



How to Read African American Literature: Post-Civil Rights Fiction and the Task of Interpretation

Aida Levy-Hussen

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How to Read African American Literature offers a series of provocations designed to unsettle the predominant assumptions and interpretations readers make when encountering post-Civil Rights black fiction. Convening around the prolific slavery narratives that lie at the heart of contemporary black literary studies, Aida Levy-Hussen's argument develops on two levels: as a textual analysis of black historical fiction, and as a critical examination of the reading practices that characterize the scholarship of our time.

Examining a body of novels written after the Civil Rights era, including works by Toni Morrison, David Bradley, Octavia Butler, Charles Johnson, and others, Levy-Hussen engages the charged debate over how these writers and their critics understand the work of black literature and its preoccupation with narratives of slavery. Through a series of readings informed by psychoanalysis, affect theory, memory studies, and feminist and queer theory, she reveals how social injury and collective grief inhabit and drive post-Civil Rights African Americanist discourses. Levy-Hussen contends that rather than wed ourselves to a "therapeutic" mode of reading (the idea that working through historical trauma will enable psychic healing in the present) or "prohibitive" reading (the belief that such fictions of historical return are dangerous and to be avoided), we must develop a supple method of reading and interpretation that attends to the indirect, unexpected, and opaque workings of historical fantasy and desire. Moving beyond the redemption of historical wounds, Levy-Hussen makes a crucial intervention into African American literary studies, proposing new ways to read African American literature.

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