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Reading Under Cover of the Veil: Oral and Textual Literacies in Antebellum America

Sandra Elaine Jones

This article examines the relationship between oral- and textual-literacy systems that existed during the antebellum period of United States history. I argue that African-American intellectual processes are more accurately understood as existing on a literacy continuum that reflects equality between oral literacy and textual literacy. A literacy continuum deconstructs the notion of the textual supremacy and assumes a mutually dependent relationship between the oral and the textual. Ultimately, it enables a reevaluation of oral practices as intellectual processes and systems of knowledge production.

Leaving . . . the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,—the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*

Introduction

Elizabeth McHenry's "Forgotten Readers: African-American Literary Societies and the American Scene" examines black female literary societies that existed in free black communities in the nineteenth century.¹ Literary societies were established in significant numbers in the 1800s and served a vital educational function in black communities for nearly 100 years. Yet, this historical phenomenon has received little scholarly attention. McHenry maintains that because of this serious scholarly neglect, "we remain less cognizant of the variety of processes of intellectual production and exchange that have existed within African-American communities--processes through which texts were both created and read" (150). McHenry attributes this neglect to the singular identification of black culture as "oral in nature." Such a characterization, she argues, has obscured the full scope of black intellectual processes, especially the reading and writing of texts (151).

While McHenry argues that the identification of black culture as oral in nature has obscured our understanding of African-American intellectual processes, I believe the characterization of African Americans as an "illiterate race"—from the early seventeenth century through much of the twentieth century—constitutes a greater problem. The illiterate label in relationship to African Americans is problematic because it assumes

a European-based written textuality as the exclusive and universal standard by which knowledge is produced and measured. In other words, it suggests that a European-based textual literacy is the only valid form of literacy that exists and the only important literacy for African Americas to acquire. However, this assumption ignores the very real conditions under which African Americans existed in the Americas. It denies the rich intellectual production and exchange rooted in oral knowledge production systems. The existence of perpetual enslavement where participation in activities like reading and writing were often prohibited by law required the utilization of alternative forms of intellectual development and exchange. Oral traditions were vitally important under these circumstances. For example, storytelling, the verbal transmission of knowledge, proved to be a central mechanism by which family and cultural history was preserved and passed along the generations. Music, the simple singing of spirituals or blues, became powerful communication mechanisms for enslaved African Americans. The creation of meaning through behavior provided an alternative means of intellectual exchange. Under the conditions of enslavement, acquiring literacy of these alternative oral forms was often more important than textual literacy.

Like the authenticity arguments that surrounded early black literary production, the assumption that blacks are an illiterate race is an outgrowth of the fallacy of black inferiority. An idea rooted in the social construction of the slave persona, the designation as inherently illiterate was an important feature of the dehumanization of black people. Such a broad characterization implied that, with just a few exceptions, blacks as a race have limited intellectual capabilities that impede a significant mastery of intellectual practices, including written literacy skills. Moreover, black inferiority theories imply that these intellectual constraints are inherent in the physiological makeup of the black body. In this context, illiteracy becomes synonymous with educability and suggests that African Americans as a population are not “educable.” This designation has persisted over time, during periods of enslavement as well as freedom, and manifests itself in modern biological and cultural determinist theories such as those authored by Arthur Jensen (*Genetics and Education*), and Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray (*The Bell Curve*). In actuality, rather than proving genetic and biological inferiority, these pseudo-scientific theories serve to legitimize any societal inequalities or disadvantages suffered by African-American populations.

Understanding the full scope of African-American intellectual processes of which McHenry speaks requires a recognition and re-evaluation of other knowledge production systems, especially oral ones. I argue in this article that African-American intellectual processes are more accurately understood as existing on a literacy continuum with an equal level of utility for both oral literacy and textual literacy. Situating knowledge production in an oral context expands the definition of literacy and challenges the superiority of Western concepts of literacy that construct a binary between the textual and the oral. The written/oral binary assumes a dominant/subordinate power relationship between textual literacy and oral literacy. A literacy continuum deconstructs the notion of the supremacy of textual literacy and assumes a mutually dependent relationship between the oral and the textual. At the same time,

a literacy continuum enables a re-evaluation of orality as a valid intellectual process and system of knowledge production. A literacy continuum leads one to the genesis of African-American intellectual processes found in antebellum America, particularly in the everyday survival existence of the enslaved population. Intellectual as well as physical survival depended on mastery of uniquely constructed knowledge generating systems rooted in African knowledge production systems. Without the construction of an orally-based system, black resistance to slavery would have been impossible.

Critical Literacy Theory

Particularly relevant to this topic is the emerging field of “New Literacy,” or critical literacy studies that challenge traditional Western definitions of literacy, as too narrow to encompass the full range of literacy practices.² Critical literacy studies offer a decidedly different conceptual frame that views literacy in broader sociocultural and political terms by recognizing how language is affected by and effects social relations. As such, language contains a value specific to the circumstance in which it is used. It follows that acquiring language literacy—written and oral—is relevant only in the context in which it is needed and practiced.

My argument assumes that a temporally, geographically, and culturally affected term such as “literacy” is best examined recognizing the elusiveness of its definition as a concept and practice. A traditional definition of literacy is “the quality or state of being literate” (Merriam-Webster). In its most practical Western sense, literacy has generally meant obtaining the ability to read and write. Yet, the level of reading and writing skills one needs to be considered literate has undergone many changes over time. For the great majority of the population in the British-American colonies for most of the eighteenth century, the “quality or state of being literate” meant acquiring very basic skills in reading primarily for the purpose of religious instruction. Writing, or more precisely penmanship, was considered an advanced skill until the 1830s (Thornton 76). In the antebellum period, the ability to sign one’s name was a significant measure of literacy. With the growth and mass accessibility of American public education in the late 1800s,³ enrollment in school became the method by which literacy levels for the population were measured. Many argue that today’s “state of being literate” should include the new literacy associated with the technological era since computers, the internet, emailing, texting, and tweeting have become central media in information and communication dissemination. Under such fluid socially constructed standards, the quality or state of being literate, then, depends largely on the societal context.

Contemporary scholarship across a spectrum of disciplines challenge the boundaries of traditional definitions as too limited to consider temporal, geographic, and cultural changes affecting concepts and measurements of literacy. For example, Dubin and Kuhlman discuss literacy in a broader academic context by suggesting the literacy has come to encompass meanings that go beyond the simple definition of reading and writing to include competence, knowledge and skills (v-x). Sociologist J.A. Langer argues for a more comprehensive definition suggesting that, “literacy can be

viewed in a broader and educationally more productive way, as the ability to think and reason like a literate person, *within a particular society*" (9-27). Anthropologist James Collins challenges limited literacy definitions by questioning the "central assumptions that literacy can be treated as a thing-in-itself, as an autonomous technology... its nature and meaning shaped by, rather than determinate of, broad cultural-historical frameworks and specific cultural practices" (75-93).

In her study of the African-American literacy practices in the modern American classroom, Elaine Richardson identifies a conceptual incompatibility between African-American Vernacular English and the historical propensity for schools to promote what she terms "White supremacist and capitalistic-based literacy." She argues that the diverse composition of modern American classrooms requires an expanded use of language and literacy forms. Effective teaching and learning of African-American students require an expanded use of African American Vernacular English, noting the ways in which African-American literacy practices has been an essential attribute to African American survival from "slave ship to scholarship" (4). Richardson's findings underscore a general argument that context is as essential for assessing literacy as it is for understanding and interpreting African-American intellectual processes. It also attests to the importance of considering a range of oral practices as significant forms of literacy and knowledge production.

Influenced heavily by critical literacy approaches, I argue that within the cultural-historical framework of a society which Abraham Lincoln called half free and half slave (Lincoln "A House Divided"), where the enslaved population was subjected to laws that prohibited acquisition of written literacy, mastering the skills of oral literacy constituted the most essential attribute of the "quality or state of being literate" for African Americans. Unique cultural-historical conditions necessitated the simultaneous construction of an alternative oral literacy system at the same time as blacks attempted to acquire textual literacy skills. An alternative literacy system grew largely "under cover of the veil"—that is, outside of the literacy framework of the dominant white population. Furthermore, this alternative literacy was grounded epistemologically in the oral traditions culturally specific to African cultures. Thus, an exploration of African-American literacy during the slavery era must take into consideration a range of oral practices that were developed and used by the enslaved population, which traditional definitions do not allow. Practices such as memorization and forms such as storytelling, spoken-word poetry, blues-song constructions, sermons, and testifying all became important components of the analytical skill sets that functioned as methods of producing knowledge.

Oral Literacy

I have argued that reading and writing were not the only forms of literacy necessary for enslaved Africans in antebellum America. Oral literacy also held significance in creating unique African-American communication systems vital to black progress and survival under slavery. In fact, the state of being literate for the enslaved population meant being

intimately familiar with those systems. Storytelling, testifying, songs, riddles, and more were rooted in oral traditions that derive from the culture that Africans carried with them from Africa. Orality constituted an accessible and democratic mode of teaching and learning in black communities that were available to all; at the same time, it provided a protective shield from intrusion by white society, and, as Heather Williams suggests, provided a private life for enslaved Americans (7). Williams maintains that most of the news and information gathered by the enslaved involved "listen[ing] hard and remember[ing] well." She writes that eavesdropping

Constituted a vital and accessible component of the intelligence network within slave communities. As important as literacy was to the slaves who employed it in service of their own freedom or for the benefit of others, enslaved African Americans also had other ways of knowing. They relied heavily on oral and aural systems of information. (9)

Other "ways of knowing" such as listening, information gathering, memorization, and articulation skills facilitated learning in an environment that forbade it. Orality made it possible to pass on information and knowledge from person to person and from one generation to the next. It provided collective analytical forms through which blacks could make sense of and affect the world around them. Because orality is a participatory activity, it helped to create community linkages and a sense of identity as well.

Drawing upon oral traditions, enslaved blacks devised their own secret communication systems that only they were effective in decoding. Encrypted messages embedded in songs, hidden in quilts, and incorporated in riddles are all examples of an underground communication system existing in slave communities. The roles of music and song in the daily lives of enslaved populations are well documented (Genovese; Blassingame; Southern). Because many forms of communication, including group conversations, were often forbidden by slavocrats, singing was among the few collective activities in which blacks could engage freely. Angela Davis observes that music became an extension of everyday speech serving both an aesthetic and political purposes. Davis notes that, "the musicalization of speech" became a means of "preserving African cultural memory," as well as "help[ing] to construct community among the slaves." She writes:

Through field hollers and work songs, black people communicated to one another a sense of membership in a community that challenged their collective identity as slaves. They created a language whose meanings were indecipherable to everyone who was not privy to the required code. And, indeed, white slave owners and overseers often assumed that work songs revealed an acquiescence to slavery... The language of spirituals... was encoded in a way that permitted slaves to communicate specific modes of resistance through metaphors based on biblical teachings. (167)

Spiritual music, as well as other cultural attributes, represented a masterful method of resistance, especially in the countless individual and collective efforts to escape a life of enslavement. Music served as a medium through which messages circulated throughout the enslaved community when a planned escape was underway. They contained instructions on when to leave and maps of where to go to be safe from detection. These very practices represent communication systems that were hidden in plain view. They were available to those able to understand them and unavailable to outsiders.

Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, one of the first known novels written by an African-American woman, contains illuminating examples of the hidden communication system that existed among the enslaved community. Although it is a fictional account, it is illustrative of the type of hidden communication systems based on oral traditions. In its opening pages, Harper introduces the concept of "market speech," a covert means of communication that existed in the novel's slave community. *Iola Leroy* begins with a seemingly simple dialogue between two of the novel's main characters, Robert Johnson and Tom Anderson, who appear to be discussing the quality of produce in the market. Both characters are slaves, and the time is set toward the end of the Civil War.

"Good mornin', Bob; how's butter dis mornin'?"

"Fresh; just as fresh, as fresh can be."

Did you see de fish in de market dis mornin'? Oh, but dey war splendid, jis' as fresh, as fresh can be."

"That's the ticket," said Robert as a broad smile overspread his face. (Harper 2)

We learn shortly that this simple dialogue contains a hidden message of significance. The state of the market is a metaphorical reference to the successful efforts of the North in the Civil War. Harper soon tells us "some of the shrewder slaves, coming in contact with their masters and overhearing their conversations, invented phraseology to convey in the most unsuspected manner news to each other from the battle field" (8-9). The obvious intention of this dialogue in market speech is to introduce the existence of an alternative form of literacy among the novel's slave community that figures significantly in the novel's construction.

By introducing market speech in the beginning of the story, Harper provides an important instruction to its readers on how to gain meaning from the novel as a whole. P. Gabrielle Foreman's concept of "histotextuality" is useful for explaining the function of the type of market speech found in *Iola*. Histotextuality or "surplus meanings" is a covert correlation between a text and historical events or figures that have become a part of a group cultural frame of reference. Foreman explains that it is "a strategy marginalized writers use to incorporate historical allusions that both contextualize and radicalize their work by countering the putatively innocuous generic codes they seem to have endorsed" (330). While the story in *Iola* is written using the popular sentimental style of the nineteenth century, the cultural referents in the novel are the historical references that come from a decidedly African-American experience and

black historical-cultural context. The significance of the Civil War, the inclusion of characters modeled after important figures in black history such as W.E.B Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, and references to specific issues such as the surreptitious acquisition of education are significant identifiers for a black reading audience. While Harper appears to address one audience with her use of sentimentalism, her historically based rhetorical strategy is in fact a covert communication with another audience— itself a form of market speech.

In *Iola Leroy*'s black community, information is gathered and shared in ways that make use of alternative literacies. Information comes from newspapers, as well as through listening to conversations, or as Williams's terms it, "ease dropping." Body language and other everyday behaviors is also a part of information gathering that introduces another kind of literacy. For example, the light and happy demeanor of Bob and Tom in the passage cited above is a behavior that can be read as a text. It becomes an indication to those who can interpret it that the North is doing well in the war. Harper gives a very explicit demonstration of the literacy of reading behavior through the character Linda. After his encounter with Robert, Tom enters his home and begins to relate to Linda the news that he has learned that day. He tells her that the papers are full of news about the victories of the North, to which Linda replies:

Oh, sho, chile...I can't read de newspapers, but ole Missus' face is newspaper nuff for me. I looks at her ebery mornin' wen she comes inter dis kitchen. Ef her face is long an' she walks kine o' droopy den I thinks things is qwine wrong for dem. But ef she comes out yere looking might pleased, an' larffin all ober her face, an' steppin' so frisky, den I knows de Secesh is gittin' de bes ob de Yankees. (9-10)

Linda has devised a way to read and interpret the fortunes and misfortunes of war through the behaviors and moods of "ole Missus." In this situation, the behaviors and moods of the oppressing class provide just as much information as the newspapers. How very important this form of literacy must have been to slaves. With these different literacies in oral as well as written forms, all in the community possess the ability to effectively read and interpret important situations and events relevant to the survival of blacks.

These simple dialogues suggest much about the multiple literacy forms used in the conduct of everyday life in slave communities. Our first speaker Tom speaks in dialect, which Harper uses to represent that he cannot read or write. Robert, on the other hand, speaks Standard English, and Harper tells us that he has learned to read and write. Yet, these two speakers communicate in a third way that is accessible to both of them but not readily accessible to the slave-owning white population around them. Market speech, the coded language of resistance, is a valued language medium in this situation. It requires a different literacy developed by the community for the purpose of safely exchanging knowledge and giving meaning to events. One can imagine many instances where market speech or a subtext, oral reading, and relationships between the written

and spoken word were used to conduct the business of the slave community. The ability to participate in this covert communication system depended on knowledge that of necessity was transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Orality aided secrecy, which was especially important in regard to the resistance of slaves to their bondage.

Orality, existing as it did in the center of antebellum African-American life, occupied an essential space in the African-American intellectual tradition. Moreover, it maintained a vital connection between the African cultural past and the African-American cultural present. Orality represented an immediately accessible vehicle for African diasporic cultural survival in the Americas. In this context, it was perhaps initially more important than the textual communication forms that blacks would grow into.

Oral and Textual Literacy Continuum

This is not to deny the importance of textual literacy for the enslaved populations. However, traditional literacy scholarship fails to explore these two systems on a continuum and consequently obscures the significance of oral literacy practices. Oral communication forms had a utilitarian function that actually facilitated the acquisition of reading and writing literacy.⁴ The typical methods of teaching reading in antebellum America gave a great advantage to those with a high level of oral learning skills. To acquire this elementary level of literacy, one simply needed to hone the ability to “listen hard” and “remember well.” A more useful practice is exploring the continuum of oral and textual literacy during the period of American slavery. I begin with the assumption that the “state or quality of being literate” is determined to a large degree by societal context. The state or quality of being literate was different for blacks not only because of the oral influences in their culture. The condition of enslavement required mastering a variety of literacy forms that included reading and writing skills, and it necessitated alternative forms of communication based in oral traditions. Therefore, any accurate assessment of African-American intellectual development, especially during the slave era, must necessarily include literacy rooted in oral traditions as a learnable and viable structure.

It is helpful to remember that enslaved populations in the colonial and antebellum eras existed within a society that was itself embracing Enlightenment principles of rationality. African Americans were inspired by Enlightenment principles precisely because they included the ideals of freedom and equality for all human beings. In this context textual literacy held an ideological as well as a practical allure for black people. The second part deals with the importance of retention of oral traditions rooted in indigenous knowledge production methods that enabled cultural development and physical survival. In this context orality and textuality represents two different but equal ways of knowing. Blending these two systems establishes a continuum unique to African-American culture. Labeling African Americans as belonging to an illiterate race ignores the extensive and most often surreptitious reading instruction available to blacks that existed for the entire length of the chattel slavery era. Recent scholarship has

raised questions about the levels of textual illiteracy among enslaved black Americans during the colonial and antebellum eras.

For example, E. Jennifer Monaghan’s *Learning to Read and Write in Colonial America, Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book* includes an exploration of the multitude of individual and institutional avenues to reading and writing literacy available to African Americans in the colonial and the antebellum periods of American history. Janet Duitsman Cornelius’s *When I can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South*, suggests that more blacks than we have previously acknowledged did, in fact, acquire reading and writing skills. She questions the extent and effectiveness of anti-literacy laws in preventing African Americans from acquiring reading and writing skills. Heather Andrea Williams’ *Self-taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* examines the learning process of enslaved people and shows the use of oral literacy as a means of resistance. In the process, Williams illuminates the central role of orality in the life of the black populations and its importance in the acquisition of textual literacy.

Testimony taken from ex-slaves and slave narratives describe the ways in which oral processes aided in the acquisition of textual literacy among enslaved populations and suggests a much larger textually literate population than previously recognized. Because orality was an integral component of African-American culture, these processes were easily employed. Virginia-born ex-slave John Quincy Adams reported,

Whenever he heard a white person reading aloud, he lingered to listen... Then, at the first opportunity, he repeated to his parents everything he had heard. They, in turn, encouraged him to “try to hear all you can, but don’t let them know it. (Williams 9)

Most importantly, a spoken reading lesson could not be easily discovered by whites. Instruction that began by listening and remembering was continued by articulating and decoding what was remembered in the privacy of slave cabins.

In another example, “A woman in Beaufort, South Carolina, recalled that her mistress and master spelled out any information they did not want her to understand. As she was unable to read, she memorized the letters and repeated them as soon as she could to her literate uncle. He then decoded her memories into words or scraps of words (Williams 9).” Interestingly, Williams has found that, “more than one hundred years [after slavery], when slave cabins were excavated, archaeologists were surprised to find, along with predictable shards of colon ware pottery, food bones, and oyster shells, the remains of graphite pencils and writing slates, some with words and numbers still written on them (20-21).”

Basic literacy instruction can even be found in the games of enslaved children. In a 1989 article on the playing habits of slave children, David K. Wiggins describes children’s games that demonstrate how such a process might have gone. His information is taken from 1930s WPA interviews conducted with ex-slaves:

Through the playing of games, slave children were often able to learn simple skills of literacy. "I learned some of the ABC's in playing ball with the white children," remembered Mattie Fannen of Arkansas. Anna Parks, who lived on a large plantation in Georgia, remembered nothing about special games except "Old Hundred." "Us would choose one and that one would hide his face against a tree while he counted to a hundred. Then he would hunt for all the others. They would be hiding while he was counting. We learned to count playing Ole Hundred. (25)

While these examples show the use of memorization skills in obtaining information, they also illustrate the communal nature of the learning process. More importantly, they show how it was possible to safely pass these skills from one generation to the next through the conduct of everyday work and play.

The preceding examples illustrate the strong relationship between oral and written literacy in the everyday lives of enslaved people. They show a literacy continuum at work in which one form facilitated the other. As a community, blacks understood well the value of oral and written literacy as a survival skill, and as a community, they handed down the craft to younger generations using methods that were best suited to their acquisition. Blacks who learned to read taught other blacks. They read letters and newspapers to those who could not read themselves. In this sense, if one person on a plantation or in a town could read and write, oral practices gave the entire community access to written literacy. Consequently, rather than replacing other forms of literacy, written literacy complimented orality, and the two function together as a literacy continuum.

Exploring literacy on a continuum enables one to articulate a more complete picture of African-American intellectual life during the period of American slavery. Erasing the textual versus non-textual paradigm allows recognition of the unique intellectual processes located at the center of African-American life. It affords an opportunity to look under cover of the veil into the intellectual life and processes of enslaved populations, and it revalues those processes. Thus we are positioned to consider some of the long neglected processes of intellectual production and exchange of which McHenry speaks. While McHenry's argument relies on the position that the characterization of African-American culture as oral in nature has been emphasized too much, I think a reconsideration of oral practices examining them in relation to textual literacy could broaden our understanding of those processes.

Endnotes

1. This article became a chapter in McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* published in 2002.

2. The concept and practice of critical literacy grew out of the social justice pedagogy of Brazilian Marxist educator Paulo Freire.

3. For example, free public elementary education was available to all American children

by the end of the 19th century. The 1862 Morrill Act or the Land Grant College Act enabled the creation of colleges in the states.

4. According to Monaghan, for most people literacy was measured by the ability to read on elementary levels and to sign one's name. Formal schooling was not necessary. Typical instruction in reading followed the "'ordinary road,' a tiered process beginning with the alphabet, four lines of syllables, the invocation, and the Lord's Prayer and ending with the Bible. Reading texts was most often slow and deliberate, and was oral in nature with lessons taught by rote."

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To Learn About Science: Real Life Scientific Literacy Across Multicultural Communities

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Much of the current research on scientific literacy focuses on particular text genres read by students within the classroom context. We offer a cross-case analysis of literacy as social practice in multicultural communities around the world, through which we reveal that individuals with no formal education, as well as people with varied levels of schooling completed, customarily and actively engage in literacy events with the goal of learning about science as part of their everyday lives. We argue that these outcomes substantiate the notion that multiple ways of being scientifically literate actually exist and that scientific literacy in its most fundamental sense is crucial in science education, despite the fact that the most common definitions and notions of scientific literacy have predominantly considered its derived sense (Norris and Phillips 224).

Introduction

Many definitions and approaches to science or scientific literacy have been set forth by institutional authorities, educators, and researchers from varied fields of study, such as science education, disciplinary literacy, and social research on public engagement with science (AAAS; Hand et al.; Lemke). Different disciplinary takes on science education and literacy have yielded distinctive interpretations of terms, theoretical perspectives, lines and methods of research, as well as relatively independent bodies of knowledge around a common topic (Feinstein). The analysis we present here is theoretically framed by two converging fields of inquiry: science education and disciplinary literacy.

Science educators and science-education researchers rather indistinctly use the terms science literacy and scientific literacy as interchangeable. According to Roberts (732), the term *scientific literacy* predominates in the literature and is pervasively used in a number of countries. *Science literacy*, on the other hand, is particularly utilized by science educators in the United States as a result of its appearance in the official documents published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1990 and beyond (Roberts 732). For many researchers the discrepancy has no implications, although some consider that the terms differ in meaning. Considering that researchers in the literacy field have also consistently made use of the term