

## Introduction

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In the twenty-first century, literary histories may achieve a limited degree of comprehensiveness in dealing with a vast amount of literary and cultural data; the idea that they might be definitive is merely tantalizing. We are cautioned to remember, as Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon have suggested in *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, that “the literary past” – that is, the past of both literature’s production and its reception – is unavoidably interpreted in the light of the present and that literary historians create meaning by ordering and shaping stories about texts and contexts; in short, “economic, political, and broader cultural and social perspectives on issues like race or gender must be brought to bear in the constructing of any literary history today in a different way than in the past.”<sup>1</sup> These premises about writing history assume great importance in a project that focuses on the continuing evolution of African American literature, because the subject is intimately related to such matters as the slave trade and the curious institution of slavery in the United States; the forced merger of African ethnic groups into an identity named African American; new forms of verbal expression which are the consequence of contact among Africans, indigenous peoples, and Europeans; struggles for emancipation and literacy; race as a social dynamic, and the changing ideologies that support the American democratic experiment. The writing of literary history, of course, must cross disciplinary boundaries, for it cannot otherwise provide nuanced reports on the indeterminacy of texts. The adequacy of the literary history is challenged by the recovery of forgotten or lost texts and the acquisition of new insights. Moreover, advances in cultural theory and criticism may necessitate continued modification and revision of the historical interpretation. Thus, literary history is always a work-in-progress. No matter how logical their arrangements of parts, their explanations of interconnections among forms, public events, and creative choices, and their configuration of tradition, literary historians conduct unfinished quests for order. Nowhere is this vexed search greater or more necessary than in the field of African American literature.

*The Cambridge History of African American Literature (CHAAL)* has a goal that may seem radical within the tradition of writing literary histories. Beyond presenting a fairly complete chronological description of African American literature in the United States, from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, this reference work seeks to illustrate how the literature comprises orature (oral literature) and printed texts simultaneously. The reason is not far to seek. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. demonstrated in *The Signifying Monkey*, performance is one of the distinguishing features of African American literature. The role of utterance or speech is not necessarily secondary to the role of writing or inscription. Speaking and writing are interlocked frequencies of a single formal phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

Increasingly, literary historians are beginning to recognize that writers are not the sole shapers of literature, that people who are not usually deemed citizens in the republic of letters must not be ignored in describing the interweavings of literature, imagination, and literacy. Thus, we must give attention to the roles of publishers, editors, academic critics, common readers, and mass media reviewers in shaping textual forms, literary reputations, and literary tastes. *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* is a part of that emerging recognition.

We contend that a literary history of African American verbal expressions will make a stronger contribution to knowledge about literary production and reception if it exploits insights derived from Stephen Henderson's theorizing in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*<sup>3</sup> and from Elizabeth McHenry's claim in *Forgotten Readers* that "to recover more fully the history of African American cultural production...we must be open to replacing our notion of a singular black literary tradition by attending to the many, diverse elements that form the groundwork of any tradition."<sup>4</sup> Such replacement suggests the desirability of avoiding a strictly binary focus on literary production, e.g. opposing the folk level of production examined at length in Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*<sup>5</sup> to a more public level of self-conscious imitation, creation, and consuming.<sup>6</sup>

Although the strongest syncretism of African and European modes is located in texts, the story we must tell is more complicated. We locate the origins of African American literature not in the United States but on the continent of Africa. Our construction of a history begins with the oral and written practices of diverse, mainly West African ethnic groups whose African identities were transformed in the process of the Middle Passage and in their subsequent dispersal in the Americas. Traumatic as this passage from life to death was, to borrow language from Robert Hayden's poem "Middle

Passage,” this moment of the slave trade did not exactly leave people bereft of memory or their culture. The view that the enslaved arrived in the United States as hopeless pagans and primitives is being slowly dislodged. “The native African,” as historian Michael Gomez puts the matter, “did not forget her own language, whether or not she ever learned or demonstrated that she had learned the English dialect.”<sup>7</sup> Gomez argues convincingly that Africans in the Americas had to grapple with both interethnic change and linguistic creolization, processes that “moved along a continuum from ethnicity to race.”<sup>8</sup> If a literary history begins with unquestioned assumptions about African cultural unity, it will perpetuate the unfortunate idea that literary tradition(s) emerged from the imaginations and adaptive strategies of a more or less unified race of people. Such a history overlooks the importance of exposing points of difference and points of sameness. The myth of unification is deconstructed by the data provided by eighteenth-century published texts in comparison with oral “texts” recovered during the nineteenth century. If the word “texts” is used in a liberal, postmodern sense proposed by Roland Barthes,<sup>9</sup> it can be discerned that written texts and oral texts can both be presented as “published” material; knowing the provenance of an oral “text,” however, urges one to weigh carefully variations in the origins of African American texts. At the level of expressive origins the fiction of unity can be exposed.

The complex social, linguistic, and literary background of enslaved Africans persuades us to restore their humanity, to give more careful attention to the extent that Arabic/Islamic and indigenous forms of literacy informed traditions of poetry and narrative prior to the Atlantic slave trade. To be sure, we agree in part with the idea that the origins of African American literature, according to Dickson Bruce, involve “a process in which black and white writers collaborated in the creation of ... an ‘African American literary presence’ in the United States” and that “at the center of this process was the question of authority.”<sup>10</sup> In conceptualizing this project, however, we privilege Africa and African American agency a bit more strongly. This choice intensifies inquiry about the dynamics of change and brings to the foreground a distinct, frequently conflicted, relationship that African American literature has with America’s literary traditions in the broadest sense. It also enables us to construct a narrative that accounts, as rigorously as possible, for continuing patterns of harmony and discord in collective creativity as well as in the creative expressions of individuals. We have also consciously rejected the categories “major” and “minor,” categories that serve to frustrate rather than clarify our general understanding of how literary traditions take multiple shapes over time.

For the purpose of writing literary history, we are indebted to Lucien Goldmann's assertion that the object of human sciences is "human actions of all times and places in the degree to which they have had or now have an importance for and an influence on the existence and structure of a human group."<sup>11</sup> What is being addressed is indeed the story of the existence and complex structure of African American literary acts and artifacts, and their continual evolving in the United States. Given that the magnitude of the project necessitates the writing of the narrative by various hands, we want this sense of literature as a human enterprise to increase the possibility of having minimal disruptions in the narrative flow. We ask questions, from the vantage point of a uniquely contextualized rootedness, about how Africans and their African American descendants use sounds and linguistic signs. We anticipate, of course, certain objections related to the issue of "language versus literature," particularly as the issue is manifested in our decision to deemphasize the exclusive definition of literature as possession of letters. We take instead literature to mean selected items of "verbal culture."

It must be emphasized that this history will privilege some concerns implicit in linguistics or in the larger field of communication, in particular the semantic and ideological dimensions of literature. The lines between literary studies and cultural studies are sufficiently indistinct to authorize the exploration of literary formations as cultural phenomena. Thus, our sense of a beginning can be represented by concise discussion of indigenous African language practices and their impact in tandem with European cultural contacts on the emergence of African American literature. Had Africans from various ethnic groups not come into contact by virtue of their removal from Africa and relocation to the far distant lands of the Americas, it seems unlikely that our currently recognizable deep structures of black literature, as these have been discussed in seminal works by such critics as Houston A. Baker, Trudier Harris, Aldon Nielsen, Hortense Spillers, and Henry Louis Gates, would have ever evolved. Locating the origins of literary thought in the specific conditions of internal and external African slave trading reorients scholarly study to the indivisibility of form and the motives for producing forms, matters central in the history of literary production and reception.

The history of African American literature we envision borders on what one might call cultural genetics (diachronic study of language, rhythm, and sound pertinent to literature), a principled effort to minimize a priori conceptions of what really happened in the unfolding of a people's literature and to sift through extant textual evidence to tell a story.

Twentieth-century scholarship in the field of African American literature gave substantial attention to individual authors, genres, and movements, and it incorporated varying degrees of literary history in explaining how writers, generic transformations, and moments of unusual artistic productivity (the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance, for example) have shaped a literary tradition. Such early studies as Vernon Loggins's *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (1931), Sterling Brown's companion books *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1938) and *The Negro in American Fiction* (1938), J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), and Hugh Gloster's *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (1948) initiated historically focused discussions of literature. Based on materials gathered by Alain Locke, Margaret Just Butcher's *The Negro in American Culture* (1956) stressed what one might call the omni-American nature of African American culture, an issue that still must be negotiated in creating a comprehensive history of African American literature. For this history, we draw on a number of stellar studies of scholars, produced in the last thirty-plus years. John Lovell's *Black Song: The Force and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out* (1972) is a magisterial example of historical investigation of a genre. Eugene B. Redmond's *Drumvoices* (1976) provides comprehensive documentation of black poetry from 1746 to the 1970s. Addison Gayle's *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (1975), Bernard Bell's companion histories *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987) and *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Roots and Modern Literary Branches* (2004), and J. Lee Greene's *Blacks in Eden: The African American Novel's First Century* (1996) illustrate historiographic shifts in the study of a genre. Similarly, Stephen Butterfield's *Black Autobiography in America* (1974), William Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1986), Geta Leseur's *Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman* (1995), and Roland Williams's *African American Autobiography and the Quest for Freedom* (2000) emphasize the implications life writing may have for the development of other forms. These works and many others are preludes to the monumental tasks assumed by Blyden Jackson in *A History of Afro-American Literature*, vol. 1: *The Long Beginning, 1746–1895* (1989) and Dickson D. Bruce in *The Origins of African American Literature 1680–1865* (2001), namely, the creation of explanatory narratives of the first two centuries of the African American literary tradition. Prior to the publication of these works, scholars and students were obliged to develop a sense of African American literary history from various articles, books, bibliographies, and the introductory matter in anthologies of African American literature. Jackson and Bruce were arguably pioneers in attempting

comprehensive explorations of the historical conditions governing the African American literary enterprise, and their books served as useful guides for the construction of this volume.

This literary history establishes the validity of engaging a people's expressions over time by accounting for the simultaneity of aesthetic, political, spiritual, and religious dimensions in their works. It makes a case for what might be called liberated readings by orienting readers to the ways that African American writers, or creators if you will, have used principles of overdeterminacy in shaping situated responses, the emotive and intellectual traces of their being-in-the-world.

*The Cambridge History of African American Literature* reflects the intentions and preferences of the editors, these being an inevitable result of temporality, our cultural grounding, and scholarly trends. However much historical narratives are governed by "facts" about the subject, the selection and ordering of "facts" is influenced by varying degrees of subjectivity. The history is never totally objective. Ethical scholarship demands that readers be aware of the justifications that buttress the narrative choices, methodologies, and angles of interpretation present in the history. At this point in the history of scholarship, the weight given to theory in literary and cultural studies often does not encourage a balance between judging literary texts as documentary evidence and evaluating the formal features of those texts to expose their rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions. In short, it is possible to have a literary history that deemphasizes the Horatian ideals of delighting and instructing. We wished to avoid this embarrassment in the making of this volume, because we deem literature and literary transactions to be profoundly human activities.

We consider the text, whether from oral or print traditions, as necessary responses to the affairs and conditions that at any given time serve as catalysts for literary interpretations and discourses. This in no way reduces our concern with the language or languages of spoken (oral tradition) and written texts, what Gates has called our "speakerly" and "writerly" legacy.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, it is use of language and multiple forms of literacy that give shape and substance to a literary tradition. It is Goldman who reminds us that this use of language is one element of a complex phenomenon he saw as "the object of historical sciences," just as McHenry urges us to change "our focus from...familiar to unfamiliar definitions of literacy."<sup>13</sup>

Aware that contemporary literary theory and criticism may inadvertently minimize the importance of human agency in literary discourse, we foreground the importance of human consciousness and will in the creation of

literature. Thus we highlight moral, political, and aesthetic concerns of texts with varying degrees of emphasis, fully aware of the extent to which these are often determined by specific critical schools and preferences. The object of this variation, of course, is to find a convincing balance between what we know about texts and the contexts from which they emerged. We will note as a cautionary matter that history, as opposed to criticism, demands sensitivity to how a given work might have provoked or otherwise engaged an audience in the past and to how the same work engages the modern mind. We are obligated to observe the distinction E. D. Hirsch made in *Validity in Interpretation* between “meaning”, which is provisionally static, and “significance”, which varies among interpreters. Such observation tempered our planning, although we were aware that Hirsch’s formulation must always be challenged by recognition that meaning and significance are not givens but constructions.<sup>14</sup>

The division of the volume into three parts is consistent with our intention to present a fairly complete chronological ordering of events and assess the developments and major trends in African American literature from its African origins to its print inception in the seventeenth century to the present. Each part is then organized into chapters with dates to serve as a general guide for the reader. We caution readers to remember that beginning and ending dates for these divisions are suggestive. They are not absolute. The conditions that impact various forms of cultural production affect writers, and writers expand and explode the very boundaries we may claim they define. It is to be expected, therefore, that our chapter authors will refer to and discuss writers and texts that might appear outside the timeline of their coverage, just as we consider it appropriate to allow a certain degree of overlap among the individual chapters.

The eleven chapters in Part 1 deal with the African American literary tradition from 1600 to 1910. We have chosen to begin with what Blyden Jackson considers the two-hundred-year germination period of African American literature, dating back to 1441 when the first Africans were captured by a Portuguese sea captain, thus initiating that lucrative and all-encompassing event the Atlantic slave trade, and redefining the entire Atlantic world.<sup>15</sup> The subsequent peopling of North America by European settlers, the importation of African slaves, and the widespread practice of American slavery are primary factors to be considered when examining the meanings and materials constituting the earliest African American literature. It was indeed a “literature of Africans in America.” F. Abiola Irele’s opening chapter draws the reader’s

attention to what many critics have agreed is central to this literature as it was then and now: the element of *sound*, a black sound, as manifested through the languages of music and the voice. There are two main reasons why sound is given preeminence. First, Africans brought to the Americas were prohibited by law from being taught to read and write in English. For a longer time than most people living in a foreign land, therefore, African Americans were forced to create effective and elaborate systems for communicating based on sound and the instruments of sound, the voice, the body, and, for those who were fortunate, the drum. The second reason is that the newly arrived Africans spoke many languages that would become an interethnic language through a continuing process of creolization. This was a functional language needed to serve multiple roles, not the least of which was negotiating plantation life. Thus, the relationship between the spoken and the written and the values reinforced by the politics of dislocation, relocation, and identity as the basis for oral and print literatures, must be kept in mind.

Against this backdrop of conquest, colonization, and the acquisition of wealth and power, a series of public discourses and legal actions which authorized specific ideologies of race became absorbed into an emergent black literature between 1600 and 1800. Both print and oral, both Anglophone and colonial, it was created by African slaves, free blacks, and mulattoes, for whom the memories of Africa were essential to their psychic and social survival, as so many of the slave songs confirm. By offering this perspective as a way to understand the travel and exchanges initiated by the slave trade as one of the earliest forms of transnationalism, Philip Gould and Vincent Carretta in Chapters 2 and 3 confirm the centrality of African-derived people to the project of modernity, which is discussed at length in Part II. Just as Paul Gilroy has linked modernity to his concept of the Black Atlantic as a form of intellectual and geographic encounter,<sup>16</sup> so too are we reminded that a sizeable body of writing by kidnapped African travelers to England, colonial America, and elsewhere planted the seeds of the contemporary Black Diaspora. It was this literature of movement, “geographical, ontological and rhetorical,” as Gould convincingly argues, that began to demonstrate “complex negotiations of the language and ideas normally associated with Enlightenment ideology.”

The years between 1820 and 1865 are as critical as they are ironic in the development of African American writing. If we consider the subject of slavery and the representation of black people in literature, then we could argue that at this juncture virtually all American literature is “black.” Chapter 4 by Stefan Wheelock and Chapter 5 by John Ernest consider the



forty-five-year period from inside and outside the organized abolitionist movement in order to comprehend the broad range of activities that produced antislavery literature. Wheelock pays special attention to a literature of self-empowerment, resistance, and spiritual reform, created by those who imagined new possibilities for women in religious authority, a development that did not take place without struggle. By looking at the geographical distribution of the African American population in the United States in midcentury, the coexistence of different language traditions, and the literature of both enslaved and free people, we can gain a fuller appreciation of the richness and diversity of pre-Civil War literature, while emphasizing the larger question of literacy and the growth of print culture in America. Chapter 6 by Kimberly Blockett and Chapter 7 by Joycelyn Moody concentrate on the purposes of writing and reading, especially when the ideas of freedom and independence are being interrogated. They point to some new directions that challenge conventional notions of literary and cultural production, distribution, and audience in some of the most crucial decades of the nineteenth century. From militant activism and radical abolition to expressions of national, cultural, and linguistic identity, African American literature began to consolidate a complex racial and cultural identity well before Emancipation. If there is a central theme in this literature, it is a concern with resisting the monolithic and generally negative view of African Americans, encouraged, however inadvertently, by the focus on slavery. What all the literature shares, whether antislavery or pro-black, is a belief in the freedom to speak for oneself. In an effort to reflect this diversity, Blockett explores literature written by free blacks North and South, while Moody examines the origins and impact of the black press.

The fight against slavery necessitated a propagandistic mode of writing committed to education and information about “the peculiar institution” as it agitated for the end of slavery. Postbellum America frames an era commonly understood as the “dawn of freedom,” the years between 1865 and 1910, which presented new conditions for forging an entirely new literature of necessity. It is not surprising that during Reconstruction (1865–77) the contradiction between the possibility of a fully realized freedom and the threat of new forms of oppression and discrimination fueled enormous debates. African American literature after the Civil War begins to shift its racial discourse in order to (1) promote racial and moral uplift, social progress, and solidarity; (2) gain an identifiable, if not authoritative presence in mainstream America; and (3) exercise greater control over the representation of self. In part, this is a function of the way African American literature

confronted late nineteenth-century sensibilities, including the “cult of true womanhood,” the sentimental novel, and diminishing national interest in the plight of black people.

As Warren J. Carson points out in Chapter 8, despite the end of Reconstruction and entrenchment of segregation, the rapid growth of public and church-supported educational institutions, advances in print technology, and an earnest desire to overcome the obstacles of economic oppression gave substance and energy to a multifaceted enterprise that African Americans took to mean freedom. The institutional and organizational life of blacks took highly visible forms and created important roles for women in churches, businesses, and self-help societies. This, in turn, inspired autobiographies, biographies, and anthologies of achievement, and fiction focusing on domesticity, racial violence, and empowerment. These forms of writing were profoundly impacted by the changes in demography, the increase in literacy, the activities of women’s and literary clubs, and the revitalization of an independent black press, which, as Donald Joyce points out, was at an all time high.<sup>17</sup> While large numbers of African Americans remained on farms, a significant number migrated to the North, Midwest, and West. Migrations of African American people created greater opportunities for them to be influenced by a wider range of cross-cultural dynamics and traditions than was possible during slavery. In this regard, black literature, like dance and music, symbolized and represented ideas and emotions that were themselves in flux, the idea that prompted Farah Jasmine Griffin’s investigation into the development of an “African American migration narrative,” giving the provocative title of her resulting work as *Who Set You Flowin’?* (1995). In order to give sufficient attention to the key generic developments in the critical years before the New Negro Renaissance, this section includes Chapter 9, Keith Byerman and Hanna Wallinger’s discussions of fiction by both men and women, and reconsiderations of poetry in Chapter 10 by Keith Leonard and Chapter 11 by Mark A. Sanders. These chapters allow for more focused and parallel discussions of African American poetry and fiction.

The beginning years of the twentieth century provide a point of origin for Part II. Changing conditions of African American life and new structures of authority governing ideas, action, and expression contributed to a collective declaration of identity and social cohesion, which we define as a specific African American modernism, an organizing theme for Part II. The twelve chapters deal with what might be considered “geographies of the modern” for the years from 1910 to 1950. For the period between 1950 and 1976, chapters treat the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic phenomena era as critical historical markers; the final set of chapters look more

closely at the narrative and poetic transformations that took place in the years after 1976.

Considerable scholarship already exists on the New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance, a period usually limited to the decade of the 1920s. However, the imperatives driving the Renaissance, delineated in Craig H. Werner and Sandra G. Shannon's Chapter 12, serve as the basis for our extending the Renaissance period to the 1950s. These imperatives came from the growing acceptance of the literary representations of blacks by blacks and were facilitated by the commercialization and commodification of African American expressive culture, all of which made for new aesthetic possibilities. Emily Bernard follows in Chapter 13 with a consideration of "The New Negro Movement and the politics of art." Equally important, however, is the period between 1920 and 1950, defined by two major wars, a depression, the transformation of black people from rural to urban, immigrations, and the rise of a Cold War sensibility. Therefore, in Chapters 14 and 15, Darryl Dickson-Carr and Nicole Waligora-Davis describe the shift toward social realism in literary expression, one that, while different from the New Negro Renaissance in style and emphasis, demonstrates a continued and highly influential period of literary productivity, which manifested itself in a Chicago Renaissance and also became far more global following the Great Depression.

Chapter 16 by John Lowe sets the tone for the discussion of the Civil Rights era in African American literature by exploring the post-Second World War fashioning of the American story. While the radical innovation in artistic expression and a certain occupation with the exchanges between America and Europe have shaped our notion of a Renaissance, we follow the lead established by Houston Baker, Craig Werner, George Hutchinson, and others by looking at an interior domestic context to better understand the dynamics of African American literary culture. This emphasis, however, does not deny the importance of continuing interaction of ideas and expressions between and among the multilingual population of black people living in the United States and throughout the African Diaspora, interactions to which Sabine Broeck and Daryl Cumber Dance give attention in Chapters 17 and 18.

Many have considered the decade of the 1950s a golden age in African American literature. It began as Gwendolyn Brooks won a Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* in 1950, only to be followed by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* (1959). The criticism on Ellison and Hansberry alone suggests that African American literature by the late fifties not only had found an audience, but also had declared itself a rhetorical battleground, capable of generating ideas, metaphors, and myths that were

undeniably American. While this is the shortest period in our historical narrative, it evokes both the most important and the most radical changes that help account for the complex sensibility that would govern subsequent black literary practice. With increased educational and social opportunities, a new generation of writers emerged whose careers would take full shape after 1970, all intent on rethinking the conceptual boundaries for African American literature and the literary imagination. In addition to Ellison, Brooks, and Hansberry, the period saw the emergence of James Baldwin, Paule Marshall, and, as the decade drew to a close, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) among others. In general, African American writing drew its strength from an ability to master the themes and conventions of traditional American writing, while simultaneously engaging in a new “literary archaeology,” as Toni Morrison suggests.<sup>18</sup> We view the 1950s as the beginning of a sustained period of highly influential black writing and its preeminence in American culture. Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, John A. Williams, and Leon Forrest, who were college age in the 1950s, were among the first generation of black writers to come of age reading other black writers whom the broader society would soon acknowledge as extraordinary.

This portion of *CHAAL*, therefore, offers a close examination of two decades with epoch-changing events and occurrences: the Civil Rights Movement and the dismantling of legal segregation, the Black Power Movement, the Vietnam War, and the Feminist Movement. The contradictory nature of the period is indicated by the lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi and race riots in Newark, Detroit, and Chicago on the one hand. On the other there were sweeping changes in the body politic as a result of well-funded federal and private programs to advance social justice and promote equality, especially those in higher education that resulted in the institutionalization of Black Studies. Determining the relationship between the literary works and the period thus requires paying careful attention to the way in which African American literature engaged these contradictory cultural forces. It is not insignificant that the two decades seemed to be diametrically opposed to one another: the fifties bringing about the hopefulness of integration within the USA, the sixties calling for the death of US capitalism. Whatever ideological orientation one takes, until then, little attention had been given to solving the nation’s most pressing social and economic problems. Following the assassinations and deaths of a host of leaders, both known and unknown – John Kennedy, Medgar Evers (Mississippi NAACP leader), Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. – riots erupted in the nation’s cities confirming the magnitude of unaddressed problems.

The shift in the political and ideological winds is reflected in the phrase “black art is black life” and the call for a new literature, revolutionary in content and form, the subject of the final chapter in this grouping. This new black literature is governed by a Black Aesthetic that James E. Smethurst and Howard Ramsby II explore at length in Chapter 19. Expressing the rage and intensity of the period, the Black Aesthetic defined itself as a new spiritual and political force, indeed a Black Arts Movement (BAM). It found its base among a grassroots, working-class population, most of whom had seen little if any change in their own social circumstances. Oppositional by definition, BAM found its parallel in an assortment of institutional formations, the most important of which was the rise of Black Studies, and the wide-scale educational reforms that were not always willingly embraced by the academy. BAM and the radical rupture that African American artists made with the past gave new meaning to racial and historical narratives.

By investigating these literary developments in the twentieth century in view of recent theories about race, gender, and cultural politics, the chapters in Part II defer acts of judgment that would emphasize the failure or successes of a given movement. Instead, these chapters enable our looking more closely at ways in which African American writing was advanced through radical and conservative agendas that added complex layerings and histories for writers to uncover. Just as we considered New York and Chicago as literary case studies for the 1920s and 1930s, we consider multiple centers of production as well as various platforms during the 1960s and 1970s. This strategy permits the juxtaposition of leading authors with lesser-known writers and less-discussed genres, such as theater. But it also allows Trudier Harris in Chapter 20 to examine what is involved when writers turn the facts of history into fiction. This turn to history and the historical in search of “sites of memory,” the term popularized by Pierre Nora,<sup>19</sup> is especially noticeable in works that followed Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966). The folk novel of slavery and reconstruction demonstrated the rich literary potential in that very subject matter that most had wanted to forget. Likewise, in Chapters 21 and 22 Opal J. Moore and Tony Bolden look at these developments as they took shape in black poetry, without dismissing the role and importance of the earlier Black Arts Movement, which perhaps contributed to rather than detracted from – as some have argued – greater mainstream visibility for many poets. Retaining the focus on genre in these chapters leads to greater insights about the cross-fertilization between and among forms of written and oral expression. Mapping the growth and development of black literary production becomes central to each of these chapters which consider the twentieth century from a chronological

perspective. Rather than a finite sense of beginnings and endings of movements, the intention is to foster a deeper understanding of the continuities, appropriate breaks, disruptions, and false starts and to help recover a sense of balance between internal and external factors that directly or indirectly shaped literary ideas and practices at a given moment, for a particular group of writers in one or more geographical locations.

If there is a year that is most significant for the history of contemporary African American literary production, it is 1970. It was in that year that Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Louise Meriweather, Alice Walker, Toni Cade [Bambara], Mari Evans, Michael Harper, Audre Lorde, and Maya Angelou each published a major work; Charles Gordone won the Pulitzer Prize for his provocative play *No Place To Be Somebody*. This decided shift leads us to consider some of the reasons for the increased demand for and reception of black literature. In terms of content, scholars are generally agreed that African American literature in the last three decades of the twentieth century was marked by a reinvestment in storytelling and orality. African American literature redefined the meaning and function of art as an aesthetic and social force, and, especially since the 1980s, has placed a greater importance upon performance-based modes of expression. Writers confronted race, directly, obliquely, or not at all, and they examined or reexamined issues of class, gender, sexuality, and intragroup relations to a far greater extent than ever before. This body of literature, as Madhu Dubey and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg discuss it in Chapter 23, has produced a rich array of forms that utilize the dramatic, lyric, and narrative modes in new ways and draw their fundamental strength and energy from the social/political context of various cultural origins. This concluding chapter in Part II confirms the existence of an African American literature that continues to push beyond national and aesthetic boundaries, even as it moves inward, passionately and expertly reclaiming the past. Thus, we are especially concerned in Part II with how texts “rediscovered” now reshape views of their past “significance.”

Part III, while still historical, is a reminder that this volume serves as a corrective to conventional literary histories by addressing the apparent contradiction between culture and capital. Appropriately called “African American literature as academic and cultural capital,” its five chapters reflect upon the operations of literature in the marketplace and forms of scholarly practice. At a time when modern technologies enable works to reach untold numbers of American and international audiences, we can get the illusion that literature addresses a unified community of audiences in sexual, gender, or class terms. The truth is that the market is more segmented than it ever has been.

Moreover, at least one consequence of this expanded marketability of black texts is the creation of false boundaries between modes – the literary and the popular, for example – too often used to determine what is worthy of critical attention and what is not. Just as modern technology makes possible the interface between words, sound, and rhythm creating new “texts,” the interface between new readers and black literature has redefined the role and importance of reading and writing in a postmodern age. While this is a topic for a book-length discussion in its own right, it must be noted here that those very works considered insufficiently “literary” have created a large base of readers and writers and represent a sizeable component of African American literary production. More importantly, both children’s literature, as examined by Giselle Liza Anatol in Chapter 24, and popular fiction, examined here by Candice Love Jackson in Chapter 25, pose questions to readers and viewers about race, power, and social change in innovative and effective ways that have generated lively discussions about textual, ideological, and aesthetic concerns. A second important area is African American theater, which has made significant strides in building new audiences, especially with the record performances of playwrights such as August Wilson, three-time Pulitzer Prize winner. The stage as a site for engaging matters of history and culture opens up numerous possibilities unavailable before, according to Harry J. Elam in Chapter 26. To this extent, while we must view literary production as being driven by market forces that define both the audience and the form, it also adds range and complexity that changes the terms of literary discourse altogether. These popular fictions, as Jackson argues, must therefore be seen on a continuum that includes the textual play of Toni Morrison’s fiction as well as other kinds of texts (such as romance novels) that meet specific cultural and ideological needs of dedicated audiences. Because this is a very complex area for scholarship with countless volumes published since the 1970s, Chapter 25 does not offer detailed discussion of the works. It does, however, cover representative authors, outlining the historical and political developments shaping this unique period in African American literary history.

With regard to the history of scholarly practice, Chapter 27 by Lawrence P. Jackson is devoted to the rise of theory and criticism before the epistemic ruptures of the 1960s. Looking at what came before allows us to consider the relationship between established literary discourses and paradigms. Tracing the work of black scholars from the 1940s to the 1960s, who worked primarily in “separate spheres” and were for the most part excluded from the mainstream dialogues, highlights the conditions leading up to and surrounding radical shifts after the publication of *Black Fire* (1968) and *Afro-American*

*Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (1979). The displacement of traditional, hegemonic critical paradigms in works by Addison Gayle, Jr., Stephen E. Henderson, Lorenzo Thomas, and other Black Aesthetic theorists was itself overturned by what might be named critical reconciliation with structuralism, postmodernism, the new historicism, and deconstruction. Finally, Kenneth W. Warren's Chapter 28 points us to forms of things unknown about a future for African American literature in the twenty-first century.

In its totality, *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* bids readers to ponder their own roles in the construction and reconstruction of a literary history, and whether, as Kenneth W. Warren proposes by way of tentative conclusion, "the [presumed] end of racial inequality will also portend the end of any significant cultural work for African American literature." We are obliged, of course, to withhold judgment on the matter until other literary histories are written in the problematic nowness of the twenty-first century.

Like anthologies, contemporary literary histories are compilations of parts rather than seamless expositions. They always leave some portion of the story untold. Written by independent, transnational thinkers who are not of one accord regarding the dialogic, aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural dimensions of ethnicity-bound narratives, *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* contains omissions. For some perspectives they deem essential, readers will have to consult specialized articles and books. It is the function of the *CHAAL* bibliography and suggested further readings to direct them to those resources. Attention to forms of black writing that have special efferent and aesthetic properties – namely, letters, personal and political essays, biographies, "pure" and collaborative autobiographies, film as literature, the graphic narratives of an Aaron McGruder, and contemporary orature – is either diffuse or invisible.

The most obvious omission is sustained commentary on such "canonized" and "uncanonized" writers as Alice Childress, John Oliver Killens, Toni Cade Bambara, Alvin Aubert, Maya Angelou, Kalamu ya Salaam, Arthenia Bates Millican, Toi Derricotte, and others, all of whom ought to be acknowledged as participants in the evolution of African American literature. The absence will very likely evoke partisan execration, and the signifying must be confronted with audacious forthrightness. Truth be told, considerations about word count, literary historical subjectivity, instances of editorial amnesia in accounting for three centuries of literature, and the mission impossible of herding cats are all to blame. We are cognizant of gaps, the want of full disclosure. *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* is a necessary but not a definitive one, because a definitive literary history remains a post-future project.



## Notes

1. Mario J. Valdez and Linda Hutcheon, *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. ix–x.
2. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text,” in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 170–261.
3. Stephen E. Henderson (ed.), *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow, 1972).
4. Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 6–7.
5. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
6. See Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
7. Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 174–175.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
9. Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in Vincent B. Leitch et al. (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 1470–1475.
10. Dickson Bruce, *The Origins of African American Literature 1680–1865* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. ix.
11. Lucien Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 2.
12. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, pp. xxv–xxviii.
13. McHenry, *Forgotten Readers*, p. 14.
14. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 8.
15. Blyden Jackson, *A History of Afro-American Literature*, vol. 1: *The Long Beginning, 1746–1895* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 1.
16. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
17. Donald Joyce, *Gatekeepers of Black Culture: Black Owned Book Publishers in the US 1817–1981* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).
18. Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in William Zinsser (ed.), *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 183–199; p. 112.
19. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” in Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally (eds.), *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 284–300.



PART I

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AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE  
FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE  
TWENTIETH CENTURY

