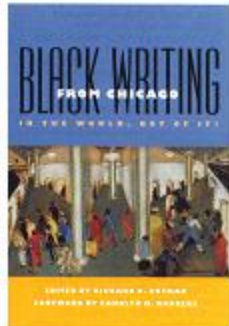


Books

Reviews



Native Sons and Daughters



Chicago's black lit history gets its due in a new anthology.

By Jonathan Messinger

Richard Guzman's new collection of African-American writing from Chicago is a heady mix of old-school agitprop and literary wonderment, a testimony not only to the multitude of great black writers who were born or passed through here, but to the myriad forms literature may take.

In his introduction, Guzman addresses the dearth of anthologies collecting African-American literature. The late Gwendolyn Brooks published *Jump Bad* in 1971, and the Organization of Black American Culture published *Nommo: A Literary Legacy of Black Chicago (1967-1987)* in 1987. Guzman's *Black Writing from Chicago: In the World, Not of It?* (Southern Illinois University Press, \$19.95) is the first academic attempt to gather the disparate, and, arguably diasporic, literature of Black Chicago from the 19th century to the 21st.

Guzman uses author's birth dates to organize the collection chronologically. At first glance, this approach seems to eschew intellectual heft in favor of an easy way out, allowing Guzman to avoid making thematic connections. But *Black Writing* has an elliptical resonance: There are echoes of Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. DuBois, both included at the beginning of the anthology, in the excerpt from Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, included toward the end.

Guzman has approached his task like a curator. He's chosen work from such luminaries as Brooks and Richard Wright, that identifies their idiosyncratic styles, even if they're not quintessential selections. Similarly, he's included pieces that would otherwise now be inaccessible to contemporary readers.

Take, for example, two selections published in the *Chicago*

Defender during the newspaper's early years. In an editorial from 1917 headlined "Keep Your Mouth Shut, Please!" the editors exhort new residents to keep their voices down on city buses and trains. The editorial reads: "Cut this out, dear reader, and whenever you see one talking loudly hand it to them." It's a tasty bit of old-school newspaper belly-aching, but it's also an extension of the *Defender's* leading role as a voice of the "Great Black Migration," when the paper circulated nationwide and printed train schedules to facilitate the movement of blacks from the South to the North. A few pages later, though separated by nearly 30 years in the paper's history, Langston Hughes satirizes a similar social problem in one of his popular "Simple Stories" columns, featuring the comic character Jesse B. Semple. Jesse is perturbed at the amount of grease people put in their hair: "...there ought to be a law against people with greasy heads going around leaning them up against people's walls and spotting them all up."

It's to Guzman's credit that he included both of these. Though they seem to address frivolous topics, they also encapsulate the different ways literature can speak to

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social concerns in the space of the same newspaper.

The anthology includes important contemporary figures as well. The latter years are necessarily focused on poetry, given spoken word and slam's dominance in the last 15 years. Guzman reprints poet and performer Marvin Tate's gorgeous "The Ebony Mannequin in the Marshall Fields State Street Store Window" and Tyehimba Jess's fiery poem "We Live."

Though diverse in style and voice, subject matter and perspective, enough charged current runs through the anthology that, by the end, you can almost hear the contemporary writers talking to their forebears.

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"A work of great importance, and a sheer delight to read."
Carolyn Rodgers,
Poet, National Book Award Nominee

"...an important contribution that will be greatly appreciated by scholars and by much of the general public."
Lonnie G. Bunch,
Founding Director, National Museum of African American History

"A tremendous resource for anyone interested in the literature of Chicago...At the same time each selection has a national significance."
Lisa Woolley,
Author, *American Voices of the Chicago Renaissance*

"...impressive...fascinating..." *Chicago Tribune*