



# **The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth-Century African American Literature (Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory)**

*Shelly Eversley*

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## **The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth-Century African American Literature (Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory)** Shelly Eversley

In this book, Shelly Eversley historicizes the demand for racial authenticity - what Zora Neale Hurston called 'the real Negro' - in twentieth-century American literature. Eversley argues that the modern emergence of the interest in 'the real Negro' transforms the question of what race an author belongs into a question of what it takes to belong to that race. Consequently, Paul Laurence Dunbar's Negro dialect poems were prized in the first part of the century because - written by a black man - they were not 'imitation' black, while the dialect performances by Zora Neale Hurston were celebrated because, written by a 'real' black, they were not 'imitation' white. The second half of the century, in its dismissal of material segregation, sanctions a notion of black racial meaning as internal and psychological and thus promotes a version of black racial 'truth' as invisible and interior, yet fixed within a stable conception of difference. The Real Negro foregrounds how investments in black racial specificity illuminate the dynamic terms that define what makes a text and a person 'black', while it also reveals how 'blackness', spoken and authentic, guards a more fragile, because unspoken, commitment to the purity and primacy of 'whiteness' as a stable, uncontested ideal.

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