

# THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Valerie A. Smith, General Editors

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF

AFRICAN  
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LITERATURE

THIRD EDITION

VOLUME 1



THE VERNACULAR TRADITION

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THE NEW NEGRO RENAISSANCE

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# THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *General Editor*

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VOLUME 1



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*In memory of Nellie Y. McKay*



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## Preface to the Third Edition

In the fall of 1986, eleven scholars gathered on the campus of Cornell University to discuss the need for a *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* and to consider how best to execute the mammoth task of editing such a historic anthology, should we collectively decide to embark upon it. These scholars, chosen for their leadership in the field, represented a wide array of methodological approaches to the study of literature; each had a particular expertise in at least one historical period in the African American literary tradition. We were accompanied in our deliberations by M. H. Abrams, the "father" of Norton Anthologies, and John Benedict, vice president and editor at Norton, both of whom had championed our project during its two-year gestation period from proposal to approval.

Two things struck us all, we think it fair to say, about our discussions. First was a certain sense of history-in-the-making, in which we were participating by the act of editing this anthology. While anthologies of African American literature had been published at least since 1845, ours would be the first Norton Anthology, and Norton—along with just a few other publishers—had become synonymous to our generation with canon formation. Because of its scope and size, a Norton Anthology could serve as "a course in a book," as John Benedict was fond of saying. So, in spite of the existence of dozens of anthologies of black literature—a tradition of which we were keenly aware since we had closely studied the tables of contents and editorial introductions of each of these and photocopied and bound them for each of our prospective editors—none was ample enough to include between two covers the range of the texts necessary to satisfy the requirements of an entire survey course. To meet this need was our goal.

This was crucial if we were going to make the canon of African American literature as readily accessible to teachers and students as were, say, the canons of American or English literature. Too often, we had heard colleagues complain that they *would* teach African American literature "if only the texts were available" in a form affordable to their students, meaning in a one- or two-volume anthology, rather than in a half dozen or more individual volumes. Were we successful in our endeavor, we believed, then not only could teachers teach African American literature, but they would do so eagerly, and new courses would be created in four- and two-year institutions and at the high school level. A well-edited, affordable anthology democratizes access. And broader access was essential for the permanent institutionalization of the black literary tradition within departments of English, American Studies, and African American Studies.

The second surprise of our Ithaca meeting was how “un-theoretical” the process of editing would be. Many of us were deeply engaged in the passionate theoretical debates that would define “the canon wars,” as they came to be called. It soon became apparent to us that editing an anthology is not primarily a process concerned with *theorizing* canon formation; rather, it is about *forming* a canon itself. If we were successful, we would be canon-makers, not canon-breakers. Our theories about the canon, no matter how intricately woven, were not as important as the actual practice of agreeing upon the periodization of African American literature published (principally in English) in England and the United States between 1746 and the present and then selecting the signal texts in the tradition that comprise its canon.

Ironically, we were embarking upon a process of canon formation precisely when many of our poststructuralist colleagues were questioning the value of a canon itself. Our argument was that the scholars of our literary tradition needed first to *construct* a canon before it could be deconstructed! For while the scores of anthologies of African American literature published since 1845 had each, in a way, made claims to canon formation, few, if any, had been widely embraced in the college curriculum. And that process of adoption for use in college courses is a necessary aspect of canon formation.

So, setting aside our individual passions for theorizing, we collectively got down to the nuts and bolts of editorial policymaking, addressing fundamental questions such as how many pages to devote to each period, where those periods should start and stop, and what principles of selection would lead us to the gathering of works that were essential both in the formation of our tradition and to its teaching and explication. Though readily available elsewhere, certain core texts, such as Frederick Douglass's 1845 slave narrative, we agreed, must be included, since our goal was to respond to our Norton editor's challenge to produce “a course in a book.” Our task, then, was not primarily to bring lost or obscure texts back into print; rather, it was to make available in one representative anthology the major texts in the tradition and to construct a canon inductively, text by text, period by period, rather than deductively—that is, rather than through *a priori* ideological or thematic principles agreed upon in advance, which would function like a straitjacket for our selections. Further, through carefully edited introductions and headnotes, we wanted to help students see how these texts “speak to,” or signify upon, each other, just as they had “spoken” to each other across time, space, and genre, as authors read and revised each other's representations of the experiences, feelings, and beliefs of persons of African descent pondering the ironies of being at once black, American, and human. We wanted the anthology to give full voice to the key tropes and topoi that repeat—are echoed and riffed and signified upon—so strikingly across the African American literary tradition, thereby allowing formal linkages to be foregrounded in the classroom. Most importantly, we agreed that each period editor would have the final say about the texts selected for her or his period. A full decade would follow our organizational meeting in Ithaca, but in 1997, the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* was born.

To our surprise, the anthology was widely reviewed in both trade and academic publications, commencing with a major feature in *The New York Times*. Perhaps even more surprising, the trade edition was purchased in great numbers by nonacademics, often members of the growing African American reading public, hungry for texts about themselves. Within the academy, more than 1,275 colleges and universities worldwide have adopted the anthology since publication in 1997. The first anthology to allow the oral tradition to “speak” for itself through recordings of music and spoken-word performances, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* has made an important statement about the crucial role of the vernacular in shaping our written tradition.

In this Third Edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, we offer the most extensive revision in our publishing history. Three new editors have joined the team: Valerie A. Smith, Dean of the College, Woodrow Wilson Professor of Literature, Professor of English and African American Studies at Princeton University, who succeeds the late Nellie Y. McKay as co-General Editor; Brent Hayes Edwards, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University, who succeeds Arnold Rampersad as editor of “The Harlem Renaissance”; and Kimberly W. Benson, Francis B. Gummere Professor of English and Director of the Hurford Center for Arts and Humanities, Haverford College, who succeeds Houston A. Baker, Jr. as editor of “The Black Arts Era.” Each editor, new or continuing, is a well-known expert in the relevant field or period, and had ultimate responsibility for his or her section of the anthology, but we have worked collaboratively from first to last.

The Third Edition has benefited from a wealth of suggestions from instructors and students using the book in the classroom. It includes the work of 140 writers, representing African American vernacular traditions, poetry, drama, short fiction, the novel, slave narratives, essays, memoir, and autobiography. In keeping with the practical goal of offering “a course in a book,” we have included the following longer texts in their entirety: Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa*; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*; James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; Jean Toomer, *Cane*; Nella Larsen, *Passing*; Richard Wright, “Fire and Cloud”; Alice Childress, *Trouble in Mind*; Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha*; Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*; Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*; Toni Morrison, *Sula*; Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*; August Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*; and Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*. Likewise, we continue to make available, where possible, texts that we believe represent the origins of a genre: among these “firsts” are Lucy Terry’s only poem, “Bars Fight” (1746), the earliest known poem by an African American; Victor Séjour’s “The Mulatto,” the earliest short story by an African American (published in Paris in 1837); selections from the first African American novel, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853); and, new to the Third Edition, a selection from Hannah Crafts’s *The Bondswoman’s Narrative* (1858), the first novel written by a black woman and the first novel written by a female fugitive slave. We have also tried to select texts that most fully reflect the technical and rhetorical development of the various genres over time. For

the first time, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* features more than 75 illustrations added throughout the volumes.

The Third Edition, in its new two-volume format, includes a wealth of fresh selections. Volume 1, *Beginnings through the Harlem Renaissance*, opens with the first of two parts devoted to the Vernacular Tradition; the earliest forms—spirituals, secular rhymes and songs, ballads, work songs, the blues, and folktales are included in Part 1. “The Literature of Slavery and Freedom, 1746–1865” introduces four important early voices: William Craft and Ellen Craft, authors of “Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom;” “S,” the author of “Theresa, A Haytien Tale;” Hannah Crafts, now authoritatively recognized as author of *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*; and Solomon Northup, whose bestselling narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* was a literary sensation in 1853. Responding to instructors’ requests, an important chapter from Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has been added. To “The Literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance, 1865–1919” have been added the peripatetic Nicholas Said’s “A Native of Bornoo,” as well as short fiction by Charles W. Chesnutt and Pauline E. Hopkins.

“The Harlem Renaissance” has been dramatically revised. The period introduction pays fresh attention to the reach of modernist innovation and debate in the period, both geographically and across a variety of arts. New writers Hubert Harrison, Eric Walrond, Paul Robeson, Nicolás Guillén, René Maran, and Richard Bruce Nugent, as well as new selections by Alain Locke, Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, George Samuel Schyuler, and Langston Hughes attest to the diversity of the renaissance in Harlem and across the globe. Responding to instructors’ requests, Nella Larsen’s compelling novel *Passing* and Jean Toomer’s groundbreaking *Cane* are newly included in their entirety.

In Volume 2, *Realism, Naturalism, Modernism to the Present*, “The Vernacular Tradition, Part 2,” features an expanded discussion of hip-hop in the section introduction and new lyrics by Jay-Z and Jean Grae. “Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, 1940–1960” offers new selections in a variety of genres: new author Alice Childress is represented by her play *Trouble in Mind*; also added are Chester B. Himes’s short story “Cotton Gonna Kill Me Yet,” Gwendolyn Brooks’s much-requested poem “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” and a pair of important essays: Richard Wright’s “Fire and Cloud” and—building on the international theme—James Baldwin’s “Princes and Powers.”

Selections in “The Black Arts Era, 1960–1975” have been extensively rethought to more fully mirror that dynamic era; these shifts are discussed in the revised period introduction, headnotes, and annotations. Six writers—Raymond Patterson, Calvin Hernton, Henry Dumas, David Henderson, Amos Mor, and James T. Stewart—are newly included, and a host of writers—Malcolm X, Sonya Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde, Larry Neal, June Jordan, Haki R. Madhubuti, among others—are represented with new or expanded selections. New plays include Ed Bullins’s short experimental play, *Clara’s Ole Man*, and Adrienne Kennedy’s much-requested *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

"Literature since 1975" keeps pace with the contemporary scene with the addition of six new authors—fiction writer Edward P. Jones; Barack Obama, represented by his powerful "Race Speech"; Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks; and poets Elizabeth Alexander, Natasha Trethewey, Kevin Young, and Tracy K. Smith. Works by several others have been reselected, notably poets Rita Dove and Lucille Clifton, and the Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison, whose novel *Sula* is included in its entirety. The revised period introduction pays fresh attention to the powerful influence on writers of signal events of the twenty-first century, from Hurricane Katrina to the reelection of Barack Obama to the death of Trayvon Martin. Fresh attention is paid to science fiction by black writers, to the resurgence of autobiographical writing, and, in counterpoint to the urban phenomenon of hip-hop, to urban fiction by women writers.

Finally, with the Third Edition, the internet enables us to expand and diversify our selections of oral literature, music, and the spoken words of authors themselves. Building on our conviction that vernacular expression lives in performance (not merely on the page), we now provide to adopters a new Instructor Resource Disc that makes rich media conveniently accessible for classroom use. It features the vocal and instrumental and spoken-word selections formerly found on the audio CDs, as well as Robert G. O'Meally's liner notes, plus new audio recordings, and over 180 images. In addition, students have free access—via the registration code printed inside the front cover of the book—to the StudySpace website ([www.norton.com/africanamericanlit](http://www.norton.com/africanamericanlit)) specially developed for the Norton Anthology. The site features an embedded playlist with over 100 songs and spoken-word audio selections, conveniently available for students who wish to listen outside of class; YouTube performance clips, including archival film, speeches, and music videos for songs featured in "The Vernacular Tradition," among other materials.

### *Additional Resources from the Publisher*

The Third Edition introduces a two-volume paperback format that has been welcomed for its flexibility and portability by instructors and students using Norton Anthologies. This format accommodates instructors who use the anthology in either a one- or two-semester survey. To give instructors even greater flexibility, the publisher is making available the full list of 230 Norton Critical Editions, including such frequently assigned novels as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*. A Norton Critical Edition can be packaged with the anthology for free. Each Norton Critical Edition gives students an authoritative, carefully annotated text accompanied by rich contextual and critical materials prepared by an expert in the subject.

As mentioned above, students who activate the free StudySpace password included in each new copy of the anthology gain access to the embedded playlist, performance clips, and images, as well as more than 30 reading-comprehension quizzes with extensive feedback, 50 short-answer questions, and an extensive glossary. The rich gathering of content on StudySpace is

designed to help students understand individual works and appreciate the sounds and sights of African American literature and the vernacular tradition. For new and seasoned instructors, *Teaching with The Norton Anthology of African American Literature: A Guide for Instructors* by Bryan Sinche, University of Hartford, provides discussion questions; lists of themes and characteristics for each author in the anthology; suggested readings for thematically organized courses; strategies for teaching the vernacular tradition; a selected bibliography of pedagogic resources; suggestions for integrating media in the classroom; and essay and exam questions. The Guide is available in a searchable online format. Finally, Norton Coursepacks bring high-quality digital media into a new or existing online course. The Coursepacks include all content from the StudySpace website. Norton's Coursepacks are available in a variety of formats, including Blackboard/WebCT, Desire2Learn, Angel, and Moodle, at no cost to instructors or students.

### *Editorial Procedures*

In each literary period, the anthology presents the writers in the order of their birth dates and the works of each writer in the order of their publication. Thus, the anthology's organization facilitates a chronological approach to African American authors as well as generic or thematic approaches. Each editor has been responsible for defining the canonical writings of his or her period and for writing introductory essays, headnotes, and footnotes reflecting the best available scholarship. As in other Norton anthologies, period introductions and author headnotes are meant to be self-sufficient, thereby minimizing the student's need for supplementary biographical, political, or cultural material. After each work, we cite (when known) the date of composition on the left, and the date of first publication on the right. When a work has been excerpted, "From" appears before the title; the omissions are indicated in the text by three asterisks; and, when necessary, summaries of deleted material are provided. The Selected Bibliographies for each period and author have been updated. The timeline, included as an appendix, has been enlarged and updated.

Producing and revising this anthology has been a truly collaborative effort. The project has moved forward with the help of hundreds of colleagues in the field, who evaluated its general merits, made early recommendations for individual selections, and later proposed refinements and expansions based on their and their students' classroom experience. The editors are deeply indebted to these teachers. A list of Acknowledgments names advisors who prepared detailed critiques of the selections and responded to the extensive user survey that helped us shape the Third Edition.

The editors would like to thank M. H. Abrams and the late John Benedict for believing in this project and supporting it from its inception, as did Donald Lamm, then chairman of W. W. Norton & Company. The late Barry Wade eagerly accepted editorship upon the untimely death of John Benedict. Julia Reidhead, our longtime inhouse editor, not only has been a tireless advocate of this project but also has displayed a dazzling attention to detail. Without her support, this project would not have been realized. We also give special thanks to Carly Fraser Doria, Associate Editor, who

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We have attempted to reconstruct the African American literary heritage without pretending to completeness. Limitations of space and prohibitions on copyright have prevented us from including several authors whose texts are important to the canon and whose level of excellence warrants inclusion here. Despite these limitations, we believe that we have represented justly the African American literary tradition by reprinting many of its most historically important and aesthetically sophisticated works. The authors of these works (whose birth dates range from 1730 to 1972) have made the text of Western letters speak in voices and timbres resonant, resplendent, and variously "black." Taken together, they form a literary tradition in which African American authors collectively affirm that the will to power is the will to write and to testify eloquently in aesthetic forms never far removed from the language of music and the rhythmic resonance of the spoken word.

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

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## Introduction

### Talking Books

The lesson to be drawn from this cursory glance at what I may call the past, present and future of our Race Literature apart from its value as first beginnings, not only to us as a people but literature in general, is that unless earnest and systematic effort be made to procure and preserve for transmission to our successors, the records, books and various publications already produced by us, not only will the sturdy pioneers who paved the way and laid the foundation for our Race Literature be robbed of their just due, but an irretrievable wrong will be inflicted upon the generations that shall come after us.

—VICTORIA EARLE MATTHEWS, 1895

In the history of the world's great literatures, few traditions have origins as curious as that created by African slaves and ex-slaves writing in the English language in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. In the stubbornly durable history of human slavery, it was only the black slaves in England and the United States who created a genre of literature that, at once, testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge to be free and literate, to embrace the European Enlightenment's dream of reason and the American Enlightenment's dream of civil liberty, wedded together gloriously in a great republic of letters.

For what could be more peculiar to the institution of human slavery than liberal learning, than "the arts and sciences," as the French philosophes put it? Slavery, as Lucius C. Matlock argued in 1845 in a review of Frederick Douglass's now classic *Narrative of the Life*, "naturally and necessarily" is "the enemy of literature." Despite that antagonistic relation, Matlock continued, slavery had by the middle of the nineteenth century "become the prolific theme of much that is profound in argument, sublime in poetry, and thrilling in narrative." What's more, he concluded with as much astonishment as satisfaction, "the soil of slavery itself"—and the demands for its abolition—had turned out to be an ironically fertile ground for the creation of a new literature, a literature indicting oppression, a literature created by the oppressed: "From the soil of slavery itself have sprung forth some of the most brilliant productions, whose logical levers will ultimately upheave and overthrow the system." It will be from "the pen of self-emancipated slaves," Matlock predicted, that "startling incidents authenticated, far excelling fiction in their touching pathos," will "secure the execrations of all good men and become a monument more enduring than marble, in testimony strong as sacred wit. . . ."

African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American bellettristic tradition. To say that they did so against the greatest odds does not begin to suggest the heroic proportions that the task of registering a black voice in printed letters entailed. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, the author of the first full-length black autobiography, *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince* (1770), and the source of the genre of the slave narrative, accounted for this animosity, as well as the slave's anxiety before it, in the trope of the talking book:

[My Master] used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and then I 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 followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes that it would say something to me; but I was sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black.

The text of Western letters refused to speak to the person of African descent; paradoxically, we read about that refusal in a text created by that very person of African descent. In a very real sense, the Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write. With Gronniosaw's *An African Prince*, a distinctively "African" voice registered its presence in the republic of letters; it was a text that both talked "black," and, through its unrelenting indictment of the institution of slavery, talked back.

Making the text "speak" in the full range of timbres that the African enslaved in England and America brought to the process of writing became the dominant urge of the ex-slave authors. So compelling did Gronniosaw's trope of the talking book prove to be that, between 1770 and 1815, no fewer than five authors of slave narratives used the same metaphor as a crucial scene of instruction to dramatize the author's own road to literacy, initially, and to authorship, ultimately. John Marrant in 1785, Cugoana in 1787, Equiano in 1789, and John Jea in 1815—all modified Gronniosaw's figure of the talking book as the signal structural element of their autobiographical narratives, thereby providing the formal links of repetition and revision that, in part, define any literary tradition. So related, in theme and structure, were these texts that by 1790 Gronniosaw's Dublin publisher also included John Marrant's *Narrative* on his list and advertised its sale on Gronniosaw's endpapers.

Still, the resistance even to the idea that an African could create literature was surprisingly resilient. As early as 1680, Morgan Godwyn, the self-

described "Negro and Indian's Advocate," had accounted for the resistance in this way:

[a] disingenuous and unmanly *Position* had been formed; and privately (*as it were in the dark*) handed to and again, which is this, That the Negro's though in their Figure they carry some resemblances of manhood, yet are indeed not men . . . the consideration of the shape and figure of our Negro's Bodies, their Limbs and members; their Voice and Countenance, in all things according with other mens; together with their *Risibility* and *Discourse* (man's *peculiar* Faculties) should be sufficient Conviction. How should they otherwise be capable of Trades, and other no less manly employments; as also of *Reading* and *Writing*, or show so much Discretion in management of Business; . . . but wherein (we know) that many of our People are *deficient*, were they not truly Men?

Godwyn's account of the claims that Africans were not human beings and his use of the possession of reason and its manifestations through "Reading and Writing" to refute these claims were widely debated during the Enlightenment, generally at the African's expense.

The putative relation between literacy and the quest for freedom provided the subtext for this larger debate over the African's "place in nature," his or her place in the great chain of being. Following the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina, the largest uprising of slaves in the colonies before the American Revolution, legislators there enacted a draconian body of public laws, making two forms of literacy punishable by law: the mastery of writing, and the mastery of the drum. The law against learning to write read as follows:

And *whereas* the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attending with great inconveniences; *Be it enacted*, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.

The law against the use of the talking drum was just as strong:

And for that as it is absolutely necessary to the safety of this Province, that all due care be taken to restrain the wanderings and meetings of negroes and other slaves, at all times, and more especially on Saturday nights, Sundays and other holidays, and their using and carrying wooden swords, and other mischievous and dangerous weapons, or using or keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes. . . . And whatsoever master, owner or overseer shall permit or suffer his or their negro or other slave or slaves, at any time hereafter, or beat drums, blow horns, or use any other loud instruments, or whosoever shall suffer and countenance any public meetings or seatings or strange negroes or slaves in their plantations, shall forfeit 10 current money, for every such offence.

In the Stono Rebellion, both forms of literacy—of English letters and of the black vernacular—had been pivotal to the slave's capacity to rebel.

Writing, many philosophers argued in the Enlightenment, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of "genius," the visible sign of reason itself. In this subordinate role, however, writing, although secondary to reason, was nevertheless the *medium* of reason's expression. We *know* reason by its representations. Such representations could assume spoken or written form. Eighteenth-century European writers privileged *writing*—in their writings about Africans, at least—as the principal measure of the Africans' humanity, their capacity for progress, their very place in the great chain of being. As the Scottish philosopher David Hume put it in a footnote to the second edition of his widely read essay "Of National Characters":

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient *Germans*, the present *Tartars*, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular.

Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are *negro* slaves dispersed all over *Europe*, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In *Jamaica* indeed they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning [Francis Williams]; but 'tis likely he is admired for every slender accomplishment, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, responding to Hume's essay a decade later, had this to say:

The negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from the countries, although many of them have been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praise-worthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color. The religion of fetishes so wide-spread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature. A bird feather, a cow horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and of invocation in swearing oaths. The blacks

are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.

Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), echoed this discourse in his disparaging remarks about Phillis Wheatley's book of poems:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrus of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.

To test assertions such as these, various Europeans and Americans educated young black slaves along with their own children. "El negro Juan Latino," who published three books of poetry in Latin between 1573 and 1585, was one of the earliest examples of such an experiment, followed by Wilhelm Amo, Jacobus Capitein, and Francis Williams, in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The first black person to publish a book of poetry in English, Phillis Wheatley, was also the subject of such an experiment. But whether Wheatley had the capacity to write, *herself*, poems of such accomplishment, was a matter of considerable controversy in Boston in 1773.

And it was a matter of controversy and of immediate concern to her master and mistress, John and Susannah Wheatley, because the publication of their slave's book was dependent upon establishing the "authenticity" of their slave's authorship, the fact that she had written her poems herself. How could they prove that? Well, sometime in 1772 or 1773, through a procedure the nature of which scholars have yet to discover, the Wheatleys persuaded a group of Boston's most august citizens—"the most respectable characters in Boston," as they would later be described, no less than eighteen of them—to read Phillis Wheatley's manuscript and then, somehow, to "examine" her about the poems in that manuscript. Whether or not they did so collectively, in a trial setting (as a filmmaker might conceive it), or whether they did so individually (which seems unlikely, given the time that eighteen separate interviews or examinations would entail), we do not know. Among them were John Erving, a prominent Boston merchant; the Reverend Charles Chauncey, pastor of the Tenth Congregational Church; and John Hancock, who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence. At the center of this group would have sat His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the colony, with Andrew Oliver, his lieutenant governor, close by his side.

We can only speculate on the nature of the questions posed, either collectively or individually, to the fledgling poet. Perhaps they asked her to identify and explain—for all to hear—exactly who were the Greek and Latin gods and poets alluded to so frequently in her work. Perhaps they asked her to conjugate a verb in Latin, or even to translate randomly selected passages from the Latin, which she and her master, John Wheatley, claimed that she "had made some progress in." Or perhaps they asked her to recite from memory key passages from the texts of John Milton and Alexander Pope, the two poets by whom the African seems to have been most directly influenced. We do not know.

We do know, however, that the African poet's responses were more than sufficient to prompt these eighteen august gentlemen to compose, sign, and publish a two-paragraph "Attestation," an open letter "To the Publick" that prefaces Phillis Wheatley's book, and which reads in part:

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa, and has ever since been, and now is under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

So important was this document in securing a publisher for Phillis Wheatley's poems that it forms the signal element in the prefatory matter printed in the opening pages of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, which was issued in London in the fall of 1773 because Boston printers remained skeptical about her authorship and refused to publish the book. Without the printed "Attestation," Phillis Wheatley's publisher claimed, few would have believed that an African could possibly have written poetry all by herself. As the eighteen put the matter clearly in their letter, "Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of PHILLIS."

This curious anecdote, surely one of the oddest oral examinations on record, is only a tiny part of a larger, and even more curious, episode in the Enlightenment. At least since the end of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African "species of men," as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature, could ever master "the arts and sciences." If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave, rightly relegated to a low place in the great chain of being, an ancient construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale ascending from plants, insects, and animals through human beings to the angels and God himself.

By 1750, the chain had become minutely calibrated; the human scale rose from "the lowliest Hottentot" (black South African) to "glorious Milton and Newton." If blacks could write and publish imaginative literature, then they could, in effect, take a few "giant steps" up the chain of being, in a pernicious metaphysical game of "Mother, May I?" For example, reviewers of Wheatley's book argued that the publication of her poems meant that the African was indeed a human being and should not be enslaved. Indeed, Wheatley herself was manumitted soon after her poems were published. That which was only implicit in Wheatley's case would become explicit fifty years later. George Moses Horton had, by the mid 1820s, gained a considerable reputation at Chapel Hill as the "slave-poet." His master printed full-page advertisements in northern newspapers soliciting subscriptions for a book of Horton's poems and promising to exchange the slave's freedom for a sufficient return on sales of the book. Writing, for these slaves, was not only an activity of mind; it was also a commodity that gained them access to their full humanity—Horton literally bought freedom with his poems.

Two hundred and twenty years separate the publication of Phillis Wheatley's curious book of poems and Toni Morrison's receipt of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Morrison's success is part of a larger phenomenon. African American literature has been enjoying a renaissance in quality and quantity for the past several decades, even vaster than the New Negro, or Harlem, Renaissance of the 1920s, spurred on to a significant extent since 1970 by the writings of African American women such as Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, Gloria Naylor, Jamaica Kincaid, and Terry McMillan, among a host of others. The number of literary prizes won by black authors in the last thirty years, including Pulitzer Prizes, National and American Book Awards, far exceeds the total number of such honors won by African Americans during the previous hundred years. And several times since 1990, as many as three or four black authors have appeared simultaneously on the best-seller list of the *New York Times*. While the audience for this magnificent flowering of black literature crosses all racial boundaries, black readers have never been more numerous: as early as June 1996 the *Times* reported that African Americans were purchasing 160 million books a year; a decade and a half later, that figure has dramatically increased.

This prominence in the marketplace has had its counterpart in the curriculum. Black literature courses have become a central part of the offerings in English departments and in departments of American studies, African American studies, and women's studies. Maya Angelou's delivery of "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993 (she was the first poet to read at an inauguration since Robert Frost did so for John F. Kennedy in 1961), Elizabeth Alexander's delivery of "Praise Song for the Day" at President Barack Obama's first inauguration in 2009, and Rita Dove's unprecedented two-term appointment as Poet Laureate of the United States are further signs of the pervasive presence of African American literature in American society. The globalization of hip hop, the dominant form of American popular music for the past three decades, has not only spawned a "Spoken Word" movement (a much larger postmodern version of poetry readings by the Beats in coffeehouses on the 1950s) and the citation of classical black poetry (and the "sampling" of canonical soul and rhythm and blues lyrics from the 1960s and 1970s in marvelous examples of intertextuality), but also has contributed to a renaissance in African American poetry, which we shall address at the end of this essay.

This broad acceptance of the authority of African American writing was, of course, not always the case. Leonard Deutsch, a professor of English at Marshall University, recalls the harsh resistance that greeted his request to write a Ph.D. dissertation on Ralph Ellison at Kent State University in 1970. When his prospectus was approved, a member of his thesis committee—a well-known Melville scholar—resigned in protest, arguing that

To write this dissertation is bad on two counts: for Len Deutsch himself, and subsequently for the university. A doctoral dissertation implies substance, weight (stuffiness often accompanying this), and spread, and not concentration upon the wings of a gnat. If it be concentration, the dissertation must by concentration bring together and sum-up worlds of thought and material—the dissertation as metonymy or synecdoche,

which it generally is. One could, for instance, write about Hemingway, Faulkner, or Bellow (recently living or still kicking) because men like them have established a respectable and accepted corpus of work ranging sufficiently to call for comment.

Ellison's work, he concluded, was not of the stature to warrant being studied for a Ph.D. in English. Other stories of white professors and predominantly white institutions of higher education discouraging scholarly interests and careers in African American literature abound in academic folklore.

The resistance to the literary merits of black literature, as we have seen, has its origins in the Enlightenment and in the peculiar institution of slavery. The social and political uses to which this literature has been put have placed a tremendous burden on these writers, casting an author and her or his works in the role of synecdoche, a part standing for the ethnic whole, signifying who "the Negro" was, what his or her "inherent" intellectual potential might be, and whether or not the larger group was entitled to the full range of rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. Because of the perilous stature of African Americans in American society, their literature has suffered under tremendous extraliterary burdens.

Writing in the "Preface" to *An Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929), V. F. Calverton, a Marxist critic, argued that black literature was primarily a reflection of the Negro's historical economic exploitation:

In a subtle way, Negro art and literature in America have had an *economic origin*. All that is original in Negro folk-lore, or singular in Negro spirituals and Blues, can be traced to the economic institution of slavery and its influence upon the Negro soul.

Richard Wright would echo these sentiments in his "Blueprint for Negro Writing," published in 1937. Calverton went on to argue that the Negro's music and folk art were never "purely imitative," and that black vernacular cultural forms were "definitely and unequivocally American," the only "original" American culture yet created. Wright, too, would repeat this claim. If black writers turned to their own vernacular traditions, he concluded, black literature could be as original and as compelling as black music and folklore. The literary movement of the 1920s, he maintained, was more important for what it implied about what historian Carter G. Woodson called "the public Negro mind" than for what it had contributed to the canon of the world's great literatures:

If this new literature of the Negro in America does not constitute a renaissance, it does signify rapid growth in racial art and culture. It is a growth that is as yet unfinished. Indeed we may say it illustrates a growth that in a dynamic sense has just begun. It indicates more than the rise of a literature. It marks the rise of an entire people.

Calverton's argument about the production of literary arts and "the rise of an entire people" echoed the eloquent argument that the poet James Weldon Johnson had made in his important anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, published in 1922, at the very beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson's preface remains one of the major critical essays on

the nature and function of black literature. In it Johnson states explicitly what had been implicit in the critical reception of black literary production since Phillis Wheatley: blacks must create literature because it is, inevitably, a fundamental aspect of their larger struggle for civil rights, and it can never escape this role because it serves as *prima facie* evidence of the Negro's intellectual potential:

A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced. The world does not know that a people is great until that people produces great literature and art. No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior.

Johnson here was drawing upon Ralph Waldo Emerson's claim (made in 1844 in his speech "On the Emancipation of the West Indies") about the necessity for blacks to contribute "an indispensable element" to the American nation's cultural mix before they would be granted full citizenship:

If the black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization, for the sake of that element, no money, nor strength, nor circumstance can hurt him; he will survive and play his part. . . . The intellect—that is miraculous! Who has it, has the talisman. His skin and bones, though they were the color of night, are transparent, and the everlasting stars shine through with attractive beams.

In large part because of these extraliterary expectations—and because of the pernicious withholding of literary and formal education from blacks—African American literature did not come of age until well into the twentieth century. As Sylvestre C. Watkins put it in his *Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1944),

Negro history and Negro literature have maintained a very close relationship through the years. In his struggle for a better way of life, the Negro has, through necessity, made his literature a purposeful thing born of his great desire to become a full-fledged citizen of the United States. His late start did not allow him the pleasure of creating a new phrase, or a more beautiful expression. The struggle against ignorance, indifference and racial bigotry had first claim upon his time and energy.

Indeed, the tension inherent in the African American tradition between even the most private utterances of a poet such as Phillis Wheatley—whose mastery of the English language and whose grace under pressure as *the* synecdoche for the African in Western culture would merit for her a place in the canon, even if her work were not as layered as it is—and the political uses to which those utterances are put obtains to this day. What is the "black voice" that Gronniosaw sought to place in his text? What, exactly, accounts for the "African" element in African American literature? What is the relation between vernacular literature, the blues, gospel, the sermon, and jazz and the formal African American literary tradition? And what relation does the canon of African American literature bear to that of the

American tradition? To begin to address these questions, we and our nine colleagues decided to produce this anthology.

*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* is a celebration of over two centuries of imaginative writing in English by persons of African descent in the United States. It is most certainly not the first anthology seeking to define the canon of African American literature. But it is the most comprehensive; its sheer scope and inclusiveness enable readers to trace the repetitions, tropes, and signifying that define the tradition.

Just as the eighteenth-century slave narrators revised the trope of the talking book, writers in the black tradition have repeated and revised figures, tropes, and themes in prior works, leading to formal links in a chain of tradition that connects the slave narratives to autobiographical strategies employed a full century later in works such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Precisely because "blackness" is a socially constructed category, it must be learned through imitation, and its literary representations must also be learned in the same way—like jazz—through repetition and revision. The African American literary tradition exists as a formal entity because of this historical practice, which the editors of the monumental anthology *The Negro Caravan* (1944) called "a sort of literary inbreeding which causes Negro writers to be influenced by other Negroes more than should ordinarily be expected." If Virginia Woolf was correct when she claimed that "books speak to other books," it is also true that works of literature created by African Americans often extend, or signify upon, other works in the black tradition, structurally and thematically. Tracing these formal connections is the task of the teacher, and is most certainly a central function of this anthology.

If African American literature is flourishing dramatically in the twenty-first century, so too is the academic study of this field. Critical studies, anthologies, encyclopedias, companions, chronological histories, reprints, and reference works of all sorts are enabling us to reassemble the fragmented history of African American writing, buried so often in what one commentator in 1854 called "the ephemeral caskets" of periodical literature, pamphlets, occasional publications, and limited, even vanity, editions. This scholarly work of recovery will most likely end the cycle of each generation of scholars being forced to reinvent the proverbial wheel. Such duplication of effort has been the great curse confronting scholars of African American culture. These tools—the collective scholarship of the last several decades—will enable future scholarship and creative learning.

*The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* builds upon a distinguished tradition of anthology editing that began at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century, with the publication of *Les Cenelles: Choix de Poésies Indigènes* in New Orleans in 1845. These forays into canon formation—for every anthology defines a canon—were also acts of love, arduously grafted together under the most difficult circumstances. Often, a black writer's work exists today only because of his or her presence in a scarce or rare anthology. Robert Thomas Kerlin's superbly edited *Negro Poets and Their Poems* (1923), for example, includes works by poets such as J. Monrad Allen, Joshua Henry Jones Jr., Eva A. Jessye, Irvin W. Underhill, and Andre Razaf-

keriefo, whose works are seldom, if ever, taught or anthologized today. Today's canonical figures can often be another generation's amusing footnote to literary history.

In making selections for this anthology, the editors listened carefully to a caution advised by the writer and social critic Victoria Earle Matthews in 1895 in her important speech "The Value of Race Literature":

Race Literature does not mean things uttered in praise, thoughtless praise of ourselves, wherein each goose thinks her gosling a swan. We have had too much of this. . . . Race Literature does mean though the preserving of all records of a Race, and thus cherishing the material saving from destruction and obliteration what is good, helpful and stimulating. But for our Race Literature, how will future generations know of the pioneers in Literature, our statesmen, soldiers, divines, musicians, artists, lawyers, critics, and scholars?

We have endeavored to choose for the Norton Anthology works of such a quality that they merit preservation and sustain classroom interest. Like several historically important anthologies—Kerlin's *Negro Poets and Their Poetry*, Calverton's *Anthology of American Negro Literature*, Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee's *Negro Caravan*, among others—we have given a prominent place to the black vernacular tradition. We have placed this section at the beginning of our text because, historically, anonymous vernacular literature certainly preceded the tradition of written letters among African Americans, and because *all* of the world's literatures have developed from an oral base. In the instance of our literary tradition, the oral, or the vernacular, is never far from the written. Oral expression—the dozens, signifying, rap poetry—surrounds the written tradition rather as a Möbius strip intertwines above and below a plane, in the traditional antiphonal "call and response" structures peculiar to African and African American expressive cultural forms. Not only has the vernacular tradition served as the foundation of the written tradition, but it continues to nurture it, comment upon it, and criticize it in a dialectical, reciprocal relation that surely obtained historically in every major literary tradition. (A visit today to a black beauty parlor, or barbershop, in a black neighborhood, verifies this claim.) The vernacular tradition, however, does not live on the page, but in community and in performance. The Norton Anthology, with its accompanying multimedia website, is the first anthology to offer side by side the written and oral traditions, thus illuminating the connections between them. This unique feature of our anthology is a literal response to James Gronniosaw's compelling metaphor, an electronic talking book that makes concrete the black tradition's first structuring metaphor; through technological innovation, we have come full circle from Gronniosaw's foundational trope of 1770.

As we go to press, we are in the midst of an especially active and fecund period for African American literature, as evidenced by the dazzling array of work produced across the full range of modes of artistic expression. Take, for example, the stunning work of poets such as Rita Dove and Yusef Komunyakaa (winners of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1986 and 1994, respectively), and the prolific second generation, including Thomas Sayers Ellis, Terrance Hayes, Tracy K. Smith (winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for

poetry), Natasha Trethewey (United States Poet Laureate and winner of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for poetry), and Kevin Young, bridged by the sustained work of Elizabeth Alexander, widely known for her volume *The Venus Tentot* and her poem "Praise Song for the Day" (which, as we mention above, she read at President Obama's inauguration in 2009). The organization Cave Canem has contributed dramatically to the growing sophistication, influence, and popularity of black poetry nationally. The most recent developments in African American poetics, what Alexander calls "a black poetics for the times," have yielded poetry epitomized by formal dexterity combined with deep connections to black sounds and cultural referents. That this groundbreaking work in formal traditions is happening in tandem with exciting developments in black cinema and in the fourth decade of hip hop is sure to spark cross-fertilization and fascinating innovations by artists in all three areas. No wonder some scholars believe that black poetry is flowering as never before, certainly not since the Black Arts Movement, spearheaded and championed by Amiri Baraka in the latter half of the 1960s.

But this vital period for poetry—and here we must pause to note the passing of that crucially significant, shape-shifting canonical poet, Amiri Baraka, in early January 2014—is matched by equally important innovations in fiction and drama. The enduring significance and bold formal experimentation of writers such as Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, Jamaica Kincaid, Toni Morrison, Walter Mosley, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker go hand-in-hand with the important and exciting fiction by writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Paul Beatty, Teju Cole, Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz (winner of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for fiction), Victor Lavalle, Danzy Senna, and Colson Whitehead, among many others. These writers explore transnational and bi-/multi-racial themes with dazzling invention, drawing on emerging technologies, an array of genres, their identities as first-generation African immigrants and Caribbean-African Americans, feminist and gay or lesbian, and all sorts of even more-localized black hyphenations, such as Haitian-African American, Nigerian-African Americans, Dominican-African American. Through their work, they put into question what we mean by an "African American" identity or "African American literature" in fresh ways, ways that challenge essentialist notions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, national identity, and even "race" and "literary tradition." These writers embody and express "new" ways to be "black" within the context of traditional American racial and artistic definitions. Among playwrights, the work of the late Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson (winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 and 1990), Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks (winner of the Pulitzer in 2002), and Anna Deavere Smith has inspired a younger generation that includes Eisa Davis, Lydia Diamond, Danai Gurira, Katori Hall, Branden Jenkins-Jacobs, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Tarell McCraney, and Tracy Scott Wilson. With this generation of black writers, the black diaspora is fully rooted in rich new soil.

The broad and deep influence upon contemporary African American writing of spoken black English and popular vernacular forms—especially hip hop, of course, but "hip hop as one sound among many that these writers

interpolate into their work” from both sacred and secular forms, as Alexander puts it—is a notable development in the tradition over the last two decades. But we should recall that the relation between the black-spoken and the black-written, as it were, has itself been a leitmotif in black aesthetic theory whose origins go back at least to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s concerns about the merits of his dialect poetry versus his standard English poetry and James Weldon Johnson’s introduction to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922 and carry through the critical essays of Baraka and other Black Arts Movement writers. One can argue, then, that the canon, in the twenty-first century, has returned to contemplate and reconfigure its roots, and that the trope of the talking book, literalized in Toni Morrison’s brilliant formal narrative innovation in her novel *Jazz*, has never in the history of the African American literary tradition been more varied and vital.

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