

INTRODUCTION

Loosed Canons

The Race for Literary History

People who are looking for “a lot of interesting ideas,” and hope to dabble here for little more, offend the author and degrade themselves. They would do well to stop right now. Those who read in order to take action on their consequent beliefs—these are the only readers I respect or look for. Atrocities, real and repeated, proliferate within this social order. The deepest of all lies in our will not to respond to what we see before us.

—JONATHAN KOZOL, *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*

This book has been inspired by numerous conversations, conferences, articles, and books over the years, but basically it was sparked by my initial experience of reading and trying to understand Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892). Intrigued by the names of the characters in Harper’s novel, I started to do some very elementary research on such names as Iola, Delaney, Latimer, Latrobe, and Gresham, and in so doing found my way to Ida B. Wells, Lucille Delaney, George Latimer, John Hazlehurst Boneval Latrobe, and Gresham’s Law, among many other entrances to the complexities of nineteenth-century American history and culture.¹ Since then, I have had many occasions for realizing anew that I did not know nearly enough about the literary and cultural history on which, according to my doctorate and professional experience, I was supposed to be an expert. As I read and taught numerous narratives, novels, poems, pamphlets, orations, and other pieces, and as I immersed myself in the relevant and even peripheral scholarship on African American literature, culture, and history, I found myself increasingly convinced that we cannot appreciate American literary and cultural history without a deep understanding of nineteenth-century African American literature. I found myself focused on a single though admittedly broad question: What are the requirements

for this field? Why is it that so many conversations, conference sessions, articles, and books about American literary history seem to require so much translation, adaptation, qualification, or simply patience to those who come to questions about the field by way of a broad and deep involvement in African American literature? What constitutes a *just* approach to nineteenth-century African American literature, and what does justice in literary studies have to do with the broader realm of justice so central to Black Studies?

Perhaps another way to put this is to say that this book is devoted to a very simple question: What is African American about African American literature, and why should we identify this as a distinct tradition? If we take African American literature to be literature written by African Americans, then a great number of nineteenth-century texts cannot be considered part of this tradition—the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1884), for example, or any number of slave narratives written by a white amanuensis. If we take it to be literature *about* African Americans, then we will face the specter of such texts as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Joel Chandler Harris’s “Uncle Remus” tales (1881–1910), and William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). We can, of course, dismiss the question altogether and merely note that it matters little how we identify some of these texts as long as we read them. But the insistent reality of African American history, the literary traditions that have been influenced by that history, and the scholarly traditions that have developed in turn will not be so easily decategorized, and the presence of black caricatures, stereotypes, or even feminist icons in the works of white writers only highlight the cultural dynamics that have made *African American* a significant ideological and cultural marker, one still very much needed. In this book, I will have occasion to talk about the various Uncle Toms, Uncle Remuses, Nat Turners, and “Ar’n’t I a woman” icons that play an important and sometimes defining role in African American literary history. My goal, though, will be to address a more complex network of authors, texts, narratives, tropes, and rhetorical maneuvers, the deeply intertextual and multivocal world of nineteenth-century African American literature.²

Even without such historical work, questions about the significance or even the necessity of the term “African American” have been matters of familiar but increasingly serious and pressing debates. Various versions of such questions have been regular features of conservative commentary on the dangers of identity politics. But such questions are implicit

as well in the work of prominent commentators on race who understand and appreciate the difficult history out of which this literary tradition emerged—Paul Gilroy and Anthony Appiah, for instance, who have argued for the need to work “against race” and toward a new “ethics of identity.”³ Although such approaches have been variously denounced or ignored by many scholars, one could easily argue that conventional approaches to both American and African American literary history actually support and even justify the presentation of “race” as a conceptual category that can be simply developed, abandoned, or otherwise transcended to meet the needs of a complex social world. Too often, that is, the role of race in literary history is limited to a feature of identity, a problematic identifier for cultural traditions, or a theme in literature—even to the point of making it a significant revelation to observe that sometimes African Americans do not write explicitly about race. More historically grounded and rigorous race theory—the work of David Theo Goldberg or Saidiya Hartman, for example—is applied selectively in literary scholarship but has had little discernible effect on approaches to American and African American literary history, as if the history of and theories about race are important topics to cover but luxuries we cannot afford when faced with the chronological demands of anthologies, the narrative demands of literary history, or simply the capitalist demands governing the play of new ideas, fashionable frameworks, and intellectual capital central to scholarship. Such approaches to and avoidances of the complexities of racial history, I suggest, threaten to reduce African American literary history to the dynamics of a familiar and facile multiculturalism, the story of heroic struggles against the odds, a history of a body of literature that is an important part of America’s larger story, a dramatic story of the evolutionary process that takes us from Harriet Wilson to Toni Morrison.

At the same time, African American literature as a field of study has become increasingly institutionalized—always problematic for any field of study, but certainly not a bad development. Anthologies of African American literature have been published throughout the twentieth century, and major press anthologies are now a well-established presence in classrooms. The story of African American literary history has been constructed as well in scholarship published throughout the twentieth century and in recent years. This story has been raised to a new level of authority by valuable literary histories, including most prominently Blyden Jackson’s *A History of Afro-American Literature* (1989), Dickson Bruce’s *Black American Writing from the Nadir: The Evolution of a Literary*

Tradition, 1877–1915 (1989) and *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680–1865* (2001), and Bernard Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) and *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (2004). *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, still under way as I write this introduction, promises to be an especially important and innovative attempt to relate the history of African American expressive culture on its own terms. Significant, too, are the major considerations of specific genres of African American literature that are beginning to appear, such as *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (2004) and *The Cambridge Companion to the Slave Narrative* (2007). If not yet a familiar story to most readers, African American literary history has become an increasingly established one.

This is, though, a history in danger of becoming a *settled* story, even as it continues to develop; it is also a history in danger of becoming *unsettled*, its fundamental terms theorized beyond the point of stability, before it has a chance to fully establish its authority. Of course, African American literature surveys will still be taught, and there will still be a vital community of African Americanists who will gather at conferences and in publications for the purpose of exploring the literature of those identified as African Americans. African American literary history will continue to exist in roughly the way that African American history exists during Black History Month—sometimes a sophisticated story, more often a simple one, frequently an inspiring one, but almost never one in any danger of keeping anyone up at night.⁴ The field will remain marginalized, a somewhat suspect area of specialization, but not one to which scholars interested in broader, more encompassing fields need to attend to scrupulously when writing about black authors in other contexts. Like the numerous histories of “America” that sequester African American history into a chapter or a series of scattered paragraphs, or the many biographies of white Americans that make no mention of race, American literary history will continue to variously account for and ignore the larger significance of African American experience and aesthetics. African American literary history will continue to carry the burden of representing the discredited but lingering social category of race.

My approach in this book follows the usual framing of African American literature by emphasizing the importance of U.S. racial history in the creation, distribution, and reception of this literature, though from a different angle.⁵ Specifically, it accounts more fully for the complexity of U.S. racial history, as well as for the central importance of black scholarly

and activist history in shaping the tradition of African American expressive culture. The developing interest in African American literature over the past few decades has demonstrated, I believe, that it is all too possible to isolate or contain African American literature, distancing it from the broader concerns of Black Studies. Often, it either is contextualized within established notions of the literary tradition and approaches to literature or is placed in “conversation” with various literary traditions in the service of an idealized multiculturalism, bringing to mind the justice of Charles Mills’s observation that “the recent advent of discussions of ‘multiculturalism’ is welcome, but what needs to be appreciated is that there are issues of political *power*, not just mutual misconceptions resulting from the clash of cultures” (125). Race is a presence in the literature, or a quality or identifier of the author, or one among many social topics, rather than a social order that writers work to represent, or to which writers respond, or within the particular contingencies of which writers develop an approach to the art of what can be said against the force of the unspeakable. A generalized and flexible understanding of race becomes the entrance to or identifier of literature produced by nonwhite writers, while literature by white writers still largely remains racially neutral—accomplished, in part, by identifying certain works or moments in texts as racist, so as to distinguish these racial moments from the “nonracial” mainstream of the text as a whole, of the author’s work generally, or of the larger tradition in which the author is viewed. Such racial moments can be seen as a blemish, an unfortunate part of an author’s perspective, a troubling stream of thought in the cultural landscape, but they are in little danger of inspiring a consideration of American literary history with Black Studies at its center, and certainly not a wholesale reconsideration of the terms and goals of literary study. There is, after all, much to support Robert E. Washington’s argument that, in the twentieth century, “the liberal-left white intelligentsia both fostered and culturally subjugated the dominant black literary schools” (330). Often, African American literature is kept so busy *representing* race in scholarship and in the curriculum that it is not given the opportunity to represent the race that extends beyond blackness and to retheorize the cultural order that constitutes race.

In this book, I insist that a complex understanding of racial history—with an emphasis on the deep structures of the social order that “race” has both defined and justified historically and on the communal networks that have formed over those deep structures—is central to the cultural history that produced nineteenth-century American literature,

and that this is the framework within which nineteenth-century African American literature and aesthetics can be most fully appreciated. This might seem like a basic enough claim, given the nature of the struggles of African Americans throughout the nineteenth century. But I make this claim in the face of a long history of scholars who address race largely as a matter of embodiment or by way of generalized accounts of the discredited sciences and social politics of the past. I also make this claim in the face of an academy that sometimes seems rather impatient with the subject of race and determined to get beyond it by rejecting “race” (often, in such studies, a floating and rather slippery signifier) as a useful category for literary and cultural analysis. This is not to say that I am unsympathetic to Paul Gilroy’s view “that there is something worthwhile to be gained from a deliberate renunciation of ‘race’ as the basis for belonging to one another and acting in concert” (*Against Race* 12), though I am afraid that many will be only too happy to get on this particular bandwagon. Nor do I want to miss what Gilroy says is “a chance to break away from the dangerous and destructive patterns that were established when the rational absurdity of ‘race’ was elevated into an essential concept and endowed with a unique power to both determine history and explain its selective unfolding” (*Against Race* 14). I am, however, left with that history that has been determined, unfolded, and explained. How do we revise a history narrated according to the imperatives of “the rational absurdit[ies] of ‘race’” if we do not attend to the realities of the manifestations and effects of a social order that race is? What do we do with the sites of memory we encounter daily—the movies, music, textbooks, indexes of books—that continually lead us back into the matrix of race, reminding us that however much we might want to avoid dwelling in the past, we cannot avoid the multifarious ways in which the past dwells in and around us? Even if we can give up “race relations” or racial group identities as a way of categorizing and understanding social behavior and envisioning possible worlds of understanding, we should be careful about dismissing “race” as a category for understanding the cultural geography of the economic, political, and historical orders.

In applying this rationale to the study of literature, it is important to recognize that renouncing race will have no effect on how most practitioners teach and write about white literature. But it will seriously affect the ways in which we read, react to, and utilize the lessons of African American literature—making much of that literature a response to a category of thought that no longer has currency and leading us to lose the ways

in which that literature responds to a matrix of concerns, a historical/systemic order, that remains all too current. After all, we are still more likely to encounter an essay, or a pedagogical approach, that “complicates” the category of race in the study of, say, Zora Neale Hurston’s work than to find complicated racial dynamics in the novels of Ernest Hemingway. Similarly, in anthologies and classrooms, “units” devoted to race focus more on the Hurstons of the literary world than on the Hemingways. In other words, the project of rejecting race as a category of thought is complicated by the fact that white culture has long renounced or repressed race as a category of thought for many of its writers—to the extent that it is still rare to encounter specialists in Hemingway or in other authors who consider race to be a pressing research concern. It is rarer still that such scholars will identify themselves as specialists in white national literature. Aside from those conducting “race studies,” many literary theorists will be satisfied to enter and exit the subject of race with a good (mis)reading of Gilroy and a few others. Many, in fact, will be satisfied if the rest of us renounce race and send the message up to the head office.

In this book, I argue that such perspectives rely on dangerously naive concepts of race, superficial conceptions of African American literary history, and simplistic understandings of how scholarship and intellectual commentary function in social space and time.

With such concerns in the background—and often in the foreground—of the chapters that follow, *Chaotic Justice* is about the demands, the pleasures, the challenges, and the occasional misdirections involved in reading nineteenth-century African American literature. To get at a just approach to this body of literature, I argue, we will need to learn to look at the race that extends beyond the identity or social position of authors, the race that is manifest in the literature and in the web of connections that both lead to and follow from the literature. Nineteenth-century African American writers stand out in their approach to the concerns addressed throughout this book precisely because they understood that they had no stable narrative of history or community capable of either shutting out or representing the force of historical experience. These writers, I believe, provide us with the most useful of maps—not the kind that charts a course to the future, but rather the kind that enables us to determine our present orientation in the currents of history.

Too often, this body of literature is identified simply as the beginnings of a literary tradition that eventually discovers its force in the Harlem Renaissance and is fully realized in the unprecedented authority that

some of the most prominent African American writers enjoy today. However, I do not seek merely a new conception of the origins of African American literature, the new beginnings of a familiar story that we can now adjust accordingly. Indeed, I reject a chronological construction of African American literary history. The story I mean to tell has to do with the activist roots of African American literary history and therefore an understanding of literature devoted to interrogating the social order, constructing community, and promoting concepts of justice beyond those imagined by most white sympathizers. These are roots that branch out in several directions; they are not just the source of the imagined first fruits of black aesthetic achievements in the twentieth century. Thus, these are roots that should complicate our understanding of African American (and American) literary history—its construction, its significance, and its demands upon those who invoke it. At a time when the great majority of scholarship on African American literature focuses on the twentieth century (with essays on Toni Morrison being submitted to journals virtually every week), it is essential to explain the importance of the relations among politics, aesthetics, and social order negotiated by nineteenth-century African American writers.

While I admire the work of Morrison and the many other contemporary African American writers deserving of serious attention both in scholarship and in the classroom, I think that we are not in a position to understand them, or the world they address, unless we attend with equal care to the many texts produced throughout the nineteenth century, a time often represented by a virtual handful of narratives, poems, novels, and speeches by a few of the most prominent writers. It is, of course, significant that in the face of almost unimaginable injustice, and often against all odds, many African Americans of that era turned to literature. Although a version of my argument could be constructed from any historical period, I focus on the nineteenth century in this book because its cultural pressures (the system of slavery, the development of racial science, the social, political, and economic practices governed by a white supremacist culture) and the major historical moments of the century (the Civil War, Reconstruction, and important legislation and Supreme Court decisions) highlight the multidimensional locale, the intricate inequities, and the racist policies central to the development of African American literature and central, too, to the social, political, legal, and literary systems in which we still live and work. Moreover, the historical distance of the nineteenth century to many readers today is itself significant (as amply

demonstrated by both classroom experiences and the studies produced by those relatively unversed in African American history), for twenty-first-century readers of these texts engage in a layered cultural performance as they negotiate not only the cultural dynamics that produced the texts but also the dynamic cultural processes that have shaped the critical reception of these texts today.

The artistic merits of early African American literature have long been a subject of considerable debate. Scholars have regularly pronounced, sometimes in print and often in conversation, William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) a bad novel or Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) a subliterate text, and some have felt obligated to ask of Harper's *Iola Leroy* and other texts, "Is it good enough to read?"⁶ For many readers even of those texts that have been accepted into the canon, what makes the early writers representative of African Americans generally are the conditions under which they lived—and what makes them remarkable is that they have reached a level of achievement that meets the standards even of those who have enjoyed the benefits of education and a privileged life. As John Reilly observed long ago, "Despite other variety, the most prevalent assumption among those who think about Afro-American literary history—whether in articles, books, or classroom presentations—is that the success of literature can be discerned in its utility as social documentation, an assumption to which is sometimes joined severe judgment of works composed, it is presumed, before Afro-American authors had the option to choose art over combative writing. In other words, works of literature are dissolved into their referents" (89). One result has been an approach to African American literary history that has focused on the development of literary talent as measured by increasingly recognizable achievements in established genres, a romantic narrative of African American writers who endured considerable oppression but still persevered in their literary ambitions until their achievements were established beyond all reasonable doubt. Another result has been an approach that has focused on an imagined progression from necessarily political writing in the nineteenth century (antislavery publications, for example) to increasingly more "universal" themes grounded in black history and experience. After all, it is hardly surprising that early anthologies of African American literature offered only a brief sampling of nineteenth-century publications, that the percentage of African American writers in American anthologies today increases as the volume nears the present, or even that anthologies of African American literature struggle to represent, in their subdivisions

and other organizational schema, the difficult tension between the political and the aesthetic that has been the hallmark of African American literature.

Of course, it is possible to define this tension in ways that favor a narrow understanding of the political, but to do so is to misrepresent both African American history and the literature it has produced. African American writers have long been aware of the dangers of identification with the stereotypical condition of oppression, that all there is to African American life is the experience of degrading conditions. Understandably, then, many writers and scholars have worked over the years to prevent African American literature from being viewed simply as sociological—that is, an unremitting comment on the injustices that have defined the contours of black communities in the United States.

I argue that this defense undermines the power of African American literature. As Robert Washington asserts, “Most scholars writing about black literary works simply assume those works have been socially consequential but fail to explain how they operate—sociologically speaking—in cultural space” (10). There are a number of reasons for this failure to explain, not the least of which are concepts of cultural space that rely on naive understandings of the concept of race and of the history of race in the United States. Drawing on chaos theory, I will explore the shifting instabilities of racial identity and cultural performance during the nineteenth century, and the ways in which African American literature produced throughout that century reveals various pressures that have directed the guiding currents of U.S. history. Because they have been, of necessity, so directly, consistently, and profoundly engaged in the multifarious contradictions of American history and culture, African American writers have created a body of literature capable of explaining a nation that often appears profoundly inexplicable. Various excluded from the national story or reduced to a supporting role in it, African American writers have long been engaged in the challenge of representing the complexity veiled by the nation’s convenient fictions. The terms of that engagement are the subject of *Chaotic Justice*.

What is African American about African American literary history? Toni Morrison has spoken of her desire to “develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black,” noting that “if it was truly black literature, it would not be black because I was, it would not even be black because of its subject matter. It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together—the sentences, the structure, texture and

tone—so that anyone who read it would realize” (qtd. in Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 181). Here, Morrison emphasizes the role of the reader, the one capable of a significant realization. A great deal of teaching and scholarship inspired by African American literature has been devoted to trying to encourage and guide such realizations—that is, that understanding that extends beyond complacent or even celebratory responses to black literature. And involved in those realizations would necessarily be some understanding of the shifting dynamics of a white supremacist culture, the unstable terms of which even the most intrinsic blackness must struggle with and against. It is not incidental that so much of African American culture focuses on the performative, the improvisational, the dynamic. John Bryant has rightly observed that “our culture is a fluid text, but we want to read it as a fixed thing, never seeking to find the dynamics of its changing but always to discover the authority of its imagined fixity, its nonexistent past purity” (174). In this book I consider what it might mean to imagine African American literary history not only as something other than “a fixed thing,” but also as something other than a single or linear narrative. In other words, I contemplate a literary history defined not simply by authorship or subject matter—and how it is put together by an imagined master narrative connecting authors and subjects—but rather by the way that it functions within an unstable culture, the way that it is considered in its component and dynamic parts, and the way that it is *read* by readers always and at once both prepared and unprepared to understand it.

Links of a Chain

In 1985 the Black Classic Press republished Drusilla Dunjee Houston’s *Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire*, a book originally brought out by the Universal Publishing Company of Oklahoma City in 1926. In a commentary written for the 1985 edition, James G. Spady tells the story of his discovery of the book and its journey back into print. Spady asks, “How did we learn of her?”—and he answers: “First of all being in Philadelphia and surrounded by a rich culture and oral history, the names and deeds of our progenitors were ever present. One of the great oral historians of our era was Thomas W. Harvey, president of the Universal Improvement Association and a close associate of Marcus Garvey. Among the many experiences he shared with us in a typical Saturday session was this dynamic Black author of *Wonderful Ethiopians of the Ancient Cushite Empire*” (v). Spady’s story is instructive, involving communities, oral history, black political organizations, and regular gatherings where black history could be