

INTRODUCTION

THE AFRICAN AMERICANIZATION OF VICTORIAN LITERATURE

One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman,

An infant crying in the night,
An infant crying for the light;
And with *no language—but a cry*.

—ANNA JULIA COOPER, *A VOICE FROM THE SOUTH*

Reprinting Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* in an antislavery newspaper. Reimagining David Copperfield as a mixed-race youth in the antebellum South. Arguing that Alfred, Lord Tennyson plagiarized "The Charge of the Light Brigade" from an African war chant. Using George Eliot's poetry to promote African American solidarity. Reading a poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti as an allegory of African American literary history.

These are some of the many unlikely and intriguing things African American writers and editors did to and with Victorian works of literature in the second half of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries. No marginal phenomenon or fringe practice, these transnational, cross-racial transpositions and repurposings were often the handiwork of major figures in the African American literary and intellectual tradition, including Frederick Douglass, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Charles Chesnut, Pauline Hopkins, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Yet almost all these deployments of and responses to Victorian literature remain little known; indeed, some of the most sustained and provocative instances have gone entirely unrecognized.

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Reaping Something New sets out to recover, make sense of, and learn from this remarkable yet neglected history.

As this book will show, nineteenth-century British literature was woven deeply into the fabric of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African American literature and print culture. Not only were African American writers and editors immersed in the transatlantic literary culture of the day, and not only were they working with and against prevailing generic norms and conventions: in addition, they regularly cited and reworked and repurposed specific features of selected Victorian poems and novels at the levels of diction, phrasing, dialogue, description, characterization, and plot. Typically, the texts chosen for such treatment evince little or no interest in the historical situation, political concerns, or everyday lives of African Americans. Yet through acts of what I will call *African Americanization*, these texts were viewed through the lens of and made to speak to these matters and used to produce new texts in which they are central.

“Whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms,” James A. Snead argues in a seminal essay on black culture, “we are indeed not viewing ‘the same thing’ but its transformation,”¹ and the practices explored in this book prove both inherently and intentionally transformative—even when they take the form of verbatim borrowing. In other words, through their engagement with Victorian literature, the figures studied here were “reaping something new.” I borrow this phrase from Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall”—as we shall see, a poem with a blatantly racist speaker that is nonetheless, or therefore, made use of by both Charles Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins. In these instances as throughout *Reaping Something New*, we will find that close engagement with Victorian literature represented no mere capitulation to existing constraints, but instead constituted a deliberate political strategy and means of artistic expression. We will also find that this practice did not impede or undercut the development of a distinctive African American literary culture and tradition, but on the contrary contributed directly to its development. It did so through the very repetition of African Americanizing engagements, repetition that grew increasingly self-conscious and self-referential, as writers and editors built on, responded to, and positioned themselves in relation to prior instances.

Victorian literature’s role as an important archive for the production of African American literature and print culture, I will also argue, makes African American literature and print culture an important archive for the study of Victorian literature. Recovering the African American uses of Victorian literature not only increases our knowledge of its dissemination, mobility,

and adaptability but also, and thereby, contributes to our understanding of that literature itself. The responses Victorian works garnered and uses to which they were put—how they were read, recontextualized, retooled, and reimagined—powerfully defamiliarize these works and force a rethinking of their ideological investments, political import, and cultural significance.

While African American engagements with Victorian literature thus shed light on various aspects of that literature, they tend especially to provide new perspectives on its treatment of race. This may seem unsurprising, but it should not be taken for granted: as noted above, race is not obviously central to many of the Victorian works taken up by African American writers and editors, and depictions of African Americans in these works are virtually nonexistent. Yet rather than simply calling attention to this absence or marginal presence, African Americanizations make newly salient the specific ways and ends to which Victorian novels and poems do or do not represent individuals of African descent (and members of nonwhite races more generally). Conversely, if paradoxically, African Americanization can also call into question the importance of race in texts in which it has always seemed central, as we shall see especially when we come to George Eliot.

This apparent counterexample in fact exemplifies the unpredictability of the insights afforded by the history of engagement I explore. To capture this history in action and gain access to its insights, I practice a method I call *close reading at a distance*. Close reading at a distance combines detailed, granular textual analysis with consideration of a work's geographical dispersal and uptake, especially by readerships not envisioned or addressed by the work itself. Breaking from the (new-) historicist tendency to grant interpretive priority to a text's narrowly construed, originating historical context, close reading at a distance treats the meanings texts accrue as they move through space and time and the uses to which they are put not only as equally legitimate objects of inquiry in their own right but also as valuable resources for understanding the work itself. Unlike some versions of book history and reception studies, then, close reading at a distance does not bracket—or abandon the very notion of—"the work itself." Instead of dissolving the work into its reception or afterlives, close reading at a distance seeks to understand the relationship of these afterlives to the source text—to understand, that is, precisely what the afterlives do to and with their sources, as a way of better understanding both the sources and the afterlives.²

With the phrase "close reading at a distance" I also allude to Franco Moretti's coinage "distant reading." I share Moretti's interest in the ways literary works travel across space, but I do not therefore turn to analytical

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methods that, as he says, largely dispense with reading altogether. If, for Moretti, “distance [from reading itself] is a condition of knowledge,” I am interested in the ways “distance” of various sorts between implied and actual readers serves as a source of critical understanding.³

Yet if “close reading at a distance” is this book’s method, it is also in a very real sense the book’s subject: that is, not only what I do but what the writers and editors I examine are doing. The felt “distance” these cultural producers are interested in probing and exploiting is geographical, national, racial, and eventually temporal as well. By calling the texts these individuals produced evidence or examples of “close reading,” I do not mean to suggest that they conform to the protocols of academic literary criticism that developed in the twentieth century; rather, I mean to highlight the scale—which is to say, the granularity—of these engagements with Victorian literature. This granularity is worth highlighting both because it has gone largely unrecognized and because my own, similarly granular approach may require some defense in the current critical climate. Close attention to the formal structure and rhetorical particularities of literary texts is easily dismissed as decontextualizing, apolitical, or indeed narrowly “academic”; as we shall see throughout this book, however, from the perspective of African Americanizing close readers at a distance of Victorian literature, the stakes could not have been higher.

We can begin to recover and explore the African Americanization of Victorian literature with the help of the epigraph to this introduction. This passage occurs in the first paragraph of Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892 collection of essays, *A Voice from the South*, a book now recognized as a milestone in African American literary and intellectual history. In this opening salvo of her “Raison d’Etre” (as she titles her preface), Cooper identifies the gap she intends her book to fill: “In the clash and clatter of our American Conflict,” she writes, the one voice that has not been heard from is that of the “Black Woman of America.”⁴ She evokes this lack by quoting, without attribution, three lines from Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (first published in 1850).

How are we to understand Cooper’s turn to Tennyson? In a certain respect, his appearance is unremarkable: at the time Cooper was writing, Tennyson was probably the best-known, most celebrated living poet in the English-speaking world. Moreover, his concluding phrase, “with *no language—but a cry*,” neatly captures the paradoxical sense of Cooper’s “mute and voiceless note.” So far, so routine an act of citation. And yet the turn to Tennyson to make the point Cooper makes is itself paradoxical,

if not self-contradictory: announcing her intention to give voice to black American women, Cooper quotes the poet laureate of Great Britain—who, needless to say, was not a black American woman.

As the preface continues, the tension between Cooper's argument and her use of Tennyson to advance that argument only grows more pronounced. Advocating an identitarian epistemology and model of representation, Cooper declares, "I feel it essential . . . that truth from *each* standpoint be presented at the bar." Efforts by individuals who do not occupy a particular "standpoint" to represent its "truth," she insists, will inevitably fall short: "as our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot *quite* put themselves in the dark man's place, neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman."⁵ A self-identified "Black Woman of the South," Cooper raises her own voice accordingly in the hope that it can "help to a clearer vision and a truer pulse-beat in studying our Nation's Problem."⁶ Insofar as she cedes her voice to Tennyson's right at the outset, then, Cooper seems to undercut her own argument and reaffirm the very hierarchy she intends to challenge.

Can we find a gain to match the loss Cooper risks with this seemingly self-defeating rhetorical maneuver? Apparently not, according to the literary historian who has given Cooper's prefatory words their widest circulation and indeed elevated them to emblematic status: the epigraph to General Editor Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s foreword to the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers—a foreword that appears in each of the two-dozen-plus volumes in that groundbreaking series—begins in the same spot as the epigraph to the present introduction. However, Gates omits Cooper's citation of Tennyson, replacing the poet's words with an ellipsis: "And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman. . . ." Skipping ahead a couple of paragraphs, Gates's epigraph resumes with Cooper's declaration that "The 'other side' has not been represented by one who 'lives there.'"⁷

Several factors presumably motivate this omission by Gates: even if Cooper's use of Tennyson did not seem like a blunder for the reasons noted above, the poet's presence in the opening lines of the Schomburg Library foreword—which is titled "In Her Own Write"—would clearly be a distraction. Even worse, Cooper's citation of Tennyson in her "Raison d'Être" seems to violate the spirit of the Schomburg Library's own *raison d'être* as Gates presents it. "Literary works configure into a tradition," he argues, "because writers read other writers and *ground* their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom

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they feel akin. It is through this mode of literary revision . . . that a ‘tradition’ emerges and defines itself.” Thanks to “the collective publication of these works by black women now, for the first time,” he continues, “scholars and critics” will be able “to *demonstrate* that black women writers read, and revised, other black women writers.”⁸ Intertextuality, then, is central to Gates’s version of literary history, and the source of the Schomburg Library’s value as a “library”; that is, its value resides in the relationships among texts it makes more readily visible, rather than, say, in the interest or merit of individual titles. It seems fair to surmise, then, that the most prominent intertextual gesture in Cooper’s introduction gets suppressed from a foreword that stresses the importance of intertextuality because Cooper chose the “wrong” intertext.

The model Cooper violates reflects Gates’s influential theorization of the African American literary tradition as a whole. As he and his fellow editor put it in the introduction to the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, “writers in the black tradition have repeated and revised figures, tropes, and themes in prior works, leading to formal links in a chain of tradition,” and in fact “the African American literary tradition exists as a formal entity because of the historical practice of repetition and revision.”⁹ Both in this introduction and in his monograph *The Signifying Monkey*, where he develops his theory at greatest length, Gates acknowledges that writers in the black tradition also repeat and revise texts from “the Western tradition,” adding that “they often seek to do so ‘authentically,’ with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular.”¹⁰ Gates’s own hugely important critical and editorial work, however, focuses almost exclusively on the ways African American writers “revise tropes from substantive antecedent texts in the African American tradition.”¹¹

It is no surprise that efforts to establish the legitimacy and value of a particular body of writing—to establishing its status as literature, and as *a* literature—would shy away from apparent evidence of indebtedness. As Gates among others has shown, moreover, “the concern to be original” is an enduring theme in black letters; he quotes—as an exemplar of “nearly two centuries’ brooding on lack of originality in the black tradition”—W.E.B. Du Bois’s statement that “we must turn from negation to affirmation, from the ever-lasting ‘No’ to the ever-lasting ‘Yes.’ Instead of drowning our originality in imitation of mediocre white folks . . . [we] have a right to affirm that the Negro race is one of the great human races, inferior to none in its accomplishments and in its ability.”¹² As is well known, the twentieth century in particular saw repeated attempts to identify and celebrate expressive

forms and practices deemed “authentically” black, whether the product of the unique experience of African Americans or New World permutations of an African cultural inheritance, or both.

By contrast, this book will follow Cooper’s lead by risking attention to the attention that she, along with many other African American writers and editors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paid to Victorian authors and texts. To be sure, there now exists substantial encouragement to take such a risk: the lingering hegemony of the Gatesian model of literary tradition notwithstanding, over the past couple of decades a number of influential scholars have pioneered an alternative view of African American literature as productively engaged with other literatures. These scholars include feminist critics such as Frances Smith Foster, Carla Peterson, and Ann duCille, who identified and broke with a critical tendency to take African American women writers’ ostensible debts to British literature as warrants to dismiss their work as overly genteel or bourgeois or elitist;¹³ scholars of the “Black Atlantic,” led by Paul Gilroy, who focus on the role of cross-cultural exchange and substitute hybridity for authenticity as norm and value;¹⁴ relatedly, advocates of cosmopolitanism, such as Ross Posnock, who have tracked and defended black writers’ embrace of what Posnock calls an “anti-proprietary view of culture as unraced,” as exemplified for Posnock by Du Bois’s famous statement, “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not”;¹⁵ and scholars such as William W. Cook, James Tatum, and Dennis Looney, who have explored African American engagements with earlier European authors and traditions.¹⁶ *Reaping Something New* is especially indebted to and aligned with work on the nineteenth century’s transatlantic, interracial traffic in tropes and texts, work including Laura Doyle’s history of the novel’s “race-liberty plot,” Elisa Tamarkin’s analysis of “black anglophilia,” and Elizabeth Young’s study of “black Frankenstein.”¹⁷

Building on these bodies of work, I seek to reconstruct a specific tradition of engagement with Victorian literature—a tradition that remains poorly understood and indeed largely invisible.¹⁸ This tradition, I find, does not for the most part consist in efforts to bracket or transcend racial identity. Nor does it constitute prima facie counterevidence against the existence of a coherent, distinctive African American literary tradition. On the contrary, I show that major African American writers and intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often leveraged nineteenth-century British literature in their very efforts to cultivate racial solidarity, to claim a distinctive voice, and to establish a distinct tradition or literature.¹⁹ We can already see this strategy in play not only in Cooper’s writing

but even in the statement by Du Bois that Gates cites: with his talk of the “everlasting No” and “everlasting Yes,” Du Bois paradoxically phrases his affirmation of “Negro” originality in terms provided by Thomas Carlyle, eminent Victorian sage and notorious apologist for slavery.²⁰

My analysis also seeks to nuance and move beyond two common ways of describing, and implicitly justifying, a Victorian—or, more broadly, British or European or white—presence in African American literature. One of these approaches is to argue that African American writers’ relationship to canonical literature is not one of indebtedness or imitation but rather subversive appropriation. For example, Ann duCille argues that, “making unconventional use of conventional literary forms, early black writers appropriated for their own emancipatory purposes both the genre of the novel and the structure of the marriage plot.”²¹ The other common approach is to read these writers’ engagements with white literature as politically symbolic acts of cultural positioning. As Kenneth Warren puts it, “to insist on a manifold literary inheritance could count . . . as both a demonstration of the irrationality of segregation and a refutation of charges that black cultural expression was inferior to works produced by whites.”²²

There is clearly a good deal of truth to both these arguments. Returning to Anna Julia Cooper, we can see that her citational practices do the work Warren describes (and indeed, Warren mentions Cooper earlier in the same paragraph). Throughout *A Voice from the South*, Cooper protests the severe restriction of educational opportunities for both blacks and women and argues for the general social benefits that an expansion of such opportunities would yield. In making her case, she references a range of authors from the Western tradition, and the very act of making such references implicitly makes her case: by displaying her own cultural literacy and rhetorical sophistication, Cooper demonstrates that black women are capable of such literacy and such sophistication—capabilities that were by no means taken for granted in 1892.²³

Yet the arguments I have identified with duCille and Warren only carry us so far: as we shall see repeatedly, these arguments tend to exaggerate the uniformity and conventionality of the white-authored literature taken up by African Americans, on the one hand, and to shortchange the constitutive nature and complexity of particular intertextual relationships, on the other. For example, insofar as African American authors *were* engaged in cultural positioning, this positioning necessarily depended on the current standing of the authors referenced. Yet the reputations of Victorian authors were by no means settled at this time. Rather than members of a timeless pantheon,

even the most prestigious Victorians were, and signified as, contemporaries or recent predecessors; if the writers and editors I examine were “reaping something new” in the sense of creating something new, then, they were also “reaping”—working with—poems and novels that were themselves “new.” This contemporaneity will be important to my argument, as will the shift that occurs over the time covered in this book. Frederick Douglass reprinted “The Charge of the Light Brigade” in 1855 immediately upon its publication; Anna Julia Cooper quotes *In Memoriam* just weeks before Tennyson’s death in 1892; W.E.B. Du Bois juxtaposes decades-old poetry by Tennyson with newly published British poetry at the turn of the century. A quarter-century later, after the period I focus on—that is, well after the end of the Victorian era—Nella Larsen will have her character Helga Crane recall a line from *In Memoriam* in the 1928 novella *Quicksand*. What Tennyson signifies in each instance changes, in part because of the passage of time as such but also because of the changes in reputation and mode of access that accompany it. The fact that Helga Crane does not think of Tennyson by name but rather “recalled a line that had impressed her in her lonely school-days” speaks to the latter factor, even as that line itself speaks to the former (the passage of time): the line she recalls, from the first section of *In Memoriam*, is “The far-off interest of tears.”²⁴

I also insist, however, that there is often much more than cultural positioning to these intertextual engagements. African American writers and editors do not always just sit with, say, Eliot or Tennyson to show that these esteemed figures winced. Nor are they necessarily intent on pulling the chair out from under these figures. Instead, African American cultural producers have a history—I will argue that they establish a self-reflexive tradition—of working with nineteenth-century British literature in generative and multivalent ways. These engagements shape texts, create meaning, reveal affinities, and establish affiliations. While it would be going too far to locate the marrow of the African American tradition in nineteenth-century Britain, we may take it as telling that the phrase “the marrow of tradition,” made famous by Charles Chesnutt, is borrowed from a poem by nineteenth-century English writer Charles Lamb.²⁵

What the tradition of engagement I describe does not do, however, is dissolve the boundaries between Victorian and African American literature. There are two reasons for this: first, the Britishness of the former frequently plays a key role in its meaning and significance for the African Americans who engage with it. Second, far from demonstrating the “Victorianness” of the African Americans who made use of Victorian literature, these

engagements typically reveal racially and nationally inflected differences in perspectives and priorities as well as convergences. In the terms of Joseph Rezek's taxonomy of transatlantic work, then, this book does not belong to the group of "comparative or integrated studies of British and North American writing" that aim to show "that Anglo-American literature coheres through shared aesthetic qualities, common ideological investments, and transatlantic reading practices"; rather, it belongs to the body of work that "insists that even the distinctiveness of the cultures of Great Britain and North America can only be understood by attending to the transatlantic currents running through them."²⁶

Even as I argue that African American engagements with Victorian literature help constitute and even form a distinctive tradition—that is, a self-aware, internally dialogic pattern over time—however, I would emphasize the heterogeneity and particularity of these engagements. The workings and implications of individual instances can only be determined on a case-by-case basis. And these cases often require—and reward—much finer-grained attention than has typically been paid by attempts to read African American literature in relation to British literature: attention not only to the borrowing or reworking or critique of generic forms and conventions, such as the marriage plot, but also to the specific language, tropes, and narrative structures of individual texts. It is at this level of granularity that many African Americanizations of Victorian literature take place and become legible.

Returning again to Anna Julia Cooper, then, I propose that instead of suppressing the lines from Tennyson she quotes, or resting content with viewing them as a demonstration of cultural literacy, we look at them more closely. Tennyson conjures the image of the crying infant at the end of section LIV of his elegy for his beloved friend Arthur Hallam, one of many sections in which the poet grapples with his religious doubts. The first four of the section's five stanzas elaborate on the speaker's opening declaration, "Oh yet we trust that somehow good / Will be the final goal of ill."²⁷ Yet the final stanza characterizes this faith as "my dream" and asks plaintively, "but what am I?"²⁸ Cooper quotes the despairing answer to this question.

The concerns prompting this passage in *In Memoriam* are distant from those of Cooper's "Raison d'Etre." But if this distance suggests that the original context does not matter to *A Voice from the South*, the distance itself does: as suggested above, the gap between original and new contexts serves as a measure of creative agency. Consider, by way of contrast, an earlier

citation of the same *In Memoriam* passage that appeared in the African American press. The writer of an 1861 article entitled “Modern Literature,” reprinted in the African Methodist Episcopal Church’s *Christian Recorder*, laments that “We have no great literary writers save, perhaps, Mrs. Stowe, who are wreathing with their genius the cross of Christ.” He or she then declares that “Tennyson’s painful confession leaps unwittingly from all their lips” and quotes the lines Cooper quotes (along with the preceding question to which they provide an answer).²⁹ Thus, this writer uses lines originally expressing religious doubt to express religious doubt, whereas Cooper uses them to describe the virtual absence of black American women’s voices from the national discourse.

Citation is by definition an act of recontextualization, but not all recontextualizations are alike. The contrast between these two citations of the same passage makes plain that Cooper’s is not self-effacing after all, but instead self-asserting. Moreover, her citation is less a demonstration of the cultural literacy that enables one to cite a well-known poem than of the cultural mastery that allows one to make free with it for one’s own purposes. Cooper’s failure to name poet or poem reinforces the appropriative dimension of her quotation: she undoubtedly expects her readers to recognize the passage—indeed, her display of mastery depends on it—but at the same time her choice not to cite Tennyson by name underscores the extent to which she makes these lines her own.³⁰

Significant as this recontextualization is, the work Cooper does on and with Tennyson’s lines goes further. Unlike any other citation of these lines I have come across, Cooper manipulates the passage at the level of punctuation and typography: *In Memoriam* reads “And with no language but a cry,” whereas *A Voice from the South*, as we have seen, adds a dash between “language” and “but” and italicizes the last five words, giving us “And with *no language—but a cry*.” This visual play registers and signals her conceptual and referential play: Cooper quotes all of Tennyson’s words but quotes them slant.

More specifically, by accenting and setting off the final words as she does, Cooper indicates to the reader what is most important about these lines for her purposes. Focusing attention on these particular words and suggesting that they are especially freighted with meaning, she also makes it more likely that the reader will read them allusively. And in fact the word *cry* figures prominently in one of the best-known poems by one of the best-known African American women to precede Cooper in entering the public sphere. Frances E. W. Harper’s early poem “Ethiopia” (1854) begins,

Yes! Ethiopia yet shall stretch
Her bleeding hands abroad;
Her *cry* of agony shall reach
The burning throne of God.³¹

Here indeed we find “the sadly expectant Black Woman . . . with *no language—but a cry*.”

Cooper’s recontextualization of Tennyson’s lines thus makes them into an allusion to Harper’s. Cooper reinforces this allusion later in *A Voice from the South* by including these very lines from Harper’s poem: discussing “the work and influence of the colored women of America,” Cooper quotes this passage to illustrate her claim that “Frances Watkins Harper could sing with prophetic exaltation in the darkest days.”³² Through her use of Tennyson, then, Cooper subtly positions herself within African American history as the successor to Harper and the generation of “pioneers” she represents.³³

Read thus, Cooper’s citation of Tennyson paradoxically conforms to an understanding of African American literary tradition as constituted primarily by intertextual relations among African American texts. This will often prove true in the following pages: as we shall see, one way African American writers used nineteenth-century British literature was to establish or negotiate relationships with other African American writers. When African American writers turn to nineteenth-century British literature, in other words, they are not necessarily turning away from African American literature. On the contrary, often they are either revealing or creating links between the two, as in the Cooper / Tennyson / Harper example,³⁴ and sometimes they are self-consciously participating in and even referencing an African American tradition of citation and appropriation.

Indeed, if African American writers and editors treat nineteenth-century British literature as an archive, they might also be said to create their own nineteenth-century British canon, through repeated recourse to certain authors, texts, and passages. This is especially true with regard to Tennyson, whose presence looms larger than that of any other British author in the period covered by this book. That is, while Tennyson’s outsized presence derives in part from his stature in the culture at large as well as from the particularities of specific poems, it is also the case that this presence is self-perpetuating and self-reflexive.

My brief reading of Cooper’s citation of Tennyson begins to suggest the rewards of closer attention to moments of intertextual engagement between

African American and Victorian literature for those interested in African American literature. At the same time, however, this reading could conceivably call into question the value of such attention for anyone intent instead on better understanding Victorian literature itself: the more fully Cooper makes Tennyson's lines do her own bidding, the less relevant her citation may seem to an understanding of those lines themselves, the poem from which they are drawn, or the poet who composed them.

Yet sometimes the less true a citation is to a passage's original context, the more revealing it proves, precisely by virtue of this defamiliarizing recontextualization. In this instance, for example, I noted above that Tennyson, *needless to say*, was not himself a black American woman. The use to which Cooper puts Tennyson's lines made it necessary to say this, and the sheer oddness of this necessity might startle us into asking a host of questions: Is there anything in Tennyson's self-presentation that invites the implicit identification Cooper enacts through her borrowing of his words? Does Tennyson share the identitarian epistemology with regard to race, nationality, and gender that Cooper is articulating when she quotes him? How is Tennyson's status as not a black American woman inscribed or reflected in his poetry? Does Tennyson himself ever write in the voice of a black American woman—or of a black, or an American, or a woman tout court? Does he ever allude to or borrow from writers assignable to these categories? Does he ever engage in Cooper-like acts of radical recontextualization or transpositioning with any source? If we were to follow Cooper's lead and reread section LIV of *In Memoriam* as if it were in the voice of a black American woman, would the poem read differently? How does it compare with the most famous Victorian poem actually written in such a voice, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point"?

Some of these lines of inquiry would no doubt prove more productive than others. Pursuing for a moment the last one, we might note that Tennyson's and Barrett Browning's speakers figure, in similar terms, similar doubts about the meaningfulness of existence: in the stanzas preceding the one Cooper quotes, the former strives to believe "That nothing walks with aimless feet; / That not one life shall be destroyed, / Or cast as rubbish to the void / . . . / That not a worm is cloven in vain,"³⁵ while the latter surmises (in lines that intermittently employ *In Memoriam*'s iambic tetrameter) that if God made her "He must have cast his work away / Under the feet of his white creatures, / With a look of scorn—that the dusky features / Might be trodden again to clay."³⁶ Cooper's use of Tennyson thus puts his poem in dialogue with another Victorian poem as well as an African American one.

For the purposes of this introduction, I am more interested in identifying the kinds of questions an African Americanization such as Cooper's raises than in attempting to answer them, but these questions are by no means rhetorical. (I return to Tennyson himself in chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6, with chapter 2 in particular teasing out the implications of a reframing more explicit and more radical than Cooper's.) Both implicitly and explicitly, African Americanizations of Victorian literature pose provocative questions and make provocative claims that it will be the work of this book to tease out and address. As we shall see, sometimes these provocations are a byproduct of an appropriation or citation made primarily for an author's or editor's own purposes, whereas at other times they motivate the textual encounter.

The insights afforded by African Americanizations of Victorian literature vary widely in scale, from the most local of textual moments to our understanding of the cultural work of literature. These African Americanizations revise our understanding of the formal features of particular works; of the shape of a particular author's oeuvre, including newly visible preoccupations, patterns, and interrelations among texts; and of the political significance of major works. Most consistently, these practices make us see differently Victorian literature's treatment of race, and reveal how intimately the treatment of race is bound up with other, ostensibly unrelated aspects of an author's work. At the same time, though, even as African Americanizations of Victorian texts highlight and clarify the role race plays in particular texts, they also make clear that a text's treatment of race does not negate or exhaust its interest and value from an African American perspective. By the same token, the insights these African Americanizations afford into Victorian literature extend beyond its treatment of race.

The Victorian literature in question here—that is, the Victorian literature that mattered most to African American authors and editors in this period—is paradoxically both familiar and surprising. Familiar, because many of the texts seized upon for reprinting, rewriting, commentary, quotation, or allusion were well known in their day and are now canonical; the texts themselves, and even more so their authors, were and continue to be viewed as central to mainstream—white, middle-class—nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture. Thus, while a number of Victorian authors will appear in the following pages, in addition to Tennyson the ones who appear most frequently are Charles Dickens and George Eliot. But the African American archive of Victorian literature is surprising nonetheless because, as I have emphasized, the Victorian texts with the richest African American afterlives do not themselves depict African American characters.

This archive is also surprising for its inclusion of works that are not canonical or even well known today. Remaining with the example at hand, for instance, we might note that Anna Julia Cooper’s epigraph to part 1 of *A Voice from the South* reads:

For they the Royal-hearted Women are
Who nobly love the noblest, yet have grace
For needy, suffering lives in lowliest place;
Carrying a choicer sunlight in their smile,
The heavenliest ray that pitieth the vile.

.....

Though I were happy, throned beside the king,
I should be tender to each little thing
With hurt warm breast, that had no speech to tell
Its inward pangs; and I would soothe it well
With tender touch and with a low, soft moan
For company.

—GEORGE ELIOT³⁷

At least as striking as any use Cooper makes of these lines from Eliot’s 1869 poem “How Lisa Loved the King” is the fact that she cites this particular poem: even within the corpus of Eliot’s poetry, which in general receives little scholarly attention, “How Lisa Loved the King” is an obscurity.³⁸

Citations such as this revise our knowledge of which Victorian texts even have afterlives—knowledge that may play a larger role in determining our sense of a canon, or more simply of which works merit critical attention, than we tend to acknowledge. As we shall see, the most dramatic shift in perspective encouraged by the history of engagement traced in *Reaping Something New* will in fact relate to George Eliot, albeit not thanks to this citation of “How Lisa Loved the King”—its further citation by Mrs. Booker T. Washington notwithstanding.³⁹

This book covers what I argue is the heyday of the African Americanization of Victorian literature, from the editorial practices of Frederick Douglass in the mid-nineteenth century to the citational practices of W.E.B. Du Bois in the early twentieth century. The book’s organization is basically chronological, although a focus on afterlives means that there are multiple

chronologies in play: that of the publication of the works being taken up, and those of their taking up. The governing chronology here is more the latter, although the chronologies often coincide, since the African American responses I look at often occur (or begin) at the time of initial publication.

Each of the first three chapters of the book explores the multiple uses to which one particular Victorian author—and indeed one primary work—was put by African Americans. Each of the last three chapters takes the opposite tack and considers the uses an individual African American author made of works by multiple Victorian authors. Each approach offers certain analytical advantages, and both involve tradeoffs in coverage and emphasis. The use of both speaks to my sense of how best to capture the complexities of individual encounters and to narrate the development of these practices over time. In addition, though, this organization also reflects my desire to grant primacy to neither the African American nor the Victorian dimension of my argument. Even as this book seeks to reveal the unacknowledged links between African American and Victorian literature, it also, by the same token, seeks to heighten the fluidity of movement between African Americanist and Victorianist orientations or approaches. While it remains quite possible that African Americanists and Victorianists will find different aspects of the following analyses of greater interest, I hope to show that the history I am excavating renders “African Americanist” or “Victorianist” analyses fully entangled with one another, and at times indistinguishable.

Chapter 1 explores the reprinting of *Bleak House* in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* and its rewriting in or as Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*. Breaking from the critical history of determining the ideological effects of Dickens’s novel on the basis of its intrinsic formal features, I look at actual uses to which the novel was put. At the same time, I argue that a proper understanding of the work Douglass and Crafts do on and with the novel cannot replace but, on the contrary, requires close attention to the text itself. Focusing in particular on a cultural function that has come to be seen as one of the novel-form’s most important—the cultivation of national identity—I tease out the paradox whereby *Bleak House*’s attempt to consolidate the community it imagines through the exclusion of slaves and people of color becomes most conspicuous when members of those very groups make Dickens’s novel a resource for their own efforts to build communities and transform the nation.

Chapter 2 takes as its focus another now-iconic Victorian text reprinted and discussed in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* immediately after its initial publication: Alfred Tennyson’s poem about a disastrous yet heroic battle in the

Crimean War, “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” I do not quite use this deployment of the poem to consider the relationship of African Americans to the dominant cultural tradition, nor to explore the nature and politics of interracial cultural appropriation—instead, I show that Douglass and his contributors deployed the poem to raise and address these very issues. This is most dramatically the case in James McCune Smith’s stunning argument that “The Light Brigade” was plagiarized from an African war chant used to call the slaves to rebel in Haiti. In addition to unpacking the logic and performative force of this seemingly outlandish claim, I also take it seriously as a source of insight into Tennyson’s poem. McCune Smith’s racializing recontextualization of “The Light Brigade,” I argue, repositions it within Tennyson’s oeuvre and helps make visible Tennyson’s own strategy of deracializing recontextualization. Introducing a temporal dimension to my analysis, I also trace the persistent use of this seemingly topical poem to address African American experience over the second half of the nineteenth century.

While these two chapters focus on reprintings, readings, and rewritings that switch the racial context or referent of Victorian texts, the next three chapters explore the uses of texts that are themselves about the switching of races, whether through the discovery of ancestry or a decision to pass (or both). In chapter 3, I show that Eliot’s epic poem *The Spanish Gypsy*, which most critics in its own day and ever since have dismissed as a failure, was embraced by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and other late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century African American writers as a politically salutary effort to break the narrative link between discovered minority ancestry and victimization, and to imagine such a discovery instead as the occasion for affirmative identification and heroic (if often sacrificial) action. Verbally echoing the poem and borrowing its plot of unwitting passing and voluntary racial affiliation, these writers turn *The Spanish Gypsy* into a response to the tragic mulatto/a plot—or rather, they pick up on and highlight the ways it already was one. Both what these writers take from Eliot and what they choose to leave behind—including her emigrationist conclusion—cast Eliot’s poem and central aspects of her career more broadly in a different light and even suggest a new explanation of her choice of the pseudonym “George Eliot.”

Narratives of passing and racial re-identification remain important in chapters 4 and 5, which consider the presence of Victorian literature in the work of the two most widely studied African American novelists of the turn of the twentieth century: Charles Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins,

respectively. Chapter 4 traces the career-long engagement with Victorian literature of Chesnutt, the author who provided what is quite possibly the first fictional depiction of an African American reader of that literature: Mr. Ryder, the Tennyson-loving protagonist of the short story “The Wife of His Youth.” While Mr. Ryder aspires to *not* be African American, I argue that Chesnutt himself never treats Victorian literature merely as a symbol of whiteness. Instead, he draws on that literature to help construct his own narrative investigations of racial identity and identification even as he probes the limitations of its treatment of race. In particular, Chesnutt repeatedly references and reworks Victorian depictions and invocations of mixed-race identity. This pattern receives its fullest articulation in *The House Behind the Cedars*, which explores what it would mean if the protagonists of two classic Victorian bildungsromans who are both fleetingly figured as mulattoes—David Copperfield and Maggie Tulliver—really were mixed race. Turning his attention to characters who actually are mixed race (rather than merely figured as such) in his last, posthumously published novel *The Quarry*, Chesnutt conducts a final reckoning with Victorian literature, one that addresses head-on the charge of derivativeness his close reworking of Victorian texts knowingly courted.

Chapter 5 traces Pauline Hopkins’s complex engagement with Victorian literature from the numerous yet little-noted citations of Tennyson in her first novel, *Contending Forces*, to her unacknowledged verbatim borrowings from Edward Bulwer Lytton in her last one, *Of One Blood*. Hopkins’s engagement with Victorian literature, I argue, is crucially mediated and motivated by that literature’s existing presence within African American literature, in particular in the work of her exact contemporary Chesnutt. Like Chesnutt and in dialogue with him, she uses Victorian literature to explore the ways cultural transmission can both supplement and circumscribe biological genealogy. Unlike Chesnutt, Hopkins also uses mainstream, ostensibly conservative Victorian literature in ways that systematically amplify the transgressive currents of her work with regard to gender and sexuality as well as race.

Chapter 6 revisits the best-known citations of nineteenth-century British literature in the African American literary tradition: the chapter epigraphs in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, many of which pair lines of music from Negro spirituals with passages of nineteenth-century British poetry. I show that just as Hopkins used Victorian literature to respond to Chesnutt, so too do Du Bois’s citations of nineteenth-century British literature self-consciously intervene in the larger history of African American

engagement with that literature. Even as he uses this literature to evoke a realm free from racial prejudice and strife, as many critics emphasize, he also locates these poems within and brings them to bear on black history and experience, deploying them as weapons in the ongoing struggle for racial equality.

In addition to re-citing poets and poems with a history of African American citation, Du Bois also expands his archive from earlier nineteenth-century poets to include more recent works. This is not a break from previous practice but rather an extension: Du Bois maintains the spirit of engagement with contemporary literature that played such an important role for virtually all his predecessors in the African Americanization of Victorian literature. But in doing so he also signals the beginning of the end of this phenomenon, at least in its major phase—his own late, bravura reading of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “The Blessed Damozel” as an allegory of African American literary history notwithstanding. As I show in my afterword, however, two twenty-first century novels suggest that Victorian literature still has a distinctive role to play in literature written by African Americans, both through and despite efforts to consign it to the past.

While the scope of *Reaping Something New* should be clear by now, questions may remain regarding the rationale for this scope as well as my terminology. I will attempt to anticipate and address the most important ones:

Why Victorian literature? In other words, if one is interested in African American engagements with non-African American literature, why focus on Victorian literature in particular? As I show, Victorian literature has a distinct status and appeal for literary African Americans during the period covered in this book. This is partly a function of this literature’s Britishness: as Elisa Tamarkin in particular has shown, British culture was widely viewed as superior to American culture in the nineteenth-century United States, and African Americans had heightened “anglophiliac” tendencies due to Britain’s history of support for abolition and the freedom from racism or even racial identity it putatively offered to African American travelers and refugees.

In addition, the literary encounters I describe are structured as much by the contemporaneity or near-contemporaneity of the British literature in question as by this Britishness itself. My point is not that authors or editors ignored older literature but rather that contemporary or recent literature signified differently—namely, as contemporary or recent. As we shall see, such factors as topicality, form or site of encounter, cultural capital, and

positioning in the literary field come into play and play out differently depending on a text's relative recentness or historical remoteness. For example, whereas citing earlier literature stakes one's claim to a culture's heritage, engaging with contemporary literature establishes one's status as a full participant in an ongoing cultural conversation or literary movement. Often an act of self-positioning among or in relation to prominent contemporaries, such engagements can also serve to position those contemporaries themselves, whether as allies, interlocutors, or objects of critique.⁴⁰

Victorian or nineteenth century? While most of the British literature I discuss will be Victorian in the strict sense—that is, composed and published during the reign of Queen Victoria, 1837–1901—I will at times also discuss British literature from earlier in the nineteenth century. For my analysis—as, I argue, for the authors and editors themselves—the distinction between Romantic and Victorian does not carry great weight, and of course writers at midcentury are as close in time to, say, a second-generation Romantic such as Byron as those at the end of the century are to a high Victorian writer such as Eliot. As William St. Clair and other scholars have shown, moreover, the distribution and availability of much Romantic-era literature was undiminished or even enhanced in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the U.S. as well as Britain.⁴¹

Why African American literature and print culture? In other words, if one is interested in the afterlives of Victorian literature, why look to African American afterlives in particular? Work on the dissemination of, and responses to, Victorian literature has tended to focus its sights on the nations that made up the British Empire, for good and obvious reasons. Yet even work specifically on the literary relations between the U.S. and Britain has, until recently, tended to ignore African American literary culture. The historical situation and subject-position of African Americans is distinct from that of the British Empire's colonial (and postcolonial) subjects as well as that of other Americans, and distinct in ways that crucially inflect attitudes toward Britain and its literature.

In a compelling discussion of what he calls “colonial Victorianism,” Simon Gikandi argues that “Victorianism was not a discourse or ideology that was simply imposed on the colonized; it was also a set of ideas and ideals that were deployed by colonial subjects as a means to a different end—their freedom.”⁴² I argue, similarly, that African Americans deployed Victorian literature for their own purposes; however, the relationship of that literature to the forces of domination in the U.S. was much more equivocal than in the colonial context. African American engagements with Victorian

literature thus merit separate attention, and the elaborate and unpredictable forms these engagements took ensure that they reward it. The sustained, manifold African American engagement with Victorian literature generates a version and vision of that literature unavailable elsewhere.

Why “engagements,” “afterlives,” “uses,” “deployments,” “transpositions,” “re-contextualizations,” “repurposing,” “citations,” “translations,” etc.? Why, that is, the proliferation of terms to name the relationship(s) in question, and why these terms in particular, most of which are as vague as they are clunky? Perhaps the broadest term we have to denote relationships between texts is “intertextuality.” I have used this term sparingly, however, for two reasons: first, because it often carries a narrower meaning, associated with poststructuralist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, that is not dominant here; and second, because even when “intertextuality” is taken in its broadest, most neutral sense, it still leaves out practices and forms of cultural presence or modes of response that are important to this book. Foremost among these are commentary or criticism—a relationship between texts that could conceivably be brought under the umbrella of “intertextuality” but rarely is—and the reprinting of Victorian texts in African American periodicals. (While my focus is on literature and print culture, I should also note that there are other forms of presence that I only touch on, such as inclusion in school curricula and public performance, as in the public recitation of poetry.)⁴³ In this book I bring together a wide range of seemingly disparate formal and material practices, precisely to argue that they form a continuum, a set of practices and relationships that can be better understood when viewed as just that: a set. However, this is not standard operating procedure in literary studies: while there has been rapid growth in periodical and print culture studies, the work of framing and reframing performed by a work’s publication format or inclusion in a particular periodical is rarely considered alongside or in relation to the (what I would argue is comparable) work of framing and reframing performed by such literary devices as allusion, parody, or diegetic transposition.⁴⁴ For this reason, no one term exists that covers all the necessary bases. The closest is perhaps “engagement,” which is capacious and introduces an element of agency without implying a specific power dynamic—unlike, say, terms such as “influence” or “debt” or even “reception” and “adaptation,” on the one hand, and “writing back” or “critique” or “confrontation” or even “response,” on the other.

I will often use the term “afterlives,” which I find useful both for its generality and its implication of a spatial and even conceptual remove: African

Americans were not the intended or imagined audience for these works, and the uses they made of Victorian literature were entirely unanticipated, even when they were in keeping with the spirit of the work, and even when that work itself envisions its own dissemination and repurposing (as is especially the case with *Bleak House*, as we shall see in chapter 1).⁴⁵ On the other hand, this term can be misleading insofar as it suggests a temporal remove, whereas, as I have been arguing, contemporaneity and even immediacy play important roles in prompting engagements with particular texts and determining their significance. It matters that Frederick Douglass began reprinting *Bleak House* before Dickens finished writing it.⁴⁶

What about the Victorian uses of African American literature? Radically disparate levels of political power or cultural capital between groups do not preclude the possibility of symmetrical cultural traffic between them, or even of a subaltern group's forms of cultural expression wielding a disproportionate influence on—or undergoing appropriation by—a dominant one. U.S. history makes this plain, with the role of African American music in the national culture Exhibit A. It is not unreasonable to ask, then, whether there is not a Victorian archive of African American literature to match the African American archive of Victorian literature this book explores. This is, in fact, a question I will ask of two of the Victorian authors I focus on, Dickens and Eliot; while with regard to the third, Tennyson, I will examine at length the posing in the period itself of a cognate question—not of African American but of African or Afro-Haitian influence. In none of these cases, however, will I find a level of presence or engagement comparable to those I find with regard to Victorian literature in African American literature and print culture (although writings *about* African Americans do prove especially significant for Eliot).⁴⁷ I do not consider this surprising, given the limited amount of writing published by African Americans before the end of the nineteenth century and the even more limited access Victorian writers had to this literature. But nor is it disheartening or discomfiting, given what I do find: to focus on the Victorian presence in African American literature and print culture may seem to risk resurrecting discredited beliefs in the latter's derivativeness or imitativeness, but the story I tell offers scant support for such views. Quite the opposite. Indeed, although my task and my tone are analytical rather than celebratory, I do not mind acknowledging that in writing this book I have repeatedly had my breath taken away by the inventiveness and sheer audacity that characterize the African Americanization of Victorian literature.