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Playing the Changes: From Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse

Craig Werner

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In Playing the Changes, Craig Hansen Werner presents a polyrhythmic approach to the continuities and discontinuities of the American literary tradition. He focuses on the relationship between two superficially distinct traditions: European (post)modernism and African American culture in both literary and musical forms. A primary contribution of Playing the Changes is its exploration of different "phrasings" of issues important to highly conscious African American artists from the late nineteenth century (Charles Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman) to the 1990s (Toni Morrison's Jazz). A final sequence highlights the centrality of black music to African American writing, arguing that recognizing blues, gospel, and jazz as theoretically suggestive cultural practices rather than specific musical forms points to what is most distinctive in twentieth-century African American writing: its ability to subvert attempts to limit its engagement with psychological, historical, political, or aesthetic realities.

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