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Location, Location, Location: Remapping African American Print Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States

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LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: REMAPPING AFRICAN AMERICAN PRINT CULTURE IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY UNITED STATES

Quentin Story McAndrew

Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-Century African American Literature by Eric Gardner. Margaret Walker Alexander Series in African American Studies. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. pp. x, 258. $50.00 cloth.

Eric Gardner's fascinating *Unexpected Places* makes a convincing, recovery-based argument for reassessing the essential character and location of African American literary production in the nineteenth-century United States. Gardner's volume—which received the 2010 inaugural EBSCOhost/Research Society for American Periodicals Book Prize for the best scholarly monograph on American periodicals published in the past three years and an honorable mention for the Western Literature Association's Thomas J. Lyon Book Award for outstanding single-author scholarly book on the literature and culture of the American West—radically broadens a nineteenth-century African American literary canon dominated by slave narratives and an accompanying construction of black identity based upon the status of "slave" or "former slave." In the current canon, black voices of the 1800s sound largely along south-to-north pathways inscribed by the fugitive, in narratives preoccupied by oppression and escape that use sentimental devices to garner sympathy from a largely white, abolitionist audience. Gardner argues that these characteristics have become so expected that they limit scholars' ability to envision different possibilities for black textual expression. As he notes, "While there is no doubt of the slave narratives' importance and while early black novels are clearly crucial

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to thinking about both black literature and American literature generally, our near-obsession with specific kinds of narratives has drawn sharp and narrow boundaries around 'what counts' as and in black literature" (9). Gardner advocates a far-reaching expansion of those boundaries that enlarges traditional notions of black literary production. *Unexpected Places* reveals a far-flung network of African Americans who speak from the interior of that community back to it; who are concerned with black domesticity, mobility, and uplift; and who often seem surprisingly, even disconcertingly, silent about issues of race or white oppression.

Gardner places his work alongside what he terms "New Regionalists," scholars who are recovering and complicating localized black presences in the United States in efforts like B. Eugene McCarthy and Thomas L. Doughton's *From Bondage to Belonging: The Worcester Slave Narratives* (2007) or William Andrews's *North Carolina Roots of African American Literature: An Anthology* (2006). The self-designation is appropriate, given Gardner's book-long emphasis on the impact of (unexpected) localities on literary production, but his volume arguably does even more. The multilocal, multivocal, and multitemporal weaving of *Unexpected Places* exposes an intricate web of itinerancy and settlement, publication and circulation, that stretches across a continent and half a century (1830–80). The volume ultimately performs what might be called a trans-*intra*nationalism, recovering, reinterpreting, and redrawing our understanding of nineteenth-century African American literary exchange on a national scale. Gardner uncovers the contributions of seemingly marginalized voices that speak from inside the nation but outside the locations we've been taught to expect to find them. His analysis begins in St. Louis and ranges to the far west, well away from the traditional south-north trajectory and northeastern center of African American literary production that *Unexpected Places* so adroitly contests. Instead of escaping the brutal South for the civil North, Gardner's educated African Americans themselves become transmitters of civilization, carrying literacy and domesticity to the wild western frontier, to the South itself, or, in the case of one Peter K. Cole, across the Pacific. Moreover, the mobility explored in *Unexpected Places* is autonomous; in a volume occupied by free black itinerant preachers, tradespeople, lecturers, teachers, and writers, even slave Polly Wash (mother of the better-known Lucy Delaney) travels independently across state lines from slaveholding Missouri to free Illinois and back again in a quest to encourage testimony on her behalf in her ultimately successful freedom suit.

The effectiveness of *Unexpected Places* derives from its accretive force. To read this volume is to experience a continuous layering of newly recovered black biographies and texts that together communicate the expansive vitality of the nineteenth-century African American literary marketplace. That marketplace is, in large part, a location marked by optimism. No matter their individual subject matter, the texts in *Unexpected Places* share an underlying assumption that black uplift and a nationalized sense of African American community are ultimately achievable within the United States. As Gardner notes, "One of the 'places' that runs throughout the locations considered in this study is . . . the metaphorical black nation within a nation" (18), an imagined space populated by an autonomous, interconnected community of African Americans who create that community even as they write about it.

Two early entries indicate the larger extent of Gardner's project, which begins in antebellum St. Louis. The city is familiar as an ingress for westward settlement but also as a foreboding gateway for slaves moving into the darkest South; it's also grounded in the African American literary canon as the onetime home of former slave and abolitionist author William Wells Brown. From this accustomed place, the surprising voices of John Berry Meachum and Cyprian Clamorgan emerge. Meachum was born a slave but earned enough money to purchase his and his family's freedom—and to purchase twenty slaves of his own. His servants eventually bought their manumission, but only after Meachum presumably benefited from their bondage. In his *Address to All the Colored Citizens of the United States* (1846), Meachum calls for a national congress of black representatives, and implicitly counters the Liberian colonization movement by promoting the creation of a black national awareness within the boundaries of the United States. He also argues for unity and uplift among African Americans through individual moral reckoning and personal industry, but skirts issues of abolition and white racism.

While Meachum, who thought highly of his former master and complained of the "laziness" of free blacks, may be considered an anti–William Wells Brown, Cyprian Clamorgan is even more iconoclastic. In the preface to his 1858 *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis,* Clamorgan rails against the sentimental excesses of abolitionist literature and then provides a gossipy, tabloidlike catalog of the lives, sins, and monetary worth of the upper economic strata of the black population of the city. Clamorgan's documentation of an entire group of economically successful African Americans and his audience of both

black and white readers hints at the potential for upward mobility and celebrity for blacks even in the racially charged environment of antebellum St. Louis. The mixed-race Clamorgan was himself radically mobile; plying his trade as a barber along the Mississippi, he sometimes passed as white and sometimes didn't, shifting locations and identities as he moved between two families: a white wife and daughter in New Orleans, a black wife and two sons in St. Louis. Clamorgan and Meachum together hold out the possibility of independent and upward economic mobility for African Americans, and begin to indicate a diversity of nineteenth-century black authors who refuse to speak the discourse of slavery and victimization.

In *Unexpected Places,* Gardner establishes the black periodical as "*the* central publication outlet for many black writers—and especially for texts that were *not* slave narratives" (10). In retrospect, given the commonplace of periodical publication for authors in general during the period, this should come as no surprise; the fact that Gardner's rich sources are "unexpected" underscores how much interesting recovery work remains to be done. From the plays of William Gay Greenly to the twenty-installment *John Blye* (1878) by William Steward to Civil War exposés written from remote Morrowtown, Ohio, by Lizzie Hart, black authors found in black periodicals the best opportunity for publication.

African American newspapers like the *Philadelphia Recorder* and *San Francisco Elevator* were friendly collectors and distributors of content from marginal locations, providing regional and even national reach to sometimes remote, isolated individuals. Published pieces often related a traveler's perspective, enacting black mobility from within the margins of the page and carrying its possibilities and pitfalls to the African American nation at large. The *Recorder* printed the letters of Sallie Daffin, who traveled during the midst of the Civil War from north to south on an mission to educate newly freed slaves, and whose final letter counterintuitively urges northern blacks to settle in the South to help build a strong black community there. From 1867 to 1870, the *Elevator* published the letters of Peter K. Cole, a black expatriate in Japan who constitutes himself against an Asian other, claiming an identity that materializes as essentially American without regard to his race.

Similar examples are so numerous in *Unexpected Places* that upon reaching the book's conclusion it's difficult to view Gardner's recovered texts and locations as peripheral at all. Rather, they emerge as disparate but interwoven strands in a nation-spanning black community that claims its position not

as marginal to the United States, but as deeply central to it. Gardner's restoration of these voices demonstrates the assertive construction by African Americans of an African American literary market in the nineteenth century. This effort includes a dispersed, literate population of not only black writers and editors, but also black readers, who aren't explicitly considered in *Unexpected Places* but who nonetheless populate its pages as the active consumers of African American print culture. Educators like John Berry Meachum, who organized a school for blacks in St. Louis, and Sallie Daffin hold a doubly constructive role as they create both content and new consumers for the literary African American marketplace.

The power of mobility, settlement, and publication to effect an African American national community is the leitmotif of Gardner's book. As he explains,

> The African American writers I locate in unexpected places did not only "get there" by exercising mobility, but were continually concerned with the proper practices of mobility to ensure racial elevation, citizenship, and broader participation that would make their places seem more expected and more deeply tied to the rest of the black nation. (20)

At the same time, an unexpressed corollary emerges from *Unexpected Places:* the autonomous itinerancy that is so generative of African American print culture simultaneously threatens its longevity because the perpetuation of various periodicals is closely tied to specific individuals. The eventual demise of the *San Francisco Elevator* results from the collapse of Reconstruction but also from the itinerancy of its principal contributors, some of whom died, and many of whom left for the East. The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church's *Repository of Religion and Literature* fades without the guidance of its editor Elisha Weaver, who departs Indiana for a successful run at another A.M.E. Church publication, the *Recorder* in Philadelphia. The similar ends of the *Repository* and the *Elevator* perhaps demonstrate the inverse of Gardner's positive mobility: movement may both create and threaten black literary production. Still, like Elisha Weaver, who leaves the *Repository* to build the *Recorder* into one of the most important black periodicals in the nation, fundamentally itinerant content producers might exit one location only to arise in another, offering fresh perspectives and opportunities for the expression of black voices in print.

Tension between mobility and stability similarly reverberates through the cautionary epilogue to *Unexpected Places.* In closing,

Gardner warns against the danger of racially misidentifying recovered authors. He highlights the cases of the white Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, touted for years as a black author, and of the conflated personas of white Alabama poet Mary Eliza Tucker Lambert and black Detroit writer Millie E. Lambert, an error still replicated today. Gardner also resists the temptation to write about Hannah Crafts's manuscript in large part because her blackness cannot yet be positively confirmed. With such examples, Gardner demonstrates that mistaken identities may become solidified and resistant to correction. While such errors may be ultimately productive, as in the case of Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, whose precorrected black identity inspired the *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Woman Writers* (1988), the overwhelming loss of African American texts from the nineteenth century necessitates that scholars ensure that recovered works are actually written by the voices we seek to restore. Nonetheless, in a volume preoccupied with mobility, Gardner's legitimate call for the validation of authorial blackness can't help but evoke the contradictory transience of identity, and the difficulty of ever finally fixing the essential nature of a subject. As demonstrated by Cyprian Clamorgan, the itinerant barber who confounds racial boundaries as he travels deeper into the South to his white family from his northerly black St. Louis home, mobility and fluidity remain critical to any discussion of race or racialized categories of literary production. Ironically, it is Gardner's own precise locating of unexpected black texts and writers that powerfully demands we mobilize our own fixed notions to consider a more fluid definition of nineteenth-century African American literature.

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