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Martha Jane Nadell

American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism, Volume 30, Number 1, 2020, pp. 86-91 (Review)

Published by The Ohio State University Press



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Review Essay

Constructing Readers and Citing Writers: New Work on African American Literary History

Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature. By Daniel Hack. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. 304 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), \$24.94 (paper and ebook).

The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader. By Shawn Anthony Christian. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016. 152 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), \$25.95 (paper and ebook).

Reviewed by Martha Jane Nadell
Brooklyn College

There are some lovely photographs of Charles Chesnutt's library at his Lamont Avenue home in Cleveland, where he moved in 1904. In one, Chesnutt sits on a rocking chair, holding an open book that is illuminated by the lamp resting on the desk next to him. In another, Chesnutt sits at this desk, pen poised, as though he is about to write on a sheet of paper in front of him. There is another open book in this photograph, but this one is facedown on the desk, as though Chesnutt had just read something that inspired him to write. These two photographs, which so clearly link the act of reading to the act of writing, suggest that Chesnutt's identity as writer and his identity as reader were intertwined and mutually constitutive. And it is this idea that is taken up by two recent books about African American literature and its complex relationship to reading—and hence writing—practices.

Daniel Hack's fascinating and comprehensive *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature* explores an important yet understudied element of African American literature from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century: the deep engagement of African American literature with Victorian literature, most of which did not attend to African American life and history. Hack argues that major African American writers, including Chesnutt, read and reworked contemporaneous Victorian poetry and prose through a large range of citational practices. He calls this the "African Americanization" of Victo-

rian literature, a process that carried both political and social weight through its varied and even strategic uses of these British texts (19).

Hack calls his method “close reading at a distance,” in part to distinguish what he does from close readings that may decontextualize texts from their historical production and contextualize readings that may avoid granular consideration of form (3). Hack’s innovation is to read in a large range of citational practices—reprinting, rewriting, referencing, echoing, and even verbatim borrowing of plot, character, structure, and language—through what he calls “geographical dispersal and uptake” texts. Examining how a range of texts acquire meaning over time and across space, he offers nuanced interpretations of how original sources and their “afterlives” are interrelated (3). But this isn’t only Hack’s method. It is also the very subject of his investigation, for he claims that African American writers and editors were doing the same thing through their citational practices; they, too, were digging into Victorian sources, closely reading and then repurposing them to make a variety of claims about African American literature, history, and lives.

Hack’s work is, in many respects, a counter to and expansion of Henry Louis Gates’s project of identifying an African American literary tradition through intertextuality, the idea put forth in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988) and, later, in the landmark *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. If Gates points to earlier African American literature as the predominant if not sole archive for mid-nineteenth- to early twentieth-century African American literature, Hack identifies British literature of the same period as another, vitally important, archive. Through their transnational transformations of Victorian literature, African American writers endeavored “to cultivate racial solidarity, to claim a distinctive voice, and to establish a distinct tradition of literature” (7). Through multivalent citational practices, African American writers used Victorian literature not only to formulate their own works but also to claim an African American literary tradition that was distinct from the British one with which they engaged, to critique that British tradition and to make “something new” (9). Hack’s work, however, does not see this African Americanization as a one-way street. In investigating the complex and multiple ways African American writers read and deployed elements of contemporaneous Victorian poems and novels, he also claims these efforts encourage re-readings and reinterpretations of Victorian works. Hack argues that while Victorian literature became a source archive for African American writers, African American literature became an interpretative archive for Victorian literature.

Chapter 1, “Close Reading *Bleak House* at a Distance,” explores how African American editors and writers put *Bleak House* to work. Reading what he calls the novel’s “antislavery afterlives,” Hack positions *Frederick Douglass’ Paper’s* serialization of Dickens’s complete work, despite the novel’s exclusionary treatment of race and place, as inaugurating “the decades-long tradition of African Americanizing deployments of Victorian literature” (23). Although it may seem strange that Douglass reprinted a novel that actively excludes people of color in its commitment

to what Hack identifies as its “localism,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* harnessed *Bleak House* to construct a community of readers linked by shared politics and shared cultural references (38). Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* exhibits a different approach; it tracks, paraphrases, and rewrites the novel’s plot, dialogue, and characterization, at times verbatim, in ways that dismantle its problematic localism, thereby actively critiquing multiple elements of slavery.

Chapter 2, “(Re-)Racializing ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade,’” traces appearances and citations of Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade” from the mid-nineteenth century (in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*) through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a note on how, in 1990, the extremely proper butler Geoffrey recited it in a British accent on the popular television show “The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.” Hack argues that this long history of using the poem reflects African American writers’ interrogation of their relationship to the “dominant cultural tradition,” the “nature and politics of interracial cultural appropriation,” and questions of originality and plagiarism (17). Hack reports on the fascinating case of James McCune Smith, who asserted in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* that formal aspects of the most famous lines of Tennyson’s poem (“Cannon to the right of them”) are lifted from a Congolese chant, thus forcefully claiming the influence of African cultural forms on Western ones. Hack follows this discussion with an account of the many rewritings and transformations of the poem, as well as its use in schools and performances through the beginning of the twentieth century—rewritings and transformations that ultimately became a central part of an African American literary tradition.

Chapter 3, “Affiliating with George Eliot,” examines how writers from the 1860s to the early twentieth century cited, deployed, and modified the racial logic of Eliot’s “The Spanish Gypsy,” a poem that attends to multiracial identity and race switching. Writers were especially interested in the poem’s plot, which they transformed and deployed to encourage positive understandings of African American identity, a use that suggests that they more thoroughly understood the poem than many contemporary Victorian critics. Hack focuses especially on Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s reworking in *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869) and *Iola Leroy* (1892) of selective elements of poem’s plot and phrasing, as well as its interrogation of race, nation, and identity.

Hack’s next three chapters shift from tracing how individual Victorian texts were deployed to examine the variety of ways individual African American writers deployed a number of Victorian sources. Chapter 4, “Racial Mixing and Textual Remixing: Charles Chesnutt,” traces the “plot” of Chesnutt’s relationship to Victorian literature, suggesting that his drive toward intertextuality changed over time and only fully emerged in his later work, which critiques Victorian literature’s understandings of race (81). Hack traces how Chesnutt used the work of Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Eliot, Hardy, and Tennyson as sources—but problematic ones—to represent mixed-race individuals. Hack follows Chesnutt’s citational practices from his famous short story “The Wife of His Youth” (1898) through *The*

House behind the Cedars (1900) and *The Quarry* (posthumously published in 1909). He argues that Chesnut's intertextuality allows him to "move from reading white stories to writing black ones" that ultimately point out the limitations of Victorian representations of mixed-race individuals and create new visions (107).

Chapter 5, "Cultural Transmission and Transgression," follows Pauline Hopkins's engagement with Victorian literature, both through references to Tennyson and her "unacknowledged borrowing" of the work of Edward Bulwer Lytton (137). Rather than critique Hopkins's moves, Hack explores how Hopkins challenges and replaces the virulent racism evident in such works as the Mary Harwell Catherwood's 1893 novel *The White Islander* and in US literature to produce "counter-normative" and "transgressive" representations, especially of race, gender, and sexuality (139). Hack further argues that Hopkins's engagement with Victorian literature is also an engagement with African American literature, specifically with Chesnut's own African Americanization.

Chapter 6, "The Citational Soul of Black Folk: W. E. B. Du Bois," digs deeply into the citational practice of Du Bois's most famous work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Hack argues that Du Bois uses Victorian literature, by then a past tradition, and contemporary British literature to reflect on the African American literary tradition of engagement with Victorian literature. Hack focuses on how and to what ends Du Bois uses specific passages, texts, and authors, paired with the musical notations of the "Sorrow Songs"; this investigation is more expansive and nuanced than most critical inquiries into Du Bois's epigraphs, which do not distinguish enough among the range of epigraphs and which fail to take into account the long history of African American citational practices. Hack thus sees the epigraphs not as juxtaposing an African American musical tradition with a Western literary one but rather as juxtaposing an African American musical tradition with an African American literary tradition of citation.

Shawn Christian's thought-provoking *The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of the New Negro Reader* picks up—almost—where Hack leaves off. Rather than focusing solely on how certain texts deploy other texts, Christian investigates the different strategies used by writers, editors, and teachers to imagine and construct the African American reading public of African American texts. This move combats the marginalization of African Americans in one of the central political agendas of the Harlem Renaissance—racial uplift through appeals to the white reading public—and challenges scholarship that views the Harlem Renaissance as dependent on the "intercultural exchanges among black promoters, black writers, and black patrons" (7).

Christian roots efforts to construct an African American reader (a composite of "ideal, intended, and actual readers") and an African American reading public (an "interpretative community" with a "national black consciousness") in early twentieth-century print culture and the historical circumstances of the Harlem Renaissance, including the increase in literacy, the rise of the black press, the spate of publications of black-authored works, and the institutionalization of book clubs

and campaigns that encouraged reading (3, 7). Writers, editors, and academics imagined the “New Negro” reader, then, as part of efforts to foster “racial pride,” “cultural literacy,” and the ability to engage in “critical interpretation of racial representation” among African Americans—forging a “public culture” founded more on “rhetorical gestures” than actual interchange among writers, editors, and readers (7, 115).

Christian begins his work early in the period. His first chapter, “Creating Critical Frameworks: Three Models for the New Negro Reader,” looks at the varied ways James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Sterling Brown closely read and reviewed African American texts in journals and anthologies. Although they engaged in literary criticism that served almost as instruction in how to read, and hence write, in various genres and about various issues related to African America, they disagreed about what should be emphasized. Through reflections on dialect and depictions of African Americans from varied class backgrounds and places, they actively constructed models for their New Negro readers.

The second chapter, “In Search of Black Writers (and Readers): *Crisis’s* and *Opportunity’s* Literary Criticism,” focuses on the literary contests in two of the most important magazines of the Harlem Renaissance. These contests offered magazine readers models for how to read and write, articulated connections between the craft of writing and the representation of race, nurtured writers by providing funds and publicity to help create a body of African American modernist work, and promoted positive shifts in race relations and racial identity.

Rather than examining what many have argued is the bible of the Harlem Renaissance, the third chapter of Alain Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* (1925), “Beyond *The New Negro*: Artistry, Audience, and the Harlem Renaissance Literary Anthology,” explores three anthologies that followed it: Charles Johnson’s *Ebony and Topaz* (1929); Countee Cullen’s *Caroling Dusk* (1927); and Otelia Cromwell, Lorenzo Dow Turner, and Eva Beatrice Dykes’s *Readings from Negro Authors* (1931). Differing in their political and literary agendas, these anthologies gathered works from a range of styles, genres, and themes. They became symbols of “the racial body,” directly addressing readers and both exposing them to and guiding their reading of the newest and, in the minds of their editors, the strongest African American literary output.

Chapter 4, “Pedagogy for Critical Readership: James Weldon Johnson’s English 123,” uses Johnson’s handwritten notes from his teaching at Fisk University to consider Johnson’s sense of an African American literary tradition. In detailing how he read, Johnson provided his students with instructions on how they should read and, more broadly, the manner in which African American reading should happen. This pedagogical approach was a central element of the construction of the New Negro reader; indeed, we can see all of the efforts Christian details as possessing pedagogical impulses.

Let us return, then, to the photographs with which I began. If we contemplate them in light of Hack’s and Christian’s works, we can imagine Chesnutt reading

not just any book, but a work from across the Atlantic, written by a white, British author. And after he moved from his armchair to his desk and set the book face-down, keeping it close but leaving it at the same time, we can imagine Chesnutt enacting a citational practice. He began the process of transforming his reading into something of his own and of an African American literary tradition. We can also imagine actual African American readers taking cues from Chesnutt's library and his positions in the photographs and curating their own collection of books written by African American authors, reading them and linking themselves to a larger community of like-minded readers. The work of both Hack and Christian thus provides us with important views on ways that writers, editors, and critics helped construct African American literary histories and communities.