

Introduction

“It is the dream of my life – to be an author!” exclaimed a young Charles Chesnutt in a journal he kept during his years as a schoolteacher in Fayetteville, North Carolina. In the mere 200 words or so that follow, Chesnutt reveals a remarkably complex and astute understanding of what makes this dream so compelling, of its contradictory character, of how it might be realized, and of the high likelihood of failure:

It is not so much the *monstrari digito*, though that has something to do with my aspirations. It is not altogether the money. It is a mixture of motives. I want fame; I want money; I want to raise my children in a different rank of life from that I sprang from. In my present vocation, I would never accumulate a competency, with all the economy and prudence, and parsimony in the world. In law or medicine, I would be compelled to wait half a life-time to accomplish anything. But literature pays – the successful. There is a fascination about this calling that draws a scribbler irresistibly toward his doom. He knows that the chance of success is hardly one out of a hundred; but he is foolish enough to believe, or sanguine enough to hope, that he will be the successful one.

I am confident that I can succeed, in some degree, at any rate. It is the only thing I can do without capital, under my present circumstances, except teach. My three month vacation is before me after the lapse of another three, and I shall strike for an entering wedge in the literary world, which I can drive in further afterwards. “Where there’s a will etc”, and there is certainly a will in this case. (*JCWC* 154–55)

Nothing in this entry necessarily identifies its author as an African American, and one of the issues this study will explore is why such rhetorical invocations of a race-free or racially neutral dream of authorship express the ambition of some of the landmark African American novelists from the Jim Crow era, all of whom recognized in their “Negro” identity an asset for striking their “entering wedge in the literary world.” We must initially face the fact that for the authors surveyed in this book there was no African American model of literary greatness to govern and set an ultimate

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standard for their initial ambition (a fact only partially qualified, as we shall see, by Ralph Ellison's ambivalent relationship to Richard Wright or James Weldon Johnson's to Paul Laurence Dunbar). Literary ambition originates in the experience of literature, and "literature" as these writers generally experienced it was predominantly white and European: "Every time I read a good novel," Chesnutt began the entry above after having just finished William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, "I want to write one" (*JCWC* 154). Langston Hughes insufficiently accounted for this felt lack of inspiring precursors when declaring that the African American writer whose desire to be "a poet – not a Negro poet" was betraying a desire "to write like a white poet" and indeed "to be a white poet." "No great poet has ever been afraid of being himself," Hughes added ("Negro Artist" 91). But this truism had to be affirmed against an array of racist implications attaching to the category of "Negro writer" during and beyond the Jim Crow era, and against the dominant cultural perception internalized by aspiring African American authors that black America had not yet produced a "great" literary author. The variously successful authors who are the subject of this book – Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison – had no choice but to make their names as "Negro" writers, but they did so without wholly relinquishing an ideal of authorship as transcending racial markers, and in part because they remained to varying degrees under the inspiration of formidable white models of literary greatness. As Chesnutt lamented in an earlier journal entry, "I wish I could write like Dickens, but alas! I can't" (*JCWC* 80).

This book describes the way modern African American literature emerged as due in good part to the ambition of some of its landmark novelists not merely to be authors but to be *literary* authors, and their concomitant struggles to enter, win a place in, and maintain a place in the *literary* world during the Jim Crow era. It thus deals with a crucial but circumscribed phase of African American literary history, beginning roughly in 1896, the year of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, when William Dean Howells introduced Dunbar as "the first instance of an American Negro who had evinced innate distinction in literature" ("Introduction to *Lyrics*" 253), and reaching its apex in 1952, the year of Ellison's National Book Award-winning *Invisible Man*, which for William Barrett marked "a sensational entry by the Negro into high literature" (Butler, *Critical Response to Ellison* 23). This is the phase evoked by the title of Kenneth W. Warren's recent book *What Was African American Literature?*, which rightly reminds us that "widespread calls for the production of *a* literature

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by black Americans did not become standard until late in the nineteenth century” (16). Those calls were predicated on the widespread perception – by blacks and whites alike – of what Pascale Casanova calls “literary destitution” (see *World Republic* 177–85), the assumption that African Americans hitherto had little to no literature and thus were obliged to make one or continue suffering the ignoble reputation and fate of literarily destitute peoples. Consequentially *a* literature emerged of which Chesnutt was happy to be honored as “the first Negro novelist” during the Harlem Renaissance (*ES* 546), and of which Alain Locke could describe *Invisible Man* as but the third point “of peak development in Negro fiction” after Toomer’s *Cane* and Wright’s *Native Son* (“*Native Son* to *Invisible Man*” 41). I will discuss the pertinence of Casanova’s concept and try to justify my undoubtedly selective approach to the field more fully below, but first want to return to Chesnutt’s journal entry and analyze more fully the contradictory nature of his literary ambition as expressed therein.

Chesnutt’s entry exemplifies Richard Brodhead’s assertion that “[n]one appears in authorship without the prior achievement – funded by just that specificity of will and imagination that makes that figure a distinctive being – of thinking him- or herself over from a person in general into that more specialized human self that is an author” (*Cultures* 110). Indeed, the journals themselves – so remarkably preserved – embody a precocious performance of authorship such as we find enacted in the surviving notebooks and letters of many, even most, successful writers. But as variously enacted in both the published and unpublished writings of the authors at issue here, the authorial persona reveals in conjunction with a sense of the usual strategies for actually becoming an author the peculiar dilemmas that stem from wanting to win mainstream recognition as a “Negro author” in a racially hierarchized social field.

Having declared authorship the dream of his life, what did this entail for someone in Chesnutt’s sociological position – that of a relatively well-educated “mulatto” situated in a provincial and more overtly racist region of the United States – if he were to make that dream a reality? First of all, it meant recognizing that “the literary world” he needed to access was in a geographically precise enough elsewhere – “the Metropolis,” “North” (*JWC* 106, 111) – that he would have to get out of Fayetteville as soon as possible. And it meant bearing some deeply paradoxical understandings of the literary enterprise. He candidly embraced the material motives of authorship, yet could not disentangle these from loftier, intangible motives. His sense that literature might prove an easier career option than law or medicine sits oddly alongside his sense of it being an

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extraordinarily risky one (“the chance of success is hardly one out of a hundred”). In thinking of literature as a plausible ticket to a life of bourgeois comfort and respectability, he could not repudiate the idea of the spiritually heroic, self-destructive artist, willing to gamble against nearly impossible odds to answer a sublime calling. From the outset, then, his tacit recognition of the irrational, spiritual measures of success (let alone of greatness) that would seem to make “the literary world” relatively anomalous within a capitalist economy might have prepared him for the kinds of failure he would meet with even after he had succeeded in becoming an author.

What Chesnutt called “the literary world” I will tend to call “the literary field” to signal my application here of Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical concept of a relatively autonomous, dynamic social space in which a kind of “inverse” spiritual economy came to prevail within the modern capitalist marketplace, distributing in the process a hierarchized system of “positions” determined by apparently greater or lesser freedom from material necessity and political struggle. From the practical young Chesnutt’s perspective, what made the literary field attractively anomalous was the extent to which it appeared to function like a truly free market: one could compete in it “without capital,” it rewarded “the successful,” and – this went without saying – racial barriers might prove less likely to block entry. But if it was such a site of equal opportunity, this owed much to its relative social invisibility and the predominantly spiritual forms of capital it traded in. The literary “profession,” as Bourdieu describes it, is a “profession which is really not one,” but rather a relatively amorphous, permeable, and undefined social field entered through a number of jobs one might take up that put one in contact with established writers, publishers, and critics gathered in or near a literary “capital.”¹ Thus:

the literary field is so attractive and so welcoming to all those who possess all the characteristics of the [social] dominants *minus one*: to “poor relations” of the great bourgeois dynasties, aristocrats ruined or in decline, members of minorities stigmatized or rejected from other dominant positions, and in particular from high public service, and those whose uncertain and contradictory social identity predisposes them in some way to occupy the contradictory position of dominated among the dominants. (*Rules of Art* 227)

(“Literature” was the only profession, Virginia Woolf noted, that “has never been shut to the daughters of educated men,” requiring but “books, pens and paper,” and, of course, the literacy that women of her class shared with African Americans of Chesnutt’s relatively privileged class [*Three*

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Guineas 214–15].) Most pertinently, Bourdieu claims that “racial discrimination is generally less strong in the intellectual and artistic field than in other fields” (*Rules of Art* 227), which seems supported by the relative ease with which Chesnutt and his contemporary Dunbar became acclaimed writers in one of the worst periods of American racism, and by the recurring turn to literary self-promotion on the part of African Americans and their white defenders in the face of aggressive political oppression. “Literature rather than politics, science, or government is the arena in which the American Negro . . . will win his earliest, perhaps his brightest laurels,” wrote the disenchanted Reconstructionist judge and novelist Albion Tourgée in an 1888 letter to Chesnutt, a few years before taking on Homer Plessy’s defense; “Power will not flow to their hands for many generations, but art and literature will be the field of their achievement and triumphs. Aesop never ruled on earth, but his kingdom is coeval with man’s immortality” (Letter to Charles Chesnutt, December 8, 1888, CWCC).

We must turn to other journal entries to see how race more emphatically inflects Chesnutt’s orientation toward the field. As a young man destined to become one of black America’s talented tenth, his literary ambition was informed by a clear sociopolitical purpose: “I will show to the world that a man may spring from a race of slaves, and yet far excel many of the boasted ruling race. If I can exalt my race, if I can gain the applause of the good, and the approbation of God, the thoughts of the ignorant and prejudiced will not concern me” (*JWC* 92). Chesnutt took for granted the inescapable connection between his individual aspirations and the goal of racial uplift. But he seems not to have anticipated the extent to which excelling at authorship and exalting his race could be in tension with one another. Helping his “people” meant fighting for the eradication of racism; becoming “an author” meant standing out as best he could – most notably from other “Negro authors” – as a writer of “literature,” an example of what individual African Americans could achieve aesthetically under ordinary competitive conditions. Reading William Wells Brown’s *The Negro in the Rebellion* confirmed the young diarist in his belief that “the Negro is yet to become known who can write a good book” (*JWC* 164). And this belief gave him the selling point that would admit him into “the literary world.” Writing to George Washington Cable in 1889, after having published his first dialect stories in the highly prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* without identifying himself racially, Chesnutt thought it better to buck Tourgée’s advice against disclosing his race, being “under the impression that a colored writer of *literature* is something that editors and the public

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would be glad to recognize and encourage” (*TBAA* 29; emphasis in original). Chesnutt aimed to position himself within the literary field as a literary rarity, “a colored writer of *literature*,” by virtue of the literary qualities and higher literary intention of work that nonetheless took for its subject matter the plight of black Americans under Jim Crow. And this, I am arguing, is largely how what first came to be critically and commercially recognized as “African American literature” got made: *by ambitious African American writers positioning themselves as bearers of a literariness that African American writing was broadly assumed to lack*. Chesnutt became so foundational to early twentieth-century histories of African American literature because, like those canonical figures writing in his wake, he singled himself out as a “Negro writer” committed to transcending the putative flaws of “Negro” writing without relinquishing African American subject matter. This meant not merely turning his back on provincial and specifically Negro publishing venues, but tacitly accepting, even reiterating and reconfirming, the rules and judgments of a near-exclusively white, Eurocentric literary field whose shifting and elusive notions of “universal” aesthetic value would prove difficult to navigate and conform to, and even detrimental to his success. Each of the African American writers studied in this book helped bolster, even as they contributed so much to overcoming, the perception of African American literary destitution their uniqueness was predicated on. Thus one of its main contentions is that *the belief in African American literary destitution, or at least a rhetorical insistence on it, was fundamentally enabling*; it motivated several of African American literature’s now most securely canonical authors to make or advance that literature by being its “first” fully literary author.

Testimony to literary destitution is not hard to find in African American writing from the last decade of the nineteenth century until well after the Harlem Renaissance. Chesnutt’s blanket assertion following his disparaging remarks about Brown is a perfect example. In her 1895 call for a “Race Literature,” Victoria Earle Matthews concedes, “we must admit in reverence to truth that, as yet, we have done nothing distinctive” (“Value of Race Literature” 289). T. Thomas Fortune asked ten years later, “Why is it that among ten millions of Afro-Americans, who are by nature prodigally endowed with the artistic temperament, we have but three men of letters, and these by no means of the first magnitude? The question is an important one, as the capacity of a race is largely measured by the achievements of its writers” (“Dearth of Afro-American Writers” 2). As late as 1931, in the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance, a letter was circulated announcing the establishment of the “Du Bois Literary Prize,” whose aim was “to offer

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a real stimulus to Negro letters on the basis of pure literary value and not of race provincialism” (CWCC). In an unpublished 1938 essay for the Florida Federal Writers’ Project, Hurston acknowledged and bluntly explained black Americans’ poor literary showing compared to their achievements in music: “In literature the first writings have been little more than the putting into writing the sayings of the Race Men and Women and champions of ‘Race Consciousness.’ So that what was produced was a self-conscious document lacking in drama, analysis, characterization and the universal oneness necessary to literature” (*FMOW* 910–11). “The mediocrity of what has been called ‘Negro Literature’ is one of the most loosely held secrets of American culture,” declared Amiri Baraka – then LeRoi Jones (*Home* 105), a decade after *Invisible Man*. As for the author of *Invisible Man*, a 1966 profile for the *New York Times Magazine* recorded him saying, “there have been no more than a half dozen good novels by American Negroes,” without specifying which (*CWRE*).

Literary destitution is, of course, a relative concept, inseparable from perceptions and conceptions of literary wealth. We can think of the 1890s – at least from 1892, the year *Plessy v. Ferguson* began and the year of Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South* – as the moment in which an awareness of it took root and lay ready to be capitalized on by black literary aspirants. Both Cooper and Matthews looked to bring African American literature from beyond the pale and into what Matthews called “the broader field of universal literature” (“Value of Race Literature” 288), suggesting the extent to which a “race literature” can only emerge as a literature by entering into a broader field of established literary relations and possibilities. Put another way, for a literature to emerge as such it must enter into an *inter-national* relation with wealthier, more powerful literatures, the most formidable (yet inspiring) of which is that “universal” literature that has managed to transcend its national origins and national contexts. Casanova’s description of “the world republic of letters,” derived in important respects from Bourdieu’s theorization of “the literary field” in France, reveals a “universal” matrix of undoubtedly European origins underlying the struggle of any oppressed people to gain literary recognition: a fundamentally hierarchical world wrought by patterns of cultural domination and assimilation or subversion, and driven by competition between literary haves – with their accumulated “traditions,” resources, and hard-won autonomy – and literary have-nots (see Casanova, *World Republic* 34–40). Thus any nationalist literary project (such as the collective ambition to make a “race literature”) must be understood comparatively. The “broader field of universal literature” lies always already on the horizon

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with its models of achievement, so that when Matthews looks forward to a “race literature” that shall be different from and superior to a still emerging and insecure “American literature,” Matthews sees the coming of a black George Eliot or black Hannah Moore (“Value of Race Literature” 288). That “broader field of universal literature” also provided otherwise unlikely sources of inspiration in the Russian author Alexander Pushkin and French writers Alexandre Dumas *père et fils*, whose “Negro” blood was so significant for African American intellectuals precisely because it was supposedly so insignificant in their native lands and to readers worldwide.

Only the greater currency among relatively privileged African Americans of this conception of literature as an intrinsically ennobling cultural activity accounts for the newfound pressure on aspiring writers to meet what Warren calls an “indexical” as opposed to “instrumental” measure of literary value (*African American Literature* 10–11). Johnson was reiterating a decades-old commonplace when he wrote in the 1922 preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* that “[t]he final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced” (“PFE” 9). Without the inherently comparative view of literature as “an index of racial progress, integrity, or ability,” there could be no awareness of “literary destitution” and no motive for creating a “literature” that has values apart from immediate political purposes (Warren, *African American Literature* 10).² Without recognizing and internalizing the distinction between a literature of racial advocacy and what Chesnutt called “efforts in the line of pure literature” (*TBAA* 88), the African American writers surveyed here could never have struggled with the paradoxical bind described by Warren that would beset their work throughout the Jim Crow period and beyond: namely, “that the success of black literature as a political tool threatened to undermine its status as an index of black integrity” (*African American Literature* 10). Belief in “art’s special status as a realm apart” (*African American Literature* 13) informed Chesnutt’s ambition to establish himself as “the foremost man of his race in pure literature,” as he soon came to be called (Brawley, *Negro in Literature* [1910] 28), as it informed the same ambition of Johnson, Toomer, Thurman, Hurston, Wright, and Ellison. Whatever we might think of that belief today, we can probably agree that without these writers, all of whom held it to varying degrees, African American literature would have taken longer to emerge from virtual invisibility.³

A chief peculiarity of the literary history I am charting is that the ambition to be the “first” and “foremost” African American author gets

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reiterated over several literary generations. None of these African American writers suffered much anxiety of influence vis-à-vis their African American precursors; they could be notably dismissive, even cruel toward them. Wright's cutting reference to the Harlem Renaissance writers as "prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America" (*RWR* 37) is akin to Chesnutt's low view of Brown and Thurman's caustic assessment of Chesnutt and Dunbar. Hurston and Wright's antipathy toward one another had as much to do with their competition for a single rare position as it did with their different political and aesthetic orientations. Ellison's efforts after *Invisible Man* to separate his achievement from Wright's, as well as his occasionally deflating remarks about Hughes and Claude McKay, fall in line with this literary-historical tendency. And it got reinforced by white critics, who in celebrating the latest great black literary hope facilitated either the forgetting of African American literature (by writing as though there has not hitherto been any) or downgraded earlier achievements as relatively preliterary. Here is one of the first white reviewers of *Invisible Man*, for example, slipping into what we will come to recognize in this study as an almost ritualistic rhetoric:

Many Negro writers of real distinction have emerged in our century: Arna Bontemps, Ann Petry, Chester Himes, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright. But none of them, except, sometimes, Richard Wright has been able to transcend the bitter way of life they are still (though diminishedly) condemned to, or to master patiently the intricacies of craftsmanship so that they become the peers of the best white writers of our day. Mr. Ellison has achieved this difficult transcendence. "*Invisible Man*" is not a great Negro novel; it is a work of art any contemporary writer could point to with pride. (Webster, "Inside a Dark Shell"; emphasis mine)

In light of this tendency, African American literature from Chesnutt and Dunbar to Ellison and James Baldwin seems to move without moving, at least until it culminates in Ellison's transformative achievement. Insofar as it leaves a "tradition" behind, it is a tradition of failure, misguidedness, or highly qualified success that keeps presenting its ambitious beneficiaries with a fresh opportunity. "Artistically the field is virgin," wrote an enthusiastic Toomer to Locke in the midst of working on *Cane* (*LJT* 27); "Negro" life in the United States is "a virgin field for writing," uncannily declared Wright in an interview given twenty years later, after the publication of *Native Son* (*CRW* 37).

This rhetoric confirms Warren's assertion that "African American literature was prospective rather than retrospective. . . . In the main, writers

and critics tended to speak as if the best work had not been written but was yet to come, and the shape of that work was yet to be determined” (*African American Literature* 42–43). Each ambitious writer could thus imagine themselves bringing this literature into “the broader field of universal literature” by writing its first “great” work and becoming paradoxically recognized as the first “Negro” author to shed the parochial connotations of “Negro” authorship. Each could then retroactively confer on their predecessors at best the ambiguously canonical status of what I am calling *sacrificial precursors* by recognizing them as writers who never fully realized their ambition, but who in publishing novels, poems, or plays and winning varying degrees of short-term success brought African American literature a step or two closer to meeting, in Johnson’s words, “the literary standards of the world” (*SWI*: 269).

A real quandary for the author writing under these conditions is the difficulty of knowing what constitutes the moment of the race’s full literary arrival. In the 1926 *Crisis* symposium, “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed,” Joel Spingarn stood out for encouraging as many African American–authored books as possible, on the assumption, it would seem, that a normalization of black writing, regardless of quality, is a precondition for cultivating the great writers that are rare for any “race” or nation: “The culture of a race must have a beginning, however simple; and imperfect books are infinitely better than a long era of silence” (*Crisis* Symposium, “Negro in Art” 193). A year later, from a different standpoint, Thurman criticized “the Negro art ‘renaissance’” precisely for encouraging mediocrity through overproduction, while still taking stock of the literary gains it helped bring about: “Serious and inquisitive individuals . . . are isolating, interpreting, and utilizing those things which seem to have a true esthetic value. If but a few live coals are found in a mountain of ashes, no one should be disappointed” (*CWWT* 200). Progress toward literary parity with other peoples could be measured, it would seem, by a race’s capacity *to select and not just collect*, to put quality before quantity. As late as 1935, Locke began his annual review of the year’s literature for *Opportunity* with some rather tortuous metaphors to convey his faith that the race would ultimately enter into the literary “sea” even as it was still struggling to navigate the river leading to it, even as he was still rhetorically asking, “Where, then, are we?” (“Deep River” 238). Six years later a young Ellison took stock of “recent American Negro fiction” for *The New Masses*. We still get the sense of a literature on a path to being fully realized as such, but catapulted closer to its goal by “the high artistry of *Native Son*” (“Recent Negro Fiction” 22). Abetting that literature’s