



Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership (Difference Incorporated)

Erica R. Edwards

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Social and political change is impossible in the absence of gifted male charismatic leadership—this is the fiction that shaped African American culture throughout the twentieth century. If we understand this, Erica R. Edwards tells us, we will better appreciate the dramatic variations within both the modern black freedom struggle and the black literary tradition.

By considering leaders such as Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Barack Obama as both historical personages and narrative inventions of contemporary American culture, Edwards brings to the study of black politics the tools of intertextual narrative analysis as well as deconstruction and close reading. Examining a number of literary restagings of black leadership in African American fiction by W. E. B. Du Bois, George Schuyler, Zora Neale Hurston, William Melvin Kelley, Paul Beatty, and Toni Morrison, Edwards demonstrates how African American literature has contested charisma as a structuring fiction of modern black politics.

Though recent scholarship has challenged top-down accounts of historical change, the presumption that history is made by gifted men continues to hold sway in American letters and life. This may be, Edwards shows us, because while charisma is a transformative historical phenomenon, it carries an even stronger seductive narrative power that obscures the people and methods that have created social and political shifts.



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