



Black Atlas

GEOGRAPHY AND FLOW
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
AFRICAN AMERICAN
LITERATURE

Judith Madera

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INTRODUCTION

ON MEANINGFUL WORLDS

Black Atlas is about the ways literature reflects and composes place. I begin from the position that places are sites we imbue with meaning. They are constituted by our ways of knowing. Just as importantly, they are imprints of feelings and attachments. The pages that follow look at the ways places are generated through processes of participation. They take the view that places are about how we use them, how we share them. I further argue that place resists the closure of any singular mode of representation. Place is something semiotic (between concept and symbol) and something material with real conditions. It exceeds any private experience. In making these claims, it is necessary to foreground the stakes of my argument—what a reinvigorated understanding of place means for more specific communities in time. I am particularly interested in what place means for those whose histories have been vernacularized, or simply overwritten in the dominant records of a culture. *Black Atlas* is about these kinds of communities and about their stories.

This book takes up with African American literature from the volatile period between 1849 and 1900, an era of massive national expansion and hemispheric ambition. The period encompasses the radical abolitionist movement, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. From an artistic perspective, it might be called “the rise of the black novel period,” because the decade of the 1850s alone launched the first generation of black novelists, including William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, Harriet Wilson, and Martin Delany.¹ But to limit the story of black place aesthetics to this midcentury literary surge is to hem a complex record of print expression into a too-narrow scope of periodicity and genre. Late-

century literature gains its projection in relation to earlier writing. And the range of midcentury textualities considered here actually comes into relief against later, post-Reconstruction fiction in a variety of ways that do not align with imposed historicizations.

Black Atlas thus begins with the supposition that place pushes against assimilable forms. Place unsettles sweeps of development-based histories. It also interrupts ideas of black history as a march of progress, or a story of protest within a national frame. Thus, to better attend to the complexities of literary place aesthetics, I extend this rise of the black novel, as I am calling it, to a longer view of literature. I start with the first novel to be published by an African American author, William Wells Brown's 1853 *Clotel*, and close with the end-of-century literature by authors like Pauline Hopkins and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. Theirs was the kind of fiction that tied the specters of the past to the flows of a new black cultural history, poised at an uncertain but impending modernity. Across this expanse, these pages consider the ways literature stages the processes of place as a discursive struggle.

I should state, too, that the readings that follow are not sequenced around a series of symbolic spaces. (Here I think of Melvin Dixon's *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* [1987], which reads modernist black narratives as quests for belonging in relation to the mythico-real spaces of wilderness, underground, and mountaintop.) Nor do I organize *Black Atlas* as a collection of topical sites in black history, which I then examine through the lens of literature. Instead, what I keep at the center of my discussion is how African American literature itself arranges geographic meaning. I go on to argue that discourses about place can effectively produce experiences of space, and that what African American literature does with a lucidity and richness is make place into a theatre of deliberation. Place in African American literature is a complex of meaning that cues different worlds of necessity and possibility.

This book brings into focus a group of authors, all from the critical half-century, beginning with William Wells Brown, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, James Beckwourth, and Frances E. W. Harper and extending to Pauline Hopkins and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, among others. It encompasses political editorials from black serials (the *North Star*, *Anglo-African*, and *New Orleans Daily Creole*), detailed travel writing and exploratory accounts, and midcentury national maps of hemisphere.

Yet the authors I look at here are unified less by the worlds they inhabited than by the worlds they invented. Most centrally, they are united by the prominence of geography—*geo* (world) and *graphia* (writing)—in their literature. Their writings, I argue, reflect not just the times, but the processes of place. That is, their work is about the complexities of place—and place has a valence outside of fiction. In terms of organization, I have tried to select texts that most clearly illustrate my claims about the relations of the literary to the geographic. However, my argument is less about patching together any synthetic canon than it is about the centrality of territorial relationships and geographic materiality to meaningful correlations between race politics and black literary aesthetics. I especially arrange the chapters to locate and historicize something that African American literature showcases in respect to other narrative traditions in the Americas: the highly interstitial scope of placement blacks worked through—both materially and perceptually—in the United States.

I further argue that although nineteenth-century African American authors did write about scenes and sites frequently inaccessible to white U.S. and British readers, they did more than present stories about how the other half lives, or make “peculiar” witness for popular print commodity. Instead, to gain representation in the symbolic structures of white territorialization, black authors had to write over white principles of containment. They had to dismantle dominant organizational codes of place. They did this by revealing the contingencies of dominant discourses and the different fabrications that took the form of geographic fact. They also got close to something I think of as parallel invention. As the following pages consider, nineteenth-century African American literature produces subject mappings. It creates worlds and effects sensibilities and relations to those worlds. So what I try to attend to are the ways literature stages place and simultaneously breaks with scales of geography that abrogate the local as a function of the national, or that collapse hemisphere into nationalist paradigms of influence. As I will describe shortly, literature confounds the logic of scale.

Finally, I suggest that what animates the literature I look at here is its engagement with deterritorialization. Deterritorialization, as a dislodging of geographic contexts and descriptors, takes different forms in each of the following chapters. It can be about presenting a world and presenting how to undo it. It can also be about posturing in one world and

moving an agenda forward in another, or passing through the codes of a given space outside the modalities that systemize control. Regardless, it is a leading mode of representative practice in the literature I consider here. Deterritorialization partitions territory. It moves boundaries. And so it has the potential to be generative since, by realigning territories, it can alter the overall map. The approach to deterritorialization I pursue in *Black Atlas* connects to the ways literature configures black flow (the currencies that traverse space—be they speech acts or the movements of cultures and capital) in nearly all of these texts. It also connects to what I suggest is the creative potential of deterritorialization. This is an important consideration in the subsequent chapters. African American authors and intellectuals understood that it was only through decoding dominant registers of power that they could find openings for different forms of actualization. The authors I examine used their writing to interrupt racist ordering systems. They used it to make contours for spaces of dissension. That is, they used it to yield new forms.

Spaces of Dissension

The term “spaces of dissension” is influenced by Michel Foucault’s early archaeological-styled work on discourse formation and the accidents or contradictions that keep a dominant discourse from ever being fully self-contained. These contradictions pose certain openings whereby new discourses can emerge.² As Foucault contends, spaces of dissension are always in subtle negotiation with the agendas of power. They belong to no specific domain, and they reconstitute in different places. In my treatments here, I read spaces of dissension and discursive deterritorialization as modes of a similar thing: I take them both to be interactive forms of a black aesthetic that is always in negotiation with other circulating discourses. But additionally, the body of literature I examine prompts a further recognition. African American literature shows that spaces of dissension are more than reactive, rhetorical gestures toward a real “out there.” They are not just declamatory expressions against a backdrop of material history. Rather, they are fields of invention that mediate different worlds.³ So instead of taking the production of such spaces to be inevitable cracks in the coherence of some pervasive ideology, or quasi-attached resistance acts that defy the sense of a system (as Foucault would suggest), I look at them as deliberate narrative strategies.

I say “narrative” because that is how they reach the modern reader—through the records of writing. But they could be constituted by any variety of practices: life practices, escape acts, performances. What African American literature shows is that spaces of dissension are produced on purpose, to effect new modes of figural representation: they are aesthetic figurations of a process. And this process is the business of feeling out the normative organizational codes that cohere in oppressive power systems, and then finding disruptions in, contradictions to, and corridors through these codes. This is what black flow is about. Its forms are virtually endless because it does as it makes.

Black Atlas traces a portion of this deterritorializing work geographically through nineteenth-century black literature since the literature itself is so invested in gauging and reformulating different exercises of power. It is literature that narrativizes different schemes of possibility for black positioning. For example, dispersed through the plotlines of Martin Delany’s serially released novel *Blake* (1859–62) is an instructional counter-atlas. In chapter after chapter, the author illustrates devices for black escape via land knowledge (moss growing on the north side of tree bark), river knowledge (crossing sites and the names of steamer captains), basic astronomy and navigational technology (lodestone and compass), and an array of performances in the gaps of white custom. All constitute the material of black passage out of slavery. All feed a black counter-discourse of place that takes shape against other cartographies.

Literature, I argue, serves as an important vehicle for those interested in understanding the operations of place as creative strategies for living. It gives purchase to places that fall outside of historiographical landscape accounts, spaces termed obsolescent, nonproductive, or generally removed from the scenes on which real modern action is believed to transpire. It also confers shape on spaces that go unrepresented in traditional cartography. Fiction poses questions about what is mappable and which sites cast shadows; it opens dwellings and it opens the spaces of memory. It writes not just known spaces or the negative aesthetics of dislocation. It makes a relationship between scenes of experience and worlds that can be imagined.

In writing this book, I have also had occasion to reflect on the ways space is about stories. Our stories are constantly augmented by the spaces we inhabit. The scales and vantages espoused in narratives are, in effect, maps of times embedded in space. Thadious Davis understands

this when at the beginning of *Southscapes* she writes, “approaching space as a site of struggle over value and meaning necessarily involves engagement with the structures underpinning and driving narration itself.”⁴ Geographical knowledge is produced through narrative, and as this book illustrates, narratives negotiate geographies of power. Moreover, stories yield insight into the ways users design their environment—even as these environments seem to determine them. Stories, I claim, are archives of movement and spatial representation. They are a circulating commons. “Every story,” Michel de Certeau writes, “is a travel story—a spatial practice.”⁵

And insofar as the readings that follow connect stories to spatial practice, I think it is necessary to consider, at least briefly, what space means in relation to place, especially because space is so frequently equated with freedom and place with enclosure. I mean that for all the possibility space ostensibly hosts, we associate it with emptiness. Space suggests extension—without a set course.⁶ Humanist geographers tend to interpret space as something abstracted from the particular.⁷ It is a framework for configurations shaped by time and somehow subject to scientific law. Computer scientist Paul Dourish argues that despite major gaps of legibility, space has come to be seen “as a natural fact—a collection of properties that define the essential reality of settings of action.”⁸ Processes flow through space, but it evades our scope of causality and ideas about closure. Its range makes it largely unmeasurable.

By contrast, place has a rather different set of associations. Place is attached to our sense of values, *genius loci*, and our experiences of boundedness. In terms influenced by Martin Heidegger, place constitutes the boundaries through which presencing can begin. Without such boundaries for presencing, there can be no being, no identity or identification.⁹ This distinguishes place from space’s infinite extension: place is closer to us and closer to our connections. From Henri Lefebvre to Fredric Jameson, space represents surface and synchronicity, a kind of vertical history. Place, on the other hand, contains times as practices; it spans a horizontal axis of forward experience and backward recollection. Sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that places reveal time by tradition (a point we will return to in the later chapters dealing with region).¹⁰ And Yi-Fu Tuan, whose work perhaps best defines the turn to humanistic geography beginning in the 1970s, emphasizes the ways individuals and people bond to settings, calling place “a center of felt value.”¹¹ Though geogra-

phers on the whole recognize place to be one of the field's most contested concepts, certain understandings come together as convention. Political geographers Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires state this paraphrastically: "Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed."¹² We superimpose our frameworks for meaning on place, and space, ostensibly, lays its claims on us.

Yet the literary histories I will examine here turn on an understanding that rejects the dominant dualism of space and place—namely, the presupposition of an absolute space from which place can be particularized, and the primacy of space over place. As I argue, such divisions tend toward a succession of reductions. This is particularly the case when it comes to examining represented spaces (spaces in discourse, spaces in art) because, among other things, spaces become legible to us by the ways they orient the human subject. We can read spaces if they enable structures of meaning, or if they present a world of sensations. Thus, we know space like we know place: by the practices it "presences." But my main concern is more simply that the division proves misleading. It unnecessarily foreshortens our views into the ways actual life spaces work, how they are made and get into circulation. And it leads to the equation of place with representation, which is actually another kind of closure, much like making time the particularization of historical occurrence.¹³

This leads to the issue of periodicity, something I do not want to leave aside in this preliminary discussion about geographical approaches. One point I should make at the outset is that I take the foregrounding of place as process to be part of the generative, critical work I see that is bringing forward a newer set of benchmarks for the organization of African American literature. These benchmarks are more geographically inferential than they are sequential. For example, recent scholarship in black diaspora and hemispheric studies has gone quite a distance to expose the kinds of exceptionalisms inherent in the project of containing literary aesthetics and discourse circulations in national forms (Carr, Gruesser, Gruesz, Kazanjian, Levander, Levine, Nwankwo).¹⁴ From another angle, works like Stephen Knadler's *Remapping Citizenship and Nation in African American Literature* and Ivy Wilson's *Specters of Democracy* trace within the aesthetics of citizenship a foundational reflexivity, a spatial indeterminacy that lies at the base of any projection of the national. Knadler, for example, looks at the border spaces between comparative cultures for alternative contexts to the meaning of democratic self-making. And

Wilson follows a pervasive shadow presence, an undercurrent that comes alive in the echoes and recesses of national form. For Robert S. Levine in *Dislocating Race and Nation*, an attention to the conspicuously fictive, provisional qualities of a national culture—what Levine aptly calls an “unknowingness” undergirding a culture’s assemblages—is just as valuable an opening for the modern critic as the forms of consensus that inform any “rising national literature” paradigm.¹⁵ And in the project of expanding an expressly African American frame of reference, Eric Gardner’s *Unexpected Places* illustrates the breadth of frequently overlooked textualities from the black periodical press that can be recovered (just as Gardner himself archivally recovers) by extending our views of a literary landscape to a much broader range of print publication venues.

In contrast, a sequentially driven, horizontal analysis of cultural history is generally configured to obscure from view events and scenes that do not point toward a given conclusion. Indeed, such arrangements hold together long-standing chronologies of African American aesthetics—whether it means the culmination of black agitation after slavery into a proto-civil rights movement, or a staging of the Harlem Renaissance as the flowering of the Great Migration from the rural South. These older historiographies, which I see no need to single out here, are by no means poor conceptualizations. On the contrary, they offer organized and compelling frames for symbolizing African American national experience. And they remain valuable for their conductive role in bringing forward an African American literary tradition—which at the present time of writing, I suppose, we are no longer inclined to view as a somehow singular tradition.¹⁶ But place-based histories frequently prove most interesting when they do not adhere to such chronographies—when they run aslant of temporal encapsulations. This is because geographical approaches can provide a wider aperture for inspecting counter-histories or counter-movements that do not directly lead to a given historical junction. Thick descriptions of place may be less valuable as an organizing motif for sequential-axis histories because of their inclusive nature. Yet the point remains that many paths in cultural expression do not work as designs leading to some determined end.

And so I begin from the claim that nineteenth-century African American literature is starkly geographic. The readings that follow intervene in major period debates about free soil, regionalist scales of production, Indian deterritorialization, internal diasporas, color line spatial-

ities, pan-American expansionism, and hemispheric circuitry. They do so because the literature I examine did so first. I also argue that African American literature reconfigures geographic contexts by intensifying sites of identification and sites of defamiliarization. It manipulates the signification of different geographies in ways that make openings for black aesthetic emergences.

Having previously addressed periodicity, I should also make a claim for genre. Most basically, the generic category of novel in the black rise of the novel begs qualification. (This is discussed in detail in the first chapter of this book.) The nineteenth-century black novel did not exist in any bracketed specificity. There was not an integrated sense of readership for it. Nor was there a more unified or nationalized commercial market to tap, as was the case during the rise of the novel in eighteenth-century England. Nineteenth-century black authors targeted multiple publics. For instance, Brown's first edition of *Clotel* was directed to a white, primarily British, antislavery readership, while Delany's *Blake*, published just a few years later, was written for a literate, largely urban, black magazine subscription base. And in as much as it appealed to different constituencies, the black novel borrowed from many conventions. It was, in fact, something closely intertwined with parallel innovations in other narrative forms, including autobiography, serial fiction, natural history, and political theory. *Black Atlas* takes all these genres to be constitutive of nineteenth-century African American literature. But it keeps in focus the era's most incisive and developed writing about place, writing found in the radical genre-bending work of a number of the period's important authors.

Finally, I think it is important to describe how I mobilize the subject of geography in this book: I pursue a characterization of place as something both material and invented, which is actually indicative of geography's reach. That is, the literary analyses that follow do not have to subtend geography's disciplinary function in some way, since geography is a practice already attached to both writing and human apportioning of landscape. As geographic historians have argued, geography is a compound field of study. What separates geography from related domains like geology or topography is that geography is about places as interconnected, interactive phenomena. It poses questions about the nature of places and the ways they are organized, not as contiguous sites but as interwoven spatial forms. Geographer Michael Curry argues that the his-