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Charting Streams of Literacy and Rhetorical Bridges in Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream*

Royster, Jacqueline Jones. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*. (Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture). Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2000. 352. Illustrations. 45.00 cloth. 19.95 paper.

Roxanne Harde, Queen's University

In *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*, Jacqueline Jones Royster discusses the acquisition of literacy as a dynamic moment in the lives of African American women. She develops a theoretical framework through which she considers how these women incorporate literacy, and how they use it as tool to express self and society and to criticize and transform that society. Royster begins with the assertion that the "presence of African American women as writers of worth has typically been neutralized and their achievements devalued" (4), then charts the course of literacy in these women's lives, while focusing on the essay as a specific literate practice chosen by African-American women as an instrument of social criticism and change. While Royster notes that many of these women write in and across genres, she sees the essays of African American women as providing a unique opportunity to analyze their rhetoric.

Like feminist scholars before her, Royster calls for other ways of reading, asking that readers delay their desires for claims and assertions to be resolved quickly and predictably, that they work more actively "to see how the evidence variously connects as the story unravels, viewpoint by viewpoint" (12). She makes clear that she does not see African American women as monolithic in either personhood or writing practices and she works throughout the book to avoid essentializing or generalizing about the women or literature under discussion. Furthermore, she holds her analysis to her particulars, that is, close reading of the essays written by these women as

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individual texts and writers, and does not make comparison part of her methodology. At the same time, Royster's analysis of their literary productivity discloses patterns of rhetoric in their habitual and vibrant focus on sociopolitical issues, on the experience of African American people, and more specifically on the viewpoints of African American women.

Given that Royster's scholarship centers on literacy and rhetoric and the ways in which African American women revise the world through the ideologies that function in their writing practices, her layout is webbed rather than chronological, her view rhetorical, historical, and ideological as she examines African American women's literacy and education. This webbed patterning, while effective for the content, may be the cause of the one stylistic aspect I find troubling: Royster's habit of mixing metaphors in her leitmotifs. She often leaves the reader unsure if they are looking at streams and rivers, other landscapes, or through some mix of lenses. Aside from these figurative distractions, each of her three sections discusses clearly how literacy happens, and focuses on a particular essayist and on pertinent interpretive frameworks. She supports her research with an extensive bibliography—although I find its eight divisions unwieldy—and a “Photographic Essay” that assists her textured reading of African American women's literacy practices and the agendas they embed in their rhetoric.

In the two chapters of her first section, “A Rhetorical View,” Royster examines Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* as a connection between language and action, then develops an analytical framework. From her reading of Walker's rhetorical maneuvers and her use of the essay as literary practice of choice for sociopolitical action, Royster builds a model that clarifies literacy as sociocognitive practice, distinguishes the sense-making strategies of African American women, and establishes the roles and functions of essay writing as “particular to a systematic making of meaning in the habitual use of language for sociopolitical action” (10). In using rhetorical analysis to pay attention to the form and the performance of it by African American women, she centralizes basic rhetorical questions concerning voice, vision, agency, and audience, but does not polarize her analytical frame in binary or exclusive terms. Through effectively conjoining the values by which Walker defines her task with general conclusions about the specific and deliberate intentions African American women bring to their essay writing, Royster develops a means to examine how material conditions of life and work shape and inform their rhetoric, although their writing practices may vary in style and content.

Royster goes on to provide a model of literacy as sociopolitical action that takes into account the three features of literate acts: the context for literacy production, ethos formation, and rhetorical action. She combines thoroughgoing scholarship and intensely holistic thinking throughout her book, an approach clearly manifested in her discussion of African American women's literate practices flowing from the oral practices of African and early African American culture. She argues that writers who have internalized values from a cultural system that holds oral practices in high esteem are likely to carry those values into literate practices and to blur the lines between orality and literacy in protean genres, such as the essay. She thus makes clear that women from Maria W. Stewart to June Jordan are not simply appropriating a form designed for others, but also that their uses of the essay are active and enabling, for the writers and for their readers as they respond to their sociopolitical reality and write their world anew. While Royster's continued connection between rhetorical finesse and basic literacy might seem incongruous at first, I find convincing her use of the quest for empowerment and social activism as a connector between acquisition of literacy among African American women and the rhetorical strategies they develop as

essayists.

In her second section, "A Historical View," Royster discusses the acquisition of literacy and development of rhetorical sensibilities by African American women, from their first generations through the nineteenth century. She reconstructs the history of their literacy, outlines the matrix of events, values and practices drawn from historical accounts of African American women's experiences, then connects this matrix to the literate practices of these women, in the particular light of their formation and development of writing selves. Royster's historical view begins with the influences on women's lives in Africa, and she acknowledges the dominance of Euro-Western and male biases in the majority of historical interpretations and focuses on current scholarship that reconstructs African American women's history on the basis of a collective body of lived experiences. From her wide readings in African history, philosophy, and theology, Royster relates the African ethos to similar patterns in the rhetoric of African American women essayists. In particular, Royster makes clear the link between the African privileging of the tribe to the sense of community set as a striking feature of essayists from Ida B. Wells to Audre Lorde.

In her own rhetoric, Royster's scholarly voice is both intimate and distanced. In the case of the former, she makes clear that she has no interest in being a dispassionate observer, that she allies herself in community with African American rhetoricians: "We demonstrate our abilities to operate not just as speaking subjects within community but as intellectual beings, capable of learning and capable of exercising the knowledge we have acquired" (51). In the case of the latter, she relies more on figures of thought than those of speech. For example, while describing the transmission of African culture, she spends a paragraph making clear that as we reconstruct and thereby "re-imagine" the lives of precolonial African women and colonial African American women, we rely on a "culturally imprinted voice," by which she recognizes culturally embedded practices flowing from generation to generation. However, Royster closes the paragraph with the speculation that knowledge and understanding of one's culture "might become coded into the bloodlines" (88). Having been started on this imaginative line of thought by Alice Walker's claim of being inspired to write *The Color Purple* by ancestral voices, Royster returns to Walker to indicate the connection may be spiritual, rather than natural. Having ensured her reader's complete attention, Royster states her hypothesis that across time and space, African American women have been helped to understand, "whether by intuition or instinct, through the spirit or by storytelling, or by some other process," who they are, and how to see the world and themselves in it (89). Her rhetoric thus combines thorough and inventive scholarship with intuitive and imaginative understanding.

Royster then combines readings of the early quest for literacy as a quest for autonomy, agency, and the tools for social change with historical readings of how the sociopolitical climate of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries determined literacy acquisition and language use. In specific looks at Lucy Terry Prince, Charlotte Forten, Clara Howard, and Selena Sloan Butler, Royster addresses the rise of the essay written by African American women through the nineteenth century, and contextualizes these women and their work within the broader American political scene. As she examines higher education and African American women through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, Royster delineates how educational opportunities extended their development of a rhetorical expertise that carried the primary task of reforming their society. She tells the Oberlin story, the rise of the Black Clubwomen's Movement, and the place of women in the African American periodical press as markers of the shift in educational opportunity. Royster continually draws on her theoretical framework to focus closely on the essay as the form by which women such as Anna Julia Cooper, Lucy Stanton, and Mary Jane Patterson establish and implement social and political agenda, and to offer evidence of their rhetorical prowess, intellectualism and community leadership. Her discussion of the club women harkens back to

her historical reading of African women in community ensuring that the generations following would share the same impetus to support one another, and her look at their support for Ida B. Wells is particularly compelling. Royster's own recovery work of Wells serves as an example of the continuum of rhetorical effort among African American women. She condenses the historical context of these women into one flowing stream as she argues that these writers use, and have used, language in strategic ways to disrupt sociocultural expectations and to defy dominant discourses, that they create, and have created, a space for their voices where no space had existed. With *Traces of a Stream*, Royster takes her place among these "talented users of language who have demonstrated expertise across multiple measures of performance and achievement" (77).

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Ida Wells-Barnett (1862-1931)
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**Review of "We are Coming": The Persuasive Discourse
of
Nineteenth-Century Black Women
by Shirley Wilson Logan**

Logan, Shirley Wilson. *"We are Coming": The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. 225. Illustrations. 44.95 cloth. 19.95 paper.

Doreen Piano

"We Are Coming" is a welcome and necessary contribution to understanding the depth and range of persuasive strategies used by nineteenth-century African-American women rhetors in their speeches to both black and white audiences. In exploring accounts of their public discourse, Logan meticulously pieces together archival sources such as women's magazines, essays, speeches, personal correspondence, news articles, and editorials to create a more comprehensive account of the political and cultural issues at stake for African Americans. Applying rhetorical concepts such as Burke's "identification," Carolyn Miller's expanded definition of Bitzer's "rhetorical situation," and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's "presence," Logan deftly analyzes how nineteenth-century African-American women rhetors were able to "work" their audiences in complex and subtle ways.

As in her last book, *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African-American Women*, Logan structures *"We Are Coming"* around key speakers and writers as a method of establishing a particular historical setting and political climate in which their public discourses were constructed, presented, and received. However, whereas *With Pen and Voice* presents an historical survey of African-American women's speeches and writings of the nineteenth century, *"We Are Coming"* concentrates on how specific rhetors exemplified a particular type of oratory. Thus, what makes *"We Are Coming"* especially relevant to rhetoricians is its in-depth rhetorical analysis of key issues relevant to the African-American community: the abolition of slavery, women's rights, the anti-lynching campaign, and racial uplift.

Each chapter illustrates how rhetorical strategies deployed by African-American women rhetors were situated within specific historical moments. For example, although many post-Civil War speakers addressed the rise of mob violence against African Americans in the South, it was Ida B. Wells who campaigned most persistently and passionately for the passing of anti-lynching laws during three decades in U.S. history (1890-1920) when more people were lynched than were legally executed (Logan 70). In analyzing Wells' use of figures of speech such as amplification and repetition, Logan applies Olbrechts-Tyteca's and Perelman's concept of "presence" to show how Wells graphically illustrated the horror and degradation of lynching to "audiences geographically and emotionally removed from the circumstances to which they were asked to respond" (Logan 74).

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**Conference
Reminder:**

**Rhetoric Society
of America**

May 23-26, 2002

**Rhetorical
Democracy:
Discursive
Practices
of Civic
Engagement**

**Las Vegas,
Nevada**

**Proposal
Deadline:
9/7/01**

The editors invite readers to submit book reviews for possible publication in Peitho. The reviews should consider books published by, about, or for women in rhetoric and composition. Please limit reviews to 750-1000 words. Reviews must also conform to the MLA Guidelines for non-sexist language.

Forward reviews or inquiries to Susan Jarratt at the Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of California, Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697. You may also e-mail submissions to sjarratt@uci.edu.

Even more important to Wells was the need to prove that the crimes supposedly committed by those lynched, primarily the rape of white women, never occurred. By revealing proof of white women's complicity in interracial sexual relations as reported in southern newspapers, Wells deconstructed the predominant myth of black men preying on innocent white women which justified the violence against them. In this way, Wells could make her main point: that mob violence was an attempt to limit and control the progress of African Americans. Moreover, Wells' reliance on already-written newspaper accounts of lynchings provided her with another powerful rhetorical tool. As Logan claims, "The mouths of the murderers were the mouths of the press, a press that all too often[...]engaged in the 'inflammatory work' of suggesting or predicting appropriate punishment for the accused" (91). Using these accounts created a sense of objectivity and kept Wells' own emotions at bay, thus averting any possible criticisms of her speaking in an overwrought (in other words, "womanly") fashion that may have weakened her hard-hitting message.

In nearly every chapter, Logan points to the formidable conditions that African-American women faced when speaking to predominantly white audiences. Often just their positionality as black women engendered rhetorical constraints. In adapting Wells' technique, Logan uses nineteenth-century newspaper accounts written by white women to show how their own comments were racially inflected. As Logan comments in her introductory chapter, "The general response of white audiences to the very presence of intelligent, articulate black women was often much stronger than their response to anything the women had to say. These speakers were the embodiment of their message[...]" (22).

Yet despite the racial discriminations that existed, some African-American rhetors felt it necessary to reach white audiences to make clear that while African-American women's concerns were often similar to their white sisters', they also were quite different. Frances Harper, a public speaker from the mid-1800s to the early twentieth century, deftly negotiated this discursive balancing act through her use of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's concept of "association" and "disassociation." In this way, Harper underscored common points of unity with the white women she addressed, most often using Christianity as a shared principle, at the same time that she distanced herself by underscoring her experiences. This shifting of allegiances from gender to race made clear to white audiences that her affinities ultimately positioned her as championing race over women's rights.

The most haunting subtext that threads through Logan's book is the exclusion of African-American rhetors from the public sphere. Thus, the creation of "black counter-publics" such as black women's clubs and the Baptist church provided spaces where rhetoric held the most potential for social change. For example, in analyzing Victoria Earle Matthews' speech "The Value of Race Literature" at the 1895 Boston Conference of Colored Women, Logan employs Carolyn Miller's modification of Bitzer's "rhetorical situation" to illustrate how Matthews' focus on the importance of black literary production was a "fitting response" to an open letter written by the President of the Missouri Press Association that maligned black women as being "wholly devoid of morality [...]prostitutes, thieves, and liars" (Logan 132). Rather than respond directly to the letter, Matthews used epideictic, deliberative, and forensic rhetoric to convey a multivalenced response that countered

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deliberative, and forensic rhetoric to convey a multivalenced response that countered racist representations as found in white literary texts, presented a history of literary contributions by African Americans, and most importantly encouraged the women gathered to produce, and influence others to produce, a body of African-American literature.

In many respects, "We are Coming" answers Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams' call in their essay "History in the Spaces Left: African American Presence and Narratives of Composition Studies," to recover the histories of voices left out or suppressed by primacy narratives. It contributes to our understanding of the intersecting and overlapping discourses of abolition, women's rights, mob violence, and racial equality that pervaded nineteenth-century America by focusing on African-American women's powerful presence in these discursive sites. Logan's detailed analysis of how style, content, and context are deeply intertwined in public discourse confirms how rhetorical action is produced and sustained through complex negotiations of one's subject positions in a variety of cultural arenas.



Victoria Earle Matthews. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundation.

**The 3rd Biennial International
Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference**

**will be held at Millikin University
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