

# MINORITIES RESOURCE AND RESEARCH CENTER NEWSLETTER

FARRELL LIBRARY  
KANSAS STATE  
UNIVERSITY

June 1979

## Interview with Joe Weixlmann, editor, Black American Literature Forum

---

*You'd be surprised what's lurking on those shelves. I found that K-State had first editions of all his (Paul Laurence Dunbar) things . . .*

---

**WHAT INTERESTED YOU IN DOING WHAT YOU'RE DOING NOW (TEACHING AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE AND EDITING BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE FORUM)?**

That's a question I've been asked many, many times and one I wish I could answer with a great degree of clarity. I suppose it has something to do with the fact that I was raised in a predominantly German neighborhood in Buffalo, New York, adjacent to a predominantly Black neighborhood, and I found some cultural confluence there as a consequence. Probably the more real reason, as time went on, is that I began to be intrigued by a number of writers—Black, Chicano, Native American—though I couldn't find out much information about the Chicano or Native American writers at that time. To some extent, it's still a problem.

**WHAT WAS YOUR MAJOR INFLUENCE AT K-STATE?**

Probably more than any of my other instructors, Walt Eitner encouraged me to read outside the boundaries of mainstream American writing, especially in his poetry classes. I did a very lengthy paper for him, for example, on Paul Laurence Dunbar. Dunbar was the first Black American writer that I dug into in any depth, and it was for Walt's class.

**WERE YOU ABLE TO DO YOUR RESEARCH AT K-STATE?**

You'd be surprised what's lurking on those shelves. When I started doing my work on Dunbar, I found that K-State had first editions of all his things, or almost all of them, a good number of critical materials, and so on.

**WHO DO YOU CONSIDER THE GIANTS IN BLACK LITERATURE TODAY?**

Those questions are always difficult, if not impossible, to answer. I'd like to speak more in the direction of who interests me. Reed would be one. I don't know that I would put him at the head of the list, but he is certainly an important writer and **Mumbo Jumbo** and **Flight to Canada** are important novels. Ernie Gaines, definitely. I somehow wind up teaching **The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman** at least once a semester and usually two or three times in classes here and there. Poetry-wise, Gwendolyn Brooks, to name the obvious; of the younger people, Michael Harper and Amiri Baraka.

**AT THE TIME YOU HAD STARTED WRITING, WAS THERE MUCH WRITTEN ABOUT BLACK WRITERS?**

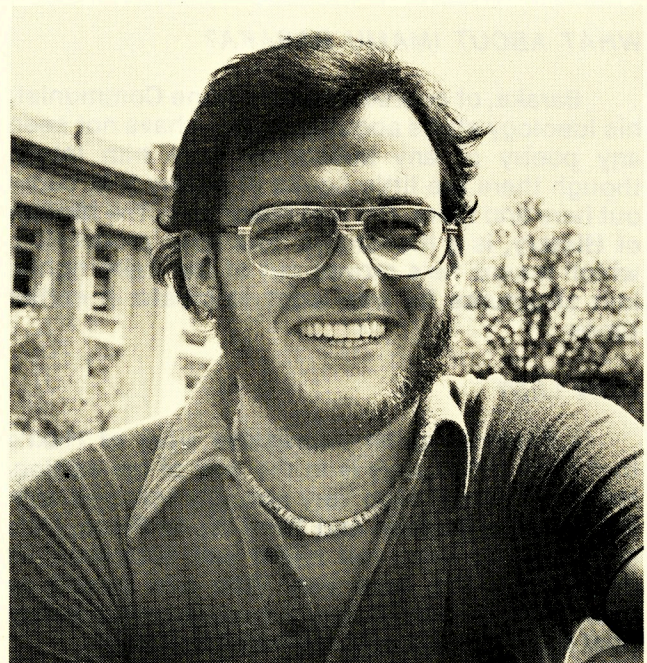


Photo credit—Sharron Pollack



I think one of the misconceptions people have is that nothing existed in print until the 1960s. There was a lot of stuff, but I don't know that any of it was paid particular heed. One can go back at least to the '20s and '30s: books like James Weldon Johnson's **The Book of American Negro Poetry**, Alain Locke's **The New Negro**, some of Benjamin Brawley's early things, Loggins' pioneering book on early Black American literature, and so forth—J. Saunders Redding's **To Make A Poet Black** in '42. There's a lot of major work from the '20s on through, but the accessibility of it was very slim. Another project that I did, also with Walt Eitner, was with Black portraiture—not Black writers as such, but Black character types—in 18th-Century American drama.

#### COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE LITERATURE OF THE '60s TO NOW.

It strikes me that what's happening in the '70s, in contrast to the '60s, is the development of a greater tolerance level for various kinds of literature. I think what I see happening is very healthy—that no longer do people feel constrained to write just certain types of literature, but they seem more desirous of broadening out into forms that before wouldn't have been possible. For instance, not that the '60s were devoid of humor, but a lot of the '70s writings move in the direction of humor—a much greater acceptance of not having to be serious and so “committed,” finding other ways of being committed—a movement beyond a rigid Black Aesthetic stance and an increasing tolerance level for white critics, for example. And writers seem increasingly tolerant of one another's work.

#### WHAT ABOUT IMAMU BARAKA?

Baraka, of course, has now gone Communist; his ideology shifts about radically. I have not seen any poetry of any substance from him lately, though there are little books of poetry that come out here and there. His last major play, **The Motion of History**, is a monstrous, four-hour production, which means he's moved out of the more tightly knit structures he was wont to create in earlier times.

#### DON LEE?

I think the most impressive work of Haki's that I see these days is in the way of his editing. He's, of course, been very strongly involved with **Black Books Bulletin** and Third World Press. He's been writing what you might call sociopolitical essays, but I've seen very little new poetry as such. Still, he always was a more powerful verbal poet than he was a poet for the printed page.

#### WHO ELSE IS THERE NOW?

The other person I ought to mention while speaking of important figures is James Alan McPherson, whose book **Hue and Cry**, published in 1969, is a marvelous, marvelous collection of stories. Everyone interested in him waited for more, and indeed his next book **Elbow Room**, published last year, won a Pulitzer Prize, though he still, I don't think, has any real following. Toni Morrison's **Song of Solomon**, of course won the prizes for **everything** last year. I'm not quite so impressed with her writing in general as some people are, although she certainly is a substantial writer.

#### WHAT ABOUT BALDWIN?

I have, generally speaking, a personal distaste for most of his stuff. Taste, I think, is the key word. I'm more interested in writers who tend to be less intense in the conventional sense of the term, less **engage**. I can read Baldwin and appreciate him in much the way that one reads John Milton and appreciates him, but it isn't the sort of thing that I'd take home on a weekend to leaf through for enjoyment.

#### WOULD YOU BE TALKING IN TERMS OF SOMEONE LIKE FRANK YERBY?

God, no. But someone like Ishmael Reed, Barry Beckham, or Clarence Major.

#### WHAT ABOUT POETRY?

There's a relatively new press devoted to poetry open in Detroit called Lotus Press. Broadside Press, throughout the '60s, published the poets who really changed the literature of the '60s: Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, all the major people, though some of these folks were publishing with New York houses as well. But the powerful stuff was coming out of Broadside, which now is all but defunct. Gwen Brooks was just through here, and since she'd been doing her recent poetry with Broadside and I'd not heard anything from Dudley Randall, Broadside's founder, in a while, I asked her what was going on with the firm. She indicated that Dudley had sold Broadside and the people who bought it are doing nothing with it. The last book they published, or at least the last book that they sent **BALF**, was a collection of poems by Sterling Plumpp, and that was in 1976. I doubt that there's been anything released in the last two and a half years. But Lotus Press has been coming out with some **magnificent** stuff; brought out a couple of volumes of Lance Jeffers' poetry. James Emanuel has a big book that they just published.

#### DO YOU SEE ANY REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WRITING STYLES?



I don't think in those terms, though Ishmael Reed, for example, does. He thinks of the West Coast as doing specific things in literature. The West Coast is certainly producing a lot more distinctly multi-ethnic publishing ventures, and there seems to be a much more real concern in the California school system with engaging in the study of ethnic literature and with approaching writing from a multi-ethnic viewpoint rather than looking at works individually. There's a relatively new publication devoted to the writings of the Black South called **Callaloo**. The editor-in-chief is Charles Rowell, a Louisiana poet, now teaching at the University of Kentucky. Also, I've been corresponding with some of the poets who were in **Bikart South**. They seem to have a distinct sense of region, though one would be foolish to try to define their poetry monolithically. There tends, perhaps, to be a greater sense of place in the writing, a greater sense of setting, more emphasis upon natural surroundings, but there is also a very distinct sociological writing that they're into. You can only generalize to a point. In the midwest and east—in Chicago, in Washington, in New York—I can't really pin down schools of poetry. There are, of course, very active writer-oriented programs focused around Howard University especially. Howard has a lot of creative writers on its staff. Stephen Henderson is in charge of the Institute for Arts and Humanities at Howard, and while it would be ludicrous to call them a school of writers, people like Ethelbert Miller and John Oliver Killens are there, and Howard's been holding summer symposia that have been bringing in writers from all over the country. The other big locus of writing, or perhaps I should say distributing, is Houston, Texas. A poet named Ahmos Zu-Bolton is in charge of a group now calling itself Energy Earth Communications. Among other things, they've been publishing a journal called **Hoo-doo Black Series**, of which they've now released, I believe, thirteen numbers.

#### DO YOU SEE ANOTHER RENAISSANCE ANYTIME IN THE FUTURE?

Well, if things fall true to form, we should have one, I suppose, in the year 2000. We had one in the '20s and one in the '60s. It would be appropriate for one to come right at the turn of the next 1000 years. I don't know how you predict these things; I don't think you can. I think that there is a continual output of literature now that is extremely good, extremely strong. The only problem that I really foresee presently that might prevent things from burgeoning is the fact that publishers fail to keep books in print. For anyone trying to teach courses, or teaching a variety of courses, it's simply difficult to teach anything but that staple of Ellison, Baldwin, Baraka, Hughes, etc. While there's nothing wrong with that categorically, it would be nice to be able to have a



Photo credit—Evan Williams

wider selection. Toni Morrison's books, with the exception of **Song of Solomon**, are all out of print, and she's in the middle of the publishing industry, a senior editor at Random House! At least in paperback, **Sula** and **The Bluest Eye** are out of print; you can't get ahold of them at all.

#### HOW ARE YOUNG WRITERS DIFFERING FROM THE ESTABLISHED OLDER WRITERS?

It seems like one of the places you might start answering that is by trying to define who a young writer is and who an old writer is anymore. One could argue that, in a certain sense, writers like Sonia Sanchez, like Haki and other people who made their reputations in the '60s, are now "older," yet it would be difficult for me to suggest that there is anything that has really gone beyond what they've done. Sonia took the printed page about as far away from tradition as you could take it, and formally I've not seen a single thing that is any more experimental in terms of poetry than the writing of the '60s. Clarence Major is working with what might be called the "deconstruction process"—deconstructing the form of the novel—in a more profound way than any Black writer heretofore. I gather a lot of interesting things are going on in the theatre, but there's no way for anyone living in Indiana to get at that first hand. Moreover, a lot of the plays that are being produced simply aren't being published. Owen Dodson, who, for years, was at Howard University and who now lives and writes in New York, is serializing a book-in-progress on Black drama in **Black American Literature Forum**, and anyone interested in finding out some of the things that are presently going on in the drama should take a look





MINORITIES RESOURCE  
AND RESEARCH CENTER

Farrell Library  
Kansas State University  
Manhattan, Kansas 66506

at what he has to say. In the main, he's been working from authors' manuscripts; most of the stuff just doesn't exist in print.

**WILL WE BE SEEING ANY MAJOR CHANGES  
IN THE FORM OF BLACK AMERICAN  
LITERATURE FORUM?**

One of the things that I've been trying to do is to establish some patterns that I would like to see us move in. We did an issue almost completely devoted to Ishmael Reed last year, and the next issue that will be coming out will be completely devoted to Clarence Major. I'm thinking about the possibility of McPherson as someone to work with for next year. In any case, in at least one of the four yearly issues, I want to bring into critical focus a writer who has written a substantial amount of fiction or poetry or drama or some combination and who has received either little critical attention or insufficient critical attention. The other thing that we've been trying to do is to become more conscientious about providing very thorough reviews of every important book in the field that comes out. In trying to get the space to do this, we've had some success getting grant money so that we can print somewhat longer issues.

**DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING FURTHER TO  
ADD?**

One of the writers that I've been paying a fair amount of attention to lately is Ronald Fair, a Chicago novelist who left the country in the late '60s basically because he was fed up with political conditions in America and went, of all places, to

Finland. In 1977, he did a book called **Rufus** which was published by a West German publisher, and he's working on a epic poem called **The Afro-Americans**, sections of which **BALF** will be doing. Dynamite, just dynamite; terrific stuff. But one of the things that interests me is the fact that Ron is over in **Finland**. The pattern of the Black American writer abroad persists; the expatriate experience of McKay, Baldwin, etc.—these are not isolated cases. So continually we are forced to ask the question of how supportive, frankly, American society is toward the Black writer, how tolerant it is of the Black writer. We get a lot of verbal commitments to minority literature, but we see books going out of print and the major houses still only printing maybe two or three Black-authored books a year. I'm teaching a Harlem Renaissance course right now and was reading through a section of Langston Hughes' **The Big Sea** in which he talks about the major New York publishing houses releasing only one book by a Black writer each year. I don't know that we've gone a hell of a lot beyond that. We seem to be mired down in the same kind of thing. That anything gets written should produce some sense of wonderment; that so much of such great worth gets written is a cause for celebration.

*Aside from his duties as editor of **BALF**, Weixlmann is an English professor in the Department of English and Journalism at Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. (1970, 1973 respectively) in English with a concentration in American Literature from Kansas State University.*

The Minorities Resource and Research Center Newsletter is a bimonthly publication.

Antonia Quintana Pigno, Director, the Minorities Resource and Research Center. Farrell Library, Kansas State University. 532-6516 Ext. 51.

Rita Schwermann and Anthony J. Seals, Editors

