maintains that the modes of production, seen within the world economy, must be regarded as the primary frameworks for analysis of race and ethnicity. That is, that it must be made clear that the economic factors determine the nature and dynamics of ethnic and race relations. In a word, that capitalism thrives on maintaining racial and ethnic tensions among the various groups of the world. In the U.S. and in South Africa, for example,