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978-1-107-05983-2 - The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

Excerpt

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JULIE BUCKNER ARMSTRONG

## Introduction

In July 1963, a few weeks before the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, several well-known artists began meeting to discuss how they might use their talents in service of the civil rights movement. The artists – Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Norman Lewis, Charles Alston, and others – called themselves “Spiral,” after the Archimedean spiral that moves outward and upward. Spiral held one exhibit in 1965, “First Group Showing: Works in Black and White,” a subtitle that reflects both a color palette and a political statement. In a nation sharply divided over race, oppositions clash, confront, and sometimes meet in shades of gray. Spiral’s significance lies less in this show than in the group’s example of collective creative energy directed toward progressive social action.<sup>1</sup> Many similar alliances of artists, writers, and performers formed during the 1960s believing that the arts could, and should, inspire change. From the artist, through the work, to the audience, and into the community (outward and upward), *movement* would flow.

Take, for example, the painting *Freedom Now*, Reginald Gammon’s selection from Spiral’s 1965 show, which serves as a cover image for this volume. Gammon portrays a demonstration, with its bottom section focusing on faces in the crowd, and its top on marching feet clad in boots and sneakers. Signs at the top, left, and right form a triangular visual field with fragmented words: two clearly say “Now,” and one presumably says “We Demand Integration and Freedom.” By cutting off the words, Gammon invites audience members to finish the statements, articulating for themselves why these protestors have taken to the streets. Viewers therefore become part of the demonstration, other wide-open mouths participating in the call and response that the painting’s title signifies:

What do we want? *Freedom!*

When do we want it? *Now!*

*Freedom Now* serves a dual function with respect to this volume. As part of the Spiral exhibit, the painting exemplifies understudied connections

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between the civil rights movement and the arts. As a cover image, Gammon's piece emphasizes words (protest signs) and action (marching feet) – or, more pointedly, words *as* action (open mouths demanding “Freedom Now!”) – highlighting one of the book's key themes. Audre Lorde's 1977 essay, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” expresses the idea best. Facing a possible cancer diagnosis and, thus, her mortality, Lorde realized, “I was going to die, if not sooner than later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.”<sup>2</sup> The opposite of silence – speaking her truth, speaking up, speaking out – became Lorde's way of countering invisibility, fear, alienation, and powerlessness. For Lorde, language provided, in the face of death, a profound articulation of life.

The *Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* introduces readers to a rich resource for understanding one of the most significant instances of “the transformation of silence into language and action.” The scholarly essays collected here look at fiction, poetry, drama, and related cultural productions from and about the United States' long civil rights movement. Many of these texts respond (whether intentionally or not) to a question that Richard Wright famously asked in his 1945 memoir *Black Boy*: “Could words be weapons?”<sup>3</sup> The answer was a resounding “Yes,” as scores of writers seized upon the power of words as weapons, bridges, balms, and tools for bearing witness, making sense, and remembering. Continuing the admonitions of Wright and Lorde, the many works examined here confront discrimination, marginalization, violence, and death with the most powerful weapon of all: language.

The *Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* appears at an auspicious time for looking at the relationship between language and action. The book's publication date of 2015 marks several anniversaries in a long civil rights history. One hundred fifty years ago, in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawed slavery. It was the first of three “Reconstruction Amendments” that clarified the place of blacks in a nation founded, at least in principle, on ideals of freedom and equality (the Fourteenth, ratified in 1868, guaranteed due process and equal protection under the law; the Fifteenth, ratified in 1870, granted voting rights to black men). The year 2015 also marks fifty years since the Selma-to-Montgomery March and passage of the Voting Rights Act. On March 7, 1965, activists attempted a fifty-mile protest walk from Selma, Alabama, to the capitol in Montgomery. State and local police beat them back in an attack so brutal that the day came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.” A subsequent protest, beginning weeks later, drew thousands – this time walking under the protection of U.S. Army troops, federal marshals, and federally commanded

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Alabama National Guardsmen. The situation in Alabama drew national attention to the need for legislation to prevent voting discrimination. During the following months, while Gammon's *Freedom Now* and other Spiral works were on view at New York's Christopher Street Gallery, a bill wound its way through the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, under constant threat from white southern congressmen. In August 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson finally signed the Voting Rights Act into law.

Such anniversaries stand as reminders that the fight for civil rights in this country remains a series of gains and losses extending beyond one short period of "movement" during the mid-twentieth century. The Reconstruction Amendments met multiple forms of resistance. Many states quickly passed laws to undermine them. Known colloquially as "Jim Crow," after a popular racist caricature during the time, these laws strictly circumscribed black public and political behavior. The penalties for violating Jim Crow ranged from imprisonment – often a new form of slavery through labor camps and debt peonage – to violence and death. The year 1892, commonly known as the "nadir" of U.S. race relations, recorded the highest number of lynchings on record.<sup>4</sup> A few years later, in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court gave legal sanction to Jim Crow, institutionalizing "separate but equal" racial segregation with its *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. That decision would not be reversed until 1954, when the Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregation in public schools was inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional. During the decade that followed, the civil rights movement – a multifaceted effort that included grassroots activism and federal legislation – dismantled de jure, or legalized, Jim Crow.

A question that many civil rights scholars ask today is whether Jim Crow exists de facto – in fact. The year in which preparations for this volume officially got under way, 2013, turned out to be pivotal for that debate in particular and for civil rights gains, losses, and definitions more generally. In January, Barack Obama was sworn in for his second presidential term – a key marker of what many call a "post-racial" era. In June, the Supreme Court's *Shelby County v. Holder* decision struck down a provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that required federal monitoring in certain districts, calling it no longer necessary in a post-civil rights age. Critics of the decision (foremost among them, 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery march leader John Lewis, now a U.S. Representative from Georgia) argued that it would disenfranchise certain citizens based on race, ethnicity, and class. The constellation of political, legal, and social forms of discrimination that exist in a supposedly "colorblind" society has come to be known as the "New Jim Crow" (or, alternatively "Juan Crow" and "Jane Crow"). Perhaps the most contentious is a prison system that has grown exponentially during the past

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few decades, with sentencing and incarceration rates for black and brown males disproportionately higher than those of whites. Also controversial is the question of whose equality counts under the civil rights banner. In 2013, two Supreme Court rulings paved the way for same-sex marriage, with supporters hailing the decisions as part of a “new civil rights movement.” Those who disagree with the application of such terminology believe that doing so takes away from the distinctive effort to eliminate legalized Jim Crow that took place during the 1950s and 1960s. How to define the current moment – post-civil rights, New Jim Crow, new civil rights – remains debatable. More certain is that American definitions of freedom and equality undergo continual revision, especially as those definitions refract through the prisms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other intersecting subjectivities. The times we inhabit have outpaced our language.<sup>5</sup>

This volume considers the relationship of literature to such a tangled history. For many years, civil rights scholars have observed what one might call a “trade gap” in the academic exchange of ideas.<sup>6</sup> Writing in 2000, Charles Eagles described how civil rights historiography privileged analysis of political and social issues over the cultural and intellectual. Four years later, Richard H. King agreed, noting that “the ‘full’ history of the Civil Rights Movement is not being confronted” when literary, art, and music criticism is left out.<sup>7</sup> More recently, an explosion of works – from anthologies, to monographs, to articles and special issues of journals – has begun to rectify the literature side of this disparity.<sup>8</sup> Although recognizing that a comprehensive overview of what has now become an extensive field of inquiry is nearly impossible, the *Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* brings together leading thinkers to survey significant traditions, genres, themes, and critical approaches, suggesting along the way the variety of questions that remain to be asked. In particular, scholars realize that the relationship between literature and civil rights extends well beyond creative productions merely reflecting political developments or critical analyses contributing to academic conversations. As Christopher Metress explains, literary representations offer “valuable and untapped ... material artifacts.” Rather than functioning as adjuncts to history, these important resources have their own “cognitive value ... in the production of social memory.”<sup>9</sup>

Metress provides a conceptual framework for understanding literary productions in two different ways: as historical evidence (an artifact) and as a process (producing social memory). Other scholarship replicates this division. A foundational article by Barbara Melosh argues for viewing civil rights novels beyond their (then current) status as pedagogical tools, as add-ons to history courses. Instead, Melosh describes them as “primary resources” that present “historical evidence of ideology.” Margaret Whitt

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teaches civil rights through literature, explaining that “literature can help us ‘feel’ history.”<sup>10</sup> For both Melosh and Whitt, literary works hold a status equal to, or greater than, other kinds of documents because they provide truths that rise above facts. If some scholars see civil rights literature as evidence or artifact, others view it as a process: how readers understand or engage with the world around them. In *Down from the Mountaintop*, Melissa Walker describes how black female novelists writing during the 1970s and 1980s bring readers into a conversation that Martin Luther King Jr. initiated with the title of his 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here?*<sup>11</sup> Similarly, for historian Richard H. King, civil rights literature invites readers to ask wide-ranging moral and epistemological questions. In “Politics and Fictional Representation,” King writes, “literature can inform us in the deepest sense about certain ethical and political dimensions of the way we ‘are’ in the world.... At its best fiction can illuminate certain dimensions of the experience of politics that otherwise might have remained hidden.”<sup>12</sup> Walker and King, then, take further the idea that literature acts as evidence, offering reading as a process of exploring new realms of experience, imagination, and identity.

As the term “new realms” suggests, scholars often rely on spatial metaphors to describe acts of reading civil rights literature. Writing in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally employ French historian Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* or “sites of memory.” *Lieux de mémoire* can be any space, object, or practice (cemeteries, churches, rituals, sayings, monuments, symbols, texts, and so on) that stand at the crossroads of personal and collective memory. Because *lieux de mémoire* often form counter-narratives to official or mainstream histories, interacting with them involves thinking critically about one’s relationship to a particular past.<sup>13</sup> Readers of civil rights literary texts become active participants rather than passive consumers of memory and meaning. In *The Nation’s Region*, Leigh Anne Duck also uses a metaphor of place – a “site for forms of analysis and understanding” – to describe southern literature. Readers entering its spaces navigate the difficult ideological waters where segregationists insist “that apartheid constituted a vital cultural trait” and others “create a venue for more democratic and radical visions.”<sup>14</sup> One should not, however, confuse a spatial metaphor with one located in a specific place. In a book that examines literary responses to Medgar Evers’s murder, Minrose Gwin utilizes a term from trauma studies, “frames of remembrance,” to consider broader relationships. Gwin asks “how such a moment as the Evers assassination becomes a continually shifting frame of remembrance that reveals just how incompletely and imprecisely the border is spliced historically between past and present – and

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spatially between the U.S. South and the rest of the world – when it comes to cultural memory of human-inflicted trauma in a long and ongoing civil rights movement.”<sup>15</sup>

The discussion so far might seem to some readers a jumbling confusion of nouns and verbs. How can a literary work be a thing (a material artifact) and a process (one that also gets described as a place)? Perhaps it is more helpful to think of literature as an imaginative space where the interaction between reader and text results in transformation. The act of reading has the potential to change how readers see themselves, their communities, and their histories. Literature asks readers to step outside of themselves to imagine new ways of seeing and being in the world. Literature produces dynamic engagement through emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic difficulty. “Your silence will not protect you,” Audre Lorde reminds us. Language operates as a form of action: the word conjures freedom – now.

Civil rights literature, then, offers a means of working through questions of historical complexity as well as local and global significance. In doing so, literary representations offer an alternative to what scholars call civil rights “consensus memory.” This way of constructing a story about the past continues to dominate popular culture and to vex the paradigm shifters of new civil rights studies, determined to provide more nuanced historical accounts. Briefly, the consensus story starts in 1954, when the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision prompted national leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. to direct a nonviolent movement to end segregation. Events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), the Freedom Rides (1961), the Birmingham Campaign (1963), Mississippi’s Freedom Summer (1964), and the Selma-to-Montgomery March (1965) resulted in positive changes to law and custom. The late 1960s rise of Black Power and the 1968 death of King represented a decline in this movement’s values and a fragmentation of its aims, leaving it essentially broken and ineffectual by the mid-1970s. Civil rights scholars from multiple disciplines have asked what this narrative says and what it leaves out – for example, stories of grassroots efforts, economic justice, self-defense, radicalism, and connections to other movements nationally and internationally. For example, in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford ask, “What kind of civil rights movement is produced through this consensus memory and what vision of the present does it help to legitimate, valorize, or condemn?”<sup>16</sup>

For one, the dominant narrative offers a “satisfying morality tale” about the “natural progression of American values,” historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explains, but one that is too “easy.” Hall argues for making “civil rights harder ... harder to simplify, appropriate, and contain.” Hall

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is concerned in particular with having the movement's meaning co-opted by forces determined to reverse its achievements.<sup>17</sup> Her message becomes clear in the conflicting understandings of civil rights seen in the 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision and U.S. Representative John Lewis's reaction to it. The Supreme Court ruling assumed a movement whose goals were met, making federal monitoring of voting rights no longer necessary in places where Jim Crow laws formerly disenfranchised large portions of the population. Lewis, however, perceived a need to remain vigilant in an ongoing struggle between civil rights gains and losses.

A phrase from the title of Hall's article, "the long civil rights movement," has become a catch phrase for something more than extending chronology. *When* one brackets dates of the civil rights movement is often a function of *what* one considers that movement to be. When Hall connects the 1954–1968 "consensus narrative" to progressive politics of the 1930s and a "movement of movements" that took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s, she implicitly, if not overtly, extends the black freedom struggle to include such objectives as economic justice, gender equality, and gay rights.<sup>18</sup> Writing in the journal *Souls*, Peniel E. Joseph makes a related point, that "popular and historical narratives have conceptualized [1954–1965] literally and figuratively as 'the King years,'" a story that "obscures and effaces as much as it reveals and illuminates." While Joseph has a focus different from Hall's, specifically Black Power, he too expands ideas of the civil rights movement. His article and a later, more in-depth study demonstrate how Black Power developed alongside nonviolent direct action campaigns of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Instead of describing a "declension narrative" that sees figures such as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers as less acceptable stand-ins for the consensus narrative's more palatable figures (i.e., King or Rosa Parks), Joseph describes Black Power as a radical attempt to connect African American political discourse to international anti-colonial movements.<sup>19</sup>

Pinpointing the *when* and *what* of the civil rights movement is a subject of continual scholarly debate. Two articles might sum up that debate's extremes. On the one hand, Leon Litwack's "Fight the Power": The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement" offers a very broad view. Litwack states, "The civil rights movement began with the presence of enslaved blacks in the New World, with the first slave mutiny on the ships bringing them here."<sup>20</sup> Litwack takes his discussion into the present day with the appearance of the New Jim Crow in examples such as the prison-industrial complex, the decline of urban infrastructures, and crucial points of crisis such as the federal government's indifference to human suffering in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. On the other hand, Richard H. King in "The

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Civil Rights Debate” clearly narrows the civil rights “movement” from 1954 to 1968. During this time period, individuals “sought during a sustained fashion ... to destroy the Jim Crow system of segregation and disfranchisement.” This work differs markedly from the longer civil rights “*struggle*” (emphasis in original).<sup>21</sup>

The discussion prompts a question. If the *Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* offers literary works as a solution to the problem of consensus memory, then what, if any, definition of civil rights (“movement” or “struggle”) underlies the project? The most pragmatic approach might be to follow Brian Norman’s lead in *Neo-Segregation Narratives: Jim Crow in Post Civil Rights American Literature* and understand “civil rights” as both a “useful” and “slippery” term.<sup>22</sup> This Cambridge Companion looks primarily at literature about events that took place from the post-World War II through the Black Power eras – traditional “movement” years – while recognizing that these events arose from very broad historical and artistic contexts that began in slavery and continue today, and that also include a diverse array of actors and stakeholders. Not all the chapters contained here agree on “when” and “what” the civil rights movement means. For the most part, however, they recognize that something transformational and sustained (to borrow Richard King’s word) happened from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. Some writings distinguish between a civil rights or black freedom *struggle* and a civil rights movement; some do not. Most agree that making such distinctions is more difficult when one discusses literature rather than history. A case in point involves works that look back at earlier events for, of course, writers often return to the past to address contemporary concerns. Where the chapters included here do converge is less upon what constitutes a historical time period and more on the value of literary and cinematic representation for civil rights study. As Robert J. Patterson and Erica R. Edwards explain in their introduction to a 2013 special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, the “strategies of close reading and methodologies of cultural studies” that literary scholars employ offer provocative challenges for reconceptualizing a significant and complex story.<sup>23</sup>

This volume’s chapters are organized loosely by literary tradition and genre. Contributors discuss works from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, demonstrating the variety of materials available for civil rights literary study and different critical approaches to examining these texts. The first selections establish historic and artistic frameworks for understanding civil rights writing. Chapter 1, Zoe Trodd’s “The Civil Rights Movement and Literature of Social Protest,” shows how writers from peak decades of civil rights activism draw upon strategies of literary protest that writers such



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as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs developed during the abolitionist movement. Gwendolyn Brooks, Ann Petry, Robert Hayden, and Ralph Ellison provide examples of “spatio-symbolic” representation, where spaces that initially symbolize segregation, confinement, and other forms of social marginalization transform imaginatively into places of opposition, opportunity, and freedom. By making connections to literary abolitionism, Trodd explains, such writers perform two important functions. They turn “the no-place of America’s margins into a site of resistance,” and they expand the civil rights “movement’s temporal boundaries” beyond conventional perspectives.

The second chapter in this volume, by Brian Norman, raises similar questions about time and space. Norman employs a range of texts to trace three primary strategies that black writers have used to represent a Jim Crow that has proven surprisingly durable and protean across the twentieth century. Authors such as Nella Larsen, in *Passing* (1929), and Richard Wright, in “Big Boy Leaves Home” (1935), reveal the physical and psychological violence that results from crossing the color line. Other works – notably Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker’s 1983 *The Color Purple* – show characters rejecting the color line altogether. In a different form of rejection, some writers “get out,” to quote George Schuyler’s 1931 satirical novel *Black No More*, turning to international or fantastical settings. In all three cases, Norman explains, “The Dilemma of Narrating Jim Crow,” is both an artistic problem (how to represent compulsory segregation without reinscribing it) and a spatial one (how to negotiate a system that insists upon races knowing their “place”).

The two chapters that follow examine the relationship between the civil rights and Black Arts movements. As GerShun Avilez explains, writers, artists, and intellectuals of the late 1960s and early 1970s focused in particular on creating a black public sphere where arts organizations, publication venues, and university curricula would enact social change. One might, in fact, trace the development of a companion to civil rights literature back to the formation of the first Black Studies program at San Francisco State University in 1969. Through an in-depth reading of Barry Beckham’s 1972 novel *Runner Mack*, Avilez shows how writers from the period responded to repeated disappointments at creating real civil rights change. Mack’s surrealist novel departs from typical Black Arts Movement realism, but its characters’ decision to attempt revolutionary destruction – “takin’ over the muthafuckin’ country” – seems reasonable, given the way American dreams too often become nightmares.

Within the past few years, scholars have begun to re-examine the African American stage within a longer performance tradition. Nilgün

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Anadolu-Okur's chapter for this volume situates Black Arts Movement theater within that context. Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 classic play *Raisin in the Sun* is almost synonymous with the phrase "civil rights literature," and for the Black Arts Movement writers who followed, theater was a form of revolutionary struggle. Anadolu-Okur's essay looks at this period as a turning point for black theater and, more broadly, in African American culture. Works such as Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicidal when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), and Charles Fuller's *Zooman and the Sign* (1980) show African Americans negotiating an unprecedented "ownership of agency."

Anadolu-Okur's chapter provides a transition point where the volume shifts from literary movements to literary genre as a lens for examining civil rights issues. The next chapters look specifically at fiction, poetry, and film from the movement's "classic phase" to consider different strategies for representing transformational social change. My own contribution surveys the landscape of civil rights fiction – defining and providing examples of different types, and outlining typical plots and themes. The chapter considers why a controversial novel such as Kathleen Stockett's *The Help* (2009) is so popular for teaching movement history. I propose as alternatives texts such as John O. Killens's *Sippi* (1967), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and Anthony Grooms's *Bombingham* (2001) that are complex and nuanced like the movement itself.

The next chapter, by Christopher Metress looks at a specific fictional form: the white southern movement novel. Here, Metress examines how white southern novelists wrestled with the social and structural reconfigurations that were taking place during the turbulent years of 1954 to 1968. Canonical writers such as Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and Robert Penn Warren produced a variety of personal and literary responses to the changing times. These writers, however, did not directly engage with the civil rights movement in their fiction. Many lesser-known figures, including Elizabeth Spencer, William Bradford Huie, Shirley Ann Grau, and Jesse Hill Ford, produced movement-related works that were widely read. Metress's chapter looks at novels by two writers all but forgotten today – Lettie Hamlett Rogers and Elliot Chaze – to provide a literary perspective on an understudied subject: the range of views white southerners held about the mid-century's confrontation with race.

Following Metress, Sharon Monteith examines cinematic engagements with the civil rights movement. For many audiences, film provides a vehicle for popular understandings of the movement itself, and more generally, of mid-century race relations. As Monteith has argued elsewhere, the movement became a "media event ... and now it is being replayed as a cinematic