



Eric Gardner. *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 329p. ISBN 9780190237080. US\$ 29.95.

With *Black Print Unbound*, Eric Gardner has significantly advanced the study of African American culture and history while at the same time giving a master class in working across the various methods of inquiry and styles of research gathered under the big tent of print culture studies. *Black Print Unbound* is a study of the *Christian Recorder*, the weekly newspaper of the AME Church, as a publication “conceived by African Americans, edited by



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African Americans, written primarily by African Americans, and largely distributed by African Americans to an almost completely African American audience” (4). Gardner pays attention to these diverse, yet interdependent, scenes of print culture, and approaches them from different methodological perspectives that he labels cultural history, material history, and literary history. This book is an in-depth case study of a single black periodical, a deep history of its “embodied and imagined” communities of writers, producers, and readers, and an invitation for others to extend Gardner’s singular knowledge of the *Recorder* archive into future work (16).

African American literary historians Frances Smith Foster, Elizabeth McHenry, Joanna Brooks, and others have argued that nineteenth-century African American writing must be understood as part of the social organizations that produced and sustained it. Realizing Foster’s multiple urgent calls for scholars to pay close attention to ways the Afro-Protestantism and its print culture supported nineteenth-century black life, *Black Print Unbound’s* first half explores the relationship between the AME Church, the *Recorder*, and related ventures like AME Church’s Book Concern. In this section, Gardner traces in detail the “material history” of the paper including its sources of funding, its relationship to Philadelphia, and the career of its editor from 1860-1868, Elisha Weaver.

In the most stunning chapter of this section, Gardner traces names from the *Recorder’s* published subscription lists to census and other historical records with an eye toward understanding who the paper’s subscribers were. This is a remarkably grounded way to understand a periodical’s readership that goes far beyond an “implied reader” or even a small sample of readers. This chapter studies the newspaper’s readership in both granular detail and at large scale. Gardner was able to identify 1,179 of the 3,385 first-time and renewing subscribers acknowledged in the *Recorder* (100). There are many implications of this chapter, but perhaps the most important emerges from Gardner’s identification of many subscribers of (and writers for) the *Christian Recorder* who were listed as illiterate in white-authored census records. Included in this list is the prolific writer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. The contradiction is testament to the significance of African American spaces and publications for African Americans, and demonstrates in stark terms the need for scholars to study African American writing outside of the various “white envelopes” that distort it.



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The second half of the book focuses on African American literary history, with chapters focusing on “information wanted” ads seeking and mourning family lost and separated by the brutal market interests of enslavers, the *Recorder’s* network of correspondents, elegies, and Julia C. Collins’ serialized novel, *The Curse of Caste*. These chapters speak to the varied forms and genres of African American literary writing to be encountered and recovered through in-depth periodical research. A hallmark of this entire book that comes across in these chapters is the way Gardner provides comprehensive history and criticism of the *Recorder* and its authors, while also gesturing toward work other scholars can take up.

And that is perhaps the key characteristic of Gardner’s scholarship. Authoritative histories, and *Black Print Unbound* certainly is one, are generally thought to be “the last word” on a subject. Even though the book stretches beyond 300 pages, one always senses Gardner in the margins pointing to the voluminous work left to be done on the *Christian Recorder*. His recent publication of a comprehensive bibliography of children’s literature in the *Recorder* (in *Who Writes for Black Children?*, University of Minnesota Press, 2017) and his discovery of a chapter of Harper’s *Sowing and Reaping* previously thought to be lost in a missing issue of the *Recorder* (*Common-place* 13.1 October 2012) are yet other examples of how his comprehensive study of this important newspaper continually turns over new ground for scholarship in African American periodicals and literature. *Black Print Unbound* uses bibliography, biography, history, and literary criticism to deliver a field defining and field expanding work.

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