This encounter bemused the Princeton colporteurs, and they wrote it up as simply another example of the ignorance of the people of the Pine Barrens. Yet this odd encounter may suggest something more. The idea of a free book obviously fascinated this woman; she wanted one; she thought she needed one; and she was willing to take care of one. But she forgot that she had been given one already by a colporteur the summer before. Her reverence suggests a traditional appreciation for books; her preoccupation with getting a free title, and then forgetting about it, fixes her as well in an emerging consumer society.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the American Tract Society and other religious publishers mounted massive, well-organized campaigns first to make books cheap and plentiful by turning them into a modern, mass-produced consumer goods, and then to teach people to read and to value those books in the most traditional way. Their aim was to use new mass media to encourage old reading habits—to preserve what David Hall has called "traditional literacy," the intense reading of a few standard texts. In effect, they would democratize tradition, exploiting new possibilities to accomplish ancient objectives. They hoped to turn every family in the United States into an old-fashioned New England reading circle. They would make books both cheap and dear.[50]

This meeting of the new and the old produce a wonderful mixture of reader responses out on the publication borderlands of antebellum America. In the mountains of Appalachia, in the Great Valley of the Mississippi and beyond, readers encountered cheap books shipped from New York and Philadelphia and carried door to door by itinerant colporteurs. Some people were hostile, some skeptical, some merely indifferent. Some took these cheap books for what they were: throw-away consumer goods. Others treasured them and wrapped them in linen or buckskin—or treasured them and used them up! Some glanced at them; others read them with savage intensity. Some read their books as Bunyan had read his two centuries before, with passages "hammering at his mind, striking him across the face, pursuing him relentlessly."[51] Some forgot they had books at all. Certainly religious publishing societies did not succeed in supplanting novels or sensational newspapers with Baxter's *Call*, nor could they manufacture a nation of readers filled with the passion of John Bunyan. But the evidence suggests that they were at least partially successful in linking the tools of the new consumer culture to the timeless treasures of religious reading. Though their books were cheap, the style of intense reading they favored was, if not resurgent, at least not lost in the new world of mass publication. In antebellum America, as today, even a free book could be a pearl of great price.

15 *The Literate and the Literary: African Americans as Writers and Readers—1830–1940*

ELIZABETH McHENRY AND
SHIRLEY BRICE HEATH

> You made yourself known to me by coming into my office and putting into my hands, for criticism and friendly advice, a manuscript embodying your devotional thoughts and aspirations, and also various essays pertaining to the condition of that class with which you were complexionally identified. You will recollect, if not the surprise, at least the satisfaction I expressed on examining what you had written.
>
> –WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON TO MARIA STEWART, 1881, REPORTING AN INCIDENT THAT TOOK PLACE IN 1831 (REPRINTED IN STERLING, 1984, P. 153)

> If I had all the talent of all the short story writers put together, it would avail me nothing in this country, provided I should try to write anything which would represent the Colored-American's side of the question.
>
> –MARY CHURCH TERRELL TO T. A. METCALF, HOME CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL PRESIDENT, MAY 25, 1916, INCLUDED IN THE TERRELL MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Much has been written on the absence of literacy skills among African Americans across American history or on the individual achievements through literacy of particular individuals, such as Harriet Jacobs or Frederick Douglass. But literacy in most of these studies has centered on reading or the simple ability to sign one's name. What of those African Americans who chose to write and read in groups in the faith that their writings might help enlighten others—especially the literary reading public? What of those individuals who used their reading of literary works to inspire their own writings and to push their sense of the promise of presenting the life of African Americans through literature? Of these, we hear almost nothing, in part because, especially since the 1960s, it has been more fashionable to valorize poverty than to detail the contributions of middle- and upper-class African Americans.[1]

From *Written Communication* 11.4 (1994): 419–44.

Primarily in the northern states before the Civil War, merchants, shipowners, ministers, and printers in urban areas formed an elite group of educated and active citizens. During Reconstruction, their numbers were swelled by members of the legal and medical professions, politicians, and landowners who highly valued education, literature, and music.[2]

It was from among these classes that writing and reading groups formed to consider the merits of works written by and about the "Colored-American side of the question." Maria Stewart came from such a group, and Garrison, editor of the *Liberator,* counted on writers within such literary societies to furnish his publication with occasional pieces. Nearly a century later, Mary Church Terrell, lecturer and active clubwoman and wife of a Washington, D.C., judge, lashed out at editors and officials of writing schools for not doing more to see that literary pieces from Black writers were included in their literary journals.

For a substantial group within African American society, reading literature and taking part in writing groups provided from the early decades of the nineteenth century a central orientation toward being literate, aiding self-improvement, and moving social justice forward with additional "voice." From the 1830s forward, African Americans formed literary societies that encouraged reading and writing by their members, and developed a literary community with authors, editors, and publishers throughout the nation who shared an interest in literature. Proponents of building this literate community urged the merits of individual and group expression for informing, validating, and exploring the knowledge and creativity of African Americans. The role of the literary in projecting and expanding this *literate* presence has gone largely unreported, whereas much has been written about the distinctive *oral* culture of African Americans.

Public arts performances, media portrayals, and scholarly articles and books since the 1960s have celebrated and demonstrated the rich and varied oral culture of African Americans. From folktales and proverbs to testifying and rapping, the verbal performing arts of African Americans have received wide recognition, and educators and social scientists, as well as literary critics, have fallen easily into the habit of referring to African American culture as "oral in nature."[3] Literary arts have followed this same pattern, particularly in works of the Harlem Renaissance that strongly developed the power of the oral; political and rhetorical achievements of the civil rights era further emphasized particular strategies of oral performance.

But as is the case with almost any key image that wraps itself about a group or institution, the portrayal of African American culture as oral has become unrelenting and has pushed aside facts surrounding other language uses—especially those related to reading and writing throughout African American history. Hence, despite their impressive history and contemporary pervasiveness, the literate values and habits of African Americans have been almost invisible in the arts and social sciences. In leisure and religious habits, through literature and political rhetoric, groups of African Americans, particularly those of the urban middle and upper classes, have firmly embraced and intensely practiced both reading and writing habits, forming reading clubs, supporting the press and publishing houses, and sponsoring public readings of imaginative literature.

The denial or omission of these events and organizations from both scholarly treatment and pedagogical background for presentation of literary works by African Americans has served academic culture by allowing the distancing and objectifying of African Americans while reserving designations such as "literate" for the "dominant" culture. The focus on African American orality has thus often implied an absence of reason and permanence, in contrast to the presence of these properties within literacy and particularly habits that surround the reading and writing of literature (Gates, 1986, pp. 8–10). The strong quest in multicultural studies to make groups out to be as different from one another as possible and to give each group a distinctive "hook" as a type of cultural logo has contributed to the ease with which an encompassing view of African American life as oral has come to be accepted. This article explores a few of the reasons why the strong contemporary trend to attend only to oral language traditions among African Americans is highly misleading. Provided here is a brief overview of several key domains of evidence related to the history of literate habits and values among African Americans, with discussion of their influence and recognition by both the press and literary publications at various times and places.

Reading and Writing Behind the Pulpit

Perhaps more than any other genre, the sermon has advanced the notion of African Americans as "an oral people." Much celebration of the oratorical and hortatory skills of ministers has centered on performance and the question of recalled portions of texts repeated and adapted throughout long recitations. In line with the considerable amount of work on epic verse-making, scholars have closely analyzed ways in which preachers (both in the pulpit and on the political circuit) recite large blocks of materials. Such analyses have shown that sermons are ultimately narrative, with a strong basis in literate sources; yet their oral performance has received the lion's share of attention from scholars.[4] This has been the case even though primary sources from ministers and orators throughout African American history indicate the extent to which many preachers based their oral performances on written texts of authority—the Bible and classical texts, as well as on their own written notes and outlines. Abilities in reading and writing were confluent with and indeed often the basis of spoken performances for the most famous of African American ministers. Numerous written sources—spiritual, political, and rhetorical—produced the skillful argumentation and memorable flourishes of the "literary" that lay scattered within sermons delivered orally.[5]

Ministers performed their sermons differently according to particular themes chosen for individual occasions. Stored in memory were literary phrases and chunks of texts as well as gestures and expressions linked to particular themes. The call and response nature of both political oratory and sermons provided time for spokespersons to "create" the next passage and

facilitated rapid production of large blocks of texts. Many of these sermons were later *re*written (using notes written before performance as well as the experience of the oral deliveries) to be preserved and distributed in Sunday church bulletins, periodic publications, and occasional collections. These written forms were themselves rhetorical statements, designed for multiple audiences beyond churchgoers and often with a keen sense of possible political and social ends.[6]

A similar process has worked in the "raising" of hymns, composition of spirituals, and the chanting of prayers—forms that look "oral" but are often deeply based in written preparations and source texts, especially sermons.[7] Variation in pace and intonation, as well as rhythm, and use of call and response, along with repetition of key portions of written texts, blend with story-telling techniques and dramatization. These devices permit long pauses, insertions of relevant contemporary issues, and personal testimony, allowing the memory of the preacher, prayer leader, or singer, to "catch up" and aid the performance of long texts without immediate recourse to written materials. The key here is that modification from the written text and from one performance to the next is not only acceptable, but expected; situational "readings" by the performer enhance the original written text materials. Hence, their written base in no way detracts from the creativity and talent required of their oral performance.

Spiritual narratives published in the nineteenth century similarly bear a strong tie to written sources. Both their content and style derived from not only the Bible, but also literary portions of other authenticating texts on spiritual, philosophical, legal, and political matters. Though often interpreted as autobiographical—just one individual's story—these meditations represented collective identities and combined homiletic features along with other subgenres often considered "oral," such as personal accounts and extemporaneous prayers.[8] Numerous rhetorical devices and lexical choices in oral performances derive from written materials and stabilize the verbal art of the oral text—often, to be sure, in imitation of the discourse of other public performances and worldviews. The sense of "literary" conveyed through many of these comes from the Latinate style using heavy nominalizations and convoluted syntax ("My parents being wholly ignorant of the knowledge of God, had not therefore instructed me in any degree in this great matter. Not long after the commencement of my attendance on this lady, she had bid me do something respecting my work" [Lee, 1849/1988, p. 3]). These written texts and their performances were thus revoicings (and rewritings) of the words of others newly cast in contexts and specific performances with particular goals tied to local and contemporary concerns.[9]

Readers and Their Institutions

Since the 1830s, the method of moving back and forth among published texts, one's own writing, and oral performance has marked the habits of groups as well as those of individuals such as ministers and political leaders. Relatively little can be known about occasions and methods of talking about the writing of texts of various sorts in earlier decades, but the few records that remain (primarily in scattered personal reminiscences and archives of organized groups, such as literary societies) suggest how speaking encircled reading, and how reading—especially of literature—surrounded writing. These intertwinings came often as preparatory occasions for the public lectures of those who spoke out as individuals to numerous audiences on their literary, social, and political concerns.

Throughout American history, aside from those listeners connected with well-known groups tied together through their commitment to antislavery efforts, abolition, and political participation, numerous clubs—benevolent, social, and literary—were integral parts of Black community life. As early as 1841, social commentators described the life of upper- and middle-class Blacks and noted their contributions to the establishment of libraries, debate societies, and literary groups.[10] The same members involved in these pursuits also supported the Black press (journals as well as newspapers), wrote letters back and forth frequently, and often visited together when they traveled from place to place. The Black women's club movement, deeply rooted in a sense of mutual aid, led to a national convention in Boston in July 1895, from which the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) emerged. This group was to hold substantial political and artistic influence—especially in Washington and the Northeast—through the 1920s.[11]

The organization of literary societies falls primarily into three time periods—the decades between the 1830s and the Civil War, those between the late 1870s and the end of the nineteenth century, and those of the Harlem Renaissance era. In this first period, when the free Black population expanded from approximately 320,000 to 488,000 (13.5 percent of the Negro population in 1810; 11 percent in 1860 when 46.2 percent was in the North and 44.6 percent was in the South Atlantic division and the remainder in the Midwest and West [U.S. Census, 1918, pp. 53–57]), roughly fifty societies came into existence, scattered not only in major urban areas, but also in towns such as Cincinnati, Albany, Pittsburgh, and Newark. The decade of the 1830s was a peak period for such clubs as the Female and Literary Society (1831) and Minerva Society (1834) in Philadelphia, the Ladies Literary Society (1834) in New York City, Afric-American Female Intelligence Society (1832) in Boston, and the Ladies Literary Society and Dorcas Society (1833) in Rochester.

In Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, and New York, the strong elite class of African Americans sought out and obtained institutions other than literary societies to assist them in their literary pursuits. For example, through organizations such as the Philadelphia Library Company of Colored Persons (1833), they built library collections, established reading rooms, and sponsored lectures and debates. Many of these African Americans linked these efforts to the need to give valid evidence of the refinement and cultural intelligence of their members through their familiarity with literature. The Female and Literary Society of Philadelphia, for example, saw literary pursuits—both reading and writing—as paths to "mental improvement."[12] The

Minerva Literary Association wanted to encourage and promote "polite literature," to offer opportunities for recitations, and to provide an environment for creative writing in both prose and poetry (Porter, 1936, p. 561).[13]

African Americans of these and later decades counted on formally organized literary clubs as audiences to read their writings; they also joined together in highly informal and often unnamed discussion groups within their own homes. Well-known names in the history of African American women especially were behind these clubs, many of which served as cultural outlets for elite families who, barred from theaters and clubs, created their own intellectual atmosphere within their homes or in connection with local churches.

Sara Iredell Fleetwood, whose husband, Christian Fleetwood, was a choir director and founder of Washington D.C.'s Mignonette Club, which performed plays and concerts at St. Luke's Church, determined that their home would be a place where some literary life was ensured. She described a typical once-a-week evening program in the 1870s to which their friends came:

> We adopted the following program which has proved very satisfactory. 1. Music, 2. Reading followed by conversation on the same, then an Essay and conversation on the Essay, after which answers to questions propounded at a previous meeting, followed by questions to be answered at the next meeting. The chairman of the evening then announces the Essayist and Reader for the next week. This is followed by a quotation recited by each one present. The closing exercise is music. One distinctive feature of these evenings is the well understood fact that no refreshments will be furnished, a decision that does much to insure the permanency of these entertainments. (quoted in Sterling, 1984, pp. 431–432)

Sara Fleetwood's comment on refreshments indicates her awareness that social clubs held in the homes of individuals had a tendency to slip from serious literary pursuits to culinary contests among the members who hosted each month.

Among these women were those willing to promote not only the writing of essays each week for discussion at the next week's meeting, but also the reading of literature. Some of these women saw as a goal of the club the inspiration of those who wished to produce imaginative literature, and advertisements in literary journals announced with enthusiasm any publication of a member of one of the literary clubs. Most of these women lived in urban areas, where they could attend the lectures and public readings of the many White European writers who came to the United States to meet their readers and to promote their books. For example, Frances Anne Rollin (1847–1901), a young free woman from Charleston, South Carolina, determined very early in her life that she wanted to be a literary writer. She went to Boston to pursue her writing and there privately read figures such as Thomas Macauley and went to public lectures by Charles Dickens and fellow American Ralph Waldo Emerson—who refused to speak in locations that excluded Negroes (Nell, 1855, p. 114, cited in Porter, 1936, p. 557). Through her years in Boston Rollin wrote a biography of Martin R. Delany, doctor, Black nationalist, and African explorer, and the first African American to be commissioned a major in the U.S. Army. The biography was published in 1868 and reprinted in 1883 under the name of Frank A. Rollin, a decision she and her publisher made because they feared the American reading public would not accept a book written by a Black woman.

Regardless of their conviction of the importance of having creative writings by Blacks widely read, those who wanted their work published met a constant struggle in finding publishers. In many locations, such individuals came together, often only sporadically in literary and reading clubs, to cheer each other, exchange ideas about publishing, and talk of what was currently happening in the literary world. In several cities, someone within these groups often corresponded regularly with one or more of the more successfully published writers, letting these authors know that others were reading them and that they too believed in the power of the pen.

Prominent members of such literary societies through the second half of the nineteenth century were often alumnae of Oberlin College's "Ladies Course," which led to a literary degree. Later Oberlin allowed women to enter its regular degree program or "the Gentlemen's Course," but between 1850 and the mid 1860s, their "ladies" centered their studies on literature. Many of these Black women shaped the social life of their upper classes in cities of the Northeast. They traveled abroad extensively and reflected considerable ambivalence and diversity of views ranging from those of the Victorian elite to those that foreshadowed their sisters who later took up active feminist perspectives. The very diversity of pulls on these women made their lives as writers all the more difficult. In her 1894 account of the accomplishments of "the Afro-American woman," Mrs. N. F. Mossell spoke of the mixed blessing these women faced in being, on the one hand, more and more wanted as journalists, observers, and commentators by the press, and, on the other, pulled by the continued demands from their key roles within their families and "blue stocking" communities.[14]

After the Civil War, the aesthetic aims of Afro-American women's groups turned increasingly to gender issues and political causes that directly touched the lives of women. Founding members of the NACW, for example, set out to encourage women across America to form their own clubs and societies and to speak out and write about matters of race and gender. Many founding members of the NACW, such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Mary Church Terrell, traveled about the country giving lectures to both male and female groups, on college campuses, and for civic events. They kept diaries, sustained a voluminous correspondence, and maintained club records, as well as composed lectures and articles printed in newspapers and journals. Several women's clubs founded in New England brought Black and White women together with the objective of raising the intellectual and educational standards of all women through writing, reading, and discussion.

The Woman's Era Club, founded in 1892, was one of the most prominent clubs in Boston. During these decades, churches as well as groups of individuals, promoted literary clubs. The *Brooklyn Eagle* of 1892 reported: "Almost every church in Brooklyn had a literary society. There was no class of its city's citizens fonder of literary pursuits than the Afro-American" (Jenkins, 1984, p. 39).

The active women's club movement during this period was provoked in part by the desire to combat the public image that Black women were incapable of association with high culture or the challenge of mental pursuits. Women linked to many of the clubs saw it as their charge to establish kindergartens, vocational schools, and high schools, and to ensure that reading literature was an integral part of the life of each of these educational ventures. A majority of the women in the women's club movements were teachers.[15] Closely linked with their club activities were their uses of writing in order to spread news of their causes, to stir up financial and political support within their regions, and to organize protest writings to counter presentations in the White press of the immorality of Black women. The density of communication not only within the United States among these women, but also among several of these club women and groups in England, is illustrated within the archives of Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper, as well as in the letters-to-the-editor section of newspapers and journals after the Civil War. For several, such as Terrell, the positions of their husbands—as judges, physicians, or congressmen, for example—gave them considerable economic and social leverage within local social affairs, as well as substantial inside political knowledge they used to help advance issues and causes close to their interests.[16]

Through many of these clubs, the solidly middle- and upper-class Black elite women of these decades, again largely in northeastern cities, played key roles in the suffrage movement. They spoke out on the lecture circuit, using texts they wrote through their inspiration from works they had read in English as well as in foreign languages, especially French. Several women, for example, Mary Church Terrell, spoke often on matters related to the "Race Problem." She also argued that imaginative writing, far more than polemical political treatises or editorials, could convey a sense of the lives and needs of "Colored Americans" for White readers.[17] She herself tried to get journals to accept several short stories she wrote, and she helped promote the poetry of writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar for wider distribution. Yet in spite of repeated efforts to have her imaginative writings published, she met rejection at every turn, and had to settle for her popularity on the lecture circuit and occasional publications of her essays.[18] Within Washington, she remained active in the Book Lover's Club, encouraging members to read and write imaginative works and to hold a strong faith in the merits of such work in educating readers and advancing issues of concern to the Black community.

She lived next door to Paul Laurence Dunbar in Washington, and knew many of his fellow authors, often entertaining them when they came to Washington. She also often visited their families on her lecture tours. Yet she never successfully broke into imaginative literary publishing. Numerous magazines controlled by Whites rejected her material as of insufficient interest to their readers, though she persisted, sending her stories off to journals ranging from *North American Review* to *Saturday Evening Post*. She corresponded with major publishers and several of her female contemporaries who were also writers, often asking them advice about securing a publisher or how to write in a particular genre, such as autobiography. Many opportunities came for her to publish her "observations" or comments on the needs of Black women or the life of Blacks in Washington, D.C. She was published by both the Black and White presses. But for most of her more serious articles on matters of race in the United States, she had to count on publication in England. By U.S. editors, she was frequently advised to drop her efforts to write short stories, often criticized as sentimental and overwritten for didactic purposes. She was told to stay with essays for the serious topics she wanted to address—primarily the conditions of the Negro and especially of Negro women and children. She strongly believed a "conspiracy of silence" existed on the part of the American press, who resisted presenting literary materials that would set forth "conditions under which Colored people actually live today—their inability to secure employment, the assault and battery constantly committed upon their hearts, their sensibilities and their feelings" (Terrell to Metcalf, May 25, 1916, included in the Terrell manuscript collection, Library of Congress). She wrote many letters expressing this view to publishing companies, literary journals, and schools that taught writing, urging them to promote and publish relevant imaginative literature.

Several decades after Terrell's efforts, another Black woman, Georgia Douglas Johnson, in Washington, D.C., faced the same sense of isolation and rejection with respect to her writing. This woman's efforts typify the third period of major development among African American literary societies. During this period, clubs and club founders were closely linked to writers of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as to several of the little literary magazines begun during this period and to some of the more well-established Black journals, such as *The Crisis*. Johnson helped solve her need for a supportive circle of listeners and critics for her work by creating a literary salon in her home and by writing numerous letters urging the promotion of imaginative writing by Black Americans. In the 1920s, she hosted meetings of local artists and readers in her home, often inviting members of the Harlem Renaissance to drop in and talk about their work. She herself kept up a steady correspondence with many New York writers letting them know that they had an active supportive reading group in Washington.[19]

During this period, Black writers seemed intent on bringing the oral and written together in their literary productions. They chose no longer to assert the humanity and morality of the Black race by painting portraits of either the collective experience of slavery or the rise to prominence of individuals striving for acceptance in single organizations (such as the church) or institutions strongly identified with the White community. They wanted instead to

create images of their own heritage and environments of life and to proclaim the power of literature by Blacks to build a public image of the literate strength of their community. Their concern was to produce works of fiction and poetry whose meanings could be read differently by different audiences —Black and White, educated and uneducated. For many Black readers, the writings of literary artists reached them first through journals usually published by clubs, federations, or literary societies, or through direct readings given by writers on lecture circuits. Black writers were kept busy with such lectures, because in this era of numerous active literary societies, they could count on their works receiving attention in every major city and many towns across the country.

These writers knew they walked a delicate line in trying to please a growing range of readers with diverse expectations of their works. For the most part, they themselves wanted their works to affirm the cultural identity of the Black community not in relation to its White counterpart but through the dynamics of their own qualities and characteristics. Their choice of genres such as novels, short stories, and poetry enabled them to emphasize individual differences among those they chose to portray in their writings. Unlike the autobiographies and spiritual narratives of the nineteenth century that reflected collective experiences, their imaginative works left readers with no doubts of the variety and depth of life experiences among Blacks. Yet these writings were committed to trying to move the society forward in the struggle for civil rights by using the powers of fiction and poetry to engage attention, arouse empathy, and move readers to thoughtful reflection and action.[20] A major way of drawing out the potential for different readings of their literature came in their blending of written bases with reports of oral performances by their characters. Wanting, on the one hand, to let readers know they and many of the characters they portrayed were educated and informed, and, on the other hand, to reveal something of the oral performative features that cut across the lives of both educated and uneducated Blacks, these writers blended the oral and the written.

A prime example of the artistry of such blending comes in the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, anthropologist and novelist. For those readers who look at her work as a whole, it is not possible to miss the strong literate base she portrays for preachers and storytellers, as well as her indications of the ways that many community members relied on written sources of information in their daily living. Similarly, she makes clear the influence of the mass of written folklore materials on her own rendering of the oral. Her most widely acclaimed work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* consists of such a remarkable percentage of direct speech and recreates so many qualities of oral narration, that African American literary critic Henry Louis Gates (1988) uses it to define a category of literature he calls "Speakerly Texts." Hurston (1981) herself signals the basis for the "speakerlyness" of her writing and that of other Blacks in her essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," as she talks of the mimicry, metaphor, and drama in art forms.

The "fiction" of Janie and Eatonville depends not only on the oral stories of the people of rural north Florida but also on Hurston's melding of these with ideas from a host of written social science texts. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* must be read on the multiple levels her written representation demands. She locates within the story of Janie and her search for a balanced heterosexual relationship a variety of dimensions of culture in terms of gender, class, race, and historical era that she as trained anthropologist might have chosen to explicate in nonfiction or social science texts. Instead, her fictional and anthropological Eatonville serves as the locus of storytelling in the novel and is the place to which Janie returns to tell her story. Moreover, her story, like that of Hurston, draws on other stories collected "in the field" —as place and discipline. Writing for a White patron and a growing White and Black audience of fiction readers, Hurston saw in imaginative writing special opportunities for revoicing and double-voicing messages related to social justice in race and gender relations that could not be directly expressed in anthropological nonfiction writing. Janie's story is a story of a town and its people and their relationships; within the "fiction" of this town that she writes, Hurston finds the psychological "space" she needs to compose a community and also criticize its shortcomings as well as reveal the societal ills that produced it.

As a Black woman from rural north Florida, Hurston knew she was recording stories—her own and those of others of her color and class—that would carry considerable significance. Although she herself was highly educated, her use of and interaction with the oral culture she chose to study was not an attempt to standardize or "correct" it. Rather, what she perceived was a necessary relationship between the entertaining impact of her written representations of oral stories and the troublesome but necessary development of a political consciousness and voice among those ready for such a reading.[21]

Through writing, Hurston found the space to "talk back" to even the most silencing cultural factors.

Literary Journals

Over the decades between 1830 and 1940, literary journals provided both outlet and stimulus for such "talking" and for building a sense of a community of writers and readers. Some idea of the number of writers and readers of literature comes from the history of literary journals published by the Black press or through literary societies in the years between 1830 and 1940.[22] Figures related to the number of pieces submitted to these journals are not available, though some inferences can be made from the correspondence of key figures who note consistently the intense competition for publication.[23] Subscription figures for these periodicals produced primarily for African American audiences indicate that many were published for only a short time, but letters and diaries of individuals make clear that the copies that circulated were widely available for borrowing and for joint reading within literary society meetings.

Literary magazines and the few journals devoted to other topics that include a literature section give substantial indications of the role of literary societies, especially those of women, in circulating and reading literature writ-

ten by both African Americans and European Americans. William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* (1831–1865) devoted a "ladies department" column to women's activities, and a substantial portion of the news reported here came from literary group members who often identified themselves only as "a colored female." Other early journals also included in nearly every issue some mention of literary events or creative writing by readers. Journals, such as *The Woman's Era,* published at the end of the century as the organ of the NACW, invariably mentioned the activities of its affiliated literary societies and occasionally included poems by its members. The same continued to be true for those journals that began publication in the 1920s, though many of these were closely connected to individuals identified with the Harlem Renaissance.

Many Black journals had decidedly clear goals they believed could be advanced through their publication. *The Voice of the Negro,* published 1904 to 1907, carried a banner beneath its title that read: "An Illustrated Monthly Magazine devoted to the unraveling of the World's ethic, ethnic snarl and for people who do not believe there is virtue in color or the lack of it." Circulation figures for these journals varied greatly; some went to 15,000, whereas others remained around 500. *Colored American Magazine,* (an early journal of this name was published briefly from 1837–1841) began in 1900 and lasted until 1909, reaching a top circulation of 15,000. Included were literary writings, as well as political commentaries on events of current interest—particularly education and legal issues. *The Crisis,* a publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois, ran from 1910 to 1976, reaching its height of influence during the 1920s, when it was at times primarily a literary journal. *Opportunity,* published from 1923 to 1949, achieved a circulation of nearly 10,000 and did much to stimulate and encourage creative writings among African Americans. Writers such as Countee Cullen and Sterling Brown worked on the staff of this magazine and achieved early boosts to their reputations by publishing their work in it.

Some journals, such as *Black Opals,* published in Philadelphia, bore strong ties to particular literary societies. Others were linked to particular faculty members of universities (such as those at Howard University who sponsored *Stylus,* published erratically between 1916 and 1941, and at one time closely associated with Alain Locke and also supported by Jean Toomer). These journals included considerable discussion of contemporary writers, dramatists, and other artists and reflected an active reading public whose letters and brief articles showed their concern about the need to stimulate more Black writers and artists. The Boston Quill Club published its own journal, *Saturday Evening Quill* (1928–1930), and included poetry, fiction, essays, drama, and some artwork.

Relative success in publishing works by Black writers came only with the Harlem Renaissance, and a link with a literary journal was only one way these writers stayed in touch with their readers. Figures such as Countee Cullen spoke often to literary societies around the country, urging members to continue both reading and writing within their groups. These individuals also reiterated both in their work and in their private correspondence the importance of creative writing as a critical force in reaching out to audiences who were certain never to hear a Black man or woman in a lecture hall or to pick up a newspaper or journal published by the Black press.

Conclusion

The history of reading and writing and the role of literature in creating and sustaining self- and group images of being literate should set aside any inclination to view African Americans exclusively as "an oral people." Though often put forward with "politically correct" and supportive intentions, this blanketing cultural characteristic has left a strong misperception of African American history, especially when added to the extensive research attention that has been given to African American English Vernacular and to oral performances that range from shucking and jiving to rapping. African Americans, through many of the very forms most closely associated with "oral" features, have based their communication to a great extent on writing and reading. The ability to shift between various dialects and into what is now called global English is well-evidenced in their writings and in reports of their discussions of literature within their literary societies. Similarly the strong tendency among English teachers within public schools to choose as exemplars of African American literature primarily works that portray individuals unable to express themselves in writing or in global English perpetuates the view that such speakers represent the norm. Of contemporary novels, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is much more likely to be selected than a work by Andrea Lee (such as *Sarah Phillips*) that portrays educated middle-class or upper-class African Americans.

Similarly, the social, political, and intellectual histories of literary authors may be easily overgeneralized or stereotyped in the ways of teaching that surround "multicultural" literature. Curiously, theorizing about *how* to present these texts and their authors has remained underdeveloped and often unrecognized as a need (Parker, 1993). It is all too easy for students to develop the idea that the backgrounds of African American writers (as well as those from Native Americans, Mexican-origin groups, etc.) do not show the same degree of variation in class, region, and ideology as other writers. Students reading these literatures, especially fiction, need to be reminded that the stories told should not automatically be taken as autobiographical. For example, the major choices as exemplars of African American literature tend to depict characters whose impoverishment and exploitation challenge them to survive as individuals that rise out of and above the circumstances of other victims of discrimination. The writings of Harriet Jacobs as an ex-slave are far more often read and referred to than those of Ida B. Wells as newspaper publisher and lecturer. Stories of Zora Neale Hurston's background in the poor rural areas of north Florida receive much more attention than accounts of the elite backgrounds of her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries such as Dorothy West or Jessie Fauset. Hence, students especially need an

understanding of the backgrounds of African American literary writers (particularly of earlier decades) so that they may have an accurate picture of the range of their social and occupational contexts. Such accounts would also depict the various ways in which literature figured in the ambitions, goals, and aims of individual writers from different classes and social backgrounds.

The work to be done in restoring accuracy and cross-class representation of African American writers extends beyond classrooms. Scholars need to give much more attention to the range of written genres in relation to oral genres of African American authors, as well as to their readership—the people and places for whom written materials became central to interaction and action.[24] Research still has much to tell of the extent to which African American writers have deliberated the indeterminacy of the role of imaginative literature as well as their own struggle between devotion to the literary and to their tasks as writers in a world in great need of social reform.

10 *Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition*

ANNE RUGGLES GERE

> Two prisoners in contingent cells communicate by blows struck on the wall. The wall separates them, but it also permits them to communicate.
>
> —SIMONE WEIL

In a rented room on Leavenworth Street in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco a group of women gathers on Friday afternoons from two to five to provide one another advice and feedback on their writing. The Tenderloin District, identified by many as a home for drug dealers, welfare recipients, criminals, and mental health patients, also provides a home for several writing groups including the Tenderloin Women's Writing Workshop. Carol Heller, who has studied this group, notes that although these women have little formal education, they take their writing seriously; they offer one another encouragement as well as criticism and suggest revisions. As Carolyn, a member of the group, put it, "We can disagree with each other's views, but the point of this workshop is to do the work" (Heller, *Multiple Functions* 225).[1]

In Lansing, Iowa, a small farming community, a dozen writers gather around Richard and Dorothy Sandry's kitchen table. They meet on Monday evenings during the lull between fall harvest and spring planting and spend two hours reading and responding to one another's writing. In their prose they look at the experience of farming, old equipment, the process of milking cows, and country schools. Frequently writers talk about their plans before they begin writing, gathering suggestions and ideas for shaping their material. These writing workshops are part of what Robert Wolf, the workshop facilitator, calls the Rural Renovation Proposal, which aims to revitalize both the economy and democracy of small towns by building community and consensus among individuals who can then address local problems.

Participants in groups like the Tenderloin Women's Writing Workshop and the Lansing, Iowa, Writers' Workshop represent a tiny portion of the

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