

# *The Origins of Afro-American Fiction*

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IN THE STUDY of any body of literature, one is always confronted with a particular set of premises or conditions that must be acknowledged at the outset. In the case of African American writing, the problem that must be acknowledged is central to the whole question of writing as a consciously symbolic act. For much of what we hope to infer and conclude from the research that we do presumes an identifiable author or 'author function.'<sup>1</sup> Such presumptions are not so clear in the historical development of African American writing, especially its earliest literature. For we are limited in the claims we can make about specific texts because of the questions inherent in the birth of the written literature as we have come to know it.

If I were to frame these issues in the form of questions, they would include: what is the definition of an 'author,' and what is the definition of a text? When I raise the first question, I am thinking of issues such as who wrote the book—the slave or his / her collaborator / editor / ghostwriter; who had control over the manu-

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1. For a discussion of this term, see Michel Foucault's essay 'What is an Author,' in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josue V. Harari (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), especially pp. 148–60.

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script; what is the relationship between the writer and the audience; and whose voice or language is the book written in? When I raise the second question, I am thinking of the distinction between what would be considered a 'closed text' and an 'open text.' Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* would represent a 'closed text' because the work exits as a finished work, although different editions may include various prefatory matter. In contrast to this, a folk tale, a folk sermon, a traditional Negro spiritual or ballad (even one from which formal poetry may be derived) all represent 'open texts' because the language and often the structure vary from version to version. These texts are 'open' not only because so many different versions survive but also because they continue to evolve and transform, their vitality derived from their infinite existence through the process of communal reconstruction. Although certain of these issues are relevant in a general sense, they all take on a very special character, given the marginalized status of black people historically in American society.

Given these questions, therefore, how does one proceed to determine the 'origin' of a particular genre of African American literature? One simple way is to select a particular text that is considered the 'first' of its type or particular tradition that is written by a black person and eliminate any ones that are questionable, using only those works for which there is some general consensus. In this way, the hard questions can be left alone and one does not delay the research process.

Another way to proceed, as I do here, is to acknowledge the interrelationship between the origin of black writing, especially black fiction, the issues of authorship, and the problematic status of black writing and black writers in America. One fundamental variant in all of this is whether one views literature as a product or a process. While both points of view hold validity in certain contexts, the concept of literature as a process is most useful for looking at the history of black literary production and the development of certain genres and identifiable traditions in black writing.

In his study of the African American novel, the best we have on

the subject, Bernard Bell argues that 'the Afro-American is a hybrid narrative whose distinctive traditions and vitality are derived basically from the sedimented indigenous roots of black American folklore and literary genres of the western world.'<sup>2</sup> In his path-breaking study, Bell charts the development of a bicultural tradition in black fiction writing, one that is both oral and literary, Afrocentric and Eurocentric.<sup>3</sup>

What Bell proposes is that in order to understand the history of Afro-American writing, one has to understand the history of Afro-American culture. Bell's use of biculturalism is instructive here. For the concept of cultural dualism is a central metaphor in analyses of Afro-American history. The poet Paul Laurence Dunbar explained this dualism in terms of the artist with his lament 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,' which questions why 'God made the poet black and bid him sing.'<sup>4</sup>

The most explicit expression of this dilemma has been provided by W.E.B. DuBois, however, at the turn of the century in his classic work, *Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903. DuBois remarked, 'It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body.'<sup>5</sup> Ralph Ellison also describes this double vision, illustrating it in the very complex symbolism in his classic novel, *Invisible Man*. Similarly, William Andrews, a leading scholar of Afro-American autobiography, uses the term 'creative dialectic' in his examinations of the slave narrative and early black autobiography. Thus, when Bell tells us of the 'socialized ambivalence,' an organic feature of black novels that results from

2. 'Introduction,' *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), p. xii.

3. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

4. *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1980).

5. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics*, ed. John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon Books, 1965) p. 215.

paradoxical white values and/or conflicting black ones, he is translating a cultural code that is both traditional and modern.

The traditional cultural code is inscribed in the literature of slavery, the first discernible period of active black literary production in the United States. Two questions help to sharpen our understanding of the nature of this cultural code. First, to what extent did black writing take its impetus from the conditions of slavery and the organized struggle against it, a struggle in which black people along with others were central. Second, what were the discrete forms of institutionalized activity that codified specific features of the lives of people that we can identify as black. In other words, how can we view the emergence of African American writing during slavery as an expression of an emerging Afro-American nationality,<sup>6</sup> recognizable by a distinctive and admittedly contradictory social consciousness, ideological development, and social practice?

Before exploring this further, however, it is important to make a distinction between our use of the concept of nationality and the misuse to which this kind of cultural inscription or encoding has been put. Perhaps the most unfortunate example can be seen in the views and theories promoted by the 'blackness as social pathology' school. To these observers, black culture, like black people, has been so victimized that there can be no resolution to the tension and dualities as expressed by DuBois, Ellison, Andrews, or Bell. According to this view, the results of the 'two warring ideals' is ultimately abnormal personality development, disruptive behavior, malfunctioning family and institutional life, etc. One need only mention the well-known names of Daniel Moynihan, father of the 'black matriarchy' thesis, Nathan Glazer, and others to recall how popular and pervasive is the theory that analyzes black people as passive victims, and never as active creators in their own historical experience.

6. Nationality is used here also in the cultural-anthropological sense, that is, the sum total of the social institutions, daily life, and culture (both artistic, material, folk, and formal) that characterize the black experience historically.

Fortunately, today a more acceptable view is replacing this victimization analysis. According to more recent scholarship on black culture, the tension, the unsettling duality that DuBois described so well, is seen as a source rather than a destroyer of Afro-American expressive culture, and is considered primarily responsible for the vitality, diversity, and regenerative quality often attributed to the black experience. Developments in the area of cultural anthropology and folklore over the last fifty years, as well as developments in cultural theory and criticism and Afro-American studies in the last twenty, have expanded our knowledge of Afro-American culture even further, thus confirming the misconceptions of earlier, misguided, if well-intentioned scholarship.

Because we are still very far from any real consensus about the nature of Afro-American culture, this continuing debate over the nature and origin of that culture informs general discussions of black culture in slavery and afterwards and has an important bearing on the way in which we interpret black literature and the writing of black literary history.

There are, for example, three main views about the origin of black culture that are still hotly debated. The first emphasizes the destructiveness of slavery, especially the complete destruction of any African retentions. This view also holds that black people created a culture anew from the borrowings of their European slavemasters and the conditions of slavery. This position was substantiated in the work of University of Chicago sociologist Robert Park and influenced an entire school of black social scientists; perhaps the most prominent among them is E. Franklin Frazier. With the appearance of *The Myth of the Negro Past*, by Melville Herskovitz, a pioneer in African studies, a second, highly controversial view was added to this debate. Herskovitz concluded that it was African survivals more than the absence of African culture that characterized black American culture as we have come to know it. He based his conclusions on two important sources. The first was Afro-American linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner, who had done a definitive study of the Gullah language of coastal South Carolina.

His second important source was his own field research in cultural 'syncretism,' a term he coined to explain the presence and persistence of African survivals in the cultural and social practices of black people in America. This perspective led to considerable discussion and active research in reconstructing traditional African culture and, in fact, continues to serve as a basis for the ideological position known as cultural nationalism.

The third view, which might be seen as a synthesis of the above positions, holds that Afro-American culture, which emerged under slavery, resulted from a process of cultural creolization, which is essentially a linguistic and anthropological term for cultural change and transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Cultural creolization is used to explain a process in which two people and two cultures interact—in this case, African peoples and Europeans—with one people taking on the characteristics that result from a process of cultural synthesis. For black people in the United States, this cultural creolization has involved two complex and dynamic aspects. Among Africans themselves, a creolization process developed as Africans who were captured from different places and from different cultural backgrounds were forced to live together under the conditions of the slave trade and slavery. A process of mutual cultural exchange and synthesis took place. Almost simultaneously, this dynamic mixture of African cultures was interacting and exchanging with European cultures, which were themselves varied because of the different national identities and cultural patterns of the oppressive slave traders and plantation owners, who were British, French, Spanish, etc.

Thus, this process of creolization or cultural transformation (which Africans were going through within the institution of slavery in the Americas) has two distinct yet interrelated dimensions, two ways in which Africans were being transformed into Afro-Americans: African cultural traits were either lost or retained; in

7. See Abdul Alkalimat, et al., *Introduction to Afro-American Studies*, (Chicago: Twenty-First Century Books, 1986), p. 249.

addition, a new cultural expression was adopted and internalized, which can be designated as Afro-American culture.

This process of creolization, however, was determined by the conditions of forced labor and total social control under slavery. If we examine the structural features of the slave system, we can identify a continuum that reflects degrees of creolization or cultural transformation. Five types of experiences are immediately apparent:

1. Runaway slave communities such as the maroons of Jamaica and the 'Geeche' or 'Gullah' people of the Sea Islands off the Georgia and South Carolina coast preserved African cultural traits to the most significant degree. These communities appeared to be creolized to a lesser degree because of their historic cultural isolation, and they have provided a rich source of information for scholars such as Lorenzo Dow Turner, Melville Herskovitz, and others.

2. Field slavery, the characteristic modal experience for most blacks, involved not only long work hours and a segregated social life but was also closely linked to important cultural developments that were often at odds with one another. As a distinct Afro-American culture began to develop, it did so in response to both the externally imposed violence and the internally imposed forms of social control.

3. House slaves have generally been understood as those who had a 'better' lot than most, since they worked under conditions conducive to the greatest degree of cultural assimilation, i.e., borrowing more of the slave owner's culture than his/her own parallel in the fields.

4. Until recently, less has been written about urban slaves. The city was the center of cosmopolitan and dynamic cultural interaction, and slaves who were hired out to work in larger urban areas generally experienced more freedom of movement than their counterparts. In this context, two lines of cultural development can be said to have emerged: the sacred or religious and the profane or secular. The manifestations of these two cultural modes were the church, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dance hall, the

'juke joint,' the 'dive,' all forerunners of the barroom or nightclub. 5. Although slavery meant that most blacks were slaves, there were, mainly in the North, a population of free blacks, those who had never been slaves, although this number rarely rose more than 5 percent by 1770. Gradually, the population of free blacks increased after the Revolutionary War, as the larger estates in the North became divided up into smaller farms that operated only during a few months of the year. Other opportunities to acquire freedom were presented to slaves, including enlistment in the Revolutionary War, open manumission, running away, purchase, revolts, and, finally, total abolition, which had occurred in all of the Northern states with the exception of New York by the end of the eighteenth century. Free black populations existed in the South as well, especially in Virginia and Maryland (the state from which Frederick Douglass escaped), where manumission is reported to have occurred more frequently and also where more slaves seemed to have experienced successful escapes.<sup>8</sup>

There is ample evidence to suggest that it was mainly communities with a sizable number of free blacks — Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston, for example — that took the lead in establishing early independent institutions like the African free schools, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Baptist churches, the masonic lodges, and benevolent and mutual aid societies.

Given these structural dimensions of black slave life, it is possible to understand more about the origins of the highly stratified culture that we identify with the black experience today. A close look at the music of the slave period provides an excellent example. Many communities of runaway slaves maintained the drum and the basic features of traditional African music. Field slaves, prohib-

8. The slave trade itself was abolished by an act of Congress in 1808, and this undoubtedly had an effect in liberalizing attitudes toward slavery. Thus, communities of free blacks, though small, had ample opportunity to develop and, because of the ostracism from the broader society, did so in relative isolation and with a great deal of diversity. A number of individual studies, focusing on Philadelphia, Maryland and the Chesapeake area, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, have pointed out the early development of black community institutions.



ited from using the drum, were the collective authors of many of the spirituals, a distinctive and perhaps the earliest form of black music that maintained many of the African features but had only the human voice as an instrument. These traditional Negro spirituals have been said to represent the Africanization of Christian cultural expression based on the painful experience of being a slave. House slaves were frequently used to entertain the slave master, and for this reason they were taught to perform European music as white people performed it. Urban slaves were caught in the dynamic cultural explosion, and the earliest forms of blues and jazz music can be traced to them.

The concept of cultural creolization, the view that is most applicable to the current discussion, reinforces the idea that the culture is a process and that cultural production is not static but is interactive and constantly changing. In other words, Afro-American culture was changing as it interacted with the varying conditions of slavery. While cultural creolization makes it difficult to separate out 'original' African elements in cultural forms that are synthetic and dynamic, at the same time it focuses on the large cultural repository upon which an Afro-American written literature had to draw. Proposing that the creation of the Afro-American community during slavery was triangular (cultural transfer among different groups of Africans and then between Africans and Europeans) rather than dualistic (cultural transfer between Africans and Europeans) changes the nature of the arguments about cultural and literary symbiosis.

When we move this general discussion of culture to the more particular discussion of Afro-American literature, another important factor comes into clearer focus, namely, that various literary forms, like cultural forms, may be qualitatively different but could derive from the same cultural matrix. For example, the shift from oral or folk literature to a written literature is certainly qualitative—each involved different systems of cultural and social production—and yet both forms coexisted during slavery. In addition, the slave who 'told' his or her story and those numberless, nameless

authors of the spirituals are especially important not only because these two forms of expression reveal an experience that we no longer have access to but also because these stories and spirituals provided the basis for a variety of forms emerging out of the discourse of slavery. Houston Baker has argued persuasively that there are indeed certain forms in Afro-American cultural expression that we should regard as an ideological and structural matrix for the development of black expressive culture. For Baker, it is the blues.<sup>9</sup>

It is within this context that we can view the development of writing as an indication of a specific level of social and cultural, and I would add, organizational or institutional development. The birth of black written expression reflects, in this regard, the changes that had come about as a result of this diverse population of Africans in America, the increasing number of free black communities, and the ideological and political unity that black people, along with others, had against the oppressive system of slavery. We might say, therefore, that black writing was the intellectual and formal manifestation of a culture at a certain level of its development. Just as we must weigh the level of technological development in a society, in which certain advances are possible, we must include in the study of Afro-American literary expression some understanding of the level of cultural development and production.

One can study, for example, the life of Frances Harper, the most prolific black writer in the nineteenth century, who wrote the first short story by a black, 'The Two Offers,' in 1849. The story later provided the basis for her famous novel *Iola Leroy*. Harper's career as a public figure — intimately involved with the antislavery movement, the Christian temperance movement, missionary and Sunday school union boards, women's clubs, and suffragist organiza-

9. See *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Michel Foucault makes a similar argument in his discussion of nineteenth-century Europe and the work of Marx and Freud. According to Foucault, Marx and Freud are 'founders of discursivity' because of the endless possibilities for discourse established by their writings. See Foucault, 'What Is an Author.'

tions—permitted her a certain freedom of movement and access, which she took full advantage of. She wrote constantly—letters, speeches, poetry, essays, and fiction—and almost every one of her works can be viewed in relation to her work and ideas in one organizational context or another.<sup>10</sup>

Insofar as the black experience during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was relatively diverse, it also had distinctive common features. Practically all blacks had some ties to slavery as a modal experience, the experience of the majority, and, in consequence, those who successfully escaped became deeply committed to assisting the freedom of others. In surveying black life and culture in this period, we can propose a typology of black writing—similar to that of the slave experience itself—that corresponds to the range of literary activities in which black people were engaged: documentary, autobiographical, and creative literature.

Documentary literature represents the largest portion of black literary material of this period. Judging by the large number of sermons, letters, and appeals like that of David Walker, not to mention those that are yet to be uncovered, black people have left a fairly comprehensive record of their intellectual and social activities that spanned the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In fact, this body of literature is so extensive that it is necessary to divide it into two broad categories that symbolize the natural divisions that occurred in black life. In the first category are secular texts, including letters, appeals, petitions, charges, and constitutions. These materials do not necessarily exclude religious commentary, but they do not derive from a formal religion situation. A second category of black documentary literature is that of sacred texts, which includes catechisms, disciplines, hymns, and recorded sermons. One of the hypotheses that remains to be explored is the extent to which the sacred literature, as defined here, reflects the role of the church as the sole or main source of literacy instruction

10. See Hazel Carby, *The Reconstruction of Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and the author's introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frances E. W. Harper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

and antislavery. The second part of this hypothesis calls attention to how and when the 'sacred' forms give way to more 'secular' literary forms (i.e., narratives, fiction, novels, etc.) as antislavery sentiment spread or was taken up by the broader society.

Autobiographical literature is a second large type of writing in which black people were actively engaged, beginning with the first known slave narrative written by Briton Hammon in 1760. The historian William Andrews defines autobiographical writing as 'a discrete narrative text in which an Afro-American recounts a significant portion of his life.'<sup>11</sup> Hence, a black autobiography must be written in the first person and emanate from the consciousness of a black man or woman. For this reason, the records from the late 1690s that describe the efforts of 'Adam Negro' to win his freedom from his Boston master through petitions to the Superior Court probably do not qualify as an authentic Afro-American autobiography, although this material can certainly be called a precursor as Andrews suggests.

We have grown accustomed to seeing the slave narrative as one homogeneous form, primarily because of the extensive documentation of these narratives by the WPA and more recent efforts such as James Blassingame's *Slave Testimony* and George Rawick's multivolume work, *The American Slave*. Andrews, however, discerns distinct, different categories of slave narratives: the narratives of religious conversion and Indian captivity, criminal confessions, the spiritual autobiography, travelogues, memoirs, diaries, and the modal form of the narrative written by fugitive slaves, which reached its height in the 1850s. What is intriguing is the abundance of rhetorical and aesthetic strategies available for the writer to use and modify. For example, Briton Hammon's narrative, mentioned above, incorporates elements from the stories of Indian captivity and religious conversion, as well as from the popular travelogue. Biographical literature might also be placed in this category, al-

11. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 18.

though this form of expression is written in the third person and focuses on a collective or group history.

Creative literature represents the third category of black literary expression. When we think of creative writing by early blacks, we generally think of Phillis Wheatley or the two other earliest poets, Albery Whitman and Jupiter Hammon. But there is general agreement that the earliest creative literature, which can be defined as the expression of a cultural experience crystalized in a concrete verbal or textual form, is the Negro spiritual, or 'sorrow songs,' as W.E.B. DuBois called them. The spiritual, moreover, belonged to a large body of black folk expression, which was primarily oral and which represents the foundation of slave culture. According to Lawrence Levine and John Blassingame, slave music, slave religion, and slave folk beliefs as well as slave tales were a part of a highly sophisticated cultural system. These were not simply survival techniques but were 'instruments of life, of sanity, of health and self-respect.'<sup>12</sup>

These specifically oral forms would seem to serve as the antecedents for black fiction. However, much more research needs to be done to demonstrate the structural and ideological links between the novel and these various tales, legends, myths, and musical forms such as work songs, folk ballads, the early blues. However, it is important to remember that these expressive art forms developed in the context of a diversity of experiences; field workers, house or domestic slaves, and urban slaves all contributed different types of expression and borrowed from one another. We must also bear in mind that this type of creative expression was the mass expression of the time and, as such, gave a unique voice to the individual and group experience of slavery. As we have noted, the structural features of black music and black folklore form a matrix for more than one form of black written expression, in this case,

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 80. John Blassingame is the author of several books on slavery, most notably *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

both autobiography and fiction. The similarities and differences between these various kinds of creativity must be carefully documented.

Bernard Bell and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., both argue that we are indebted to black slave music for the call and response element that served as the foundation for both black music and the black spoken arts, especially the style and structure of the traditional black sermon. In addition, they point out that other techniques, refined as part of black oratory, have had a significant impact upon black fiction, increasingly so today. These various forms of verbal art or verbal contests, games, or dueling, took several forms: sounding, signifying, and, perhaps the best known, playing the dozens. Again, no consensus exists about the origin of these forms, but we must not assume that these 'rituals of insult,' as they have come to be called, only developed to deflect anger and aggression or to serve as an internal outlet for resistance since any external ones were punishable by death. Their persistence, the elaborate manner in which they were performed, and their influence upon contemporary black oral and written expression requires more careful examination. For example, at least two other functions of these verbal arts have been identified: training in verbal facility and self-discipline. One loses the contest when playing the dozens if one cannot think of an appropriate response to one's partner; furthermore, it becomes important to control one's feeling, in short, to be 'cool.'

We might also draw a parallel between the verbal joust, the ritual of insult, and black humor, which represents another way in which black people learned to deflect sadness or tragedy or other serious situations connected to their socially subordinate status. The extensive and fairly unique practice of redefining what is humorous and what is serious, the important role and development of the black comic performer, and the infinite variety and number of black jokes, racially inspired or otherwise, would suggest that laughter or humor is a form of signification traceable back to slavery, if not to African origins. Black humor, the expression of

black life in a tragi-comic mode, and situational irony or comic reversal are all highly visible and persistent features of black written expression, although they have seldom received much critical attention. Although Langston Hughes made the most sustained use of the tradition of black humor, and the tragi-comic elements can be seen in the works of writers such as Ishmael Reed, Gayle Jones, and David Bradley, it would be worthwhile to look more carefully at this as an original feature of black fiction.

This typology of early black literature and the accompanying discussion of its sources and influences before the rise of fiction *per se* is not intended to suggest that the roles and function of this literature, be it documentary, autobiographical, or creative, were mutually exclusive. Indeed, one of the most intriguing facts about early black expression is that the boundary lines between specific genres and forms are not so easily drawn. This is especially true for what we call secular and sacred expression. While we have generally come to understand the spiritual as a religious song, spirituals were originally used just as widely in nonreligious settings. Spirituals were sung as rowing songs, field songs, and work songs; there were spirituals composed for moral and didactic purposes, as well as songs for social protest and other social needs.

In order to preserve the unity of this literature, one must regard black writing from three different perspectives: as social document, or as an expression of its relationship to the historical moment in which it was created; as self-representation, a way of giving definition to an individual or group self as separate and distinct from those definitions created by others; and as aesthetic creation, or as a formal, linguistic, or verbal product, whose properties are defined and judged by a set of standards, commonly understood and established by a specific cultural milieu.

In addition, when we are talking about the literature, it is necessary to make explicit the frame of reference, *i.e.*, whether one is talking about documentary, autobiographical, or creative literature. Otherwise, we run the risk of subjecting this very rich literature to a set of monolithic interpretations or obscuring the real

purposes it was obviously intended to serve. Indeed, one of the major shortcomings of the dominant vision of literary standards—which manifests itself in the notion of canon—is that it is guilty of Eurocentrism, a brute insensitivity to and ignorance of the different cultural milieus and frames of reference by which literature is to be judged.

The above discussion is intended to provide an overview of the background out of which black fiction emerged. Another very important aspect of this discussion has to do with the way in which the literature was produced. This question is much harder to answer, since very few social historians have attempted these kinds of reconstructions. Nevertheless, at some point, each of us has to ask the following question: How could black people write, given the level of illiteracy, the laws preventing the education of slaves, and the small communities of free blacks in existence in the eighteenth century? An obvious answer is that black people were aided by sympathetic whites and that there were some exceptional black people with persistence and ambition. Both of these are certainly true, but there is another aspect—that of nationality—that we need to pay attention to. If black people did create, early on, strong, viable organizations and institutions that reflected a wide range of intellectual and social developments, and not just the organized church, other features of black social organization stand to be revealed. Very little attention has been paid to the ideas of self-preservation and self-improvement that materialized in a variety of ways, among them, the establishment of mutual aid and benevolent societies, as well as educational and social-service organizations. Although women like Frances Harper were instrumental in integrating the white women's missionary society, Sunday school unions, and various temperance and suffragist organizations, black people before the Civil War had formed separate organizations along the same lines.

Given the reality of social segregation, and the interests of a burgeoning free black population, associations and groups sprang up quickly. In an article that appeared in *The Journal of Negro*



*Education* in the 1940s Dorothy Porter presented a sizable list of 'Negro Literary Societies' (using her language), organized by city and state and giving the dates of their formation. Included are some nine societies for Philadelphia, two for Pittsburgh, six from New York City, two each from Buffalo and Rochester, one each for Albany, Poughkeepsie, and Schenectady, New York, three for Troy, New York, five for Boston, one each for New Bedford and Hartford, two for Providence, one for Newark, New Jersey, two for Baltimore, three for Washington, D.C., and one each for Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio, and Detroit. According to Porter, her research was incomplete, and she could never find the time to pursue it. I would suggest that these fifty-odd literary societies—the earliest founded in 1828—are a rather strong indication of an active intellectual life among black people, and it is extremely unfortunate that we do not have any more information about them. Certain basic rules for the creation and distribution of literary works, which we know to have come from many of these groups, must have operated for these organizations and societies, no matter how modified the forms were. And the fact that by late in the nineteenth century an independent black publishing network was well established throughout the country tends to suggest that something of a literary 'underground' grew up alongside the underground railroad itself.

We also know that black creative writing appeared in the black periodicals that abound, beginning with *Mirror of Liberty*, the first Afro-American magazine published by David Ruggles in 1838. Poetry and fiction, autobiographies and histories, got published by black religious presses, newspaper presses, and job printers. Self-published work, which is the hardest to track down and the most ephemeral, was undoubtedly an option. Even Frances Harper had a volume of her poetry published before she was 'discovered' by the abolitionist movement and William Lloyd Garrison. This led to the publication of her famous *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, perhaps the most widely distributed volume of poetry by any writer in the nineteenth century and most writers in the twentieth. Paul

Laurence Dunbar had also published a volume of his own poems before coming to the attention of mainstream America with the help of William Dean Howells.

Our knowledge about black literary expression is scanty indeed, and we are far from having even general knowledge about who was writing black literature and how it was written, produced, and distributed. We can say that black writing represented a continuous process of literary engagement with people of their own race, with the ideas of the time, as well as with those who ruled and governed society. One general problem in attempting to do research in this kind of reconstructive history is that many of the organizations charged with the responsibility of maintaining and preserving the literary and cultural artifacts—libraries, museums, archives, and other agencies—have been narrowly ethnocentric in their acquisition policies. Hence, much has been lost forever.

Although it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the first Afro-American fiction was published—Frances Harper's story 'The Two Offers,' in 1849, and Harriet E. Wilson's novel, *Our Nig*, in 1859 (first published in England in 1853)—we must not assume that there was no firm literary ground to support these admittedly rough first fruits. If we bear in mind that the essential purpose of this fiction was to create a broader, more sustained discourse with a mixed readership, which neither antislavery poetry nor the slave narrative was sufficiently capable of doing, we can assume that this purpose was consistent with the growing feelings of freedom that prevailed at mid-century.

In other words, the birth of black fiction, and the Afro-American novel in particular, represents a process of consolidation of those formal, linguistic, and rhetorical strategies associated with a diversity of black written expression. Within the context of a constantly evolving social and cultural milieu, black writing was now able to seek for itself a kind of freedom, to novelize, in a way that was not previously possible. And while we would not see the full possibilities that this creative freedom would allow until well past the middle of the twentieth century, there is a certain irony in the

knowledge that black fiction as we know it today—the profoundly historic richness of Toni Morrison, the social satire and caricaturing of Ishmael Reed, the dramatic intensity and gender critiques of Alice Walker, the introspective and at the same time historically accurate vision of John Edgar Wideman—can all be better understood within the context of Afro-American cultural dynamics or criticism. The truth of the matter is that Afro-American fiction today has outstripped whatever might be called its American or western form. It has certainly outstripped most American—meaning white, male—critics' capacity to explain it. This is significant because what many of us fail to realize is that this great black fiction that is now so widely published, read, and adapted to movies and television, reached its zenith after the novel had been proclaimed dead by well-known and respected critics. It is indeed ironic that the death of the Eurocentric, Anglo-American novel has been accompanied by the birth of a novel of a new type—one produced by African American writers from the complex matrix of black culture. If this is the case, and it seems to me that it is, then perhaps the final day of payback has arrived: black writing has done no more than 'signify,' reclaim a territory and make it our own.

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