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978-0-521-87217-1 - The Cambridge History of African American Literature

Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward

Excerpt

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Introduction

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In the twenty-first century, literary histories may achieve a limited degree of comprehensiveness in dealing with a vast amount of literary and cultural data; the idea that they might be definitive is merely tantalizing. We are cautioned to remember, as Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon have suggested in *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, that “the literary past” – that is, the past of both literature’s production and its reception – is unavoidably interpreted in the light of the present and that literary historians create meaning by ordering and shaping stories about texts and contexts; in short, “economic, political, and broader cultural and social perspectives on issues like race or gender must be brought to bear in the constructing of any literary history today in a different way than in the past.”¹ These premises about writing history assume great importance in a project that focuses on the continuing evolution of African American literature, because the subject is intimately related to such matters as the slave trade and the curious institution of slavery in the United States; the forced merger of African ethnic groups into an identity named African American; new forms of verbal expression which are the consequence of contact among Africans, indigenous peoples, and Europeans; struggles for emancipation and literacy; race as a social dynamic, and the changing ideologies that support the American democratic experiment. The writing of literary history, of course, must cross disciplinary boundaries, for it cannot otherwise provide nuanced reports on the indeterminacy of texts. The adequacy of the literary history is challenged by the recovery of forgotten or lost texts and the acquisition of new insights. Moreover, advances in cultural theory and criticism may necessitate continued modification and revision of the historical interpretation. Thus, literary history is always a work-in-progress. No matter how logical their arrangements of parts, their explanations of interconnections among forms, public events, and creative choices, and their configuration of tradition, literary historians conduct unfinished quests for order. Nowhere is this vexed search greater or more necessary than in the field of African American literature.

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The Cambridge History of African American Literature (CHAAL) has a goal that may seem radical within the tradition of writing literary histories. Beyond presenting a fairly complete chronological description of African American literature in the United States, from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, this reference work seeks to illustrate how the literature comprises orature (oral literature) and printed texts simultaneously. The reason is not far to seek. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. demonstrated in *The Signifying Monkey*, performance is one of the distinguishing features of African American literature. The role of utterance or speech is not necessarily secondary to the role of writing or inscription. Speaking and writing are interlocked frequencies of a single formal phenomenon.²

Increasingly, literary historians are beginning to recognize that writers are not the sole shapers of literature, that people who are not usually deemed citizens in the republic of letters must not be ignored in describing the interweavings of literature, imagination, and literacy. Thus, we must give attention to the roles of publishers, editors, academic critics, common readers, and mass media reviewers in shaping textual forms, literary reputations, and literary tastes. *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* is a part of that emerging recognition.

We contend that a literary history of African American verbal expressions will make a stronger contribution to knowledge about literary production and reception if it exploits insights derived from Stephen Henderson's theorizing in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*³ and from Elizabeth McHenry's claim in *Forgotten Readers* that "to recover more fully the history of African American cultural production...we must be open to replacing our notion of a singular black literary tradition by attending to the many, diverse elements that form the groundwork of any tradition."⁴ Such replacement suggests the desirability of avoiding a strictly binary focus on literary production, e.g. opposing the folk level of production examined at length in Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*⁵ to a more public level of self-conscious imitation, creation, and consuming.⁶

Although the strongest syncretism of African and European modes is located in texts, the story we must tell is more complicated. We locate the origins of African American literature not in the United States but on the continent of Africa. Our construction of a history begins with the oral and written practices of diverse, mainly West African ethnic groups whose African identities were transformed in the process of the Middle Passage and in their subsequent dispersal in the Americas. Traumatic as this passage from life to death was, to borrow language from Robert Hayden's poem "Middle

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Passage,” this moment of the slave trade did not exactly leave people bereft of memory or their culture. The view that the enslaved arrived in the United States as hopeless pagans and primitives is being slowly dislodged. “The native African,” as historian Michael Gomez puts the matter, “did not forget her own language, whether or not she ever learned or demonstrated that she had learned the English dialect.”⁷ Gomez argues convincingly that Africans in the Americas had to grapple with both interethnic change and linguistic creolization, processes that “moved along a continuum from ethnicity to race.”⁸ If a literary history begins with unquestioned assumptions about African cultural unity, it will perpetuate the unfortunate idea that literary tradition(s) emerged from the imaginations and adaptive strategies of a more or less unified race of people. Such a history overlooks the importance of exposing points of difference and points of sameness. The myth of unification is deconstructed by the data provided by eighteenth-century published texts in comparison with oral “texts” recovered during the nineteenth century. If the word “texts” is used in a liberal, postmodern sense proposed by Roland Barthes,⁹ it can be discerned that written texts and oral texts can both be presented as “published” material; knowing the provenance of an oral “text,” however, urges one to weigh carefully variations in the origins of African American texts. At the level of expressive origins the fiction of unity can be exposed.

The complex social, linguistic, and literary background of enslaved Africans persuades us to restore their humanity, to give more careful attention to the extent that Arabic/Islamic and indigenous forms of literacy informed traditions of poetry and narrative prior to the Atlantic slave trade. To be sure, we agree in part with the idea that the origins of African American literature, according to Dickson Bruce, involve “a process in which black and white writers collaborated in the creation of ... an ‘African American literary presence’ in the United States” and that “at the center of this process was the question of authority.”¹⁰ In conceptualizing this project, however, we privilege Africa and African American agency a bit more strongly. This choice intensifies inquiry about the dynamics of change and brings to the foreground a distinct, frequently conflicted, relationship that African American literature has with America’s literary traditions in the broadest sense. It also enables us to construct a narrative that accounts, as rigorously as possible, for continuing patterns of harmony and discord in collective creativity as well as in the creative expressions of individuals. We have also consciously rejected the categories “major” and “minor,” categories that serve to frustrate rather than clarify our general understanding of how literary traditions take multiple shapes over time.

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For the purpose of writing literary history, we are indebted to Lucien Goldmann's assertion that the object of human sciences is "human actions of all times and places in the degree to which they have had or now have an importance for and an influence on the existence and structure of a human group."¹¹ What is being addressed is indeed the story of the existence and complex structure of African American literary acts and artifacts, and their continual evolving in the United States. Given that the magnitude of the project necessitates the writing of the narrative by various hands, we want this sense of literature as a human enterprise to increase the possibility of having minimal disruptions in the narrative flow. We ask questions, from the vantage point of a uniquely contextualized rootedness, about how Africans and their African American descendants use sounds and linguistic signs. We anticipate, of course, certain objections related to the issue of "language versus literature," particularly as the issue is manifested in our decision to deemphasize the exclusive definition of literature as possession of letters. We take instead literature to mean selected items of "verbal culture."

It must be emphasized that this history will privilege some concerns implicit in linguistics or in the larger field of communication, in particular the semantic and ideological dimensions of literature. The lines between literary studies and cultural studies are sufficiently indistinct to authorize the exploration of literary formations as cultural phenomena. Thus, our sense of a beginning can be represented by concise discussion of indigenous African language practices and their impact in tandem with European cultural contacts on the emergence of African American literature. Had Africans from various ethnic groups not come into contact by virtue of their removal from Africa and relocation to the far distant lands of the Americas, it seems unlikely that our currently recognizable deep structures of black literature, as these have been discussed in seminal works by such critics as Houston A. Baker, Trudier Harris, Aldon Nielsen, Hortense Spillers, and Henry Louis Gates, would have ever evolved. Locating the origins of literary thought in the specific conditions of internal and external African slave trading reorients scholarly study to the indivisibility of form and the motives for producing forms, matters central in the history of literary production and reception.

The history of African American literature we envision borders on what one might call cultural genetics (diachronic study of language, rhythm, and sound pertinent to literature), a principled effort to minimize a priori conceptions of what really happened in the unfolding of a people's literature and to sift through extant textual evidence to tell a story.

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Twentieth-century scholarship in the field of African American literature gave substantial attention to individual authors, genres, and movements, and it incorporated varying degrees of literary history in explaining how writers, generic transformations, and moments of unusual artistic productivity (the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance, for example) have shaped a literary tradition. Such early studies as Vernon Loggins's *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (1931), Sterling Brown's companion books *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1938) and *The Negro in American Fiction* (1938), J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), and Hugh Gloster's *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (1948) initiated historically focused discussions of literature. Based on materials gathered by Alain Locke, Margaret Just Butcher's *The Negro in American Culture* (1956) stressed what one might call the omni-American nature of African American culture, an issue that still must be negotiated in creating a comprehensive history of African American literature. For this history, we draw on a number of stellar studies of scholars, produced in the last thirty-plus years. John Lovell's *Black Song: The Force and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (1972) is a magisterial example of historical investigation of a genre. Eugene B. Redmond's *Drumvoices* (1976) provides comprehensive documentation of black poetry from 1746 to the 1970s. Addison Gayle's *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (1975), Bernard Bell's companion histories *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) and *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (2004), and J. Lee Greene's *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century* (1996) illustrate historiographic shifts in the study of a genre. Similarly, Stephen Butterfield's *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), William Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1986), Geta Leseur's *Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (1995), and Roland Williams's *African American Autobiography and the Quest for Freedom* (2000) emphasize the implications life writing may have for the development of other forms. These works and many others are preludes to the monumental tasks assumed by Blyden Jackson in *A History of Afro-American Literature*, vol. 1: *The Long Beginning, 1746–1895* (1989) and Dickson D. Bruce in *The Origins of African American Literature 1680–1865* (2001), namely, the creation of explanatory narratives of the first two centuries of the African American literary tradition. Prior to the publication of these works, scholars and students were obliged to develop a sense of African American literary history from various articles, books, bibliographies, and the introductory matter in anthologies of African American literature. Jackson and Bruce were arguably pioneers in attempting

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comprehensive explorations of the historical conditions governing the African American literary enterprise, and their books served as useful guides for the construction of this volume.

This literary history establishes the validity of engaging a people's expressions over time by accounting for the simultaneity of aesthetic, political, spiritual, and religious dimensions in their works. It makes a case for what might be called liberated readings by orienting readers to the ways that African American writers, or creators if you will, have used principles of overdeterminacy in shaping situated responses, the emotive and intellectual traces of their being-in-the-world.

The Cambridge History of African American Literature reflects the intentions and preferences of the editors, these being an inevitable result of temporality, our cultural grounding, and scholarly trends. However much historical narratives are governed by "facts" about the subject, the selection and ordering of "facts" is influenced by varying degrees of subjectivity. The history is never totally objective. Ethical scholarship demands that readers be aware of the justifications that buttress the narrative choices, methodologies, and angles of interpretation present in the history. At this point in the history of scholarship, the weight given to theory in literary and cultural studies often does not encourage a balance between judging literary texts as documentary evidence and evaluating the formal features of those texts to expose their rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions. In short, it is possible to have a literary history that deemphasizes the Horatian ideals of delighting and instructing. We wished to avoid this embarrassment in the making of this volume, because we deem literature and literary transactions to be profoundly human activities.

We consider the text, whether from oral or print traditions, as necessary responses to the affairs and conditions that at any given time serve as catalysts for literary interpretations and discourses. This in no way reduces our concern with the language or languages of spoken (oral tradition) and written texts, what Gates has called our "speakerly" and "writerly" legacy.¹² Ultimately, it is use of language and multiple forms of literacy that give shape and substance to a literary tradition. It is Goldman who reminds us that this use of language is one element of a complex phenomenon he saw as "the object of historical sciences," just as McHenry urges us to change "our focus from...familiar to unfamiliar definitions of literacy."¹³

Aware that contemporary literary theory and criticism may inadvertently minimize the importance of human agency in literary discourse, we foreground the importance of human consciousness and will in the creation of

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literature. Thus we highlight moral, political, and aesthetic concerns of texts with varying degrees of emphasis, fully aware of the extent to which these are often determined by specific critical schools and preferences. The object of this variation, of course, is to find a convincing balance between what we know about texts and the contexts from which they emerged. We will note as a cautionary matter that history, as opposed to criticism, demands sensitivity to how a given work might have provoked or otherwise engaged an audience in the past and to how the same work engages the modern mind. We are obligated to observe the distinction E. D. Hirsch made in *Validity in Interpretation* between “meaning”, which is provisionally static, and “significance”, which varies among interpreters. Such observation tempered our planning, although we were aware that Hirsch’s formulation must always be challenged by recognition that meaning and significance are not givens but constructions.¹⁴

The division of the volume into three parts is consistent with our intention to present a fairly complete chronological ordering of events and assess the developments and major trends in African American literature from its African origins to its print inception in the seventeenth century to the present. Each part is then organized into chapters with dates to serve as a general guide for the reader. We caution readers to remember that beginning and ending dates for these divisions are suggestive. They are not absolute. The conditions that impact various forms of cultural production affect writers, and writers expand and explode the very boundaries we may claim they define. It is to be expected, therefore, that our chapter authors will refer to and discuss writers and texts that might appear outside the timeline of their coverage, just as we consider it appropriate to allow a certain degree of overlap among the individual chapters.

The eleven chapters in Part 1 deal with the African American literary tradition from 1600 to 1910. We have chosen to begin with what Blyden Jackson considers the two-hundred-year germination period of African American literature, dating back to 1441 when the first Africans were captured by a Portuguese sea captain, thus initiating that lucrative and all-encompassing event the Atlantic slave trade, and redefining the entire Atlantic world.¹⁵ The subsequent peopling of North America by European settlers, the importation of African slaves, and the widespread practice of American slavery are primary factors to be considered when examining the meanings and materials constituting the earliest African American literature. It was indeed a “literature of Africans in America.” F. Abiola Irele’s opening chapter draws the reader’s

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attention to what many critics have agreed is central to this literature as it was then and now: the element of *sound*, a black sound, as manifested through the languages of music and the voice. There are two main reasons why sound is given preeminence. First, Africans brought to the Americas were prohibited by law from being taught to read and write in English. For a longer time than most people living in a foreign land, therefore, African Americans were forced to create effective and elaborate systems for communicating based on sound and the instruments of sound, the voice, the body, and, for those who were fortunate, the drum. The second reason is that the newly arrived Africans spoke many languages that would become an interethnic language through a continuing process of creolization. This was a functional language needed to serve multiple roles, not the least of which was negotiating plantation life. Thus, the relationship between the spoken and the written and the values reinforced by the politics of dislocation, relocation, and identity as the basis for oral and print literatures, must be kept in mind.

Against this backdrop of conquest, colonization, and the acquisition of wealth and power, a series of public discourses and legal actions which authorized specific ideologies of race became absorbed into an emergent black literature between 1600 and 1800. Both print and oral, both Anglophone and colonial, it was created by African slaves, free blacks, and mulattoes, for whom the memories of Africa were essential to their psychic and social survival, as so many of the slave songs confirm. By offering this perspective as a way to understand the travel and exchanges initiated by the slave trade as one of the earliest forms of transnationalism, Philip Gould and Vincent Carretta in Chapters 2 and 3 confirm the centrality of African-derived people to the project of modernity, which is discussed at length in Part II. Just as Paul Gilroy has linked modernity to his concept of the Black Atlantic as a form of intellectual and geographic encounter,¹⁶ so too are we reminded that a sizeable body of writing by kidnapped African travelers to England, colonial America, and elsewhere planted the seeds of the contemporary Black Diaspora. It was this literature of movement, “geographical, ontological and rhetorical,” as Gould convincingly argues, that began to demonstrate “complex negotiations of the language and ideas normally associated with Enlightenment ideology.”

The years between 1820 and 1865 are as critical as they are ironic in the development of African American writing. If we consider the subject of slavery and the representation of black people in literature, then we could argue that at this juncture virtually all American literature is “black.” Chapter 4 by Stefan Wheelock and Chapter 5 by John Ernest consider the

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forty-five-year period from inside and outside the organized abolitionist movement in order to comprehend the broad range of activities that produced antislavery literature. Wheelock pays special attention to a literature of self-empowerment, resistance, and spiritual reform, created by those who imagined new possibilities for women in religious authority, a development that did not take place without struggle. By looking at the geographical distribution of the African American population in the United States in midcentury, the coexistence of different language traditions, and the literature of both enslaved and free people, we can gain a fuller appreciation of the richness and diversity of pre-Civil War literature, while emphasizing the larger question of literacy and the growth of print culture in America. Chapter 6 by Kimberly Blockett and Chapter 7 by Joycelyn Moody concentrate on the purposes of writing and reading, especially when the ideas of freedom and independence are being interrogated. They point to some new directions that challenge conventional notions of literary and cultural production, distribution, and audience in some of the most crucial decades of the nineteenth century. From militant activism and radical abolition to expressions of national, cultural, and linguistic identity, African American literature began to consolidate a complex racial and cultural identity well before Emancipation. If there is a central theme in this literature, it is a concern with resisting the monolithic and generally negative view of African Americans, encouraged, however inadvertently, by the focus on slavery. What all the literature shares, whether antislavery or pro-black, is a belief in the freedom to speak for oneself. In an effort to reflect this diversity, Blockett explores literature written by free blacks North and South, while Moody examines the origins and impact of the black press.

The fight against slavery necessitated a propagandistic mode of writing committed to education and information about “the peculiar institution” as it agitated for the end of slavery. Postbellum America frames an era commonly understood as the “dawn of freedom,” the years between 1865 and 1910, which presented new conditions for forging an entirely new literature of necessity. It is not surprising that during Reconstruction (1865–77) the contradiction between the possibility of a fully realized freedom and the threat of new forms of oppression and discrimination fueled enormous debates. African American literature after the Civil War begins to shift its racial discourse in order to (1) promote racial and moral uplift, social progress, and solidarity; (2) gain an identifiable, if not authoritative presence in mainstream America; and (3) exercise greater control over the representation of self. In part, this is a function of the way African American literature

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confronted late nineteenth-century sensibilities, including the “cult of true womanhood,” the sentimental novel, and diminishing national interest in the plight of black people.

As Warren J. Carson points out in Chapter 8, despite the end of Reconstruction and entrenchment of segregation, the rapid growth of public and church-supported educational institutions, advances in print technology, and an earnest desire to overcome the obstacles of economic oppression gave substance and energy to a multifaceted enterprise that African Americans took to mean freedom. The institutional and organizational life of blacks took highly visible forms and created important roles for women in churches, businesses, and self-help societies. This, in turn, inspired autobiographies, biographies, and anthologies of achievement, and fiction focusing on domesticity, racial violence, and empowerment. These forms of writing were profoundly impacted by the changes in demography, the increase in literacy, the activities of women’s and literary clubs, and the revitalization of an independent black press, which, as Donald Joyce points out, was at an all time high.¹⁷ While large numbers of African Americans remained on farms, a significant number migrated to the North, Midwest, and West. Migrations of African American people created greater opportunities for them to be influenced by a wider range of cross-cultural dynamics and traditions than was possible during slavery. In this regard, black literature, like dance and music, symbolized and represented ideas and emotions that were themselves in flux, the idea that prompted Farah Jasmine Griffin’s investigation into the development of an “African American migration narrative,” giving the provocative title of her resulting work as *Who Set You Flowin’?* (1995). In order to give sufficient attention to the key generic developments in the critical years before the New Negro Renaissance, this section includes Chapter 9, Keith Byerman and Hanna Wallinger’s discussions of fiction by both men and women, and reconsiderations of poetry in Chapter 10 by Keith Leonard and Chapter 11 by Mark A. Sanders. These chapters allow for more focused and parallel discussions of African American poetry and fiction.

The beginning years of the twentieth century provide a point of origin for Part II. Changing conditions of African American life and new structures of authority governing ideas, action, and expression contributed to a collective declaration of identity and social cohesion, which we define as a specific African American modernism, an organizing theme for Part II. The twelve chapters deal with what might be considered “geographies of the modern” for the years from 1910 to 1950. For the period between 1950 and 1976, chapters treat the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic phenomena era as critical historical markers; the final set of chapters look more