free description of the composing strategies of three intellectuals writing from the margins. The examples of the four theo-political tropes drawn from popular culture make the theory more accessible and point to practices that can be imported into the writing classroom. For these and other reasons, I intend to use it as a recommended text next spring in a seminar in applied rhetoric, and I will certainly use it the next time I teach composition theory. It points us in the right direction as we continue our efforts to understand how effective compositions use the master’s tools to do their work. Stull and Audre Lorde may, in fact, both be right.


Reviewed by Juanita Rodgers Comfort, Old Dominion University

Traces of a Stream is an exceptional starting point for scholars who wish to examine the literate practices of African American women. Not only is it a striking effort to redefine a theory and methodology for engaging rhetoric as a cultural study, it is also a valuable attempt to reclaim the intellectual traditions of a group that historically has not been regarded by mainstream critics as intellectually or socially significant. Jacqueline Royster explains that her book’s theme emerged from the discovery that African American women have experienced a long history of literacy and intellectualism, extending back beyond their presence in this country to their ancestral roots in West Africa. Speaking of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that have relegated these women to the margins of society, she writes, “Periodically . . . these women have managed to break out from containments seeking to enclose them. Periodically, their talents have flowed past the barriers, reconstituted themselves, and become noticeable as ‘traces of a stream.’”

She divides her study into three interwoven parts which examine rhetorical, historical, and ideological perspectives on the literate practices of a group that she calls elite nineteenth-century African American women, products of “an era during which the shift in educational opportunity after the Civil War gave rise for the first time to the development of a cadre of well-educated women.” She uses the descriptor “elite” not merely to highlight socioeconomic privilege but also—per-
haps more significantly—to focus on the positions of status these women occupied within their own communities. The term foregrounds values of education and service to the community that contributed to the respectability of these women.

As a sister scholar of black feminist essayists, I am pleased to note that Royster’s study centers on her subjects’ strong attraction to essay writing. Critical attention to the essay tradition of black women is long overdue. While scholars have generated a considerable body of literary criticism examining African American women’s fiction, poetry, drama, and other forms of literary nonfiction (such as letters and autobiography), they have published few critical studies of their essays. Most of what has been published to date on African American women’s essays appears in the form of single chapters here and there in collections such as Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives by Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman and In Her Own Voice: Nineteenth-Century American Women Essayists by Sherry Lee Linkhorn. I can think of no more extensive examination of this nonfiction genre, specifically as it has evolved in the hands of black women writers, than what Royster has achieved with this important work. Essays are especially fascinating to me as carefully orchestrated symbolic acts wherein the words on the page are made meaningful both to the person who writes them and to the person who reads them. As Royster demonstrates, the essays by the women in her book are acts of sense-making that deal with a range of often competing perspectives, each one embedded with intentions, vested interests, ideologies, value systems, and politics. They are acts of thinking made social, acts of communication made personal. They are acts of constructing both what will be important to oneself and what one desires to become significant to others. The juxtaposition of authorial intimacy and critical detachment in essay writing is no more effective than in the service of African American women writers, for whom the genre has become an important means of self-definition, knowledge-making, and social/political action.

In part one, Royster explores what she calls the “rhetorical prowess” that derived from the essayists’ individual and collective experiences. Two key concepts anchor her discussion: literacy as socio-political action, and literacy as socio-cognitive practice (ways of knowing, believing, and doing). She explains how the essay, as a mode of rhetorical discourse, allows the strategic enactment of social agendas because it is flexible enough to accommodate the full range of discursive options that writers wish to employ—whether autobiographical or expository, whether
understated or strident. Within the territory of the essay, these writers were able to exert multiple identities, speak in several voices, and engage in numerous kinds of battles, despite the muting of black women’s voices in nineteenth-century American society. The subject matter of these writers’ essays—from acquiring an education and coping with domestic conditions, to ending the practice of lynching, defending black womanhood, and generally advancing the race—helped to shape their own as well as their readers’ reality, how they should perceive the “real world.”

Several key questions anchor Royster’s study: “Under what circumstances did these women acquire literacy? What did literacy and learning mean to them? In what ways were they empowered to act in the world by their knowledge of language and how it might be useful in achieving particular rhetorical effect? Most of all, after they acquired these tools and abilities, what did they actually choose to do? What did their actions show evidence of? What differences did their actions make?” In addressing these questions, Royster draws on rhetorical theory to emphasize the importance of these writers’ textual identities relative to their topics. From the standpoint of ethos, an essayist creates an image of herself that she can deploy strategically as a warrant, authorizing her to make sense of her ideas in particular ways. Because an essayist invokes her “self” in her work to warrant a given range of ideas and opinions, she can position herself between her subject matter and her readers, with great persuasive effect.

The chapters of part two provide the historical particulars of Royster’s study, introducing readers to the lives and rhetorical achievements of individual African American women writers: Charlotte Forten Grimké, Anna Julia Cooper, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, Mary Shadd Cary, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and a number of others. Writing from what she calls an “afrafeminist” vantage point, Royster locates the perspectives of these women at the center of her critical study and theory-building. She weaves scholarship in African and African American studies into her historical account in order to establish the existence of a distinctive world view that has been played out in the diverse historical experiences of diasporic peoples. This perspective suggests that being “black” in terms of belief system rather than simply color encompasses a longstanding Africentric consciousness along with a shared experience of domination.

A foundational chapter of this section is chapter three, which explores temporal dimensions of traditional African cosmology in order to establish at least part of a foundation for these essayists’ sense of ethos. Relating the ancient spiritual concept of zamani (the time when a dead
person joins the community of spirits and thus achieves immortality) to
the contemporary communicative practices of diasporic peoples, Royster
hypothesizes that women in the zamani have “helped African American
women to understand—whether by intuition or instinct, through the spirit
of storytelling, or by some other process—who we are, how we should see
the world, how we should perceive ourselves in it, and also how we might
assume the authority to speak and to act as thinkers, writers, and leaders,
even in the face of contending forces within the new geographical and
cultural context.” This discussion is especially pertinent (and, I would
say, groundbreaking in rhetorical studies) because it posits rhetorical
agency as a factor of these women’s African spiritual heritage indepen­
dent of analyses that would place such a cosmology in a subordinate
position relative to some secular, Eurocentric master narrative. While
European sensibilities are certainly a significant part of the landscape of
African American women’s lives, they are not the ultimate measure of
these writers’ experience. Thus, Royster deploys the afrafeminist concept
as essential grounding for establishing that who these women were, where
they came from, what they experienced, and how they made sense of the
world affirms their presence and worth as historically and culturally
significant persons.

In the subsequent chapters of part two, Royster uses this afrafeminist
framework to analyze the literacy issues resulting from a legacy of West
African cosmology tempered by the experience of slavery. Always
emphasizing the connection between literate behavior and social action,
she reviews the social and political environments of the late eighteenth
and early nineteenth centuries that gave rise to the struggles of women like
Luce Terry Prince, Clara Howard, and Selena Sloan Butler to help create
literacy opportunities for themselves and others. She demonstrates how
these women vigorously pursued goals of social and political enfranchise­
ment through their participation in arenas of public discourse. The
historical section concludes with a photographic essay that, along with
section dividers throughout the text showing close-up images of these
women’s faces, brings readers into intimate contact with them. This
strategy of embodiment seems designed to counter a kind of stubborn
blindness that Royster has often encountered as she has shared her work
with others: “I’ve never heard of these women.” The photographic essay
and section dividers allow the women profiled in this text in effect to
assert, “For those of you who need further proof, yes, we actually lived.”
And their eyes reveal a sparkling intelligence and strong determination.

Part three of this book will resonate strongly with scholars who have
attempted to promote a research agenda that centers on the lives of black women. Identifying her researcher role in this project as that of historical ethnographer, Royster describes her research process and establishes an ideological framework for those who wish to conduct afrafeminist scholarship. Specifically, she addresses the significance of African American women intellectuals adopting the methodology of the participant-observer, along with the value of such work for literacy studies. She posits that the collection of detailed accounts ("thick descriptions") of the literacy practices of diverse groups such as African American women should produce a richer understanding of literacy in all of its variety.

*Traces of a Stream* is a carefully conceived, richly documented, and highly articulate account that amply fulfills its promise to "establish a suitable place in the world of words and action for the contributions and achievements of African American women writers." I believe that readers will be as impressed as I have been by the ways in which Royster's discussion provides insight into the scope and texture of literacy and its potential to shape the evolution of a society even as it changes the course of individual lives. This book teaches students of literacy several important lessons, not least among them being that we must look critically into the spaces between our established accounts of literate practices, for there is much more there than current scholarship has allowed us to see.

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Reviewed by Min-Zhan Lu, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

In the introduction to *Framing Identities*, Wendy Hesford states that she hopes her book will provide "a conceptual model for teachers-researchers across the curriculum to study the contradictory uses and social consequences of autobiography in the pedagogical contact zones at their own institutions and enable them to imagine new pedagogical spaces for the practice of autobiography as cultural critique." She thus aligns herself with teachers and researchers concerned with studying autobiography at the intersections of the material and discursive realms.

Like many recent publications on the subject, *Framing Identities*, winner of the 1999 W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book in composition theory, debunks expressivist notions of autobiogra-