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The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print—The State of the Discipline

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Abstract

“The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian” explores scholarship located at the intersection of African American Studies and the History of the Book. While the two fields have a great deal to offer one another, I argue that there has, until recently, been only fitful dialogue between scholars from each camp, a phenomenon I trace in part to the schism between enumerative and analytic bibliographers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Surveying scholarship on topics ranging from the noetics of orality to Oprah's Book Club, I conclude that scholars of African American culture and of print culture have much to gain from a sustained dialogue and that, increasingly, exchanges are taking place.

THE TALKING BOOK AND THE TALKING BOOK HISTORIAN



African American Cultures of Print—The State of the Discipline

Leon Jackson

Talking Back to the Talking Book

In his 1772 autobiography, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw*, the author—an African-born former slave living in England—recalled his first encounter with the printed word, shortly after his enslavement on a Dutch ship. His master, he explains,

used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips.—I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading I follow'd him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I open'd it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou'd say something to me; but I was very sorry and greatly disappointed, when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis'd me because I was black.¹

Subsequent Afro-British and African American autobiographers—including John Marrant (1785), Quobna Ottobah Cugoana (1787), Olaudah Equiano (1789), and John Jea (c. 1815)—claimed similar encounters, leading critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. to argue in a landmark study of 1988 that the

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