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African Americans and the Quest for Freedom

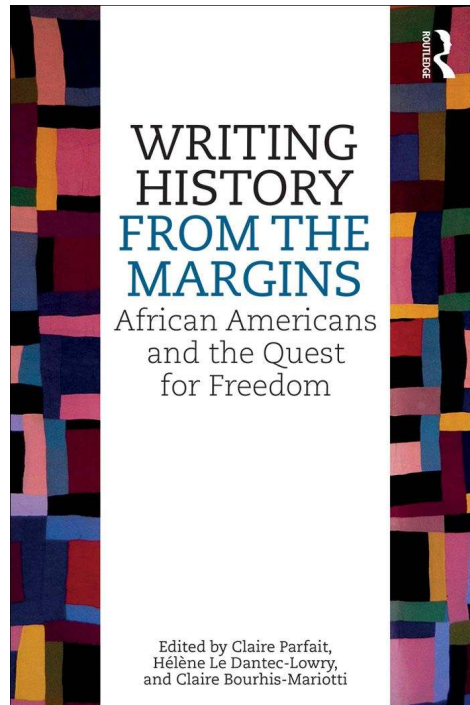
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- 1 This interdisciplinary volume is assuredly a collective endeavor: the contributions convincingly edited by three leading French scholars in the field of African American studies reflect part of the work done within the scope of the three-year project “Writing History from the Margins: the Case of African Americans,” supported by Sorbonne-Paris Cité. Associating American and French scholarship, the collection combines several approaches, and perfectly embodies current trends in cultural history, with an emphasis on materiality.
- 2 The two parts, “New Perspectives on African American History”, and “Material and Visual Culture and the Writing of History” are carefully balanced and connected not only through their common object, but also through their focus on print culture.
- 3 As stated in the introduction, the essays are linked “by the desire to investigate the productive power of the margins” (3), and informed by the notion that if African American history – “history with an agenda” – is inherently a “site of resistance and activism,” so is its historiography. While the scholars’ object is “history with an agenda,” they are themselves engaged in “correcting” a national history, and in rescuing historians and artefacts that were possibly doomed to oblivion. History helps to challenge collective amnesia, just as individual endeavors to make, and collect, cultural and artistic artefacts is a way of preserving memory. Another thread running through the volume is the historiography of African American history, as the volume answers the call for a closer focus on Black historians sounded by historians such as John Ernest, Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, or earlier still, Benjamin Quarles.¹
- 4 The first two essays by Claire Parfait and Cheryl Knott exemplify a book history approach, responding to Leon Jackson’s call for cross-fertilization of African American studies and book history². Concentrating on two distinct periods, the late 19th century, an era ripe for the commodification of memory, and the 1930s, the two chapters recover historians and their work to “fill out the history of black historians” (27), while addressing the question of the professionalization of history in the United States. Why do books disappear? How can we map the lifecycle of works of history? Comparing the publication histories of Joseph T. Wilson’s *Black Phalanx* and George Washington Williams’s *History of the Negro Troops*,³ both issued in 1888, Claire Parfait looks at the promotion and selling strategies of the publishing houses, to ultimately consider the paradoxical disappearance of Wilson’s book in 20th century historiography, while Williams’s was hailed as a major landmark. Book historians will find especially insightful Parfait’s use of the list of subscribers for *Black Phalanx* to assess a profile of the actual readers of the book. Cheryl Knott’s study evinces great methodological rigour, tracing the steps in the publication and the reception of a textbook, *The Negro, Too, in American History* (1938). Exploring the forgotten



papers of its author, amateur historian Merl Eppse, Knott points out the specificity of the southern publishing scene, in Tennessee, and reflects on the position of a “semi-professional” historian, compared with his contemporary Carter G. Woodson. Interest is further heightened by the fact that Eppse is the only historian in the volume who was not an outright activist.

- 5 In the third chapter, drawing on The Digital Archive of Massachusetts Anti-Slavery and Anti-Segregation Petitions from Harvard University, Nicole Topich concentrates on this particular print form in a generally neglected period when petitions were still being addressed, between the Revolution and the Civil War. She connects these petitions with a tradition going back to the Revolution, and identifies many of the petitioners as writers of history themselves. The connection of these texts with “histories of the larger transformations in antislavery activities among northern free black communities”(47), and their inclusion of personal *histories*, make them invaluable sources for historians of abolition. Indeed, she contends that Wells Brown’s and Nell’s historical works were based on such narratives⁴. The last section in the first part, “From the Margins with a Legacy of Agency in Africity: An Encyclopedic Idea,” examines not the publication of a book, but rather, its *idea*, revising prior scholarship on the *Encyclopedia Africana*, whose concept was for a long time been attributed to W.E.B. Du Bois. Tracing its origins to journalist and self-taught historian John E. Bruce, Michael Benjamin demonstrates how the project was deeply grounded in the specific context of the 1890s, when the “history of progress” was paramount. In the process he reinstates Bruce in the narrative of amateur historians, underlining the importance of one of his influences, Edward Wilmot Blyden.
- 6 Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry’s essay offers a perfect transition to the second part: this study of a *House Servant’s Directory* (1827)⁵, authored by Robert Roberts, an African American domestic servant, is another demonstration of the power of the margins, or might we say, of the “intermediate,” as Roberts negotiated between his activism and his position as servant to a white family. The text, examined through the prisms of race and class, constitutes a unique source for cultural historians: never openly challenging cultural and social norms, it testifies to the ambivalent position of its author, subservient and yet actively militant. The chapter further shows the ways in which domestic service could be considered as a social stepping stone, and an inherently dignified position, allowing Roberts to redefine manhood to include the value of honor integral to this kind of work.
- 7 The next two chapters examine “the fabric of history”: slave clothing (Katie Knowles), and African American Quilts (Géraldine Chouard). Knowles’s contribution is perhaps the most surprising, bringing together two strands of scholarship, the history of slavery and fashion studies, not spontaneously associated, in an attempt to demonstrate “the imperative that dress be a central part of the analysis as scholars continue to explore the history of race and slavery in the United States” (89). She contends that slaves manipulated their clothing allowances, ultimately turning a dress code into a site of resistance. Her essay, however, raises questions pertaining to historical sources for the history of slavery: the relatively scarce extant pieces of clothing, their uncertain dating, complicate the study of slaves’ fashion. In addition, the different geographical origins of such pieces, and ultimately, the exceptionality of the selected corpus, make it difficult to come to general conclusions.
- 8 In “African American Quilts. Color, Creation, and (Counter)Culture,” Géraldine Chouard takes us on a journey through the history and historiography of this particular cultural artefact, “a major cultural and rhetorical art form”. If quilts can, literally, recount

historical experience, they also represent a material source for writing history. Participating in the history of African American protest, from their origins as emblems of “collective, cooperative work” in the 19th century, to more individual and creative endeavors in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, African American quilts attest the agency of women, as well as their role in the abolitionist movement. Beyond historical issues, the debate over these artefacts – “forgotten” in general exhibitions of patchwork until the 1970s, then dismissed as southern folklore – brings us to envision quilts in the context of the discussion on the boundaries “between high art and low art” (120) of the early 2000s.

- 9 The volume concludes on two essays on visual arts. James Smalls excavates the seminal work of forgotten social, political activist and art historian Freeman Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: an Interpretation* (1916), which aimed to “re-inscribe African Americans from the margins to the center of American cultural and political history” (132) ⁶. Murray – one of the founders of the Niagara Movement – vowed to deconstruct racialized representations, challenging in the process what he perceived as “elitist assumptions” in the writings of – white—American art scholars at the turn of the 20th century (134). While Smalls hails Murray’s “pedagogical audacity,” he does not conceal his contradictions, including the chauvinism and gendered assumptions that transpired in his dislike of certain works, or his methodological shortcomings. In the last article, Amy Kirschke focuses on Romare Bearden’s lesser-known, early cartoons, published in the 1930s, which proved more political and militant than his later art. Once again print culture is here central: Kirschke’s artistic and intellectual “biography” of Bearden emphasizes the role of magazines and of editors, in particular Du Bois, in shaping the cartoonist’s vision. In student magazines as well as in *Opportunity*, *The Crisis* and *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Bearden found publishing outlets and a place to complete his apprenticeship. While one might disagree with the characterization of Bearden as a historian, this contribution is an interesting piece in intellectual history, tracing the role of German artist George Grosz and of different institutions in the nurturing of Bearden’s talent.
- 10 By concentrating on history and historians, this volume takes African American studies down a little-trodden path, offering new and complementary approaches in cultural history. Historians of slavery, abolition, and Civil Rights will find much to reflect upon in the wide array of sources herein presented, as well as in the stimulating historiographical developments. This inherently interdisciplinary collection evinces the vitality of African American studies on both sides of the Atlantic, moving beyond the study of literature.

NOTES

1. John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (2004), Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered* (2010), Stephen Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African American Historical Writing in 19th-century America* (2009),

Benjamin Quarles, *Black Mosaic: Essays in Afro-American History and Historiography* (1988), Darlene Clark Hine, *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future* (1986).

2. See for example Leon Jackson, "The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian : African American Cultures of Print. The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 13 (2010), 250-308.

3. Joseph T. Wilson, *Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States in the Wars of 1775-1812, 1861-65* (American Publishing Company, 1888), and George Washington Williams, *History of the Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865; Preceded by a Review of the Military Services of Negroes in Ancient and Modern Times* (Harper & Brothers, 1888).

4. See William Wells Brown's historical works, *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863); *The Negro in the American Rebellion, His Heroism and His Fidelity* (1867); *The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancements of the Colored Race* (1874); and William Cooper Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855).

5. Robert Roberts, *The House Servant's Directory or, A Monitor for Private Families* (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1827).

6. Smalls notes that the only biography of Murray to date was authored by his great-granddaughter (Anita Hackley-Lambert, *F.H.M. Murray: First Biography of a Forgotten Pioneer for Civil Justice*, 2006.) Murray's papers are held by the Moorland-Spingarn Center at Howard University.

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