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Book Review: Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature

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Over the past decade or so, masculinity has become a subject of continuing critical and theoretical fascination in the academy, and there is now a burgeoning subfield of work on the subject of black masculinity alone. This growing body of scholarship on black masculinity has developed in part in recent years because critics have increasingly understood the status of race in masculine formation and the importance of looking beyond white men as a normative category. Michael K. Johnson offers a revealing and admirable study of black masculinity in relation to a topic that has ordinarily been presumed to be incompatible with black male identity formation: the American frontier. His study, a timely one that should prevent us from ever making this assumption again, makes a valuable and unique contribution to contemporary critical and theoretical dialogues on black masculinity.

Johnson draws on a rich legacy of works in literature by Oscar Micheaux, Owen Wister, Nat Love, John A. Williams, and William Gardner Smith. An added strength of his study is its illustration of the origins of this frontier theme in African American literature in such early works as *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealing with John Marrant, a Black* (1785). Johnson develops his highly intertextual study through engaged and sometimes comparative readings of mostly novels from chapter to chapter. His purpose is to demonstrate ways in which African Americans have revised and expanded the myth of the frontier since its emergence in the nineteenth century. He shows us how some black writers have highlighted the frontier as a spatial backdrop precisely for the purpose of illustrating ways in which it allows black men to transcend the barriers conventionally imposed by the dominant discourses of race in the United States.

The work of scholars such as Richard Slotkin and Annette Kolodny, along with classic histories of the frontier offered by Frederick Jackson Turner and Theodore Roosevelt, helps Johnson establish the critical foundations for his argument. Furthermore, feminist perspectives and novels by black women writers such as Pearl Cleage, Toni Morrison, and Pauline Hopkins are also methodologically important in shaping Johnson's study of black masculinity. His highly effective strategy of juxtaposing works that are not ordinarily thought of in relation to one another is most fascinatingly manifested in the third chapter where he explores Love, Hopkins, and Wister. Indeed, this study, as the introduction states, "helps us to expand our understanding of the way African American writers have participated in the creation of American literature in general and of the literature of the frontier in particular—as both agents and innovators." That Johnson highlights the extranational contours of the American frontier myth makes his study relevant to an increasingly transnational American studies and, to an extent, also underscores the utility of global and transnational frameworks in studies of the American Great Plains.

Johnson's early invocation of the iconography of Sonny Rollins's album *Way out West* may leave some readers hungry for even more historical examples of popular invocations of the frontier myth to complement the discussion of literary works. This is a fine and well-crafted book. It urgently needs to be read in the continuum of scholarship on early national ideologies of manhood by Dana Nelson and Robyn Wiegman.

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