

Introduction

A Call for Other Ways of Reading

As the subtitle indicates, this book is about literacy, social change, and African American women. I chose the title because of reactions I have consistently received over the years when I have presented papers on early generations of African American women writers and their achievements. Without exception, after a presentation, at least one person—sometimes from surprise, or with an awareness of deprivation, or with indignation or embarrassment, or sometimes with a sense of what I have come to call deep disbelief¹—at least one person will say to me, “I’ve never heard of these women.” I have been compelled to tolerate this reaction as a truth, even though from my research I know quite well that African American women have actively and consistently participated over the years in public discourse and in literate arenas. They have conveyed in many forms their ideas, dreams, visions, and insights. I know quite well that their actions have made a difference in terms of their advocacy and activism within an array of both noble and ordinary causes. I also know quite well that the lines of accreditation, the rights of agency, and the rights to an authority to make knowledge and to claim expertise have often not been extended in a systematic way by this society to African American women. Quite the contrary.

On one level in addressing this reality, I have assumed a long-range view, with the intent of suggesting some trends about the general landscape of African American women’s literate experiences within the context of systemic matrices of oppression. In this regard, what history demonstrates is that for many reasons (racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, political and economic oppression, and so on), barriers have been constructed within our society around many people’s lives and thereby around their literate practices, with African American women being one clear example. African American women have been persistently subjected

to measures of value and achievement that have been set and monitored by others, who have not had their interests or potential in mind and who have been free historically to discount, ignore, and disempower them. These barriers, though variable, are socially, politically, and culturally defined, and the impact of them in this case is that they have cast the lives of African American women in shadow. The barriers have served as filters, screening from view the women themselves, systematically blocking out the very possibility of a substantial crediting of their achievements, such that these achievements, when they do seep into view, are typically considered exceptional rather than as part and parcel of a pattern. The presence of African American women as writers of worth has typically been neutralized and their achievements devalued.

Despite such constraints, however, my research indicates that African American women's resistance to sociopolitical barriers has been considerable and that, although their achievements may have been devalued, they have not been thoroughly neutralized or contained. From the beginning of their opportunities to learn, African American women have engaged consistently and valiantly in acts of literacy that have yielded remarkable rewards for themselves and for others. Periodically, therefore, these women have managed to surprise the world, to break out from whatever containments would seek to enclose them. Periodically, their talents have flowed past the barriers, reconstituted themselves, and become noticeable as "traces of a stream." Given impediments that serve to discourage recognition and accreditation, however, when moments of reconstitution occur, the world of letters and the society at large have tended to speak of these moments, quite ironically, as moments of "re-birth" and "renaissance," with the Harlem Renaissance and the African American women writer's renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s being two distinctive examples: times when talents and abilities that were in shadow trickled into the light. In effect, such labels indicate in an odd way that the society was reacting to resistance, that is, noticing the *presence* of those formerly unnoticed and unacknowledged as if to say, "Oh! There you are. I didn't see you before. How long have you been standing there?"

This view of reaction to *presence* provides a framework for understanding a follow-up question I sometimes hear as "Are there others?"—which I often interpret as "Who are these people really? Aren't they truly

unique and exceptional? They're not typical or representative, are they? Shouldn't we just be surprised and move on? How did such success happen?" At these moments, I delight in the opportunity to say: "Yes. There were others. The list actually seems endless." And, "No, now that I know more about them, I'm really not surprised at all either by their numbers or by the quality of their achievements."

At such moments, I have the opportunity to acknowledge the stream that is visible as evidence of the sea that until now has passed unnoticed. In directly addressing the question "Are there others?" I explain that we are apparently experiencing in our contemporary world yet one more cycle of reconstitution, one more breakthrough of talent and ability. I explain also that, over the generations, African American women's achievements as language users have been surprisingly consistent. I suspect that, in being so, these activities have actually gained in both volume and momentum over the years. I explain that by many measures we have evidence in the current era of a renewal of strength within a less hostile context, a revitalization that seems to be giving rise, as we speak, not only to renewed strength but to new and unknown directions as well.

In this work I take into account this longer-range view. My intent generally is to view the acquisition of literacy as a dynamic moment in the lives of African American women, as people with desires for agency and authority in the use of written language. To facilitate this analysis, I have developed a theoretical framework within which to consider how early generations of African American women incorporated literacy into their lives and how they used literacy systematically as a variable tool. The theory begins with the notion that a community's material conditions greatly define the range of what this group does with the written word and, to a significant degree, even how they do it. The pivotal idea is that what human beings do with writing, as illustrated by what African American women have done, is an expression of self, of society, and of self in society.

Operating from this longer-range view of African American women's work, I seek to reconstruct a pathway to rhetorical prowess specific to their experiences, outlining a matrix of events drawn from the realities of African American women's history. In explaining the matrix, I present a framework and methodology for contextualizing the literate behavior of

African American women in time and over time. My intent is to underscore, at this point in our scholarship, that we gain in an understanding of literacy in general from views of literacy in its particulars, from placing the “thick descriptions” of the literate practices of a particular group in the company of similar descriptions of other groups. In other words, this analysis is rooted in the idea that we need a more concrete sense of human variety in the use of literacy in order to support the abstractions that we might very well draw more clearly at a later point in this analytical process as we place well-told stories of literacy next to other well-told stories of literacy.

From my perspective, however, it is not possible to render the complex story of African American women as literate beings in monodimensional terms. To interpret evidence more fully, we need not just a long view but a kaleidoscopic view. We need a sense of the landscape, certainly, but simultaneously we also need closeup views from different standpoints on the landscape. It has been crucial to this analysis, in fact, that I do not remain focused solely on generalities. My imperative has been to identify a specific set of women within the more diverse group of African American women and to consider this subcategory multidimensionally as a case in point.

I chose for this study elite African American women, focusing particularly on elites of the nineteenth century, an era during which the shift in educational opportunity after the Civil War gave rise for the first time to the development of a cadre of well-educated women. I assigned *eliteness* to this group based, not just on class privilege (though economic status is indeed one marker of eliteness), but more on the positions of status they occupied within their own communities. I chose to look at women who laid claim through their families and through their own actions to the label *well respected*.

Generally, in the African American community, *well respected* is not a term to which high economic status is always the first measure. Community status derives also from other measures. These women were well educated in communities that valued education. They were often professional women, particularly teachers, journalists, and community organizers in communities with critical needs, and they served these communities well. They were women from families of *good* reputation, and/or they were

married to men of good reputation. Further, these women had also been diligent in building for themselves reputations as good and honorable women who demonstrated daily, in the face of hostility, that they were self-respecting, that they operated always with a sense of propriety, that they understood and accepted the requirement during this era that African American women needed always to be *ladies*.² They were perceived and perceived themselves to be hard-working, socially conscious, and ideologically committed to activism and advocacy. Perhaps more important, this combination of factors meant that, unlike many of their less fortunate sisters, these women had access to power and influence, and because of their elite status, they also had the luxury, the class privilege, and the time to use this access in their own interests and in the interests of others.

In addition to looking at a specific set of African American women, I also chose to look at one type of literate practice, rather than presuming I was able to consider all. Early groups of African American women writers wrote in many genres, and many of them wrote across genres. To localize the analysis, therefore, I chose to examine their nonfiction prose, concentrating mainly on the essay. In terms of form, the essay is variable, with unique potential for those who speak or might be compelled to speak against prevailing sentiments—in this case in the interest of social change. The essay among African American women is a long-standing genre of choice, such that focusing on essay writing as a specific literate practice offers a distinctive opportunity as an analytical springboard.

In bringing together these multiple viewpoints for an examination of African American women's literate experiences, my intent is to state unequivocally that African American women are not monolithic in terms of either personhood or literate practices. In making this statement, my goal is not to concentrate on building a place for African American women that is defined by a sense of essentialism. Actually, my goal is quite the opposite. I seek instead to acknowledge that I am looking generally at patterns of behavior, but specifically at just one set of women who vary even within the distinctive category I have assigned to them. My effort, therefore, is one of balance. While trying to resist essentialist analyses, I am trying at the same time to identify and to contextualize general patterns of literate behavior. The effort is to document and account for

what was accomplished by elite nineteenth-century women as a cadre of educated professional women, and to suggest how their activities might connect, again multidimensionally, to the practices of others both before and after them in the making of various traditions.

In this regard, I am very much aware that comparisons between African American women and other groups are certainly possible, by gender, race, class, genre, purposes, and so on. There are some practices that connect well with the practices of African American men, or with women of other races and ethnicities, or with other writers of essays, and so forth. This analysis, however, does not seek to make comparison a central methodology, in either an intragroup or an intergroup way. Although such comparisons are instructive and ultimately critical to a full understanding of how literacy works, I prefer to take as a point of departure the analysis and interpretation of the particle (that is, elite African American women in the nineteenth century) in a definable and defensible context (literacy as social action), rather than taking on as an initial endeavor all that should be accounted for in a comprehensive analysis of the full wave of possible literate activity.

In making this distinction, I recognize that, to the extent that the experiences of African American women overlap with the experiences of others, so too is it likely that any conclusions I draw about their literate practices might well apply to the literate practices of others. Since my intent at this point is to make a case for clarity and understanding and not for separateness or uniqueness, I expect such possibilities. With this project, in fact, my view is that the task at this point is to reconsider the information base in specific ways and then to engage in a systematic process of re-formation and review in the interest of constructing dynamic analytical frameworks with more interpretive power, that is, a greater potential to account for variety and pattern and to explain them. The immediate challenge is to make visible many features, factors, relationships, people, and practices that heretofore were not visible—to articulate what is there and what seems to be going on. Further, the challenge is to resist a drifting toward speedy claims, static conclusions, or overgeneralizations. Although I believe we should expect theory and practice to shift in the ongoing accumulation of knowledge and understanding, my desire with this project is not to claim either distinctiveness or sameness but to make better sense. A preliminary step in making sense is learning to look, listen,

and look again, to think well, and to speak as though knowledge is now and has always been in the making.

Given this attitude, I am making no claims in this book for the exclusivity of African American women's actions or the exclusivity of their importance as writers in the larger scheme of things. This statement indicates that, although I believe there are distinctions to be made, I accept that there is much work still to do in this area before hierarchical assertions of excellence and quality may need to take priority in either theory or practice. I also accept the reality that, although this book contributes to the knowledge base, it cannot be expected to do in its limited pages everything necessary to clarify all literate practices and achievements of all African American women.

Worthy of note in explaining the choices I have made is the organization of the chapters. There is an identifiable progression in thought presented across the chapters, but the progress is not always linear. It might be more apt to say that the chapters do indeed have a chronology that plots the experiences of African American women along a trajectory. For example, I start in the present, flash back to precolonial Africa, and generally build from there chronologically back to the present. However, in keeping with the need for a dynamic view, the pattern of development—though shaped by chronology—is more webbed than linear. I seek to enrich the vision of the reader as I render this account by bringing texture into the story—taking time to explore each piece as a distinctive dimension of the pathway to understanding. I have tried consciously to resist being driven by the desire to assure that each step is a forward movement. By contrast, the movement tends instead to be forward-looking, perhaps, but also somewhat meandering and recursive. The story of African American women's acquisition and use of literacy is complex; its rendering should, likewise, be guided by the need to complicate the reader's vision rather than simplify it.

In order to facilitate the reading process and to signal the way in which I see three basic viewpoints converging, I have organized the chapters into three sections: a rhetorical view, a historical view, and an ideological view. It is the combination of these three perspectives that constitutes what I am calling the "thick description" of the literate practices highlighted in this book. There are two chapters in part 1: "In Search of Rivers: Womanist Writers and the Essay" and "Toward an Analytical Model for

Literacy and Sociopolitical Action.” In chapter 1, I use *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* to examine African American women’s habitual use of literacy for sociopolitical action. I establish essay writing as the form of choice in these practices, and I contextualize the practices as part of the whole cloth of communicative experience. In chapter 2, I construct a model, designed to clarify literacy as a sociocognitive practice; to distinguish the sense-making strategies of African American women; and to establish the roles and functions of essay writing as particular to a systematic making of meaning in the habitual use of language for sociopolitical action.

In part 2, I focus on a historical view of African American women. I concentrate particularly on the acquisition of literacy and the development of rhetorical sensibilities. In chapter 3, “The Genesis of Authority: When African Women Became American,” my intent is to reconstruct a historical pathway for literate behavior; to outline a matrix of events, values, and practices drawn from accounts of African American women’s history; and to connect this matrix to the literate practices of African American women over time, in light especially of what these practices suggest about *ethos* (the formation and development of a writing self) and rhetorical decision-making. In chapters 4 and 5, I move to talk about literate behavior and social action. In chapter 4, “Going Against the Grain: The Acquisition and Use of Literacy,” I start with the acquisition of literacy among African American women as the development of a new tool in a new context. I discuss the social and political environments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as they shaped the contexts for literacy acquisition and language use and as they supported the identification of clear and present mandates for social and political action. I demonstrate how these contexts operated in the lives of specific women (among them Lucy Terry Prince, Charlotte Forten, Clara Howard, and Selena Sloan Butler), and I assert that these circumstances are significant to the process whereby African American women developed cravings to participate in public discourse and to effect social and political change. I use Maria W. Stewart, the earliest-known African American woman writer of political essays, as a case in point, to show how literacy becomes an instrument for change.

In chapter 5, “From This Fertile Ground: The Development of Rhetor-

ical Prowess,” I discuss how African American women enhanced their literate resources and developed rhetorical prowess as they acquired higher education and entered the world of both paid and volunteer work. I take into account the emergence of a cadre of professional women and how professional identities were incorporated into ethos formation and the creation of a writing self. I pay particular attention to the rise of the Black Clubwomen’s Movement, a movement ripe both for the development of rhetorical expertise and for engaging in social and political action. In addition, I examine the African American periodical press as a primary arena for the participation of African American women in public discourse and thereby to some extent in public policy-making. I end this chapter with a discussion of the tradition of essay writing in order to acknowledge that essays, as an accommodating nonfiction form, have consistently held a central and vibrant place in the text production of African American women, in their use of language to speak out, and in fulfilling their desires to participate actively in establishing and implementing social and political agenda. I emphasize that an examination of nonfiction writing offers other benefits as well, pointing out the extent to which such texts offer evidence, not only of traditions of rhetorical prowess but also of traditions of intellectualism and community leadership. In chapter 5, I draw examples from a variety of essay writers, over time, to show through this type of textual analysis that the essaying practices of African American women have been both habitual and systematic.

In part 3, my intent is to concentrate more precisely on methodological and ideological perspectives. In the last chapter, chapter 6, “A View from a Bridge: Afrafeminist Ideologies and Rhetorical Studies,” I narrate my own learning curve in carrying out this project. When I look back over the years spent completing the project, I realize I have indeed learned many things. I realize I have things to say (about methodology, for example) and that there are lessons I can share with others who may have common or complementary concerns. This chapter recounts the process of my research and attempts to extrapolate, in a more precise way, a methodology, using the term *historical ethnography*, so that this approach might actually be useful to someone other than myself.

In essayistic fashion, these six chapters tell a winding tale concerning the development of a tradition of rhetorical prowess and a rendering of

this tradition in scholarship. Each section focuses attention in its own fashion: on the arena in which literacy happens, on the ways and means of a language use, on the art and artistry of a particular language user, on frameworks that offer interpretive possibilities. In creating this textured viewing of African American women's practices, I am in effect extending a call to readers for other ways of reading—a call that resonates with what I suggest in this introduction is a demand from the subjects of study (literacy and African American women) for a shift in paradigms in research and in scholarship, or for other ways of analyzing and composing.

From the perspective of reading (as compared with analyzing, interpreting, and writing), as experienced readers of scholarship, we have the habit of readily expecting to affirm, question, or dismiss claims, and to see evidence in a fairly predictable pattern of development, in keeping with the discourse expectations of a given field. I suspect that this book will disrupt these habits in what may ultimately prove rather peculiar ways. My suspicions raise questions about the extent to which our reading habits and preferences—like our writing habits and preferences—might be more culturally influenced than we acknowledge. I suspect that this book might work better if readers are willing to delay their desire for claims and assertions to be immediately and predictably resolved. My approach might be more satisfying if readers recognize a claim, certainly, but are then willing, in a sense, to “run a tab” for evidence, not just in waiting to see that there is indeed evidence but in working with me, perhaps more actively than may be their habit, to see how the evidence variously connects as the story unravels, viewpoint by viewpoint.

In light of this call for other ways of reading, this book is indeed an invitation to listen to a story. As a writer, my obligation in rendering the text is to be clear and accurate, as with all scholarship, and I do indeed seek to fulfill this obligation. However, in the case of this scenario, where so much is unknown and undocumented, a second responsibility is to hypothesize about what remains missing in a way that is reasonable and useful for further research. Moreover, given what we have managed to document to this point, yet another responsibility emerges. As I spend time explaining in chapter 6, because I identify so closely with the subject, I feel deeply obligated to be respectful of women such as Maria W. Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and so many others whom they

represent. I am obliged to assume that their lives and work as African American women were fully laden with value and that it is up to us, the researchers and scholars, to discover the nature and extent of that value.

The effort to be true both to the tasks of scholarship and to the task of respecting the subjects of the scholarship is the process whereby I have experienced the most compelling desire to connect myself, as an African American woman, directly to this story. This desire manifests itself most clearly in the voice I use throughout the book. Primarily, the stance I assume is the stance of the typical scholar. I position myself at a respectable distance and speak with an acceptable amount of dispassion, as required for scholarly voices—most of the time. In fact, I do so because I agree that such a stance is generally appropriate.

In spite of my acceptance of this scholarly role and responsibility, however, occasionally I find I cannot, nor do I want to, set aside the fact that the story of African American women and literacy is my story too. There are moments, even after close editing, when I use the pronoun “we” and quite clearly signal that this “we” is not literacy scholars, the community I ally myself with throughout most of the book, but African American women. In other words, I shift the viewpoint deliberately, consciously, and I intend for myself to be viewed as one among those who constitute the subject of this discourse. I consider these moments to be an acknowledgment of what Amy Shuman explains as strategic romanticism.³ I acknowledge my connections at these points quite simply because it seems it would be disingenuous and inappropriate for me to do otherwise. I realized fairly early in the project that I had no desire to be totally dispassionate, nor to assume a “pseudo-objective” stance. To the contrary, I have come to see advantages in acknowledging connections, in considering the ethical implications of these connections, and in admitting the biases that must inevitably inform any scholarship that might be produced as a result of an acknowledgment of ethical space.

As a result, what I do claim is that, in terms of the intellectual enterprise, I have used methodologies and composing strategies that are well rooted in current literacy scholarship. At the same time, I make the case that being well rooted in the discipline does not automatically dictate that I must set aside the passion this work generates in me. I have come to believe that a scholar can be scholarly and still be ethically and pathetically

connected to the subject. What, then, needs to be acknowledged (as opposed to being apologized for) is scholarly viewpoint and vested interests. Consequently, I openly and proudly acknowledge my identity with this story. My view is that my personal passion, in its openness, does not change one iota the realities of these women's lives. Despite the places where passion might seep through this text, the story does indeed speak for itself, which makes my alliance with its central characters virtually a by-product of its power to hold and to absorb the attention. Moreover, in suggesting that scholarly viewpoint and interests be treated as normal rather than abnormal, I remain confident of the critical abilities of readers. I believe that the readers of this volume will be astute enough to make their own sense of the details I present and the process whereby I present them, and I have faith that the sense they will seek to make, whatever visions of reality they hold, will be positively and productively affected by my rendering of these lives.

Ultimately, my goal in this work is to establish a suitable place in the world of words and action for the contributions and achievements of African American women writers. In the context of a nation where race, class, gender, and culture matter, these women have been not only innovative but also bold and courageous. Their contributions and achievements stand; I am pleased to pay tribute, with all that scholarship will allow, to the hands and minds that made it so.