

BEFORE HARLEM

An Anthology of African American Literature
from the Long Nineteenth Century

Edited by Ajuan Maria Mance

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AN ANTHOLOGY OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE FROM
THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

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BEFORE HARLEM

In loving memory of my grandparents,
Jennie Vee Hughes Crockett, John Frazier Crockett,
Ernestine English Mance, and William Wilson Mance, Sr.

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INTRODUCTION

The time frame of this collection is based on historian Eric Hobsbawn's notion of a long nineteenth century. In his Marxist analysis of the rise and fall of European political and economic power, he defines the beginning and end of this period based on key developments in the economic and political systems of Europe—the French Revolution and the beginning of World War I—that only loosely conform to its traditional hundred-year span.¹ *Before Harlem* adapts Hobsbawn's basic concept to the specific sociopolitical circumstances and historical conditions that shaped the emergence of African American literature.

For the purposes of this collection, the black nineteenth century begins in the year 1808. While the pioneering black writers of the 1700s—Lucy Terry, Jupiter Hammon, Benjamin Banneker, Phyllis Wheatley, and others—are historically and thematically significant, it is not until 1808 that we first see the emergence of U.S. black literary communities and African American print culture. In that year, black communities in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia commemorated the end of the slave trade in Britain and the United States with speeches, sermons, and brief editorials, many of which were published in pamphlets and progressive newspapers; and it is in these writings and their reception that we see the simultaneous emergence of both a black audience for African American texts and an African American community of literary and textual practice. The period ends in 1910, with the founding of the *Crisis* magazine, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The launch of the *Crisis*, led by scholar and activist W. E. B. Du Bois, corresponded with a shift in the tone and focus of African American literature and thought, from the late-nineteenth-century interest in “Negro improvement” to the twentieth-century focus on restoring black Americans’ basic civil rights and achieving social and political equality.

In July of 1895, a full 15 years before Du Bois’s *Crisis* magazine, the First Congress of Colored Women convened in Boston. The culmination of more than a decade of African American women’s political organizing, this gathering represented the first attempt by black women to organize at the national level around issues of common concern. The assembled delegates (104 black

women, "representing fifty-four clubs from fourteen states and the District of Columbia") heard speeches on a range of subjects, from traditional "women's issues" to education, economics, religion, and more (Logan 133).² Principal organizer Josephine Ruffin spoke on the importance of universal academic and moral instruction for African American women; writer and activist T. Thomas Fortune addressed the gathered delegates on the subject of "Political Equality," and, under the leadership of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the Committee on Resolutions called for employment equality for all African American workers.³

Among the invited presenters was New York-based novelist and reporter Victoria Earle Matthews, whose speech, "The Value of Race Literature," established her as one of the earliest African American thinkers to envision the study of U.S. black literature as a discrete field of inquiry. Her address understands the literature of any given race as all of the written expression of its people and is inclusive of creative and scholarly works, as well as journalism and speeches. She offers the following definition: "By race literature we mean ordinarily all the writing emanating from a distinct class—not necessarily race matters; but a general collection of what has been written by men and women of that Race: History, Biographies, Scientific Treatises, Sermons, Addresses, Novels, Poems, Books of Travel, miscellaneous essays, and the contributions to magazines and newspapers" (Matthews 287). Conceived in this way, race literature becomes the fullest and most accessible record of a people's capacity for analysis, reflection, and invention. Its preservation safeguards not only (or even primarily) a body of texts, but a cultural and intellectual legacy. As such, Matthews's call for the preservation and study of race literature is as concerned with safeguarding the African American written tradition as it is with raising awareness of the culture and community out of which that tradition emerged. She writes, "Race Literature does mean [. . .] the preserving of all the records of a Race, and thus cherishing the materials, saving from destruction and obliteration what is good, helpful and stimulating. But for our Race Literature, how will future generations know of the pioneers in Literature, our statesmen, soldiers, divines, musicians, artists, lawyers, critics, and scholars?" (Matthews 187).

It is unlikely that Victoria Earle Matthews herself could have imagined the current state of African American literature studies. Although the last twenty-five years have seen significant progress toward the recovery and authentication of early African American texts, the vast majority of nineteenth-century African

American writers and their work remain largely unknown to contemporary readers.⁴ Though little more than a century has passed since Matthews so clearly and thoughtfully mapped out the relationship between race literature, intellectual history, and cultural memory, the richness and breadth of African American literature of the nineteenth century has largely faded from memory, along with all but a vague awareness of the intellectual and cultural debates, political and social struggles, community publications and institutions that fostered and sustained U.S. black writers and their work. Literary historian Elizabeth McHenry sums up the irony of the current state of African American nineteenth-century studies: "[T]he 'recovery' and reprinting of various texts has augmented our access to the nineteenth-century literary creations of African-American writers, [but] we remain less cognizant of the variety of processes of intellectual production and exchange that have existed within African-American communities, processes through which an African-American readership was deliberately coordinated" (McHenry 477).

The failure of increased access to nineteenth-century black texts to bring about a broader awareness of the period's African American intellectual and literary communities is a direct result of the ways that the preferences and concerns of contemporary scholars in the field have shaped and limited the manner in which pre-Harlem Renaissance writers and their work come into view. Contemporary U.S. black literature scholarship highlights those texts that have come to reflect not so much the interests and priorities that shaped the creation of past literatures as the interests and priorities of the current population in looking at the past. One factor shaping the interests of contemporary African American literature scholars is the desire to find and celebrate the progenitors of today's African American writers and texts, as reflected in a 1997 interview with African American literature scholars and *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) coeditors Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay. McKay explains the impetus behind the anthology's attention to early black texts: "We are interested that people should understand something also that comes from the [beginnings of the African American literature tradition]. Where do we begin to see the quality and the depth of the kind of writing that we now have? Where did it come from? And can we look back to the earlier writers and find it there?" (Gates and McKay, "From the Soil of Suffering").

For the current novel-centered moment in literature, this search for the roots of the "quality and the depth of the kind of writing that we have now" entails, first and foremost, a search for early black novels and novelists, with

a similar interest in early book-length memoirs and autobiographical narratives as well as those poets and short-fiction writers who were fortunate enough to see their works collected and republished in book form. In the current moment, in which the most celebrated African American works have been those that seek to interpret African American perspectives and experiences in ways that are comprehensible to black and nonblack readers alike, the search for roots has also meant greater attention and visibility to those nineteenth-century African American texts that were most widely embraced by the period's white readership.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY WRITERS AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE CANON

The impact of these preferences on the current U.S. black literature canon is apparent in the nineteenth-century selections that appear in influential collections like the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997, 2003, 2014) and *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1998). Their consecutive release in 1997 and 1998 marked a turning point in African American literature studies. Although these are neither the first nor the most recent general anthologies in the field, the ambitious scale of these volumes (each includes more than two thousand pages of selections spanning more than three hundred years of written and orally-transmitted works) and the canon-making authority of their presses (W. W. Norton and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, respectively) combined to create what Richard Elliot Fox has described as "the most formidable" anthologies of African American literature ever produced (Fox 2).

As one of the main entry points through which twenty-first-century readers encounter African American writers and their work, these and subsequent anthologies of similar scale (notably the *Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature*, in 2000, and the *Wiley-Blackwell Anthology of African American Literature*, in 2014) have played a critical role in defining the U.S. Black literature canon; and their influence has been greatest in the subfield of African American literature before the Harlem Renaissance. While a number of African American writers from the Harlem Renaissance onward continue to draw a steady audience of mainstream readers, only a handful of nineteenth-century black writers remain consistently in print. Consequently, comprehensive anthologies like the *Norton* and the *Riverside* are many readers' first and only

exposure to African American literature of the period. Among the growing body of nineteenth-century works that are currently available for scholarly research, the *Norton*, the *Riverside*, and similar collections have selected as the most canonical, most essential black texts of the period those poems, novels, and autobiographical narratives distinguished by their effectiveness at conveying African American experiences, aesthetics, and ideas across racial lines, to readers outside of the black community.

To achieve a measure of success beyond the black readership is a significant accomplishment for African American writers of any period. For nineteenth-century black texts in particular, given their emergence against the backdrop of either southern chattel slavery (during the antebellum years) or lynching and Jim Crow (in the decades after Reconstruction), such broad recognition is truly noteworthy. Still, it is important to recognize that broad acceptance of certain black texts reflects not only the willingness of some white readers (and a small number of white, mainstream periodicals and publishers) to embrace a handful of black-authored works, but also their unwillingness to engage with the vast majority of African American writers.

For the overwhelming majority of black writers, the African American readership and the press by which it was served were the only options, whether they aspired to access the larger white readership or not.⁵ Ironically, though, while a nineteenth-century black writer's accessibility to white readers did not preclude his or her accessibility to and even popularity among the African American readership, that writer's success or failure in reaching the white readership of his time is often a key factor in determining his status relative to today's African American canon. Albeit inadvertently, contemporary scholars' search for the progenitors of contemporary black genres and texts has, through its greater interest in those cross-racial communications published in book form, extended the influence of the nineteenth-century white readership and its publishers into the present day, where their preferences and sensibilities continue to influence the terms on which nineteenth-century African American writers and their work are made accessible to white and nonwhite readers alike.

As a result, abolitionist poems from book-length collections by George Moses Horton and Frances E. W. Harper have become staples of the African American canon, while pieces like "The New York Riot" (1863), poet Solomon G. Brown's account of the tragic New York Draft Riots of 1863 (originally published in the *Christian Recorder*, a weekly publication of the African

Methodist Episcopal [A.M.E.] Church and one of the most widely circulated publications of the period) remain largely unknown to today's reading audiences. H. Cordelia Ray's "Lincoln: Written for the Occasion of the Unveiling of the Freedman's Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln" (1876) has met a similar fate. One of the most widely read poems by any woman of her day, but originally published in pamphlet form, this work has largely been forgotten by both scholars and casual readers.

The interests and preferences of today's readers of nineteenth-century texts have influenced not only which writers make their way into the canon, but also which works by even the most prominent writers gain the widest circulation. This is epitomized by the coverage of Frederick Douglass in today's most prominent African American anthologies. Today, as in his lifetime, Douglass is easily the most widely recognized of all black nineteenth-century authors. However widespread his notoriety among today's readers, the range of works associated with him is nevertheless quite narrow. The inclusion of excerpts from his book-length *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in virtually all comprehensive U.S. black anthologies published during the last forty-five years overshadows his participation in African American intellectual, political, and aesthetic debates.⁶ The *Norton*, the *Riverside*, and the more recent *Wiley-Blackwell Anthology of African American Literature* (2014) each reprint his *Narrative* in its entirety, along with excerpts from "What to the Negro is the Fourth of July," one of his most celebrated abolitionist speeches.⁷ (The *Norton* also includes excerpts from Douglass other two popular autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.) Though Douglass was an active participant in nineteenth-century African American literary and intellectual culture, the selections in these anthologies portray him not as a writer shaped in part by the aesthetic practices, ideas, and debates that defined the black literary and intellectual communities of which he was a part, but rather as an isolated respondent to the debates around black freedom and equality that took place among activist whites. Few anthologies include Douglass's editorial pieces on the issues and concerns of northern blacks, even though such pieces appeared regularly in each of his three newspapers. The emphasis in the *Norton*, the *Riverside*, *Wiley-Blackwell* and other collections on his narrative and his abolitionist speeches obscures the degree to which the aesthetic choices and political perspectives evidenced in Douglass's work were shaped by the ongoing discussions of politics, culture, and education taking place within the period's black readership.

The same patterns of preference that obscure Douglass's participation in the intraracial dialogues and debates that took place in black antebellum communities are evident in contemporary anthologies' treatment of other prominent nineteenth-century black writers. Consider, for example, the case of William Wells Brown, whose inclusion in recent African American anthologies is virtually universal. The selections of his work in recent collections like the *Norton*, the *Riverside*, *Wiley-Blackwell*, and *Prentice Hall* are drawn primarily from his antebellum narrative, his abolitionist novel, *Clotel*, or some combination of the two. A frequent correspondent to several African American-owned newspapers as well as William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*, his letters to these publications go wholly unaddressed.⁸ Though Brown authored at least six additional books, including a three-volume history of the African American people, these works have received little attention from today's readers and scholars. The portrait of the Brown oeuvre offered up in the U.S. black literature canon and those general anthologies through which its interests and priorities are reinforced reflects, quite simply, the way he was understood and appreciated by the period's mainstream reading audience.⁹

The same interaction between historical biases and contemporary interests that has limited the visibility of all but Dunbar's dialect poetry completely obscures the contributions of most of his peers. One such figure is T. Thomas Fortune, whose remarkable *Black and White* (1884) offers a radical analysis of the impact of wealth distribution on U.S. notions of race and power that would seemingly rank it alongside W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, but who is virtually untreated in the general anthologies of recent decades. A deeply influential editor and activist who worked with equal passion in a variety of genres, from lyric verse to epic poetry to prose fiction to political philosophy and social theory, Fortune was a frequent contributor to African American newspapers, as well as the founder and co-owner (with father Emmanuel Fortune Jr.) of *The New York Freeman* (later renamed *The New York Age*). Widely recognized as the most distinguished and influential journalist of his time, Fortune was considerably less well known to white readers; and, alas, it is his relationship to the late-nineteenth-century white readership that most closely resembles both his relationship to today's African American canon and his presence in those general anthologies that have served to define its parameters.¹⁰

Fortune represents what Elizabeth McHenry refers to as the "failed" or only "partially achieved" writer, a label she assigns to those African American

writers who failed to realize success “in the conventional senses,” by gaining access to mainstream (white-owned and white-run) publication venues (McHenry 383). Such writers are not failures in the traditional understanding of the word. Indeed, many such writers, including McHenry’s own example of Mary Church Terrell, were widely published and highly regarded within black print culture, and many never sought publication outside of the black literary establishment. Regardless of these considerations, though, it is their “failure” to attract the interest of white, mainstream editors and publishers that corresponds most closely with the nineteenth-century black writer’s inclusion in or exclusion from the African American canon.

Elizabeth McHenry calls for a reengagement with the failed and partially achieved writers and texts of the pre-Harlem Renaissance era. McHenry’s own example of the circumstances under which Mary Church Terrell became a “failed” writer points to the importance of revisiting her work and the work of her peers. Terrell’s uniform rejection by mainstream (white) publishers was, McHenry asserts, consistently linked to her uncompromising and direct calls for racial justice. The following comment, from Harcourt editor J. E. Springarn is, according to McHenry, a characteristic critique of the author’s work: “perhaps you are too intent on reforming this world than on creating an imaginary world of your own, after the artist’s fashion” (McHenry 384).

That Terrell was widely published in African American periodicals and pamphlets points to the substantial divide between the kinds of race writing that were embraced by African American readers and those works whose tone and content on issues of race were deemed acceptable for the white readership. One of the side-effects of the last several decades of scholarly focus on prose writers who achieved traction in mainstream (majority white) audiences has been the privileging of those works whose resistance relies on an aesthetics of subtlety, characterized by the subversion, revision, and adaptation of the themes, personae, and settings that were common in mainstream depictions of black subjects and settings; but this preference has developed at the expense of those African American writers and writings, genres and techniques, themes and points of view that developed and thrived in the literary production and intellectual exchange that was taking place within black communities.

It is a distinction well represented in this comparison between Charles Chesnutt’s “The Goophered Grapevine,” the first African American short fiction ever published in the popular mainstream magazine *Atlantic Monthly* (1887), and David Bryant Fulton’s “Henry Berry Lowery, the North Carolina

Outlaw: A Tale of the Reconstruction Period," based on the true story of a popular folk hero, and originally published in *The Citizen*, an African American newspaper (year unknown).¹¹ Chesnutt's tale manipulates key elements of the white-dominated plantation tradition, overtly deploying its settings and character types, even as it subverts its apologist themes of nostalgia for antebellum culture and society. In Chesnutt's piece, plantation life includes none of the sexual subjugation or crude violence that greets readers of the slave narratives, and the enslaved men and women who populate his tale appear more accepting of than aggrieved by their servitude. Chesnutt's tale does, however, disrupt the plantation tradition's characteristic portrayal of its enslaved characters' happy submission to the will of their masters. Instead, it complicates the presumed hierarchy of white power over black lives by introducing the seminal character of Aun' Peggy, a free black woman whose knowledge and skill as a conjurer grant her the power to effect change in the lives of black and white characters alike. Despite the apparent hierarchy of the owners over the enslaved, both constituencies must humbly submit to the will of Aun' Peggy, and Chesnutt depicts both black and white characters attempting to curry her favor through generous offerings of food and other valuable provisions.

Like Chesnutt's "Goophered Grapevine," David Bryant Fulton's "Henry Berry Lowery" is set in the rural South. Fulton's tale, however, openly rejects the period's white supremacist ethos, replacing the black-white binary on which it depends with a complex racial landscape that includes the "octoroon outlaw" Henry Berry Lowery, his white and Mexican American antagonists, and his racially diverse gang of brawlers and thieves (Fulton, "Henry Berry Lowery" 65).¹² In addition, Fulton's text challenges the exalted status of white outlaw heroes like Jesse James by juxtaposing the similarities between both outlaws' exploits and reputations against the significant disparity in their resources. Writing under the pen name "Jack Thorne," the author explains that, "[j]ust as the name of Jesse James sent an involuntary shudder through the souls of those who heard it, although far removed from the scene of his depredations, so did the name of Henry Berry Lowery awe and terrorize in North Carolina" (66). In addition, Fulton emphasizes that Lowery's gang was able to build their fearsome reputation with considerably fewer arms than the better-equipped and all-white James Gang. He notes, "The James boys and their followers were armed with the most improved firearms of that day; with the exception of the carbine carried by Lowery himself, taken from a Mexican who attempted to capture him, the only weapons these men had were knives

and double-barreled shotguns" (66). That he prefaces this comparison with a description of the ethnic makeup of Lowery's gang ("Lowery and his intrepid freebooters were all colored men") implies a relationship between race and access to armaments (66).¹³ Both Chesnutt's and Fulton's pieces contribute significantly to our understanding of how questions of race, region, culture, and class intersect in the African American nineteenth-century texts. Alas, though, Chesnutt's embrace by mainstream publications like *The Atlantic Monthly* has been rewarded with a firm place in the African American literature canon, while writers like Fulton, whose works found their greatest audience among black readers, have largely been forgotten.

BLACK PRINT CULTURE AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN READERSHIP

The selections in *Before Harlem* are based on a revisionist framework that seeks to contextualize the nineteenth-century black text within the literary and aesthetic sensibilities and concerns of the period's African American readership. This anthology views the Chesnutts and Dunbars of the literary world not as more important than, but alongside and in the context of the Fortunes and the Fultons of the day (that is, those writers who were well regarded among black readers, but otherwise largely unknown). *Before Harlem* does not, then, reject recent anthologies' identification as worthy of preservation and transmission those nineteenth-century African American writers who achieved mainstream recognition. Rather, this collection works from an alternative vision of this period, based on revised selection criteria that take into account the recent canon-making efforts of today's scholars and editors but rely even more heavily on the literary, cultural, and political priorities and interests of black nineteenth-century readers, writers, and editors.¹⁴ While *Before Harlem* includes selections by Douglass, Chesnutt, Dunbar, and others whose works were well received by readers and publishers on both sides of the black-white color line, this volume presents these and other writers as they appeared in the African American press. Where the anthology includes excerpts from their most widely read works, those selections are presented alongside those that were published in black-owned and -edited periodicals, by African American-owned book presses, or in pamphlets or other print media aimed at the black reading audience, including self-published, small-press, and locally distributed volumes.

Before Harlem combines the broad coverage of general anthologies like the *Norton* with the greater interest in works published by African American periodicals and publishing houses found in more specialized collections, like Joan Sherman's influential *African American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century* (1992) and Shirley Wilson Logan's *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth Century African-American Women* (1995). In combining these features and extending them, this collection challenges prevailing conceptions of genre. Because of its emphasis on the ways that nineteenth-century African American writers engaged and addressed their black readership, *Before Harlem* de-centers the book as the primary vehicle for the transmission of U.S. black literature. This anthology's increased attention to the writers whose works were disseminated through the period's African American magazines, papers, and pamphlets is reflected not only in the inclusion of writers who have often been overlooked, but also in its broader representation of several of the forms that dominated periodical literature of the time. These include rarely treated forms like serialized fiction, the correspondent's letter, and the speech.

This revisionist approach to genre also extends to more familiar (and frequently anthologized) literary forms, certain of which are represented in proportions and contexts that depart from the ways that U.S. black literature of this period has previously been presented. The realignment of the criteria by which to select nineteenth-century texts for anthologizing is perhaps most apparent in the treatment of poetry and autobiography, arguably the two defining genres of this historical subfield. Most often encountered as an antebellum, abolitionist phenomenon, the nineteenth-century African American autobiography takes on compelling and unexpected qualities in the period after Reconstruction. Postbellum autobiographies, like William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home, or The South and Its People* (1880) and the self-titled *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (1893), draw heavily on the structural and thematic framework of antebellum slave narratives. Yet their creation after the end of U.S. chattel slavery combines with their majority-black reading audience to produce in such texts a level of candor and a breadth of perspectives on the experience of enslavement, the role of white southerners, and the relationship between U.S. black writers, recently emancipated blacks, and black Africans that is largely absent from the more familiar abolitionist works.

Like the post-Reconstruction slave narrative, nineteenth-century African American poetry receives only limited coverage in even the most