



PREFACE



This book *New Bones* is an amazing collection. Of course, we can say this because of the extensive work that has been put into completing the project. But there are other reasons for holding this anthology in high esteem, including that it is the first and most extensive collection of its kind. There are other well-regarded texts that collect contemporary writings by African Americans, but those works often organize around a theme, genre, or subject matter. *New Bones* pulls together, in one well-compiled resource, writings by Black writers since 1970, the time period that many readers are most familiar with and intrigued by. What makes *New Bones* an even more exciting collection is the way that it brings together well-known writers and newer voices, creating a lovely gathering of Black voices. These are, quite literally, new bones.

In organizing the anthology we have selected works that best represent authors, but also works that introduce and expand ideas of what contemporary African-American literature is. We have chosen a broad spectrum of writing: fiction, poetry, autobiography, nonfiction essays, speeches, plays; covering a wide range of topics, including relationships, gender, history, social problems, migration, education, mythology, color, identity, language, amongst others. We have also carefully avoided, in most cases, using excerpts of works, especially with fiction, and instead used representative short fiction when possible so that the reader can appreciate the entire piece. In the cases where excerpts are used, we have offered a generous selection for context.

There are three prominent features of the anthology that bear some comment; the first is the introductory essay that precedes each writer. This essay serves to introduce the reader to the writer using biographical and career information as well as providing a brief overview of the themes and aesthetics of the included selections. These introductory essays also offer ways of reading the work, sometimes give insight on common ways that a writer or a work has been received, and often make reference to other writers in the anthology whose work evokes similar themes or ideas. In this way, the introductory essays serve to clarify the incredible web that is contemporary African-American literature.

Another important feature of *New Bones* is the inclusion of "Focused Study" sections. These focused studies aim to give a reader a more extensive introduction to a particular writer, and in this respect, those sections are significantly

longer than others. Each focused study provides a longer introductory essay, a wider selection from the author's work, and at least one secondary essay relevant to the author (for example, an interview, or a critical essay). The eight such sections included are divided across genres and subject matter, and also highlight newer as well as established writers.

A final noteworthy feature is the very comprehensive introductory essay that proceeds this preface. This essay, written in very readable prose, provides a very effective introduction to contemporary African-American literature, offering insight into the historical and political factors that preceded this body of writers. The essay further explores the development of contemporary aesthetics in various genres. What is most effective about this essay is the way that it offers general and thematic frameworks with specific examples, such that readers of other works included in the anthology can readily consider texts in light of the body of information in the introduction. The anthology also includes key artwork by Black visual artists in the last thirty years, and ends with a list of writers not included in the anthology, but who are also part of this larger body of contemporary African-American writers and thinkers.

We hope that you will find this collection useful, inspiring, and engaging.

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INTRODUCTION



The sharp increase in both quality and quantity of literary production from the 1970s through 1990s signals a contemporary renaissance of African American literature, one that rivals the scope and duration of the Harlem Renaissance. The number of award-winning Black authors has grown dramatically, with more in the 1980s and 1990s than in the rest of the century. Consider, for example, Derek Walcott's 1992 Nobel Prize, Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize, August Wilson's 1987 and 1990 Pulitzer Prizes, Yusef Komunyakaa's 1993 Pulitzer Prize, Maya Angelou's reading of a poem at President Clinton's 1993 inauguration, and Rita Dove's 1987 Pulitzer Prize and unprecedented two-term appointment as poet laureate. All of these achievements testify to the importance of African American literature in broader American life. Since 1990, it has not been uncommon for three or four African American authors to appear simultaneously on the *New York Times* best-seller list. With a diverse and growing audience, including a committed African American audience, Black authors are enjoying richly deserved visibility and, sometimes, fame.

In addition, scholars in the last fifteen years have placed Black literature at the center of English and Women's Studies curricula. And many universities have established African American studies programs that highlight literature.

The ascendance of African American literature after roughly 1970 is related to the vigorous, grassroots racial protest of the previous sixteen years. That protest arguably began in 1954, when JoAnn Robinson and her organization, the Women's Political Council, raised strong objections to legalized racial segregation on the buses of Montgomery, Alabama. The following year, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to yield her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white man. Immediately, Robinson and the Women's Political Council distributed thousands of leaflets calling for African Americans to boycott city buses. Emerging as the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Martin Luther King, Jr., defined the protest as a Biblical struggle against American Pharaohs and part of dark-skinned peoples' worldwide rebellion against white supremacy and colonialism. When his home was bombed, King delivered an impromptu Sermon on the Porch, explaining that the boycott would only rely on the weapon of Christian love and nonviolence. In 1955 the Supreme Court vindicated the nonviolent boycotters by outlawing segregation on the buses of Montgomery.

In 1960 four African American college freshman sat down at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, and refused to leave. With no advanced planning, similar sit-ins quickly spread to more than fifty cities. Inspired by Ella Baker, youthful protesters then met to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was organized by Robert Moses, Ruby Doris Robinson, and many others. In 1961 the Congress of Racial Equality, founded by James Farmer in 1942, conducted nonviolent Freedom Rides through Alabama and Mississippi. White racists greeted Freedom Riders with severe beatings and set one bus on fire with the Freedom Riders aboard. Farmer and other Freedom Riders, not their attackers, were jailed.

Much to the chagrin of President John Kennedy, a huge, nonviolent grass-roots struggle engulfed much of the South and the nation. The most important focal points were Mississippi, where Fannie Lou Hamer, a former sharecropper, inspired many with her courage and her songleading; and Alabama, where King directed his key crusades. Following Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson secured passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the most important racial law since Reconstruction. In 1965, following protests by SNCC and King in Selma, Alabama, Johnson proposed and Congress approved the Voting Rights Acts, which guaranteed that, for the first time, African Americans could vote anywhere in the United States.

During the early 1960s, Malcolm X attracted many listeners in the urban North as he eloquently railed at White oppression, instilled racial pride, and advocated racial separation. Black writers were also involved in the process, as evidenced for example by James Baldwin: In the 1950s and 1960s, Baldwin wrote trenchant novels and nonfiction that powerfully articulated enormous anger at racial inequities; he also marched with civil rights demonstrators. Especially in Mississippi and Alabama, nonviolent civil rights activists were routinely beaten and occasionally tortured or murdered. Their racist attackers were seldom arrested and rarely convicted. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) wiretapped and harassed King and other nonviolent protesters while usually ignoring those who beat, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered them.

As activist Anne Moody explains in her classic autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), idealistic civil rights agitators grew disillusioned with every level of American government. Sounding like Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and other leaders in SNCC rejected the goals of racial integration and nonviolence in favor of "Black Power" and economic development. Disillusionment deepened when Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965 and when President Johnson escalated the Vietnam War, into which a disproportionately large number of African American soldiers were drafted. Some of the early objections to the war came from civil rights agitators. King denounced it in 1967. Between 1964 and 1968, rioting and burning became fairly common in large American cities, most notably Los Angeles, Detroit, and Newark. Massive disturbances were widespread following King's assassination in 1968. He had called earlier riots "the cry of the unheard."

In this context, between roughly 1965 and 1976, authors banded to form the Black Arts Movement, which sought to redefine and transform social conditions through literature. Specifically, writers furthered the freedom struggle, promoted "Black Power" and "Black Consciousness," and proclaimed the beauty of Black people. They urged self-definition, cultural unity, and community-based revolutionary politics.

Led by such figures as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Askia Toure, and Larry Neal, the Black Arts Movement began in New York City as poets delivered angry, vernacular chants throughout Harlem. Black Arts also flourished in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans. Ed Bullins, Ron Milner, and other playwrights attracted eager audiences. Authors initiated numerous journals, including *Black Dialogue*, and publishing outlets, most notably Dudley Randall's Broadside Press (in Detroit) and Haki Madhubuti's Third World Press (in Chicago). Randall published hundreds of poets, including such older luminaries as Sterling Brown and Gwendolyn Brooks and such promising writers as Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight, and Sonia Sanchez. Many of these works experimented with form, often incorporating rhythms and phrases from streetcorners. A few Black Arts books, such as Baraka and Neal's anthology *Black Fire*, received broad national distribution. But large New York publishers generally avoided Black Arts writers.

During the 1960s, some feminist activists questioned the assertive, largely male public leadership of the Civil Rights Movement, whose watershed March on Washington featured a day of speechifying (including King's famous "I Have a Dream" address), but no orations by women.

Beginning in 1970, certainly the single most important characteristic of contemporary African American literary tradition is the explosion of writing by women. In 1970 Toni Cade Bambara edited *The Black Woman*, a landmark anthology that documented Black women writers' dissatisfaction with sexism, racism, and the narrow range of experience expressed in White and Black literature. They also announced their new and growing dedication to female self-determination and self-expression.

During the 1970s, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, June Jordan, and others proposed that "Blackness" was not as unifying or as simple a concept as many in the Black Arts Movement presumed. Even during the 1960s, such writers as Adrienne Kennedy questioned the homogeneity of "Blackness" and the tendency of Black Arts to essentialize Black experience. Jordan, among others, objected to the traditional, secondary status of woman in defining "Blackness." Walker and other southern artists contested the assumption that "Blackness" was an urban phenomenon, an assumption that seemed popular among Black Arts participants, who generally lived in large cities. Lorde's poetry raised the visibility of gays and lesbians within the continuum of "Blackness." Concentrating on life in the Caribbean Basin, Marshall and others reminded readers that African Americans could not contain or define the entire experience of the African Diaspora.

The lives of Black women, long ignored or relegated to stereotype, became the focal point for most Black women writers. Their work in all genres often blended militancy, personal exploration, and self-affirmation. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and many others critiqued the valorization of Black manhood and the subordination of women—themes that emerged, for example, in the extremely popular, posthumously published *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965). Walker, Morrison, and others analyzed the intertwining complexities of sex, race, and class as an argument for the whole, healthy future of Black families and communities. Investigating gender relationships and stereotypes, they extended thematic arenas to include sexuality and spirituality, mother/daughter relationships, and women's friendships.

Poetry: Black Arts Movement and Beyond

The most prominent genre of the Black Arts Movement was poetry that was publicly performed, poetry that was heard as much as it was read. Defiantly anti-elitist, many Black Arts poets drew from the vernacular tradition of sermons, popular music, and Black speech (including signifying) to inspire audiences toward revolutionary action. The verse was free and conversational and—especially in the case of Quincy Troupe and Sonia Sanchez—deeply influenced by jazz and the blues. In some cases, poets appropriated specific American forms; Amiri Baraka, for example, initially adopted the avant-garde style of the Beat movement. Combining the rousing strategies of storyteller and preacher and the themes of radical politics and Black pride, Black Arts Poets established a rich tradition for contemporary writers to mine.

Many Black Arts poets published their best-known poetry between 1965 and 1970, as evidenced by the following catalog: Amiri Baraka, *Black Magic Poetry* (1969); Nikki Giovanni, *Black Talk/Black Judgment* (1968) and *Re: Creation* (1970); Mari Evans, *I Am a Black Woman* (1970); Haki Madhubuti, *Think Black* (1967), *Black Pride* (1968), and *Don't Cry, Scream* (1969); Etheridge Knight, *Poems from Prison* (1968); Sonia Sanchez, *Homecoming* (1969); Jayne Cortez, *Pisstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (1969); Carolyn Rodgers, *Paper Soul* (1968) and *Songs of a Black Bird* (1969). The influence of Black Arts philosophy, valuing the unique history and culture of Black art and community, could not but help to be an important influence on literary production in the early 1970s and beyond.

A resurgence in the popularity of performance poetry, the spoken word, is a current, nationwide practice among people of many ethnicities. This phenomenon reflects the lasting impact of Beat and Black Arts oral poetry. Numerous contemporary Black poets—notable Ruth Forman, Quincy Troupe, and Wanda Coleman—continue to hone the art of performed poetry. In addition, the extremely important, centuries-old tradition of African American oratory continued to thrive in the presentations of such notables as Angela Davis, Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Jesse Jackson, and Cornel West.

During the 1960s, some African nations moved from colonization to independence—or, as King and Malcolm X explained, from oppression to freedom. In an effort to negate the effects of White ideology, people began to investigate and celebrate African culture, which inspired a sense of common origin and helped create a “new” African American identity. Civil rights activists, including Fannie Lou Hamer, traveled to Africa; Stokely Carmichael moved there. Many Black poets—including Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka—also journeyed there, often returning with new styles of dress and song and vocabulary to integrate into their work. Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde also ventured to Africa for inspiration. The exploration of African mythologies and images is still common in contemporary African American poetry, as the interest in the African Diaspora thrives.

Poets expanded the territory of Black poetry in other ways as well. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Derek Walcott explored themes related to the West Indies. In *Poems from Prison* (1968), Etheridge Knight spotlighted the life of the underclass and, especially, the not uncommon experience of prison. In 1997, Toi Derricotte explored biracial identity—an examination that younger poet Ruth Ellen Kocher continues in *Desdemona's Fire* (1999).

Like other genres, poetry experienced a woman-driven shift in the 1970s, when Lorde published *Cables to Rage* (1970), *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), *Between Our Selves* (1976), and *Coal* (1976). Lorde's prestige and audience grew with each new collection. She filled her verse with images of strong, self-affirming women, and especially in *The Black Unicorn* (1978), she integrated African mythology, establishing ties between Africa and African America and imagining wider realms of self-definition and self-assertion for Black women. Lucille Clifton wrote her second and third collections of poetry, *Good News about the Earth* (1972) and *An Ordinary Woman* (1974), which forecast her prolific production of seven more collections and a memoir during the 1980s and 1990s. With the publication of second and third collections—*New Days: Poems of Exile and Return* (1974) and *Things That I Do in the Dark* (1977)—June Jordan stepped forward as a dominant poetic force whose output would be profuse. Clifton and Jordan focused on the strength and resilience of mothers in Black communities and the dynamics of gender relationships. Clifton's concision contributed to the impact of her statements about genealogy, Christian heritage, and women's friendships, while Jordan expanded the range of poetic subjects and themes. Women poets of 1990s—including Ruth Forman, Jewelle Gomez, and Toi Derricotte—benefitted enormously from the formidable legacy of Lorde, Clifton, and Jordan.

Many poets continue to rely on the still lively sounds and rhythms of blues and jazz. Sherley Anne Williams, Quincy Troupe, and Michael S. Harper integrate musicality into the style and content of their poetry. Writing about solitary Black women and about relationships between Black men and women, Williams relies on the blues tradition with its emphasis on remembering pain and brutality and with

its call to transcend pain in secular ways. She proclaims the sorrows of humanity with rhythmic delivery, call-and-response reminiscent of Black folk preaching, and a single voice—mournful, but resilient. Harper and Troupe draw more centrally on the primarily urban tradition of jazz. As it celebrates the human capacity to endure and thrive under pressure and to improvise coping strategies, jazz resonates in Harper's *Images of Kin* (1977), which negotiates African American with "American" identity and history. Jazz also vibrates in Troupe's *Weather Reports* (1991), as he integrates urban sights and sounds with Southern sensibilities and pace. With the publication of *Magic City* (1992) and *Neon Vernacular* (1993), Yusef Komunyakaa also engages in thoughtful poetic musicality.

Drama: A Continuing Social Force

During the 1960s, drama (along with poetry) deployed language as a weapon of social change and revolution. Lorraine Hansberry's famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), anatomized gender and generational tensions within a family seeking racial equality. Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), *The Baptism* (1967), *The Toilet* (1967), and *Four Black Revolutionary Poems* (1969) sought to break the illusion of the stage, to make drama represent living experience. *Dutchman*, which won the 1964 Obie award, addresses the oppressive powers that create and reify divisive stereotypes of race and gender, particularly those involving Black men and White women.

If Baraka is the best-known playwright of the Black Arts Movement, Adrienne Kennedy is the dramatist whose subsequent productivity is most notable. Publishing seven plays in the late 1960s, Kennedy continued to write, producing *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976), *Orestes and Electra* (1980), and *The Alexander Plays* (1992), a collection of four new dramas. Kennedy fills her plays with surrealistic images, dream-like interactions between characters (some of whom are played by more than one actor), masks, and non-traditional music.

Drama continues in many ways to follow the conversational style and content of Black Arts. Racism continues to be crucial to subject matter, though issues of class, gender, and sexuality have also become central. While the "lesson" or call to action is not as dominant in drama as it once was, contemporary drama still addresses structural social problems. Drama has also become increasingly fertile ground for experimentation with voice and form. Because Ntozake Shange's renowned *for colored girls who consider suicide/when the rainbow is enough* (1975) is replete with multiple perspectives, voices, settings, and dance, Shange calls her work a choreopoem. Anna Deveare Smith's exploration of contemporary racial conflict and violence in Los Angeles (*Twilight*, 1992 [1993]) and Brooklyn (*Fires in the Mirror* [1992]) are one-woman portrayals of many viewpoints surrounding the Rodney King incident and the Crown Heights class between the Hassidic Jewish and African American communities. Smith's multifaceted approach and play

with narrative voice may help subsequent writers capitalize on sociological field research and what it says about race in the United States.

The most celebrated American playwright of the 1980s and early 1990s is August Wilson. Wilson often depicts African Americans in the urban North during earlier decades of the twentieth century. These characters, who typically range from the lumpen-proletariat to the lower middle class, struggle against severe restrictions that racism imposes on their lives, which combine wit, pluck, courage, pathos, and tragedy. In *Fences*, which premiered on Broadway in 1987, Wilson created his saddest and most memorable character in the charming Troy Maxson, a garbage man and former baseball player in the Negro Leagues, who is degraded by racism and his own inability to emotionally support his son and wife. With Wilson's phenomenal presence, but also with the talent and works of Smith, Shange, and others, the dramatic tradition in African American literature remains strong.

Fiction: Renewal of Narrative

Nineteen seventy proved at least as important as any year in the entire history of African American letters. In 1970, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and June Jordan each published their first novels: *The Bluest Eye*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and *His Own Where*, respectively. Morrison concentrated on the effects of internalized racism on the disintegration of a Black family in a small midwestern town. Walker focused on impoverished Black men in the South who brutalized women after being brutalized themselves by Whites. And Jordan rounded out the variation with her examination of experience in New York City. Not only did Toni Cade Bambara publish her germinal anthology, *The Black Woman*, in 1970, she also issued *Tales for Black Folks*, which demonstrated that African American stories and traditions needed to be preserved and communicated within the Black community.

Narrative fiction revived the treasure of orality and storytelling that had been practiced primarily in the mode of poetry during the Black Arts Movement. Relying on vernacular language, James Alan McPherson's stories in *Hue and Cry* (1969) depict survival under White power or loss suffered under it. John Williams's fast-paced novels, including his well-known *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967), critiqued the continuation of racial inequities. Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar* (1974) is informed by jazz and the blues. In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and other novels, postmodernist Ishmael Reed—an advocate of “Neohoodooism”—harnesses wild fantasy and collage to mock diverse foibles and absurdities, including racism.

It is not that Black fiction was dormant during the 1960s, but more that poetry and drama became central to the political imperatives of the time period. Near the end of the 1960s, the publication of the texts listed above, and some that follow, led to the current contemporary interest in Black fiction, an interest that rivals the period in the 1940s and 1950s when James Baldwin, Richard

Wright, Ralph Ellison, Ann Petry, and Gwendolyn Brooks all wrote fiction of some repute. Because of an incredible contemporary community of writers, the subjects of fiction have now diverged greatly.

Setting narratives in his childhood neighborhood, John Edgar Wideman published six novels after 1970 as well as two short story collections, including *All Stories Are True* (1993). The geography and meaning of "home" resonate richly in the novels that comprise his *Homewood Trilogy* (1985). He sometimes employed variations of modernist stream of consciousness, leading readers through time without disruption and smoothly switching point of view. Wideman's overall concern is to affirm the history and survival of Black families who suffer under terrible conditions. As Wideman chooses his great-great-grandmother Sybela Owens as the foundation for his *Homewood Trilogy*, he demonstrates respect for tradition and ancestry.

Other novelists also reconsider the past, including slavery. Ernest Gaines's *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1989) treat the experience of bondage. Gaines adapts the form of slave autobiography; Johnson contemplates the epistemologies of slaves and slave owners. Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), and Sherley Anne Williams' first novel, *Dessa Rose* (1986), also revisit the history and legacy of slavery, especially with respect to women's experiences. The central purpose of revising history and culture is to add to the complexity of what is already known. Thus, *Dessa Rose* focuses on slaves traveling West toward freedom. Sweet Home of Morrison's *Beloved* is not a large Southern plantation, but a small Kentucky farm. Naylor's *Mama Day* centers on the slave heritage of an island. Each of these authors asserts that slavery is a complex part of American history that needs to be reexamined continually, never forgotten, and never simplified to one story deemed "authentic." Much of this writing seeks in nonlinear ways to reconstruct the past for the purpose of understanding the present, a project in which male writers such as Ishmael Reed in *Flight to Canada* (1976) and David Bradley in *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) are also involved. Showing appreciation for African writers, some contemporary novelists incorporate elements of African cosmology and mythology, especially the emphasis on the significance of ancestors.

While many writers revisit slavery, others build on the philosophies and heritage of dominant cultures. Intertextuality thus extends beyond precedent in the African American tradition to adoption of form and thought from other traditions. With *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker engages the English tradition of the epistolary novel. Eastern philosophy is a dominant theme in James Alan McPherson's *Crabcakes* (1998) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*. Naylor's *Mama Day* resonates with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; her *Linden Hills* (1985) revises Dante's *Inferno*. Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), which has also been produced as a film, experiments with the form of the detective novel. Terri McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), both produced as mainstream movies and both lingering for weeks on

the *New York Times* bestseller list, popularized her as a romance writer. Octavia Butler's numerous novels, including *Wild Seed* (1980), apply devices of science fiction to illuminate slavery and oppression, while Samuel Delany's *Return to Neveryon* Series uses science fiction to explore sexuality. All these intertexts complicate common forms with African American themes.

Revision of "American" history and increasing acknowledgment of multiple and global heritage has created greater recognition of writers who examine the African Diaspora and immigration. The contributions of Caribbean-based writers are especially marked. Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), and *Daughters* (1991) examine relationships between African Americans and Caribbeans. Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) elide Jamaican history, myth, colonization, and constructs of race. Jamaica Kincaid's novels *Annie John* (1985), *Lucy* (1990), and *Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) and her short story collection *At the Bottom of the River* (1996) plumb the intricacies of mother-daughter relationships and colonized identities. Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* (1995) is rich in the tradition of Haitian storytelling. The variation of Black lives and identities put forth by Caribbean-based writers notably expands the entire literature of the western hemisphere.

Fiction for children has also blossomed. Creating positive communities and encouraging positive Black identity requires educating Black children to resist discrimination and affirm history, heritage, and self. Since the Black Arts Movement insisted on a revolutionary vision of African American culture and communities, production of children's literature has proliferated. Well-known authors have written many books for children. Lucille Clifton has published more than a dozen children's books, many featuring a young African American boy, Everett Anderson, learning about his culture. June Jordan's first novel, *His Own Where* (1970), was intended for adolescents. Her *Fannie Lou Hamer* (1972) reminds a young audience of Hamer's huge importance. Sherley Anne Williams' recent *Working Cotton* (1992) is based on the poetry in *Peacock Poems* (1975), which documents a day in the life of a young girl in the field.

Autobiography: Subjectivity Spoken

While autobiographies were popular and prevalent during the 1960s (for example those of Malcolm X, King, and Anne Moody), the genre experiences an explosion in the 1970s similar to that in fiction, especially in terms of a greater number of women's voices. In 1970—the same year that Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and June Jordan issued their first novels—Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* dazzled readers and became enormously famous. *Caged Bird* and Angelou's many sequels spurred the popularity of autobiography.

With the publication of *Zami* (1983), which she calls biomythography, Audre Lorde offers the first written account by a Black lesbian dealing with isolation from her Black family and culture, her outsider status in queer culture, and homophobia during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States. Lorde also imag-

ines for herself a healing and redeeming space within the Grenadian mythology and poetic language her mother passed down to her. In her poetic memoir, *Generations* (1987), Lucille Clifton begins with the story of her great-grandmother (who was a slave), documents the life of her father (whose death and funeral work as the immediate setting), and closes with the future of her children and the perpetuation of her family's heritage. Her memoir is a communal autobiography seen through her eyes. Formally, the narrative is loose, weaving her father's stories into her own reflections and including photos of family members to people the prose poem narratives with images.

June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni, and bell hooks practice somewhat similar autobiographical strategies in their genre-conflating collections of political essays. Each weaves personal narrative into political prose, realizing that to separate the two spheres is not only arbitrary but counterproductive. Like Clifton, bell hooks in *Bone Black* (1996) and *Wounds of Passion* (1997) captures central experiences in short narrative pieces and interchanges third-person and first-person voice (especially in *Wounds*). hooks celebrates the surge in autobiographical narratives and notes the need for more experimentation and greater appreciation for honesty and creative strategies: "Constantly faced with the paucity of nonbiased information about our lives as black women and men, it is both reassuring and affirming that we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in autobiographical narratives by African Americans. . . . Experimental memoirs have become the cultural sites for more imaginative accountings of an individual's life" (*Wounds*, pp. xviii-xix). This comment is also true of the narrative memoirs by male writers. In *Brothers and Keepers* (1984) John Edgar Wideman applies strategies of modernist fiction as he considers his brother's life and prison sentence, using the narrative space imaginatively. Wideman's interest in autobiographical writing is furthered in *Fatheralong*, published in 1994. Works by writers like Nathan McCall (*Makes Me Wanna Holler*, 1994) and Mark Muthabane (*Kaffir Boy in America*, 1989) also expand the Black tradition of autobiography.

Critical and Literary Essays: Intellectual Presence

A growing tradition of African American cultural, political, and literary criticism has produced some of the most important public intellectuals in the United States. In the 1970s Alice Walker discovered the forgotten work of Zora Neale Hurston and defined it as a linchpin of American fiction. Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) differentiates between African American and mainstream feminism and emphasizes the importance of recognizing all forms of creativity, from quilting to gardening. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argues in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self* (1987) and *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) that race is a construct of language and that African American texts rely on rhetorical strategies, not the direct outpouring of lived experience. Houston Baker's *Long Black Song* (1990) and *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (1995) propose that texts be studied within the tradition of African American music.

Barbara Smith and her colleagues' *All The Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) highlights the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality and recommends such an analysis as a heuristic for reading. Both in her essays and in *Her Own Where*, June Jordan consistently supports the power and value of Black English. Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984) challenges and broadens scholars' treatment of sexuality in African American letters. Articulating powerful social criticism, bell hooks and Cornel West dialogue in *BREAKING BREAD* (1991). In several essays in *YEARNING* (1990), hooks advocates a body of work to critique media depictions of African Americans. Varied in subject and approach, these and other philosophical texts revise the ways scholars and the public view African American culture and literature.

Broad Themes in Contemporary Black Writing

The themes that are central to Black literature post-1970 are interconnected with and reflective of developments in the genres. One principal idea is exploration of selfhood, a theme that has its roots in the experiences of forced migration and enslavement, and the unrelenting oppressive economic, social, and psychosocial conditions that African Americans endure in the U.S. landscape. This theme manifests most clearly in the autobiographical tradition. The particular approach that these writers take to self and selfhood includes a greater exploration of difference among people who are linked by racial identity; including investigations of mixed-race identity and sexuality. As the population of African America grows, the notions of community and class necessarily undergo critique and expansion. Some examples include Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which focuses on the development of identity for a young African American girl; or Bebe Moore Campbell's *Sweet Summer* (1989), which investigates the relationship between a young girl growing up in urban Philadelphia with her mother but spending sweet summer months with her father in rural North Carolina. Both writers focus on coming of age for Black girls, which was something of a literary novelty, and Campbell offers a rare commentary on Black women and their fathers. Further examples include Toi Derricotte's poetic commentary on biracial identity; Essex Hemphill's attention to the lives of Black men and their participation in Black American national and cultural politics; or Terry McMillan's romance-flavored look at Black middle class lives—all of which suggest the expansive nature of selfhood in contemporary literature.

The concept and construction of memory, which is a part of the contemporary interrogation of selfhood, is an especially fruitful theme for work in this anthology because of the relationship between memory and history, truth and time. Memory is crucial because of the inaccurate histories that have been recorded about the lives of African Americans, and the contested nature of what is called "the Black experience." Sometimes, all there is to refute an error of history is the memory of a person who dares to tell his or her truth. And still, the act of remembering is dynamic and fluid, always changing how the event or experience

happened, giving new contours to the edges of the remembered thing. Memory then becomes political and necessary, but also ambivalent and imprecise. Cornelius Eady's loving meditation on the loss of his father, or Rita Dove's competing and complementary stories in *Thomas and Beulah* reveal both the struggle and the joy of memory.

A common example of how memory is engaged in the literature is in the use of slave narrative. In tune with some tendencies of post modernism, some contemporary Black writers play with time, merging past, present, and future, or using ghosts or other manifestations of ancestors to disrupt the common psychic barriers between states of time. David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*, along with works by Reed, Naylor, Morrison, and Williams, reflect the increased contemporary interest in slave narrative as aesthetic. Memory as a literary and psychic construct also facilitates the interest in the African Diaspora—the literal and emotional community of people of African descent, living wherever they do in the world, whose lives are linked by forced dispersion from their homeland. The interest in Diaspora is not exclusively particular to contemporary writers. Still, the various revolutionary movements throughout the Diaspora in the decade or so that precede 1970, especially those in the Caribbean, the United States, and various West African countries, seem to have further facilitated literacy exploration of Diaspora, especially as Diasporic experiences inform processes of selfhood and self-regard.

Another prominent theme in the work of Black writers since 1970 is a passionate interest in writing and language. Writing has for many decades been of interest to African Americans, especially because the ability to write (as it represented a level of literacy) was almost a necessary requirement for freedom prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. The slaves who were able to write and read were the ones who most often had access to information necessary to break free, or who were able to engage in labor that might allow them to save money and, in a few instances, purchase their freedom. If nothing else, writing was important to selfhood and memory, important to the ability of a person to write his or her own experience of the world. The potency of slave narratives attest to this. As much, then, as Black people have yearned for writing, they have also exhibited wariness about the ways that writing and language have been used against them, for example legal documents that sanctioned enslavement, or literacy tests designed to forestall voting rights, or scientific documents that allegedly confirmed the inferiority of Black people. Morrison's character Schoolteacher in *Beloved* represents the intersection of these concerns.

Added to this historical ambivalence toward writing and language are the influences of the Black Arts Movement, which used word play to encode a Black vernacular; and of contemporary post modern and sociolinguistic critical thought, which suggests that language is, at best, unstable. The literature represented in this anthology often exhibits a high degree of word play, of using words in particular ways to speak two or more meanings, what is called signifying. Some writers use various vernaculars, or intentionally misuse words, to further contest the authority of language, but also to expand the language for their purposes. A cadre of

poets—Sonia Sanchez, Angela Jackson, Jayne Cortez, Clarence Major, Quincy Troupe, and Michael Harper—have created work with strong examples of this tendency. This interest in language influences both the content and the form of the work. For example, Cortez, Troupe, and Harper are expressly interested in writing in a jazz style, in a form that mirrors the repetition and revision that is jazz music aesthetic. This formalistic innovation reinforces the orality and performance quality that so characterized the poetry of Black Arts. Additionally, writers like Sapphire are beginning to introduce elements of hip hop into the literary tradition; this inclusion of hip hop is part of the “New Black Aesthetic” that novelist Trey Ellis argues in his essay of the same name. This special attention to form and content has been supported by the increased presence of Black studies in academic institutions. In fact, two of the more celebrated scholarly texts of Black literary criticism are Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (1984) and Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey*, both of which are centrally about Black literary language use.

In works since 1970, many writers and thinkers, especially various Black women, explore psychic, spiritual, and social healing and restoration. The scope of political activism often includes issues of community and nation, attempting to separate those issues from private experiences. This attempted division ignores, in Angela Davis’s phrase, “the highly social character of interior lives.” Such authors as Davis, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and bell hooks assert that both interior spaces and public issues are territory for political destruction and political restoration. In his essay included here, writer and activist Joseph Beam acknowledges these contributions of Black women and draws a direct line between their psychic and spiritual interests and his own themes. A similar connection can be seen in works by Cornelius Eady and Randall Kenan.

This attention to the psychic and spiritual capacities of self results in an interest in the power of the spirit and in the struggle toward wholeness. The aesthetic representation of wholeness does not lead to easy or simplistic resolutions, but instead allows writers to address complex issues, such as urban deterioration, or globalization of economies. Alice Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, where she weaves a complicated narrative about female genital mutilation is an example of the uneasy but unrelenting aesthetic investigation of peace and social justice. Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls* is another outstanding example of the use of interiority as a political site. What these writers suggest is that triumph is not always public and grand, but sometimes is quiet and sweet, personal and complicated. These texts struggle with and against nihilism, and gesture towards the possibility of transformation.

There are, of course, many other characteristics that could be said to represent, in some way, Black literature since 1970. What we offer here is not a definitive outline, but highlights of some key themes that are prominent in the works surveyed here.

What this anthology reflects is the stunning production of writing by African Americans in the past thirty years. Taken together, contemporary African Ameri-

can writers aim to convincingly re-envision and reframe the entire history of White and Black American race, gender, and class relations and the entire history of American literature. In many ways, they succeed, in what is a phenomenal literary and cultural achievement.

R. Joyce Lausch with Kevin Everod Quashie and Keith D. Miller

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