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“I Never Heard of Him”: Teaching Early African American Literature over the Past Twenty-Five Years

WILLIAM ANDREWS

WHEN I got my PhD in English in 1973 at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, the study of African American literature in colleges and universities across the United States was just getting into gear. As an English major in college in the mid to late 1960s, I had never had or even heard of a course in black American literature. In graduate school, however, I had a rare opportunity, a seminar with Blyden Jackson in 1970 called Black American Autobiography. That spring, while the campus was erupting in the wake of the invasion of Cambodia and the killings at Kent State and Jackson State, I first read the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave*, the *Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, a 1953 edition of Charlotte Forten's *Journals, Up From Slavery, Along This Way, The Big Sea, Dusk of Dawn, Black Boy*, and a handful of autobiographies from the 1950s and 1960s. It was a heady time.

Reading these classic texts of early African American literature changed my life. I don't mean it was some sort of road-to-Damascus experience. But that seminar and those texts had a powerful effect on my thinking about literature. I have often reflected since then that if I had only one course to take to introduce me to African American expressive culture, not just “literature” but the thought and expression of black Americans fortunate enough to have access to writing and print publication, then Blyden's seminar would have served the purpose wonderfully. To be sure, the course had its gaps. We did not read Olaudah Equiano, although he was available in a paperback edition. We did not read Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, although that book had come back into print a year earlier. But what I did read of the classic African American autobiographies—particularly those of the nineteenth century, by Douglass, Brown, Forten, and Booker T.

Washington—made a deep impression on me, which in turn shaped the way I have taught and studied African American as well as African American writing ever since. It may not seem like much of a discovery now, but for me, a young white graduate student studying in the South in the early 1970s, the dawning of African American writing on my nascent scholarly consciousness brought three crucial realizations into focus:

First, there was continuity, intellectual and formal continuity, in African American thinking and writing from their beginnings to the present time.

Second, forms and genres of writing, such as autobiography and the novel of purpose, that received little attention in most of my graduate classes were central to the evolution of African American literature.

Third, what I was being trained in—the study of American literature before World War I—took little cognizance of black American writing of the nineteenth century. What, I wondered, was I missing out on?

It was this sense that an important piece was missing in the story of the development of American literature that led me to start reading early African American literature in a semisystematic fashion late in graduate

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school. The more I read, the more I became convinced that early African American literature merited a critical and scholarly hearing, not only to enrich American literature, not only to provide historical grounding for twentieth-century African American literature, but also because those writers had produced compelling texts worthy of serious attention on their own account.

Of course, looking at early African American literature this way was regarded as rather curious to a lot of people I met in the academy in the 1970s and well into the 1980s. On the annual report I received a couple of years after I started my teaching career at Texas Tech University was the statement, "Needs to branch out from Charles Chesnutt." I was doing research for a book on Chesnutt at the time, and some of my senior colleagues in the English department thought I shouldn't concentrate so much of my energies on a minor writer. Fortunately I moved in 1977 to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where a year later another assistant professor arrived from Harvard to teach black literature in the Afro-American studies department. In Nellie McKay I finally found a colleague to whom I could talk about my interests in early African American writing without receiving the polite but perplexed reply that usually signaled noncomprehension or worse. Even in a first-rate research institution like Wisconsin I was often surprised to learn how little was known of African American history or expression before the contemporary era.

For instance, I attended a dinner party in Madison at the home of the chair of a humanities department, and we got into a discussion of the research that each of us was doing. When our host, a philosopher, asked me what my main subject was, I told him that I had just finished writing a book on the history of black autobiography in America from 1760, when the first black autobiography was published in this country, to 1865, when slavery was formally abolished. The man, interested, wanted to know how many autobiographies had been published by African Americans in that time. When I told him that there were about a hundred separately published autobiographies of blacks published in America before 1865, he seemed astounded. He wanted to know who some of these autobiographers were. "Well," I said, "the most famous one, of course, is Frederick Douglass." The philosopher paused, then confessed, "I never heard of him." I tried to tell him a little about Douglass and why he is worth reading. But as I talked, I was genuinely confounded that this highly educated man had

never even heard of the writer. This experience led me to teach Douglass and other early African American writers with greater vigor than I had before!

Our intellectual horizons are certainly opening up to the serious study of early African American writing today in ways unimaginable twenty years ago. In part this expansion is due to the sometimes celebrated, sometimes abominated, opening up of the canon of American literature. In 1980 I proposed to the Library of America, then just getting under way, that they publish a collection of slave narratives. I wrote in my proposal that "the slave narrative was the major literary mode of the early Afro-American storyteller." My statement didn't impress the Library of America then, but in 2000 they finally got around to publishing the book I recommended twenty years ago. *Slave Narratives*, coedited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and me, differs not that much in its contents from the collection I first proposed. Such narratives are now considered to be important both literarily and historically. Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* has become canonical; it is reprinted in full in the canon-shaping *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (Baym and Machlis), as are selections from Equiano and Jacobs, along with poems and a number of letters by Phillis Wheatley. The fourth edition of the canon-busting *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Lauter and Yarborough) gives more pages to Douglass than it does to Edgar Allan Poe. In addition to generous selections from Equiano's and Jacobs's narratives, *The Heath Anthology* also reprints materials from the fiction of William Wells Brown and Harriet E. Wilson. Imagine an American literature anthology doing that twenty years ago.

Clearly, then, the study and teaching of early African American literature in the American academy are thriving. In 1996, a year before the publication of both *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (Gates and McKay) and *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (Hill), a beautifully edited anthology of early African American literature was published under the title *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors in the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century*, edited expertly by Vincent Carretta of the University of Maryland, College Park. Carretta's copiously annotated edition of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* is now available in an inexpensive paperback edition from Penguin. I could list a number of other excellent separate editions of the work of prominent early African

American writers, such as Phillis Wheatley (ed. John Shields; ed. Julian Mason), George Moses Horton (ed. Joan Sherman), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (ed. Frances Smith Foster), Harriet E. Wilson (ed. Gates), Harriet Jacobs (ed. Jean Fagan Yellin), and Paul Laurence Dunbar (ed. Joanne Braxton). Specialized anthologies on nineteenth-century African American writers are available now (Appiah, *Early African-American Classics*), and anthologies of genres, such as Jerry Ward's *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African American Poetry*, provide strong groundings in pre-twentieth-century African American writing. Recently I received an e-mail from Christopher Mulvey, a professor of English and American studies at King Alfred's College, Winchester, England, announcing a timetable for the creation of an electronic hypertext edition of *Clotel*, which will soon be available on the Web and on CD-ROM. This edition is part of the African American Research Library. Another Internet resource for the teaching of early black literature is the Web site at UNC, Chapel Hill, *North American Slave Narratives*, on which a library of all slave narratives in English has been constructed; at present it has more than 250. This site also features two bibliographies of slave autobiographies, biographies, and fictitious slave narratives.

In addition to this explosion in the availability of important texts of African American literature, several thoughtful, well-researched, and informative critical books and essay collections have been published in the last ten years. A few are Frances Smith Foster's *Written by Herself*, Carla Peterson's "*Doers of the Word*": *African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830–1880*, John Ernest's *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature*, Robert S. Levine's *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, and Rafia Zafar's *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760–1870*. After the success of Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations* in 1993, it is hard for critics of American literature to ignore or dismiss early African American writing as sub-literary, documentary in nature, or concerned with issues and problems that were peripheral to what so-called mainstream American writers addressed.

In the 2002 MLA *Job Information List*, I saw announcements of positions in nineteenth-century African American literature at major Research I institutions, including the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the University of Pennsylvania. Ten years ago, having a

tenured or tenure-track person in early African American literature would have been regarded as a very low priority, if a priority at all, for most major college or university English departments in this country.

What has happened in the American academy to make the teaching and study of early African American literature more possible and more respectable than ever before? The most obvious factor in this change of intellectual climate is the expansion of the canon. People aren't just writing articles and books about earlier texts; they want to teach these texts too, and the market has responded. Ten years ago Charles Chesnutt's novels were available from university presses only. Now several big commercial houses have put his work in inexpensive paperback editions with good introductions, and the university presses are scrambling to publish novels Chesnutt couldn't get into print in his lifetime. We now have Chesnutt's journals, speeches, articles, and a healthy selection of his letters out in scholarly editions.

Another factor is that the idea of literature or literariness has been interrogated, deconstructed, and reconstructed again in ways that enable rather than hamper the study of early African American literature. Previous paradigms of literariness tended to enforce the canon of American literature that I grew up with in the 1960s and 1970s. They saw literature as written in a language different from that of the journalist, the political speech maker, the scientist, or the philosopher. Such paradigms argued that the connection of a text to its author on the one hand and its reader on the other was irrelevant to the text's meaning or value. In more recent years, however, critical analysis suggested that perhaps all concepts and paradigms of literary value are historically contingent. It's not that traditional paradigms of literary value are wrong or right or that, having deconstructed them, we now know what literature truly is and what it isn't. Instead we know, better than we did before, that ideas of literary value change and that the criteria and canons of literariness do not enjoy consensus in a culture but rather are in perpetual tension and conflict. This lack of consensus is not something to be lamented or explained away. "Teach the conflicts," Gerald Graff has urged us, and it's a good slogan, I think, when we consider teaching early African American literature, especially in relation to early American literature. I don't know of a better way to teach Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and his foundational *Notes on the State of Virginia* than to place those texts in dialogue

with Benjamin Banneker's critical analysis of Jefferson's texts in his open letter to Jefferson in August 1791. I also invite you, the next time you teach Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, to place it in dialogue with *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America*, first published in New London, Connecticut, in 1798. It's available in *North American Slave Narratives* and *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, second edition. If there was ever a contemporary of Franklin who set out to live by Franklin's code, it was this African-born slave who purchased his own freedom and set about fashioning himself into a man of property and middle-class dignity. Venture Smith's story constitutes a fascinating commentary on how caste affects a black man's attempt to enact the Franklin myth of class mobility in early America.

It's possible today, as never before, to read early African American and early white American texts in this kind of dialogue, because our understanding of literature and of literary history proceeds now from a greater cautiousness in making cultural generalizations about value and from a more inclusive grasp of the dynamics of culture at particular moments in history.

Literariness, I tell my students, isn't so much what's in the text as what's in our minds when we read the text. Today, when we read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, we don't cringe at the melodramatic scenes and sentimental language that thirty years ago restricted this slave narrative to the category of the subliterate. We explain to our students how the melodrama works, how the sentimental is invoked and then turned to social or political purpose, how the Gothic allowed slave narrators like Jacobs and Douglass to convey to their white readers the enormity of slavery and sexual exploitation. My approach is mainly functionalist: I'm more interested in what a text does and in what it seems to have been intended to do than I am in assessing, let alone evaluating, what it is. Thus in response to a distinguished colleague's question a few years ago as to whether one can find in early African American writing any "good literature," my reply was, "Good for what?"

Although I believe that early African American slave narratives and conversion accounts are every bit as literary as, say, Anglo-American captivity narratives or spiritual autobiographies, I can't recall during my years of studying African American autobiography ever being particularly curious about whether these

books were "good literature." My aim has been to help recover a part of cultural history—the formative history of African American autobiographical expression—in order to find out what these autobiographers thought and felt and said about themselves, especially about their identities as black people and as Americans, and their reasons for writing or dictating autobiographies. My assumption has been that most early black autobiographers didn't think they were writing literature and weren't trying to compose "good literature" at all—which frankly is what makes them and their work particularly intriguing to me.

The main reason we don't have to treat early African American writing anymore as simply a foreground to the real literature that emerges in the 1920s is that we have been presented in the last twenty years with compelling alternative ways to conceive of and read those earlier writers.

Foremost among the pioneers of new ways of thinking about early African American literature have been the feminist and womanist scholars and teachers who showed us how powerfully gender is inflected in that literature. Among their groundbreaking volumes are *Black Women Novelists* by Barbara Christian; *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*, which was edited by Gloria T. Hull and others and which Nellie McKay is expanding for a new edition; and Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Carby gave us the first theoretically informed materialist reading of the rise of a black female narrative tradition in African American literature. She historicized nineteenth-century women's texts (white as well as black) more thoroughly than had been done before and was one of the first to urge that we read the work of Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Nella Larsen through the triple lens of race, gender, and class ideologies. Her book also took one of the most thoughtful revisionist looks at stereotypes in early African American literature, particularly the stereotype of the mulatta. Revisionist readings of stereotypes in African American literature, from the work of Sterling Brown to the work of Houston Baker, Trudier Harris, and Eric Lott, have given us new tools with which to estimate the form and function of early African American texts.

Another important trend in African Americanist criticism in the 1980s and 1990s was the rise of cultural intertextuality. Two critics who became identified with this development were Houston Baker and

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Beginning with *The Journey Back* and continuing in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Baker articulated a criticism that proceeds from a kind of structuralist assumption that African American literary texts are mapped by “distinctive black American lexical and conceptual fields” that are grounded in expressive culture and that give words like *Africa*, *freedom*, and *white* special resonance and significance in African American texts (*Journey* 20). Since 1980 Baker has shown in various books and articles that African American literature is as much orally and aurally based as it is text-based. Thus, to reckon fully with African American writing, of whatever period, one must recognize it in the context of a larger, multivalent, and perpetually dynamic black cultural discourse. Setting key texts of early African American literature such as the narratives of Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs in what he called “the blues matrix” of African American culture (*Blues* 3–4), Baker built a prototype for an approach that is now routinely pursued by those who do cultural studies.

The study of vernacular traditions that inform African American literature was certainly not new when Baker began to advocate it, but Baker, and then Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*, argued that the vernacular constitutes not simply the creative subsoil of African American literature but also the cultural foundation on which that literature rests. To read the literature culturally is to realize the vast intertext that interweaves the writing into the preaching, the singing, the signifying, and so forth. In the process of presenting this argument in *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates made the arresting contention that there was an intertextual relation among writers of the late-eighteenth-century slave narrative that indicated a literary self-consciousness previously undetected. His elaborate analysis of the trope of the talking book in early African American texts provided an instructive instance of how they could be read as part of their writers’ expressive community. This awareness in turn made it easier to conceive of early African American literature in ways we typically associate with later African American literature—as composed of groups or schools of writers who read one another, comment on and critique one another, parody one another, rewrite one another, and thus develop affinities and a sense of history that we can call a tradition.

New work on narrative in the last twenty years, launched by Robert Stepto’s *From behind the Veil*, the many studies of early autobiography, particularly slave

narratives; and the thoroughly historicized studies of the novel, from Bernard Bell’s *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* in 1987 through Lee Greene’s *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel’s First Century*, have also influenced our conception and teaching of early African American literature. Probably the single biggest difference between that excellent anthology of the early 1970s, Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon’s *Black Writers of America*, and the Norton and Riverside anthologies of the late 1990s is that in Barksdale and Kinnamon the expository prose of early black literature, the essays and speeches, gets three times as much space as the narrative prose. In the Norton and Riverside anthologies, narrative prose gets double the space that is accorded to expository prose in the pre-1865 period of African American literary history. Why the change? The work of various critics in this field during the past twenty-five years, many of whom I have already mentioned, has shown us ways to read, interpret, and teach these narrative texts that we didn’t have before. And now that we have so many fine individual texts of early African American narrative literature, both fiction and autobiography, it is no surprise that narrative now dominates over exposition in both teaching and research.

What I know about teaching early African American literature is based largely on my personal experience in the classroom and on the work I’ve done editing pre-World War I African American writing. There are a few ways I would like my teaching to develop in the future. I would like to study and explore how to teach this subject from the standpoint of social, economic, and class consciousness. I would like to explore how class became an issue in African American literature. It’s pervasive in the early texts—in Equiano, Venture Smith, Douglass, Jacobs, Keckley, Harper, Dunbar, and Chesnutt. While literacy and writing are often treated as signifiers of freedom and literary authority in African American writing, they are also powerful class markers. I’d be interested to know how other teachers have taught class issues in African American literature.

Another interesting issue is the profession of authorship. I often teach Wheatley as a highly career-oriented poet with a strong sense of profession. The problems of professional authorship beset a wide range of writers in one way or another, from Jacobs and Harriet Wilson in the mid-nineteenth century to Chesnutt and Dunbar in the early twentieth. I also

think there is a link between African American conversion narratives and the rise of the profession of authorship. Profession of faith often leads to profession of authorship, after all.

A third interesting question—though maybe more for graduate students than undergraduates—is what we mean when we call a literature early. And where does early African American literature end and modern African American literature begin?

Perhaps these questions can serve as a prelude to further discussion and more teaching of this field.

Note

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5. I asked if he had . . . torch; he said he disliked torches and always read . . . meters by . . . light of . . . match. 6. I remarked that if there was . . . leak in . . . gaspipe there might be . . . explosion while he was reading . . . meter. 7. He said, 'As . . . matter of . . . fact, there was . . . explosion in . . . last house I visited; and Mr Smith, . . . owner of . . . house, was burnt in . . . face.' 25. Peter Piper, . . . student in . . . professor's college, asked him why he refused to talk to . . . press. 26. We're going to . . . tea with . . . Smiths today, aren't we? 27. He got . . . job in . . . south and spent . . . next two years doing . . . work he really enjoyed. 28. It is . . . pleasure to do . . . business with such . . . efficient organization. 29. . . . day after . . . day passed without . . . news, and we began to lose hope. You will need five past progressives and three simple pasts. ask come dance grin hold not dance order play throw. On the dance floor half a dozen couples (1) themselves around. Most of them (2) cheek to cheek, if dancing is the word. 3. Complete the sentences using these pairs of verbs. Use the past simple in one space and the past continuous in the other. come - show get "go hope - give live - spend look - see start - check in 1. Just as I was. into the bath all the lights "off. 2. I "to go away this weekend, but my boss me some work that I have to finish by Monday. 3. Thomas explained that he had gone/ went home early because he felt ill. The waiter took my plate away before I had finished/ finished eating. 10 Jane didn't want any dinner. She had eaten/ ate already. American literature owes its revolutionary traditions, of course, to the War of Independence. And it owes much to the traditions of pioneering in the free lands of West. The people who grew up under the conditions of the frontier spirit handed down the traditions that produced such men as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and such poets and writers as Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Jack London and Ernest Hemingway. 3. What was the main occupation of the population before the American Revolution? 4. How many people lived in the colony ten years after landing of the "Mayflower" Pilgrims? 5. Where did literature of the New American nation appear? 6. When and where was the first American University founded? 7. What were the first books of the colony about?