THE NEGRO CARAVAN

Writings by American Negroes • Selected and Edited by Sterling A. Brown, Howard University; Arthur P. Davis, Virginia Union University; and Ulysses Lee, Lincoln University

THE DRYDEN PRESS • PUBLISHERS
New York

Designed by Stanley Burnshaw

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PREFACE

THIS ANTHOLOGY of the writings of American Negroes has three purposes: (1) to present a body of artistically valid writings by American Negro authors, (2) to present a truthful mosaic of Negro character and experience in America, and (3) to collect in one volume certain key literary works that have greatly influenced the thinking of American Negroes, and to a lesser degree, that of Americans as a whole.

Several anthologies of prose and poetry by American Negro writers have preceded this one. All are useful to the student, but they generally represent either single types, such as James Weldon Johnson's pioneering *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922; revised and enlarged 1931), Newman I. White and Walter Clinton Jackson's *An Anthology of American Negro Verse* (1924), and Carter G. Woodson's *Negro Orators and Their Orations* (1925); or single periods, such as Benjamin Brawley's *Early Negro American Writers*; or a single form in a single period, such as Carter G. Woodson's *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860*. Johnson's Anthology, Robert J. Kerlin's *Negro Poets and Their Poems* (1923, revised and enlarged 1935), and Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927) pay only slight attention to poets before Dunbar. Two anthologies attempting to cover the entire range of types and of periods are V. F. Calverton's *Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929) and *Readings From Negro Authors,* edited by Otelia Cromwell, Lorenzo D. Turner, and Eva B. Dykes (1931). Both were prepared over a decade ago, and in that decade a large amount of publishing has been done by James Weldon Johnson, Charles Johnson, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, and Richard Wright, to name only a few of the better known writers. Even for the period before their publication dates, however, these books are far less comprehensive in scope than *The Negro Caravan*. There is very little in both books, for instance, representing the numerous and influential writers of the nineteenth century.

Comprehensiveness for its own sake was, of course, not an editorial aim. But comprehensiveness seemed a necessity for one of the aims of the book, namely, a more accurate and revealing story of the Negro writer than has ever been told before. Thus writers such as David Ruggles, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Charlotte Forten, Mrs. Keckley,

Charles Langston, to mention only a few who have never appeared in any similar anthology, are included, not as finds, but because their writings are interesting and pertinent.

A section of folk literature, ampler than in any similar anthology; the neglected antislavery pamphleteering and journalism; the little-known fugitive slave narratives; the earliest novels (never before anthologized); all of these inclusions do more than enlarge the scope of *The Negro Caravan*. They serve the editorial purposes, which are different from those of any preceding anthology.

The Negro Caravan should be useful, not only to students of American literature, but also to students of American social history. It presents the literary record of America's largest minority group, and in doing so it sheds light upon American culture and minority problems. It pieces out a mosaic more representative than is to be found in any other single volume. Many classes of Negroes, from many sections, undergoing many sorts of experiences, are shown in this mosaic. A cursory glance at the table of contents will reveal the highly composite make-up of the book.

The Negro Caravan covers the entire period of Negro expression—from the writings of Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon to the current fiction of Richard Wright. All literary types are represented. The selections are divided according to types into eight sections: Short Stories; Novels (selections); Poetry; Folk Literature; Drama; Speeches, Pamphlets, and Letters; Biography (Biography and Autobiography); and Essays (Historical, Social, Cultural, and Personal). Within each section the arrangement is chronological, except as noted in the historical essays, where the subject matter supersedes the chronology for reader interest. Each section begins with a historical and critical introduction explaining the history of the type as used by Negro authors. Each author's work is prefaced by a biographical and bibliographical note. There is a chronology of events in American history and literature that have significant pertinence to the writings of American Negroes, as well as a chronology of the history and literature of Negroes.

Passages have been omitted from several of the selections for reasons of space and interest. These omissions have been indicated by dots for short passages and by asterisks for longer passages. There have been no other editorial alterations in the selections except the correction of obvious errors and misprints. The typographical peculiarities of the nineteenth-century selections have been retained. The few summarized sections that were felt necessary for long short stories, are enclosed in brackets. The editors have supplied many titles of selections where the authors give no titles, or where the selections, standing

as units, seem to require more descriptive titles than the titles of the larger works. Though the editors favor a simplified dialect, they have kept the dialect as the authors wrote it, except in rare instances for the sake of clarity.

Vernon Loggins' *The Negro Author* (1931) and Carter G. Woodson's *The Mind of the Negro As Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis, 1800-1860,* have been of great value in the preparation of this anthology. The earlier anthologies have been useful, especially James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry* and Brawley's *Early Negro American Writers*. Cooperation of authors and copyright holders has been generous. Helpful advice came in from many sources; especially to be singled out are the aids afforded by Arthur Spingarn of New York and Henry P. Slaughter of Washington, bibliophiles with great knowledge of the subject. Mr. Slaughter put his huge collection at our disposal for items difficult to find. Mrs. Dorothy Porter's cooperativeness, patience, and resourcefulness were invaluable to us. Her sure knowledge of the extensive collection of The Moorland Room of the Howard University Founders' Library was a great help, and but for her, many biographical facts would be missing. Walter G. Daniel, Librarian of the Howard University Founders' Library, kindly placed the facilities of the library at our disposal; members of the library staffs at Howard, Hampton Institute, Lincoln University, and Virginia Union University were generously cooperative. Invaluable assistance in the last stages of preparing the manuscript was given by Dean Charles H. Wesley, Dean Charles H. Thompson, and Professor Charles E. Burch of Howard University, and by Mrs. Virginia Macbeth Jones of Richmond. Many of our colleagues have given us a helping hand and words of good cheer. The numerous friends who worked so strenuously in Richmond, Hampton, and Washington in the last months of preparing manuscript must already know our gratitude. The editors' families have watched the work from its inception with interest and sympathy. To Daisy T. Brown and Clarice Davis, who saw the work through with such unfailing and good-humored understanding, all three editors extend their heartfelt thanks.

Sterling A. Brown
Arthur P. Davis
Ulysses Lee

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THE NEGRO CARAVAN

INTRODUCTION

THE Negro has been a favored subject for American authors from the earliest years of the nation. Cooper, Melville, Poe, William Gilmore Simms, Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, and many others tried their hands at picturing Negro life and character in portraits that turned out quite dissimilar. America's most popular novel and play, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* caused a flood of pro-slavery and antislavery arguments in fiction. Blackface minstrelsy, considered to be one of America's few original contributions to dramatic history, was for a long time the most popular theatrical entertainment in the United States, and its burlesque of what was considered to be Negro behavior is still influential in the moving pictures and in radio. During the period of local color, such white authors as Irwin Russell, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page made their literary reputations by exploiting Negro folkways.

In the twentieth century the literary popularity of Negro life and character has not abated. It is likely that Thomas Dixon, aided by David Wark Griffith in *The Birth of a Nation,* and supported by their latest disciple, Margaret Mitchell, in *Gone With the Wind,* has done more than historians and social scientists to implant in the American mind certain inflexible concepts of Reconstruction. Pulitzer Prize winners like Julia Peterkin and Paul Green, popular best sellers like Octavus Roy Cohen and Roark Bradford, and regionalists like DuBose Heyward and Erskine Caldwell, have reported and interpreted the Negro with great interest though with varying skill, honesty, and sympathy. On the twentieth-century stage, plays by white authors about the Negro have ranged from Edward Sheldon's *The Nigger* to such fantasies as Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures* and John LaTouche's and Vernon Duke's *Cabin in the Sky,* and such militant plays as *Never No More* by James Knox Millen and *Stevedore* by Paul Peters and George Sklar.

White authors, basing their interpretations on necessarily limited knowledge derived from an outside view, run the risk of stereotyping Negro character. This is true even when they have the best intentions in the world toward their subject, and many, of course, did not have the best intentions.

> I swear their nature is beyond my comprehension. A strange people!—merry 'mid their misery—laughing through their tears, like the sun shining through the rain. Yet what simple philosophers they! They tread life's path as if 'twere strewn with roses devoid of thorns, and make the most of life with natures of sunshine and song.

Any American reader could be forgiven for taking the above to refer to the Negro. It is actually a passage about the Irish, spoken by an English officer in a play that deals with one of the most tragic periods in the history of Ireland. It is one of the oddities of American culture that the three most popular figures in the comic gallery are the Negro, the Irishman, and the Jew, figures whose histories have more than their share of persecution and abuse. Other immigrant people have often been humorous butts.

It appears to be a literary truism that racial and minority groups are most often stereotyped by the majority. Today in Europe, conquered or threatened minorities receive substantially the same literary treatment that the Negro has received here for so many years. With certain honorable exceptions, more numerous in our own time, the white authors dealing with the American Negro have interpreted him in a way to justify his exploitation. Creative literature has often been a handmaiden to social policy.

Thus, in antebellum days, the Negro was shown to be, by his peculiar endowment, the perfect, natural slave. Southern preachers in their *Bible Defenses of Slavery;* physiologists with their "scientific" discoveries made at long range; political economists with their insistence that there should be "servile, laborious beings to perform servile, laborious offices" so that a small master class could sustain chivalry were warrants for J. P. Kennedy to write:

> No tribe of people have ever passed from barbarism to civilization whose progress has been more secure from harm, more genial to their character or better supplied with mild and beneficent guardianship adapted to the actual state of their intellectual feebleness, than the negroes of Swallow Barn.

Complementary to this contented slave was the comic Negro, the clown, the dearly beloved buffoon, seen at his best in the minstrel shows. His corollary was the wretched freedman, the Negro so unhappy among the cold, unsympathetic Yankees and so unequipped for freedom that he frequently stole back to the South on a sort of Underground Railroad in reverse. After emancipation these stereotypes were handled by persuasive authors like Thomas Nelson Page, who gave us the classic examples of slaves yearning for the good old days "befo' de War," speaking often, we fear, like ventriloquists' dummies. In

Reconstruction the wretched freedman became the brute, swaggering about, insulting, and assaulting, and it must be added, wanting to vote.

Abolitionist authors yielded also to the habit of stereotyping. Besides their idealized victims, they also created the "white slave," the tragic mulatto, who to most of the abolitionists seemed to be more tragically doomed than darker fellow bondsmen. Later writers have also emphasized, to an even greater degree, the woes of Negroes of mixed blood.

In the twentieth century the contented slave may be gone but his lineaments remain in his offspring who, though exchanging the cabin for the cabaret, is a creature of mirth and rhythm and song, free from worldly cares. The exotic primitive, unmoral and flamboyant, has been a popular stock figure in our time. Some writers, like Vachel Lindsay, Paul Morand, and Carl Van Vechten, have seen Africa resurgent in the contemporary Negro, the irresistible Congo cutting through the black. Revolting from a drab America standardized by the Babbitts, many authors turned to the Negro as a symbol of escape, and rather strangely, of unshackled freedom.

It is inaccurate to infer that all white authors have taken the easy way of stereotyping. Herman Melville refused to see peculiar endowments in the Negroes aboard the *Pequod,* or in the mutinying slaves of the *Benito Cereno*. From Cable, Twain, and Tourgée down to such authors as Paul Green, E. C. L. Adams, T. S. Stribling, DuBose Heyward, Evelyn Scott, Erskine Caldwell, William March, and Hamilton Basso—many white authors have honestly and courageously insisted upon proffering testimony that differed from that of countless more popular witnesses. But in the main, Negro life and character in American literature have been narrowly grooved, in a way to reinforce, whether consciously or not, American social policy toward the Negro.

The validity of much of the work of white authors cannot be denied, but the belief as expressed, for instance, in many publishers' announcements, that white authors know the Negro best is untenable to the editors of this anthology. They believe that the "inside view" is more likely to make possible the essential truth than "the outside." We go to French authors, Russian authors, German authors, for deeper understanding of those nations; to a Polish Jew, for instance, for deeper understanding of that minority; to working-class authors for deeper understanding of that class.

White authors offer such unimpeachable qualifications for understanding Negroes as playing with Negro children, attending Negro picnics and churches, and bossing Negro gangs. One states that her slaveholding ancestry enables her to interpret Negro character better than any Negro author could interpret it. The editors believe, however, that Negro authors, as they mature, must be allowed the privilege and must assume the responsibility of being the ultimate portrayers of their own.

When the Negro artist has expressed his own people, he has almost always refuted, or differed from, or at least complicated the simpler patterns of white interpretation. Thus, at the very time when J. P. Kennedy was complaisantly writing of the "intellectual feebleness" of the Negro of Swallow Barn, free Negroes in New York were editing and publishing their own newspapers, organs of outspoken propaganda for the antislavery cause; others were contributing money and articles to Garrison's *Liberator*. David Walker's celebrated and inflammatory *Appeal* was being circulated in the South in spite of sharp censorship. And Negroes had been publishing poetry and prose for over half a century. During the argumentative period of the eighteen forties and fifties, many narratives of fugitive slaves were written, powerful ammunition for the antislavery arsenal. Sometimes fictionalized or ghost-written, sometimes dictated to abolitionists, and often, as in the instances of William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, written by the fugitives themselves, these autobiographies formed a popular American literary type, serving as useful sources for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The record of the Negro author extends well over a century and a half. But Negro expression was not confined to the printed page, written under abolitionist sponsorship in the North. In the South, on cotton and tobacco plantations, in field and factory, along "slave row" and in the dank rooms adjoining the slave marts, in camp meetings and in secret brush arbors, the slaves were creating a fine body of folk-song—such spirituals as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Deep River," and such satires as "My ole mosser promise me." From these folk expressions of slavery to contemporary blues and worksongs, the folk Negro has revealed himself to be much more than contented slave, comic buffoon, and wretched freedman.

In the literature of American Negroes, these favorite stereotypes do not often appear. The self-effacing black mammy, the obsequious major-domo, the naïve folk, and the exotic primitive, to name instances, are seen from a different point of view and are presented with a different stress. This is not the same as denial of the existence of Negroes who resemble and serve as bases for the stereotyping. But Negro writers feel justly that these stereotypes have received far more attention than their importance in the total picture warrants, and that, being stereotypes, they are superficial, resulting from memory more than from observation and understanding. Negro authors write of their kinsfolk, their friends, the people with whom they rub shoulders daily. They

find it hard to believe that these characters are as simplified as much literature has made them. And they know so many types of Negroes who have never found places in the books. Much Negro writing, of course, consciously revolting from the offending stereotypes, produces counter-stereotypes of its own. But whether a blues patched together in some dimly lit honky-tonk, or a novel perfected in the few hours after work, or an essay attacking the bias of history, Negro writings generally agree in giving a portrait of Negro life and character different from that which has been handed down for over a century.

A second unifying bond, related to this one, is the theme of struggle that is present in so much Negro expression. Before Emancipation, by far the greatest amount of writing was in the antislavery tradition. Speeches, often letters, pamphlets, poems, the first tentative groping novels, were all conceived as strokes for freedom. The folk expression of the slaves, especially in its more memorable form, the spirituals, shares this deep concern. Out of the storehouse of Christian ideas and idioms, the slave took those that spoke most of his condition, and transmuted them into poetry telling of tribulation and faith, symbolic, naturally indirect, in the way of good poetry, but none the less convincing. After Emancipation, Negro writers turned to the struggle for the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy. In the twentieth century, Negro writers continue to use both creative and informational literature to attack abuses and injustices and to demand that democracy live up to its name.

In spite of such unifying bonds as a common rejection of the popular stereotypes and a common "racial" cause, writings by Negroes do not seem to the editors to fall into a unique cultural pattern. Negro writers have adopted the literary traditions that seemed useful for their purposes. They have therefore been influenced by Puritan didacticism, sentimental humanitarianism, local color, regionalism, realism, naturalism, and experimentalism. Phillis Wheatley wrote the same high moralizing verse in the same poetic pattern as her contemporary poets in New England. While Frederick Douglass brought more personal knowledge and bitterness into his antislavery agitation than William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Parker, he is much closer to them in spirit and in form than to Phillis Wheatley, his predecessor, and Booker T. Washington, his successor. Francis E. W. Harper wrote antislavery poetry in the spirit and pattern of Longfellow and Felicia Hemans; her contemporary, Whitfield, wrote of freedom in the pattern of Byron. And so it goes. Without too great imitativeness, many contemporary Negro writers are closer to O. Henry, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Waldo Frank, Ernest Hemingway, and

John Steinbeck than to each other. The bonds of literary tradition seem to be stronger than race.

The editors therefore do not believe that the expression "Negro literature" is an accurate one, and in spite of its convenient brevity, they have avoided using it. "Negro literature" has no application if it means structural peculiarity, or a Negro school of writing. The Negro writes in the forms evolved in English and American literature. "A Negro novel," "a Negro play" are ambiguous terms. If they mean a novel or a play by Negroes, then such works as *Porgy* and *The Green Pastures* are left out. If they mean works about Negro life, they include more works by white authors than by Negro, and these works have been most influential upon the American mind. The editors consider Negro writers to be American writers, and literature by American Negroes to be a segment of American literature. They believe that it would be just as misleading to classify Clifford Odets' plays about Jewish life as "Jewish literature" or James T. Farrell's novels of the Chicago Irish as "Irish literature" or some of William Saroyan's tales as "Armenian literature."

The chief cause for objection to the term is that "Negro literature" is too easily placed by certain critics, white and Negro, in an alcove apart. The next step is a double standard of judgment, which is dangerous for the future of Negro writers. "A Negro novel," thought of as a separate form, is too often condoned as "good enough for a Negro." That Negroes in America have had a hard time, and that inside stories of Negro life often present unusual and attractive reading matter are incontrovertible facts; but when they enter literary criticism these facts do damage to both the critics and the artists.

Negro writers are not numerous; their audience, with few exceptions, is small; the subject matter they know best is often controversial; and almost all of them make their livings from jobs other than writing. Yet they must ask that their books be judged as books, without sentimental allowances. In their own defense they must demand a single standard of criticism.

The editors do not hold that this anthology maintains an even level of literary excellence. A number of the selections have been included as essential to a balanced picture. Literature by Negro authors about Negro experience is a literature in process and like all such literature (including American literature) must be considered as significant, not only because of a body of established masterpieces, but also because of the illumination it sheds upon a social reality.