African Americans and the Sea: A Complicated Relationship is Anthologized

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Abstract

The only way Frederick Douglass could escape enslavement and become a free human being was to be a seaman. In 1833, sailors could move freely about the country, no matter their skin color, as every seaman was vital to the 19th Century American maritime economy. I learned this during my conversation with Dr. David Anderson, editor of the forthcoming book, ***I Will Take to the Water: An Anthology of African Americans and the Sea***. It is filled with sea-focused literature written by African Americans, from 18th-Century mariner-writer Olaudah Equiano, to contemporary poets like Kiki Petrosino and Lucille Clifton. Anderson, a professor at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, talked about his research process, his goals for the anthology, and his own ancestral connection to the sea.

CL: First, what drew you to this project?

DA: So basically, the project kind of fell into my lap. Richard King—he contacted me. He was the editor of the *Seafaring America* series, which is a series of books published by the University Press of New England, which sadly is no more. So, he [King] just reached out to me because I had posted syllabi at the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment site on African American environmental writing. We had a couple of conversations. I assumed he was just somebody who wanted to talk. And we were just conversing about what a book might look like without really any thought that I would edit it. I just threw out a bunch of ideas, because the idea was very interesting and exciting, but very novel to me. I don't typically study maritime literature. Eventually he asked if I would be interested in co-editing with him, and then editing. Ultimately, I said yes and we soon placed the anthology with the University of Chicago Press.

CL: But why do we need a book that anthologizes the relationships and history African Americans have with the sea?

DA: If you're going to talk about Black culture and Black history, something that is fundamental to Black culture—and ultimately to Black literature—is this maritime experience. Generally speaking, the public doesn't know about it. What they know is the Middle Passage period, right? Black experience with the ocean is far, far more involved, complex, and longer than the Middle Passage. Enslaved Africans brought their own knowledge of waterways and the sea with them to the New World. They were not bereft of this knowledge, because their cultures basically depended upon fishing and upon aquaculture. When we discuss slavery, often we discuss it in such a way in which we are lacking the knowledge of the experiences and the knowledge of both enslaved people and free people. We can't really describe their lives. We can't give them credit for the knowledge that they had. An understanding of Black relations to the sea is central to understanding the fundamental drive for Black agency and autonomy.

CL: *An anthology like* I Will Take to the Water *has never existed. How daunting was this task?*

DA: I was advised by another anthologist, Camille Dungy. She's a wonderful, wonderful poet. I asked permission to reprint one of her poems ("The Blue," 2011). And she was so excited. And she said, "Let me give you one piece of advice: don't try to categorize everything from the beginning." She said, "Collect everything that you can and just lay it out. And then see what's there, see if there are any recurring themes, or patterns." And so, to the best of my ability, the ten sections basically represent the kinds of patterns that I kept finding.

One of the issues was locating any prior scholarship—which is kind of diffuse about this writing—and trying to look at a wide variety of sources. There are some very good histories, some really good bibliographies, some reference texts. There was a scholar at the University of Kansas named Elizabeth Schultz who wrote the entry for African American literature (*Encyclopedia of American Literature of the Sea and the Great Lakes,* 2001). I did a lot of digital searching. I didn't simply want a text that was *set* at sea, or along the sea. I wanted text that either directly engaged with the ocean, or with the experience of living on, or in, or working in, or being with the ocean.

CL: Was it a priority for you to present an anthology focused beyond African American tragedy at sea?

DA: It was a priority to present something other than tragedy. And yes—an inevitable part of African American history is a history of discrimination. But that isn't the full history. That can be so overemphasized that you can fail to see how African Americans are trying to find, or create degrees of agency. Also, I didn't want it just to be about antagonism. African Americans turned to the sea, not only because it was one of the better opportunities—it wasn't perfect. But they did find fulfillment often.

CL: And this includes the opportunity to make a living.

DA: The maritime economy was the root of not only the dominance of the British Empire, but the foundation of the economy of the young United States. By 1800, almost 20% of the personnel working aboard merchant vessels in the United States were African American. Almost 1/5 of the workforce was Black. A lot of those African Americans had ties to the maritime industries. Black New Englanders were more likely than their white counterparts to work at sea. They were likely to be employed longer than their white counterparts at sea, mainly because that was one of the best jobs. There was widespread job discrimination and they were trapped in these terrible-paying, menial jobs. So, going to sea was one of the best opportunities.

Figure 1 ***Unidentified African American sailor in Union uniform sitting with arm resting on table.***

There was a little less discrimination in whaling, than, say, aboard merchant vessels, or in the Navy. I'm not saying it was common, but it was not unheard of for there to be Black owners of whaling vessels, for there to be Black whaling captains.

CL: I never knew this. So, what was the purpose of whaling?

DA: Oil for lamps and lubrication, before you had petroleum. African Americans were probably 1/4 or 1/3 of the workforce. [Whaling] was in places like Martha's Vineyard; there's long been a little pocket of African Americans in Martha's Vineyard. But Native Americans had lived on the island. Native Americans were very experienced whalers, and they shared the knowledge with African Americans. African Americans would sometimes just come and join the whaling trade.

CL: I'm really excited because this is not history that we've been taught. I'd never even associated African Americans with this type of labor. I've only ever associated my ancestors, for example, with picking cotton and working in agriculture.

DA: Agricultural workers do indeed make up the largest proportion of Union Black workers, both free and enslaved. That having been said, it doesn't mean that slaves only work the land. They had a variety of skills and many slaves who were agricultural workers, also at a certain point needed to man the boat to take goods downstream. When winter came and the owner wanted more money, [they] would rent out the slave and the slave would work aboard a ship for a period of time. There are many agricultural tasks that require boats, ships sailing, familiarity with ports, and so on. So, it's important to be aware that it's not just sailors, but there's also these other people who were frequently on the water, or associated with other industries.

Figure 2 ***A ship's caulker. Frederick Douglass worked as a caulker in a Baltimore shipyard.***

Frederick Douglass was trained to be a ship caulker. He's on the riverfront, in the wharfs of Baltimore. He's rubbing shoulders with sailors as he's working aboard one ship after another, after another. And he's intimately involved in this really large maritime life.

CL: In your introduction to the anthology, you write that Fredrick Douglass was a "central figure" in the African American tradition of writing about the sea. Why is Douglass' contribution so significant?

DA: I thought Douglass was important because he's canonical. Douglass wrote very frequently about his experiences growing up in the Chesapeake Bay area in other parts of his narratives, particularly in *My bondage and My Freedom* (1855). He writes about his grandparents, for instance, and the centrality of slaves to the maritime economy in the Chesapeake Bay region. That's why I included an excerpt about his

Figure 3 ***A Protection Certificate issued to an African American sailor in North Carolina in 1860. Even at this late date, the certificate proclaims the man as a "citizen" of the U.S. whereas other Protection Certificates had been modified to call African American sailors "natives" of the U.S.***

grandmother being an expert weaver of nets and an expert fisherwoman. It's part of a narrative in which he's envisioning a post-slavery south. But he's really insisting upon the economic importance of African Americans, whereas in earlier narratives, it's just "Let's get the hell out of the South!" With *My Bondage and My Freedom*, it's "African Americans are really central to this, and we need to think of a way in which we can provide them with equitable economic opportunity." Douglass writes about his immersion in a very complex and inspiring Black maritime world. He points out, in ways more fully than other writers, the variety of jobs that African Americans did.

CL: The anthology also includes tales of exploration, as well as descriptions of fun and leisure.

DA: Travel was significant. It represented Black aspiration and mobility. And [authors] would often write about travel and compare notes about their experiences aboard ships, as opposed to on land; their experiences in other countries, as opposed to the United States. These people often felt most American aboard ships, because it allowed them to think about who they were. And you have this long romantic tradition of associating the sea with possibility and longing. The sea as a possibility of escape. The sea narrative dominates some of these texts because it is about joining a new community. Testing yourself against the natural world. Fighting to survive and coming back changed.

Figure 4 White, John H. Blacks And Whites Take To The Water At A 12th Street Beach On Lake Michigan On Chicago's South Side [08/1973] Photograph. Retrieved from the U.S. National Archives

Leisure [was a] middle-class aspiration. The "leisure" section of the anthology can potentially be very consumerist. But it's because in the 19th century, there arose this leisure economy. And what you have is African Americans agitating. Getting access to a beach was an insistence on one's equality, wanting to and deserving to have leisure to enjoy oneself, to enjoy beauty. They were barred from resorts, beaches, swimming

pools, amusement parks, and so on. In many ways, they had to create their own. There's an excerpt from the novel *Love* by Morrison (2003). It was about this woman falling in love with a man who helped create sort of a beach, or leisure resort for African Americans. One of [Frederick Douglass'] sons created Highland Beach in Maryland, which was one of the first Black beaches. There were two beach front properties in Los Angeles that were created to serve African Americans.

CL: Still, you do begin the anthology with works that conjure up images and memories of the tragic Middle Passage. Readers first engage with Lucille Clifton's "the atlantic is a sea of bones." Why should readers begin there, with Clifton's haunting poem?

DA: I chose that poem, one—because I love it so much. And I love Lucille Clifton so much. I think she really captured the images. But there are other things that really stood out in that particular poem. There is this strong spiritual belief of being able to reconnect to ancestors. But also, there's something that I thought was remarkably beautiful: the allusions to the book of Ezekiel. The "Sermon of the Dry Bones" from the book of Ezekiel is a text that many African American preachers turned to again and again. That section from the book of Ezekiel was one of the two Biblical texts most preached upon by Black preachers in the 19th century—the other being "Ethiopia shall spread her wings" (Psalm 68). They used it to talk about the African diaspora and reconnecting to it. But also, reconnecting to maternal ancestors and these women who, in some cases, chose death rather than to go into enslavement.

Also, it bookended perfectly with the text at the very end of the anthology, which was August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean.* It is a reenactment of a slave voyage and open illusions to the book of Ezekiel and The Sermon of the Dry Bones.

CL: Let's talk a little about how these writers portray the sea in their texts. They aren't simply describing waves, the salty taste, and the feel of the ocean's breeze. To them, the sea means so much more than that.

DA: There is this long romantic tradition of associating the sea with possibility and longing, right? *The sea as a possibility of escape*. The sea narrative dominates some of these texts because the sea narrative is about leaving, joining a new community, city. Testing yourself against the natural world. Fighting to survive and coming back changed.

There were lots of spiritual narratives that mentioned voyages, partly because many missionaries themselves traveled frequently. But also, they associated the ocean with the sublime. In fact, when Edmund Burke first writes about the sublime in the 18th century, he says the sea is the "embodiment of the sublime." The sublime was a new category of aesthetic appreciation. It wasn't beauty. It wasn't ugliness, or picturesqueness. It was the sense of all before the overwhelming. He turned the sublime into not simply a kind of fear and awe, [but] a sense of being overwhelmed, your senses being bombarded and overwhelmed. So, it's very humanist. And in fact, the sublime becomes a dominant aesthetic category and often racialized and gendered.

But you find many Black writers writing about the sublime, because they're arguing for their humanity, too. (Olaudah Equiano, who was a writer and a former slave, is an example of more of the sublime). They feel often that they're coming face-to-face with Providence, or the power of divine Providence. And these narratives are often about demonstrating Black ability in this particular world, and then it later becomes a sight of beauty. So, you have lots and lots about beauty in the natural world, but also lots of texts, particularly in the 20th century, in which relationships are broken by the ocean. And the question of whether these relationships should be brought together, or maintained, in the face of essentially modern forces is what it is often represented.

CL: ***You include the work of writers from as early as the eighteenth century, to more contemporary poets, such as Douglas Kearney (*****"Swimchant for Nigger Mer-Folk,*** **" 2009)** ***and Kiki Petrosino (*****"Hymn for the Black Terrific," 2013*****). What nuances do contemporary writers bring, or contribute, to African American maritime literature?***

DA: I think particularly there's a much wider range of historical reference, and very self-conscious historical examination and recreation. There's a lot of meta commentary about the very process of constructing the last, or the marginalized. If you think about somebody like Douglas Kearney, his poem ["Swimchant"] is referring to the Middle Passage. But I mean, it's almost like he's really influenced by mix culture. That poem brings together the traditions of concrete poetry and visual poetry; with the sonic and the visual, he plays with font size. He makes allusions to Robert Hayden's *Middle Passage* as a literary precursor. He makes fun of Walt Disney, *The Little Mermaid* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1989), and that little Caribbean crab singing.

CL: ***(laughs) Sebastian.***

DA: Yes, Sebastian. He [Kearney] is really scathing, the way that he attacks it. But in many ways, a lot of these texts are very aware of the lingering traumas of the past. And they bring that to the forefront over and over, and over again. But it's a way of reflecting [upon] how the heck did we get here? Who are we and where do we move forward? A lot of it is insisting upon recovering the past. And I think these writers are very mindful of creating a tradition of literature. All of them refer to many different things. Kiki Petrosino, in [her] poetry, is alluding to this difficult relationship. She's quoting *Moby-Dick* (Herman Melville) As a writer, she taught a special class on *Moby-Dick.* She knows Melville in and out. And [she's] drawing upon these literary precursors as a way of examining these dark drives and motivations.

CL: Who is this anthology for?

DA: It was envisioned to be for undergraduates and the general reader, as well. This is a project that already relies on a lot of subsidies and a lot of catalysts to make it possible. We hope that a lot of people will read it. It's not meant to be esoteric, even though I'm hoping scholars will read it and assign it in their classes—it's both for literature classes and history classes. But it's meant to be accessible to a general reader and also provide a scaffolding that would lead to other things if they wanted to pursue it.

CL: Do you have a personal connection to the sea?

DA Some of my ancestors were free in South Carolina in the 18th century. And the story that some family members tell—I found this out decades later—is that some family members may have been seamen. But a lot of that is lost to history. I do know they were free, and because of repressive policies and taxes in South Carolina after the revolution, rather than stay in South Carolina, they left and moved to the interior of the country. In other words, that connection to the sea, which may have existed, was lost and erased.

Another example is my great-great-grandmother, a woman named Diverne Atwood. [She] was a free girl in Jamaica who was kidnapped and enslaved as part of the International Slave Trade. So, that Caribbean connection exists. But again, it's lost, or erased. Studying some of this material is a way of partly finding out a little bit about my family.

CL: Did you wander upon any surprises during your research?

DA: There were some new voices and some reassessment of old ones. There was a writer named James H. Williams and this guy was a seaman. His father had been a seaman who died when he was young. Williams basically became a union activist and he became sort-of a muckraking journalist who would write these personal, beautifully written essays about his experience to give people a sense of what the height of the Golden Age of American sailing had been, what it declined into, and what reforms were needed to bring it back. And he's a gorgeous writer. I was surprised that he knew his slave narratives; there are references in one of his works.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson ("As in a Looking Glass," "The Fisherman of Pass Christian") is best known as the estranged wife of Paul Laurence Dunbar. But she herself grew up in Louisiana, writes about Creole and Black experience in Louisiana. And she writes some really amazing stories and poems. She was a remarkable figure. She was a teacher. She was a newspaper editor. She was A civil rights activist. She did a lot and her journals were published, edited by Gloria Hall. They're a fascinating view of a Black middle class woman's life and experience. Also, she writes about what it's like to go to one of these Black resorts, to Highland Park. And it's beautifully written and there's nothing else like it. And so, it made me aware much more fully of Nelson. Alice Dunbar Nelson is an important writer who doesn't get her full due.

CL: In your opinion, which writer best captures the relationship people of the African diaspora have long had with the sea?

DA: When I taught texts as part of a class this last semester, one of the last ones was Paula Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow (1983).* What an amazing novel. I just fell in love with that novel and she deals with a lot. She alludes to the Middle Passage. It's [about] a widow who takes these cruise ships on the Caribbean and essentially is repressing mourning the loss of her husband and all of the horrifying sacrifices she and her husband had to make to become successful. She eventually decides to take a trip to an island that is off the coast of Granada. She reconnects to her African roots and ancestry. So, in many ways, it's a kind of going back and undoing the problems of the diaspora. That is one text that I think, better than any other, really embodies the entire history.

*Figure 5 "**Negro sailors of the USS MASON commissioned at Boston Navy Yard proudly look over their ship which is first to have predominantly Negro crew, " Boston, Massachusetts, [3/20/1944] Photograph. Retrieved from the U.S. National Archives.***

I Will Take to the Water: An Anthology of African Americans and the Sea is tentatively set to be released in the fall of 2023.