

Introduction

IN SEARCH OF BLACK READERS

No scene from African American literary history is more familiar than that of Frederick Douglass's learning to read. In his 1845 autobiography, Douglass describes how, when he was a young slave, his mistress taught him the alphabet and how to spell basic words. When her husband learned what she was doing, he promptly insisted she stop Douglass's lessons, telling her that "it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read." But rather than putting an end to Douglass's education, Mr. Auld's words of warning to his wife only solidified Douglass's determination to learn to read. "If you teach that nigger . . . how to read, there will be no keeping him," Auld told his wife. "It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself," Auld continued, "it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." According to Douglass, "these words sank deep into [his] heart"; they led him to understand that "the white man's power to enslave the black man" was located in his ability to maintain the black man's ignorance and his illiteracy. Without the assistance of his mistress but armed with the discovery that "what [his master] most dreaded, that I most desired," Douglass designed ingenious ways to continue his education surreptitiously.¹ Although the Aulds watched him vigilantly to prevent his learning to read, Douglass nevertheless contrived ways to "steal" literacy, first

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from poor and hungry white boys in the neighborhood in exchange for bread and then by challenging his associates in a Baltimore shipyard to write better than he; in this way, he deceived them into demonstrating their abilities and then absorbed all that they knew.² Despite Douglass's confirmation that there were times when he felt that "learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing," his life story is a testimony to his belief that literacy was "the pathway from slavery to freedom."³ While still enslaved, Douglass began a "sabbath school" where, without the knowledge of his master, he quietly taught "my loved fellow-slaves how to read."⁴ Once he was free, his career as a successful abolitionist lecturer and journalist was predicated on his literary and oratorical skills.

Let me compare Douglass's antebellum experience of learning to read with another relatively familiar scene of reading and writing from African American history: the tremendous thirst for education demonstrated by freed slaves in the years following the Civil War. Before the war, every southern state except Tennessee prohibited the education of slaves. After their emancipation, the freedpeople's desire for instruction was enormous, and they enthusiastically grasped opportunities to read and write openly and legally. "Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education," wrote Booker T. Washington of the post-Civil War atmosphere in the South. "It was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn."⁵ Although lack of funds prevented the Freedman's Bureau from itself establishing schools for ex-slaves, it coordinated the activities of the many northern benevolent and missionary societies that turned their attention to the education of ex-slaves after the Civil War. Working with organizations such as the American Missionary Association, much-needed schools were established throughout the South. Most of these schools were taught by middle-class white women, the majority of whom were from New England and received their commission from a northern freedman's aid society. W. E. B. Du Bois would later describe the arrival of the northern teachers who traveled to the South to teach the newly freed slaves as the "crusade of the New England school-ma'am," whose mission was "planting New England schoolhouses among the white and black of the South."⁶

These scenes—the first of an individual slave covertly learning and teaching others to read, the second of the great masses of former slaves being educated in schoolhouses established and run by an army of New England school teachers—constitute the most familiar representations of African American literacy in the nineteenth century. But while they are the most familiar, they are not the only examples of African American reading and writing from this period. Less well-known are stories of the efforts of free blacks in the urban North to acquire and use their literacy, or of the channels through which they gained access to and distributed books and other printed texts.⁷ Although technically free, this population also faced systematic resistance to their efforts to gain and exercise their literacy. Like their enslaved brethren in the South, however, they recognized that reading was a potentially transformative activity, not only for individuals but for society as a whole. Despite their exclusion from institutions of formal education and their limited access to literary works in the first decades of the nineteenth century, despite economic conditions and social systems that were designed, in the words of Frances Smith Foster, to “repress and dehumanize, if not destroy black people,” free blacks in the urban North realized the urgency of creating their own opportunities to become readers and institute systems through which to exchange and produce literature.⁸ At the beginning of the nineteenth century they began establishing societies to promote literacy and to ensure that, as a group, they would not be excluded from the benefits associated with reading and literary study. Their literary societies were both large and small; they planned reading lists and provided regular opportunities for black writers to publish original literary creations, both orally and in print. Members ensured the development of their literary skills by supporting one another while also maintaining an environment where ideas could be openly discussed and honestly critiqued. In fostering the development of a literate population, literary societies furthered the evolution of a black public sphere and a politically conscious society.

To better understand the various ways black Americans have acquired and used literacy, we must further complicate our understanding of early African American literacy by considering the literary activities of free blacks and the legacy of the antebellum institutions that they built to promote reading and share texts. Of this group of black

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readers, we have heard almost nothing; they have been, for the most part, forgotten. Despite the enticing preliminary work of historian and librarian Dorothy Porter, whose 1936 article in *The Journal of Negro Education* presented a sizable list of what she called Negro Literary Societies, little scholarly attention has been paid to these organizations or to the readership that they cultivated and sustained.⁹ While scholarship in the last decades of the twentieth century made the reading practices of enslaved African Americans increasingly visible, the reading practices of free blacks in the antebellum North and the literary activities of black Americans generally after the Civil War have remained largely invisible.

Students of African American literature, history, and culture have come to know that “invisible things are not necessarily ‘not there,’” as Toni Morrison recently put it; “certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves.”¹⁰ Such, I argue, is the case with the historical invisibility of black readers, especially in the early nineteenth century. There are a series of complex and inter-related reasons for their invisibility that have as much to do with recent trends in scholarship on African American history and literature as with the difficulty of conducting research on early nineteenth-century subjects, especially those concerning people of color. To introduce my study of the literary societies and reading practices of African Americans between 1830 and 1940 I will discuss why some early black readers and the literary productions that they created have remained invisible and then suggest some of the archaeological processes through which they can be made visible.

Much has been written about the absence of literacy skills among African Americans, from the historical past when legal codes prohibited slaves from reading and writing to the present when media reports inform us of the deficient reading skills of black youth. While the history and continuing ramifications of black illiteracy are undeniable, assumptions about the illiteracy of African Americans have prevented us from seeing what is also undeniable—their literate practices. The legalized withholding of literacy left a pernicious legacy that even the desire for education exhibited by ex-slaves in the years following Emancipation could not immediately erase. According to United States Census data, by 1880 70 percent of the black population was illiterate; by 1910 30 percent of the black population remained illit-

erate. What these and other figures document is the slow but steady rise in black literacy in the United States in the decades of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. But today it is the persistent weakness of the literacy skills in African American communities that is most often cited and, even more problematically, assumed. Contemporary studies continue to emphasize the deficient functional-literacy skills of segments of the black population and point to their low test scores as proof of the “traditional” weakness of literacy skills in the black community.

Assumptions about African American illiteracy continue to play a part in preventing the widespread recognition of the complexity of the history of African American literacy and literary interaction; but this has not alone been responsible for rendering invisible the literate legacy of black Americans. While in recent years black verbal performance arts, from folktales and proverbs to testifying and rapping, have received wide recognition, the singular identification of African American culture as “oral in nature” has helped to push aside facts surrounding other language uses—especially those related to reading and writing. African Americans as a people and African American literary studies as a discipline have defined themselves in terms of their relationship to oral, or vernacular, culture. Denied direct forms of written expression, black Americans turned to traditional vernacular forms to communicate their sorrow and their hopefulness and deflect their anger at their subordination. In addition to sermons, folktales, and jokes, forms of music like spirituals, work songs, and the blues have historically been central to African American expression. Frederick Douglass noted the importance of spirituals to the black community in his 1845 autobiography; his observation would be revoiced in 1903 by W. E. B. Du Bois, who located spirituals, which he called the “sorrow songs,” at the center of American history and culture, calling them the “singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”¹¹ During the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s there was a revival of interest in other vernacular forms that influenced contemporary black oral and written expression. This interest in and revaluing of the verbal arts historically performed by African Americans led, in the 1980s and 1990s, to the compelling definition and delineation of the black vernacular as a category of African American literary study. Although this approach has been

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supported by a wide range of scholars, most notable is the work of Houston Baker Jr., and Henry Louis Gates Jr., which has illuminated the importance of the black vernacular to African American literature and cultural production.¹² This work has been critical and salutary. But celebrations of the black oral tradition and black vernacular have also unwittingly undermined historical evidence that points to a long and complex history of African Americans' literary interaction, not only as readers of the "canon" of European and European American authors but as creators and readers of their own literature as well.

Another reason African American readers have been forgotten is that the work of contemporary scholars has been directed toward the experiences of those who, before the Civil War, were legislated into illiteracy. Although African American expressive art forms developed in the context of a diversity of experiences, the attention of scholars of African American history and literature has largely been arrested by the experience of the southern slave and the fugitive slave narrative. The complex rhetorical aims of the slave narrative and the individual and political importance of this form have led African Americanists to situate the slave narrative as the founding paradigm of black literary production in the nineteenth century, with the slave narratives of two individuals, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, serving as representatives of the form. While slave narratives generally, and these two texts specifically, are crucial representatives of one aspect of African American literary production in the nineteenth century, the danger of privileging them is that we risk overlooking the many other forms of literary production that coexisted alongside slave narratives. The same years that saw the greatest popularity of slave narratives, for instance, were also the years that free blacks were first organizing literary societies; these societies encouraged and supported a great variety of writing, much of which found its way into print in the early newspapers and periodicals directed toward an African American readership. The fiction and poetry, autobiographies, histories, appeals, and other forms of writing published in these and other sources, as well as the writing that was published by religious presses or was self-published, are important forms of black literary expression that have been largely overshadowed by scholarly attention to the slave narrative. In order to recover more fully the history of African American cultural production, with all of its nuances and complexity, we must

be open to replacing our notion of a singular black literary tradition by attending to the many, diverse elements that form the groundwork of any tradition.

The paucity of extant records that might help us to recover the complex literary landscape of African Americans in the nineteenth century certainly complicates this work. By and large, what has been preserved as the “official” record of American literary history does not include the literature or literary activities of African Americans. With few exceptions, the words African Americans did write were not valued by libraries, museums, archives, or other institutions charged with the responsibility of preserving literary and cultural material. Although African Americans did realize the importance of and assumed responsibility for recording and preserving their own cultural artifacts, precious few of these have managed to survive. The task of locating these widely scattered fragments of African American literary and cultural history, especially in the antebellum period, is itself daunting, and the process of piecing them together presents its own particular challenges. Given these difficulties—conspicuously missing dates, identities of main characters, and other details that are the essence of “reliable” historical data—any narrative drawing on these sources and trying to tell the story of nineteenth-century African American literacy will of necessity be but a contribution to a larger enterprise.

Inquiry into the history of black readers is further complicated by the difficulty of tracking down evidence of so elusive a practice as reading. How can we know or historically document the act of reading, an activity that in our own day and age, at least, is mainly practiced in silent and individual ways that seem impossible to access? Moreover, if it is hard to know contemporary readers, how can we come to know past readers and assess their habits and the value that they assigned to the practice of reading? As Carl Kaestle notes in his introduction to *Literacy in the United States*, the very prospect of looking for readers is daunting in part because it must include the complex project of deciphering literacy, which surrounds us but proves difficult to measure and assess. Moreover, it is even more difficult to trace the meanings of literacy in earlier decades, since literacy, like all historical practices, changes with time and is defined differently in different historical epochs.¹³ Even if we could agree on one precise definition of

literacy, the task of delineating and portraying the American reading public of the last two centuries, let alone the African American reading public of the same period, would still present itself as a tremendous challenge. Some European American readers left elaborate paper trails to document their reading; diary accounts, subscription data from popular magazines, and the records of particular institutions, such as the Book of the Month Club, have proved effective ways of tracking the literary practices of many Americans. Sources that reflect the reading practices and literary habits of African Americans, however, especially in the early nineteenth century, are relatively few and scattered. What we have to do, I would argue, is to realize the importance of considering past reading practices by reconstructing them through what Roger Chartier has called the “sparse and multiple traces” that remain.¹⁴ These readers existed, and their trails are important—and possible—to establish.

A number of factors make this a favorable intellectual moment in which to undertake the project of recovering forgotten African American readers and reconstructing the various processes by which their reading practices were shaped. At this writing, scholarship on print culture and the History of the Book continues to emerge rapidly. Hailed by Robert Darnton in 1989 as an important new discipline, the History of the Book has evolved into a field concerned with the “social and cultural history of communication by print.”¹⁵ Its purpose, broadly stated, is to “understand how ideas were transmitted through print and how exposure to the printed word affected the thought and behavior of mankind during the last five hundred years.”¹⁶ Emphasizing their belief that “literature is a human institution, part of a matrix of social and cultural forces from which it emerges, rather than a pure or abstract idea, independent of history,” historians of the book have shifted their attention away from writers and the texts they produce to readers and the context in which literary texts are received and read.¹⁷ The wide definition of exactly what constitutes the History of the Book has also necessitated that its practitioners abandon the boundaries that have traditionally divided the disciplines. In addition to cultural history and literary studies, their work has relied upon a variety of theoretical lenses necessary for understanding the epistemological and social conditions in a print culture. For these reasons it is a field that is particularly receptive to uncovering the many diverse

communities of readers that have simultaneously existed and exposing the contexts of the actual reading practices of particular groups at particular times.

Although studies in the History of the Book have long been prominent in Europe, American scholars did not energetically enter the field until early in the 1980s; at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has become a vital field in the United States. Centers for the study of the History of the Book, like those established by Pennsylvania State University and the University of Wisconsin, as well as the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP), formed in 1992, promise generous support for the development of scholarly inquiry into every imaginable aspect of book history. In conjunction with the American Antiquarian Society, Cambridge University Press is compiling a five-volume series on the History of the Book in the United States, a project that will certainly raise new questions about book history in the United States even as it answers old ones. Principal among the new directions introduced by these questions will be increased attention to the ways underrepresented cultures have interacted with books as both readers and writers. A number of recent developments attest to the extent to which scholarship of this sort is already vibrant in the United States, especially for the period after 1876. At the forefront of this research is the Center for the Study of Print Culture in Modern America, begun in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1992. A cooperative effort between the University of Wisconsin and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the center is dedicated to “stimulating research into the print culture collections of groups whose gender, race, occupation, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (among other factors) has historically placed them on the periphery of power but who used print sources as one of the few means of expression available to them.”¹⁸ In 1995 the center hosted its first conference, appropriately called “Print Culture in a Diverse America.” A volume of selected papers from that conference, published in 1998, has been widely praised for demonstrating the scholarly shift of attention in the United States from the “cultural impact of reading and publishing the works of well-known European authors” to “exploring lesser known, but still important, aspects of America’s diverse populace.”¹⁹ As Wayne Wiegand, codirector of the Center for the Study of Print Culture in Modern America, rightly points out, primary sources that document

the print culture history of underrepresented groups remain “seriously understudied”; at the same time, however, Wiegand’s own work attests to the fine scholarship that is already being done in the United States to document the ways minority cultures have interacted with books, as readers, writers, and publishers.²⁰

If we are to gain further access to and understanding of the literate and literary practices of African Americans, we must be willing to look in new directions at the various reading cultures that existed in black communities. By slightly shifting our focus and adopting new methods of inquiry we will better understand the diverse components of the African American literary tradition and better appreciate the impact that black readers and the institutions they created to support their literacy and their literature had on the development of American and African American literary traditions. Much current research on reading examines the interpretive practices of readers and the nature of these practices across contexts—particularly the university and other institutions associated with a literary canon. New directions in the study of black readers and reading need, however, to decenter formal education as the primary institutional force behind the reading of literature. Historically, black Americans have been denied access to formal educational opportunities, and the public education that has been provided for them has been of inferior quality. They have therefore created and relied on other institutions to supplement and sustain their literary education. To uncover a more nuanced and more accurate history of their interaction with literature, we must look beyond the venues traditionally associated with reading and literary discussions and ask a series of broader questions: What institutions have centered the literary experiences of African Americans? Where has literacy been practiced and literature enjoyed, discussed, and debated? How have literary texts been acquired and exchanged?

These questions will expand our perspective beyond the classroom to a series of nonacademic venues like churches, private homes, and beauty parlors that have, since the nineteenth century, been sites for the dissemination of literacy and for literary interaction for members of the black community traditionally excluded from the nation’s elite liberal arts colleges and universities. They will shift our attention away from the records of the institutions traditionally associated with the dissemination of print, like public libraries and bookstores, to the

records of less familiar, less formal institutions such as reading rooms and itinerant booksellers. The exemplary story of Kathryn Johnson, a black woman who began her life as an itinerant bookseller in 1922 after returning from a post abroad with the YMCA during World War I, illustrates the importance of such a reorientation. Johnson traveled throughout the north- and southeastern United States selling books out of the back seat of a Ford coupe. By 1925 she had covered ten states and some twenty-five thousand miles in two and a half years and sold over five thousand volumes of books, one hundred volumes at a time, since that was all that she could fit in the back seat of the car. Johnson's mission was to sell books by and about African Americans to an exclusively black clientele; what she called her two-foot bookshelf—"two feet of books," she proclaimed, "that you and all the colored people ought to read"—included works by W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, Benjamin Brawley, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Silas Floyd. Her sales trips, during which she regularly received permission to address the congregation at local churches, shed light on one of the ways literacy and literature were disseminated in black communities in the first decades of the twentieth century. So too does her understanding of her occupation and her success. "I am not first of all selling books," Johnson explained. "I am first of all creating a desire for reading. . . . I knew the books that would help the Negro to understand his honorable place in the United States. The question was how to get him to buy them. . . . I knew the man or woman must handle the book, see what was in it, before he would put money down for it. So I bought my Ford and became an itinerant bookseller."²¹

What is confirmed by Kathryn Johnson's story is that evidence attesting to the activities of black readers may come from unexpected sources. It also suggests that to understand black readers, then and now, we must be willing to expand our notion of the very definition of literature and literacy, and their functions in different historical periods. Late twentieth-century definitions that associate literature with imaginative writing, usually novels and poetry, are incompatible with the "literature" that Johnson was disseminating to her readers in 1925; Johnson made explicit her understanding that her "buyers [didn't] want fiction. They look at such a book and say 'it's only a story,' and put it down. They want to spend their earnings for reality."²² Further-

more, Johnson's understanding of what her buyers wanted is incompatible with antebellum African American definitions of what constituted a literary text. Although fiction and poetry were included in early African Americans' definition of literature, so too were treatises, declarations, letters, appeals, and, perhaps most significantly, journalism of every variety. As Carla Peterson notes in the introduction to her study of nineteenth-century black women's literature, this expansive definition of literature includes "genres and texts that would be considered either 'nonliterary' by modernist criteria . . . or 'minor' by historical standards, and thus unworthy of serious attention."²³ Lack of serious attention to these texts and genres as literature in the twentieth century has made it possible to overlook their importance in the nineteenth century. One reason scholars have posited an African American literary tradition as a monolithic entity that begins with the slave narrative is that they have not valued these other literary forms. It has seemed equally reasonable to assume that because most black people were not in a position to own bound books, they did not read. But rather than bound books, newspapers were the primary sites of publication and sources of literary reading for African Americans in the nineteenth century. Their letters, essays, poems, and narratives—all considered "literature" according to contemporary definition—appeared regularly, not only in the pages of abolitionist publications like William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* and their own African American newspapers but also in periodicals normally reserved for white writers. These texts survive as both a remarkable record of the wide variety of writing done by early black Americans and evidence of what they were reading as well.

An openness to reconsiderations of early nineteenth-century literary history provides opportunities to chart definitions of literacy we may have overlooked in the past. The slave narratives of particular individuals, especially Frederick Douglass, have been mined for their linkage of literacy with, in Douglass's words, "the pathway from slavery to freedom." Recently, black feminist scholars have questioned the absoluteness of the "literacy equals freedom" paradigm, opposing (among other things) its failure to distinguish between the conditions and results of literacy for men and women.²⁴ My research on nineteenth-century literary societies adds to this a concern for the emphasis in the Douglass "model" of black literacy on reading as a solitary or individ-

ual activity with an explicit directive to write as its ultimate goal. As the activities of a few of the literary societies I explore will illustrate, some literary coalitions did encourage their members to practice their literacy individually and to themselves become writers. But others encouraged their members to develop different relationships with texts. Not every member of African American literary societies wanted to be a writer or enjoyed an unmediated relationship with texts; some black Americans participated actively in the activities sponsored by African American literary societies without ever acquiring the ability to read or write for themselves. The limited definition of black literacy associated with Frederick Douglass fails to take into account the extent to which the spoken word offered many black Americans access to written texts. Many early nineteenth-century literary societies endorsed a broader notion of oral literacy that did not valorize the power of formal or individualized literacy over communal knowledge.

The fact that reading in early black communities was not always an individual enterprise, and that not every reader enjoyed an unmediated relationship to the text, may not correspond with Frederick Douglass's experience of literacy but it helps us to make sense of the experiences of other early nineteenth-century "readers" like Douglass's wife, Anna Murray Douglass, who technically never learned to read or write but was an active member of the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society when she and Frederick met. Ironically, he was a slave who could read and write. She was free, but essentially illiterate, and would remain so throughout her life, even as her husband made his way through and achieved prominence in the world of American letters.²⁵ Without the ability to write letters or otherwise create a lasting record of her experience, Anna Murray Douglass left little information about her life, and there is no record that explains her experience as an illiterate member of the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society. Without being herself "literate," we can only imagine that Anna Douglass must have nevertheless derived pleasure from the texts she "read" and discussed, and her literary activities must have sharpened her understanding of the power and various uses of the word. The riddle of Anna Douglass's lifelong illiteracy and her membership in a literary society has long troubled scholars of African American history and literature, to this day introducing a challenging series of questions that are not easily answered. But these are the

very questions that will stimulate new ways of looking at the multiple uses of literature and the various literary situations that existed in nineteenth-century African American communities.

To this point, I have noted the importance of changing our focus from formal to informal institutions, official to unofficial venues, familiar to unfamiliar definitions of literacy. One last important step we need to take is to dispense with the idea of a monolithic black community and replace it with a more accurate and historically informed understanding of a complex and differentiated black population. With few exceptions, the Africans who were brought to the United States were slaves; most would remain enslaved, as would their descendants, until Emancipation. In the years around and the decades following the Revolutionary War, however, many African Americans living in the North did gain their freedom. While the South grew more and more dependent on slave labor for its economic viability in the first decades of the nineteenth century, emancipation continued in the North. Once freed, African Americans clustered in northern cities; as the recent scholarship of Gary Nash, James Oliver Horton and Lois Horton, Emma Lapsansky, Julie Winch, and others has documented, they formed strong communities, sustained families, and built institutions through which to voice their desire for the rights and privileges of citizenship.²⁶

In the past, the importance and significance of the free black population has been both overlooked and undervalued. One reason for this is that their experience was assumed to be that of a privileged few. It is true that the free black community—located primarily in the urban North and in the South's port cities like Charleston and New Orleans—never amounted to more than 10 percent of the black population in the United States before the Civil War. But the legitimacy of this group and the importance of their activities must not be discounted or dismissed because of its relatively small size. Recent scholarship has shown us the complexity of African American culture in the North and the diversity of the communities of free blacks that formed there before the Civil War. This work should dispel once and for all what Willard Gatewood, writing in 1990, called the “myth that black society is [or ever was] a homogeneous mass without significant and illuminating distinctions in background, prestige, attitudes, behavior, power, and culture.”²⁷ It is true that the common experience of op-

pression and racial discrimination brought blacks of different classes together in unexpected ways; although some black Americans found various degrees of distinction within their own communities, these same individuals were equally scorned by the white population. It is nonetheless very important to realize that it has never been possible to speak of *the* black experience, and attempts to do so constitute a gross oversimplification of African American history. Equally detrimental and inaccurate are attempts to romanticize the solidarity or common experience of the black community. While examples abound of the ways that black Americans have been unified in their demand for civil rights, their different experiences and various cultural locations have made them widely and at times bitterly divided; these internal divisions and intraracial tensions demand attention. Instead of fixating on a fictional notion of black solidarity, we must try to learn all we can about what African Americans have shared as well as where they have differed; an openness to difference will move scholarship on African American history, literature, and culture to more complex and, ultimately, more important ground.

In addition to dispelling the myth of the monolithic black community, we need to reassess and complicate our ideas about what has constituted resistance for African Americans given their diverse experiences. Since the 1960s and with the rise of such disciplines as African American studies, ethnic studies, and women's studies, the impulse to document the diverse strategies of resistance employed by traditionally underrepresented groups in response to the oppression of the dominant group has been central to the research agenda of African Americanists. In looking for the overt and the hidden forms of resistance to which black Americans turned to challenge white power structures, scholars like Herbert Aptheker, Eugene Genovese, Eric Foner, and Robin D. G. Kelley have been motivated by the need to counter portrayals of black Americans as the silent and inert victims of discrimination and oppression. The result of their work is the recognition that acts of resistance among ordinary, working-class black people have taken a variety of forms, some of which have been more visible than others. Studies of black slave communities have been pivotal to reshaping our understanding of the ways in which slaves performed acts of resistance on an everyday basis; although subtle and hidden from their masters, these covert acts shaped all of antebellum southern

society, politics, and daily life. In addition to expanding the very notion of what constitutes an act of resistance and raising our awareness of the ways that the “daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts” of working-class African Americans in the Jim Crow South “often informed organized political movements,” Kelley has also identified multiple forms of resistance employed by black youth in the last decade of the twentieth century to create a space for themselves within the institutions and social relations that dominate their lives.²⁸ Recent scholarship on contemporary cultural productions such as rap and hip hop demonstrates the same incentive to portray the extent to which members of the black working class, although seemingly powerless and outside official structures of power, have nevertheless devised ways to participate in the political struggles that surround them, to challenge their oppression, and to express their subjectivity.

By expanding our definition of resistance to include its previously unrecognized forms, we have transformed the experience of slaves and the black working and lower classes into the paradigm for understanding African Americans and their history. The vigor with which this paradigm has been embraced across the disciplines is itself a sign of the significance and timeliness of this recuperative work and the importance of the formerly underrecognized experience of this segment of the black population. But the current tendency to present the working class as the symbolic representative of an ideal of “authentic blackness” and to view the actions of this segment of black society as the only meaningful forms of resistance is dangerous for two reasons. First, it artificially diminishes the complexity of the black community and advances the notion of a monolithic black culture that is unsupported by historical fact. Second, it ignores a significant portion of the black community whose experience was different from that of the black working class. Rather than valuing the experience of one group over that of another, we must seek to establish a perspective on the history of black Americans that takes into account the variety of their experiences and the numerous and often interrelated ways they responded to their various situations.

Although in the past it has been necessary to establish and protect the significance of the black working-class experience as a corrective to earlier assumptions about this population’s disorganization and inac-

tion, we have arrived at an important historical juncture where we can begin to bring together what we know about the diversity of black Americans' experience in the United States. The result will necessarily be a more complex historical perspective and a more balanced and more historically accurate one as well. Following the lead of recent scholarship on black Americans in the free North before the Civil War and the rehabilitative work of literary scholars Hazel Carby, Frances Smith Foster, and Carla Peterson, I submit that to achieve this goal we must reopen our critical explorations of the middle and upper classes of black society and reevaluate the ways in which we have seen and judged their various responses to the hostile climate in which they lived and the racial injustices they faced. In privileging the experience of working-class blacks as more legitimate than that of their middle- and upper-class counterparts, historians have discredited and devalued the experience of middle- and upper-class black Americans throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Against the backdrop of the "authentic" actions of their less-privileged counterparts, the perspectives of the black middle and upper classes, their activities, and their actions have been considered as indicative of one of two things: the desire to assimilate into the white middle class, or the passive acceptance of white domination and accommodation to racial segregation. This limited vision of the black middle and upper classes as assimilationist or accommodationist oversimplifies the complexity of their actions; in doing so it also grossly underestimates the complexity of the experience of black Americans in the United States.

What is called for at this critical juncture in the development of African American historical, cultural, and literary studies is a greater understanding of the common forms of oppression faced by black Americans, as well as a more complex vision of what constitutes resistance. African American literary societies provide a convenient lens through which to contemplate and develop this perspective. My study of the organized literary activities of middle- and upper-class African Americans in the nineteenth-century urban North argues that African American literary societies were formed not only as places of refuge for the self-improvement of their members but as acts of resistance to the hostile racial climate that made the United States an uncomfortable and unequal place for all black Americans, regardless of their social or economic condition. Although greater literary appreciation was one

outcome of organized literary activities, it was not the only goal of African American literary societies; through their reading and writing, the members of these literary societies sought effective avenues of public access as well as ways to voice their demands for full citizenship and equal participation in the life of the nation. Their organized literary activities were a particularly effective means of educating individuals who would consider themselves capable, respected citizens.

The quest for citizenship among African Americans has often been cast as another manifestation of the desire to assimilate into white society. The establishment in 1816 of the American Colonization Society introduced in the United States the first widespread, organized attempts to “return” blacks to Africa. This development pitted those who believed blacks would never receive fair treatment in the United States and wished to emigrate against those whose identification with and commitment to remaining in the United States was firm and whose resolve to gain the rights of American citizenship unbending. Debates between emigrationists and black nationalists and those who believed that black Americans could and should be integrated into American society continued throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. One of the largest mass movements among African Americans was led by Marcus Garvey, whose Africanist, nationalistic, separatist, and militant Universal Negro Improvement Association advocated that all black Americans go “home” to Africa, if not physically on the Black Star Line, the steamship company Garvey founded to transport blacks back to Africa, then psychologically by imagining themselves as in every way separate from the white population. Although ultimately unsuccessful, Garvey’s movement gave voice to the disillusionment of many with the unfulfilled promises of American democracy and provided leadership to a segment of the black population disgusted with the integrationist efforts of organizations such as the NAACP and its more liberal key officials like W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson. It epitomizes the dichotomy tracked by historians throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries between those black Americans who categorically rejected the United States and wished to leave it and those who believed it could be transformed into a place that lived up to the rhetoric of its founding documents.

Historically, African American literary societies have supported the aspirations and the activism of those who wished to reform rather than

leave American society; their membership believed that pursuing the freedom and equality promised to all Americans in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution was not only an opportunity for African Americans but also their greatest responsibility. The earliest African American literary societies fulfilled the demands of the vision of democracy that circulated in Jacksonian America; they were schools in which free, northern blacks could learn the skills that were essential to good citizenship. As Shirley Brice Heath notes in an essay on nineteenth-century concepts of writing and education, literacy was closely linked with ideals of “citenry.”²⁹ Antebellum Americans believed they were part of a *new* republic; in this new republic, the exchange of information and political ideas that literacy and literature enabled was essential to sustaining a healthy democracy. As such, literacy was a key patriotic duty. Equally important as the ability to read and write was the matrix of skills that could be derived from the study of literature. Reading and responding, whether orally or in writing, to a variety of texts, analyzing ideas, and speaking critically and succinctly in conversation with others were talents deemed essential not only to the advancement of individuals but to the prosperity of the nation as well. Although officially excluded from the workings of the nation, black Americans throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century believed that their future in the United States depended on creating for themselves the educational and cultural opportunities that would prepare them to understand the demands of democracy. The network of literary societies they formed between 1830 and 1940 reveal their members’ determination to achieve the rights of citizens in the United States; but these literary societies also challenged them to develop the skills that were essential to fulfilling the responsibilities of citizenship and achieving the promise of American democracy that ensured full participation for all.

Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies examines how literary societies have worked to promote activism, to foster resistance, and to create citizens in black communities throughout the United States. My specific focus is on the century between the height of the Anti-Slavery Movement and the Harlem Renaissance. I begin by looking at the development of literary societies in free black communities in the antebellum North in the context of early Americans’ understanding of reading, writing, and

print as technologies of power and political agency. Although officially excluded from the workings of the nation, free black Americans were nevertheless exposed to and understood the relationship between literacy and citizenship; they saw their literary societies and the organized literary activities that they sponsored as one way to arrest the attention of the public, assert their racial and American identities, and give voice to their belief in the promises of democracy. In the second chapter, I explore the ways the earliest literary societies interacted with the black press in the years between 1827 and the beginning of the Civil War to coordinate an African American readership and foster the sensibility of black nationalism that was essential to both the survival of the black community and their organized pursuit of civil rights.

Ironically, the years following the Civil War that saw the tremendous hunger for education and the mass pursuit of literacy by former slaves was a time when literary societies were in decline. In the aftermath of the failure of Reconstruction, literary societies were reorganized in the North; although they continued to promote the promise of democracy and encourage black Americans to develop through literary work the skills necessary to become model citizens, they were also the staging ground for black communities' increased activism. In chapter 3 I look at two prominent literary societies from the turn of the century, the Bethel Historical and Literary Association in Washington, D.C., and the Boston Literary and Historical Association. At a time when direct political agitation seemed hopeless, both organizations served their participants by providing a forum through which to design and debate alternative strategies of empowerment. Whereas chapter 3 examines two literary societies that created an environment conducive to activism, chapter 4 looks at an activist movement, the black women's club movement of the 1890s, and explores the ways it promoted literary activities and a commitment to the distribution of printed texts. Although literary work was but a component of the black women's club movement, reading and literature were essential to black women's efforts to contest racist discourses and represent themselves as moral and worthy of respect. The fifth chapter of *Forgotten Readers* looks closely at one literary society, the Saturday Nighters of Washington, D.C., and allows me to explore the ways that association with a particular literary society empowered two individuals, Jean Toomer and Georgia Douglas Johnson, to develop both personally

and professionally. Finally, the epilogue of the study comments on the current interest in book clubs and reading groups among black Americans; rather than a new phenomenon, these literary societies reveal the durability of the rich African American tradition of collective literary study.