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Yohann Lucas, *Renaissance de Harlem et Black Arts Movement : la construction d'un canon littéraire africain-américain*, Paris, Sorbonne Université Presses, 2025

Résumé – Paru en 2025 aux Sorbonne Université Presses, l'ouvrage *Renaissance de Harlem et Black Arts Movement : la construction d'un canon littéraire africain-américain* de Yohann Lucas, maître de conférences à l'université de Rouen Normandie étudie, comme son titre l'indique, la formation du canon littéraire africain-américain à travers deux périodes fondatrices, la Renaissance de Harlem dans les années 1920 et 1930, et le Black Arts Movement dans les années 1960 et 1970. L'auteur choisit un corpus d'anthologies et de revues parues à ces moments de foisonnement créatif pour expliquer leur rôle dans la conception d'un canon. Il entraîne ses lecteurs et lectrices dans une étude détaillée de ces objets littéraires, structurée en trois parties : production, reproduction, et préservation. Les étudiants et étudiantes, doctorants et doctorantes, chercheurs et chercheuses s'intéressant aux canons littéraires, à la sociologie de la littérature mais aussi à l'histoire de la littérature africaine-américaine auront tout intérêt à ouvrir les pages de cet ouvrage.

Mots-clés : canon littéraire ; littérature africaine-américaine ; réception ; Black Arts Movement ; Renaissance de Harlem

Keywords: literary canon; African American literature; reception; Black Arts Movement; Harlem Renaissance

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Over 392 pages, Yohann Lucas tells the history of the making of the African American literary canon, focusing on two specific burgeoning eras that led to its birth, via the creation of anthologies and magazines. The first era was the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. The second happened thirty years later with the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. These two eras stand out due to the abundance of texts, anthologies, and magazines, that were created around these two movements. By focusing on these two movements, he leaves the intervening decades and post-1970s developments as potential areas for future scholarship.

Before diving into the rich body of his work, one has to notice the attention to detail brought by Yohann Lucas throughout his analyses and critical insights. Terminologies are constantly defined and what strikes the reader is not only the precision of Lucas' definitions, carefully crafted to avoid any inconsistency, but also the attention to proper wording, and to the meaning of words. This linguistic precision provides a basis for his broader argument about canon formation.

Building on this methodological foundation, magazines and anthologies are studied, analyzed, and dissected to demonstrate how they made the canon, with whom, by whom, and what ways were used to make it possible to talk about an African American literary canon today. Lucas studies authors and their work, but also the literary paratext: the choice of titles, the images chosen and disseminated in the peritext of anthologies, and the introductions by their editors.

In his introduction, Lucas argues that the canonizing process is organized into three distinct phases, and so is his book, developed within the seven following chapters: chapters 1 to 3 delve into the production of a canon, chapters 4 to 6 into the reproduction of the latter, and the last chapter is about the preservation of the canon.

Producing a canon

In chapter 1 entitled "Littérature et Mouvements," Yohann Lucas questions the varied movements that exist within literature, not only the two movements evoked in his title, but also those present within the compound of geography, gender, and the evolution through time and space. Canon formation was never a singular or isolated process. Lucas shows how different modes of communication and transportation (like Black Star Line) made it possible to share messages and liberation movements across countries, leading the fights to become unified. He also analyzes editorial decisions as they set the tone of the anthology or magazine published.

Defining oneself and being recognized, legitimized (41) by American society was important, while at the same time moving away from the usual criteria decided by white gatekeepers. The best example

provided is the slogan “Black is Beautiful” of the Black Arts Movement, which explicitly departed from white criteria. This process of self-definition and legitimization required moving from underground movements to institutional acceptance.

Chapter 2, “Une littérature au croisement du populaire et de l’élitaire,” traces this transformation. It evokes the context of production of African American canon, the role of universities and Black studies departments in legitimizing African American literature, and the recruitment of writers on campus (55), in parallel with the birth of the New Critics and New York Intellectuals movements. The latter largely ignored African American literary production except for a few writers whom they set in a position of authority (67), as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. Some anthologies were designed with a pedagogical interest, but sociology was also at play in the making of the canon, as evidenced by the role of the South Side Writers Group in Chicago in deciding whether to use a “social voice” and “social consciousness” instead of only a literary voice (60).

Two threads arise from this context and keep on reappearing through the monograph and explain its highly interdisciplinary content. First, Lucas argues there were constant tensions between literary or social value of a text, and second, between the elite and popular cultures, which could be explained by the need to self-finance, and to woo readers to subscribe to their favorite magazines. This economic reality shaped editorial decisions as their finances were based on two types of customers: advertisers and readers’ subscriptions. African American writers and other members of the literary world had to decide whether they needed to focus on literary quality or rather discuss social issues. They also had to decide whether they wanted to stay avant-garde and keep a low-but-elitist profile, or become more part of the popular culture. These distinctions became more and more blurred as the canon was formed.

Having established the tensions between literary and social values, Lucas turns to the American publishing market in his third chapter, “Horizons et limites éditoriales,” yet another mountain to climb filled with stereotypes and discrimination. He introduces the concept of “visibility” to develop this section arguing that to become part of a canon, a work of art has to be made available to the public (99).

There was an obvious lack of visibility for Black writers, and white publishers considered there was no market for the products they were selling. Other issues were the lack of representation at key positions, and the success of white writers writing about African American lives: a few white writers appear in anthologies about African Americans. Among other issues than the supposed limited demand for African American literature, the “type” of literature is another. For instance, Alain Locke was offered to edit a special issue of *Survey Graphic* in 1925, in which he highlighted cultural productions rather than social issues, hence controlling representation. On the other hand, in the 1960s and 1970s, an all African American model of publishing “reflected the Black Arts Movement political and cultural agenda” (126).

Despite other advances in publishing such as the democratization of mimeograph in the 1950s that led to a peak in African American literature being published around 1968-1976 (129), Yohann Lucas reminds the reader that there were still ongoing issues. Most notably, the biggest African American publishing house Johnson Publishing Company was still incomparable in size to Harper and Row or McGraw Hill, and smaller houses like Broadside amounted to little, financially speaking (146). A move from a writer to an independent publishing house was viewed as a “militant” act, like Gwendolyn Brooks who left Harper for Broadside Press in 1969 (144). A geographical move further west would do no good to the canon, despite independence gains. Lucas argues that the decentralization did not necessarily help African American literature, that then became more isolated from the publishing houses of New York (151).

Lucas does not keep a purely textual approach to the formation of the canon. In terms of visibility, with an intermedia focus, the author explains the role of illustrations in magazines rather than anthologies and the advent of broadsides, with Broadside Press leading to the “profusion and diffusion of images and illustrations created by African American movements” (132-3). Broad­sides are considered particularly historically significant in the 1960s and 1970s (135). The texts adorn themselves with images, like Yohann Lucas’s own choice of book cover, that of Harlem Book Store by Jack Garofalo. Within the book, we find images that participate in the formation of the collective imaginary/memory, in the making of a canon not only literary but also purely artistic, and intermedial. These images remind us how important archives are in the making of a literary canon and in creating a collective memory.

The illustrations also reflect the material issues arising, leading to a poor reception of some books or magazines: there were obvious flaws due to the lack of contact with professional printers, which led to a less qualitative book cover, itself drawing the readers to consider the value of such a book as “less than”, whatever the quality of the text within.

Reproducing the texts

The following chapters are particularly of value for scholars interested in reception studies or sociology of literature. Chapter 4 “Seuils de lecture” evokes right away the idea of “paratext,” coined by Gérard Genette in the 1980s in his book *Seuils*. Through this lens, he examines the norms and traditions being created. For instance, the introductions by editors help us understand their aim and their different views who should belong to their anthology.

Examining the tables of contents of these anthologies and magazines reveals who was being published and reproduced. A crucial question emerges: what it means to be an African American writer, what does it entail, and should one get the *étiquette* “black” writer to be included within anthologies or magazines? The short answer is no, as we learned earlier that white writers were sometimes included, and that some African American writers against the very *étiquette* of “black” writer like Countee Cullen were the most frequently selected in African American anthologies (155). Some authors who were considered as too influenced by white poetry or literature were sometimes excluded from anthologies, particularly in the 1960s. The question of culture is also and again raised with the paratext of some anthologies, and in his introduction to the 1969 *The New Black Poetry*; Clarence Major’s selection rests on the definition “more cultural than racial” (164) and makes room for Marxist theories.

A pedagogical consideration emerges when Lucas reminds us that most anthologies were meant for pupils or students. In Willis Richardson’s introduction to *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro*, the editor explains that the plays selected were meant for school practice (169). The American school context and the views of school commissions and commissioners had to be taken into account. The latter had – and still have – enormous power, which could translate to censorship or calls for the removal of some poems evoking sexuality, for instance: to demonstrate this, Yohann Lucas provides an analysis of the poem “I want to Die While You Love Me” by Georgia Douglas Johnson (171-2).

Not only was the question of African American writers raised, but also the legitimacy of editors of anthologies dedicated to African American literature, as some were created by white editors like V.F. Calverton’s *Anthology of Negro American Literature* in 1929. Lucas details how their previous experience in editing comforted their legitimacy. Critics are also mentioned; Dudley Randall evoked the difficulty of white critics to understand black poets (183). To illustrate the limits of language in conveying the African American experience, Lucas uses the poem “I know I’m not sufficiently Obscure” by Ray Durem (184).

In terms of representation, women are the biggest losers in the race for publishing, as the 1968 *Dark Symphony* anthology, made up of 34 authors but only four women (Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Mari Evans and Paule Marshall), demonstrates (208-9). The women are – maybe regretfully, maybe to make a point and highlight their lack of visibility – also placed at the end of this chapter, where a table of the percentages of female writers in anthologies is quite enlightening. Gender disparity is mentioned in the last few pages of the following chapter as well, as more men were reedited in anthologies than women. This inequality is made clearly visible thanks to the tables provided by Lucas. Numbers speak for themselves and make the author’s arguments empirically verifiable, and undeniable. Throughout the book, Lucas tries to right a wrong by mentioning many Black female authors – and their work – who participated in the canonization of African American literature.

In chapter 5 “Œuvres en mouvement et césure,” Lucas pauses to analyze further poems more closely, illustrating how authors used language to convey messages. Not only does Yohann Lucas trace the history of African American anthologies – how they were shaped and how they evolved – he also examines the works that are found within these anthologies. Going further than the analysis of poems such as “Invocation” (261) by Johnson or Cowdery’s “Time” (264-5) in *Black Opals*, Lucas uses this chapter to evoke the re-production of texts, and the making of the tradition by the mediators that were the authors, but also editors, anthologists, scholars, and journalists.

The circulation of texts from one medium to another determined whether they would become – or not – part of the canon. For example, many magazines such as *Survey Graphic* were the basis for anthologies like *The New Negro* (212). Some magazines were overused by anthologists (*Fire!!*, *Challenge/New Challenge*, *Negro Digest/Black World*) while others got no published work in anthologies (*Harlem*, *Black Opals*), maybe due to the geographical isolation of some of them or for some, the length of poems. One striking example is Allison Davis’s poem, considered too long, ignored by critics because of its closeness to plantation tradition, a dialectic poem with graphic distortions, which made it difficult to legitimize in an anthology dedicated to schools. Despite a corpus where thousands of works were published, only a few percentage were reproduced in anthologies, which led to the making of a tradition, and the following chapter.

In chapter 6, “La fabrique de la tradition,” Lucas looks into how works are reproduced. Out of 2,000 works studied, only 114 were reproduced. Making traditions literally means setting the majority of texts aside: Lucas reminds us that 75% of anthology content has disappeared from later publications. The reproduced works come from now well-known authors, such as Claude McKay or Margaret Walker (272-3). The value of texts from two periodicals from the Harlem Renaissance *The Crisis* and *The Liberator*, grew with their reproduction, and so did the value of these primary sources as a result.

This evolution and reproduction, or lack thereof, is tied to reader theory (particularly that of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser), with the intervention and interpretation of readers renewed every generation. The content changes the reader’s perception and the editor’s role is to create a relationship between text-author-reader (310).

Preserving the canon

The last chapter dedicated to “Symbolic Preservation” shows that the latter did not only exist through school and university: networking, literary prizes, and initial reception of works were also at play (318).

Personal networking was essential. One can consider the case of Zona Gale whose relationship with Jessie Fauset was incidental to the latter's career. She became one of the most prolific novel writers of the Harlem Renaissance. The denser the networking was, the more chances you would get at getting published and reproduced. On the contrary, the same density could lead some to feel shunned (329). The density of networks also led to intertextual references around titles, subtitles, and epigraphs or dedications; the idea was to create a filiation, a dialogue, a community.

It was also easier to get your work reproduced if you had written a poem celebrating another poet, author, or member of the community like the poem "For Malcolm X" by Margaret Walker, which was reproduced seven times. It was as much about preserving intellectual, political, and cultural legacies like the anthology *For Malcolm*. Some became viewed as important historic documents.

Literary Prizes were also part of the reproduction and symbolic preservation. However, winning a prize did not mean lasting recognition. Prize money could have an impact on the production phase, but not the reproduction. Prizes were a way to financially support African American artistic creation, but they did not necessarily focus on literary skills. The financial independence gained in the 1960s helped prevent illegal financing (356).

Yohann Lucas signs a book where he emphasizes the difficulties for African American authors, male and female, to become visible. He questions the editorial choices rigorously, showing that everything was not great in the making of an African American canon. The literary analyses are as convincing as those of the visual material found in magazines and anthologies. Editors, artists, authors were pushing to get their voices heard, to offer a path to readers, notably those who made it to the university. Yet, these networks created around magazines and edited by now famous figures of either movement, were at times replicating the same issues, particularly for women. Gender bias was at play, and the paternalistic society as well.

Lucas stated, roughly translated, that "Each anthology of African American literature needs to be seen as the support of many works, but also as a work of art in and of itself, with an aesthetic cohesion, more or less coherent." (310-11) This observation applies equally to Lucas's own monograph. While reading this book, we could not help but think of it as a new object of canonization, in a meta-literary way. Like the anthologies and magazines studied, Lucas's work has become part of the canonization of an African American literature that keeps, as his conclusion shows, on thriving.