AFRO-AMERICAN WRITING

An Anthology of Prose and Poetry

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Second and Enlarged Edition

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
UNIVERSITY PARK AND LONDON

For
Arna Bontemps and Sterling Brown
poets and pioneers

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Afro-American writing.

Includes index.
1. American literature—Afro-American authors.
2. American literature—20th century.
I. Long, Richard A., 1927– . II. Collier, Eugenia W.
PS508.N3A37 1985 810'.8'0896073 83–43224
ISBN 0–271–00374–X
ISBN 0–271–00376–6 (pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

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PART III: World War I to World War II

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Preface

This anthology is designed for varied uses. For the general reader who wishes to gain a historical overview of Afro-American writing, it should be of considerable value, For a college course, it provides a total of fifty-five authors, a selection from whom will make possible several different approaches to the material: historical, generic, thematic. The selections also provide complementary reading for varied period courses in American literature.

The chief feature of this second and enlarged edition is the inclusion of Part V: The Seventies and Beyond, which introduces the work of seven prose writers and five poets who have come to prominence in recent years. Representative selections are presented from the fiction of Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Toni Cade Bambara, and Alice Walker, and from the nonfiction of Albert Murray, Addison Gayle, and Maya Angelou. Under the heading "A Gathering of Poets" we have selected five exemplars from the widening circle whose work is enriching the poetic landscape of the seventies and eighties: Michael Harper, Larry Neal, Audre Lorde, Etheridge Knight, and June Jordan. The Select Chronology has been brought down through 1984.

In Parts I to IV we have increased the sampling of work by six writers whose reputations continue to grow—Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, James Baldwin, Hoyt W. Fuller, and Mari Evans—and have omitted a few writers now considered marginal. We also have made three reluctant omissions and several substitutions for reasons given below.

We are happy that a second and revised edition of this anthology has been made possible thanks to the good offices of Mr. Chris W. Kentera and the Pennsylvania State University Press. We are grateful to the New York University Press for its willingness to transfer its interests to us and to the new publisher. We are also grateful that all living authors and

their publishers gave us permission to re-use selections from the first edition under generous conditions.

Many estates were unable to comply with our requests, but only Richard Wright and Countee Cullen are omitted in consequence. For other deceased authors we have been able to make substitutions fully representative of their work. We are especially grateful to Mr. George Bass, executor of the Langston Hughes estate; to Harold Ober Associates; to Mrs. Robert Hayden; and to the families of Hoyt Fuller and Margaret Danner.

In Part I we have supplemented the selections from Frederick Douglass by a portion from his last great oration, on the Republic of Haiti.

In Part III we have had reluctantly to omit the poetry selections from James Weldon Johnson, and we have substituted an autobiographical essay of Claude McKay's for the selection from *A Long Way From Home* and omitted one of his poems. We have substituted a short story of Zora Neale Hurston's for the autobiographical selection from *Dust Tracks on a Road*, finding the story more representative of her art. We have also substituted two shorter, less-known, "Simple" stories of Langston Hughes for a single longer one. We have been pleased to add a substantial critical essay by Sterling Brown to complete the picture of this important writer.

In Part IV we have supplemented the essay by James Baldwin with a short story and a poetic appreciation of a major American painter, and we have added a critical essay by Hoyt Fuller and two poems by Mari Evans.

To our respective institutions, Atlanta University and Howard University, we express appreciation for various kinds of help. The following libraries have been useful: Soper Library of Morgan State College, Library of Baltimore Community College, Trevor Arnett Library of Atlanta University, and the Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore. Mrs. Lillian Miles Lewis, former curator of special collections at the Trevor Arnett Library, has extended many kindnesses. The staff of the Center of African and African-American Studies (CAAS) of Atlanta University has been of great assistance. Appreciation should be expressed to Misses Rutheen Samuels, Maggie Wanza, and Gwendolyn Marshall, CAAS assistants. Special appreciation is due Mrs. Harriette Washington Bell, former assistant to the director of CAAS, and to Miss Willie Jackson of the Afro-American Studies Program at Atlanta University. This work could scarcely have come to completion in the time available to us without the intelligent and willing collaboration of Miss Thelma Blair, to whom we are both most grateful.

For yeoman service in the manifold details of preparing the new edition, we are indebted to Pam Smith and Sara Dickerson.

Richard A. Long
Eugenia W. Collier

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Introduction

The cries of "Black Power!" that echoed down a dusty Southern road in the early 1960s, drowning out the strains of "We Shall Overcome," announced the beginning of a new age of awareness for Black Americans. The turmoil and trouble of the sixties, the tragedy and the triumph, resulted in a renewed emphasis on blackness—its meaning and its significance and the new direction in which America must turn. Thus, Afro-Americans emerged rather suddenly from their invisibility and became visible in many domains. This visibility is not an unmixed blessing. The distortions of overemphasis are as brutal as those of underemphasis. Today on every hand, strident voices, black and white, are bringing us up to date on what the Afro-American was and is.

Definitions are increasingly important. The survival of a culture —any culture—depends in large measure on the nature of its definitions of itself and of those aspects of life on which its survival depends: for example, what the past implies, what freedom means, who the enemy is. The literature of a culture is a totality of its definitions, a self-portrait of that culture. Knowledge of a literature, then, yields valuable insight into the culture that produced it. In this crucial and often mystifying age, Afro-American literature is involved in a general rage for scrutiny and redress. It is necessary for those who are devoted to the study of this literature to conceptualize a view of the Afro-American literary experience, if they are to relate effectively the reality of the past with the perplexities of the present, in the task of preparing for the uncertainty of the future.

First, then, what is to be included in the Afro-American literary experience? All writings by Americans of African descent, whether or not they write about that which is uniquely black? Writings by nonblacks which treat the Afro-American experience with insight or

sympathy? Patronizing works by nonblacks? The philosophical issues posed by these questions have never been resolved to anybody's satisfaction. But some type of resolution is vital here in an anthology purporting to deal with the literature of black Americans.

It is our conviction that Afro-American literature is grounded in Afro-American life and that anyone who partakes of this life is molded by it. Even one who minimizes his blackness and writes from a Euro-American perspective is responding in his way to his experience as a black person. The works of William Stanley Braithwaite, for example, may be counted as part of the Afro-American literary experience, as well as the militantly black works of Malcolm X and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). A strange but legitimate bedfellow is the body of black folk tales collected and recorded by white Georgian Joel Chandler Harris.

There is a rationale for confining the study of the Afro-American literary experience to the works of Afro-American writers. At the moment of social crisis through which we are passing, such a study is of the highest existential relevance. There is no wall between the academy and the street. Our books are our weapons and the only ones which are likely to enable us to survive. Therefore, we must distinguish, as never before, between the profound and the superficial, between the felt and the observed, between soul and slick. We must scrutinize our heritage with sharper eyes than ever for those segments of truth which will be our passports into the future.

And here Euro-American works are not helpful. Writings by nonblacks are likely to be about the "American" experience; writings by blacks are almost certain to be from the Afro-American experience. And it is the depths of that experience which must now concern us. It is not surprising that most white writers dealing with Afro-American experience succeed in obtaining only a negative relevance, if indeed they are not irrelevant. It would indeed be strange if it were otherwise, for they neither have nor choose to have the perspective of the Afro-American. And what they report is shaped to the expectations of the white majority. Hence it is not a matter of wonder that most bestsellers about Afro-Americans have been written by whites. And those few bestsellers written by Afro-Americans have been largely misunderstood by whites. In other words, their success is a result of a collapse in communication.

The Afro-American literary experience, then, is contained in the writings that embody the Afro-American's spiritual journeying.

And that experience is today germane to any full consideration of the Afro-American in all of his dimensions.

What are the directions apparent in the literature of black Americans? We discern in the Afro-American literary experience two essential modes, two categories of vision: the simplistic and the oracular. Both may be associated with either hope or despair—the two poles around which Afro-American works cluster. Two classics of Afro-American literature illustrate the simplistic and oracular modes: *Up from Slavery* and *The Souls of Black Folk*. *Up from Slavery* presents the simplistic vision. It is not merely a question of the so-called Washington philosophy or of Washington's moral vision. There is a coalescence of form and content which serves to underscore the simplistic nature of the work. The underlying pattern is of the Horatio Alger myth based on the Calvinistic idea of wealth being a reward for work. *Up from Slavery* is filled with simplistic themes: uprightness, cleanliness, mother-love. It is optimistic. All will be well, though the where, when, and how are only obscurely hinted at.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* we find the oracular mode illustrated. Here all is complex; the canvas is crowded. The very language of Du Bois, modelled on nineteenth-century rhetoric, is intended to suggest the manifold dimensions of the Afro-American experience. The metaphor of the veil, and the two-ness of the black man's vision are the leitmotivs of a varied collection, one that includes historical and social essays and a short story. Most appropriately, the work embodies a conscious reply to the simplistic rhetoric and ideology of Booker T. Washington.

The further importance of these two works is that in addition to illustrating the two modes, the simplistic and the oracular, they each illustrate a major genre of Afro-American literature. These two genres, the life-story and the oration, were dominant before the Civil War. There were the slave narrative and the antislavery polemic, both of which reached their masterful pinnacle in the work of Frederick Douglass, sadly neglected as a literary master. The slave narrative attained a sort of climax in Douglass' *Narrative* and then received, as it were, the kiss of death, both historically and artistically, in *Up from Slavery*. Douglass, of course, practiced the oracular mode throughout his life. His editorial "Nemesis" fulfills all the demands the rhetoricians would place upon such a work, a work that is in fact an oration. Du Bois' work falls into the tradition of these orations, though they are the orations of the study rather than of the meeting hall. His

eloquence is marshalled to move with passion and indignation the thinking man in his study rather than a crowd at a public meeting.

In addition to the two genres, the life-story and the oration, there also existed before the Civil War a rich folklore or popular literature for whose shape and content we are dependent upon tardy reporters with varying degrees of proficiency. Afro-American folklore, possessing as it does strong African roots, simply eludes attempts to cast it into Euro-American frames. It surfaced in the pre-Civil War epoch most prominently in an essentially poetic form—the biblical sermon. This was the true literature of the folk. It had its themes, its artifices, its almost universal public. And in spite of James Weldon Johnson's fears in 1927, it lives still, and has indeed acquired a secular lease on life.

Since the Civil War other genres have arisen. The essay assumed prominence during the dark years at the turn of the century when black thinkers wrestled with what was then known as the Negro Problem, and again during the twenties when black scholars assessed the place of the black artist in the scheme of things, and again in the fifties and sixties when every aspect of the black man's experience in America had to be scrutinized, and black thinkers wrestled with what had become known as the White Problem. Fiction also became increasingly important as an art form, as the image of the black man changed from Charles Chesnutt's conniving, obsequious Uncle Julius to the many faces of the Harlem Renaissance to Richard Wright's victimized Bigger Thomas to Ralph Ellison's faceless Invisible Man to the very strong, very black hero of the sixties. Poetry probed the innermost recesses of blackness, flowering most profusely in the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties and then again in the Black Renaissance of the sixties. In all genres the thrust has been increasingly toward the oracular rather than the simplistic mode as writers have discovered the materials of art in the varied nuances of Afro-American life.

Certain time cycles emerge. We distinguish the larger periods as

I. To the Civil War: the literature of the slave culture; art as an expression of suffering and an affirmation of manhood in the quest for freedom.

II. From the Civil War to the era of World War I: the literature of the newly freed citizens; the struggle for identity as reflected in literature.

III. From World War I to the era of World War II: the first flowering of Afro-American literature as high art, the Harlem Renaissance, its precursers and immediate descendants.

IV. From the mid-forties to the present: from protest to the Black Arts movement; new forms and expanded use of language as the quest for identity changes to self-discovery.*

All such divisions are, of course, artificial. Some writers extend over two or even three of the periods; some adhere only casually to the dominant thrust of the period. But time periods are convenient and economical, and they provide a workable taking-off point.

We must now turn our attention to a critical issue and an issue of criticism. This is the condemnation frequently made that Afro-American writers are lacking in universality, bound up as so many of them are by the theme of race and race-conflict, which is local, limited, parochial. Obviously, there are themes which are universal in some sense or other: love, death, and nature, for example. But any extensive treatment of such themes outside of lyric poetry has to be circumstantial, set in a given time and place. And no given time and place are universal. What is inherently universal about Dante's ten heavens and limbo, about Homer's libations to the gods and his funeral pyres of heroes, about Shakespeare's feudal kings? The answer is, very little. Or Melville's whaling ship or Mark Twain's river towns? The answer is, nothing.

The demand for universality in the writings of the Afro-American cloaks a disapproval which the critic cannot articulate: The writing of the Afro-American is the stain in the literature of this country which seriously challenges the myth of American perfection. Even the most liberal critic turns out to be a racist at this point. Fundamental wrong, fundamental error, fundamental injustice disturb the picture. And yet it is fundamental wrong, fundamental error, fundamental injustice that Afro-American literature must reflect to be true to itself, for it is a literature of oppression, it is a cry from the soul of an oppressed people. It is also a literature of protest, a cry for redress. And in its most recent manifestation it is preeminently a literature of liberation.

This, then, is the cycle of Afro-American literature; this is its dynamic course: from oppression through protest to liberation. This experience is a proper object of study and criticism both in itself and as a part of the larger pattern of the literature of the United States

*This cycle includes the writers who emerged to prominence in the seventies, some of whom came directly out of the Black Arts Movement, most of whom responded to it.

and the literature of the world. Only by seeing this experience as an entity, a totality, and then confronting it with other literary traditions will it be possible to draw from it what inheres therein, the vital and profound truths of the tragic dilemma of democracy and freedom denied in the plenitude of its unending assertion.

Part I

To the Civil War

Conventional accounts of the American experience present the American Revolution as the seed time of that peculiarly American blessing, liberty. Here we encounter the beginning of the almost continuous divergence of the black experience from the mainstream tradition, for the American Revolution modified the position of the blacks, who made up nearly one fourth of the population, mainly by transferring the ultimate authority for the maintenance of slavery from the British crown to the new republic. The change was imperceptible to the blacks. Though blacks were to be found, both slave and free, in most of the colonies at the time of the Revolution, it is Virginia which best encapsulates the history of the black man in the colonies. It was at Jamestown that the first blacks arrived in 1619 as indentured servants, the only form of servitude then known there. It was there in 1662 that slavery was declared hereditary, thus providing legal sanction for the sad history that ensued. Over a hundred years later, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia composed the Declaration of Independence, from which he was forced to delete a disapproval of slavery in order to have it adopted. However, by this time enlightened Virginians, at least, saw little future for slavery in the new United States, and Pennsylvania had gone one step further to organize an Abolition Society in 1775, a year before the emasculated Declaration.

In the colonies still further north, New York and Massachusetts, two literate domestic slaves had emerged, singing the blessedness of