



Representing the Race: A New Political History of African American Literature

Gene Andrew Jarrett

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The political value of African American literature has long been a topic of great debate among American writers, both black and white, from Thomas Jefferson to Barack Obama. In his compelling new book, *Representing the Race*, Gene Andrew Jarrett traces the genealogy of this topic in order to develop an innovative political history of African American literature. Jarrett examines texts of every sort—pamphlets, autobiographies, cultural criticism, poems, short stories, and novels—to parse the myths of authenticity, popular culture, nationalism, and militancy that have come to define African American political activism in recent decades. He argues that unless we show the diverse and complex ways that African American literature has transformed society, political myths will continue to limit our understanding of this intellectual tradition.

Cultural forums ranging from the printing press, schools, and conventions, to parlors, railroad cars, and courtrooms provide the backdrop to this African American literary history, while the foreground is replete with compelling stories, from the debate over racial genius in early American history and the intellectual culture of racial politics after slavery, to the tension between copyright law and free speech in contemporary African American culture, to the political audacity of Barack Obama's creative writing. Erudite yet accessible, *Representing the Race* is a bold explanation of what's at stake in continuing to politicize African American literature in the new millennium.

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