To Make an Old Century New

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A decade has passed since Elizabeth McHenry declared in this journal’s pages that “the more we know about the range of activities and strategies of resistance used by early black Americans as they worked toward a society that was both multiracial and equal increases the accuracy and sophistication of American cultural history.”

McHenry’s 2002 book, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, elaborates upon her earlier claim and now five new studies of nineteenth-century African American literature and history continue to broaden our knowledge of early black Americans and African American culture through the recovery of forgotten or neglected writings.

All five, in different yet compatible ways, document and supplement the turn away from vernacular and oral forms of African American expression that were once central to the formation and study of African American culture.
It was after all the “discovery” of black spirituals in the mid-nineteenth century, as Jon Cruz explains in *Culture on the Margins* (1999), “that helped to install the modern hermeneutical orientation toward cultural practices” (3). Although it was Frederick Douglass who first noted the importance of the spirituals to the formation of the black community, it was not until the twentieth century that they became the focus of cultural study. Renaming the form “sorrow songs” in his 1903 study *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B Du Bois situated them at the center of American history and culture. That claim would be echoed by the unnamed protagonist of James Weldon Johnson’s 1912 novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, who devotes himself to recovering and transcribing the songs of rural southern blacks in his attempt to “catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state.”3 Though developed during the nineteenth century as a response to the social and economic conditions of slavery, black religious music as an authentic form of African American culture was largely a twentieth-century phenomenon.

Most notable is the work of Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, which has illuminated both the meaning and significance of the black vernacular to African American literature and cultural production. Partially influenced by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Baker and Gates’s theories of African American literature rely on oral forms, particularly music, to understand not only the meaning of what Gates calls “the black text,” but also the relationship between white and black forms of American culture. While relying on written texts, these critics helped to broaden the idea of literature to include vernacular forms of cultural expression rooted in slave experience. Hence, the formation of an African American literary canon that begins with spirituals, slave narratives, sermons, and folktales.

That twentieth-century idea of the black vernacular has been slowly eclipsed in the twenty-first century by an emphasis on print culture, or what Wilson J. Moses calls “a literate tradition.”4 Focusing instead on a wide variety of forms of print culture that include not just novels, poems, and plays but also periodicals and legal cases, all five authors reviewed here share McHenry’s desire to dispel “the myth of the monolithic black community” by expanding our knowledge of early forms of black print culture (15). Recovering and rethinking this lost archive of nineteenth-century African American literature and culture requires a new set of critical tools and methods, which each of these books offers. What emerges from reading these books is a distinct literary historical approach that places the work of recovery at the center of African American studies.

While these works have certainly benefited from new cultural discoveries, to borrow from Cruz’s sociological lexicon, they are less concerned with
the search for an authentic African American identity than with providing the necessary historical context to understand and interpret these “new-old” works correctly. *Our Nig, The Bondwoman’s Narrative, The Curse of Caste, A Slave No More*—these are just a few of the titles that have altered our sense of the nineteenth century. What we learn from these discoveries is that many other forms of African American writing existed alongside slave narratives and spirituals—forms that demand a fairly high level of literacy and familiarity with multiple rhetorical forms and conventions of writing. They have also introduced a different kind of reading practice, one that relies upon historical methods for uncovering documents that have yet to be included in the official record. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the work of historical recovery that marked the beginning of this decade would be followed by literary criticism and historiography that tell a new story about black Americans who lived and wrote during the nineteenth century. Taken together, these new works committed to recovering the literate African American tradition suggest that the more of it we uncover, the more fragile must our readings of it become.

Uncertainty about the past and our inadequate knowledge of it energizes each of these new studies of the period. “Every published text, it seems, only emphasizes how much we do not know,” John Ernest contends in *Chaotic Justice: Rethinking African American Literary History* (2009). Such a statement, coming from one of the foremost authorities on nineteenth-century African American literature and history, is to be taken as more than just a gesture in intellectual humility. It marks a way of reading the past that we might now call distinctly *African Americanist*, a singular critical method that assumes that there are more texts to be recovered and many that will never be recovered. Indeed, the driving force behind texts like McHenry’s and Ernest’s is to grapple with, in Eric Gardner’s formulation, “what we don’t know of the black nineteenth century.” Like Ernest, Eric Gardner in *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature* (2009) is committed to broadening the textual and geographic range through detailed accounts of nineteenth-century African American literary productions. Both Ernest and Gardner offer powerful indictments of those scholars who reduce the study of this period to “a tiny number of texts—perhaps, in the worst cases, just two (albeit fascinating) texts, Douglass’s *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents*” (Gardner, 8). Gardner’s broad and careful readings of nineteenth-century black newspapers like the Philadelphia-based *Christian Recorder* and the weekly *San Francisco Elevator*, provide readers with what he calls “thick-contexting” that forces us to reconsider not just who wrote African American literature in the nineteenth century but *where* it was written.
Eddie Wong’s *Neither Fugitive nor Free* (2009) similarly expands the contours of African American writing and identity through meticulous reconstruction of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century freedom suits. Reading legal cases alongside literature, *Neither Fugitive nor Free* articulates an unexplored set of links between the uneven historical experiences of travel and the law. Moving beyond the literary and historical barriers of African American culture, Wong forges a link with blacks across the Atlantic that appears to destabilize the regional and generic contours of nineteenth-century African American literature that Ernest and Gardner so usefully outline. What results from Wong’s Atlantic approach to African American writing is a story that highlights the role women and children played in the abolition movement. Wong’s story relies on multiple forms of print—newspaper, legal pamphlets, and autobiographies—since these are the only ways to trace the stories of those slaves, primarily women, who sought freedom through northern courts.

Gabrielle Foreman’s *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (2009) furthers the discussion of black women during the period by analyzing works that were produced by them, rather than about them. Foreman argues that black women’s writing constitutes a distinct literary form that developed during the nineteenth century as a response to racist and sexist social policies and legislation. Through adept readings of newly recovered works by Harriet Wilson and Amelia Johnson, as well as by offering new ways of looking at better-known texts by Harriet Jacobs and Frances E. W. Harper, Foreman argues that such works provide important models for African American political and social activism today. Despite her commitment to providing “new contexts” for reading and understanding these nineteenth-century authors, Foreman admits that her readings remain, for the most part, tentative. “As African Americanists well know, we are still in the midst of recovering nineteenth-century writings and the buried biographical, historical, and political contexts of their production” (15).

Tracing the development of nineteenth-century African American literature and history as a formal discipline and practice is the focus of Stephen G. Hall’s *Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (2009). Dealing with some of the same texts, themes, and issues as literary historians, Hall provides a compelling account of the singularity of nineteenth-century African American history while also examining the ways in which African American authors were deeply engaged with the larger culture as readers and writers. Hall argues that to understand the development of African American history we must go back to the terrain of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historical practice. Dividing African American writing into
distinct generic and historical paradigms allows Hall to consider the often close ties between white and black forms of historiography.

These critical moves into the archive and the focus on the nineteenth century raise more general questions about the way we read race into the practice of literature and history. How has the turn to recovery changed the way we read? Is it possible to read and to enjoy these texts without knowing their specific historical contexts? Or do we need to wait until we have gathered sufficient information about the past before we can read these books and derive a certain degree of pleasure and knowledge from them? Is the work of recovery endless? While such a critical focus on recovering the past has been enormously productive, it has also complicated the work of interpretation, making it increasingly difficult to approach these texts as a non–African Americanist. Making these texts the purview of a specialized knowledge, available only to those who are willing and able to access that knowledge, may, however, be exactly the point.


> For our field to grow, we need to encourage a true proliferation of ideologies and methodologies, rather than to seek uniformity or conformity. An ideal department of African-American studies would have several of these approaches represented, rather than merely one officially sanctioned approach to a very complex subject.5

Despite Gates’s commitment to proliferation, his successful effort to create an officially sanctioned canon of African American writing (*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*) seemed to go against this principle. What we are witnessing now is a return to loosening the constraints of the canon—not just a broadening and expansion of it, but an outright dissolution of it. No canon, no matter how inclusive, can contain the vast range of authors, texts, and genres that these authors consider—and one can't help but wonder what will result from this “true proliferation.”
Viewing African American literature as a “chaotic,” rather than a canonical, formation, John Ernest’s account of African American literary history resists the critical move to classify literature into particular generic categories that often results in simplifying how African American literature works. Capturing and unveiling the complexity of race requires a vast knowledge of both history and literature, a knowledge that cannot be acquired easily or quickly. There are few critics, I think, who can match Ernest’s grasp of the period. Moving seamlessly from John Quincy Adams’s *Narrative* to the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Ernest exhibits the benefits of reading such seemingly different texts together. The point is not to chart simple intertextual connections but to show how reading these texts together provides the necessary rhetorical and historical context to appreciate fully each text on its own terms.

To understand race, and African American literature for that matter, requires a multidisciplinary approach that takes into consideration “the special circumstances under which nineteenth-century African American literature was written, published, and circulated in a white supremacist culture” (Ernest, 246). Following from Ernest’s earlier work, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (2004), which draws upon liberation theology to better understand the form and function of nineteenth-century African American historiography, *Chaotic Justice* looks to chaos theory to help us understand the how and why of nineteenth-century African American literature. By doing so, Ernest examines “the dynamic properties of that literature, consider[s] the difficulty of confining those properties to a linear narrative of literary history, and suggest[s] that when we recover the complexity that is vital to an understanding of nineteenth-century African American literary performances, we will remind ourselves of the equally complex but compelling concept of justice to which this literature was devoted” (Ernest, 74). The scientific vocabulary of chaos theory enables Ernest to forge important connections and juxtapositions between texts and writers that help us to understand the often complex meanings of works that have been routinely dismissed as “rough, awkward, or otherwise uncrafted” (Ernest, 74).

What emerges from Ernest’s reconfiguration of nineteenth-century African American literature echoes, in some respects, earlier claims made by George Hutchinson (1995) and Ann Douglas (1995) about the later Harlem Renaissance. While working in different historical periods, these earlier critics, significantly, insist upon a connection or, in Ernest’s terms, a conversation between black and white writers and readers in their efforts to broaden the range of American literature. Ernest’s twenty-first-century reading of nineteenth-century African American literature and twentieth-century formulations of race resists
what he calls a historically white approach to the American literary tradition. What results from the opposition between these two racial approaches may be read as either radical or conservative, depending on which side of the literary canon you find yourself. Regardless of political affiliations, Ernest issues a necessary and urgent call for readers to read obscure African American authors as if they were established white male authors, to give the former the kind of attention to a range of concerns “that we would encounter in studies of white American writers” (247). This is a tricky critical move, to argue for the distinction of nineteenth-century African American writers and at the same time to insist that they be treated on the same terms as, say, Melville and Hawthorne. It is a testament to Ernest’s breadth and depth of knowledge that he manages to pull it off. Rather than distinguish between radical or conservative, or black and white, ways of reading, Ernest’s “rethinking” of African American literary history is committed to showing us that a more rigorous reading of African American literature, with an attention to its past, is the only way to realize “a stable and just future” (251). Whether or not you agree with Ernest’s claim for African American literature, you cannot help but turn to the nineteenth-century texts he reads in the hope that his claim may yield the results he promises.

Winner of the inaugural EBSCOhost/RSAP prize for Best Book on American Periodicals, Eric Gardner’s *Unexpected Places* leads readers through a textual tour of the nineteenth century by taking us to far-flung times and places. Divided both geographically and historically into succinct chapters with titles such as “Black St. Louis in the 1840s and 1850s,” “Black Indiana, 1857–1862,” and “The Black West, 1865–1877,” Gardner’s meticulous readings of works produced outside the familiar territory of African American literature and culture located in the northeast does much to expand our idea about what constituted African American literature in the period and who was writing it.

Moving well beyond the novel and slave narrative as exemplary forms of nineteenth-century African American writing in this period, Gardner looks at texts that do not conform to the well-known generic models of African American literature that concentrate on slavery. Introducing the Indiana black author William Jay Greenly, whose plays were published in the Indianapolis-based *Repository of Religion and Literature*, alongside readings of John Berry Meachum’s *An Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States* reveals a history of African Americans rooted in print culture. What emerges from Gardner’s reading of newly recovered works found in “unexpected places” is not only a richer history of African American literature, although it is undeniably that. Gardner’s readings reveal a greater diversity of experience among early African Americans: not only were they not all slaves, or fugitive slaves,
but they stood for different ideas, held different opinions, and often found themselves in direct opposition to one another. But such opposition does not necessarily threaten the cohesion of the black community. To the contrary, it only widens its parameters, allowing for a far more eclectic sense of what it meant to be black in the nineteenth century.

While grounded in the vast archive of African American print culture, Gardner does not shy away from a more speculative mode of literary criticism. Doing so leads him to stray from single-authored texts to seek out what he, productively modifying Toni Morrison’s formulation of the “Africanist presence” in American literature, terms “black textual presence and black stories.” Rather than rewrite the past from the vantage of the present, Gardner specifically grounds his ideas of the past in nineteenth-century print culture. Following Morrison, Gardner admits that he does not have access to many of the sources, because much of them remain lost. By reading black textual presences, Gardner gives himself the creative space to examine those stories that lack a stable relationship between text and author. To tell the story of Polly Wash, the mother of the better-known autobiographer Lucy Delaney—a figure both Wong and Foreman take up as well—Gardner turns to court records and freedom suits in the final section of his first chapter. This move greatly expands the meaning of African American print culture; it is not only those works written by black Americans, but it also includes records and documents of slaves mediated through white writers. Gardner’s fascinating account of Wash’s life reveals a more complex relation between the law and slavery, and master and slave. Not only does Polly Wash’s story reveal black agency during this period; it also reveals the freedom suit to be a multivocal document that exhibits many of the dialogic qualities found in a novel.

Gardner’s account of Polly Wash is particularly relevant to cultural historians such as Edlie Wong who are interested in uncovering the relationship between literature, law, and slavery. The “freedom suit” constitutes a relatively unexplored African American textual resource, but it is one, based upon both Gardner’s and Wong’s examination of it, that holds rich possibilities for future investigation. Not only do freedom suits complicate the well-known history of slavery and abolition told by the slave narratives, but they also insist upon a new method of reading. As Gardner reminds us, “the texts of these stories were not intended to function as literary objects” (45). As such, they demand what we might call a distinctly nonliterary method that accounts for their form and meaning. Wong’s *Neither Fugitive nor Free* provides precisely the kind of reading the freedom suits demand.
Focusing on the contradictory logic characterizing British and American freedom suits, Wong revises conventional histories of slavery by illuminating the ways slaves found freedom in the interstices of the law. Going beyond the borders of the American nation, Wong’s account of slavery is a decidedly Atlantic enterprise, one that productively expands and deepens Paul Gilroy’s seminal work *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Drawing upon “a largely unexplored archive,” Wong traces the history of transatlantic abolitionism through legal stories in which slave plaintiffs, rather than fugitives, were the heroes. How to read these legal stories and assess their role in the antislavery movement requires an understanding of the actual laws that enabled them as well as the formal principles that structured the law—“its perspectives, tropes, and plots” (9). Moving deftly between landmark legal cases, autobiographical narratives, and fiction, Wong weaves together an “unofficial” history of slavery that challenges in numerous ways the “official” story of abolition (16).

Wong’s formulation of slavery and freedom as an Atlantic enterprise that relied on the constraints of travel is most fully realized in the final chapter concerning the Negro Seaman Acts. First enacted in 1822 by South Carolina as a response to Denmark Vesey’s carefully planned slave insurrection, the law made it impossible for free black sailors to enter several southern ports. If they did, they risked fines, imprisonment, and even being sold into slavery by unscrupulous captains and southern police officers. Through her discussion of the historical realities of the law and the public outcry over it, Wong provides the necessary context to read a little-known 1852 novel by F. C. Adams that provides a fictional account of the historical case of Manuel Pereira. Though a free subject under British law, Pereira was legally beaten, imprisoned, and starved by the law of South Carolina. Wong provides a reading of this novel that at once puts it in relation to contemporary novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allen Poe while at the same time showing its distinction. This is a novel so deeply engaged with nineteenth-century laws and legal culture that it simply cannot be read under the rubrics of sentimental and domestic fiction characterizing most antislavery novels. What results from Wong’s reading of Adams’s novel alongside her rigorous account of the discursive history of South Carolina’s Seamen Act is a far more nuanced and historical account of the racial politics underlying the Black Atlantic.

While the law plays a less prominent role in Gabrielle Foreman’s study of black women’s textual productions throughout the nineteenth century, it nonetheless proves vital to the formation of the racial and sexual categories that are formative to her discussion of literature. As we learn through her readings
of key black texts of the century—*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Our Nig, Iola Leroy*—it was by taking the law into their own hands that black women, ultimately, asserted their identity. It was, in other words, through literary form that black women wrote themselves into history. Taking a rather expansive view of “reading black women,” Foreman includes a close reading of Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins’s *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1895). Following the recent controversy over Kelley-Hawkins’s racial identity, Foreman’s decision to include the novel in her study of black women in the nineteenth century can be viewed as going against conventional wisdom. Gingerly sidestepping the curious case of Kelley-Hawkins’s true identity, documented by Holly Jackson and Katherine Flynn, Foreman contends that “her shifting racial and authorial identities simultaneously invite wider analysis of the breadth of Black prose writers’ political and narrative strategies” (113). Foreman coedited the 2007 special issue of *Legacy* that dealt specifically with the revelations about Kelley-Hawkins’s identity, and her chapter is drawn largely from her essay. But in the context of her book, Foreman’s reading of the novel takes on new and perhaps more politically charged consequences. Foreman provides a detailed account of how Kelley-Hawkins “passed into African American literary archives” and then was discovered to be white and then, largely through Foreman’s “histotextual” critical method, becomes a black woman. What we learn from Foreman’s account of Kelley-Hawkins’s identity and, of course, her fiction is to rethink the terms of the African American historical archive, to reflect upon the racial categories we use to classify literature, and to consider at once both the limitations and possibilities of relying wholly on history in our consideration of what does and does not count as African American literature. Indeed, the idea of African American literature may have strong, or in Foreman’s terms “embedded,” historical roots, but these are roots that do not foreclose a formal analysis of literature.

What distinguishes Stephen G. Hall’s reading of African American historical writing is precisely his willingness, indeed his outright commitment, to view history in literary terms. Drawing upon multiple forms of literary expression—the jeremiad, the Bible, classicism, Romanticism, realism, alongside non-literary forms such as scientism and objectivity—Hall looks at African American history as essentially a creative enterprise that was formed and disseminated to write African Americans into the nation’s history.

Revising the periodization of black history crafted by Earl Thorpe in the late 1950s, Hall divides African American historical writing into five distinct periods, beginning in 1817 and ending in 1915. Hall’s chapters unfold in chronological order, with the last, “To Smite the Rock of Knowledge,” provid-
To Make an Old Century New

ing an overview of the ways in which African American history came to be part of college and university curriculums in the twentieth century. Here Hall draws upon his readings of earlier historical figures to examine the changes wrought on the writing of African American history as a result of “professionalization.”

While Hall’s investigations of the origins and influences of African American historical writing throughout the nineteenth century are certainly compelling and rich, it is, ironically, his chapter dealing with twentieth-century historical developments that has the most far-reaching implications. Here Hall explains how the division between African American literature and history occurred and the consequences of that schism on the production of both. It will come as something of a surprise to historians and literary critics that Benjamin Brawley, considered to be a preeminent African American historian with his publication of *A Short History of the American Negro* in 1910, was in fact a professor of English. Brawley, as it turns out, was one of the last figures to straddle the line between history and literature as changes in facilities, faculty credentials, libraries, courses, and research agendas produced a new generation of “discipline-based scholars” (198). Such changes, Hall argues, “made an emphatic statement about the importance of history, especially black history, in the educational process” (198). Hall’s deep commitment to the value of African American history to our understanding of national history, however, owes a considerable debt to literary scholars and literary historians. Whereas mainstream historians have been slow to recognize the richness of this work, Hall relies on the critical reading methods developed by literary scholars to read African American historical writing. Hall’s unique literary historical method uncovers a tremendously important history that impressively broadens the way we think about both obscure and well-known figures. Hall’s history not only revises mainstream American history; it also revises African American history. Here we learn about the pivotal role Booker T. Washington played in the formation of African American history as a discipline and the influence of nineteenth-century African American historiography on thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. Hall’s book will, doubtless, become required reading in African American and Africana Studies curriculums; the challenge will be to make it a part of conventional history departments.

Despite the extensive research and recovery these five books offer, all five conclude with a similar appeal for more work to be done. Like Hall, all call for “a broadening of our traditional vision of the evolution of this field” by looking closely and carefully at the past. One can’t help but wonder if with so many responding to the call to “rethink” African American literature and history we might be ready to consider why all this broadening and expanding
of the tradition has had the strange effect of making African American writing more elusive than ever.

Notes
2. It is worth noting that this current critical commitment to literary recovery and print culture relies in no small part on the truly groundbreaking work of Frances Smith Foster. As a forerunner in the growing subfield of recovery, Foster’s critical oeuvre provides perhaps the best lens through which to view the texts discussed in this essay. See Frances Smith Foster’s introduction to *Minnie’s Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, and Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper* (Boston, 1994) and *Written by Herself: Literary Production of African American Women, 1746–1892* (Bloomington, 1993). Foster’s more recent work provides useful reflections on the stakes of recovery. See, for instance, “Ports of Call, Pulpits of Consultation: Rethinking the Origins of African American Literature,” in *A Companion to African American Literature* (Malden, Mass., 2010) and “Looking Back Is Tricky Business,” *Narrative* 18 (2010): 19–28.