Introduction

Essays Beyond the Nation

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In 1973 an editorial team at Yale University published American Literature: The Makers and the Making, the most influential American literary anthology of the decade. This two-volume work both exemplified the state of the field and set the direction of Americanist literary criticism for the next ten to fifteen years. As framed by the editors, Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, the selections in the first volume charted a tripartite literary development beginning with the Puritans' "Pre-National Literature (1620–1743)," proceeding to the revolutionaries' "Emergent National Literature (1743–1826)," and culminating with the triumphal achievement of "A National Literature and Romantic Individualism (1826–1861)." For those authors and texts that didn't quite fit their nation-based teleological schema, Brooks et al. created an oxymoronic subcategory, "Literature of the Nonliterary World," where supposedly nonliterary and non-national African American and Native American writers were collected. Race therefore emerged as an ancillary but not irrelevant excess within an anthology that sought to present seamless connections among race, nation, and literature. Native American writers, for example, complicated the various ideas of the national espoused by the Puritans and American Revo.utionaries, while Frederick Douglass's position within the anthology as a figure of the "nonliterary world" signaled the extent to which the literary itself lay uneasily within the editors' national frame.

But perhaps the editors were simply prescient in relegating Douglass to their non-national grouping, for their selected text, an excerpt from My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), was published only a few years before Douglass began to express an interest in emigrating to Haiti. Though he never did emigrate, he retained his fascination, traveled to Hispaniola in 1871 to ask inhabitants what they thought about becoming a black state in a hypothetical American Union, and served as U.S. minister and consul general to Haiti from 1889 to 1891. He was so admired by Haitian leaders that they chose him as their...
official representative to the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Outraged and alienated by the upsurge of whites’ antiblack racism during the 1880s and early 1890s, Douglass in his capacity as Haiti’s representative celebrated the Haitian revolution as “one of the most wonderful events in the history of this eventful century, and ... in the history of mankind,” and extolled Haiti as “the only self-made Black Republic in the world.” His critique of U.S. racism from within the space of the Haitian pavilion suggests that Douglass’s position in U.S. history cannot be separated from his position in Haitian history—that his relatively recent relocation from the margins to the center of American literature anthologies should necessitate a rethinking of both the national and the literary.

Though it is easy to critique older anthologies that so blatantly uphold traditional notions of nation-based literary history, subsequent revisionary scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s has nonetheless tended to argue that marginalized texts by minority authors like Frederick Douglass should be central to the American canon without addressing the larger question of what constitutes “America.” In other words, much current scholarship now features hitherto forgotten or marginalized writers but continues to take the nation as the key organizing unit for literary and cultural studies. Douglass’s engagement with Haiti over a nearly forty-year period, however, suggests the larger hemispheric framework in which one of the U.S. nation’s most canonical figures worked and the importance of this framework to the various literary and cultural traditions to which he has subsequently become essential. Douglass was hardly alone among key U.S. literary and cultural figures for his keen interest in the interconnections among nations, peoples, institutions, and intellectual and political movements in the larger context of the American hemisphere. His very interest in those interconnections, as disruptive as such thinking may have been to his U.S. nationalism, helped him to see the nation’s potential and limitations within a fuller history of race in the Americas. For Douglass, to move beyond the nation was not to abandon it but instead, through an engagement with overlapping histories and geographies, to better understand it. At the Columbian Exposition, Douglass holds up a Haitian black republican mirror to Chicago’s White City of 1893 in order to represent the larger inconsistencies underpinning late nineteenth-century U.S. racialized nationalism.

*Hemispheric American Studies* takes a similarly strategic comparativist approach to consider the overarching shape and texture of American literary and cultural history. The collection as a whole focuses on the complex ruptures that remain within but nonetheless constitute the national frame, while at the same time moving beyond the national frame to consider regions, arcs, and diasporic affiliations that exist apart from or in conflicted relation to the nation. Our collection thus seeks to disrupt the temporal sequence of what Eddie Glaude has termed “nation time” by putting different national and extra-national histories and cultural formations into dialogue. By examining