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I, TOO, SING AMERICA: *Black Voices in American Literature*
Barbara Dodds Stanford

I, Too, Sing America

black voices in american literature

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To the Student

Black American writers have been the victims of both two hundred years of discrimination and a decade or less of faddish popularity. The discrimination has existed in the form of publishers' indifference, hostility, and fear and their well-founded conviction that the predominantly White reading public wouldn't read Black writers. Only recently have some American teachers, textbook writers, and students recognized the biased view most schools have presented of American literature and set out to remedy it. However, centuries of neglect have left most White—and many Black—Americans totally ignorant of what Black Americans have written.

I, Too, Sing America is written on the premise that Black literature should be studied with the same respect and critical judgment as other bodies of literature. Moreover, it presents Black writing as protest against the condition of Blacks ir America and as enduring expression of the universal human condition. Literary quality was the most important factor in selecting pieces for this anthology, but an attempt was also made to represent all major authors and literary movements as well as many points of view on major social problems. The book is arranged chronologically to emphasize the relationship of the literature to social and historical forces.

The Black experience in the United States, as revealed through literature, is an important part of the total American experience. Through reading the works of these outstanding Black writers, may you gain a better understanding of your heritage and of yourself.

Contents

SECTION 4—The Depression and World War II

SECTION 5—The Modern Age: The City

SECTION 6—The Modern Age: Integration

SECTION 7—The Modern Age: Protest

2

Reconstruction and Its Aftermath

Emancipation began a new era for Blacks in America. The newly freed slaves were eager to acquire education and property which they saw as the tools needed for their advancement. Blacks worked hard to get an education in the hopes that if they did not succeed, at least their children would. At this time, most still hoped that they, like other immigrant groups, could be assimilated into the dominant society when they overcame the backwardness caused by slavery. Booker T. Washington became the symbol of the Black man's eagerness for education. Born a slave, Washington began attending school as soon as a teacher became available even though he had to work in a salt mine before and after school to help support his family. At the age of 15 he traveled 500 miles to Hampton Institute and arrived with 50¢ in his pocket. The head teacher was reluctant to admit him, but she was so impressed by his eagerness that she finally allowed him to work as janitor to support himself. Impressed by Hampton's emphasis on practical skills, Washington founded Tuskegee Institute on the same pattern, even having the students build the school themselves.

However, while Washington and other Black leaders, as well as many Whites, were working to educate the freedmen, the South was determined that Blacks would remain subordinate and would not gain the rights of citizens. Even the right to marry legally was contested. When Reconstruction was instituted, federal troops forced outward compliance with laws gaining Blacks some rights, but some Southerners continued the Civil War with guerilla organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. When Federal troops were withdrawn after the inauguration of President Hayes in 1877, a reign of terror began which some suggested was aimed at total extermination of Blacks. Terror quickly destroyed any economic and political gains the Blacks had made and segregation developed into an art. By the 1890's the Black man's advocates in Congress were arguing, not for civil rights laws, but for antilynching legislation.

Booker T. Washington and other Black leaders found themselves forced to compromise on social privileges in order to maintain any economic stability or even physical safety. Pleased by Washington's willingness to accommodate, White leaders elevated him to a position of puppet ruler of the Blacks. Washington had almost complete control

over Black patronage appointments in the country. He controlled appointments to positions at Black hospitals, colleges, and newspapers, as well as to political jobs. Because Washington said what they wanted to hear, Whites considered him the spokesman of the Blacks.

But as Washington became more and more powerful, his position was increasingly challenged by other Black leaders, who were willing to risk their jobs. W. E. B. DuBois was the leader of the militant group opposed to Washington's conciliatory tactics. In 1905 he called together a group of militant Black leaders to the Niagara Conference, which led to the formation of the NAACP a few years later. DuBois's following grew during the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the end of World War I, Blacks in America were ready for a new, more militant movement.

Although the Reconstruction period did not fulfill its promise of providing education and economic opportunity for the Black masses, the South's Re-Reconstruction did not quite succeed in stifling all efforts at Black advancement. One evidence of the Black man's improved position is the considerably larger body of literature produced during the last half of the 19th century. Much of the writing was still political or autobiographical. Washington's main work is his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*. W. E. B. DuBois's most outstanding work of this period is *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, a collection of essays. However, there was also a considerable amount of fiction written. DuBois wrote poetry and novels as well as nonfiction works. A Black middle class began to develop, composed of graduates from the Black colleges or the more liberal Northern schools, who worked mainly as doctors, ministers, or schoolteachers. Most of these professionals were light-skinned—descendents of house servants and their masters. Sometimes called the Talented Tenth, this group was particularly interested in improving the cultural standing of Blacks and displayed great interest in literature. As segregation became more oppressive, many of these people hoped that their position might be improved if they could separate themselves from the mass of poorly educated Blacks. So they formed a small society of their own between the Blacks and Whites, not really belonging to either group. Many of those who were light enough passed for White, completely losing their racial identity.

The Talented Tenth produced most of the Black writers of the late 19th Century. However, their ambivalent feelings toward both the White and Black societies caused many conflicts which are reflected in their writings. Besides being endangered by the oppressive segregation of the period, their writing was hindered by its critical climate. The genteel editors who controlled most of the outlets for publishing were not willing to publish anything controversial. And as the anti-Black sentiment began to grow in the South, they became less and less willing to publish works of Black writers. Furthermore, to support their segregation laws, White writers tried to develop unfavorable racial caricatures, presenting Blacks as humorous, half-human creatures who were incap-

able of strong feelings and unable to control their animal impulses. Publishers were unwilling to depart from this stereotype.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, the best known writer of this period, demonstrates clearly the strange paradoxes that faced the Black man of post-Reconstruction. As a child, Dunbar was a good student and although one of the few Blacks in the Dayton, Ohio high school, he was well liked and popular. He was editor of the school paper, president of the literary society, and class poet. However, Dunbar, like many other educated young men of the time, found that White men did not know what to do with an educated Black man, as they were not willing to hire a Black for an office job, even though he was well qualified. Eventually Dunbar got a job as an elevator operator at $4.00 a week. Fortunately, he soon came to the attention of literary critics and his works began to be published. However, he was still in a quandry. The reading public, he found, did not want to read serious poetry or stories in standard English by a Black. They preferred to picture Blacks speaking in dialect and playing around on the plantation. As a result, Dunbar, one of the finest poets that America has yet produced, was forced to waste much of his talent supporting the stereotype of the Black man as an uneducated clown.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt, the first Black writer of fiction to be recognized by the White press, was also forced into a kind of literary "passing." When his first short stories were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1887 and in the collections *The Wife of His Youth* and *The Conjure Woman* in 1889, no mention was made of the fact that he was a Black. And the stories were written in such a way that the writer could easily have been a White man observing Black society. Fortunately, however, after his stories became successful, his publishers were willing to admit that he was a Black and were even willing to publish his more controversial novels about racial issues.

from *Up From Slavery*

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON (*1856-1916*)

Emancipation

Ever since I have been old enough to think for myself, I have entertained the idea that, notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did. The hurtful influences of the institution were not by any means confined to the Negro. This was fully illustrated by the life upon our own plantation. The whole machinery of slavery was so constructed as to cause labor, as a rule, to be looked upon as a badge of degradation, of inferiority. Hence labor was something that both races on the slave plantation sought to escape. The slave system on our place, in a large measure, took the spirit of self-reliance and self-help out of the white people. My old master had many boys and girls, but not one, so far as I know, ever mastered a single trade or special line of productive industry. The girls were not taught to cook, sew or to take care of the house. All of this was left to the slaves. The slaves, of course, had little personal interest in the life of the plantation, and their ignorance prevented them from learning how to do things in the most improved and thorough manner. As a result of the system, fences were out of repair, gates were hanging half off the hinges, doors creaked, window-panes were out, plastering had fallen but was not replaced, weeds grew in the yard. As a rule, there was food for whites and blacks, but inside the house, and on the dining-room table, there was wanting that delicacy and refinement of touch and finish which can make a home the most convenient, comfortable, and attractive place in the world. Withal there was a waste of food and other materials which was sad. When freedom came, the slaves were almost as well fitted to begin life anew as the master, except in the matter of book-learning and ownership of property. The slave owner and his sons had mastered no special industry. They unconsciously had imbided the feeling that manual labor was not the proper thing for them. On the other hand, the slaves, in many cases, had mastered some handicraft, and none were ashamed, and few unwilling, to labor.

Finally the war closed, and the day of freedom came. It was a momentous and eventful day to all upon our plantation. We had been expecting it. Freedom was in the air, and had been for months. Deserting soldiers returning to their homes were to be seen every day. Others who had been discharged, or whose regiments had been paroled, were constantly passing near our place. The "grape-vine telegraph" was kept busy night and day. The news and mutterings of great events were swiftly carried from one plantation to another. In the fear of "Yankee" invasions, the silverware and other valuables were taken from the "big house," buried in the woods, and guarded by trusted slaves. Woe be to