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Recovery

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The concept of recovery has been essential to the study of literary history during the past several decades, and it has been key to the field's ongoing development beyond the white, male canon. Recovery generally refers to seeking out previously understudied texts and making them more widely available for research and teaching. The importance of recovered texts to the study of white women writers and writing by nonwhite people cannot be understated. African American literature, for example, has not only been expanded by the introduction of previously understudied texts, but also the writers, places of publication, forms, and uniqueness of recovered writing have opened up new directions in the field. In their introduction to *American Periodicals'* 2015 special issue on black periodical studies, Eric Gardner and Joycelyn Moody explain how "recovering black histories—and especially histories integral to print—offers us a much richer and a more honest sense of American literature and history."¹ Periodicals present a rich opportunity for recovery, from the individual texts found in their pages to the importance of periodicals more generally within the larger realm of US print culture. The increased availability of previously understudied periodicals has significant implications for twenty-first-century understandings of a variety of literary texts, genres, and histories.

But what do we mean when we use "recovery" as a metaphor for forms of scholarly practices for the study of print? When applied to archival research, the metaphor of recovery makes methodologies for literary history seem like archaeological digs, connoting the excavation and possession of "lost" texts and their incorporation into an imagined physical body of the literary canon. To consider a text "recovered" is to imagine its material absence from and restoration to a larger textual body. But recovery does not necessitate a text's physical absence from literary archives, even while that recovery may necessitate work that makes that text more readily available in print and digital formats for study. Not simply a project of finding and reinstating texts, recovery involves broader methodologies for archival research, reading, and scholarship that extend beyond textual location and inclusion. In the absence of definite conditions by which we might understand a physical object to have been located and restored to a particular place, recovery's literal terms are more difficult to pin down. We might here ask: When has a text been sufficiently recovered? Because so much of marginalized people's literary history has been historically excluded from mainstream readership and study, the project of literary recovery is always ongoing; this work remains perpetually incomplete. But in recent academic discussions, recovery itself has also been acknowledged as imperfect and insufficient in practice. Following conversations

about the recovery of American women writers over the past decade, Michelle Burnham echoes the frustration expressed by writers such as Karen Kilcup, Pattie Cowell, Jean Lutes, Andrea Williams, and Susan Tomlinson, that women writers are often recovered only to be re-abandoned in anthologies, course syllabi, and literary histories, asking, “Why are recovery efforts so fragile, so fleeting?”² How can we tell that a text has been finally recovered? Is recovery ever permanent?

One question that perhaps precedes this one is: What constitutes recovery? Desirée Henderson notes that “recovery as it was originally defined in the 1980s and 1990s—when ‘recovery’ was understood to culminate in the publication of critical editions that exercised significant influence over literary studies and that were widely adopted in college classes—has almost entirely ceased, resulting in a re-entrenchment of the traditional canon and the ongoing marginalization of women’s writing.”³ Beyond print editions of texts, digitization projects have been similarly incomplete. Benjamin Fagan notes, for example, that “early black newspapers are completely absent from freely accessible digital databases.”⁴ Beyond the question of when “recovery” has been successful, we must add questions of sustainability and access, asking not only whether something has been recovered but also: Whose texts are recovered? And for whom?

If we regard recovery as a process of restoring “lost” texts to the canon, efforts to find and secure these texts’ place become central to our discussions. But here the metaphor of recovery leads us to another, insufficient one. Many of these items have not been lost so much as ignored. Many “recovered” texts are not simply “found” but recognized and valued by scholars with the expertise to interpret them. The processes of textual recovery are often not hunts for missing treasure but research practices that must reimagine criteria for textual valuation as preconditions for recovery work. Scholars must first contradict patriarchal, white supremacist, and colonialist notions of what is valuable, sometimes even before we can begin to identify—let alone assess—texts that might be recovered. The archival and editorial work of recovery demands that the center of power in a field shift its attention to archives, authors, genres, formats, locations, and media that previous powers-that-be have deemed it acceptable to ignore. Recovery projects do not only involve the location and reproduction of previously hidden texts that are then restored to the body of the canon. Recovered texts require something much broader in scope. In addition to shifting the parameters for evaluating recovered texts, they implicitly demand a reassessment of the larger disciplinary body itself.

In its fullest—and perhaps most useful—metaphorical sense, we must therefore interpret recovery broadly, not for what is recovered but for what is *in recovery*. A shift in focus from what is recovered to what is in recovery allows us to better acknowledge the ways archives are rehabilitated by recognizing the historical presence of white women writers and nonwhite writers and perhaps more importantly to shift focus away from passive bodies of texts to address our active and always-political methodologies for engagement with them. This sense of recovery

can be understood less as “gaining or regaining possession, esp. of something lost or taken away” and more in the broader sense of “restoration or return to a higher or better (esp. spiritual) state.”⁵ We might focus on scholars’ engagement with the archival body, rather than that body itself, as what we must restore to a higher or better state. What I do *not* mean here, however, is to read this metaphor of bodily recovery according to another definition as “the cure or healing of an illness, wound.”⁶ The body of texts and our engagement with that body, both of which we might regard as “in recovery,” require restoration because they have been historically exclusionary, not because they are ill. That is, the archive does not suffer from some natural affliction but has been deliberately shaped according to exclusionary parameters of valuation. What we might best regard as being in recovery, then, is not the archive itself but our various disciplinary engagements with it.

In this employment of the metaphor, we can see that it is more useful to resist the inherent ableism that often haunts metaphors of insufficiency and failure. White supremacy, like white fragility, as Robin DiAngelo describes, is not an illness but “a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.”⁷ To regard sexism or white supremacy as disability from which a body must recover is also to mischaracterize the refusals of those in positions of power who crafted this canon of texts through these deliberately exclusionary practices. It is to mistake what Koritha Mitchell has identified as mediocrity for merit.⁸ It is to allow histories of white supremacist and sexist exclusion a position of inculpability that they do not deserve. The necessity of recovery, then, does not name a case of illness but deliberately perpetuated neglect. Recovery as a metaphor becomes most useful when we recognize this fuller sense, understanding recovery not in terms of individually recovered texts but as a larger project of archival reparation that accurately represents the historical relations of power and upends them through more rigorous attention to our body of texts.

This shift in metaphorical orientation follows what Kinohi Nishikawa suggests when he asks scholars to “reflect on the lostness, or condition of being lost, that characterizes African American archives in the wake of institutionalization.”⁹ He promotes a different focus, which draws attention away from the simple fact of recovered texts and toward a broader assessment of the archive itself, to “a practice of archival discovery that attends to the conditions that would produce textual absence.”¹⁰ This shift in metaphorical focus is the current, innovative work of print culture studies. In her discussion of research in early African American women’s print cultures, Barbara McCaskill writes that “we may benefit from concentrating less exclusively on recovery and its uncertain outcomes and more on what the investigative process itself reveals about how to frame and then pursue questions . . . where to look for traces of them, how to interpret what we find, and, in the first place, why these mechanisms matter.”¹¹ Recovery necessitates our collective reframing of canons and innovating the way we teach and carry out both archival research and literary historical analysis. It also recognizes the historical

reasons why this work is necessary and desirable. If we see archives, canons, and methodologies as being “in recovery,” we better understand both the necessary work of, and exciting possibilities for, recovery that will transform and sustain our studies in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

¹ Eric Gardner and Joycelyn Moody, “Introduction: Black Periodical Studies,” *American Periodicals* 25, no. 2 (2015): 110.

² Michelle Burnham, “Literary Recovery in an Age of Austerity: A Review of Early American Reprints and Just Teach One,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 32, no. 1 (January 2015): 123.

³ Desirée Henderson, “Recovery and Modern Periodical Studies,” *American Periodicals* 27, no. 1 (2017): 2.

⁴ Benjamin Fagan, “Chronicling White America,” *American Periodicals* 26, no. 1 (2016): 11.

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “recovery,” accessed March 10, 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/159940.

⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “recovery.”

⁷ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Race* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 2.

⁸ Koritha Mitchell, “Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care,” *African American Review* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 254.

⁹ Kinohi Nishikawa, “The Archive on Its Own: Black Politics, Independent Publishing, and ‘The Negotiations,’” in “African American Print Cultures,” special issue, *MELUS* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 177–78.

¹⁰ Nishikawa, “Archive on Its Own,” 178.

¹¹ Barbara McCaskill, “Beyond Recovery: A Process Approach to Research on Women in Early African American Print Cultures,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 33, no. 1 (January 2016): 13.