Black Reconstructions: *Introduction*

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Harcourt, Brace, and Company's 1935 publication of W. E. B. Du Bois's magisterial *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* marked a crucial moment of hope and rage. Throughout the book, Du Bois offered page upon page of deft analysis of sources that had been too long ignored, dismissed, or willfully erased. In the wake of the Harlem Renaissance and in the midst of the Great Depression, Du Bois prayed that he could find an audience willing to challenge both an American popular culture and a white-dominated academy (embodied in the "Dunning School"[1]) that "remembered" Reconstruction by glorifying the planter class, dismissing African American rights and concerns, and reifying "new" versions of "states' rights" and white power.

The book's searing seventeenth chapter, a culmination of sorts, dissects treatments of Reconstruction in popular white-authored American school histories to reveal, per the chapter's title, "The Propaganda of History." It opens with the stunning findings of Helen Boardman's close study of such textbooks, in which Boardman found "three dominant theses": that "All Negroes were ignorant," that "All Negroes were lazy, dishonest, and extravagant," and that "Negroes were responsible for bad government during Reconstruction."[2] Du Bois and Boardman paired each of these theses with sample quotations from the school histories surveyed – from Everett Barnes's assertion in *American History for the Grammar Grades* that "Although the Negroes were now free, they were also ignorant and unfit to govern themselves" to Helen F. Giles's claim in *How the United States Became a World Power* that "These men knew not only nothing about the government, but also cared for nothing except what they could gain for themselves," and from D. H. Montgomery's assertion in *The Leading Facts of American History* that "The Negroes . . . had been slaves all their lives and were so ignorant that they did not even know the letters of the

alphabet. Yet now they sat in the state legislatures" to S. E. Foreman's language in *Advanced American History*, "Thinking that slavery meant toil and that freedom meant only idleness, the slave after he was set free was disposed to try out his freedom by refusing to work."[3]

Du Bois submits that "herein lies more than mere omission and difference of emphasis. The treatment of the period of Reconstruction reflects small credit upon American historians as scientists. We have too often a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history that the story will make pleasant reading for Americans."[4] Thus, Du Bois recognizes, early twentieth-century histories of Black Reconstruction represented a "real frontal attack on Reconstruction," especially on African American civil rights; in this, "the chief witness in Reconstruction, the emancipated slave himself, has been almost barred from court."[5] Du Bois concludes that "this chapter, therefore, which in logic should be a survey of books and sources, becomes of sheer necessity an arraignment of American historians and an indictment of their ideals."[6]

While the large audience Du Bois envisaged did not materialize in the 1930s, his book nevertheless became a watershed in the reevaluation of African American histories. The years following the publication of *Black Reconstruction in America*, especially those post-1970, gradually began to recognize the potential revolutions of the Reconstruction era, the massive ways in which the nation failed to redeem itself after centuries of slavery, the lasting trauma of slavery, the roots of Jim Crow and contemporary racism, and the significant roles many Black people have played in resisting dominant and limiting paradigms of race, nation, and citizenship. While a full historiography is beyond the scope of this volume, Paul Teed and Melissa Ladd Teed's succinct summary in their *Reconstruction: A Reference Guide* notes that "Du Bois refuted the notion that former slaves were ignorant pawns of the carpetbaggers and showed that the political activism of Reconstruction-era blacks was a natural extension of both their resistance to slavery and their role as soldiers in the Civil War. In the 1950s and 1960s . . . Du Bois's insights were developed by scholars such as Kenneth Stampp, John Hope Franklin, and Joel Williamson. These historians demonstrated that if Reconstruction-era politics was not immune from corruption, neither was it bereft of idealism. Indeed, they showed that the political alliance of former slaves and white Republican politicians produced some of the period's most notable accomplishments, including the passage of the nation's first civil rights legislation, the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, and the creation of public school systems in southern states."[7] Teed and Teed

mark the publication of historian Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (1988) – "a work that brilliantly synthesized previous scholarship while presenting new evidence of the period's enormous, if unrealized, potential to revolutionize American society and politics" – as a signal that "historians have at last come to understand" the deep flaws of the Dunning School.[8] That said, they implicitly remind us that the Dunning School's remnants are alive and well outside of the academy in a variety of pop-culture venues, "heritage" projects, statues of key Confederates in prominent public places, Confederate battle flags flying over state houses and at high school football games, and a host of other modes all deeply shaped by the white supremacist structures from which the Dunning School grew and to which it contributed.

The need to challenge that frightening recidivist vision and the possibilities created in part by Foner's book have led to an amazing array of new histories of Reconstruction, including many that attend to the period's deep connection to our contemporary moment. That flowering of historical work on Reconstruction – which Teed and Teed's book both chronicles and participates in and which Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s 2019 PBS series *Reconstruction: America after the Civil War* and companion book *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* shared with a wide audience – has included, for the first time, real consideration of women's engagement with Reconstruction; deep attention to labor, capital, and material production; the nexus of the local, the regional, and the national; politics, political processes, and law; and faith practices and religious institutions, among other subjects. A number of works have exposed and explained white violence during the period, with some recognizing deep connections between Confederate and neo-Confederate actions; some historians – one thinks especially of James K. Hogue's 2011 *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* – have gone so far as to suggest that the Civil War essentially continued, albeit with different terminology and different battlefields and battle structures, well into the later nineteenth century.

Attention to a fuller range of African American experiences has often been crucial to this work. That said, as Kidada E. Williams notes, "as far as the field has come, it still has a ways to go to capture the full kaleidoscope of African American life."[9] Williams calls on scholars to "embrace radical historical methodologies in order to uncover the more obscure inner lives of people experiencing a world turned upside down by war, Reconstruction, and redemption" and to "produce histories of fully

developed black subjects" by working "to excavate the interiorities of black life, the complexities of black personhood, and black emotions and sensibilities" with a real "commitment to intersectional approaches that include but extend beyond the most familiar ones."[10] In these and other ways, as Luke Harlow put it in prefacing a special issue of *The Journal of the Civil War Era* dedicated to "The Future of Reconstruction Studies," "historians of Reconstruction are currently at a crossroads."[11]

Scholars of African American print engagement are at a similar crossroads – or, perhaps better, a tipping point – tied to Black literature in, of, and surrounding Reconstruction. The narrative of Black print in Reconstruction began differently than the broader history discussed above. White-dominated literary criticism during the first several decades of the twentieth century generally dismissed most Black literature – especially pre-Harlem Renaissance Black literature – in toto. Rather than the consistent and outright malice of the Dunning School – or because traces of it have persisted in wide and powerful ways – such critics implicitly and occasionally explicitly deployed rhetorics of absence. The historiographical shifts that led to Foner's book – including work by historians like Franklin, Benjamin Quarles, Stampp, and McPherson – did have important corollaries in African American literary studies, but scholars of Black literature in the mid-twentieth century were focused on the monumental effort to simply bring Black texts into the majority-white academy. That work initially emphasized the earliest Black literature (ranging from Phillis Wheatley's poetry to key antebellum slave narratives) and literature created during or after the Harlem Renaissance that addressed the modernist and postmodernist aesthetics that marked many academic definitions of quality in the twentieth century.

Even at the end of that century, many literary histories suggested – as the title of Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard's field-changing 2006 collection *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem* (itself a play on Charles Chesnutt's language) reminds us – that there had been little or no African American literature between the antebellum slave narrative and the 1920s. This was true of both scholarship in African American studies and in other fields. The landmark 1985 *History of Southern Literature*, for example, mentions William Wells Brown half a dozen times, Frederick Douglass twice, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper once, and Elizabeth Keckley not at all in its 625 pages. The book's first serious treatment of Black writers is "Black Novelists and Novels, 1930–1950."[12] Lest this example suggest that the white-centric vision of much of twentieth-century Southern studies explains the much broader absence of Black

Reconstruction in literary studies, note that even a text as massively important to the recovery of nineteenth-century African American literature as Joan Sherman's *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* asserts that "the years of 1866–1877 which saw hopes for racial equality raised and shattered were unfruitful for black poetry and black culture generally."[13]

Whether because of archival and bibliographic limitations, thin conceptions of what Black writers wrote and published during Reconstruction, specific critical biases or aesthetic sensibilities, problematic methodologies, or other goals or circumstances, many scholars have echoed this continuing sense of the absence of (important) Black literature from the Reconstruction. Until very recently, anthologies of American literature have offered similarly bleak landscapes.

However, scholarly conversations in literary studies have also shifted, based in part on major recovery efforts by literary historians like Frances Smith Foster, William Andrews, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Innovative and path-breaking scholarship by these figures as well as by Carla Peterson, Joycelyn Moody, John Ernest, P. Gabrielle Foreman, Lois Brown, Ezra Greenspan, McCaskill, Gebhard, and some of the authors of chapters in this volume has helped build critical frames that can accommodate the wider range of available texts, as have moves within American literature and American studies to think about the "long Civil War" – a period definition that recognizes deep Civil War presences both before 1861 and after 1865.[14]

The last two decades have seen, for example, a growing chorus of literary historians who recognize that the years after the Civil War saw not only the massive work of Harper (see Fig. i.1), who published poems long and short, serialized novels, short fiction, essays, lectures, and letters that circulated throughout much of Reconstruction-era African America – in short, the output of a major cultural figure – but also an outpouring from William Wells Brown, whom Ezra Greenspan's recent biography rightly places as key to American letters. More scholars are recognizing the period's crucial efforts to build infrastructures to aid African Americans who hoped to enter print – as well as important moves to collect and preserve Black print including pioneering efforts in Black-authored history that would help pave the way for Du Bois's later work. We are beginning to understand that Reconstruction saw, as well, a flowering of diverse Black press venues, from the massively important African Methodist Episcopal Church's weekly *Christian Recorder* to Black papers in the West like the *Pacific Appeal* and the San Francisco *Elevator*. Beyond news,

Figure i.1 Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, engraving from William Still's *The Underground Rail Road* (1872).
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62–75978

these newspapers published diverse literary offerings including novels (not just Harper's but also works like Julia C. Collins's 1865 *The Curse of Caste*) as well as shorter texts including fiction, poetry, essays, letters, and children's literature – much of it written by African Americans for African Americans. The period also saw a striking number of narratives written by formerly enslaved men and women – ranging from small, localized publications to national works like Elizabeth Keckley's 1868 *Behind the Scenes*, which features her work with the Lincoln White House. Such texts functioned in implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue with books like William Still's massive 1872 compendium/history, *The Underground Rail Road*. Rich and only recently recovered poetry by Albery Whitman, James Monroe Whitfield, George Boyer Vashon, John Willis Menard, and several others shared shelf space with these works and with profoundly important faith-centered texts, ranging from Black church histories to narratives of individual spiritual growth. And this list is only a beginning.

African American Literature in Transition, 1865–1880: *Black Reconstructions* explores this rich field – African American print culture in the transitional years after the Civil War. It locates and studies materials that many literary critics and historians simply haven't figured into their larger narratives of American literature and culture. But as massively important as such a recovery of the "who, what, where, and when" of Black literature during the period is, this book also emphasizes a set of

methodological innovations focusing especially on the "how and why" of African American print in the fluid moments of (and surrounding) Reconstruction. Paying homage to Du Bois's landmark work, it asks both what is possible and what is needed at the current critical moment. Like Gates's *Stony the Road*, it submits that "few American historical periods are more relevant to understanding our contemporary racial politics than Reconstruction."[15] It thus makes a set of interventions that understand that such large-scale recovery inherently challenges methods dominant in American literary study – because those methods have sometimes flowed from and/or been complicit in the widespread ignorance, dismissal, and/or misreading of Black print engagement. It recognizes that we must, to paraphrase series editor Joycelyn Moody, explore the dynamics of change, the engines of literary development, and the cultural kinetics of African American literary history. We thus pray that this volume makes scholars pause and reconsider what we've collaboratively and individually said *and not said* about Reconstruction, about post-Civil War literature, and about African American spaces and traces in an often-hostile America.

At the core of such work is the recognition that many of the period's texts are not only aesthetically striking but also central to understanding key trends and transitions in African American (and broad American) literature and culture. In African American texts from Reconstruction, we see crucial thinking about race and nation in the wake of the massive war; we see, too, critical battles to articulate how that war might be remembered. Some of these texts think deeply about the carnage of the war – but also, sometimes simultaneously, about the centuries of carnage caused by the slave system. Some speak of the immediate effects of legal freedom on the millions of enslaved men, women, and children throughout the South, and some speak, too, of the lasting trauma brought on by slavery. Some elucidate the impact of formerly enslaved people voting for the first time and of the first Black elected officials. Some carefully consider key legislative, judicial, and executive acts – including and beyond the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments – that tried to "reconstruct" the nation, even as some recognize that at least some parts of the nation would need to be deconstructed or freshly constructed if African Americans were to have any chance of public engagement or even survival. Some see great hope – for self-determination, citizenship, prosperity, education, and other rights both large and small – and some recognize how deeply that hope was threatened from the period's very beginning. Some address how that hope fell apart as white northerners tired of "Southern" struggles and failed to fight racism at home, and many pair

nuanced analysis of the "changing same" in the South (and beyond) with careful weighing of the complexities of local, state, regional, and national identities and actions. Many speak of deep and abiding faith, and some struggle with how faith structures might or might not work in a faithless nation.

In short, African American print between 1865 and 1880 tells us a great deal about the nation's art, culture, memory, and struggles in a crucial period of real, potential, and frustrated transitions. These recognitions have led to this volume's dual emphasis on recovering Black print from the years just after the Civil War and on finding, adapting, and/or creating concomitant methods that grow from the texts (and contexts) and that emphasize the title focus of the series, *African American Literature in Transition*.

This book thus offers the most nuanced treatment of African American interactions with print during the period. To help map these vital years, the volume's contributions are grouped in three clusters – each containing a very brief introduction followed by four chapters, each centering on a nexus of methodological and thematic questions, and each engaging in crucial recovery work.

These clusters embody an innovative approach to chronology flowing from the broader series emphasis on "transitions." Some of the chapters, for example, open with close consideration of a single moment drawn from the period, but these moments, whether considered briefly or in depth, serve as springboards to broader work that positions chapter subjects within key transitions in African American literature and life. Very much in the sense Derrick Spires describes in his chapter, the volume as a whole is a set of exciting, challenging sketches that recognize just how incomplete both the study of Black Reconstruction literature and the praxis of national Reconstruction are.

The opening part, "Citizenships, Textualities, and Domesticities," includes chapters by Spires, Stephanie Farrar, Rynetta Davis, and me and rewrites the emphasis on national political citizenship in histories of the period by tracing the transitions in Black textual considerations various citizenships (political, religious, literary), with some emphasis on just what the "domestic" might look like during the period. The chapters in this section often locate their work through the dynamic practices and politics of important but understudied literary genres, ranging from the sketch to the narrative poem to the religious apologia.

The second part, "Persons and Bodies," offers chapters by Kathy Glass, Nazera Sadiq Wright, Keith Michael Green, and Brigitte Fielder and asks

how transitions in thinking about Black personhood and/or physicality – sometimes linked, sometimes not, and both often tied to various incarnations of citizenship – shaped and were shaped by Black authors' reading and writing of bodily states from disability to childhood and bodily governance from reform and temperance to "respectability politics."

The volume's final part, "Memories, Materialities, and Locations," contains chapters by Cody Marrs, Janet Neary, Sherita Johnson, and Katherine Adams and seizes on the demands and desires of material production – including the production of memory and place – that were so central to debates over race, citizenship, and personhood in Reconstruction. It specifically thinks through modes of making Black labors visible through print by considering concrete, tropological, and metaphysical "making," be it making physical print remembrances or fashioning domestic products – or producing raw cotton, "cotton culture," or visions of the American West and the American South. In this, the section highlights Black engagement with the national traffic in memory, specifically rubrics of memory tied to the war, nationhood, race, mobility, geography, and national destiny.

One key goal in the volume is to allow the broad thematic schema in and between the various chapters to dance with and deeply inform various chronologies and methodologies. In other words, through "fixing" individual moments and subjects, the chapters explore the before and after of each, the scene and the staging, the surrounding processes, the dynamics shaping the how and why of these moments and subjects. These approaches build from our collective sense that the volume's challenge is, in part, in one peer reviewer's words, to "unsettle a subject that has not been settled." The chapters thus offer textual, paratextual, and contextual work crucial to the kind of "ready reference" volume the period so needs and deserves while simultaneously thinking through various catalysts and chains of reactions central to the period as well as key unanswered questions. We thus study Black Reconstruction print as a "during" as well as an "after" and a "before" – as a set of textual events that both engaged with and *were* transitions.

Creating this volume, we have been constantly reminded of what we must still do. We have, for example, deemphasized Frederick Douglass – who continued to do immensely important work during Reconstruction – mainly because he has been studied and is being studied so deeply and so well by other scholars in other places (from David Blight to Robert Levine to Kathleen Diffley); that said, even more consideration of Douglass is warranted. While several chapters consider Harper and Brown, Harper's

lectures and Brown's writing about the Civil War are especially rich areas for further exploration. Scholars are only beginning to contend with the power of the Black press – a set of venues that make regular appearance in the chapters here but that demand much fuller study. And, of course, scholars continue to rediscover new texts and new ways of thinking about the authors, texts, and subjects here. There is so much to do; it is our greatest hope that this volume moves our collective work forward.

In this, then, we should reach back and remember Du Bois not only as the author of a germinal work of history and historical recovery tied to Reconstruction, but as, in some ways, a child of Reconstruction. The Black print culture explored in this volume was in full swing when, on February 23, 1868 – a seemingly inauspicious Sunday – Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Placing Du Bois, however young, in the landscapes of Reconstruction makes us wonder again about the importance of Du Bois's delivery of and then writing for T. Thomas Fortune's New York-based Black newspapers in the early 1880s, creating texts that grew directly from the flowering of the Black press in Reconstruction. It makes us reconsider the comparatively short geographic distance between the young Du Bois and the aging William Wells Brown, a lion of Black print in the Reconstruction.[16] It calls on us to think more about what Black print might and might not have flowed into Great Barrington in Du Bois's youth – and about the how and why behind that "what." Indeed, it demands that we reevaluate Du Bois's 1911 eulogy to one of the period's major figures, Frances Harper: "she was not a great singer, but she had some sense of song; she was not a great writer, but she wrote much worth reading."[17]

In short, this volume calls for reappraisals both of the period and beyond the period. We want to explore how and why the volume's recovery work should change our broader methods as literary historians and cultural critics. We want to reconsider how we might study African American literary works of the period and beyond as carefully crafted material objects circulating in a hostile print culture – objects that interfaced in all sorts of complex ways with diverse African American lived experiences during the period. We hope to enable the volume's readers to consider deeply how individual texts, authors, and actions are set in complex webs of events, circumstances, print, and personages – all situated (and/or *becoming* situated) within larger subjects, arguments, trends, traditions, and transitions.

The chapters in this book were written while many of us were thinking about the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland,