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“Making a Collection”: James Weldon Johnson  
and the Mission of African American Literature

### Anthology Theory

In the preface to the second edition of the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, the general editors—Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay—come out as “un-theoretical.”<sup>1</sup> Although several of the anthology’s eleven editors were still engaged with theory during the mid-1980s, they explain that the process of actually editing the anthology helped them to realize theory’s irrelevance. Their position against theory pits their project against the established realm of literary studies: “We were embarking upon a process of canon formation,” they acknowledge, “precisely when many of our post-structuralist colleagues were questioning the value of the canon itself” (xxx).

Of course, it quickly becomes apparent that theory does inform the formation of the anthology. To simply put various texts written in different times, spaces, and genres together in a single book would not demonstrate the connections between them; it would not satisfactorily constitute African American literature. And that is the project. For the editors view the construction rather than the deconstruction of a literary

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canon as “essential for the permanent institutionalization of the black literary tradition within departments of English, American Studies, and African American Studies” (xxix).

This essay is an attempt to illuminate this claim by the editors of the *Norton* not by analyzing the texts that the editors select for inclusion, but by considering both the impulse to collect various literary texts to form a single entity called “African American literature” and its impact on our understanding of literature as such. I will thus compare the claims of the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* with the structure and process by which the first African American literary anthology was brought out by James Weldon Johnson in 1922. While the differences between these two anthologies are certainly significant, both make claims for the anthology as satisfying a growing interest in African Americans themselves. What interests me here is the relationship between literature and African Americans both anthologies maintain.

In their anthology, Gates and McKay are advocating a tradition (and specifically a literary tradition) that should be taught and studied. They see “broader access” to African American literature as a sign that African Americans are full and equal members of American democratic institutions—and are afforded all the rights and privileges that go along with such membership. American democracy, in this literary formulation, is not simply a form of government and the process of choosing political leaders; it also, as the line I just quoted demonstrates, recognizes the representation of African American literature as part of college and university curriculums. As the editors suggest, the scores of African American literary anthologies produced before the *Norton* were also interested in canon formation, but few make the case that the African American literary anthology is a vital component of American democracy. Johnson’s anthology, however, does make the same case. There he argues that the recognition of an African American literary tradition will end racism in the United States and allow all Americans to enjoy the rights of living in a democratic nation. By examining the striking similarities in the purpose behind Johnson’s anthology and that of the recent *Norton*, I hope to suggest some of the ways in which the African American literary anthology understands itself as standing in for the voice of African Americans—a voice that has essentially been stifled. Before turning to my discussion of Johnson’s anthology, and its connection to the *Norton*, I will pursue further the *Norton*’s claims for “institutionalization.”

The overwhelming popularity of the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* has helped to highlight the importance of the anthology to our general understanding of African American literature. The editors insist that “its sheer scope and inclusiveness enable readers to trace the repetitions, tropes, and signifying that define the tradition” (xlv). And readers seem to value what the *Norton Anthology* offers. This anthology, as the editors explain, has had a far greater and wider appeal to consumers of literature than previous anthologies with similar objectives: “To our surprise, the anthology was widely reviewed in both trade and academic publications. . . . Within the academy, 1,275 colleges and universities worldwide have adopted the anthology since publication in 1997” (xxx).

The use of the anthology in so many classrooms “worldwide” is, at least in part, a result of the favorable reviews it has received. Manning Marable, an editor of another recent African American anthology, writes that “by any standard, it is a remarkable work of scholarly endeavor and cooperation.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the *Norton* is distinct from other anthologies because it is, Marable says, “the most comprehensive.” This mark of distinction, among others, leads Theodore O. Mason to claim that “more so than any predecessor, this anthology stands as a communal statement about the intellectual and cultural foundations of African American writing.”<sup>3</sup> What is the nature of that statement and, more to the point, what does such an anthology say about African American writing? Unlike previous anthologies of African American literature, this one derives much of its significance from being the most inclusive. Indeed, the second edition is considerably larger than the first; it has added a number of new selections by authors included in the first edition and introduces several “new voices.” Some of these are from the distant past, while others are contemporary. The point of the expansions and additions is to maintain the anthology’s commitment to inclusion.

There is nothing wrong with the commitment to collecting texts for the purpose of making them more accessible for students of African American literature or profiting from such a literary venture. Yet that rationale for anthologizing would shift the significance of the works included to the *idea* of the anthology itself. The editors’ commitment to the project of inclusion is linked to a belief in what they believe literature can do for the role African Americans play in American democracy.

As Mason points out, and as is clear to all those familiar with Gates’s earlier work, the idea for the *Norton* is “inspired profoundly by Gates’s work

in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988) and *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self* (1987).<sup>4</sup> Gates's earlier theoretical ventures (rather than that of his coeditors) can be seen as providing a ground for the collaborative task of editing an anthology. Gates's status as both a maker and disseminator of African American literature provides the link between the multiple editors and the literary works they choose for inclusion. Gates's theory insists on a relationship between authors and texts that arises not from similarities between them but rather from the differences or revisions that each text is seen as exhibiting. In this theory of African American literature, the substantial differences between the writing of, say, Toni Morrison and Frederick Douglass are precisely what connects them. While Morrison and Douglass write during different times and in different forms, their work, when read within the context of the same book, reveals a certain thematic continuity that qualifies them for participation in the anthology—and, ultimately, in the community of African American writers and readers.

Most of Gates's work has helped to clarify the formal properties of African American literature through close readings of individual texts. What Gates found through his investigation of writings by people of African descent was the repetition of a number of tropes and narrative conventions that formed the basic structure for a separate literary tradition. With its roots in the Fon and Yoruba cultures of Benin and Nigeria, the African American literary tradition was created and expanded with a singular purpose: "To demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write" (xxxviii). The *Norton Anthology* provides the evidence that substantiates Gates's claim.

The *Norton*, however, also does more than simply prove that men and women who can trace their genealogy back to Africa possess the requisite degrees of reason to create a lasting and meaningful literature. It claims that the works found within this anthology count as "literature" that will prove essential to furthering the democratic goals of the institutions that adopt it as such. Few have been as successful as Gates in giving African American literature such a vital purpose. Perhaps only James Weldon Johnson in his 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and in his prefaces to his own anthologies, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* and *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, makes as persuasive a case for using a liter-

ary anthology to widen the borders of American democratic institutions to include African Americans.

In the early twentieth century, however, the task of “institutionalizing” African American literature confronted a different set of challenges. Rather than questions concerning the inclusion of African American literature in various college departments, questions concerning the form and function of American democracy dominated the literary scene in the early twentieth century. It was in this environment that Johnson started to write fiction and poetry. By the time he wrote his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, American literary anthologies were standard fare. But his anthology claimed to do something that other such anthologies did not do, for his “has a direct bearing on the most vital of American problems.”<sup>5</sup> Johnson’s *Book of American Negro Poetry* sets out to complete the task his protagonist in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* abandoned in order to pass for white. I want to suggest here that collecting individual texts to produce a single, collective body of African American literature is an important but neglected feature of Johnson’s fiction and broader racial project that has come to shape our notion of African American literature today. The emphasis, however, on the passing plot of the *Autobiography* has left other aspects of the novel and Johnson’s anthologies virtually unexamined. Johnson’s anthologies, produced in the 1920s, still stand as a milestone in the making of an African American literary tradition; the form and critical apparatus of his anthologies have a direct bearing on the most recent African American literary anthology. Anthologizing African American writing, seen today as a necessary and standard literary practice, was still a novel idea when Johnson, with the help of his literary editor, J. E. Spingarn, decided to produce one.

Completed in 1922, *The Book of American Negro Poetry* stands as the first anthology of African American literature. Although nowhere near as comprehensive as the recent *Norton*, Johnson’s work’s lengthy preface, its selections, and its terms of classification tell us a great deal about the African American anthology form that, for the first time in literary history, has achieved the recognition of the English and American anthologies. By analyzing the way the first African American literary anthology was produced and the collective effort behind this singular achievement, this essay argues that a central objective of producing an African American literary anthology is to make African Americans essential to furthering the project of American democracy.

Such an objective differs somewhat from the standard definition of the anthology form. In her study of British anthologies produced during the eighteenth century, Barbara Benedict draws upon the etymology of the term. The Greek term *anthology* refers to a collection of flowers, not literature. When it is used to refer to literature, however, Benedict finds that the term describes choice and distinction as well as unity of contents.<sup>6</sup> Anders Olsson, in his recent study *The Anthologization of "American Literature,"* develops Benedict's analysis, suggesting that texts selected to be included in an anthology "are decontextualized to become recontextualized."<sup>7</sup> Benedict's focus on British anthologies and Olsson's on American anthologies help us to understand the national character of the literary anthology form, but neither author mentions the racial content of the enterprise. Johnson's project to collect poems and songs by different authors written at different times under the rubric "Negro American" brings a distinctly racial element to the anthology form, the consequences of which I begin here to theorize.

### A Novel Anthology

Considered primarily a book about passing, Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is informed by a theory of literature clarified in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, published a decade later. In the *Autobiography*, Johnson introduced to readers a protagonist who fails to fulfill his racial mission after witnessing the lynching of a black man in the South. This event shifts the course of the story and brings it to an abrupt end. Before this event, the protagonist had committed himself to collecting and reproducing "themes and melodies . . . trying to catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state" so that "Negroes themselves" and others might value the "heritage of the American Negro."<sup>8</sup> The novel ends with the project incomplete, as the protagonist is unable to overcome the "shame" of belonging "to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive" (187–88). The flagrant disregard for black men and women living in the United States contradicts the democratic principles that the nation claims to stand for. Until this condition is remedied, the protagonist suggests, the idea of American democracy cannot be realized.

The protagonist's inability to fulfill his mission despite the shame he feels is, for recent readers, a sign of his moral failure.<sup>9</sup> Such an understanding of

the novel affirms what we already know about its unnamed protagonist: he lacks character. But it is also the case, as Kenneth Warren has more recently argued in his provocative discussion of Ralph Ellison, that “Johnson’s novel reveals itself as a text that was written only because the quest to create a text of ‘classic’ expression had to be abandoned along the way.”<sup>10</sup> Although the project to create a text of classic expression is abandoned in the *Autobiography*, as Warren suggests, Johnson would return to his fictional protagonist’s project, taking on the burden of completing the work of collecting “Negro themes and melodies” himself.

Johnson would later disavow any autobiographical connection between his own life and that of his unfortunate protagonist. In 1927, with the help of Carl Van Vechten, he brought out a new edition of the book. The new edition included the name of the novelist, although the protagonist remained unnamed. Van Vechten explained the disjunction between the novelist and protagonist in his introduction to the second edition, a fact not difficult to recognize since Johnson was well known for leading a high-profile campaign against lynching as secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Although Johnson would again disavow any connection between his life and the ex-colored man’s in his own autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), he does explain how aspects of his fiction were crucial to introducing African American literature to those who had not yet been touched by it. The unknown “authorship of the book excited the curiosity of literate colored people, and there was speculation among them as to who the writer might be.”<sup>11</sup> The “literate colored people” who expressed interest in the *Autobiography*, however, are the same as “the educated classes” who Johnson’s protagonist points out “are rather ashamed of” the “old slave songs” (143). By collecting these old slave songs in the form of a book, Johnson asserted that they merited pride rather than shame.

Johnson’s protagonist turns to collecting original songs and lyrics of former slaves and their descendants while touring Europe with his patron, known throughout the novel only as “the millionaire.” The protagonist’s tour of Europe ends in Berlin, where he witnesses a friend of the millionaire’s reverse the musical process that he had mastered: “This man had taken ragtime and made it a classic” (142). As a result, the protagonist feels “stirred by an unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classical music form” (147). This desire is “unselfish” in the protagonist’s terms, because documenting the hopes and ambitions of the American Negro to create a single classic text

will “help those I considered my people.” The conversation between the ex-colored man and the millionaire raises key issues over the function of literature in national life that Johnson, at the time of writing the *Autobiography*, had become increasingly interested in through his own conversations with his literary mentor, Brander Matthews. Johnson met Matthews in 1902 when he moved to New York from Jacksonville to pursue, with his brother Rosamond and their partner Bob Cole, a successful career as a lyricist for a number of popular musicals. But Johnson soon found his interests diverging from the stage to the page, which is how he and Matthews became friends.

In outlining his genealogy in his autobiography, *These Many Years*, Matthews presents himself as the son of the millionaire Edward Matthews, who had made and lost his fortune trading and speculating.<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Oliver, a recent critic of Matthews’s life and works, traces Matthews’s intellectual journey from “Professional Millionaire” to “Literary Fellow” in his book *Brander Matthews, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Politics of American Literature, 1880–1920*.<sup>13</sup> In it, he “aims to restore Matthews to his rightful place in American literary and, more broadly, cultural history” (xv). Matthews occupies a singular place in Johnson’s literary career that is tied to the contentious position he occupies in American literary history.<sup>14</sup>

Johnson makes only a brief appearance in Oliver’s account of Matthews. But Oliver’s account of the relationship between Matthews and Johnson is the most detailed one. Oliver suggests that Johnson “sought out Matthews, whose writings on the drama had attracted his attention” (52). But Johnson was interested in more than just Matthews’s writings on drama; he also admired the convergence between literature and politics that Matthews forged through his life and work.

Well-known for his crusade to protect American authors through his founding of and membership in a number of organizations including the American Copyright League and the Modern Language Association, Matthews also led a political crusade to increase literacy in the United States by simplifying spelling. Such political crusades were always connected to his literary pursuits, which ranged from writing plays, novels, and short stories to criticism on a variety of topics both literary and political. The warm reception Johnson describes Matthews as giving him indicates the extent of his respect for him and a certain affinity between the two men that came as something of a surprise to Johnson, who had grown accustomed to the separation of people from different social and cultural groups. When he decided



to go up to Columbia University to talk with Matthews about enrolling in his courses, Johnson was flattered to find

that Professor Matthews knew of my work in musical comedy, a phase of the theater that he followed and studied closely. My reception was extremely cordial. As soon as the greetings were over and I had taken a seat, he produced his cigarette case and offered me a smoke. For the life of me, I could not prevent the inculcated inhibitions of my years at Atlanta University from rushing out in full force upon me. I accepted the cigarette and smoked it, but it was difficult for me not to feel that I was breaking school rules. Of course, I had smoked constantly since my graduation from Atlanta, but to be smoking with a professor in his office on the university grounds struck me for the time as being not only incongruous but slightly unholy.<sup>15</sup>

Johnson may have been particularly surprised by the camaraderie Matthews exhibited toward him because of the latter's exalted status as professor of dramatic literature at Columbia University and as America's foremost literary critic. Matthews counted Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and William Howells among his closest friends, yet Johnson found this highbrow intellectual easier to talk with than many of the black intellectuals he encountered while a student at Atlanta University in the 1890s. Matthews, in offering Johnson a cigarette and talking with him about his work in the theater, allowed him to become, almost immediately, one of the "old boys."

This encounter, as Johnson goes on to explain, "was the beginning of a warm and lasting friendship between Brander Matthews and me. He talked to me a great deal about the musical comedy stage and the important people connected with it." Matthews, not unlike the role the millionaire plays for Johnson's protagonist, introduces Johnson to a whole new world, the result of which is the beginning of his literary career. Aside from Oliver's discussion of Johnson's association with Matthews, none of Johnson's readers have seriously engaged how the friendship between the two may have influenced the course of African American literature. This is due, in part, to the diminished role Matthews has come to play in the history of American literature. Strongly associated with the "genteel tradition" of American literary criticism, Matthews fell out of favor with the literary establishment before his death in 1929. But for Johnson he remained one of the greatest teachers he had ever encountered and pivotal to his move away from writing lyrics for show tunes and toward a life dedicated to broadening the

scope of American literature. For this reason it is pertinent to sketch Matthews's views on literary matters, particularly those related to the definition of American literature that led Johnson to enroll in his courses.

In his answer to the question "What is American literature?" Matthews dwells upon the French writers who, unlike English writers, have not discriminated against authors on the basis of "nativity or citizenship . . . or of any political separation which may have taken place between the several peoples who possess that language in common."<sup>16</sup> The separation between American and English literature, however, is based on the fact that "certain American poets and certain American prose masters are important to us Americans, even if we are well aware that they may be less important to our kin across the sea" (73). While Americans of today, according to Matthews, "are still English . . . they are in no wise British"—a distinction that the editors of the *Norton Anthology* extend to their definition of African American literature. To substantiate this principle, Matthews returns to the history of French literature which, to his mind, has managed to evaluate the literary merits of texts written in that language most fairly. Quoting favorably a line from Ferdinand Brunetière's history of French literature, Matthews puts forward a principle of literary value that departs from "the universal and permanent standards": "Every race is the judge—and must be the only judge—of its own poets" (73–74). Recognizing American literature "as an integral part of English literature," Matthews saw it as adding something different to our understanding of literature written in the English language that allowed it to stand on its own. Turning to another non-English source, the "Spanish author-diplomat—Don Juan Valera," Matthews substantiates his belief in an American literature that possesses "a certain cosmopolitanism and affectionate comprehension of what is foreign, which is as broad as the continent that the Americans inhabit and which forms a contrast to the narrow exclusiveness of the insular British" (77). Matthews's version of literary cosmopolitanism as emphasizing the distinction and hierarchy that exists between nations and cultures is one reason, according to recent critics, why his literary criticism has fallen out of favor in later accounts of American literary history.

Susannah Ashton's account of the "literary collaborations" Matthews initiated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries deems his view of literature "proudly elitist and by extension racist, sexist, and classist."<sup>17</sup> This list of accusations against Matthews discounts his association with Johnson and, by extension, the role he played in institutionalizing American and

African American literature. Matthews's *Introduction to the Study of American Literature* was one of the first textbooks used for the study of American literature at the college level. Intended to assist the student in grasping "vital points" concerning American literature, Matthews explains in his prefatory note that "all dates and all proper names, and all titles of books not absolutely essential have been rigorously omitted." Those he calls "more important authors" are each discussed in a chapter of their own, while the "writers of less consequence" are "discussed briefly in a single chapter."<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, not a single woman or African American author is named as one of the "more important authors."

Matthews's rationale for deciding which authors are most important derives from his definition of literature. For Matthews, "literature is the reflection and the reproduction of the life of the people" (9). As a result, "American literature must needs become more and more unlike British literature" (13). Those authors who write about the elusive "difference between the American and the Englishman" are those, to Matthews, who are considered to be the more important ones. What makes literature written in English American, as opposed to British, Canadian, or Australian, is that "it enables us to see ourselves and our neighbors as we really are, or at least as we seem to ourselves to be; it explains us to ourselves" (14). In other words, literature brings "ourselves" into being. This idea of how literature might explain ourselves as Americans led Johnson to enroll in Matthews's literature courses at Columbia in 1902. Matthews's theory of literature enabled Johnson to explain himself to himself and to others in order to avoid the mistake his protagonist makes.

Johnson developed the outline for his novel when he was finishing up his course work with Matthews at Columbia. He presented the first two chapters to Matthews, who read it and offered a number of suggestions in order for Johnson to pursue his literary work further. Matthews was involved at every stage of the novel's production. After Johnson sent him the entire novel in 1908 from his post at the American Consulate in Corinto, Venezuela, Matthews took care of having the manuscript typed and prepared for publication. Finally, when the novel appeared in 1912, Matthews wrote a glowing review of it in *Munsey's Magazine* titled "American Character in American Fiction." Matthews declared that the novel "has significance for all of us who want to understand our fellow citizens of darker hue" and goes on to describe it as "composed in full accord with the principle enunciated by [H. A.] Taine in one of his letters—the principle 'that a writer

should be a psychologist, not a painter or a musician; that he should be a transmitter of ideas and feelings, not of sensations.”<sup>19</sup> Matthews’s review is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it considers Johnson’s novel—published anonymously—as a work of “American fiction” and, upon expounding its virtues, reveals a fact of its composition that only one so closely associated with it would know: that it puts Taine’s theory of literature (explicated most fully in his *History of English Literature*) into practice. The novel’s literary value, for Matthews (and ultimately for Johnson as well), was found in its exposition of the inner lives of “citizens of darker hue.” Matthews’s involvement with and evaluation of Johnson’s novel helped to establish Johnson’s literary principle: citizens of “darker hue” could be better understood by white citizens through literature.

Johnson developed this principle in his poem “Fifty Years,” which Matthews once again helped him to revise and arranged strategically to have published in the *New York Times* on January 1, 1913, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>20</sup> When Johnson completed his first collection of poems in 1917, he used “Fifty Years” as the title poem and turned, once again, to Matthews to write an introduction that would help its readers appreciate and evaluate its merits.<sup>21</sup> Matthews viewed the collection as vital to establishing the terms of a national literature that was still trying to find its place in a new century. “Literature in the New Century,” Matthews wrote, “must weigh the importance of the intensifying of national spirit and of the sharpening of racial pride. And, finally, it is for us to take account also of the growth of what must be called ‘cosmopolitanism,’ that breaking down of the hostile barriers keeping one people apart from the others, ignorant of them, and often contemptuous.”<sup>22</sup> Matthews saw Johnson’s work as representing the literature of the new century. His public declarations of approval of Johnson’s work were matched in his private correspondence with Johnson and others. Thanking him, in 1914, for an autographed copy of the novel, Matthews claimed not to have read “anything better in the past twenty four months.”<sup>23</sup> He also sent a copy of the novel to his close friend, Theodore Roosevelt. Encouraging Roosevelt to read the novel, he wrote that “it is not exactly fact—but it is the truth. And it lets the light into some dark and curious places.”<sup>24</sup> Matthews’s correspondence with Roosevelt suggests that he sent Johnson’s novel to him not merely to promote the latter’s career. He hoped that the novel would help the president to sort out the racial conflicts plaguing the nation at the time. Judging from the president’s reply, Matthews’s description seems to have struck the right chord: “I read the

autobiography that you sent me, and was much impressed by it. Ugh! There is not any more puzzling problem in this country than the problem of color. It is not as urgent, or as menacing, as other problems, but it seems more utterly insoluble. The trouble is that the conflict in many of its phases is not between right and wrong, but between two rights."<sup>25</sup> The novel, just as Matthews had hoped, helped to broaden Roosevelt's view of the race problem. After reading the novel he was able to perceive the problem not simply as between right and wrong (or black and white, for that matter). Instead, the race problem, as Roosevelt understood it, involved the rights of two separate and essentially incompatible groups to exist within a single nation. The novel helped Roosevelt to clarify the distinction between black and white Americans, and the impossibility of coexistence. Literature, and particularly Johnson's form of fiction and poetry, could help the president of the United States understand the distinction of African Americans but did not bring him closer to solving the racial conflict; indeed, it only cemented his belief that the problem was utterly insoluble. Roosevelt would later, again at Matthews's request, express his high opinion of Johnson's poems collected in *Fifty Years*.<sup>26</sup> Judging by the correspondence between the three, we can see that Matthews and Roosevelt were not simply lending Johnson's work legitimacy, as William Lloyd Garrison had done for Frederick Douglass during an earlier time. In this case, the connection between Johnson, Matthews, and Roosevelt was predicated on their common understanding of the distinction between black and white Americans and their desire to make that distinction "between two rights" a constitutive feature of American democracy as such.

In 1922 Matthews included Johnson's poem "Fifty Years" in his anthology *Poems of Patriotism*, dedicated to the memory of Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>27</sup> Johnson's poem was included in this anthology for its "patriotism," although it did not yet count, in Matthews's book, as a work of American literature. In that same year, Johnson completed his own anthology of poems, which he had sent to Matthews, hoping for a favorable review from his former teacher in the *New York Book Review*. Believing himself to be "unqualified" to write a review of an African American anthology, Matthews declined Johnson's request and passed the task of writing the review on to his colleague in the sociology department. Although the preeminent critic of American literature at the time, Matthews felt that he did not know enough about African Americans to write about their literature.<sup>28</sup> It was with this project, even more than his famous anonymous novel, that Johnson made a name

for himself in African American literature, putting, in effect, Matthews's theory of literature that explains ourselves to ourselves into practice.

### The Limits of African American Literature

Johnson became secretary of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People in 1916 at the request of Matthews's colleague in the comparative literature department, J. E. Spingarn. Although Matthews did not share the same type of friendship with Spingarn that he did with Johnson, echoes of Matthews's racialism and patriotism could certainly be heard in Spingarn's anthology *Criticism in America, Its Function and Status*, in which he included his own essays "The New Critic" and "Criticism in the United States."<sup>29</sup> Spingarn, like Matthews, is now a forgotten figure of literary criticism who was closely associated with Johnson and is better known today for his role in founding the NAACP. Spingarn's literary criticism has received minimal attention; nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine African American literature without taking into account the role he played in its formation.

Disillusioned with the limitations of academia and a rarefied form of literary criticism, Spingarn was dismissed from Columbia shortly after he delivered his infamous essay "The New Criticism" in 1910.<sup>30</sup> Although these events, as Marshall Van Deusen explains in his biography, "led Spingarn into new worlds" that resulted both in his move outside the university to the editorial board of Harcourt, Brace and Company and in his helping to found the NAACP, he continued to hold the "conviction that America's greatest practical need of the moment was to develop a capacity for the speculative life of theory."<sup>31</sup> Spingarn's literary theory, like Johnson's, was closely linked to his attempts to put the idea of American democracy into practice. Spingarn and Johnson were well connected through their work for the NAACP, but it was through the publication of Johnson's *Negro Anthology* that a literary connection developed between them.

In *Along This Way*, Johnson explains that he "began work on an anthology of poetry by American Negroes" so that "that part of me which was artist" would not "become entirely submerged" by his work for the NAACP.<sup>32</sup> In fact, just as Spingarn's literary criticism and political activism were integrally related, so too had Johnson merged his literary and political lives. Indeed, the anthology was precisely the vehicle that allowed Johnson to make such a connection. He relates in *Along This Way* how he went about forming the anthology and writing its preface.

Before I had gone very far with the work, I realized that such a book, being the first of its kind, would be entirely devoid of background. America as a whole knew something of Dunbar, but it was practically unaware that there were such things as Negro poets and Negro poetry. So I decided to write an introduction; and the introduction developed into a forty-two page essay on "The Creative Genius of the Negro." In that essay I called attention to the American Negro as a folk artist, and pointed out his vital contributions, as such, to our national culture. In it I also made a brief survey of Negro poetry. (374)

The "forty-two page essay" that functions as the anthology's preface obviously did a good deal more than Johnson lets on in his memoir. It not only provides a historical survey of "the American Negro's contribution"; it also lays out a theory of literature closely linked to what Spingarn calls "America's greatest practical need of the moment." Johnson, unlike Spingarn, is less elusive about what, precisely, is America's greatest practical need. For Johnson, America needed to put a stop to lynching, a practice he elsewhere called "America's National Disgrace."<sup>33</sup> Johnson's efforts to keep "that part of me which was artist" from becoming "entirely submerged" in the campaign he led against lynching was not, as he insists in his memoir, separate from his political work for the NAACP. In fact, Johnson's anthology enabled him to join his literary and political work and focus on a single project.

When Johnson's anthology appeared in 1922, its publisher, Harcourt, Brace and Company, sent a press release to members and friends of the NAACP. Encouraging recipients of the release to purchase the book, the publishers emphasize Johnson's position within the organization, explaining that "a most important and valuable part of the book is an essay of some forty pages by Mr. Johnson. . . . No white person can read this essay and fail to feel increased respect for the Negro. Every colored person who reads it will experience new pride in his race and a new hope for the future."<sup>34</sup> Purchasing the book would offer readers poems by various authors in a single collection, while it would also be an endorsement of Johnson's leadership. Unlike other poetry anthologies produced at the same time in the United States, of which there were several, only this one could boast an NAACP endorsement, since the name of its most prominent leader appeared on the front page.

Aware that this anthology would have to compete in the literary market "with many anthologies that have recently been issued," Johnson devotes

his essay to distinguishing *The Book of American Negro Poetry* from other poetry anthologies. Ironically, Johnson would go head-to-head with his good friend William Stanley Braithwaite, whose own poems comprise a section of the anthology. Having “a widely recognized position in the American literary world,” Johnson explains in his preface, Braithwaite “stands as unique among all the Aframerican writers the United States has yet produced. He has gained his place, taking as the standard and measure for his work the identical standard and measure applied to American writers and American literature. He has asked for no allowances or rewards, either directly or indirectly, on account of his race” (43). Given this view, it is curious that Johnson would want to include him in an anthology that makes race an essential feature of his poetry. Making Braithwaite into a Negro poet by including him in the anthology would then eliminate his apparent originality so that he might stand less problematically among the other “Aframerican writers” included in the anthology.

Braithwaite himself had tried, but failed, in the early part of the twentieth century to find a publisher for his own *Anthology of Negro Authors: Prose and Verse*. As a result of this failed venture, Braithwaite, in 1906, edited *The Book of Elizabethan Verse*, which was followed a few years later by volumes of Georgian and Restoration verse. Braithwaite eventually developed a national reputation for his anthology series, *Anthology of Magazine Verse*, which began in 1913 and was issued annually for the next sixteen years. Despite Braithwaite’s success as a literary anthologist, he was never able to make his dream of editing an African American literary anthology come true.<sup>35</sup> Although Braithwaite was a highly regarded literary editor and reviewer, he lacked the political connections to produce an African American literary anthology; instead, Braithwaite’s literary anthologies were organized exclusively by generic and historic categories, rather than identity categories. Braithwaite was merely a literary man, while Johnson merged his literary projects with his political projects, using his status as secretary of the NAACP to publicize and legitimate his authority as editor of the first African American literary anthology.

Johnson’s anthology proposed a new category of literature, extending Matthews’s definition of American literature as a vehicle for democracy. In order for Americans “to see ourselves and our neighbors as we really are,” they must first see the distinction of African Americans. Without seeing African Americans as they really are, according to Johnson, it would be impossible to distinguish American literature from other modes of writing in English. By collecting works by “Aframerican poets” to form a Negro



anthology, Johnson hoped to show that African Americans were vital to making America, as Matthews had persuasively written, different.

This nation suffers, according to Johnson, from a hazardous blind spot when it comes to “matters of Negro poets and the production of literature by the colored people in this country” (9). The consequences of this blind spot are dangerous for both parties. One way to correct the nation’s vision is to remove the object that obstructs its view. For Johnson, literature enables clear vision. In his words, “No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior” (9). The works Johnson has collected in his anthology provide the proof that the “American Negro” has written and continues to produce “great literature,” refuting all claims to the contrary. Anyone who reads the works Johnson has collected will also benefit from the explanation the anthology provides about African Americans themselves.

The poems in the collection, despite differences in theme and content, all speak, in some way, for the nameless and speechless lynching victim Johnson presents in his fiction. The anthology collects the work of forty poets whose work, taken together, helps to elucidate the silent captivity and torture Johnson’s lynching victim experiences. In the fictional narrative of Johnson’s novel, this man only “cries and groans.” Unable to find the words to ask for help, the narrator, along with the mob, only looks blankly at “his eyes bulging from their sockets . . . appealing in vain for help” (187). The speechless victim of Johnson’s novel finds the words to articulate his painful experience in the poems collected in the anthology. For this reason Johnson gives Claude McKay’s poems a preeminent place in the collection. McKay’s poems head the group of the new Negro poets, whose work makes up the bulk of this anthology (43). McKay’s poems “The Lynching,” “If We Must Die,” and “To the White Fiends” set the tone of the “Negro poets today” and mark the direction for the future. The future of America, as Johnson and his cohorts imagined it, would make lynching illegal, making it virtually impossible for a race to be “so dealt with.”

Johnson’s literary anthology would continue the political fight against lynching that had experienced a temporary roadblock when the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill he had so diligently lobbied for failed to gather a majority of votes in Congress.<sup>36</sup> Johnson’s political failure left him deeply disillusioned about the possibilities of fighting for African American rights through the electoral process. The African American literary anthology, then, proved to be a viable alternative for continuing the fight against lynching. In 1931 Johnson brought out a second edition of the anthology, which included

“An Outline of Study published separately, for the use of teachers and students” that was a collaborative effort between him and the poet/critic Sterling Brown.<sup>37</sup> As it happened, the final years of Johnson’s life were devoted not to the political work of the NAACP but to making the anthology a part of black college and high school curriculums. Leaving his political work for the NAACP behind, Johnson worked full-time on making his anthology a vital component of literature courses taught throughout the United States until his death in 1938.

### Conclusion

In his essay “Recreations of an Anthologist,” published while Johnson was studying with him, Matthews writes that “however much the collector may boast of the utility of his labors, he knows perfectly well that his motive is not utilitarian. If he is honest with himself, he will admit humbly that the attraction of ‘making a collection’ does not lie in the ultimate value of the collection when it shall be completed (as far as that may be possible). In the immense majority of cases the beginnings of the collection were accidental and wholly devoid of purpose.”<sup>38</sup> Heeding his professor’s words in the preface to his collection, Johnson concludes by explaining,

My original idea for this book underwent a change in the writing of the introduction. I first planned to select twenty-five to thirty poems which I judged to be up to a certain standard, and offer them with a few words of introduction and without comment. In the collection, as it grew to be, that “certain standard” has been broadened if not lowered; but I believe that this is offset by the advantage of the wider range given the reader and the student of the subject.<sup>39</sup>

The “wider range” of the collection has a purpose that was not part of Johnson’s original idea to make a collection. The literary anthology became for Johnson the only way to explain the importance and worth of African Americans during a time in American history when it was possible to be lynched for the mere fact of being African American.

This objective for the anthology, as I’ve been trying to show, is not far from that of the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* today. The editors’ insistence on the inclusiveness of the anthology is an attempt to make it into a political act, rather than merely a literary one, which makes Gates’s theory of African American literature, like Johnson’s and Matthews’s, committed to explaining the worth of African Americans them-

selves. The act of reading this African American literary anthology, editors believe, translates the experience of being African American so that we can better understand African Americans and ourselves. The African American literary anthology thus functions as a speech act, providing form for African Americans themselves to speak. While producing a more inclusive anthology may be one way of learning about how the voices of particular African Americans have been stifled, reading this African American literary anthology—either inside or outside the classroom—certainly brings us no closer to knowing African Americans themselves.

### Notes

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- 1 Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), xxix.
- 2 Manning Marable, "The New Bible of Black Literature," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 19 (1998): 132.
- 3 Theodore O. Mason, "Mapping the Territory," *American Literary History* 10.1 (Spring 1998): 186.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 5 James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1922), 9.
- 6 Barbara M. Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 9.
- 7 Anders Olsson, *Managing Diversity: The Anthologization of "American Literature"* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2000), 15.
- 8 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912; rpt., New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), 173.
- 9 Comparing Johnson's protagonist to Charles Chesnutt's John Walden in *The House Behind the Cedars*, SallyAnn Ferguson characterizes the former as "smug," with "a penchant for self-aggrandizement" and "an inflated psyche—not a strong African-American identity." Johnson's "cowardly, White-looking protagonist" is effectively offset by the novel's "dark-skinned" characters, who function as moral correctives ("Unmaking Blackness: The Ex-Colored Men of Charles W. Chesnutt and James Weldon Johnson," in *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson*, ed. Kenneth M. Price and Lawrence J. Oliver [New York: G. K. Hall, 1997], 232–46). Ferguson's reading of the novel as a racial allegory is not far from Walter Benn Michaels's reading of the novel. While disputing the irony Ferguson and others have identified in the text, Michaels reads the novel's passing plot as a moral choice between doing the right and the wrong thing (*Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995], 117).
- 10 Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 36.
- 11 James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Viking, 1961), 238.

- 12 Brander Matthews, *These Many Years: Recollections of a New Yorker* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), 21–37.
- 13 Lawrence J. Oliver, *Brander Matthews, Theodore Roosevelt, and the Politics of American Literature, 1880–1920* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).
- 14 Although Johnson shared friendships with a number of other well-known literary critics, including H. L. Mencken, Johnson's association with Matthews marks the start of his literary career.
- 15 Johnson, *Along This Way*, 192.
- 16 Brander Matthews, "What Is American Literature?" in *The Tocsin of Revolt and Other Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 68.
- 17 Susanna Ashton, *Collaborators in Literary America, 1870–1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 95.
- 18 Brander Matthews, *Introduction to American Literature* (New York: American Book Company, 1918), 5.
- 19 Brander Matthews, "American Character in American Fiction," *Munsey's Magazine*, August 1913, 794–98.
- 20 Matthews made substantial changes to the poem, and these changes are the subject of some critical controversy. In his discussion of the poem's composition, Robert Fleming agrees with Eugene Levy, "who says that the poem is 'much closer in spirit to *Up from Slavery* than to *The Souls of Black Folk*.'" Johnson wrote multiple drafts of the poem; the changes between the first draft and the final one are especially significant, since Johnson decided to delete nine of the first draft's stanzas because, as Johnson explains in *Along This Way*, including them would have "nullified the theme, purpose, and effect of the poem as a whole" (290). Fleming reads these excised stanzas to "show that Johnson's placid exterior concealed a raging awareness of the wrongs committed against his race" (Robert Fleming, "The Composition of James Weldon Johnson's 'Fifty Years,'" *American Poetry* 4.2 [1987]: 51–56).
- 21 Brander Matthews, introduction to *Fifty Years and Other Poems*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (Boston: The Cornhill Company, 1917), xi–xiv.
- 22 Brander Matthews, "Literature in the New Century," in *Inquiries and Opinions* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 4.
- 23 Matthews to Johnson, December 26, 1914, James Weldon Johnson Collection, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; subsequent references will be to "Johnson Collection."
- 24 Matthews to Roosevelt, January 3, 1913, in *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt and Brander Matthews*, ed. Lawrence J. Oliver (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 199.
- 25 Roosevelt to Matthews, January 7, 1913, in *ibid.*, 200.
- 26 Matthews to Johnson, April 12, 1918, in *ibid.*, 218.
- 27 Brander Matthews, ed., *Poems of American Patriotism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922).
- 28 Declining to review the anthology himself, Matthews's reply to Johnson (March 23, 1922) indicates that he did so because he felt that he lacked sufficient knowledge on its subject matter. Instead, he arranged to have Professor Giddings, then head of Columbia's sociology department, write the article. No such review, however, appeared. See also Matthews to Johnson, March 20, 1922, Johnson Collection.

- 29 These essays were the subject of considerable critical controversy when Spingarn first presented them as lectures at Columbia University in 1910. See J. E. Spingarn, ed., *Criticism in America, Its Functions and Status* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924).
- 30 Besides playing a prominent role in the NAACP, Spingarn also attempted to gain a seat in Congress in 1908. Spingarn's political activities were, as Van Deussen points out in his biography, related to his views on literary criticism. Spingarn was a close ally of Johnson's; it was at his suggestion, for instance, that Johnson was chosen as secretary of the NAACP in 1916. Spingarn was responsible for the publication of Johnson's first anthology and made a number of changes to the original manuscript that Johnson readily accepted (Spingarn to Johnson, September 30, 1921, Johnson Collection). The convergence between Spingarn and Johnson's theory and practice is a subject worth considering in a separate article. See Spingarn, *Creative Criticism: Essays on the Unity of Genius and Taste* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1917), 3–44.
- 31 Marshall Van Deussen, *J. E. Spingarn* (New York: Twayne, 1971), 31.
- 32 Johnson, *Along This Way*, 374.
- 33 James Weldon Johnson, "Lynching—America's National Disgrace," in *Writings*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Library of America, 2004), 720.
- 34 NAACP press release, April 19, 1922, Johnson Collection.
- 35 Thanking Johnson for supporting his efforts to present a series of lectures at his alma mater, Atlanta University, Braithwaite explains to him the importance of carrying his message "to the Negro academic world." He explains, "If I can put this over to the extent I have measured for it in dreaming and brooding, and laboring to provide, I think we will have won as a Race the fulfillment of the precious heritage of this American civilization. The project is the editing of an OMNIBUS OF NEGRO LITERATURE which will be a library of literature, and the practical summation of our achievement to the present" (Braithwaite to Johnson, August 12, 1934, Johnson Collection).
- 36 The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, named after Representative Leonidas C. Dyer of Missouri, was one of two federal antilynching bills brought before Congress in 1918. In *Along This Way*, Johnson describes working with Dyer and the political lobbying he did on behalf of the NAACP. Although the bill failed to pass into law, Johnson's view of his experience is generally favorable. Besides learning a number of different political "tricks" in his attempts to gain the attention of different senators, he also claims that "the Dyer bill brought out the greatest concerted action I have yet seen the colored people take." For Johnson, the Dyer bill did succeed in bringing together divergent elements of "the colored people of the country" under a single cause (364–65).
- 37 Johnson, "Preface to the Second Edition," *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 8.
- 38 Brander Matthews, *Recreations of an Anthologist* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 3.
- 39 Johnson, *Along This Way*, 374–75.