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African American Literature

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"The purpose of all art is
to lay bare the questions
which have been hidden
by the answers."

—James Baldwin

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Foreword

by Ishmael Reed, General Editor

I abandoned the use of textbooks early in my teaching career and developed my own "reader." I was frustrated with textbooks in which the preponderance of prose and poetry was written by people of similar backgrounds and sensibilities—the white-settler-surrounded-by-infidels-and-savages theme common to Euro-American literature. In these textbooks we seldom got information about how the Native Americans or the Africans felt. Female and minority writers were left out. There was slack inclusion of contemporary writers, and little space devoted to the popular American culture of our century. These textbooks seemed slavishly worshipful of the past, such that every mediocre line by a past "great" was treated with reverence while the present was ignored.

Of course, there are many worthwhile ideas to be gained from what in our sound-bite culture—in which complicated ideas are dumbed down for instant consumption—is referred to as "Western Civilization." But as Asian American writer Frank Chin points out when referring to the Cantonese model, after the ability of the Cantonese to absorb every culture with which they've come into contact, one doesn't have to abandon the styles of one's own tradition in order to embrace styles from other traditions. As I have mentioned elsewhere, the history of modern art would be quite different had not artists been receptive to or borrowed from the traditions of others. This creative give and take between artists of different cultures particularly characterizes the arts of the twentieth century.

Things have improved over the years, especially with the outbreak of textbooks labeled "multicultural," a term that has become a football in the struggle between the politically correct of the left and the right. However, even the new and improved multicultural texts appear to have added African American, Native American, Hispanic American, and Asian American writers as an afterthought. The same writers and the same—often unrepresentative—works show up again and again.*

The HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series

The HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series was created as an antidote to this version of multiculturalism whose fallibility becomes evident when talented writers, well-known and respected in their communities, are ignored. The HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series includes not only those writers who have made it into the canon but also writers undeservedly neglected in today's crop of texts.

* *For more information on the arbitrariness of this selection process, see Michael Harper's excellent Every Shut Eye Ain't Sleep.*

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In his autobiographical remarks, *Asian American Literature* editor Shawn Wong makes an important point that teachers should consider when adopting texts for their ethnic literature, multiculturalism, American literature, and introductory literature courses. Wong writes that his study of Asian American literature occurred outside of the university. "At no time," he writes, "in my English and American literature undergraduate education or in my entire public school education had any teacher ever used (or even mentioned) a work of fiction or poetry by a Chinese American or any Asian American writer." This observation could be made by all the editors of the HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series: Al Young for *African American Literature,* Gerald Vizenor for *Native American Literature,* Nicolás Kanellos for *Hispanic American Literature,* and of course Shawn Wong for *Asian American Literature.* They had to go outside of the academy—which has committed an intellectual scandal by excluding these major traditions of our common American heritage.

The Series Editors: Pioneers for an Inclusive Tradition

These editors are among the architects of a more inclusive tradition. Indeed, this series is unique because the four editors are not only writers and scholars in their own right but are among the pioneers of American literature of the latter part of this century! It's hard to imagine a list of talented insiders who are as informed about the currents and traditions of their ethnic literatures as the editors of the HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series. These texts provide teachers with an opportunity to employ material in their classrooms that has been chosen by writers who have not only participated in the flowering of their literatures but also have assisted in the establishment of a tradition for their literatures.

Al Young

Al Young is a multitalented artist who has distinguished himself as a poet, novelist, screenwriter, editor, and writing instructor. His presence is very much in demand at writing workshops and conferences. He has taught at a number of universities and colleges, including Stanford University, Crown College, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of California at Santa Cruz, Rice University, and most recently at the University of Michigan. Among his honors are a Wallace Stegner Writing Fellowship, a Joseph Henry Jackson Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an American Book Award, and a PEN/Library of Congress Award for Short Fiction. Al Young and I were editors of the Yardbird Reader series, which has been recognized as the first national publication of its kind devoted to presenting new multicultural literature.

Gerald Vizenor

Pulitzer Prize–winner N. Scott Momaday has said that Gerald Vizenor "has made a very significant contribution to Native American letters and also to American literature in general. He's innovative, he has the richest sense of humor of anyone I know, and in addition he's the most articulate person—he's a man to be reckoned with." Among his innovative novels are *Heirs of Columbus* and *Griever: An American Monkey King in China.* An American Book Award winner, Vizenor insists that the story of Native Americans in the United States should be told by Native Americans and not by intermediaries or translators. His *Native American Literature* anthology in The HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series will provide students and readers with an entirely different slant on Native American literature from the one they have become accustomed to in standard texts.

Nicolás Kanellos

Author of a number of scholarly works and articles, Nicolás Kanellos is the founder and director of Arte Público Press, the oldest and largest publisher of United States Hispanic literature, as well as the *Americas Review* (formerly *Revista Chicano-Reguena*), the oldest and most respected magazine of United States Hispanic literature and art. A full professor at the University of Houston, he is a fellow of the Ford, Lilly, and Gulbenkian foundations and of the National Endowment for the Humanities. He is also the winner of an American Book Award and is a formidable essayist with an unrivaled knowledge of the intersections of African, European, and Native American cultures.

Shawn Wong

It is not surprising that Shawn Wong and Frank Chin, Lawson Inada, and Jeffery Chan have become known as "the four horsemen of Asian American literature" by both their admirers and detractors. One wonders how Asian American literature would look without their efforts. It was they who began the painstaking construction of a tradition whose existence had been denied by the academy. In *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* and its successor, *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature,* the four editors gave permanent status to an Asian American literary tradition. Wong is also the author of *Homebase,* the first novel published in the United States by an American-born Chinese male. This novel received the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Excellence and the Fifteenth Annual Governor's Writer's Day Award. Among his many other honors, Wong has also received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He has taught writing at the University of Washington since 1984.

Remapping Our Tradition

Although the four editors are from different backgrounds, the issues raised in their introductions are those with which a few generations of multicultural scholars, writers, and artists have grappled. With *African American Literature,* Al Young has both a literary and humanistic purpose. He believes that readers and writers will be able to learn from their exposure to some of the best writing in the United States that there are experiences all of us share with the rest of humanity. Like the classic critic F. R. Leavis, Al Young believes that writing can make people better. The writers included in Gerald Vizenor's *Native American Literature* are not outsiders writing about Native Americans or colonial settlers promoting the forest as a tough neighborhood full of high-risk people, a threat to civilized enclaves, but rather works by Native Americans themselves, beginning in 1829 with William Apess's autobiography, *A Son of the Forest.* Nicolás Kanellos's *Hispanic American Literature* represents a literary tradition, part European and part African, that existed in the Americas prior to the arrival of the English. The situation in Asian American literature, one of the youngest of American literatures, is as turbulent as that of the atmosphere surrounding a new star. Shawn Wong's introduction addresses the continuing debate over issues about what constitutes Asian American literature and the role of the Asian American writer.

The books in the HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series give a sampling of the outstanding contributions from writers in the past as well as the range of American writing that is being written today. And the anthologies in this series contain a truly representative sampling of African American, Native American, Hispanic American, and Asian American writing at the end of this century so that students can become acquainted with more than the few European and European Americans covered by traditional texts or the same lineup of token ethnic writers found in the policy issue multicultural books. It should be welcome news to instructors looking for new ways to teach that such a distinguished group committed themselves to producing three-to-five-hundred-page textbooks that can either be used as the primary text in a course, supplemented with novels, combined for a single class, or used to supplement other texts that don't have the desired coverage of ethnic literature. While each book is designed to be brief enough for flexible uses in the classroom, each volume does represent the breadth of major literary genres (autobiography, fiction, poetry, and drama) that characterizes the literary contribution of each tradition, even if—as in the case of drama—the short format of the series would accommodate only a single example. The four volumes of The HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series constitute nothing less than a new start for those who are interested in remapping our writing traditions.

Writing for Our Lives

> The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors . . . but always most in the common people. Their manners, speech, dress, friendships—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—the picturesque looseness of their carriage . . . their deathless attachment to freedom (Walt Whitman, "Leaves of Grass," 1855 Preface).

Whitman said that these qualities and others await the "gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it." Though American authors from the eighteenth century to the present day have talked about a body of writing that would be representative of these attributes of democracy, one could argue that "the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it" is a recent and critical development because until recently many points of view have been excluded from United States literature. The Literary Mosaic Series also demonstrates that, for authors of a multicultural heritage, literature often provides an alternative to the images of their groups presented by an often-hostile media.

Of all the excellent comments made by Al Young in his introduction, one is crucial and strikes at the heart of why the writing is so varied in The HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series. He writes,

> and if you think people are in trouble who buy the images of who they are from the shallow, deceitful versions of themselves they see in mass media, think what it must feel like to be a TV-watching African-American male. Pimp, thug, mugger, drug dealer, crackhead, thief, murderer, rapist, absentee father, welfare cheat, convict, loser, ne'er-do-well, buffoon. Think of these negative images of yourself broadcast hourly all over the globe.

When African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans write, they're not just engaging in a parlor exercise—they are writing for their lives. The twentieth century has shown that unbalanced images can cost groups their lives. That is why The HarperCollins Literary Mosaic Series came to be—to trumpet these lives, lives that are our national heritage. And once these voices have been heard, there is no turning back.

Acknowledgments

This is a series that has been taken the time, talents, and enthusiasm of its editors—Al Young, Gerald Vizenor, Nicolás Kanellos, and Shawn Wong—and I am excited that they chose to be a part of this project. In addition, the editors and I wish to thank those people who helped us prepare the series, particularly those instructors who reviewed this material in various drafts and offered their expertise and suggestions for making the books in this series even more useful to them and their students: Joni Adamson Clarke, University of Arizona; Herman Beavers, University of Pennsylvania; A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff, University of Illinois at Chicago; William Cain, Wellesley College; Rafel Castillo, Palo Alto College; Jeffrey Chan, San Francisco State University; King-Kok Cheung, University of California at Los Angeles; Patricia Chu, George Washington University; Robert Combs, George Washington University; Mary Comfort, Moravian College; George Cornell, Michigan State University; Bruce Dick, Appalachian State University; Elinor Flewellen, Santa Barbara City College; Chester Fontineau, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana; Sharon Gavin Levy, University of Minnesota at Duluth; Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, University of California at Santa Barbara; Tom Green, Northeastern Junior College; James Hall, University of Illinois at Chicago; Lynda M. Hill, Temple University; Lane Hirabayashi, University of Colorado; Gloria Horton, Jacksonville State University; Ketu H. Katrak, University of Massachusetts at Amherst; Josephine Lee, Smith College; Russell Leong, University of California at Los Angeles; Michael Liberman, East Stroudsberg University; Paulino Lim, Jr., California State University at Long Beach; Kenneth Lincoln, University of California at Los Angeles; Marcus "C" Lopez, Solano Community College; Shirley Lumpkin, Marshall University; Barbara McCaskill, University of Georgia; Nelly McKay, University of Wisconsin at Madison; Lucy Maddox, Georgetown University; Thomas Matchie, North Dakota State University; Joyce Middleton, University of Rochester; Alice Moore, Yakima Valley Community College; Eric Naylor, University of the South; Jon Olson, Oregon State University at Corvallis; Ernest Padilla, Santa Monica College; David Payne, University of Georgia; Joyce Pettis, North Carolina State University; David Robinson, Winona State University; Don Rothman, Oakes College, University of California at Santa Cruz; Leonard A. Slade, Jr., State University of New York at Albany; Stephen Sumida, University of Michigan; Brian Swann, Cooper Union; John Trimbur, Worcester Polytechnical Institute; Hari Vishwanadha, Santa Monica College; Marilyn Nelson Waniek, University of Connecticut; Shelly Wong, Cornell University; Jackie Valdez, Caspar College; Richard Yarborough, University of California at Los Angeles.

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Introduction

Literature does not die unless its creators become the victims of genocide and silence of the grave, and until its creations are erased from the mind's ear and the mind's eye and calcined in bonfires.

—Jan Carew
"Moorish Culture-Bringers: Bearers of Enlightenment"
(Essay published in *Golden Age of the Moor,*
edited by Ivan Van Sertima)

Testify v. (1840s–1990s) to confess one's sins, bad deeds, life story (originally in church but now in music, literature, and through other forms of art); to ritually comment upon any cultural experience understood by all black people; a secular or religious confession ... Example: "I want to testify this evening to the goodness of my Lord and to the fact he directed me away from a life of sin."

Juba to Jive:
A Dictionary of African-American Slang,
Clarence Major, editor

Those "twenty Negars" sold by Dutch seamen to Captain John Smith, who brought them to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 (one year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock), did not step off the boat singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," or "We Shall Overcome," or "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)." Neither did they moan a chorus of slow blues, or cakewalk in ragtime, or break into some spirited jazz classic, or quickstep their way, all motion and flash, through Marvin Gaye's "Make Me Wanna Holler" or Aretha Franklin's "I Wonder How It Feels to Be Free." Nor did any one of them shout, "I have a dream!"

As silly as that may sound, it has to be said. Why? Because we live in a streamlet of time that sometimes seems to have been dammed off from the natural, oceanic flow of history. The emergence of those North American peoples of color—variously knows as Negroes, Blacks, and Afro-Americans—who now call themselves African Americans was not an overnight occurrence. Centuries have gone into shaping the outlook and cultural legacy of African Americans, who are, in fact, an altogether new race of human beings—biologically and culturally. And if the term *homo americanus*

is taken seriously, the story of their experience and their contributions to North American and global culture is nothing less than vast.

From pre-colonial times and the Revolutionary War through the cataclysmic wars of the twentieth century—World War I, World War II, the Cold War of the McCarthy Era, the Korean War, Vietnam, the so-called Persian Gulf War—Black Americans have served and been sacrificed. And from the Civil War of the 1860s through the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s, Black Americans, the essential American, have laid their hearts and souls and bodies on the line—and usually without forgetting their status as second-class citizens in what professes to be the world's greatest democracy.

So great has been the restlessness of our unreflective times and the republic we cherish that many citizens have serious trouble distinguishing between TV-Hollywood versions of history and the real thing. And since the majority of Americans are the descendants of slaves, indentured servants, migrant workers, immigrants, or refugees, we have much to gain from knowing even just a little about our country's true origins.

You may think you are reading and thinking about African American literature, but, in reality, it is America herself you will be exploring and experiencing through literature. And whatever else literature may turn out to be, it is surely a form of testifying.

Myth and History: Literature and Reality

Africa herself in African American culture and lore is frequently fictionalized and romanticized to the point of seeming more Africanesque than African. For example, African Americans favor Swahili as an African language to study. But many would never guess that Swahili, which, in Eastern Africa, has long served as a sort of *lingua franca*, was actually heavily influenced by Arab traders who intermarried with native women and colonized that eastern coast. Swahili, a Bantu-based language, enabled peoples of linguistically disparate cultures to talk with one another, and this included those whose lucrative business it was to literally sell others among them down the river.

Kunta Kinte, immortalized in Alex Haley's bestselling book and celebrated TV miniseries *Roots,* has come to symbolize all young Africans that slave-runners, with help from other Africans, captured and shipped to America. But Kunta Kinte was a fiction, while those "twenty Negars"—as Captain John Smith spelled them out in his *General Histories of Virginia*—were the real thing, even though we still know pitifully little about them.

In fact, we are only beginning to place in meaningful perspective information about the histories, economies, philosophies, governments, religions, and cosmologies of ancient civilizations and empires (Benin, Ashanti, Ghana, Mali, Hausa, Kanem-Bornu, Mossi, Oyo, Songhay) that flourished in regions we now know by other names.

Americans at all familiar with geography can now identify those locations as Ghana (dubbed the Gold Coast by European profiteers), the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Togo, Cameroon, the Congo, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Upper Volta, Chad, Gabon, Gambia, or Dahomey. It was from such cultures, grounded on Africa's west coast, that most plantation-bound natives were plucked.

Captain Smith's "twenty Negars," and all the Africans who followed, brought with them to America the cultures of West Africa—Yoruba, Ibo, Angolan, Akan. It would be seven years before the Dutch would import the first indentured African slaves, eleven of them, to New Amsterdam. As for the New England slave trade—which, along with rum and opium, turned the kind of get-rich-quick profits in its day that international drug trafficking does now—that industry would not be launched until 1638, when the first Africans arrived in Boston on the slave ship *Desire.*

Desire. What an apt name for a vessel jammed, fore and aft, with human cargo, without whom the building of what was to become thought of as the richest nation on earth, the United States of America, would have been clearly impossible.

Not only would African culture survive in the Americas, the African heritage itself would enable African Americans to withstand a terrifying experience, an experience whose dramatic unfoldment continues to this day.

The experience of peoples of African descent in the United States would seem unbearably harsh had we not grown accustomed to hearing about it repeatedly, rhetorically. Perhaps self-preservation plays a role in the way human beings learn to disconnect themselves emotionally from disturbing imagery and its meanings. We hear again and again about the settler slaughter of Indians, the millions executed under Stalin in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany's systematic annihilation of Jews, the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the violence-shrouded politics of the Vietnam Era, "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or the monumental scale of the political massacre in Rwanda.

These are historic events we often talk about and *hear* talked about ritualistically. What such prolonged nightmares tell us about human behavior, our own behavior, sometimes seems to be more than we can either accept or even stand to hear. And such events and experiences get packaged into formulaic, antiseptic versions, which we prefer to the real thing.

That ancient Europe really did owe much of her wisdom, know-how, material resources, and riches to Africa is vividly documented by historians, poets, and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome—Herodotus, Plato, Thucydides, Cicero, Tacitus. That North America, in her dizzying rise to power as a global leader in little more than a century, owed a great deal to Africa, and to slaves and their descendants, might largely remain a quietly kept secret were it not for the rich and powerful body

of imaginative literature—autobiography, fiction, poetry, and drama—that African American writers continue to create.

From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the importation of African slaves into the New World to feed flourishing plantation economies would bring Europe wealth of immeasurable proportions. With gold, silver, pearls, ivory, cotton, sugarcane, tobacco, and rum so plentiful, and with land and labor so cheap, neither Western civilization nor the known world would ever be the same.

"There is always something new from Africa," was what the ancient Roman writer, soldier, and statesman Pliny the Elder had to say about this fabled continent. But slavery was nothing new. Greek and Roman society had been slave-based. While slaves in Athens and Rome often tutored or educated their masters, however, literacy and reading among slaves in the United States was not only discouraged, it was punishable by law.

"Fortunate for the slave," historian Sterling Stuckey reminds us in his brilliant *Slave Culture,* "the retention of important features of the African cultural heritage provided a means by which the new reality could be interpreted and spiritual needs at least partially met, needs often regarded as secular by whites but as often considered sacred to blacks. The division between the sacred and the secular, so prominent a feature of modern Western culture, did not exist in black Africa in the years of the slave trade, before Christianity made real inroads on the continent."

Olaudah Equiano, an African and, so far as we know, the first to write a whole book in English, published in 1789, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa the African, Written by Himself,* had this to say about his homeland: "We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. Thus every great event, such as a triumphant return from battle, or other cause for public rejoicing, is celebrated in public dances, which are accompanied with songs and music suited to the occasion."

European colonials in New Amsterdam, New England, or Virginia regarded dancing and singing as pure devilment. The physical expression of joyfulness or celebration, so crucial to sacred ceremonies and devotional worship in African cultures, was punished in the colonies. Dance, especially, was sinful.

Consider that fact alone of the Negro past: the clash of cultures, in which a people found themselves not only enslaved, but among people who rejected them as human beings. Slavemasters could neither see nor could they afford to see slaves, that is, their very possessions, as possessing any culture whatever. When you begin to understand that most slavemasters viewed their slaves as cattle or livestock, then you begin to understand why so much of slave religious practices and African-derived culture had to be communicated secretly.

Once the very first of the so-called Black Codes—legal statutes that legitimized slavery as an institution—took effect in Virginia in 1661, languages and linguistic communication itself became endangered. Under slavery, not only was it against the law to teach a slave to read or write, it was illegal for slaves to teach themselves.

"Sometimes," one ex-slave recounted in *The Unwritten History of Slavery* (Nashville: Fisk University; on microfilm: Harbor Side, Maine: Social Science Institute), "the masters would let us have evenings in the church ... We'd sit in front with the patrolers behind us. The colored preachers would tell us to obey our masters. That's all they knew to say. If they said something else, the patrolers might stop them. One time we were singing: Ride on, king Jesus, no man can hinder thee, when the patrolers told us to stop or they would show whether we could be hindered or not."

Coded Meanings: The Secret Language of Communication

After she escaped North from the Maryland plantation where she was born of African parents around 1820, Harriet Tubman, a leading conductor of the Underground Railroad, slipped back into the South at least fifteen times to lead more than three hundred other women, men, and children to freedom. Easing her way around by night through southern backwoods, Tubman, destined to become known as the "Moses of her race," softly sang a special song to signal slaves bent on escaping that she was nearby and ready to roll.

This gutsy woman—who couldn't read or write—was convinced that God guided and gave her safe passage. In her heart, as she told fellow conductor Thomas Garrett, she "ventured only where God sent." And this is what Harriet Tubman sang to slaves ready to run to freedom:

Dark and thorny is the pathway
Where the pilgrim makes his ways;
But beyond this vale of sorrow
Lie the fields of endless days.

And there were other songs, each of which had two, three or many meanings, depending on who was singing, and who was listening. "Follow the Drinking Gourd," for example, urged fleeing slaves to guide themselves along their escape route by the position of the Big Dipper in the sky:

Follow the drinking gourd!
Follow the drinking gourd!
For the old man is a-waiting
for to carry us to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

Other songs included "Brother Moses Gone to de Promiseland," "Steal Away to Jesus," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

In the soil of such experiences the masked or dual aspect of African American culture took root. W. E. B. Du Bois, the eminent sociologist and political strategist, called it "double-consciousness" in his eloquent classic, *The Souls of Black Folk:* " An American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

Even though these now-classic Negro spirituals spoke at one level of Jesus and heaven and chariots and angels, they also told other stories and expressed other sentiments beyond the surface meaning of their texts. In other words, spirituals themselves comprise a vital portion of African American literature. To this day, a relatively modern gospel song such as Clara Ward's "How I Got Over" exemplifies the inspirational intentions of African American storytelling.

One hundred years after Harriet Tubman and others conducted fugitive slaves on the Underground Railway to safe-passage, another kind of conductor—a composer, arranger, pianist, and all-around musical genius—testified in another way to the complexity and depth of the Black American experience. Ellington wrote an orchestral suite that he called *Black, Brown and Beige.*

And what did Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington wish to convey by this title?

"*Black, Brown and Beige* was planned as a tone parallel to the history of the American Negro," Ellington wrote in his controversial autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress,* "and the first section, 'Black,' delved deeply into the Negro past. In it I was concerned with the close relationship between work songs and spirituals.... The second section, 'Brown,' recognized the contribution made by the Negro to this country in blood. We begin with the heroes of the Revolutionary War.... The third section, 'Beige,' [referred] to the common view of the people of Harlem, and the little Harlems around the U.S.A."

What discoveries do we make when we delve into the African American past? Have African Americans made any contributions to the United States? Do African Americans come at all close to sharing anything that resembles a "common view"?

Because the answers to questions we ask are usually found curled around the questions themselves, it might be enlightening to pause and look at each of those three questions prompted by Duke Ellington's *Black, Brown and Beige.*

First of all, the African American past, thanks to literature, is enormously recoverable. The Senegal-born slave-servant Phillis Wheatley, whose poems are ripe-to-bursting with metaphor, may very well have been thinking about the meaning or even the attainment of freedom when she sat in her master's Boston house and wrote these lines of "On Imagination":

From star to star the mental optics rove,
Measure the skies, and range the realms above,
There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
Or with new worlds amaze th' unbounded soul.
Though Winter frowns to Fancy's raptur'd eyes
The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise;
The frozen deeps may break their iron bands,
And bid their waters murmur o'er the sands.

Sifting through the sands of New World time in search of the Negro past, we come upon a unique body of literary works by writers of African descent whose backgrounds and temperaments crisscross political, esthetic, ideological, social, and geographic zones. From altogether unpredictable perspectives and temperaments, African American poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, essayists, memoirists, and scholarly critics represent the exciting sweep of diverse personalities that has always characterized the Black literary scene.

From the slave narratives and biographies of the abolitionist movement and the twelve-year post-Civil War era of Reconstruction when ex-slaves were elected to high political office in the South, from Booker T. Washington's classic autobiography, *Up From Slavery,* in which he calls for the "Talented Tenth" to lead the Negro population in bettering themselves materially through education and not through agitation; from World War I, which saw the return of Negro troops who had sacrificed their lives for their country in "the war to end all wars" and returned home from frontline duty in France and elsewhere, now more eager than ever to change their condition, from the days and nights of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, which ended with the Great Depression, on through World War II, the thunderous years of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power sixties, the anti-affirmative action eighties, and the neo-Nazi nineties—through all of these developments, African American writing has thrived and told its story.

The complexity, the range, the beauty and savvy of African American literature is stunning. If you have ever wondered what it might be like to walk in someone else's shoes, to see and think and feel through the eyes, mind, or the heart of another, then you have come to the right place. To read and listen with the mind's ear to what abolitionist activist Frederick Douglass, a runaway slave, had to say about his life and times is to step inside his body and soul.

Selling Stereotypes: A Way of Not Seeing

That we have on record written transcriptions of hundreds of stories told by the survivors of slavery seems a blessing. Such stories used to be told in family and

communal gatherings, on front porches, in backyards, kitchens, at the dinner table, at bedtime. Now we mostly get our stories from television and films.

Just think. If people buy the images of who they are from the shallow, deceitful versions of themselves they see depicted in mass media, imagine what it must feel like to be, say, a television-watching African American male. Pimp, thug, thief, mugger, murderer, drug dealer, drug addict, rapist, absent father, welfare slave, welfare cheat, convict, loser, ne'er-do-well, buffoon—these are the images, the negative depictions, broadcast hourly all over the globe.

Sterling A. Brown, the writer and teacher regarded as *the* folk poet of the Harlem Renaissance, described these kinds of stereotypes in his book *The Negro in American Fiction.* Roughly, Brown broke down these White-generated images of Blacks into seven categories: (1) The Contented Slave, (2) The Wretched Freeman, (3) The Comic Negro, (4) The Brute Negro, (5) The Tragic Mulatto, (6) The Local Color Negro, and (7) The Exotic Primitive.

Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks is the title that film and popular culture historian Donald T. Bogle gave his landmark study of Blacks in Hollywood films. Along the way, Bogle informed us that Hollywood stereotypes not only African Americans, but absolutely everyone. The impact of mass media depictions on public consciousness cannot be minimized or trivialized. In his own long autobiographical essay, *The Devil Finds Work,* the eminent James Baldwin tells us that his stepfather hated Baldwin's "frog-eyes," his mother's eyes, and had always told the boy he was ugly. This is how the writer recalls the effect on him, as a child, of seeing Bette Davis in a film: "So, here, now, was Bette Davis, on that Saturday afternoon, in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping. I was astounded. I had caught my father, not in a lie, but in an infirmity. For, here, before me, after all, was a *movie star; white;* and if she was white and a movie star, she was *rich;* and she was *ugly."*

Of course, an African American male may also see himself depicted on television as an entertainer, athlete, mayor, police chief, or Congressman. But if you crave the kind of rich, textured depictions, the nuances of subtle complexities of personality (contradictions, eccentricities, inconsistencies) that characterize real-life, breathing men and women—then you will have to put down your remote-control and pick up a poem, or a novel, or a short story.

Storytelling, which works through metaphor, is the battery that powers myth. The late Joseph Campbell, a compelling mythologist, reminded us that the first function of any mythology "is to awaken in the individual a sense of awe, wonder and participation in the inscrutable mystery of being." Poet Langston Hughes opens his moving poem "Consider Me" with the lines: "Consider me/descended also from/the Mystery." It is the stories told by these descendants of "the Mystery," the descendants of those "twenty Negars"— whispered, shouted, chaptered, rhymed, and acted out—

that make up the literature of African America, a literature popular all over the freedom-starved world, where it is translated, studied, and devoured.

The Black Cultural Achievement

By the 1920s, the Harlem that figures so prominently in the Duke Ellington musical portrait of "Negro America" had become a focal point for African American culture. Poetry, fiction, criticism, music, dance, sociology, history, education—each of these was flourishing full force after World War I in this relatively small area of uptown Manhattan.

In fact, achievements of African Americans, not only in the arts, but in practically every sphere of American life, were vast. The lawn sprinkler, the golfing tee (prior to whose invention golfers had to scoop and pile up dirt for every tee-off), the mechanical pencil-sharpener are "little inventions" for which African Americans took out patents. A. C. Roebuck, a founder of the famed Sears & Roebuck stores, was an African American. There were Black scientists such as Benjamin Banneker, the mathematician, astronomer, almanac editor, and publisher who in 1753 built America's first clock and who, at Thomas Jefferson's behest, laid out the city of Washington, D.C.

There was Norbert Rillieux, whose pan evaporator revolutionized the sugar industry; Jan Ernst Matzeliger, inventor of the shoe-lasting machine; Elijah McCoy, the mechanical engineer who is known as "the father of lubrication" and whose automatic lubrication devices inspired the phrase "the real McCoy"; Granville T. Woods, known as "the Black Edison," George Washington Carver, botanist and agricultural chemist, known worldwide for his work with peanuts; Garrett Morgan, inventor of both the gas mask and the traffic light; D. Charles Drew, who gave the world blood plasma; Dr. Percy L. Julian, the soybean chemist, the pioneer who synthesized cortisone; Dr. Ernst E. Just, revolutionary marine biologist.

But, the myth of Harlem in the 1920s was that of a place fueled, like the rest of the country during Prohibition, by bootleg booze and gangster-run speakeasies, a place where jazz and blues ran nonstop and where the literati (novelist Wallace Thurman waggishly referred to his uptown writerly crowd as "the niggerati") boogied down year-round from midnight to noon, then went home to nurse a hangover and write about the night.

The names alone practically tell the story: poets Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer; novelists Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset; singers Ma Rainey, her protegée Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, the dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson; multi-talented performers such as Paul Robeson, Florence Mills, vaudevillian Bert Williams; musicians such as Louis Armstrong, his pianist wife, Lil Hardin, Willie "The Lion" Smith, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Don Redman, the young Fats Waller, and Duke Ellington.

If ever there was an image that shows no sign of fading, it is the picture of Harlem and the fictitious version of the Cotton Club we get from the old movie and publicity stills. While a bubbling, slick-haired Duke Ellington—all got up in white, and all smiles—suavely bobs and sways in front of a smooth but snappy jazz band, sophisticated nightclub patrons sip their smart cocktails and pat their feet in time to what has been billed as "Jungle Music." The band itself, which seems a bit too jolly, backs up elaborately choreographed flocks of swivel-hipped, high-kicking chorus girls, shapely and comely, but leaning in complexion closer to Beige than Black. The truth is this: Black people, with rare exception, were only allowed *on stage* at the Cotton Club, not in the audience. And the painful irony of that situation is dealt with again and again in the literature produced by African American writers during this exciting period of American history.

It was a time when Prohibition was still going full-force, when Americans of all colors mostly still lived on farms, and when country and urban blues singers sang about outlaws and gangsters such as Chicago-based Al Capone. The Texas-bred blues singer Sam "Lightnin' " Hopkins, in one set of impishly poetic lyrics he wrote and recorded, has Capone telling the President of the United States" "You can run the country, / But I'm gonna run the city."

As for the cities themselves, they grew at a dizzying clip. By 1929, when the Great Depression all but destroyed the relative prosperity the United States had enjoyed, poor Blacks and Whites were already beginning to migrate from southern farms and small towns to industrialized northern cities.

One small-town girl, Zora Neale Hurston, the novelist and folklorist, who made her way from the all-Black town of Eatonville, Florida, up through Baltimore and New York City, where she became a prominent but not always visible member of the Harlem literary scene, had her own, unfashionable notions about how Black Americans should express themselves on paper. Hurston believed that it was perfectly fine to write about Black people without reference to the Black-White struggle; that is, it was necessary neither to depict African Americans as victims or losers, nor as martyrs or saints. In her celebrated novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* the story of one woman's full-circle search for happiness, Hurston showed what she meant. Not only did she express her opinion in the 1930s, at a time when African Americans were being socially savaged, excluded, and lynched in record numbers, she said it at a time when women of *any* color were, like children, largely expected to be seen, but not heard.

As the economy streamlined itself, however, national interest in Black culture, the Negro Renaissance, and other human rights struggles dissipated. America was catapulted into a global war against fascism. When the war was over, the American population had shifted from rural to urban, and the industrialization mobilization of

those emergency years had shifted the American economy into high gear. It took close to half a century for the United States' war economy to run out of gas.

Because culture—the lasting, ennobling product of any society—remains priceless, America is a far richer nation than it realizes. Unlike peoples of Africa, Asia, or Europe, Americans are often oblivious of their true cultural treasures. Settler-colonial nations tend to measure wealth in terms of money and military clout. As worshipers of the new, such nations-in-progress either dismiss or ignore the past, including their own history. Industrialist Henry Ford spoke for a nation when he said: "History, bunk!"

But a debunking of our history reveals that it is the stories, the art and the culture, that enrich us. As for African American literature, it is not something that was "bused" into American classrooms during the Civil Rights struggles of the sixties. Rather, African American literature is a distillation of the ways in which once-whole communities, families, lovers and strugglers, joiners and loners of African descent have experienced the United States. That is what makes this body of literature so overwhelmingly American.

From the close of World War II in 1945 to the dawn of our own age, the world changed. Germany and Japan—America's wartime enemies and postwar allies—became world economic powers. And now, as we move into the twenty-first century, young Americans of all colors and cultural backgrounds are painfully learning that they may not be able to live as well as their parents.

Something happened, but what?

As strange as it may seem, many answers to this complex question can be found in the stories, and drama, the poems and reflections of imaginative writers. "Poetry is truer than history," said Aristotle. Those poets, storytellers, dramatists, and memoirists whose works give this book its life are, in effect, sharing with the world the fruits of their experience. And, like all literature, African American literature presents an invaluable record of what lies beyond man's purely animal existence. It is the inner life of human beings, mankind's spiritual life, that literature explores. Can there ever be a more lasting or more beautiful way to testify than this?

Nurtured with sweat, watered with tears, sowed in the fertile soil of human imagination, tilled with sorrow and blood, scrap-irony and wit, paradox and hope, the bountiful crop of African American literature continues to take root and flower in the sunshine and shadow of love.

Charles W. Chestnutt

(1858–1932)

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, and raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Charles Waddell Chestnutt was a precociously gifted student who became a school teacher at the age of fourteen and a principal at the age of twenty-two. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, Chestnutt was frustrated with the limitations imposed upon Blacks in the South. He therefore moved in 1883 to New York, where he briefly worked for a Wall Street news agency before relocating to Cleveland, his birthplace. While working for a railroad company there, Chestnutt began studying the law and publishing short stories, poems, and humorous sketches in local periodicals. These avocational efforts soon paid off: in 1887 Chestnutt not only passed the Ohio state bar but received national attention when his story "The Goophered Grapevine" appeared in the Atlantic Monthly. *The 1989 publication of two short-story collections,* **The Conjure Woman and Other Tales** *and* **The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line**, *inspired Chestnutt to concentrate on his fiction, resulting in three novels over the next six years:* **The House Behind the Cedars** *(1900),* **The Marrow of Tradition** *(1901), and* **The Colonel's Dream** *(1905). Successful in business, active in civic affairs, and engaged in the raising of his family, Chestnutt also managed to write six other novels after 1905; none of them, however, was accepted for publication. Clearly his fictional denunciations of "the unjust spirit of caste"—symbolized in the problems and prejudices of those Blacks who could "pass" for White—did not make for easily publishable reading. Despite this long silencing, Chestnutt received the Springarn Achievement Award in 1928 for his "pioneer work as a literary artist depicting the life and struggles of Americans of Negro descent."*

The Wife of His Youth

Mr. Ryder was going to give a ball. There were several reasons why this was an opportune time for such an event.

Mr. Ryder might aptly be called the dean of the Blue Veins. The original Blue Veins were a little society of colored persons organized in a certain Northern city shortly after the war. Its purpose was to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement. By accident, combined perhaps with some natural affinity, the society consisted of individuals who were, generally speaking, more white than black. Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins. The suggestion was readily adopted by those who were not the favored few, and since that time the society, though possessing a longer and more pretentious name, had been known far and wide as the "Blue Vein Society," and its members as the "Blue Veins."