

On the Study of African American Literature: The Obligations of Literary History

Scholars of African American literature, whether they work in China or in the United States, have to think deeply about the consequences of their choices. We are aware that we study, teach, and write under what some philosophers designate as postmodern conditions.ⁱ These conditions enable us to have a large amount of influence in terms of what is thought and transmitted, and we are rightly anxious about whether we make good or bad choices as we seek to produce knowledge about literature. One of our problems, of course, is the availability of vast amounts of information about literature. Some of it is reliable, logical, and valid; other portions of information are theoretical, based on speculations which are not always subjected to rigorous questioning, and endlessly debatable. Our anxiety may be existential: we are not free to reject making choices, because even if we did so we would have chosen a position. We ought to be clear or wide awake about our positions.

In the twenty-first century, scholars who want to know African American literature have to confront what I call a *surplus of postmodern options* for dealing with an always expanding body of work. We have to select from methods (archival, biographical, visual, ethnographic, and quantitative) and methodologies (formalist, Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, reception and reader-response, feminist, cultural, postmodern, and post-colonial). We have to consider the canons established by two major anthologies (*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 1997, and *Call & Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, 1998) and all the forms of African American oral and print expression that are somehow “literary” but not yet designated “canonical.” Even as we undertake these difficult choices we must answer a difficult question: what are our objectives for the study of the cultural expressions, in oral and print forms, of people designated African

Americans? Our objectives and our motives are crucial, because they determine the kinds and qualities of knowledge that result from study; they also determine, in great measure, who we are.

If our motives are primarily aesthetic and confined to perceptions caused by the contemplation of objects, it is legitimate to focus on poems, novels, and drama created by people thought to be major writers in relative isolation from the enormous body of writing produced by people of African descent in the United States. If on the other hand, our motives are more broadly cultural, we must deal with the evolution of genres and dominant themes brought into being by responses to specific temporal conditions; with issues of gender, race, ideology and class in relation to writing; with the functions of theorizing and theory in revealing or concealing knowledge. It is my position or belief that quests for literary history rather than journeys in aesthetics and literary theory lead to more powerful, thoughtful, and practical forms of knowledge. Common sense precludes my suggesting any outright rejection of theory or explanatory speculation. My premise is merely that the pursuit of literary history provides a clearer understanding of continuity and change within the traditions of African American literature. Despite a lack of universal agreement about what history is, literary histories or efforts to construct narratives about time, audiences, literature, writers and literature, secure memory while theory, especially its recent manifestations, may sponsor forgetting. It is the obligation of literary history to assist us in remembering. Literary history helps us decide if our objectives for the study of African American literature pertain to detached artifacts or to the diverse, fully contextualized expressions produced and performed by African Americans. Such thinking stands behind the work Professor Maryemma Graham(University of Kansas) and I undertook in producing the forthcoming *Cambridge History of African American Literature* (2010).

I take the liberty of sharing a very small portion of our introduction for that reference work with you .

Cambridge History of African American Literature

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Introduction

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* (2002) 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.”ⁱⁱ 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.

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 centuries, 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

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: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*^{iv} and from Elizabeth McHenry's claim in *Forgotten Readers* (2002) 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."^v 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* (1977)^{vi} to a more public level of self-conscious imitation, creation and consuming.^{vii}

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 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.”^{viii} 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.”^{ix} 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^x, 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.”^{xi} In conceptualizing this project, however, we privilege African 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.

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."^{xiii} 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 descendents 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.

In its totality, the *Cambridge History of African American Literature* bids readers to ponder their own roles in the construction and reconstruction of a literary history, and whether, as Kenneth Warren proposes by way of tentative conclusion, “the [presumed] end of racial inequality will also portend the end of any significant cultural work for African American literature.” We are obliged, of course, to withhold judgment on the matter until other literary histories are written in the problematic nowness of the 21st century.

Like anthologies, contemporary literary histories are compilations of parts rather than seamless expositions. They always leave some portion of the story untold. Written by

independent, transnational thinkers who are not of one accord regarding the dialogic, aesthetic, intellectual and cultural dimensions of ethnicity-bound narratives, the *Cambridge History of African American Literature* contains omissions. For some perspectives they deem essential, readers will have to consult specialized articles and books. It is the function of the CHAAL bibliography to direct them to those resources. Attention to forms of black writing that have special efferent and aesthetic properties –namely, letters, personal and political essays, biographies, “pure” and collaborative autobiographies, film as literature, the graphic narratives of an Aaron McGruder, and contemporary orature – is either diffuse or invisible.

The most obvious omission is sustained commentary on such “canonized” and “uncanonized” writers as Alice Childress, John Oliver Killens, Toni Cade Bambara, Alvin Aubert, Maya Angelou, Kalamu ya Salaam, Arthenia Bates Millican, Toi Dericotte, and others, all of whom ought to be acknowledged as participants in the evolution of African American literature. The absence will very likely evoke partisan execration, and the signifying must be confronted with audacious forthrightness. Truth be told, considerations about word count, literary historical subjectivity, instances of editorial amnesia in accounting for three centuries of literature, and the mission impossible of herding cats are all to blame. We are cognizant of gaps, the want of full disclosure. *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* is a necessary but not definitive one, because a definitive literary history remains a post-future project.

When the *Cambridge History of African American Literature* is finally available to you, I do hope you will find pleasure in reading it and will find some answers to the many questions you may have about African American literature. That is very important to me. It is more important, however, that the book will inspire you to continue your own quest to understand why and how we African Americans have written and shall continue to write.

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ⁱ The best explication of our epistemological challenge is Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

ⁱⁱ Mario J. Valdez and Linda Hutcheon, *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. ix-x.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text,” *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 170-261.

^{iv} Stephen E. Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973)

^v Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 6-7.

^{vi} Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness; Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

^{vii} See Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

^{viii} Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 174-175.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 185.

^x Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text" in Vincent B. Leitch et al. (eds.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 1470-1475.

^{xi} Dickson Bruce, *The Origins of African American Literature 1680-1865* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. ix.

^{xii} Lucien Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 2.