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Review Of "Black Print Unbound: "The Christian Recorder," African American Literature, and Periodical Culture" By E. Gardner

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Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture
by Eric Gardner (review)

Lara Langer Cohen

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as W. E. B. Du Bois brilliantly demonstrates in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a structuring force of American culture and life. Instead of centering white normative masculinity as the way for minoritized communities to navigate racial life, the author offers an entrée into U. S. racial life through the lateral connections and affiliations Asian Americans have with African American communities. As a result, antiblackness does not become the only available racial fodder to performing citizenship and Asian American subjectivity. In the chapter “Afro Asian Rhythms and Rhymes,” we see how hip hop becomes a site, as Nitasha Sharma demonstrates in *Hip Hop Desis* (2010), of global race consciousness through which Asian Americans can critique racism and Orientalism while opening up venues for multiracial organizing. Using black feminist theory and an emphasis on coalition building, Chon-Smith disrupts singular conceptions of race and culture while showcasing the movement of ideas, desires, identities, and politics between these communities. With the examination of martial arts buddy films, we also witness the flow of ideas from Asia and Asian America into African America through Bruce Lee’s status as a cult hero in black households.

The chapter “Yellow Bodies, Black Sweat” examines how Asian athletes in mainstream U. S. sports of baseball and basketball are consumed through racialized histories of Asian America. This chapter would go well with Shalini Shakar’s *Advertising Diversity* (2015) to demonstrate how sporting corporations and media strategically invoke race and Asianness as ways to create globalized consumptive practices of U. S. sport.

When this book is taught in undergraduate courses, it would pair well with Roderick Ferguson’s *Aberrations of Black* (2004) and Martin Manalansan’s *Global Divas* (2003) as a way to further disrupt singular, heteronormative conceptualizations of race, masculinity, African American, and Asian American identity. By doing so, one would not fall into the trap of confirming particular racial heteronormativities within ethnic nationalism that were evident in Chin’s work and in popular culture. Some questions also emerge: What would masculinity look like if the author allowed for a greater exploration of the homoeroticism in sport and in martial arts?

With relation to race, it would also be critical to think about racial magnetism with the mixed-race Afro-Asian body in mind. How would masculinity and race play out in the case of African Asian Americans like football player Hines Ward? In the chapter on sport, the analysis of comparative racializations between Asian and African American athletes did not have enough substance on its own. Pairing this book with Scott Brooks’s *Black Men Can’t Shoot* and Kathy Yep’s *Outside the Paint* (both 2009), Samuel Regalado’s *Nikkei Baseball* (2012), and my own *Desi Hoop Dreams* (2015) complicates racial landscapes while interrogating Asian American affinities to sport and blackness.

Chong Chon-Smith offers an important contribution to race and gender studies with *East Meets Black*. Utilizing intertextuality through movies, literature, song, and sport, the book is an interesting model for understanding interracial sociality. In a historical moment of rampant antiblack violence, the book advances alternate ways of community building and solidarity that foregrounds a racial magnetism geared toward social critique and challenging white supremacy.

Eric Gardner. *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 2015. 329 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Lara Langer Cohen, Swarthmore College

Eric Gardner’s *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture* is a rare and invaluable book: an intensive

study of a single newspaper, focusing on less than a decade of its long run, deeply embedded in its religious and material circumstances. Such fine-grained archival analysis is vital to understanding the richness of early African American print cultures, and Gardner's subject could not be more important. The organ of the AME Church, the *Christian Recorder* was arguably the most powerful black periodical of the nineteenth century, with a (usually) weekly publication schedule and a national readership that reached into elite and working-class households alike. *Black Print Unbound* showcases the diversity of its contents, which included not only Church business but also important Civil War reporting, political commentary, and literature by well-known authors such as Francis Ellen Watkins Harper and James W. C. Pennington. One of the great strengths of the book, though, is Gardner's commitment to highlighting writers for the *Recorder* who have been nearly or even completely forgotten by literary history, such as Lizzie Hart, George Paul Vashon, Daniel Adger, Robert Meacham, and Edmonia Goodelle Highgate. Gardner's study would be welcome under any circumstances, but it feels utterly necessary following the June 2015 massacre of nine congregants at Charleston's Emanuel AME Church by a young white supremacist—a devastating reminder of both the Church's prominence as a center of black flourishing in the U. S. and the threats such world-building continues to face.

Although its subject is tightly focused, *Black Print Unbound* justly frames its work as an intervention into literary history. Despite the efforts of several generations of critics and bibliographers, Gardner observes, scholars continue to take a very narrow view of nineteenth-century black literature. They generally focus on just a few texts, mostly slave narratives, and “[a]lmost all ignore the *Recorder*” (12). Gardner ties this omission to the skittishness that Frances Smith Foster has observed scholars have about engaging with Afro-Protestantism, despite its importance to a wide variety of black writers. He also connects it to the archiving of the *Recorder* itself, which he reveals to be woefully incomplete and inaccurate. To address such problems, the first half of the book carefully pieces together the material history of the *Recorder*, including its often fraught relationship to the AME Church leadership, its home base in Philadelphia, its sources of funding, its distribution, its subscribers, and its staff—particularly Elisha Weaver, who (mostly) edited the newspaper between 1860 and 1868. During the same time, Weaver also served on and off as Steward of the AME's longstanding book publishing arm, the Book Concern, and Gardner's account of the controversies over these responsibilities illuminates the Church's relationship to print. The *Recorder* sought to build an imagined community through print, but that community also took physical form through the institutions of the AME Church. These communities were sometimes synchronized and sometimes not, and Gardner suggests that the success of the *Recorder* lay in the productive dialectic between the material realities of church community and the newspaper's representations “unbound” from them.

Gardner ends the first half of the book with a long chapter investigating who subscribed to the *Recorder*, using data gleaned from the newspapers' regular acknowledgements of subscriptions. (This chapter significantly expands on his 2011 *American Literary History* article on the same subject, which analyzed a smaller sample.) Readers will appreciate it not only as a valuable data set but also as an indispensable guide to interpreting census data, especially concerning African Americans. Gardner meticulously reconstructs the kinds of livelihoods, household arrangements, and property holdings at which such records only hint. Even more powerful is his inquiry into census data about black literacy. His research shows that white census takers habitually marked African Americans, including writers for the *Recorder*, as illiterate, in what Gardner calls “a frightening new take on [the title of Elizabeth McHenry's landmark 2002 book] ‘Forgotten Readers’” (139). Gardner finds that *Recorder* subscribers were almost exclusively black, widely distributed

geographically and demographically, and significantly more likely to be men than women. This last finding raises fascinating questions. Does it reflect the social and economic difference between subscribing and reading, such that in the kind of household Gardner finds typical of the “average *Recorder* subscriber”—a married man and woman living in the Northeast, “with church ties and children” (126)—men subscribed in their own names but other members of the household, including women, may have also read the paper? Or does it reflect what Jasmine Nichole Cobb has recently identified, in *Picture Freedom: Remaking Black Visuality in the Early Nineteenth Century*, as a pattern of disenfranchisement of married, especially child-bearing women in nineteenth-century African American print culture?

Such questions about gender and reading reverberate in the book’s second half, a literary analysis of the *Recorder* that centers black women’s contributions. This is a welcome counterpoint to the first half’s focus on the closely held male realm of Church leadership. (I was haunted by Gardner’s brief mention of an accusation of sexual assault made by one of Weaver’s congregants, which may or may not have been the unspecified “case” against him that the AME’s General Conference heard in a secret session that they determined to strike from the minutes. I admire Gardner’s determination not to tell the kinds of stories the white media itched and itches to tell about black men, but it was hard to forget this unnamed black woman.) These chapters illustrate the equivocal place the Church made for women since at least Jarena Lee. On the one hand, the *Recorder* could amplify women’s voices; on the other, it often rebuffed them if they did not modulate their voices according to certain norms. *Black Print Unbound* records too many literary careers that ended too soon, most memorably that of Edmonia Goodelle Highgate. Born in Syracuse, New York, Highgate traveled through the South during the Civil War to teach newly freed people and wrote a series of intellectually expansive letters to the *Recorder* reflecting on her experiences. Quoting Thoreau, Fuller, and Emerson, Highgate used Transcendentalist philosophy to explain how activism in the face of violence forged new forms of collective black identity: “The moral grandeur of having a heartache as one’s companion though life, because of the sacrifices we are daily making for freedom’s cause, and the sublime privilege of sounding one’s soul depth by laying our all upon the national altar, and, also, of forgetting self, losing person identity, and becoming atomic parts of personified principle, forces our duty in general” (qtd. on 189). As Gardner explains, Highgate’s combination of political commentary, personal memoir, and metaphysics asked “what a letter could do” (194)—a question he suggests the *Recorder* was not necessarily prepared to answer, especially from a young woman. Even in the brief passages he cites in the chapter, Highgate’s writing is stunningly alive (“Have I said too much? Is it inelegant? Does it not breathe balm of a thousand flowers?” [qtd. on 194]); when Gardner recounts her tragic early death, readers will feel the loss keenly.

The last chapter features the closest thing the book has to a reading of a canonical text, Julia C. Collins’s 1865 serialized novel, *The Curse of Caste*. But I actually found the previous chapter, on elegies, even more rewarding. It features the book’s closest readings and some of its most impassioned writing—some critical, some metacritical. Over 600 elegies appeared in the *Recorder* while Weaver was editor, including many poems by subscribers as well as established poets. This large body of work, Gardner notes, challenges familiar claims that we rarely study poetry written by African Americans before the twentieth century because of its scarcity. Here Gardner sharpens his opening charge that scholars continue to ignore the black press. This does not only mean that scholars neglect the evidence before them (although, as he makes clear, they often do that, too). They also neglect to question what they *don’t* see. Such complacency evinces “a common willingness to assume that not finding something allows one to draw conclusions about the (seeming) absence” (197). In the sheer number of elegies published in the *Recorder*, Gardner

finds not only an unsung body of poetry but also “a powerful interface between everyday Black love and activist politics” (201). This conjunction is exemplified by George Boyer Vashon’s deeply moving 1865 poem “In the Cars,” an elegy for his infant daughter Anne Paul Vashon that stages “the radical political acts of loving a Black child and remembering a Black child” (204). We can glimpse Gardner’s point in the poem’s title, which refers at once to the location of its address (as Vashon returns home via railroad to his mourning family) and to a notorious site of antiblack discrimination, much reported in the *Recorder*, but the entire text wonderfully repays Gardner’s extended reading.

As Gardner notes, his book’s own title is “optimistic” (20), conjuring the emancipatory possibilities of archival research on black print, and periodical culture in particular. I would have been curious to see him reflect more deliberately on the affordances of this “ethos of recovery” (13). Does it add to our existing knowledge of the field or fundamentally change its shape? How does it engage with recent challenges to historicism as an approach to the black past, in and out of slavery, by scholars like Saidiya Hartman, Stephen Best, or symposia such as the 2012 “Against Recovery?” conference in New York? *Black Print Unbound* is a remarkable model of the archival work so necessary for early African American studies, which will become all the more valuable as we debate and multiply the kinds of questions we ask of such archives.

Ellen C. Scott. *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era.* New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2015. 268 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Courtney Baker, Connecticut College

In her book *Cinema Civil Rights: Regulation, Repression, and Race in the Classical Hollywood Era*, media scholar Ellen C. Scott provides a well-researched critical history of black repression in the American film industry during the first half of the twentieth century. The study is a welcome addition to important recent publications in African American television and film studies such as Sarah Torres’s *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton UP, 2003) and Allyson Nadia Field’s *Uplift Cinema: The Emergence of African American Film and the Possibility of Black Modernity* (Duke UP, 2015). All of the projects provide a careful and thoroughgoing account of the visual media industry and its representations of black life. Scott’s book significantly advances our understanding of the conditions of film production by investigating the impact of censorship in the constitution of narratives and the framing of black bodies on screen. *Cinema Civil Rights* undertakes media studies as a material cultural studies project, referring readers to the cinematic objects while contextualizing and critiquing the material and social conditions for those objects’ construction. Scott’s work stands out among these other books for its study of mainstream Hollywood film—a genre that would seem not to provide as rich a terrain for the discussion of black representational politics. However, Scott’s canny readings reveal that an anxiety about black representation in the context of civil rights discourse in popular film has been, for more than one hundred years, a central and abiding organizing principle for studios and directors in the most powerful and longstanding film industry in the world.

Scott’s analysis of “the structure of limitation” in the film industry during its Golden Age is rooted in an understanding of civil rights as a project of “equal citizenship” that compelled and confounded African Americans throughout the