

A COMPANION TO
*A*FRICAN
*A*MERICAN
*L*ITERATURE

EDITED BY
GENE ANDREW JARRETT

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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Introduction

Gene Andrew Jarrett

The Blackwell *Companion to African American Literature* studies the canons and traditions of African American literature, even as it unsettles their major assumptions and representations. On the one hand, this collection of essays, written by today's preeminent and rising scholars, examines most of the well-known texts, contexts, genres, forms, themes, authors, and interpretations of the literature authored by the African diaspora in America. Ever since the eighteenth century, this literature has consistently incorporated forms ranging from orature, the written word, and song, to dance, jazz, and film, effectively demonstrating its versatility as a medium of African American cultural expression. The literature has constantly documented the struggles of African Americans with race and (anti-black) racism, African heritage and Euro-American influence, slavery and freedom, constitutional enfranchisement and educational progress, political agency and social assimilation, as well as the specters of history and modernity. Finally, African Americans have also regularly wrestled with the critical and commercial expectations that guided, compromised, or contradicted their own agendas as creative writers or as proclaimed agents of social change. On the other hand, the essays in this collection also interrogate why these formal, thematic, and commercial patterns have come to determine what we consider to be the best or most emblematic texts of African American literary history. The essays attempt to describe African American authors in international terms, not merely in national terms. They seek to interpret the literature as containing diverse, not predetermined, portrayals of African

American experiences. They intend to reveal the complexities and contradictions of African American literature, not merely its coherence and consistency across history. They even endeavor to broaden conceptions of the literature beyond one race or ethnicity, or beyond the notions of race and ethnicity entirely, to consider how African American writers have grappled primarily with other social factors of human identity and relationships, including gender, sexuality, culture, class, politics, and ideology. By paying equal attention to the patterns and problems of African American literary history, this collection hopes to represent a landmark achievement in academic literary studies.

Of course, previous books of scholarship have been published with lengths and ranges equal to, if not greater than, those of this *Companion*, while fleshing out to a comparable degree the theoretical and historical dimensions of African American literature. However, these books have been mostly encyclopedias, a genre of academic writing that is not without its own set of limitations. Indeed, this *Companion* distinguishes itself from two chief competitors that have been in circulation for quite some time – namely, Gale Research Company’s multivolume biographical encyclopedia of African American writers and Oxford University Press’s companion to African American literature.¹ Though covering an equivalent scope of history and issues, the Gale and Oxford textbooks differ remarkably. Subtitled “dictionary of literary biography,” the Gale volumes provide entries in alphabetical order on writers who lived during particular historical periods. The Oxford book also provides entries in alphabetical order, but they might include not only biographies of African American writers, but also descriptions of literary works, intellectual movements, and relevant social, cultural, and political issues. These huge books have been wonderful contributions to the

historical and ongoing arguments that African American literature is a subject of legitimate scholarly inquiry, and that information about this literature deserves broad and continual distribution to academic and mainstream readers alike. What the Gale and Oxford books gain in encyclopedic detail and organization, however, they lose in highlighting the ideas on literature and history that contemporary scholars have been addressing in sustained, sophisticated, and cutting-edge ways. Each essay featured in this *Companion* thus approximates the textual length and analytic depth of an article published in an academic journal. At the same time, the whole collection of essays and their appended bibliographies offer the breadth of information that one would find in an encyclopedia. The combined presentation of advanced scholarship and vast information distinguishing this *Companion* aims to provide a clear, accessible, and comprehensive account of African American literature, while challenging the very assumptions that undergraduates, graduate students, and academic teachers have long held about it.

Although the history of Africans and their descendants on American soil can go as far back as the seventeenth century, the practical chronology of this *Companion* starts in the mid-eighteenth century, when the inaugural publications of African American literature appeared in 1746 with Lucy Terry Prince's poem "Bars Fight" and in 1760 with Briton Hammon's spiritual autobiography, *A Narrative of the Most Uncommon Sufferings and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man*. The subsequent essays divide into three main sections – not according to the customary calendar of when centuries begin and end, but according to those specific historical events or periods that have had a discernible impact on the direction of African American literature.

Part I, "The Literatures of Africa, Middle Passage, Slavery, and Freedom," opens with a cluster of essays on the early American period, when our relatively recent term of "African American literature" fails to capture not only the native and ideological complexity of eighteenth-century authors but also the formal and thematic diversity of their literature. According to the first essay by Vincent Carretta, that term is fraught with contradiction, neglecting that English-speaking authors of African descent, such as Hammon, David George, Boston King, George Liele, James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, and Phillis Wheatley, were more transatlantic or international than exclusively New World or national in their identities. In addition to the enforced movement occasioned by the intercontinental slave trade, the voluntary travels of the authors across and around the Atlantic shaped their conceptions of "Africa" and "America." James Sidbury elaborates Carretta's thesis by providing historical background on the rise of plantation slavery in the British American colonies between the mid-seventeenth century and the late eighteenth century. Coupled with the provisional self-definition of Africans and their descendants during this period, the social effacement of slavery made African identity interchangeable with such New World terms as "Negro" and "black." However, Africa still remained a distinct trope for authors of African descent – including the aforementioned Gronniosaw, Equiano, and Wheatley, but also Venture Smith and John Jea. The trope suggested an imaginative reorientation to the traumas of the past, the struggles of the present, and the promises of the future, even as the material experiences of Africa itself continued to dissipate as a personal or collective reference point at the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Frances Smith Foster and Kim D. Green help usher the *Companion* into a more focused discussion on how authors

of African descent in the early national period pivoted toward establishing an identifiably African American tradition of literary writing. In their analyses of some of the authors listed above alongside Jupiter Hammon (unrelated to Briton Hammon), Jarena Lee, and David Walker, Foster and Green examine the creole languages and religious dimensions of early African American literature. Particularly, the concepts of “ports” and “pulpits” characterize the dual means by which African American writers had expressed religious doctrine and demonstrated their own salvation, and by which their readers entered into religious or spiritual fellowship (as in a conventional church) with them and with cooperating communities of readers. Nonetheless, early African American literature had employed the two concepts in the service of antislavery and anticolonial discourse, a subject that Joanna Brooks and Tyler Mabry expound on. In their essay, Brooks and Mabry paint in broader historical strokes the fact that many early African American writers, such as (Briton and Jupiter) Hammon, Wheatley, Marrant, Equiano, King, Smith, and Prince Hall, belonged to Boston- and Philadelphia-based religious networks of Anglo-Protestantism. From here, the scholars connect the struggles of these writers against racial discrimination and oppression with their literary uses of certain rhetorical forms and religious themes, as well as with their cultural and commercial strategies to publish and circulate the literature within religious networks.

As persuasive as the argument for the multilingual and religious origins of African American literature may be, we must acknowledge yet another potential origin, according to Michael J. Drexler and Ed White: the 1801 constitution disseminated by Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of a slave revolt on the French colony of Saint-Domingue, declaring the transition of this island toward national independence. They suggest that this document turned out to be one of the

most widely read in early America, even though authored by an English-speaking African descendant. In debates over the origins of African American literature, Drexler and White argue, we must account for the specific text and context of Toussaint's critique of the Anglo-Saxon universalist claims to social and political morality that had underwritten Western Enlightenment rationality.

Part I also includes a second cluster of essays concentrating mostly on the antebellum years, or roughly from the early 1830s, when American antislavery societies were being founded, through the early 1860s, the period of the Civil War. Philip Gould elucidates the economic sophistication of antebellum antislavery literature, such as those written by William Wells Brown, Harriet Jacobs, Henry Bibb, William Grimes, Solomon Northrup, and Frederick Douglass, whose critique of slave capitalism anticipated the anxieties of white, bourgeois, and Protestant readers who were experiencing the modernization of the North. Maurice S. Lee shifts our attention to the renaissance of African American literature in the 1850s – in which participated some of the slave-narrative authors mentioned by Gould, but also such novelists as Brown, Frank J. Webb, Harriet Wilson, and Martin Delany. During the decade, this literature evolved across multiple genres, ranging from the slave narrative and the novel to drama and poetry, buoyed, in part, by the special coalescence of ideological, economic, and political forces as slavery became increasingly untenable and as the country began to brace for the Civil War.

In the mid-nineteenth century, nationalism was one of the great ideological forces that African American writers had claimed as their own and had concomitantly expressed in literature. In short, it was the basis of what Robert S. Levine calls African American literary nationalism. Sown in the early part of the nineteenth century, the seeds of literary