Introduction

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On August 27, 1850, Lucy Stanton, president of the Oberlin Ladies Literary Society and likely the first African American woman to graduate with a college degree, gave "A Plea for the Oppressed" as the school's commencement address. "Slavery is the combination of all crime. It is War," she argued. "Those who rob their fellow-men of home, of liberty, of education, of life, are really at war against them as though they cleft them down upon the bloody field."[1] Stanton's contention that slavery is war finds its corollary in contemporary articulations of a foundational anti-Blackness fueling slavery and its afterlives as both a centuries-sustained "crime wave" and a "war."[2] Just two weeks after she gave this speech, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law came into effect.

Born with free status and the daughter of a conductor on the Underground Railroad, Lucy Stanton was an activist well before she became an abolitionist. She went on, post-graduation, to assist her husband William H. Day in his work as coeditor of Cleveland's weekly *Aliened American* (1853–4)[3] and to publish a short story, "Charles and Clara Hays," in its April 9, 1853, inaugural issue. Yet, two weeks after she graduated from Oberlin, her freedom was thrown into crisis when the Fugitive Slave Act created incentives to kidnap free African Americans like her into slavery. Despite this threat and the nation's continued denial of rights and protections to the "nominally free,"[4] Stanton went on to teach the freedpeople in Georgia and Mississippi, and was active in the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. By 1904, at the age of seventy-two, she had established the Sojourner Truth Industrial Club in Los Angeles as a refuge for women migrating to the city.

The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, or "Bloodhound Law" as abolitionists dubbed it, rewrote the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. That 1793 act, written to enforce Article 4, Section 2, of the Constitution, had authorized enslavers and their agents to search for the self-emancipated in free states;

criminalized assisting the escape of or sheltering a fugitive; and established a legal mechanism by which the self-emancipated could be seized (even in the free North), extradited, and returned to enslavers solely on the oral testimony of hired catchers avowing that the individual was a so-called runaway. The act prompted the emergence of a fugitive-capturing industry, which also jeopardized the freedom of free Blacks, who were unlawfully seized and sold into slavery in the South. The 1793 act resulted in the extensive networks of the Underground Railroad. In rewriting the 1793 act, the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law included the kidnapping of free Blacks and resulted in the galvanizing of moderate abolitionists, the formation of fugitive societies in what is now Canada, increased national and transatlantic abolition efforts, riots, the peaking of Underground Railroad–assisted self-emancipations, and the growth of a Black abolitionist lecture industry in the United Kingdom.

Despite the terrorizing threat and lawlessness of the kidnapping industry unleashed by the Fugitive Slave Act, enslaved and freeborn men and women contested repeated attempts to prevent and deny their freedom and exercise of rights at mid-century. And though President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863; Congress repealed the Fugitive Slave Act on June 28, 1864; and the Thirteenth Amendment was passed and ratified by December 6, 1865, Black freedom, rights, and citizenship were far from assured by the end of the Civil War. The ongoing process of securing their place as citizens of the nation saw Black women and men making and taking up educational opportunities through churches, the American Missionary Association, free schools, and organized efforts to educate the freedpeople. Institutions such as Oberlin became desegregated (1835), and schools for African American students such as Ashmun Institute in Pennsylvania (1854)[5] – which would become Lincoln University in 1866 – and Wilberforce University (1856) were founded. African American women activists negotiated the transition from female abolition to woman's rights in order to maintain a national hearing for Black rights. And in the face of ongoing violence, African Americans continued to exercise mobility, both physical and occupational, to maintain robust community, political, educational, and cultural institutions, and to further develop a vibrant expressive culture including the production and circulation of literature conceived in its broadest sense. These acts can be understood as what Richard Newman calls "black shadow politics," political practices that "challenged racialized American political institutions" while simultaneously "lay[ing] claim to core elements of those institutions," thereby revealing a "black political order that understood

the dictates and practice of democracy" as an "ongoing reconstruction of American politics."[6]

In 1850 alone, AME Bishop Daniel Payne published his collection of poetry, *Pleasures and Miscellaneous Other Poems*; itinerant preacher, activist, and formerly enslaved Sojourner Truth published the first edition of her *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*;[7] the American League of Colored Laborers was founded in New York by some of the mid-century's most recognizable, self-emancipated, African American male authors and newspapermen, Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, and Samuel Ringgold Ward; and Nancy Gardner Prince published her *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, detailing her travels to Russia where she and her husband lived in the royal court and she worked as a dressmaker to the wealthy. Prince's *Narrative* blurred generic distinctions at the same time it challenged the geographic boundaries of what we have since called an African American literary imagination by including her 1841 pamphlet on the living conditions of newly emancipated people in Jamaica, titled *The West Indies: Being a Description of the Islands, Progress of Christianity, Education, and Liberty among the Colored Population Generally*.[8]

The year 1850 throws into relief what the contributors to this volume position as central to an understanding of African American literature at mid-century. Recognizable literary genres, such as autobiographical narrative, the novel, and lyric poetry, join oral forms, such as speeches and sermons, as well as writing we today think of as belonging to other disciplines, such as history and social science, in what readers at the time understood African American literature to be. Readers and writers also understood and actively cultivated a co-constitutive relation linking political activism and politicized spaces with literature and its development. At mid-century Black American literature circulated primarily in newspapers and magazines, making possible a different relation between the reader and the world through seriality and the rhythms of weekly and monthly publication. That mode of circulation also rendered what we call a literary tradition both precarious and ubiquitous at the same time, as periodicals folded under financial pressure and new ones emerged, papers were passed round within communities, and who "readers" were understood to be was expansive since African Americans were accessing literature in communal reading settings that meant they need not have been textually literate. This literature itself was likewise expansive, challenging the nation's geographic boundaries by expanding beyond them in its representation and wide dissemination of Black thought. In other words, African American literature – its emergence and development – have always been complex.

This volume offers one way of approaching that complexity in the middle of the nineteenth century through its tripartite structure focusing on "Black Personhood and Citizenship in Transition" (Part I), "Generic Transitions and Textual Circulation" (Part II), and "Black Geographies in Transition" (Part III), each with its own brief introduction.

In this volume introduction, I map additional connections across chapters and sections that together make clear at least three crucial considerations. *Who* African Americans represented themselves to be at mid-century was imbricated with *how* they expressed themselves and *why* they chose to do so as they did. *Where* they understood Black possibilities for being, for freedom, to lie and *why* was central to their literary work, broadly conceived. Moreover, *where* and *how* Black freedom and its "alternative modes of life"[9] were already being practiced in the face of attempts to delimit them informed the Black futures this literature offered its readers. Of course, readers will discover and follow their own paths through the volume as they consider ways the brilliant work collected here speaks to developments within our wider fields. As all volumes in this series undertake to do, contributors to this volume resist the tendency toward an empirical accounting of African American literature through an emphasis on literary continuity and change as dialectically related and ongoing movements, or, in other words, as process rather than event.

The period 1850–65 is a crucial one for changes both in the material realities of African Americans' lives and in an African American literary imagination. This volume is underwritten by the understanding that material, political, and social conditions and realities, and resistance in multiple forms to those conditions, are central to an understanding of African American literature in any period. Rather than understanding such conditions as creating definitive ruptures or breaks, the contributors to this volume and others in the series stress fluidity as they explore African American literature in transition. To consider how and why African American literature undergoes the changes it does calls for revision to our extant literary historiography and an awareness of intersecting concerns. At times these may be visible in attention to sites of publication, at others in attention to a critical mass of literary focus, and at still others in a curiosity about how varied any one phenomenon we attend to might be.

This volume's focus on fifteen years of African American literary transitions at mid-century spans what are typically thought of as years of violent struggle and national crisis as the United States underwent the turbulent transition from slaveholding to "free" nation. Mid-century is often charted by the federal acts that sought to maintain slavery – the

Compromise of 1850, including the Fugitive Slave Act[10] and the 1854 Kansas–Nebraska Act[11] – and legal cases that contested both that economy and attempts to define African Americans as outside the purview of citizenship. The landmark 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision and its impacts are frequently stressed, for in holding that enslaved people were not citizens and therefore could not sue in federal court,[12] Justice Taney also proclaimed that African Americans had no rights the nation or whites were bound by law to respect or protect. To be sure, legal contests and their defining power were the stuff of Black literature at the time and since, including Margaret Garner's Cincinnati trial that inspired Frances Harper's 1859 poem "Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio" and Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize–winning 1987 novel *Beloved*.[13] The Fugitive Slave Law and the *Dred Scott* decision incited "fraught political debates among Blacks and whites alike about democracy and citizenship,"[14] debates that preceded the Civil War and any notion that either was achieved as a result of that event. Nearly all of this volume's contributors note the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and the *Dred Scott* decision as central touchstones for the question of Black freedom in the 1850s through the mid-1860s, with some framing this as contested physical mobility and others as questions of Black personhood's legibility.

Mid-century also continues to be thought by many in terms of covert and open Black resistance, the intensification of abolition, and their effects on what would become the Civil War. Here, the operation of the Underground Railroad and its aid to self-emancipating African Americans is foregrounded along with armed rebellion in the raid at Harpers Ferry that, though conceived of by John Brown, was possible because it drew on Black support locally as well as from Chatham, Detroit, and San Francisco. A culmination thesis posits the freeing of enslaved African Americans as an eventual outcome of the war, rather than as a process of self-emancipation and Black activism. Reading for culmination or the achievement of freedom in and through the war and its legal and political outcomes, in turn, reads African American literature at mid-century developmentally, stressing the slave narrative as its roots. The "golden age" of the slave narrative, its novelization, and the emergence of the early African American novel[15] are seen as indexical of intensifying debates over slavery and Black writers' centrality to that intensification.

Yet the Emancipation Proclamation "freed not a single slave,"[16] and the Thirteenth Amendment reinstituted slavery "as punishment for crime."[17] And so, we might also read the present of 1865 and the future it ostensibly offered Black Americans through its past in order to suggest that the slave

narrative's "golden age" testifies to the equivocation to come: an Emancipation Proclamation that was intended not to free but to bolster Union regiments that would nonetheless remain segregated, and a constitutional amendment that ensured the afterlife of slavery as ongoing racial capitalism. The 1850s saw the greatest concentration of slave narratives in African American literary history, and the genre persisted until the early twentieth century. Together these indicate that African American literature was registering freedom as yet unrealized within the nation and that an index of this deferral was an American reading public still interested in representations of unfreedom, even if we think of these as conditions Black subjects are represented as triumphing over. What, exactly, is reaching culmination or end at mid-century as imagined and testified to by African American writers?

These fifteen years seem neither to invite nor sustain developmental accounts, however turbulent, of Black political possibility or literary history. Rather, contributors to this volume suggest that we read not for event but for multiple conditions productive of and for Black literature. Such a protocol of reading might yield understandings closer to the complexity of an African American mid-century. Those conditions would include how Black literature was being produced and circulated; how and why it marked its relation to other literary and expressive traditions; what geopolitical imaginaries it facilitated through representation, and how and why it did so; and what technologies, including but not limited to print, enabled African Americans to both represent and pursue such a complex and ongoing aesthetic and political project.

We are still in the early stages of thinking about the conditions of Black literary production and circulation made possible by periodicals, as well as considering how central these conditions were to generic transitions. Eric Gardner argues in his 2015 study of *The Christian Recorder* that "literary historians in particular need to re-evaluate what they read (and why) much more thoughtfully, especially given recent recognitions that ... the nineteenth-century Black press [was] the best – and often the *only* – outlet for many Black authors." [18] African American readers encountered literature in its broadest sense in Black periodicals, perhaps most clearly signaled by the title of the AME Church's *Repository of Religion and Literature, and of Science and Art* (1858–63). These were publishing possibilities at mid-century beyond those white-owned and operated publishing houses and printers with abolitionist sympathies. Periodicals like *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, the *Anglo-African Magazine*, and *The Christian Recorder* offered serialization opportunities, thereby facilitating generic transitions that

include the early African American novel. And periodicals were also the spaces in which readers encountered poetry and that made possible the publication of oratory and extended essay series. Moreover, they promoted literature, reading, and "literary culture" as related aspects of what Elizabeth McHenry has called a "literary character" that Black Americans, particularly in the urban North, saw as "a means to becoming exemplary citizens who could fully participate in the civic life of their community" and the nation.[19] At least a decade ago, Frances Smith Foster argued that the Black Protestant press, in particular, was "the most consistent and influential element in the first century of African American literary production."[20] A literary history that ignores this, Foster and Chanta Haywood contend, misses the full picture of "literary style . . . the agency of African American writers and readers in shaping their tradition as well as the tradition of others," and "ultimately reduces our understanding of the historical relationships among and within various segments of American society."[21] The reach of African American literature at mid-century was extended not only with the founding of new periodicals in Canada West, San Francisco, New Orleans, and Cleveland, to name a few, but also with print culture circulation facilitated by newspaper and magazine agents in places as diverse as the Caribbean, Canada, England, Panama, and China.[22]

The Black periodical is important in its materiality, circulation, and the serial possibilities it affords. It also emerges in this volume as a site for the multifaceted exercise of citizenship and the crafting of Black personhood. Benjamin Fagan, Jennifer Gipson, and Autumn Womack ask us to think about the periodical not only as *where* mid-nineteenth-century Black literature can be found but also as a media technology that uniquely facilitated a "transition from a transnationalism routed through a white transatlantic sensibility to one grounded in a Black hemispheric imaginary" through serialization, as Fagan argues; a publishing space that, together with the genre of poetry, articulated a unique Creole-of-color identity during the war, as Gipson contends; and a media form that not only "gathered" Black readers and subjects into a "coherent base," but also pursued the question of what "constituted . . . a free Black subject," as Womack argues.

Multiple conditions of African American literary production at mid-century also include the sonic. The field has continued to inquire into how texts not only are heard and overheard in African American literature within the tradition, as Henry Louis Gates's "trope of the talking book" and a "signifyin'" literary tradition foundationally contended,[23] but also echo across a literary color line as well as across the transborder, Atlantic,

transatlantic world and diasporic geographies in multiple genres. Such an expanded sense of over/hearing and echoing suggests both a more widespread and complex use of the aural/oral that we are now beginning to consider. Recent attention to the sonic reminds us how central the aural has been and remains in an African American cultural expressivity that includes music, performance, and literature.[24]

Matt Sandler's multilayered examination of the publication and circulation history of Joshua McCarter Simpson's poem, "Away to Canada," *as song*, including its anonymous quotation in Martin Delany's *Blake* and in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Atlantic Monthly* portrait of Sojourner Truth, "The Libyan Sibyl," can be considered as taking up the sonic. For Sandler, Simpson joins Frances Harper, James Monroe Whitfield, and George Moses Horton in complicating the lyric's mechanics and capacities in ways that turned its interior deliberations to revolutionary aims and "claims about the place of Black life in American history." The sonic also calls to mind how central oratory, including the sermonic, remained to a Black liberatory politics and aesthetics unconfined to either the slave narrative or abolition at mid-century, as Barbara McCaskill explores in her work on Henry Highland Garnet. And it also suggests a way to revisit the enabling connection between Black textual production and circulation and the oral/aural practices of Black literary societies and informal communal reading spaces and gatherings.[25] But what the sonic newly attends to are the ways in which other literary texts were not merely models in a by-now thoroughly debunked dismissal of Black aesthetics as imitative but were inscribed as "overheard." Hollis Robbins and Mark Sussman pursue an argument attendant to overhearing as staging a dialectical politics of withholding and risky disclosure, the policing and violations the aural made possible, and the emergence of the early African American novel from this nexus of what they call "a space of 'conflicted listening.'"

Yet another condition being explored currently in African American literary study and an important part of this volume is the geographic, which not only names Part III, "Black Geographies in Transition," but is active in chapters outside it. Attention to the geographic in African American literature foregrounds such questions as: How is African American literature at mid-century employing an Atlantic, transatlantic, transnational, *and* national – Black national, US, and soon-to-be Canadian national – imaginary at mid-century? How was emigration and its geographies, ranging from Haiti to Canada West, Liberia, Jamaica, and Mexico not only a debate about whether Black futures were viable in the

United States but also a modality for imagining them as anti- and antenational? How did political struggles, such as the Hungarian revolution of 1848 or insurrectionary attempts to form an Italian republic from the late 1820s through the 1850s, fire African American readers and writers in ways that expanded a Black revolutionary imaginary commonly associated with Haiti? How did African Americans practice in more quotidian ways what Katherine McKittrick has called "Black geographies": movements through and imaginings of space that "expose domination as a visible spatial project"?[26]

At a time when Black mobility within the nation was all the more severely curtailed, African Americans were actively insisting that their political struggle be understood as part of the revolutionary arc of the Atlantic world. That arc included both a transatlantic imagination and circuit of political agitation that Manisha Sinha has recently called "the abolition international."[27] Black abolitionists were circulating further afield with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, many of them by force and some by choice as those who had begun lecturing in the American Northeast moved on to England, Scotland, and Ireland in order to create international pressure on the US nation.[28] Barbara McCaskill argues that central to African American literature's "pivot" at mid-century is its "redefinition" of "antislavery's activist networks . . . in an autonomous African American cultural and literary enterprise" that not only was shaped by transatlantic antislavery "tactics and strategies," but transformed those old transatlantic networks into new circuits of activism.

Haiti looms large in its significance to a mid-century African American literary imagination and is explored in this volume by Marlene Daut, Benjamin Fagan, and Stephen Hall across historical writing, essays, pamphlets, and serialized fiction in Black newspapers. However, their emphasis is excitingly different. Hall argues that, as part of an African American turn to historical revolutions at mid-century, Haiti must be understood in relation to the American Revolution as historical writers twinned them to position the mid-century United States within an unfolding Black revolutionary reality. Daut considers Haiti as a diasporic crossroads within an Atlantic world political arc that asks us to consider not only Black American literature as diasporic, but all American writing as such in the "boundless heterogeneity" and "simultaneity" of "diaspora time." And Fagan locates Haiti in an African American literary and political imaginary that was also mobilizing the Hungarian revolution through serialized publication, meaning the political struggles at these sites could not be readily divorced from those of African Americans. In other words, these chapters help us to see

that during the same period Haiti was a cipher for and precedent of US Black revolution, it was also imagined as diasporic crossroads and was one node in an international revolutionary imagination.

By 1853, African Americans were writing about Haiti and the Haitian Revolution in what quickly became a critical mass that included George Vashon, James Theodore Holly, William Wells Brown, Martin Delany, James McCune Smith, and Henry Bibb. Their writing extended what we should recognize as a tradition begun in the late 1820s with the work of activists such as Victor Séjour, Sarah Forten, Maria Stewart, David Walker, and Robert Douglass Jr. Those debates continued and grew in intensity with the 1850 Compromise, facilitating geographic imaginings that included Haiti, Jamaica, Canada West, Mexico, and Liberia through poetry, narrative, pamphlets, newspapers, and oratory. Winfried Siemerling, in his larger argument for reading a rich tradition of Black writing in Canada West contrapuntally as *both* transnational and part of a national Canadian tradition, also draws our attention to how important Canada West was as both an emigration site and one in which to imagine and plan the staging of revolution. John Brown met with activists in Chatham during a trip north via Detroit, in which he sought support for his provisional government and soldiers in the raid on Harpers Ferry.

Judith Madera has argued that "spatial thinking had the potential to reveal structural conflicts under the surfaces of encoded space,"[29] and while the "subnational ruptures" posed by emigration debates and Atlantic world revolutionary realities and imaginings are central to mid-century Black American thought and literature, Madera also calls for attention to "relational, practice-based geographies."[30] Exercising physical and occupational mobility is often understood as just such a "practice-based" geography, and one frequently taken up as central to Black freedom on a national scale. Mobility as "freedom to move" is also, Janaka Bowman Lewis argues, central to gendered practices of Black geography. Yet by taking up Charlotte Forten as a case study illuminated by a host of African American women's geographical practices at mid-century, Bowman Lewis argues for a distinct narrative genre and an understanding of mobility as far more than physical movement, proposing that "mid-century Black women's narratives of education, individual progress, marriage and family, labor, and intellectual commitments more widely . . . both reflected and produced national and community rebuilding projects."

Stephen Knadler also presses on the tendency to align physical mobility with freedom by elaborating on the "debt crisis" and "excluding out" of the mobile freeman discursively constructed as "unsuitable economic