



Whispered Consolations: Law and Narrative in African American Life (Law, Meaning, and Violence)

Jon-Christian Suggs

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African Americans have experienced life under the rule of law in quite different contexts from those of whites, and they have written about those differences in poems, songs, stories, autobiographies, novels, and memoirs. This book examines the tradition of American law as it appears in African American literary life, from pre-Revolutionary murder trials to gangsta rap. The experience, and the critique it produces, changes our pictures of both American law and African American literature.

This study reads the already canonical works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century black literature in the context of their responses to and critiques of American legal history. At the same time, it examines little known texts of African American life, from the urban humor of James D. Corrothers, through the early political essays of Chester Himes, to the adventures of black comic book heroes like Steel, Wise Son, and Xero. These are contextualized within specific legislation and case law, from the slave laws of early Virginia to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, from the case of Phillis and Mark in 1755 to the Simpson trials of the mid 1990s.

Finally, the legal texts presented are themselves critiqued by the fictions and legal analyses of the African Americans who lived out their implications in their daily lives. Through a positing of the legal and cultural concepts of privacy, property, identity, desire and citizenship, and the romantic ideals of authenticity, irony, and innocence, Suggs is able to show how our understanding of American law should be influenced by African American conceptions of it as depicted through literature.

This book will appeal to students and scholars of literary and cultural studies, law and literature, American history, as well as to scholars of African American literature and culture.

Jon-Christian Suggs is Professor of English, John Jay College, City University of New York.

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