Oh Freedom, oh Freedom,
Oh Freedom, over me!
Before I’ll be a slave
I’ll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free!

African American slave song

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “The birth of the Afro-American literary tradition occurred in 1773, when Phillis Wheatley published a book of poetry.”¹ It is widely accepted that the African American poetry tradition starts with Wheatley (c. 1753–84). Kidnapped from her birthplace in Gambia, West Africa, and sold into slavery as a child of only six or seven, Wheatley is an unusual case of a “slave” whose education, companionship, and prestige as a literary prodigy were of paramount importance to the Wheatley family who “purchased” her. Wheatley’s volume Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, published in London, is regarded as the first poetry collection to be published by an African American. Many anthologies and books on the history of African American poetry start with the poems of Wheatley, who was manumitted by her owner, John Wheatley, in the same year that her only poetry collection was published.² During her sadly brief lifetime, Wheatley was famous both nationally and internationally for her extraordinary

linguistic precociousness and literary talent. She has maintained her stature until the present day as one of the first Americans to publish a body of verse, an especially remarkable achievement considering her status as a young enslaved black woman. Wheatley’s significance has been controversial: was she merely a novelty, or a poet of value? What does it mean to say that the African American poetry tradition starts with Wheatley? Are there other options? These are the first in a series of questions about the African American poetry tradition and canon – not necessarily the same things – that we will address throughout this chapter and book.

It is a common critical perspective that Wheatley would not have been able to gain acclaim as a serious poet had she not proven herself by emulating recognizable conventions associated with the esteemed white male poets of the day, such as Alexander Pope and John Milton. Of course, this is speculative, but is the claim true? Is it necessary for black poets to show mastery of mainstream literary modes to build an audience, have impact, and achieve respect? This question has been raised since the beginnings of this genre and demonstrates the complex relationship between style and esteem for black poets. Many critics note that Wheatley, who was widely acclaimed as a prodigy and genius during her lifetime, was extremely adept in mimicry, both linguistically and literarily. As discussed by Gates and others, she had to undergo a formal examination by a group of eminent white Bostonians to determine whether she was truly the author of her poetry. Without an “Attestation” of authenticity, she was assured that it would be nearly impossible to secure a publisher for her poetry collection. This curious need for Wheatley’s “proof” of authorship suggests the fraught dynamic between two concepts that are interwoven throughout the history of this genre: authenticity and originality. The idea of authenticity often correlates poems with racialized ideas about the poet’s identity. When African American poems have been considered “authentic,” they also have been called primitive and childish, which is part of the history of critical reception of the foundational slave songs, which will be addressed later in this chapter. Too often throughout American and European history, “originality” has been associated with white authors. African American poems that are deemed to be “inauthentic” are frequently called imitative and unoriginal.

Many of Wheatley’s poems are Augustan apostrophes to ideals, such as “On Virtue,” and paeans to esteemed pillars of colonial America, such as “To His Excellency General Washington.” Critics have extolled Wheatley for interleaving her formalist verse with a subtle vein of subversion. For example, the first stanza of “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England” reads:

’Twas not long since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom:
Father of mercy, ’twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes.

The word “left,” which implies a decision and volition, is a curious choice for someone who was the victim of the unthinkable crime of child-snatching. This poem is a hymn of praise to God for bringing her from her native land, described as a dark place of errors and gloom. The final stanza concludes with advice addressed to “Ye pupils” on avoiding sin:

Ye blooming plants of human race devine,
An Ethiop tells you ’tis your greatest foe;
Its transient sweetness turns to endless pain,
And in immense perdition sinks the soul.

The speaker, whose self-described origins are in a dark land of wrongs, transforms herself, through her deliverance, into the source of sage moral wisdom (“an Ethiop tells you …”) to Harvard College students about the correct path to save their souls by making religion their priority. We could view this maneuver as extreme audacity, a projection of a prophetic voice, or a manifestation of the Magical Negro topos. The contrast between her negative comments on her place of birth and her implicit claim of moral authority as a teacher demonstrates some of the fascinating tensions in teasing out the rhetorical posture and self-positioning of Wheatley.

Many critics have defended Wheatley’s style and content by recognizing that it inevitably reflected the accepted verse of the period. While the use of standard literary forms and conventions would have been judged appropriate for the admired poets of her era, who were mainly white males, this style was questioned when used by someone of a different race and sex. It is no coincidence that one of the earliest books on the connection between literary racism and sexism, The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers by Calvin C. Hernton, opens with an epigraph
Wheatley’s critical reception was bifurcated: she was patronizingly admired for being able to imitate the poets who were held in the highest esteem, and simultaneously criticized for writing in a way that was deemed artificial and imitative for a black woman. Her status as a young black enslaved woman in colonial America made it necessary to reveal her talents strategically and with caution to keep up appearances of humility and propriety.

While she has been lauded as an originator, feminist, and cunning spokesperson for racial equality, Wheatley also has been criticized for modeling neoclassical formalist poets and writing without sufficient consciousness of her race. Some of the early major black critics who first formulated the concept and contents of an African American poetry canon shared misgivings about her seriousness and quality as a mature poet. Her use of wit, heroic couplets, learned allusions, decorous imagery, and moralizing platitudes in the School of Pope were called competent but second-rate copies. Like most critics, Brawley lauded Wheatley’s accomplishments as being remarkable in the context of her disadvantages. Brawley wrote, “Alexander Pope was still an important force in English literature, and the young student [at about age fourteen] became his ready pupil ... one of the most interesting of her efforts is the pathetic little juvenile poem, ‘On Being Brought from Africa to America,’” which has become one of her most famous and often anthologized poems.

Sterling A. Brown drew the same comparison and found Wheatley to be inferior and wanting: “Where Pope was intellectual and satiric, Phillis Wheatley was sentimental and pious; and where he was bold, she

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4 As an epigraph to *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature, and Real Life*, Calvin C. Hernton quotes the whole third stanza of Wheatley’s poem, “To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth:”

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Should you, my lord, while you peruse my song,
Wonder from whence my love of Freedom sprung,
Whence flow these wishes for the common good,
By feeling hearts alone best understood,
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate
Was snatched from Afric’s fancy’d happy seat:
What pangs excruciating must molest,
What sorrows labour in my parent’s breast?
Steel’d was that soul and by no misery mov’d
That from a father seiz’d his babe belov’d:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrranic sway?
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was ... shyly imitative.”6 Similar dismissals of Wheatley’s impact and influence as a black poet have appeared in all eras. Misspelling her name, Thomas Jefferson issued his famed critique which measured Wheatley unfavorably against Pope, one of her literary heroes: “Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. The heroes of the Dunciad are to her, as Hercules to the author of that poem.”7 James Weldon Johnson also focused on the significance of Wheatley’s being a “first” or an “early.” Johnson claimed that Wheatley’s frequent omission from textbooks of the era was “some sort of conspiracy,” which is a tantalizing comment since the nature of this perceived conspiracy remains suggested but not explained. Johnson did not connect Wheatley’s importance – or, presumably, her exclusion – to her race or to her literary quality, but rather to her sex, and stressed her place in the national order over the racial order:

Of course, she is not a great American poet – and in her day there were no great American poets – but she is an important American poet. Her importance, if for no other reason, rests on the fact that, save one, she is the first in order of time of all the women poets of America. And she is among the first of all American poets to issue a volume.”8

For Alice Walker, Wheatley’s importance was that she wrote, not what she wrote: “It is not so much what you sang, as that you kept alive, in so many of our ancestors, the notion of song.”9

Another popular perspective, especially in recent decades, is to name Lucy Terry (1724/6–1821), as the founding figure of African American poetry. Although a relatively late addition to the canon, and absent from many early anthologies and critical studies, Terry (who is also referred to by her married names of Luce Abijah and Lucy Prince) is viewed by many as the founding mother of African American poetry for her symbolic role rather than her literary contribution.10 The only known poem to be attributed to Terry, “Bars Fight, August 28th, 1746,” is considered

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10 Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps are often credited with introducing Terry and her poem into the canon by including her in their co-edited volume, The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949.
The first written by an African American. Although she lived well into her nineties, and was renowned for her rhetorical skills, the only surviving piece of her writing is this poem created when she was a young woman. Her date of birth usually appears as 1730, which makes this poem the product of a sixteen-year old. But in her brilliantly authoritative biography, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How an Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and Into Legend* (2008), Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina proves that Terry was a young girl of five or six in 1730 when she arrived in Deerfield, Massachusetts from Africa, and not an infant, as is often claimed. “Bars Fight” was reduced by Redmond to “twenty-eight-line doggerel,” and even Gerzina acknowledges it as “a singsongy ballad.”11 Gerzina’s painstakingly researched and revelatory biography of Terry and her family describes in detail the circumstances that produced this occasional poem. The subject is an unexpected and bloody raid on a community of settlers. This twenty-eight-line ballad, loosely metered in the iambic tetrameter that formed a popular pattern for song lyrics of the era, commemorated an attack on an area of Deerfield, Massachusetts called the Bars, which consisted of “two deserted houses and a field of corn and vegetables.”12 Thought to have been written in about 1746, it was not published until thirty years after her death, in 1855.13 The poem was well enough known during Terry’s lifetime that it was perpetuated, most likely as song lyrics, until its first publication in the *Springfield Daily Republican* more than a century after it was written.14

This poem has been criticized, like the writing of Wheatley, for identifying with the perspective of the society that enslaved her and was called “doggerel” and worse. The frequent use of the descriptive and evaluative term “doggerel” by the earliest serious African American literary critics in describing the perceived founders of the tradition cannot be overlooked.

12 Gerzina, *Mr. and Mrs. Prince*, p. 77.
14 Before its first publication on the front page of the November 20, 1854 edition of the *Springfield Daily Republican*, the only known copy of this poem was handwritten and located in Pliny Arms’s papers at the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association in Deerfield (Arms Family Papers, box 13, folder 17), according to Gerzina (*Mr. and Mrs. Prince*, note 80, p. 221). It is not possible to have an accurate understanding of the facts versus the romanticized fictions about Lucy Terry Prince and her life without reading Gerzina’s book, which is a major contribution to our knowledge of this previously mysterious figure.
An onomatopoetic word that derives from “dog,” it contains tones of burlesquing, and making the poems and their creators the butt of a joke. “Doggerel” elevates the position and judgment of the critic to the proverbial catbird seat. This gesture simultaneously transforms perceptions of the poet into a domesticated pet, which evokes the animal imagery often used to describe African Americans by slave-holders in plantation culture. The frequent use of this word by multiple African American critics reinforces the argument that I am building about the attitude of scholarship towards the “originators” of the tradition, and the complications of anointing these figures as the sole originators of the canon.

Regardless of dismissals of its quality, “Bars Fight” may be viewed generously as a precursor of several dominant features that continue to appear in the African American poetry genre. Music and poetry are connected since this poem is believed to have originally been intended as song lyrics. It is written in ballad form rather than a poetic form that was more culturally esteemed in this era, such as blank verse. The subject is political and topical. Its purpose is to protest and witness for the innocent and overmatched sufferers of racial discrimination and violence, in this case the white victims of a Native American raid. The diction is conversational and colloquial rather than elaborated figures, and ornate or Latinate diction. It shows empathy and value for the lives of ordinary individuals and calls out their names and personal details. Nonetheless, it would be difficult to make a case that the poem has had significant literary influence, just as it would be difficult to make the case that the actual tone, content, and style of Wheatley have had a major impact on generations of poets to follow.

African American poetry is a discipline full of opportunities for much-needed research and better understanding, but there has been progress in interest and knowledge. As one example, what we now know about Terry has increased immensely from the late twentieth century. In 1963, Bontemps wrote that she remained a slave for her entire life, which is now known to be untrue. Like Wheatley, Terry was abducted from Africa as a child, and enslaved until she married a freeman, Abijah Prince, who purchased her freedom. Her remarkable life after becoming Lucy Terry Prince has been critically and creatively researched and imagined. Although no additional poems by Terry (Prince) have been found, her long and courageous life has been well-documented. Two valuable biographies are the volume by Gerzina, and a biography for young readers, Black Woman: A Fictionalized Biography of Lucy Terry Prince by Bernard
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and Jonathan Katz. Terry’s situation as the author of one known poem differs from that of Wheatley, who published an entire poetry collection, but her single effort also has been met with ambivalent critical reception and regard.

Yet another perspective launches the African American poetry tradition with Jupiter Hammon (1711–c. 1806), who did live his entire life in chattel enslavement. Hammon wrote a poem in 1760 titled “An Evening Thought, Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries,” which was published in 1761. Although written fifteen years after Terry’s poem, Hammon’s poem is widely regarded as the first to be published by a person of African descent in the country that became the United States of America. Hammon was considered by J. Saunders Redding – whom Gates called “the veritable Dean of Afro-American literary critics” – to be “the first Negro writer in America” and “the first American Negro to see his name in print as a maker of verse.” Yet Hammon’s poetry too was reviled by critics. Jean Wagner writes, “If the quality of his verse were the only criterion [versus the fact that he wrote “the oldest extant poem by an American Negro”] we might well consign him to oblivion forthwith.” Sterling A. Brown found it “noteworthy” that broadsides were being published by “a Negro slave” when most American colonists were too busy homesteading to write poetry. But “these were by no means good poems,” which Brown summarized as “crude doggerel.” Brown identified Wheatley and Hammon as suffering from the same shortcoming: they gave back only what they “had got from others.” If they had been more themselves, their literary place “might have been greater than that of a curiosity.”

What is the significance of designating these figures and documents as the foundations of the African American poetry tradition? All three poets were enslaved at the time of their landmark writing. All three learned to read and write and produced their poetry in written form. They have been widely judged as unique or exemplary individuals, not as typical of

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15 The Lucy Terry Prince collection, which contains research materials relating to Black Woman: A Fictionalized Biography of Lucy Terry Prince (1973) by Bernard Katz and Jonathan Katz, is housed in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.
18 Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama, pp. 4–5 and 5–6.
African Americans, although paradoxically and ironically they also were evaluated based on their race and as group representatives. Their achievements were considered notable in the contexts of their tragic life circumstances in a state of enslavement, which inevitably positioned them as pitiable. We must ask what is the significance and value of the position of “first” in relation to a literary canon, and what does this designation particularly imply in an African American context? In his introduction to Redding’s classic text To Make A Poet Black, originally published in 1939, Gates calls Brawley the first to introduce the notion of a canon — a tradition of African American writing, by calling it out — “to assert the existence of this ‘great’ black aesthetic tradition...”19 Gates considers Redding to be “the tradition’s first eminent scholar-critic,” who built on Brawley’s foundation to produce “the first sophisticated book of literary criticism published about Afro-American literature.” Gates credits Redding with producing a “system” of defining and connecting the constituent units (p. xvi).

With Redding in this preeminent position, his views on the founding figures, who he calls “The Forerunners,” are of paramount importance. Redding opens his study with this important claim: “The literature of the Negro in America, motivated as it is by his very practical desire to adjust himself to the American environment, is ‘literature of necessity.’” By needing to maintain “two faces,” Redding points out that black writers needed to satisfy two different audiences, black and white, which were “opposed when not entirely opposite” (p. 3). Like “threads through the whole cloth,” these positions — he claims — run straight through the African American literary tradition from its origins. Redding describes the poetry of Hammon as “rhymed prose, doggerel,” which encapsulated his “homely thoughts” in “limping phrases” (p. 4) Wheatley was castigated as one of “The Mocking-Bird School of Poets” for her lack of originality, authenticity, and racial consciousness; being little more than a curiosity for having a good memory and an aptitude that enabled her to master culturally admired skills; and succeeding only in ineptly imitating the prevailing tastes in European culture, including the poetry of Pope, Milton, and Homer.20 “This early group of poets suffered from too great decorousness,” we read in The Negro Caravan. Though The Negro Caravan

19 Redding, To Make a Poet Black, p. xv. Subsequent page references are given in parentheses in the text.
modulates these criticisms with empathy for the poets’ circumstances, Brown stands by the accusations in his assessment of Hammon’s poetry as “crude doggerel” and Wheatley’s poetry as the product of “a cultured Bostonian whose chief interests were in the library.”

Here we arrive at a critical dilemma that haunts this genre to the present. One would expect the “originators” of a literary tradition to be judged as exemplary in quality and as making a truly original contribution, yet the literary achievements and legacies of these three figures have been treated with ambivalence at best. They have been assessed largely for their questionable ability and ambitions to reflect the prevailing tastes and dominant features of the contemporaneous Anglo-American poetry canon. Even when these poets exhibited self-awareness as members of a marginalized population with an alternative history, they were measured by their skill at enrobing their poems in conventional literary garb. Although Walt Whitman has been revered for his efforts to create an authentic “American” style, form, and diction as distinct from British exemplars, African American poets were not comparably rewarded for striving to forge their own self-determined modes of poetic originality. In fact, the situation is the opposite: efforts to generate an African American poetic mode that builds on and acknowledges its own history and traditions have been mocked and dismissed. African American poetry that used the conventions of the white canon has been judged as substandard. It should be made clear that I am summarizing the complicated history of critical reception, and not endorsing its perspectives or judgments. At moments throughout the history of African American literary criticism, Wheatley, Terry, and Hammon all have been denigrated as amateurish, reviled as inauthentic, and ridiculed as imitative. The earliest critics of African American poetry, such as Brawley and Redding, would have been the most influential in establishing the existence and definition of an African American poetry canon. Their views on these three foundational figures were, at best, grudgingly respectful and, at worst, outright dismissive. How did these figures come to be seen and taught as the cornerstones of the African American poetry canon? Is there only one African American poetry canon, or have there always been canons in the plural from the outset which we continue to see played out today?

Throughout this book, we will ask the questions “why this text and not that text?” or “why not this text and that text?” Is there a way that

visions and traditions can be valuably seen together? While I do not propose definitive answers, I hope to raise provocations and reconsiderations. Canons by their nature tend to be conservative, but I believe the stakes in canon formation are raised for a population that is already silenced and marginalized. In addition to qualifications about their literary value and originality, there are further problems in viewing Terry, Hammon, and Wheatley as the sole founding figures of the tradition. Referred to not only as “slave poets,” but also as exemplars of the so-called “literary tradition,” all three represent the print culture, and publication as the standard of literary value, which overlooks the essential role of oral and unpublished literature. All three represent the voices and perspectives of enslaved African Americans, which erases the African origins of black people in America, and the literature – both written and oral – of free African Americans. In relation to the presence of a black population in the nation that became the United States of America, they are chronologically too late to represent the origins of the tradition. John Rolfe documented the arrival in 1619 of an English warship to the colony at Jamestown, Virginia with a cargo of “20 and odd Negroes” to live in servitude, before slavery existed as a full-fledged institution. It is an often-cited statistic that this date and event mark the origins of black people in the land of the future United States. The influential compilation The Negro Caravan reflects this standard belief. Its chronology of major historical and literary events lists 1619 as the year that the “First Negroes landed in Virginia” (p. 1062).

However, there is ample evidence that black people, both free and in various forms of indenture, were in the future United States at least a century earlier. Several figures have been cited as “the first” black person to arrive well before 1619. For example, Gates identifies a free man and conquistador named Juan Garrido as “the first documented black person to arrive in this country” when he accompanied Ponce de Leon on his 1513 expedition to Florida seeking the Fountain of Youth, and later traveled to California in the 1530s. The Norton Anthology of African American Literature starts its chronology in 1492, with Pedro Alonso Nino, “traditionally considered the first person of many New World

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22 For example, see the website of historic Jamestown for a reference to “The first documented arrival of Africans to the colony of Virginia”: www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/afrcan-americans-at-jamestown.htm (last accessed August 23, 2018).

23 The source of this information is The Root: www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/10/who_was_the_first_african_american_100_amazing_facts_about_the_negro/ (last accessed August 23, 2018).
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explorers of African descent,” who sailed with Christopher Columbus. The next date listed in Norton’s chronology is 1526, when the Spanish brought the first African slaves to the country that became the United States. The year 1619 is the third date listed in this chronology.24 As early as 1790, the census of this new nation reported that there was a population of 697,897 “slaves,” and 59,466 “free colored.” By the time of the 1860 census, just before the start of the Civil War, we find 487,970 “free colored” and 3,953,760 “slaves” in the United States, with both populations having increased dramatically since the 1850 census.25

While it is inarguable that the majority of black people in America are descendants of kidnapped Africans sold into slavery, it is equally true that there has always been a significant population of free black people in America, either manumitted slaves, or born and always free. If the African American poetry tradition is widely perceived to be based solely on the writing of enslaved people of African ancestry in English-speaking America, and whose primary stylistic influences come from the Western canon, what are the implications? It is a common belief that most, or even all, black people in colonial and antebellum America were the victims, or their descendants, of kidnapping in Africa who were sold into slavery. It is another common perspective that virtually all black Americans were illiterate before the Civil War because of laws prohibiting enslaved African Americans from reading and writing, but as an indication of the rapid increase in knowledge since the late twentieth century about African American literature, history, and culture, we now know that far more enslaved African Americans could read and write than had been believed previously. Most estimates are that between 10 and 30 percent of enslaved blacks had basic levels of literacy and numeracy, while African Americans in the North could read and write at far higher levels. For the enslaved, this figure may well be underestimated, owing to the necessary circumstances of secrecy.

The notion prevails that there was a miniscule body of “early” African American poetry – meaning before the twentieth century – which necessitated that virtually all poems and poets be included in the canonical record almost as artifacts. But we gain a clearer perspective of the prevalence and value placed on writing, including poems, from scholars who have done foundational work that still has not been fully built upon. Starting in 1974 with her revelatory anthology, Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans

of the Nineteenth Century, followed by *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth-Century: An Anthology* (1992), Joan R. Sherman has brought attention to numerous fascinating and diverse poets who too often remain invisible even in the present. *Beyond Bondage: An Anthology of Verse by African Americans of the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Erika DeSimone and Fidel Louis represents a marvelous contribution to scholarship which presents a selection of poems by African Americans published between 1827 and 1899 by black presses. Presumably “beyond bondage” means freedom by means of inscribed and published poetic expression, since many of these poems were written well before Emancipation, and the contributors were “slaves, former slaves, the children of slaves, or free people of African descent.”

Even the choice of publisher extends the lineage of this documentary project of revisionism. NewSouth Books, whose origins are in a cooperative founded in 1984 called the Black Belt Communications Group, is committed to printing “regional books of national interest,” which is an apt description of the voices represented in this anthology. One hundred and fifty poems have been selected and are presented with invaluable editorial commentary and a superb introductory essay, offering fresh insight into the relationship between black poets and black presses, which becomes a topic of continuing importance as this tradition develops. Though the topic of black-owned presses was addressed most prominently during the 1960s and 1970s, that limited perspective overlooks the legacy established by many earlier African American poets who published newspapers and journals, including Alfred Gibbs Campbell and Fenton Johnson. Highlighting early publishers such as Samuel E. Cornish, John B. Russworm, David Ruggles, Frederick Douglass, T. Thomas Fortune, and Peter Williams, Jr., DeSimone and Louis show that poetry was an essential component at the birth of black publishing from the colonial period onwards, ranging from “news” handsewn into quilts, to early black pamphlets, to the establishment of the nation’s first black-owned and operated newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, in 1827, all of which routinely featured poems. The extent of African Americans writing poetry becomes evident by the presentation of better-known poets such as Horton side by side with many iterations of “Anonymous” who were still, like Horton, in the bonds of enslavement but felt compelled to give voice to their emotions, ideas, and experiences.

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The earliest and largest canon of African American poetry is the oral poetry of slave songs, or spirituals, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. As I have written elsewhere, my preference is to use the word “slave songs” for this term’s more inclusive suggestion, and to redirect critical attention to their value and function as poetic texts rather than as Christian folk hymns. “Slave songs” is a more historically and aesthetically appropriate term. It echoes the title of the first major compilation of these poems, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867) edited by William Francis Allen, Charles Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison. It is a misperception that these sung poems were all “spiritual” in nature, an image perpetuated by abolitionists who wanted to convey the impression that enslaved African Americans were all placid and pious Christians who cared for nothing but religion and reaching Heaven. “Slave songs” articulates the conditions and circumstances of their production as an essential part of their meaning and significance. Representing African survivals melded with the experience of the Middle Passage and plantation culture, the origins of slave songs date to the moment of kidnap in Africa.

They function as a composite of African and American experiences—in this sense, they may be the most authentic record of how “African Americans” came to be. They present an alternative way to perceive the origins of the genre. The result is to illuminate how the canon developed over time and recover important literature that was lost or omitted through the currently limited view of the tradition’s birth. By relocating the roots of the African American poetry tradition, we see more clearly the integral role of music. That view applies not only to Lucy Terry’s poem as popular song lyrics, but also to the extraordinary endeavor of such marginalized figures as Joshua McCarter Simpson to produce counter-songs to erase and revise the body of American music and lyrics that reviled African Americans. This perspective also allows us to see the close connections among music, poetry, and social protest that date to the origins of this tradition and have never abated. The influence of slave songs on African American poetry as it has evolved is far more pronounced than that of the so-called originators. The voluminous quantity of African American poetry that has been influenced by slave songs may even exceed those poems without allusions to these truly foundational texts.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, numerous literate African Americans were writing verse. These poets, both free and enslaved,

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knew about and alluded to a black American literary tradition, as well as the Anglo-American canon. In anthologies as early as *Old Plantation Hymns: a collection of hitherto unpublished melodies of the slave and the freeman, with historical and descriptive notes*, edited by William E. Barton (1899), we already see the development of a self-referencing tradition. Formal diversity is notable: some poems are in conventional canonical forms; some reflect the structures, diction, perspectives, and imagery of slave songs, hymns, and African survivals; and some presage the more open forms that will follow in the periods ahead. Many contain signifiers of race and key themes: African American Christianity and biblical imagery, slave songs, plantation culture, black dialect, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, freedom, black Civil War regiments and soldiers, slavery, Emancipation, the Negro race, and struggles and progress. As with the work collected by Sherman, and DeSimone and Louis, these writings remain little known. Some nineteenth-century poets, such as the sophisticated and often bitterly ironic voices of James Monroe Whitfield (1822–71) and Alfred Gibbs Campbell (1827–84), were famed and extolled during their lifetimes, yet are unjustly overlooked or entirely forgotten today. This pattern of erasure, and failure to recognize continuities connected to progressions, appears in the twentieth century, which will be discussed in later chapters.

Despite other significant sources and voices – including slave songs – the canon is based on the premise that its foundational texts were written by one of three enslaved African Americans. These are remarkable and essential voices to be represented. The direct experience of slavery, and the ability to speak from and about that state, is an integral part of American and African American history and culture. In the case of Terry and Wheatley, we even encounter the voices of individuals who were born in Africa, experienced the horror of being kidnapped in childhood, and survived the Middle Passage. Wheatley, Terry, and Hammon have earned their stature as figures of historical importance, and perhaps of literary value, though we have seen the differences of opinion on this matter. But by presenting them as the sole originators of this tradition, other traditions have been marginalized that have equal claim to be foundational to the canon. Their exclusions also reveal important insight about what has been suppressed and why. Some features that are described as later developments in the African American poetry tradition – such as formal innovation and voices of protest – are shown to have far earlier roots. Throughout each subsequent generation, the African American poets themselves certainly have been aware of many of these other and more diverse influences and literary ancestors.
The problem with the existing scenario rests in the ideological implications of the exclusions, as well as the significance of those marginalized writings. The two most important bodies of literature to be excluded at the start of the tradition are the voices of free African Americans and oral literature, which is as literary as the written discourse in this tradition. The canon as it now stands is discriminatory and ideological. It starts too late and is insufficiently inclusive and representative. In the Introduction to *American Negro Poetry* (1963), Bontemps writes, “Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, along with such other American Negroes as Jupiter Hammon and George Moses Horton, belong to a tradition of writers in bondage which goes back to Aesop and Terence.” 28 By starting with Wheatley, Hammon, and Terry, the medium of print — both as the method of production and the mode of dissemination through publication — is valorized, as is the setting of the (future) United States of America, which ignores the diasporic history of this transnational, intercultural, inter-linguistic, and transatlantic population. By using the existing touchstones, the entirety of the African American poetry tradition is perceived to have been founded by enslaved people of African descent in the eighteenth century. The tradition also is reductively misrecognized as being more uniform in style, content, and purpose than is accurate when its full breadth and diversity are recognized.

From the earliest recorded material, there have been observations about the importance of song, poetry, dance, and storytelling in the cultures of Africa. It is well documented as early as the seventeenth century that this propensity was used against the kidnapped Africans by their white captors as a method of degradation. At the same time, it was used by the kidnapped Africans, and later during enslavement, for their own wellbeing and survival. Captors used these deeply embedded practices to reinforce perceptions that the kidnapped Africans were different and inferior, to inflict control and humiliation, and to debase them into the positions of comic entertainers. The enslaved Africans used the same practices to facilitate communication, retain self-esteem, reinforce their identity as sentient subjects, subversively reject the belief systems of their captors, preserve ancestral traditions, augment community, and convey refusal and resistance towards their imposed objectification and state of unwilling captivity.

Sea captain Richard Jobson wrote in his 1623 report on the West African slave trade, “There is without doubt, no people on the earth more

naturally affected to the sound of musicke than these people.” Describing his experience in the Gambia River region, Jobson explained that “they use the singing of Songs” to exalt their history, important people and acts, and, in his particular case, “praise of us white men” – for a gratuity.\(^\text{29}\) Olaudah Equiano, kidnapped from his birthplace in Benin, wrote this famous line in one of the earliest “slave narratives” (1789): “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets.”\(^\text{30}\) Scottish surgeon Mungo Park, who explored the region of the Niger River between 1795 and 1797, described the centrality of music and poetry to the African daily social fabric: “With the love of music is naturally connected a taste for poetry, and fortunately for the poets of Africa, they are in a great measure exempted from that neglect and indigence, which in more polished countries commonly attend the votaries of the Muses.” Park explained that there were two classes of singers. The first was those who “sing extempore songs in honor of their chief men, or any other persons who are willing to give ‘solid pudding for empty praise.’” This class of singers also preserved historical events and great deeds of ancestors. The other class sang religious hymns and performed religious services, mainly Muslim. Park also described the function, style, and content of songs spontaneously created by the women as they spun cotton. This singing while working together was an integral part of West African cultures, which also registered emphatic consciousness of the white outsiders who functioned as the recorders:

They lightened their labour by songs, one of which was composed ex tempore, for I myself was the subject of it. It was sung by one of the young women, the rest joining in a sort of chorus: The air was sweet and plaintive, and the words literally translated, were these: “The winds roared, and the rains fell:–The poor white man, faint and weary, came and sat under our tree: He has no mother to bring him milk; no wife to grind his corn. Chorus: Let us pity the white man; no mother has he, &c. &c.”\(^\text{31}\)

Several qualities discussed here are precursors of the oral tradition and slave songs that are entitled to be seen as the foundation of African American – and American – poetry. Here we find the tradition of group


singing to lighten the load of labor, the antiphonal structure of call-and-response with a solo voice followed by a chorus, an attitude of pity for anyone who is separated from family, a perspective of strength in community action (“let us”), and the correlation of nature with human emotions and circumstances. Proposing that the African American poetry tradition starts with printed texts in the eighteenth century that is patently imitative of contemporaneous British exemplars such as Pope and Milton denies the African values, practices, traditions, and memories that are the birthright of African Americans.

An example of a slave song that echoes the tropes and ethos of the song recalled by Park is “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” also performed as call-and-response between a leader and the group:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long way from home.

Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air,
Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air,
Sometimes I feel like a feather in the air,
A long way from home.

Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone,
Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone,
Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone,
A long way from home.

True believer, true believer,
A long way from home.

Early white observers noted the centrality of music, dance, and song to Africans. Dena J. Epstein cites Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal who, in 1445, described the sad and incomprehensible (to him), singing of captured Africans, who “made their lamentations in songs, according to the customs of their country, which, although we could not understand their language, we saw corresponded well to the height of their sorrow.”[^32] Plentiful historical documents about life in Africa record the rich oral culture and expressive modes of verbal communication for creative, emotional, and documentary purposes. Linguistic expression was integrally connected to music and dance. It was a social

[^32]: Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals*, p. 3, n. 3.
phenomenon, mainly addressed to other members of the same group for worship, building and sustaining community, and preserving history. Documentary evidence shows that members of the African diaspora carried their traditions and practices with them, as they communicated while in transit, and, after their arrival, blended their past with new experiences in a distant land. The multiplicities of languages necessitated finding common linguistic ground after groups of kidnapped Africans were joined together during the long process of transporting them to the slave ships and their frightful destinations. Many scholars have observed that the diverse groups shared greater commonalities of practices, beliefs, and attitudes than differences, despite their differing languages and dialects.

There is extensive evidence that African survivals from oral culture are present in the earliest poetry of the enslaved African Americans in plantation culture. Part One of *The Music of Black Americans: A History* by Eileen Southern is a superb resource on the role of poetry and music in West Africa from 1619 to 1775, and their omnipresent function in the lives of individuals and the community for purposes of work, recreation, historical records, holidays, news, advice, emotional sustenance, topical commentary, and worship. Southern’s opening section is followed by an outstanding history and analysis of the continued influence and evolutions of African traditions and practices in America through the twentieth century. Interdisciplinary scholars find overwhelming proof that slave songs preserved African survivals as well as musical, liturgical, theological, historical, sociological, linguistic, and experiential influences of plantation culture in a state of enslavement. In his indispensable book *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, F. Abiola Irele constructs the argument that both oral and written texts must be considered literary in the discourse system of African and African diasporic literature. If we look at the origins of African American literature as coming from African survivals and other products of oral culture including slave songs, as well as poetry by free African Americans in colonial and antebellum culture, the diverse totality of this genre emerges in a much more exciting and dynamic way than if it is limited to Hammon, Wheatley, and Terry. It also is more accurate to look at the influence of slave songs as far stronger for twenty-first century and future generations than the poetry of Wheatley, Hammon, and Terry, as will be shown in later chapters. This point of view will form an important thread throughout this book in defining and defending an African American poetry tradition with roots that are innovative and original, self-invented and self-reflexive, resistant and assertive, and transnational and international.
It is naïve to imagine that the process of becoming an African American started on plantations on American soil. For the kidnapped Africans, the journey from their former lives to enslavement was unimaginably cruel, treacherous, and debilitating physically, emotionally, and psychologically. The process of becoming African Americans, and producers of African American cultural products, began at the nightmare moment of irrevocable capture. Extensive resources document the history of North American slavery as the crucible of a new form of community, which centrally entailed creative uses of language and culture inspired by West African traditions. In-depth scholarship on this topic can be found in many outstanding texts, including *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* by Saidiya V. Hartman, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and The Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* by Jon Cruz, and two classic texts, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* by Eugene D. Genovese, and *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* by Lawrence Levine. *The Slave Ship: A Human History* by Marcus Rediker, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* by Katrina Dyonne Thompson, and *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* by Michael A. Gomez provide well-detailed accounts of the experiences and operations of the journey to and through the Middle Passage. The concept of Afro-Pessimism, addressed in an essay collection called *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, builds on the work of esteemed scholar of slavery, Orlando Patterson. This theoretical lens asserts that “The social death of the slave goes to the very level of their being, defining their ontology,” leaving a legacy of “anti-blackness” which lingers today.33

Kidnapped Africans were bound together, often stripped naked, and forced to walk in processions called coffles to their point of embarkation, where they could remain for another few months while recovering from the journey or awaiting the next slave ship. The physically restrained people in the coffles were made to carry materials and provisions, and forced either to be silent or to entertain their captors by singing and dancing. An expressive community of language and gesture would have begun to evolve as soon as the coffles were organized, to create a bridge between multiple African languages and dialects. The cruelty, indignities, suffering, and perils to health were unimaginable, and the death rate along the journey was extraordinary. Rediker shares a chilling sailor rhyme on the

odds of survival: “Beware and take care / Of the Bight of Benin; / For the one that comes out, / There are forty go in.”

Gomez writes that it could take four months or longer simply to reach the coast, where captives could spend several additional months convalescing or awaiting a slaver. Usually the captives were incarcerated in what were essentially holding pens called barracoons, often exposed to the elements, and sometimes moved from one barracoon to another before entering the hell of the slave ship itself.

Rediker discusses the necessary development on board the slave ships of a rich interchange in languages consisting largely of English and African pidgins. Will Coleman claims that the rhetorical foundation of West Africans and the first African Americans can be understood only by recognizing the role and importance of the Dahomean god Legba (Eshu Elegbara), who “crossed the Atlantic Ocean along with the slaves.” Legba is “the master of language” and “the quintessential trickster,” who “knows how to use and manipulate semiotic codes to his own advantage in every conceivable (con)text.” As the “vodun of communication,” Legba serves, through language, as an ever-present bridge between worlds and modes of existence.

These traits were differentially exploited by the captors and captives and perpetuated on the ships. Women were often kept above decks, where they were forced to sing and dance, ostensibly for “exercise,” for the amusement of the sailors who routinely sexually abused them. Often the enslaved Africans were deprived of clothing during the ocean voyage, branded, and made the objects of torture and amusement. It could take as long as one year from the moment of capture until kidnapped Africans reached the shores of America. The physical and psychological damage for survivors was such that many never fully recovered. Suicides, resulting from maltreatment, depression, shock, and terror, were common.

The population that arrived in America, and their descendants, surely incorporated the effects of post-traumatic stress into the people that they became. After the traumatized survivors arrived on plantations, they rapidly became a source of status and entertainment for slave owners. Advertisements for slaves listed prized and desirable skills in music, singing, recitation, and dancing. According to Thompson,

For more than two centuries, the performance of music, song, and dance was an integral part of every aspect of the Southern slave experience. Ethnomusicologists, historians, and folk scholars have explored the dance movements and song lyrics of the enslaved community, recognizing that these traditions were adaptations of West African cultures that contributed to the creation of distinct African American communities.37

Thompson builds a persuasive argument that “African captives gained power within the Atlantic voyage through their songs, which acted as a form of rebellion that often has been ignored in historical texts” (p. 60). The creative expressions that represented coercion and domination by white society equally represented resistance, rebellion, and retention of identity for the African Americans. The defining moments in African American history can be retro-constructed by observing their presence as recurring poetic themes. Poems about coffles appear in all eras of this tradition, and serve a powerful mnemohistorical function to recall, reexamine, and preserve the traumatic cycle of this terrifying and humiliating experience. Coffles were employed once again when the enslaved people reached America and were moved to the auction block. The pattern of forcing captives to sing under conditions of the greatest duress is a constant in this tradition.

Singing and dancing, even when it was ordered and under the most painful conditions, were used as a public display of the ostensible happiness of the enslaved people, as Frederick Douglass vividly recounts in a famous passage from his autobiography: “I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is almost impossible to think of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy.”38 As a number of critics have observed, the centrality of oral communication, music, song, dance, and the role of the griot are features of African culture that led to exploitative stereotypes. The strong correlation between descriptions of West African cultural practices and later commentaries on slave songs from American plantations urges us to look for African origins and oral traditions as the original source from which the African American poetry tradition sprung.

It is especially important to incorporate the oral tradition in the canon because it represents the strength of African and African diasporic survivals such as the inextricability of community, performance, language, song, dance, and memory. While liturgical forms, particularly sermons and hymns, often serve as allusions or echoes in the so-called “slave poets,” other forms of performativity – such as poetic dialogues, dramatic poems, call-and-response structure, and song lyrics – are far more characteristic of slave songs as well as the poems of antebellum free blacks. A common – and accurate – view of African American poetry is that two of its essential traits are its connections to orality and to musicality. Yet the figures credited with founding this tradition show relatively little relationship to either of these features. As we know, the sole poem attributed to Terry, “Bars Fight, August 28, 1746,” appears to have been created as song lyrics. Though the music does not survive, the poem’s rhyme scheme and ballad pattern are indicative of the Western tradition, not of African structures and features. Similarly, the poetry of Hammon and Wheatley shows no pronounced influence of these features and is obviously the product of the Western canon. It is more common for critics to ascribe references to orality and vernacular culture to the laws against literacy – a deprivation – rather than to African survivals – a strength. Here is an example of viewing African American poetry, from the origins of the tradition, as aspirational to white models, and/or the products of deprivation and diminishment. In the history of reception of African American poetry, we see perceptions foregrounded of inadequacy, incompetency, and incompletion manifested in multiple ways. A foundational example is the accusation against slave songs that they were the result of poor emulation of white Protestant hymns, and therefore, absent of originality and mastery. The distinctive theology, lyrics, performance style, and musical features of slave songs were attributed to partial absorption and incompetent application of Western influences rather than the authentic power of African survivals, astounding resiliency of spirit, and supernal creativity.

Based on the root of the word, meaning to create or imaginatively start something new, it is reasonable to think of the “originators” of a canon as truly original. It is reasonable to expect their literary quality to achieve a level of greatness – even indispensability – as perceived by most critics. Foundational figures in the canon are expected to be major sources of influence and allusions. Yet there have been reservations by critics throughout the tradition on both issues as they relate to the so-called “originators.” There are radical implications for how the bedrock of the
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canon is perceived, and how we can productively and excitingly reimag-
ine a canon that has developed organically from newly reconceived roots.
Formally innovative poetry is a constant in the African American poetry
canon, though the experimental motives may not be mainly or wholly
intended as a rejection or affront to the mainstream. Yet critical perspec-
tives have tended to create dichotomies or binary oppositions about the
themes and techniques of African American poetry, which reflect being
either inside or outside the values of the Western lyric tradition. The cri-
teria often point to some failure, lack, absence, or insufficiency: is black
poetry formal or dialect, folk or literary, oral or print, difficult or popu-
list, accommodationist or protest? The mainstream is the center, hence
the perceived origins of the African American poetry canon, and the line-
age that follows. But if we look beyond the figures who are identified as
the originators, we become better equipped to recognize and appreciate
the truly original poets who have defined their own goals and methods to
sidestep this reductionist and reactive pigeonholing.

There has been little critical appetite and admiration for experimental
African American poetry, especially as a thread through the tradition,
yet it is present and traceable throughout the history of this genre. It is
precisely the writing that cannot be easily naturalized and explained by
the conventional modes of Western literary interpretation and assess-
ment that has been marginalized, starting with slave songs. The pattern
moves forward to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry and figures such
as Harryette Mullen and Erica Hunt, whose formally oppositional and
experimental writing did not receive the critical attention enjoyed by
white poets working in related trajectories. The same pattern of neglect
occurs throughout the tradition, which explains why a long lineage of
experimentalists has been disparaged, neglected, and ultimately under-
appreciated or lost. How often do we find classes or general anthologies
today that routinely feature writing by Oliver Pitcher, De Leon Harrison,
Lloyd Addison, or Allen Polite, to name only a few? To complicate mat-
ters even more, there are poets like Julia Fields and Jay Wright that chose
to actively limit or prevent their own inclusion in anthologies.

According to Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double
Consciousness*, we should expect the fractal patterns associated with inno-
vation, experimentation, and fragmentation to be normal compositional
and conceptual modes for members of the black diaspora, based on
their history of dislocation, disruption, and alienation from the herit-
age of the cultural center. But the African American, black and ethnic
minority British, and African diasporic canons tend to be fundamentally
conservative and reflective of centrist standards. That circumstance helps to explain the historical disassociation of black poetry from avant-garde practices, which deliberately addresses mainstream practices and expectations to subvert them. The African American poetry tradition has always been innovative, with a history of progressive transformation of its core materials, values, and concepts. If poets are locked out of the mainstream of power by factors such as race, their situation is different from that of poets who are granted access by means of privileges such as race, class, and sex, but who choose to reject mainstream modes and values.

I stand with scholars who find any critical maneuvers that do not grow from the history of the African American experience to be wholly inadequate. Addison Gayle, Jr. articulates the dilemma in his 1972 essay, “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic.” Gayle opens by recounting negative reviews of *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (1968), in the *New York Review of Books* and the *Saturday Review*. The criticism is that America is “one predominant culture,” so the reviewers argue that to speak of a black aesthetic is to practice racial chauvinism. With this colonial mindset, where black is bad and white is good, “the extent of the cultural strangulation of Black literature by white critics has been the extent to which they have been allowed to define the terms in which the Black artist will deal with his own experience.” For Gayle, the most striking example of this circumstance is Paul Laurence Dunbar from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

Like so many Black writers, past and present, Dunbar was trapped by the definitions of other men, never capable of realizing until near the end of his life, that those definitions were not god-given, but man-given; and so circumscribed by tradition and culture that they were irrelevant to an evaluation of either his life or his art.39

Antebellum “protest literature,” which attacks institutionalized racism, discrimination, injustice, and prejudice, is usually associated with slave narratives, essays, and novels.40 It is a common critical perspective that protest poetry is mainly a twentieth century phenomenon, which started to flower during the Harlem Renaissance with poems such as “A Litany of Atlanta” by W. E. B. Du Bois and “If We Must Die” by Claude McKay.

40 Some of the texts that are often identified as the earliest protest literature are Benjamin Banneker’s “Open Letter to Thomas Jefferson” (1791), David Walker’s “Walker’s Appeal” (1829), and Henry Highland Garnet’s “An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America” (1843).
and exploded during and after the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, the first truly incendiary period of African American protest poetry is well before the Civil War with slave songs, followed by numerous examples in the mid-nineteenth century, with such powerful voices of outrage and resistance as Elymas Payson Rogers (1814–61), Charles Lewis Reason (1818–98), Joshua McCarter Simpson (1820–76), James Robert Watkins (c. 1821–?), James Monroe Whitfield (1822–71), and Alfred Gibbs Campbell (1828–84).

African American poetry as a field of public and academic interest is dramatically escalating, propelled in part by remarkable new discoveries and access to information. Some of the brilliant recent research has resulted from digital access to materials, which has been transformative. Canons are built on access to information, and that which is made visible and available stands the greatest chance of entering awareness and recirculating. Conversely, and of immense relevance and concern to this tradition, the invisible eventually becomes lost and devalued. As examples of some of the tremendous forward strides in access and respect, The Freedmen’s Bureau Project has digitized and provided full free online access to 1.5 million handwritten records from newly freed slaves, mentioning the names of 4 million individuals, that were collected in 1865 by the Freedmen’s Bureau.41

As another example of the power of digital humanities, for over one hundred and fifty years, it was accepted among scholars that the first poetry pamphlet by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911), Forest Leaves, was a lost text. We read in Drumvoices, “Her first work, Forest Leaves has not been located.”42 The biographical comments in the third edition of the Norton Anthology of African American Literature state, “around 1845 Harper reportedly published a small collection of poems called Forest Leaves (no copy is known to have survived).”43 Johanna Ortner, a doctoral student conducting research for her dissertation on Harper, made the historic discovery of finding a copy of this manuscript through the traditional method of archival research.44 Melding conventional scholarship with digital humanities, the complete manuscript has been made freely available online in the context of the transformational

41 Accessible at www.discoverfreedmen.org/ (last accessed August 23, 2018).
42 Redmond, Drumvoices, p. 76.
work being accomplished by Commonplace.org and its sister project, Just Teach One: Early African American Print. The aim of this project is to rediscover pre-twentieth century African American literature for the purposes of “changing an academic landscape reified by decades of neglect, dismissal, and other forms of racism” and “to create points of access to these rediscoveries that appropriately frame and present these critical pieces of African American (and so American) literature and culture and that allow individuals to work in responsible, well-informed, dialogic ways to benefit teaching, learning, and further scholarship.” Here is an example of the ways in which digital humanities has the potential to profoundly reshape concepts of African American poetry and American culture. In another major discovery, scholar Jonathan Senchyne found a previously unknown handwritten 500-word essay called “Individual Influence” by Horton at the New York Public Library. Resources such as hathitrust.org have digitized many rare African American poetry volumes, and a vast trove of little magazines has been digitized by sources including the University of Wisconsin.

Such developments enabled by technology have fueled interest in this field as the enormity of exciting and potential discoveries is revealed by the democratization of information and ease of access. Because this field has not been studied with full depth and seriousness, it is a certainty that many more poets and manuscripts have been overlooked and lost, hopefully to be recovered if we know they exist. Digital humanities and increasingly open access to information will probably continue to unravel some of the mysteries that especially apply to the earliest period of the tradition and have prevented a clear overview of the enormous quantity of poetic production by African Americans in the nineteenth century and earlier. Precise birth and death dates, as well as bibliographical and biographical details, are often questionable and incomplete for the earliest figures in this genre, especially but not exclusively for those who were enslaved. This situation indicates the tremendous opportunities to conduct landmark research in this field, and proves its relative neglect, compared with the British and American poetry canons. For example, the birth and death dates for Alfred Gibbs Campbell have always appeared

47 https://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/LittleMagInt/ (last accessed August 20, 2018).
in anthologies as uncertain or unknown, including the laborious efforts by Sherman. We now know from his *New York Times* obituary (January 11, 1884), as well as digital images of his gravesite, that Campbell died in 1884 at age 57.\(^{48}\)

Other gaps and mysteries may result from an element of literary self-fashioning, strategic representation by abolitionists, subterfuge for safety, or simply mistaken attribution, which may all apply to the case of James Watkins, also known by the “slave names” of Ensor Sam and Sam Berry. The literary confusion may result from well-intended desires by abolitionists to portray enslaved and fugitive African Americans in an admirable light, as they did by referring to the sung poems of the slaves as “spirituals.” As shown by its cover, *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins* by Watkins is presented as an autobiography. In a similar statement to the Attestation of the authenticity of Wheatley’s poetry, the book contains numerous prefatory testimonials, mostly about the character of Watkins, and recommending that he be assisted in England, where he fled in 1850 after the Fugitive Slave Law was passed. J. W. C. Pennington, D.D. wrote, “I have seen his letters, and from the long intercourse I have had with all the gentlemen, I am satisfied of their genuineness.”\(^{49}\) The Preface is written by “H.R., (Bolton, February 5,\(^{th}\) 1852),” who is perhaps Robert Heywood, Esq., named as one of the gentlemen who presided over the meetings held by Mr. Watkins in Bolton, England. The volume’s “authorship” is suggested more than stated. “H.R.” provides another example of the complexities of African American authorship, which includes the suggestion of a Christian motive in abolitionism, and a telling implied definition of authorship itself. Here we encounter one of the continuing strands of this genre

\(^{48}\) I wish to pay my thanks to Col. Rob Burrows, Ivanhoe Wheelhouse Museum and Art Gallery History Curator, who is a seventh generation Patersonian, and ardent preserver of the legacy and importance of Campbell as an esteemed resident of Paterson. Col. Burrows has read Campbell’s writing at public poetry readings, and generously shared with me his unique collection of Campbell photographs and ephemera.

which identifies the social realist themes of racial hardship as the definition of authenticity, and the role of the publisher as the validated presenter of the truth. The Preface states that the many testimonials in this book, and the many more that were excluded for lack of space,

will be sufficient to inspire confidence in the simple, unadorned, truthful Narrative presented in these pages, which speaks at once to the heart, and draws out our holiest sympathies. Properly speaking, it is an Autobiography, written down as the words dropped from the lips of Mr. WATKINS, by a friend, a “Friend indeed,” and afterwards arranged for the press by the writer, with a few remarks bearing on this monstrous iniquity – Slavery.50


My purpose is not to criticize Chadwyck-Healey’s highly respected and invaluable database as an academic resource. Rather this mistaken attribution indicates a crucial pattern where voices of African American poets are too often taken as speaking for the aggregate, and not differentiated from each other as individuals. Several of Simpson’s poems have been attributed either to “Anonymous” or to authors other than himself,

51 It was reprinted in 1874 in Simpson’s magnum opus, The Emancipation Car, which expanded on the contents of the earlier slim self-published volume.
and similarly to the situation of Wheatley and so many others, “proof”
was offered by the poet himself of his ownership of the poems’ creation.
Simpson’s first book was called \textit{Original Anti-Slavery Songs}, with the
stress on “original.” His second extraordinary book, \textit{The Emancipation
Car} (1874), includes the statement, “This work is all original, though
several of the songs have been republished several times, under other
names, and by other persons, \textit{they are my own Composition}.” The poems
are stylistically and tonally cohesive, and there are no appearances prior
to the publications of his two books, so there is no reason to doubt
Simpson’s claim that he has authored these poems. The point is that
such a claim would remain needed at all, even for a free black man in the
late nineteenth century. Slave songs created a condition where anonym-
ity and denial of ownership represented discretion over ego, and safety
over renown. Simpson, an underground railroad conductor and ardent
abolitionist, was able to assert his ownership and literary aspirations. It
is interesting that the Poetry Foundation lists Simpson on its website,
and calls him “a well-known abolitionist songwriter, herbal physician,
and Underground Railroad conductor,” but does not refer to him as a
“poet.” The biographical entry states that he was “Subversive in his use of
familiar tunes” and “created a ‘double voicing’ in songs of emancipation
that included an antislavery rendition of ‘America.’” These sound like
similarly sophisticated literary processes to those of slave songs, but slave
songs are almost never categorized as lyric poetry. This metonymic
process of part representing the whole started, of necessity, with slave songs.
But it has continued through the centuries, including its manifestation of
the issue of literary tokenism – which we see with Dunbar, Hughes, and
later Jones/Baraka – where one black poet’s inclusion in an anthology was
taken as sufficient representation of all black poets. As a result, poems by
Simpson are co-opted by a variety of anthologies as communal “black
songs” of protest. An issue that is endemic in the tradition is exemplified
in this situation: how does one speak for a group and maintain individual
identity?

Sherman pointed out that at least 130 black Americans, whom she
calls “invisible poets” in American society, published their writing dur-
ding the nineteenth century. Judging from recent scholarship that takes
account of the omnipresence of poetry in black newspapers and journals
throughout the nation, this is probably a conservative estimate. Yet these
unjustly overlooked published writers did not just form a tradition: they
also entered one. An extraordinary body of diverse and stirring poetry
has been marginalized from the canon of early African American poetry,
which makes it invisible in dictating several different significant trajectories for the tradition. Rather than dividing African American literature into “vernacular” and “literary” traditions, they are clearly all one body of writing. Breaking down these barriers freshly illuminates the breadth as well as the cohesion of African American poetry. It also highlights the definitional features of this genre and supports the importance of seeing it as a varied body of indispensable verse to American and world literature. One defining trait is an adamant cry for freedom for all Americans, the insistence that this value is what America was based on, and a commitment to the ideal that this nation is morally and religiously obligated to fulfill. Related to that idea is a stress on physical safety, equal opportunities, and treatment with respect. Other common qualities are physicality, orality, performance, and oratory. Another is an integral connection between the individual and the community, which is often conveyed in various forms of dialogue, including call-and-response, and examples like the verse plays of Simpson, where individuals engage in dialogue with choruses. Double consciousness and double voicing also are dominant features.

Only by considering the songs and oral poetry of antebellum enslaved blacks, and the written poetry of free blacks, can it be judged fairly whether, how, and to what extent Wheatley deserves credit for her role as the mother of the tradition. Literary history is quite familiar with poems such as Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” and its opening line, “‘T was mercy brought me from my Pagan land.” More commonly found is the inverse of Wheatley’s stated sentiment, which starts in the earliest period of this tradition: accusations to America for its failure to live up to its ideals. Many poets in this earliest period – among them Harper, Whitfield, Simpson, Alfred Gibbs Campbell, and Josephine Delphine Henderson Heard – called the nation to task for its hypocrisy in fighting for human liberty, with many black soldiers participating in this cause, and then creating a culture of oppression. The voices are strong that say that blacks would never have fought for America’s freedom if they realized that they were helping to establish a nation that would enslave their own descendants. This theme is a commonplace, and it is impossible to read “protest poetry” of the Civil Rights Movement outside the context of these early precursors, who are far less well known than white abolitionist poets such as John Greenleaf Whittier. Why are

52 I am not overlooking but leaving aside the issue of whether she was “obligated” to make such statements and expressed them only with irony, as some critics believe.
the antebellum free black abolitionist poets not better known but we know the voices of the enslaved who have been accused of being imitative, accommodating, and substandard in literary quality? “Protest literature,” which rails against institutionalized prejudice, injustice, and discrimination, often is thought of as a twentieth century phenomenon. Sometimes the slave narratives and early African American essays and fiction are identified as the earliest protest literature, but colonial and antebellum African American poetry is wrongly ignored as an example of early revolutionary writing.

Whitfield produced one poetry collection titled *America* (1853) that deserves to be far better known for its own value and as proof of the under-recognized variety, originality, pre-modernity, and power of antebellum African American poetry. A landmark volume, *The Works of James M. Whitfield: America and Other Writings by a Nineteenth-Century African American Poet* (2011), co-edited by Robert S. Levine and Ivy G. Wilson, collects all of Whitfield’s poems, essays, and letters for the first time since the middle of the nineteenth century, and offers marvelous editorial commentary and insight. This much-needed and definitive book should dramatically increase the stature and awareness of Whitfield’s accomplishments and importance. Whitfield, known by many as “the” great African American poet during his lifetime, is among the numerous examples of poets discussed in this book who were famed during their lifetimes, and now have undeservedly faded into complete obscurity or relative disregard.

Whitfield – with Campbell, Simpson, Harper, and others – leads readers to once again confront this question: what is the relationship between African Americans and America? This question was raised about slave songs. We also find this tradition of questioning America in the earliest period of African American poetry – poets who embrace America as their home and call for it to fulfill its promise as the land of the free. Levine and Wilson argue that *America* should be viewed as a single integrated entity comparable to Walt Whitman’s monumental *Leaves of Grass*. It is one of several cohesively developed poetry collections from the period, including the remarkable *The Emancipation Car* (1874) by Simpson and *Poems* by Campbell. In several of Whitfield’s poems, America’s boast of itself, its self-image, is portrayed as a standard that has never been and must be lived up to. The opening of Whitfield’s poem “America” majestically and forcefully articulates these themes and surely belongs in the canon:

AMERICA, it is to thee,
Thou boasted land of liberty,—
It is to thee I raise my song,
Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong.
It is to thee, my native land,
From whence has issued many a band
To tear the black man from his soil,
And force him here to delve and toil;
Chained on your blood-bemoistened sod,
Cringing beneath a tyrant’s rod,
Stripped of those rights which Nature’s God
Bequeathed to all the human race,
Bound to a petty tyrant’s nod,
Because he wears a paler face.

Was it for this, that freedom’s fires
Were kindled by your patriot sires?
Was it for this, they shed their blood,
On hill and plain, on field and flood?
Was it for this, that wealth and life
Were staked upon that desperate strife,
Which drenched this land for seven long years
With blood of men, and women’s tears?
When black and white fought side by side,—

The contrast is striking between the tone of the book’s Introduction – presented anonymously in first person plural and presumed to have been written by Whitfield – and the opening salvo of the first poem, “America.” In the topos of mock humility and self-effacement that may well be taken as theatricalized and at least partly ironic, the Introduction describes the poet as “one of the proscribed race, whose lot has been ignorance and servitude,” and “a poor colored man of this city, engaged in the humble, yet honorable and useful occupation of a barber” who “feels the ‘Divine Spark’ within him.” The poet calls himself “uneducated,” and writes that his “genius is native and uncultivated.” His hope is that this book’s sales will “put money in the purse” to allow him to develop his God-given talent. Considering what we know about Whitfield, it is hard to take this tone as anything other than an expression of double consciousness or playing the dozens in over- or rewriting a national anthem as counter-discourse. In the context of African American poetry, his writing falls into the too-often overlooked tradition of counter-song, which includes examples by Dunbar, Simpson, and slave songs.

Whitfield, James David Corrothers, Simpson, Campbell, Albery A. Whitman, and Harper are some of the free black poets whose important voices are essential examples of extraordinary individuals who spoke
loudly and bravely for the cause of human rights when the dehumaniz- izing condition of slavery could be legal for any African Americans. The unfolding of the African American poetry canon, from its origins in Africa to its full flowering in the twenty-first century, is seen from an entirely different perspective if the roots of this genre are rethought. The progressions and the continuities come to light in ways that only strengthen the sense of this canon’s originality, impact, and indispensability to the world’s great bodies of literature.

There has been an uptick in scholarship that proposes a surge in experimental African American poetry starting in the middle of the twentieth century. This criticism suggests the existence of a “hidden canon” of modern and postmodern writing that foregrounds “difficult” or avant-garde methods and motivations. Experimentation has radically increased since the advent of modernism and an attendant array of sociohistorical factors, but we now can see that this phenomenon is the natural extension of a process that is inherent in the poetry of African Americans from its earliest manifestations. Little critical attention has been paid to the bold originality and experimentalism that have been present in the African American poetry tradition since its origins. African American poetry, of brilliant necessity, has always been innovative. By examining the earliest examples, and using the lens of experimentalism, the features associated with this practice are in clear evidence.

Just as we find with the exclusion of many avant-garde or oppositional texts from the mainstream canon, so we find – perhaps even more so – that some of the most subversive texts created by African Americans also have been overlooked and marginalized from the canon as it has evolved, even if they were well known in earlier times. Barbara Herrnstein Smith addresses the role of “value” as a changing and mutable property in literary evaluation and canon formation and invokes Hughes’s 1926 statement in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain:” “If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter.”[53] Considering the role of anthologies in establishing taste and value, Smith believes that the repeated inclusion of certain texts both promotes and creates their value. More and more readers encounter the work, and therefore its

[53] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” in Canons, ed. Robert von Hallberg (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 13. Within the article, the quotation of Hughes comes within a quotation from poet-critic Onwuchekwa Jemie, where Hughes’s statement is preceded by this comment from Jemie: “In this day and age, British preferences do not count in the Black World.” Subsequent page references to this article are given in parentheses in the text.
value is reinforced through its continuous supply, making “it more likely both that the work will be experienced at all and also that it will be experienced as valuable” (p. 29). Then what determines what she calls the “survival” or “endurance” of a text so that it does become “a classic” or part of the canon? It is “a series of continuous interactions among a variably constituted object, emergent conditions, and mechanisms of cultural selection and transmission” (p. 30). A circular process ensues by which the objects that are perpetuated as culturally valuable are precisely those that articulate the standards of cultural value, and “since those with cultural power tend to be members of socially, economically, and politically established classes (or to serve them and identify their interests with theirs), the texts that survive will tend to be those that appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies” (p. 30). What about the canonical texts that seem to offer cultural critique or corrective? Smith believes that they are essentially little more than prompts to “question,” “remind,” and “confront” precisely the shared values that the establishment is already committed to upholding. Such texts of questioning must remain within narrow parameters: they cannot too radically “subvert the ideologies that support them effectively” (p. 34). Smith’s theory goes far towards explaining why the most subversive and ideologically independent African American poetry would be almost guaranteed from its beginnings to enter neither the mainstream canon nor the African American poetry canon if those in power were disposed towards modeling the values of the American mainstream.

Jacob Korg called experiment “an essential element” of modernism. It is a common view that myriad factors led to a social revolution at the start of the twentieth century, which resulted in techniques that are strongly associated with experimentation, among them citationality, fragmentation, parody, irony, collage, and problematical views of the self and the lyric “I.” In African American poetry, set against a different set of historical circumstances entirely, which is to say a profound state of temporal, spatial, and relational dislocation, experiment has been essential and unavoidable since the start of the tradition. This is not the Poundian “Make it new” of the Anglo-American tradition: this is seizing workable components from utter destruction and applying the most remarkable ingenuity to adapt these remnants of psychic and material shrapnel of the past, in Darwinian fashion, into usable substances in the present. How could it

have been otherwise? When we look closely at the foundations of this tradition, and the texts that evolved from its true roots, it becomes evident that we have inherited a partial, skewed, and highly selective version, which has privileged certain types of African American poetry and erased others. The existing canon is largely oriented towards a conservative and what we might think of as “controllable” literary body. Ranging from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, three examples offer a counter-discourse to Wheatley, Hammon, and Terry: slave songs, Alfred Gibbs Campbell, and Joshua McCarter Simpson. This writing represents bodies of truly original and self-determined poetry and poetics that unsurprisingly have become invisible. This perspective gives us the opportunity to reconsider the entire African American poetry canon as a unique historical record of sparkling artistic and conceptual innovation and originality.

These examples of marginalized experimental works from colonial and antebellum America serve as expansions as well as counter-examples to the texts usually identified as foundational, such as “Bars Fight” by Terry, “An Evening Thought” by Hammon, and “His Excellency General Washington” by Wheatley. While it is essential to incorporate written texts by enslaved black people in any conception of the origins of this genre, we can see how printed poems by free black people and oral poems by enslaved black people are routinely omitted, but especially the examples that display the greatest stylistic and thematic independence, which is often conveyed in formal experimentation. It also should be noted that the oral poems of slave songs and poetry by free blacks were often more innovative than the early African American written poetry by the so-called “slave poets,” which makes their exclusion an especially potent piece of information. They tended to actively exploit the conventional literary feature of ambiguity, as masterfully developed in the classic text on this trope, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* by William Empson. Ambiguity is inherent both in poetry and in biblical rhetoric. We find this operation foregrounded in many sections of the Bible, such as the parables, where it is stated that Jesus deliberately employed modes of obfuscation to be selectively unclear to some audiences. In that sense, we can view the poets of the slave songs as among the earliest American biblical hermeneuticians: they cleverly employed a central property that existed within the biblical text as a formal model for their own communicative benefit. In contrast, it was ironic that slave holders who used the Bible as transparent and uncoded “proof” of divine support for slavery were less sophisticated than the African Americans in understanding the nuances of what can be revealed to whom and in what manner.
To further underscore the contrast between the canonical and marginalized early poems, there is a common perspective that to read and write were universally banned for enslaved African Americans who all were supposedly illiterate. Therefore, Terry, Hammon, and Wheatley could be viewed as anomalies rather than representatives of a larger group – a threat to slave-holding society. By the early nineteenth century, perhaps 30 percent of the enslaved people could read and/or write, and most of the half million free black people were educated. It also is a common, and accurate, understanding that African literary traditions are oral, which makes our current early canonical foundations appear even more misleading. To underscore the point, why are the origins of this genre based on written conventional poetry by enslaved writers who were viewed as exceptional individuals mainly writing for audiences of educated white readers? As we have seen, it is inarguable that the perceived canon is based on a so-called “literary tradition” of African American poetry produced by enslaved writers who aimed to validate the worth of their poems by formally emulating white Classical and Neoclassical texts. Therefore, perceptions of their “difference” reside in two manifestations related not to form, but to content, and assumptions about authorial identity. When the poets did not utilize themes based on the suffering or oppression of their race, they too often were judged negatively as copies of originals. When they did utilize themes based on the suffering or oppression of their race, they were frequently seen as the expressions of an underclass evoking pity in audiences of others who perceived themselves, in contrast, as privileged and elevated. Difference was guaranteed either way, accompanied by judgments of inauthenticity, incompetency, or unoriginality.

The first and earliest example of African American poetic innovation, predating any of the currently identified founders of the canon, are slave songs, which, as mentioned, are also known as spirituals, as well as plantation hymns, cabin songs, sorrow songs, or Negro religious folk-songs. These oral texts created by enslaved African Americans probably extend from the lyrics produced in the African slave coffles. Here we apply the view of Irele that a distinguishing feature of African diasporic literature is its foundation in orality, and oral texts are as literary as written texts in this tradition. Slave songs are a remarkably fresh and composite product, unlike anything pre-existing in either Africa or white America. They contain elements of African survivals, of the lyrics created in the coffles during the initial state of captivity and treacherous journey to the eventual destination of America, and the influence of American plantation
The result was something radically innovative and different; the way that early auditors most often described the slave songs was as “weird” and “strange.” Although they often are described as quintessentially American cultural products and an authentic and indispensable part of its cultural heritage, they rarely are considered as lyric poetry, and certainly are not “canonical” in the conventional sense. The Oxford University Press Anthology of Modern American Poetry opens with poems from the 1860s when slave songs were first being actively transcribed and disseminated, yet they do not appear here. Surprisingly, they also do not appear in most African American poetry anthologies, including The New Cavalcade, African American Poetry: An Anthology, 1773–1927, American Negro Poetry, The Vintage Book of African American Poetry, The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature, and others. In the few where they do appear – such as The Black Poets, Black Writers of America, The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, and The Negro Caravan – they are relegated to separate sections from “lyric” or “literary” poetry, generally called “spirituals” or “vernacular” or “folk” products.

In the origins of this tradition, with slave songs, no premium was placed on authorial credit or ownership. Though it is likely that each song was originally created by a gifted enslaved poet, they were intended to be performed and shared by the community, deliberately modified and creatively adapted, and passed along in different versions. Another practical issue that explained the slave songs’ anonymity was the prohibition against literacy, which meant that lyrics could not be written down safely – quite a significant contrast to the standard canon, which extols authorship and credit. The enslaved people used the African survival of the oral tradition for their benefit when deprived of literacy. Further, the subversive content would have put anyone identified as the author in peril. As we have clearly seen, one of the distinguishing features of the African American poetry tradition is the complex issue of ownership and production.

In deciding whether this exclusion is justified, we may consider this example that was a favorite of both Du Bois and Thomas Wentworth Higginson:

I know moon-rise, I know star-rise,
   Lay dis body down.
I walk in de moonlight, I walk in de starlight,
   To lay dis body down.
I'll walk in de graveyard, I walk through de graveyard,
   To lay dis body down.
I lay in de graveyard and stretch out my arms,
Lay dis body down.
I go to de judgment in de evenin’ of de’ day,
When I lay dis body down.
And my soul and your soul will meet in de day,
When I lay dis body down.

The compositional principle of this slave song, like many others, is unlike conventional practices in the text-based Western lyric tradition. The lyrics could be different each time it was performed with no set authoritative finished product. The segments were interchangeable, and often realigned to create new correspondences, though their presentation as printed texts and when set to music in the concert tradition misleadingly suggests otherwise. This form allowed them to be endlessly regenerative and creative to serve new purposes through a process that has been called “mosaics” and “wandering choruses.” As oral products, they obviously would not have been lineated or presented with punctuation so even their appearance in anthologies is only a transcription based on editorial incursions which hides one of the most original aspects of these poems, their adaptability. Like many other slave songs, this example is rich with cognitive blends, where there is a disanalogy – instead of a correspondence as in conventional metaphor – between source and target domains. Creative blends typically appear in situations where the desire is to convey something new, as would be the case for the enslaved people who had to create their own tradition. The poem is built on a series of tensions between body and spirit, earth and heaven, which generate clashing temporal grounds and spatial planes. A body walking through a graveyard would be assumed to be alive, yet this body is walking through the graveyard to lay itself down in a grave, which is in a state of death. Death and life form a blended space where the body is both dead and alive. The disembodied soul, which is outside the state of life, will meet another disembodied soul during the day, and meet Christian judgment in the evening of the day, another creative blend. In the blended space, we encounter a life on earth for the enslaved people that feels like a state of living death.

The next example is Alfred Gibbs Campbell, who was a remarkable free black man from Paterson, New Jersey. Campbell was so well known and revered in his lifetime that the New York Times published an extended obituary when he died at age fifty-seven in 1884 and he was buried in a well-marked grave with headstone, which were unusual for a.
black person in that era. According to his obituary in the *New York Times* on January 11, 1884:

He was an Abolitionist from his youth, and so earnestly in the cause that he would not vote in a country that tolerated slavery. Many years ago he became interested in the preparation of patent medicines, perfumes, &c., and some of his productions in this line brought him a large fortune ... Having left the Methodist church for the Congregational, he became dissatisfied, and asked to be dismissed. It was decided by the authorities to whom the matter was referred that he could get out only in one of two ways – by dying or by expulsion. He said he had done nothing meriting expulsion, and he was not ready to die; so the matter hung in abeyance a long time, to the great annoyance of the church people. He had a faculty for versifying, and some of his poems were extremely graceful. A collection of these was published last year [*Poems*, Newark, NJ, Advertiser Printing House, 1883]. He is to be buried at Paterson tomorrow.

Now a virtually forgotten author, Campbell is absent from all anthologies of American poetry that I have found, and of African American literature anthologies, he only appears in Sherman. He is not mentioned in *Drumvoices*, which is famed for its encyclopedic listings of even the most minor figures. A prosperous entrepreneur in real estate, the paper industry, and marketing products, as well as an anti-slavery and temperance activist, Campbell also edited and published a newspaper called *The Alarm Bell* from 1851 to 1852. In Volume 1, issue 5 of *The Alarm Bell*, in 1852, Campbell published his own poem called “Song of the Decanter,” which is historically significant because it is probably the first concrete poem created by any poet in America.

In addition to its appearance in *The Alarm Bell*, Campbell distributed this poem on a postcard from his home address promoting the cause of temperance. A fine example of this postcard, mailed in 1874, is found in the Ivanhoe Wheelhouse Museum and Art Gallery provided to me by courtesy of Colonel Rob Burrows, the Curator. A broadside of the poem (dated “18—”) is shown in Figure 1.

The lyrics, spoken from the perspective of a bottle of alcohol, show the poet’s aim to utilize formal poetic innovation as a radical device of defamiliarization and a means to achieve social and political efficacy, which becomes a hallmark of the subsequent African American poetry tradition. So, why have Campbell and his poetry (though “The Decanter” or some variation on that title frequently appears in varied forms with anonymous authorship on the Internet) become all but forgotten? Why have slave songs, the anonymous brilliant oral poems of the enslaved
SONG OF THE DECANTER.

There was an old decanter, and its mouth was gaping wide; the rosy wine had ebbed away and left its crystal side; and the wind went humming—humming, up and down the sides it flew, and through the reed-like hollow neck the wildest notes it blew. I placed it in the window, where the blast was blowing free, and fancied that its pale mouth sang the queerest strains to me. “They tell me—punny conquerors! the Plague has slain his ten, and War his hundred thousand of the very best of men; but I”—t'was thus the Bottle spoke—“but I have conquered more than all your famous conquerors, so feared and famed of yore. Then come, ye youths and maidens all, come drink from out my cup, the beverage that dulls the brain and burns the spirits up; that puts to shame your conquerors that slay their scores below; for this has deluged millions with the lava tide of woe. Tho’ in the path of battle darkest waves of blood may roll; yet while I killed the body, I have damn’d the very soul. The cholera, the plague, the sword, such ruin ne’er wrot as I, in mirth or malice, on the innocent have brought. And still I breathe upon them, and they shrink before my breath; and year by year my thousands tread the dismal road of Death.”

Figure 1 “Song of the Decanter” by Alfred Gibbs Campbell, from the Hay Harris Broadside Collection, Brown University Library
African Americans, systematically been excluded from the early canon of so-called “literary” African American poetry in favor of Wheatley, Hammon, and Terry? The approximately 6,000 combinatorial slave songs were produced a century before those figures lived, had far greater impact on the culture and tradition, and entail a much larger corpus of magnificent poems. The most truly self-determined and innovative African American poetry, following its own path and evading any possible accusation of imitation or copying, has been excluded from the canon as it has developed.

Finally, we turn to Simpson (1820–76), also a free black man in nineteenth century Ohio. Briefly mentioned in Drumvoices, his work is virtually invisible apart from small representation in the two Sherman anthologies. He produced the two books previously discussed, one essentially a very early prototype of the full-length volume to follow. Simpson received no formal education until he attended Oberlin College for two years as an adult. He did not complete his program and prided himself on being self-taught apart from that institutional aberration, which he basically dismissed as a waste of time. He subsequently called himself “Dr.” and treated the local population with folk medicine. Like Whitman with Leaves of Grass, Simpson spent a lifetime writing and rewriting a single book, which is his magnum opus. If it were in print and available, which it is not, this would be an incredible volume to use in the classroom, which is the position that it deserves to be in based on its originality, quality, and historical value. The first version of this book, Original Anti-Slavery Songs expanded into The Emancipation Car, an indescribable compilation of polemic, essays, meditations, poetic scripts that combine features of Greek drama with call-and-response (for example, “Queen Victoria Conversing with Her Slave Children”), and poems that Simpson describes as “airs” – parodies of popular songs that he wrote with the intent to “kill the degrading influence of those comic Negro Songs ... and change the flow of those sweet melodies into more appropriate and useful channels.” An ardent anti-slavery activist like Campbell, Simpson was serious in his ambition of hoping that what he called his “little book” would “find its way and lodging place in every house and family in the land of the free and home of the brave.”

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The Greek root of the word parody translates into “counter-song,” which is a fitting literal and metaphorical description of the process that we see in the works of Simpson. With Simpson’s work, we encounter parody and irony, which may be akin to but are profoundly different from either allusion or emulation. Unlike Wheatley, Simpson comes full bore at admired traditions, and demands that they be seen in the light of their inhumanity, evil, and hypocrisy. The first two stanzas of “Song of ‘The Aliened American,’” which is a counter-song to “America the Beautiful,” offer a glimpse of Simpson’s unabashedly harsh criticism and use of form for purposes of expressing protest and rage:

My country, ’tis of thee,  
Dark land of Slavery,  
In thee we groan.  
Long have our chains been worn—  
Long has our grief been borne—  
Our flesh has long been torn,  
E’en from our bones.  

The white man rules the day—  
He bears despotic sway,  
O’er all the land.  
He wields the Tyrant’s rod,  
Fearless of man or God,  
And at his impious nod,  
We “fall or stand.”  

O! shall we longer bleed?

In a startlingly contemporary voice, especially in Simpson’s prose in this volume, we view early examples of the traditions of satire, protest, and musicality, features that were always present in African American poetry and have become even more visibly prominent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The trickster mode and double-voicing that are characteristic of Simpson’s style also are found in many of the slave songs and poems by Campbell, which drip with sarcasm and burlesque, and demand that America stand by its own stated principles.

So here we have examples of three – among many – truly experimental African American bodies of poetry and poetics in the earliest period of the tradition. Such texts, and their exclusion from the canon, should raise questions about how and why a fundamentally conservative view of the African American poetry tradition became normative. The roots and trajectory of this tradition emerge in a wholly different light if we recognize the contributions of brilliant and self-determining innovators.
from the start of this genre. “Anthologies of Afro-American literature typically imply that black poetry began with Phillis Wheatley (1753–84), disappeared for over one hundred years, and only reemerged with Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906),” wrote Sherman in the 1989 Preface to *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (p. vii). In 1974, Sherman wrote, “Afro-Americans of the nineteenth century are the invisible poets of our national literature.” In 2010, I wrote, “the relationship of slave songs to either ‘American’ or ‘African American’ poetry has been one of curious disregard.”56 There has been progress in recovering some of these “invisible” voices, but the origins of the canon remain accepted as historical fact, when far too many poets are overlooked whose words are essential to a true understanding of what African American poetry is and how it began. Throughout this book, the “outsiders” and the unjustly forgotten are recuperated, with a call to reconsider what this body of writing would look like in its totality with their inclusion. The opportunities for further study, discovery, and theorizing remain open and enticing.