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In Review: What books by African American women writers were acquired by American academic libraries?: A study of institutional legitimation, exclusion, and implicit censorship

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What books by African American women writers were acquired
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Black, K. (2009). *What books by African American women writers were acquired by American academic libraries?: A study of institutional legitimation, exclusion, and implicit censorship*. Lewiston, NY: Mellen. 211 pp. ISBN 978-0-7734-3792-0. \$109.95.

Professor Kimberly Black of the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville has tackled a vast topic with multiple facets and implications, all packed into a slim volume, all begging for lengthier treatment. The book is a revision of the author's 2003 doctoral dissertation at Florida State University which was entitled "The Importance, Review and Holdings of Contemporary African-American Women's Poetry and Fiction in ARL Libraries, 1980-1990." The book and dissertation titles suggest the range of issues addressed: the significance of the literary output of writers from a "non-dominant" group in society; the nature of social power wielded by institution and individual; and, more specifically, the influence of the publishing industry and the book reviewing industry on the book selection process at large academic libraries where, Black argues, "collection development is the canonization of institutional knowledge" (29).

Professor Black begins by grounding her research in the theories of social power of sociologist Anthony Giddens and philosopher Michel Foucault. Chapter 2 gives an extensive analysis of the importance of the writing of African-American women in asserting their long-denied humanity and in critiquing Western, Newtonian notions of the "reality of everyday life" (33). Applying techniques of literary criticism and discourse analysis, Black discusses characteristics "distinctive to African-American women's texts" (37): polyphony in Ntozake Shange's *Liliane* and Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*; mutable space, place, and time in Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café*; nonlinear narrative structure in Tony Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* and Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man*; conjuring and magic in Jones's *Song for Annin'ho*; and communities of the unborn, living, and dead in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Writers can influence society only if they are published, reviewed, and widely read. The economic realities of publishing pose huge problems for African-American women writers trying to “break the first seal” (97). Yet, in the eleven-year span covered by this study, 102 African-American women writers published 233 literary titles (86-87), many of them highly acclaimed (143). Small presses accounted for 58% of the publications (89); university presses published only 17 titles (about 7%), mostly by already recognized writers (91). Poetry accounted for a disproportionate 70% of the titles published (86-87).

The second hurdle for writers is “making a book known,” particularly through book reviews (99). Librarians’ collection development decisions rely heavily on reviews in six “core reviewing journals.” However, only 30% of the 233 titles studied were reviewed in the core journals; large publishers were more likely to get reviewed than small presses, and fiction more likely than poetry. Three reviewing sources, *Library Journal*, *New York Times Book Review*, and *Publisher’s Weekly*, published more reviews than might have been predicted, *Kirkus Reviews* a roughly proportionate number, and *Booklist* and *Choice* disproportionately fewer. Given the importance of *Choice* as a book selection tool for academic libraries, its few reviews and its policy of not reviewing contemporary poetry are particularly damaging to African-American women writers (123).

Finally, Professor Black analyses the external and internal factors which significantly affect the inclusion of titles in the collections of large academic libraries. She argues that libraries claim to represent fairly all points of view but do not, in fact, do so (128), and she recommends that libraries renew their commitment to the inclusivity of the American intellectual canon (31, 155-156). Her suggestions for further research include studies of small presses and other marketing channels more hospitable to African-American women writers than traditional publishers, patterns of library collection of contemporary poetry, and the role of libraries as “social/socially legitimizing institutions” (156-158). The study, limited as it was to members of the Association of Research Libraries, sheds no light on library collections in smaller four-year and community colleges – or on their curricula. Since over 40% of American college students, many of them nontraditional students, begin their higher education in community colleges (AACC, 2009), it may be that college library holdings and reading assignments in college literature courses have an influence on societal attitudes parallel to that of the repositories of collective wisdom represented by the holdings of large research libraries (21).

In the tradition of doctoral dissertations, this work provides multiple literature reviews on the many topics that it addresses: philosophical and literary concepts, the attitudes of American publishers and book reviewers toward black women writers, the relationships between publishers and collection development librarians, the influence of book reviews and book review editors, among others. The 15-page bibliography is a rich compilation of the sources in the literature reviews; however, it has been only partially updated for the 2009 publication. The book is marred also by editing errors and inconsistencies: repetitions of text, misdirection to appendices and illustrative tables, inconsistent citations. The index seems to have been generated automatically from a differently-paged version of the text, so that it is virtually useless.

The major weakness of this book, however, is also its major strength: Its potential scope is impossibly large, the final product necessarily limited. In the grand sweep of the important questions it poses, it touches on many disciplines (sociological theory, literary criticism, information theory, practical librarianship), employs multiple research methods (literature reviews, discourse analysis, descriptive and inferential statistics) and has implications for theory and practice for a variety of policy-makers (social theorists, academics, writers, publishers, editors, reviewers, librarians, library managers). Each of the important issues that it touches on warrants extensive further research, building on Professor Black's rich groundwork.

Reference:

American Association of Community Colleges. (2009). *Community college facts at a glance*. Retrieved from <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Pages/fastfacts.aspx>.

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