One-hundred and thirty years ago, African American journalist Lucy Wilmot Smith wrote that “the Negro woman’s history is marvelously strange and pathetic. Unlike that of other races, her mental, moral, and physical status has not found a place in the archives of public libraries.”

Had Smith lived into the 20th century, she likely would have been disappointed to observe that American archives and libraries had shown continued reluctance to address her complaint. Until recently -- and, one could argue, even now -- our literary establishment, ranging from publishing houses to university departments, has been slow to recognize the significant contributions of African American authors, memoirists, and journalists to the American canon -- and even slower to acknowledge African American women writers in particular.

This omission is especially apparent in the canon of American pre-modernist literature -- that is, works written around or before Lucy Wilmot Smith’s time. We need look no further than recent anthologies to see that this is true. The Norton Anthology of American Literature, for example, considered by many to be the authoritative collection, features just five African American women in its selection of early American literature until 1865. Readers hoping to

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familiarize themselves with the literary classics of this time will encounter only Pauline
Elizabeth Hopkins, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and Frances Ellen
Watkins Harper. When we take into account the breadth of the Norton collection, which sprawls
across two volumes and over two-thousand pages, this representation seems limited indeed. In
Penguin’s Portable Series list, only Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* appears
among the pre-1900s texts. Lucy Wilmot Smith would shake her head.

In fact, Victoria Earle Matthews, a contemporary of Smith, did just that. In her essay
“The Value of Race Literature,” published in 1895, Matthews presents a damning critique of a
volume of American Literature edited by H.L. Stoddard at the time, citing only one female and
one male African American writer, Phillis Wheatley and George W. Williams, who made
Stoddard’s cut. “This does not show that we have done nothing in literature; far from it,”
Matthews writes. “…[I]t is a fact that thoughtful, scholarly white people do not look for literature
in its highest sense, from us any more than they look for high scholarship, profound and critical
learning on any one point, nor for any eminent judicial acumen or profound insight into causes
and effects.”² The problem of African American visibility -- or, rather, the lack thereof -- in the
literary canon has been present for quite some time.

The question of representation is not simply a matter of checking boxes to cover
particular identities and demographics. Visibility matters. A lack of visibility means that readers
of American literature will in turn lack knowledge of African American history. They will fail to
develop a familiarity with the African American experience. Matthews understood this. She
argued that the lives of African Americans were markedly different from those of other races in

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the United States, which made African American literature necessary in order for their experiences to be widely understood. Further, she argued, American literature written by whites needed a correction: white authors were frequently guilty of perpetuating racist tropes and other harmful depictions of black Americans -- a problem that could be best addressed by works written by and for black people themselves.\textsuperscript{3}

There is yet another argument to be made for adequate representation in the canon, one that African American scholar Anna Julia Cooper presented back in 1894. African American literature could serve not just to educate whites about a race of people unknown to them but, arguably more important, could also allow black Americans to study their own folklore and history. “The American Negro cannot produce an original utterance until he realizes the sanctity of his homely inheritance,”\textsuperscript{4} she wrote. Black literature is a way for African Americans to know themselves and, significantly, to see themselves as American.

In many ways, canon formation is an act of nation formation. Anthologies like Stoddard’s or the Norton collection or the Penguin series indicate who gets to see themselves represented, which points to who gets to claim themselves as American. When African American literature is rendered invisible in these collections, the implication is that African American history is less central to the history of our nation than the experience of white Americans.

In an effort to remedy this omission, two volumes of 19th-century African American women’s writing have recently arrived: ‘We Must Be Up and Doing’: A Reader in Early African American Feminisms, edited by Teresa C. Zackodnik, in 2010; and The Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers, edited by Hollis Robbins and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 2010.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 510.  
Louis Gates, Jr., as part of the Penguin African American Classics series, in 2017. Each of these editors is highly conscious of the pattern of poor representation of African American women in the canon and is explicit about their commitment to rectifying this problem. In his introduction to the series, for example, Gates presents the struggle that texts by people of color and women have undergone to “gain a solid foothold.” This challenge notwithstanding, he reminds us that black American writers have wielded literature as a weapon in the fight against racism and as a tool to advocate for fair and proper rights since the 18th century. It is only appropriate that publishing houses, libraries, and university departments now recognize these significant contributions to the history of American literature.

*The Portable Nineteenth-Century African American Women Writers* is an impressive anthology that does just that. The vast range of included works points to a formidable set of accomplishments, both from the black female writers whose works are seen therein, and from the editors and scholars who went to great lengths to recover and incorporate such works. As the volume’s introductory notes acknowledge, a significant number of these texts have only recently been rediscovered -- a fact that points to the ever-evolving state of public history and literature. Among these works, a volume of poetry by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was thought lost until as late as 2015, when a copy was newly found in Baltimore, and Sarah Farro’s novel *True Love* was only recently rediscovered by scholar Gretchen Gerzina.

The anthology includes 52 writers who, as the editors describe, saw themselves at the time as members of “a nation within a nation within a nation.” Many of the included authors --

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6 Ibid., xvi.

7 Ibid., xxiv.
and their works -- represent important firsts in American history and literature. Crack open the volume and you can find selections from the first black woman to lecture publicly about slavery in the United States (Maria W. Stewart), the first women to be ordained as a deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (Julia A. J. Foote), one of the first black women in the United States to earn a doctoral degree (Anna Julia Cooper), and the first president of the National Association of Colored Women (Mary Church Terrell). You can read the fiery articles of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who refused to give up her train seat to a white man a full seventy years before Rosa Parks’ famous act of civil disobedience, and who later came to be known among her peers as the “Princess of the Press.” You can read the first slave narrative written by a woman, Mary Prince, or selections from the first novel published by an African American in North America, *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson, a semi-autobiographical account of her experience as an indentured servant in New Hampshire.

Indeed, it is particularly noteworthy that the collection is not limited to essays or articles alone. The editors have gone to great lengths to include a diversity of forms, styles, and modes of address. The included texts encompass novels, newspaper columns, speeches, plays, poems, letters, diaries, scrapbooks, and cook books. Flip through the volume and you can find memoirs from itinerant preachers or a personal account of the famous traveling Fisk Jubilee Singers. You can read a journalistic report about the American prison system, including statistics, legal records, and data. You can encounter poems depicting the cruelties of slavery, but also homages to Shakespeare, Queen Victoria, and Marie Curie. You can find college commencement addresses. You can find excoriating critiques of white writers who depicted African Americans in a negative light. You can find an excerpt from a musical drama, a selection from a love story,
and a gothic mystery. And should you wish to learn how to make oyster gumbo soup in the southern cooking style, you can find that here too.

Together these selections depict lives in transition throughout the century: under and out of slavery, during the Civil War, and in the upheaval of the post-war years. Through the range of this collection, we see that these women had no shortage of topics to write about: their own personal experiences, the political realities of the time, religion, marriage, child rearing, education, work, finance, temperance, poetry, literature, the press and the media, the judicial system, discrimination and equality -- to name just a few such topics. The editors’ efforts have been rewarded: taken together, the selections provide the reader with both breadth and depth. They offer a window into the diversity of the lived experiences of African American women in the nineteenth-century that less tenacious editors might have skated over.

And their lives and opinions were certainly diverse. The collection will rapidly disabuse any reader of the assumption that there was a singular experience of African American women at the time. The anthology not only points to a range of styles, but also to a range of demographic backgrounds. The collection includes the voices of former slaves, including Victoria Earle Matthews, Sojourner Truth, Mary Prince, Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, and more, who depict the brutality of their recent pasts as enslaved women. But the book also features the work of women who were born or married into well-off families, especially in the North: Charlotte Forten Grimké, for example, or Sarah Mapps Douglass, among many others. Abby Fisher, the expert chef responsible for the aforementioned gumbo, did not know how to write and thus had to rely upon the generosity of literate white people in her surroundings to help record her recipes;
whereas Sarah Parker Remond, a prominent lecturer with global reach, was born into a house of privilege, where she learned to read and write from an early age.

In another significant effort to represent the vast diversity of African American women’s experience in the 19th century, the editors have also gone to lengths to include works emerging from a range of geographic locations. The slave narrative of Mrs. John Little (whose first name is unknown), written on her behalf by a white male journalist and abolitionist from Boston, depicts her escape from slavery, her flight north, her passage into Canada, and her new life there. Read alongside the other slave narratives in the collection, her biography offers a comparison between the lived experiences of former slaves in Canada versus the American North. Similarly, the published letters of Jennie Carter, written from California in 1868, illuminate the life of a black woman in the American West and remind the reader that black Americans have lived all across this continent for as long as they have been here.

Diversity of content, style, and demographics notwithstanding, the most noteworthy difference among the texts, at least for this reader, was the huge range of emotion, tone, and attitude represented among the voices, especially in pieces addressing politics, justice, and discrimination against African Americans. The texts are optimistic and angry, pleading and indicting, sarcastic, ironic, hopeful, and full of faith. At various moments educator and public lecturer Maria W. Stewart is angry; scholar Josephine J. Turpin Washington is rageful; former slave Mrs. John Little is sarcastic; and activist Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin is ironic. But minister Julia A. J. Foote is full of optimism; professor Sarah J. Early sees hope for the future; and organizer Mary Church Terrell believes African American women are fully on the path to equality and progress. Others among these writers fall somewhere in between: activist Fannie
Barrier Williams writes that “sullenness of disposition, hatefullness, and revenge against the master class because of two centuries of ill-treatment are not in the nature of our women” and “the hearts of Afro-American women are too warm and too large for race hatred.” But, at the same time, she offers this rhetorical question, which smacks of a sense of disillusionment with the status quo: “are we not justified in a feeling of desperation against that peculiar form of Americanism that shows respect for our women as servants and contempt for them when they become women of culture?”

In a similar vein, these writings represent a range of opinions on the question of where to place the responsibility for the plight of African Americans. Some point to the institution of slavery, politicians, the legal system, or whites in general. Others shift the attention to African Americans themselves, calling upon the members of their race to elevate themselves. “I don’t believe in world-saving,” writes teacher Edmonia Goodelle Highgate in 1866, “but I do in self-making.” She goes on to encourage her fellow black Americans to “aspire to leave something immortal behind you...Up! Work, make something out of yourself, even if it is like getting blood from a turnip. Try!”

If this debate between personal responsibility and structural racism resonates for you with conversations that are happening today, believe that the parallel to contemporary political issues does not end there. Throughout the volume, the writers speak to the pressing issues of their times -- many of which also happen to be the pressing issues of our own. In Mrs. John Little’s account

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9 Ibid., 402.
of separation from her parents by slave masters, informed readers will be reminded of the family separations currently taking place among immigrant families along the Mexican-American border. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin’s call for equal educational opportunities for black children recalls the articles of contemporary journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones on racial segregation in our 21st-century school systems or the recent controversy over the diminishing numbers of black students in New York City’s specialized public schools. Julia A. J. Foote’s desperate plea to eradicate the death penalty could just as well have been written today, as could Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s scorching indictment of the use of solitary confinement and exploitative prison labor, or Mary Church Terrell’s damning critique of the mass incarceration of black Americans. And Jennie Carter’s criticism of politicians who lamented the “good old days of slavery,” written in 1868, may remind readers of the 56% of whites who, in 2016, said that they longed to return to the America of the 1950s -- a decade, it should go without saying, when Jim Crow segregation was still fully underway.¹¹

The similarities across the centuries run not only in texts about public issues, but in the writers’ personal accounts as well. In her report of her time touring across Europe as a member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Ella Sheppard describes a German countess’s surprise that Sheppard spoke English and dressed like a Westerner rather than an African tribes woman -- a moment that will ring familiar to many readers who have experienced comparable microaggressions in our own time.¹² And long before Betty Friedan wrote The Feminine Mystique or Sheryl Sandberg wrote Lean In, we can read here Alice Ruth Moore’s take on the challenges women faced in


balancing professional and domestic obligations. Back in 1895, Moore already had strong opinions about whether women could “have it all” -- the short answer, she thought, was no.

While there is plenty in the Penguin collection to introduce new readers to the feminist leanings of African American activists and writers like Moore, those looking for greater depth and nuance of early African American feminist thought should turn to ‘We Must Be Up and Doing,’ Teresa C. Zackodnik’s 2010 collection. Indeed, the editors of the Penguin anthology are explicit about the similarities and differences between the collections, noting that Zackodnik’s anthology focuses on black women’s social and political life, whereas theirs offers more depth of personal and creative writing.13

It is particularly interesting to compare the overlaps and omissions between the volumes. Considered together, the selections that appear in each could offer readers one take on what might be considered essential reading to understand 19th-century African American women’s literature. For example, both volumes include not just one but two versions of Sojourner Truth’s 1851 “Speech Delivered to Women’s Rights Convention in Akron Ohio.” Both include a selection from Jarena Lee’s memoir Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel and Zilpha Elaw’s Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour. Both contain Sarah Forten Purvis’ 1831 critique of slavery “The Abuse of Liberty” and Lucy Craft Laney’s “The Burden of the Educated Colored Woman.”

But the differences between the collections are more numerous than the similarities, which speaks to the vast production of black female writers in the 19th century. Though many of

the same authors appear in each volume, the editors have mostly chosen very different selections from each. Whereas in the Penguin anthology an interested reader can review Maria W. Stewart’s speech on the perils of slavery, in which she declares that her soul is on fire “with a holy indignation,” in ‘We Must Be Up and Doing’ readers will find her expressing optimism and encouragement at the moral progress of her race. Differences like this abound. The editors of each collection have chosen to include speeches by Sarah Parker Remond, but the Portable edition highlights her address “The Negroes in the United States of America,” which urges British citizens to support abolitionist causes in the United States. In contrast, Zackodnik has selected Remond’s “Three Lectures” on slavery itself. And while both collections include Fannie Barrier Williams’ 1894 review essay “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation,” Zackodnik has also chosen to highlight her later analysis of modern educational systems in her 1904 essay “Industrial Education -- Will it Solve the Negro Problem,” as well as her anthropological account, “Social Bonds in the ‘Black Belt’ of Chicago,” from 1905.

Perhaps the most noticeable difference among the selections is the work included (or excluded) by famed public lecturer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Other than one Harper speech, “Enlightened Motherhood: An Address Before the Brooklyn Literary Society,” Penguin editors Robbins and Gates have chosen to include a wide array of Harper’s poetry, whereas Zackodnik’s volume features six different lectures by Harper, making her one of the most frequently appearing writers in the anthology. While it is delightful to read Harper’s poetry in the


15 Stewart, Maria W. "Cause for Encouragement." ‘We Must Be Up and Doing’: A Reader in Early African American Feminisms, edited by Teresa C. Zackodnik, 6.
Portable collection, the limited view of her speeches is a lamentable omission on the part of its editors.

A further comparison of these anthologies also points to what such a collection can do and how it can organize the reading and learning experience of its audience. Zackodnik, for example, has entire chapters on feminist black nationalism and lynching -- two topics that are nearly unrepresented in the Penguin anthology. (There are just two pieces on lynching in the Penguin collection, both written by Ida B. Wells-Barnett, in 1893 and 1913, respectively.) Zackodnik also includes a few selections by white women writers when she has deemed it informative to do so -- a choice that may seem controversial for a volume intended to prop up the voices of African American women, but that in fact serves to deepen a reader’s understanding of the political and literary contexts of the time. For example, Sojourner Truth’s speech to the Women’s Rights Convention is followed in the volume by accounts from Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances. D Gage (both white women). Stowe and Gage describe their accounts of witnessing Sojourner Truth speak, offering readers a window into the experience of being an audience member at a Sojourner Truth lecture.

In general, Zackodnik’s volume provides a more detailed level of analysis and historical context about the particularities of African American women’s political thought and movement at the time. Readers seeking to understand the various political groups and social clubs that formed in the late 19th century (the American Equal Rights Association, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the American Woman Suffrage Association, and the National Woman Suffrage Association, to name a few), as well as the fractures and mergers between these groups, could effectively turn to this collection for first-hand accounts of such movements; whereas
those looking for greater breadth of content, form, and style should turn to the *Portable* Penguin collection.

What each volume shares in common are the many texts that justify the existence of these very anthologies. As early as the 19th century, African American women were writing persuasive accounts about the importance of their own representation in American literature. They understood the liberatory potential of reading and writing. Each volume features essays that demand that black Americans and women of all walks of life take up their pens, record their observations, and educate each other about the realities of their lives. Together they depict a cadre of African American women who were ready and eager to read, write, and publish their own and each other’s words. “The written voice predominates,” activist Mary V. Cook wrote in 1887. “Since this is true, let the women see that the best and purest literature comes from them. Let them feel that they are called upon to consecrate all to truth and piety.”

These collections make an effort to see that the best and purest literature comes from African American women, especially by featuring the works of many writers whom readers will surely encounter here for the first time. They also deliberately acknowledge the many African American writers whose works have most certainly been lost, whose names will never be known, and whose voices will go unrecorded in American history and literature. To this end, both volumes include the 1832 speech “Address to the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, on Their First Anniversary: By a Member,” attributed to ‘Anonymous.’ There is a bittersweetness in the anonymity of that particular lecturer’s name, which recalls Virginia Woolf’s frequently quoted maxim, “For most of history, Anonymous was a woman.”

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But there is an irony to these volumes, as well. The essayists they include advocated not just for the opportunity to write and be read, but also for the chance to publish and edit. In her same essay, Cook goes on to encourage women to take on the role of editor: “She can thunder from the editor’s chair and make the people hear.”\(^\text{17}\) So what are we to make of the fact that the Penguin anthology is edited by a black American man and a white American woman, and ‘We Must Be Up and Doing’ is edited by a white Australian woman? We might hope that future volumes such as these take into consideration their African American women writers’ call for a literature that is written but also edited by them and for them.

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 472.