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For N'Koumba,
who believes in the power of history

# Editor's Acknowledgments

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*I teach the kings of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old but the future springs from the past.*

*—Mamadou Kouyaté, Mali griot*
Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali, *A.D. 1217–1237*

*It has been called a great many names, and it will call itself by yet another name; and you and I and all of us had better wait and see what new form this monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth.*

*—Frederick Douglass*
The Liberator, *May 26, 1865*

*We'll cross the danger water*

—"My Army Cross Over"

# Contents

# Introduction

This anthology represents an attempt to bring together writings—meant in the largest sense to include fiction, autobiography, poetry, letters, journalism, songs, court decisions, documents, and manifestos—that reflect the African-American experience of the last three centuries. Like any anthology, it is the product of competing priorities, the result of compromise between expected works and personal choice. When this process of selection is applied to works by African-American authors, one confronts as well the long tradition in which a single individual—Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson—has been viewed as representative. Opinions are seen not as expressions of the thinking of a particular individual in specific circumstances, but rather as somehow typical, as if differences in education, temperament, and personal history are leveled by the shared experience of race.

There is, instead, a multitude of voices to be found in this volume, some clearly engaged in dialogue with each other. John B. Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish clash over the subject of emigration. W. E. B. Du Bois responds here directly to Washington's "Atlanta Compromise." Langston Hughes rejects the academic poetry of Countee Cullen, Malcolm X analyzes the policy of nonviolent resistance. But while a great number of opinions are expressed here on a variety of topics, certain themes emerge nonetheless.

The definitive experience confronted by early African-American authors was the brutal reality of slavery. While some of the earliest writers seemed to rely on a just Providence for recompense in an afterlife, despite the careful selection by white clergymen of biblical texts on the subjects of servants and masters, few slaves proved to be true believers. Even those writers whose work is most infused with Christian sentiment, such as Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, and Harriet Jacobs, exposed the hypocrisy of Christian slave masters. Others adapted Christian texts to their own purposes, as in the triumph of Old Testament figures in the African-American spirituals gathered here.

Early African-American essays and orations provide powerful evidence of a more muscular form of resistance. David Walker's *Appeal,* Henry Highland Garnet's "Call to Rebellion," and Frederick Douglass's oration on the Fourth of July sustain "one continual cry" against the institution of slavery. Their arguments are echoed in the published proceedings of political conventions and the articles and editorials from the nascent black press, which reached their highest pitch in the years just prior to the Civil War. Resistance often took more violent forms as well and the testimony of Nat Turner and others involved in armed revolts is also recounted here.

With oration, the slave narrative became the dominant form in early African-American literature. Within this genre, represented in this volume

by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman, certain conventions were realized as the narrator recounted his or her experience in bondage, the escape, and the circumstances of life after slavery, often marginally better than life within it. The liberating potential of education forms a constant theme in these texts, which slave owners clearly recognized, imposing harsh penalties on any slave found reading or writing. The relationship between these narratives and the early works of African-American fiction, like Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and William Wells Brown's *Clotel,* and their uses in the present day are also explored, while the self-defining potential of autobiography continues to be an essential element in the writings of more recent authors like James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, and Maya Angelou. Beyond mere literacy, it remained to determine what the proper scope of a general education should include. Booker T. Washington touched off fierce debate with his assertion that "no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem," while W. E. B. Du Bois argues the importance of higher education for a "Talented Tenth."

Many of the writings in this volume exhibit a tension between the acknowledgment of a uniquely African-American heritage and the tendency toward assimilation, a conflict Du Bois termed a "twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." While James Weldon Johnson examines this "transition from one world into another" in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and Richard Wright, in *Uncle Tom's Children,* acknowledges "the dual role which every Negro must play," Zora Neale Hurston jumps headfirst "into the crib of negroism." Various efforts to forge a cultural identity, from political and economic nationalism to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s to rap's "hip-hop nation," are considered here.

Implicit in this debate is the relationship of the African-American diaspora to Africa herself and to other peoples of color around the world. Some of the earliest writers keenly felt profound dislocation upon being uprooted from Africa. Phillis Wheatley, whose surviving likeness depicts a young woman in European colonial dress, commented that should she return to Africa, "how like a Barbarian shou'd I look to the Natives." The pull of Africa to later generations is evident in the nineteenth-century colonization of Liberia, Marcus Garvey's efforts at economic interdependence, and Malcolm X's ties with African leaders as he framed African-Americans' demands for parity as an issue of human rights to be argued in the court of world opinion.

Several pieces in this volume touch on the obligation of African-Americans to perform military service in every war this country has waged. Some slaves were in fact emancipated for their service in the American Revolution, yet the companies of black troops that took up arms in the Civil War fought a constant struggle for fair treatment and equal pay. In the twentieth century,



American troops fighting abroad remained segregated, and several black veterans returning after World War I were lynched during the Red Summer of 1919 while still in uniform. The oral accounts included here of African-American soldiers who fought in Vietnam make clear that well into the twentieth century, these wars continued to be fought on two fronts.

Beyond these themes, the selection of pieces for this volume remained problematic. Some poems, speeches, and essays have become so much a part of our common culture that their inclusion seemed essential. That Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too" and Countee Cullen's "Heritage" are so well known does not diminish their power for readers coming to them for the first time. The prolific writers Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin are represented by some of their early, though accomplished, works, allowing the reader to discover their strong voices as their contemporary audiences did. Malcolm X, whose thinking was marked by a constant evolution, is viewed at major turning points along his intellectual and spiritual journey. While many commentators have written passionately about the riots in Los Angeles in the spring of 1992, the role of Representative Maxine Waters as a public figure in this debate made her opinions particularly meaningful. Certainly, the philosophies and talents of numerous writers are only partially represented, while many other important authors—Alexander Crummell and James Forten from the early eighteenth century; early black historians like George Washington Williams and Carter Woodson, and their heirs John Henrik Clark and John Hope Franklin; Wallace Thurman, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Arna Bontemps, and Nella Larsen of the Harlem Renaissance; Mary McLeod Bethune and Nannie Burroughs from the women's-club movement; new poets of the 1960s like Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, Don Lee, and Nikki Giovanni; and important contemporary essayists like Cornel West and Derek Bell—have been reluctantly omitted for reasons of space. Some contemporary authors are not included because permission for their work could not be obtained. The selection of pieces implies no judgment on the talent and significance of the writers omitted; rather, those that are included were chosen because they, in some particularly meaningful way, illustrated an essential aspect of the African-American experience, and some precedence has been given to older authors, whose works are not as widely available as those of contemporary authors.

Included here, too, are works of folklore and popular culture, from tales of strongmen like John Henry and Stagolee to the music of the spirituals, blues, and rap. The uses and limitations of folklore, dialect, and idiom are central to the work of Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Alice Walker, to name only a few.

I have tried also to include pieces that are infrequently anthologized or are difficult to find. The possibility that African navigators may have reached the shores of the Americas in pre-Columbian times is not widely recognized,

despite scholarly studies supporting this theory. It is surprisingly difficult to find, outside of libraries, basic documents like the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, executive orders and court rulings, and civil rights legislation. Though these documents were not written by African-Americans, their history and language provide a fuller understanding of African-American experience.

Some of the women whose works are included here may be less familiar than their male contemporaries, despite the greater interest in women's studies in the past several years. Perhaps even more than others of their sex, African-American women found their loyalties divided, nowhere more apparent than in the areas of education and female suffrage. To those who would argue, to use Du Bois's assertion, that "the Negro race, like all races, is to be saved by its exceptional men," women like Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper respond, "We wish not for the boys less, but for the girls more." This volume strives to provide African-American women with equitable space as well.

In all of these cases, I have tried to provide, briefly, a context for the particular selection. This volume can serve only as an introduction to its vast and complex subject and perspectives on many significant events in African-American history and culture have been necessarily omitted. Fortunately, many important works by African-American writers are coming back into print, and the reader is referred to the bibliography for suggestions for further reading.

Finally, I have attempted to highlight relationships among individual writers, and the connection between these writers and a larger tradition. For more than three hundred years, in the face of economic exploitation, peonage, lynching, prejudice, and denial of basic civil and human rights, African-American writers have collectively created a remarkable body of work, a rich and varied legacy that resonates powerfully today for all Americans.

# Note to the Reader

The texts in this volume are reprinted with original spellings, punctuation, phrasing, etc., intact to preserve both the individual authors' styles and the tenor of the historical periods in which they were written. For the reader's convenience, works mentioned in the headnotes that are also included in this volume are cross-referenced with the symbol † .

# Charles W. Chesnutt
# (1858–1932)

The writings of Charles W. Chesnutt represent a significant achievement in African-American letters, not only for Chesnutt's refinement of a novel literary form—the short story—but also because he became one of the first African-American writers, like Paul Laurence Dunbar, to gain a national audience.

Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 20, 1858, to free parents of mixed blood who had come North from Fayetteville, North Carolina, two years before his birth. His father served in the Union Army during the Civil War, and after the war ended, in 1866 he moved his family South. In addition to his formal schooling there, Charles studied German, French, and Greek, read both classic and modern literature, and served as a teacher and principal at a number of schools in North and South Carolina. In 1878 he married Susan Perry and five years later moved North to New York, where he worked briefly as a reporter for the *New York Mail and Express,* and then to Cleveland, where he became a court stenographer and passed the Ohio bar exam in 1887. But while Chesnutt used his legal career to support his family, his true desire was to become a writer.

Chesnutt had published numerous early writings and sketches in small journals and Sunday supplements when his story "The Goophered Grapevine" appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in August 1887. The piece was well received and the magazine published two more of his conjure stories. But it was not until a decade later that Chesnutt could interest the publishing house Houghton Mifflin, which owned the *Atlantic,* in a collection of his fiction. Intrigued by the conjure element in several of the tales, the publisher asked to see a few more in that vein, and the seven stories in *The Conjure Woman* were published in March 1899.

The stories in that volume introduce a transplanted Northern businessman and his wife who become the proprietors of an overgrown vineyard. Through an elaborate framing device, in each tale the wily "Uncle" Julius McAdoo, an ex-slave who lives on the property, is confronted with some business venture imagined by the planter. Taking his cue from the planter's intentions, Julius weaves a tale of magical events that took place



on the property before the war, inevitably persuading the planter, largely through the agency of his more sensitive wife, to abandon his plans to Julius's own benefit. Though the stories employ familiar characters and regional dialect, they refute the more popular image of plantation life conveyed in the Uncle Remus tales of Joel Chandler Harris, exposing the economic greed and human cruelty of the slavery period—particularly its debilitating effect on the family—and limning complex psychological portraits rooted in a particular place and time.

*The Conjure Woman* enjoyed considerable success, and a few months later the publisher brought out *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line.* Taken together, the two volumes demonstrate Chesnutt's ability to portray a wide range of African-American characters, from ex-slaves of limited economic means who inherit the whirlwind of Reconstruction in the South to the milieu of the striving sophisticates of the imaginary Groveland, Ohio, and the intricacies of the color line and black prejudice in the North. While dialect is a strong component in the first volume of stories, the portraits drawn in the Northern tales that make up much of *The Wife of His Youth*—including the title story that follows—are as finely limned as those found in the fiction of manners of Chesnutt's white contemporaries. As he abandoned the more "colorful" dialect stories and his tales took on a grimmer visage appropriate to the rising tide of racial violence in the South, Chesnutt's critical reception and commercial success waned (one is struck again with a comparison to Dunbar). By 1902, Chesnutt was forced to resume his career as a legal stenographer.

Chesnutt also wrote three novels: *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), which is concerned with interracial relationships; *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), based on the brutal riots in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898; and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), about a white Southern aristocrat who is driven from the South because of his liberal views on the race question. He is the author as well of six unpublished novels, numerous speeches, essays, and reviews, and a brief biography of Frederick Douglass. Critics remain divided over whether the stories or novels represent Chesnutt's best work; Henry Louis Gates has called *The Marrow of Tradition* "certainly the most sophisticated rendering of life in the historical period of the post-Reconstruction South that we have," while others argue that it is in his stories that Chesnutt's wit, sense of irony, and elegance achieve their greatest effect.