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NOVEL

Edited by  
Maryemma Graham



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CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR WORKS AND EVENTS,  
1645–2000

- 1492 Columbus discovered the West Indies, opening markets for slave labor
- 1526 100 African slaves brought to the North American continent
- 1619 Jamestown, Virginia colony established with twenty Africans as indentured servants
- 1643 Sugar introduced into the West Indies, requiring slave labor
- 1645 Trade in African slaves begins in Boston, later to be known as the triangular trade between North/South America, Europe and Africa
- 1705 Slave code defines slave status: all Negro, mulatto and Indian non-Christians
- 1740 Comprehensive “Negro Act” denies slaves basic freedoms, including the right to read
- 1760 *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon*, considered the first dictated slave narrative in America
- 1773 Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*, first book published by a black slave in America
- 1775 First anti-slavery society organized in Philadelphia
- 1776 Colonies declare independence from Britain; Continental Congress votes against the importation of slaves in all thirteen united colonies
- 1793 First Fugitive Slave Act
- 1808 African slave trade officially ended in Britain
- 1816 American Colonization Society founded in Washington, DC to return freed slaves to Africa
- 1822 Denmark Vesey organizes slave revolt in Charleston, SC
- 1829 George Moses Horton, slave poet, publishes poems to purchase freedom; Mexico abolishes slavery and welcomes US fugitives
- 1830 International slave trade officially ends; illegal traffic in slaves continues
- 1830–60 Slave narratives become the most popular form of American literature
- 1831 Nat Turner leads slave revolt in Southampton County, VA; Underground Railroad begins operation
- 1833 Oberlin College founded as first coeducational, racially integrated US college
- 1839 The *Amistad* revolt with fifty-three Africans led by Joseph Cinque
- 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*
- 1850s Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, first novel by an African American woman; Congress passes second Fugitive Slave Act mandating all fugitive slaves be returned to their masters; massive fugitive slave hunts begin
- 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly*
- 1853 William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter*, first known African American novel
- 1857 *Dred Scott* decision; African Americans denied access to federal court system
- 1859 Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*
- 1859–62 *Anglo-African Magazine* published
- 1861–65 American Civil War
- 1861 Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, originally thought to be a fictitious narrative
- 1862 Emancipation Proclamation abolishes slavery in states fighting the Civil War
- 1865 13th Amendment passed, granting freedom to former slaves; Freedmen’s Bureau and Freedman’s Bank established; Ku Klux Klan formed in Pulaski, Tennessee; President Lincoln assassinated
- 1866 Civil Rights Act guarantees citizenship for all Americans
- 1867 Howard University founded in Washington, DC for former slaves; Reconstruction begins
- 1868 14th Amendment passed by Congress, granting African American citizenship and civil rights
- 1870 15th Amendment passed, granting the right to vote to African American male citizens
- 1877 Reconstruction ends

- 1881 Booker T. Washington founds Tuskegee Institute in Alabama
- 1883 Supreme Court repeals Civil Rights Act of 1866
- 1892 Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*
- 1895 Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Exposition Address"
- 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court* case upholds separate but equal doctrine
- 1897 Alexander Crummell founds the American Negro Academy in Washington
- 1898 Grandfather clause introduced as voting requirement
- 1900 Charles Chesnut's *House Behind the Cedars; Colored American Magazine* begins publishing as outlet for African American literature
- 1901 Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*
- 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*
- 1904 *Voice of the Negro* begins publication
- 1909 NAACP formed
- 1910-30 The Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North
- 1910 National Urban League formed; *The Crisis*, journal of the NAACP, founded by Du Bois, begins continuous publication; anti-lynching campaign begins
- 1911 Arthur A. Schomburg, bibliophile, founds Negro Society for Historical Research (later the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture)
- 1912 James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*
- 1914-18 World War I
- 1915 Death of Booker T. Washington, considered the end of an era of black accommodation; Association for the Study of Negro Life and History founded by Carter G. Woodson
- 1916 *Journal of Negro History* begins continuous publication; *Opportunity* magazine founded by National Urban League
- 1917 *Messenger* magazine founded by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen; Bolshevik Revolution in Russia
- 1919 Du Bois organizes first Pan African Congress; the "Red Summer," more than eighty lynchings and twenty-five race riots; Claude McKay, "If We Must Die"; Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
- 1920 19th Amendment grants women the right to vote; Prohibition begins; Marcus Garvey's First International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World leads to the founding of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) to promote racial solidarity and return to Africa; The New Negro (Harlem) Renaissance begins
- 1922 *Shuffle Along*, black musical, brings African American culture to Broadway; T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*; James Joyce's *Ulysses*; Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows*
- 1923 Jean Toomer's *Cane*
- 1924 Death of Lenin in Soviet Union; Jessie Fauset's *There Is Confusion*
- 1925-27 Literary contests sponsored by *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines
- 1925 Alain Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, official anthology of the Harlem Renaissance; Josephine Baker's *La Revue Negre* (Paris); Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy*; F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; Countee Cullen's *Color*; 40,000 KKK parade in Washington, DC
- 1926 Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* and "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," considered manifesto for younger artists; Wallace Thurman's *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*; Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*; Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*; Negro History Week established
- 1927 Al Jolson appears in blackface in first talking movie, *The Jazz Singer*
- 1928 Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem*; Nella Larsen's *Passing*
- 1929 US stock market crash, Great Depression begins; Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*
- 1930 Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*; Nine Scottsboro boys charged with raping two white girls; Black Muslims founded in Detroit
- 1931 George Schuyler's *Black No More*
- 1933 New Deal legislation; WPA (Works Progress Administration) begins, provides support for writers and artists
- 1934-37 *Challenge and New Challenge*, founded by Dorothy West and Richard Wright
- 1936 Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder*
- 1937 Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Literature," groundbreaking critical article represents break with African American writers of the 1920s; Sterling Brown's *The Negro in American Fiction*
- 1939-45 World War II

- 1939 J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black*, first critical study of African American poetry
- 1940 Richard Wright's *Native Son*; bestselling novel and Book-of-the-Month Club selection; era of the "protest novel" begins
- 1941 Armed Forces and government are desegregated; A. Philip Randolph threatens mass protest march
- 1942-51 *Negro Digest* founded by John H. Johnson, devoted exclusively to African American literature, reprints African American novels (resumes publication 1961-70)
- 1942 Margaret Walker's *For My People*; first black poet to win National Award
- 1944-46 *Negro Story* founded by Alice C. Browning
- 1945 Richard Wright's *Black Boy*; Chester Himes's *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*; *Ebony* magazine founded by John H. Johnson
- 1946 Anne Petry's *The Street*; Frank Yerby's *Foxes of Harrow*; Cold War begins
- 1948 Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy*; Hugh Gloster's *Negro Voices in American Fiction*
- 1950-53 Korean War
- 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks, first African American to win Pulitzer Prize, for *Annie Allen* (1949)
- 1952 Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, represents major break with protest tradition; first African American novel to win National Book Award (1953)
- 1953 James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*
- 1954 *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision declares segregated schools unconstitutional
- 1955 Rosa Parks arrested for refusing to go to the back of the bus; Emmett Till lynched in Mississippi
- 1956 Montgomery bus boycott; Martin Luther King Jr. emerges as civil rights leader
- 1957 Gold Coast becomes Ghana, first African state to become independent; Little Rock Nine challenged by Arkansas Governor Orville Faubus
- 1958 Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America*
- 1959 Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* begins long Broadway run
- 1960 Four North Carolina A & T students' first sit-in at Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) founded; death of Richard Wright
- 1961 *Freedomways* begins continuous publication
- 1962 John O. Killens's *And Then We Heard the Thunder*; James Baldwin's *Another Country*; James Meredith faces federal troops as he enrolls at University of Mississippi
- 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington, King's "I Have a Dream" speech; Civil Rights Movement in full swing; President John F. Kennedy assassinated; death of W. E. B. Du Bois
- 1964 Three civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi, kicking off Freedom Summer; Martin Luther King receives Nobel Peace Prize; Congress passes Civil Rights Act of 1964; Organization of Afro-American Unity founded by Malcolm X
- 1965-73 Vietnam War
- 1965 Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; Selma to Montgomery March; assassination of Malcolm X; Watts riots; Black Arts Movement begins; Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, recovered and reprinted after thirty years
- 1966 Black Panther Party founded; "Black Power" slogan adopted by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress on Racial Equality (CORE); Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts becomes first elected black senator since Reconstruction; Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, first neo-slave narrative
- 1967 Race riots in Newark, Detroit, Chicago; Thurgood Marshall becomes first black US Supreme Court justice; death of Langston Hughes; Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*
- 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. assassinated; Senator Robert F. Kennedy assassinated; *Black Fire*, by Larry Neal and Leroy Jones (Amiri Baraka), principal anthology for Black Arts Movement
- 1969 Anti-Vietnam War demonstrations/peace movement in full swing; Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*
- 1970-76 *Negro Digest* changes to *Black World*, under editor Hoyt Fuller, becomes a shaping force in the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic Movement
- 1970 Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*; Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*; Toni Cade's *The Black Woman*; African American women's literary renaissance begins; Angela Davis one of FBI's "most wanted"
- 1971 Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* presents a nationalist critical approach; Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, first African American slave story made into a

- 1972 mini-series; Nathan Huggins's *The Harlem Renaissance*, first critical study of the period; Artica prison revolt
- 1973 Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* defines black modernist tradition in fiction; Congress passes Equal Rights Amendment; George Kent's *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture*
- 1974 Leon Forrest's *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*
- 1975 Albert Murray's *Train Whistle Guitar*
- 1976 Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* on Broadway; Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*
- 1976 Alex Haley's *Roots*, TV mini-series in 1977, attracts largest viewing audience in history
- 1977 Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*
- 1978 James Alan McPherson awarded Pulitzer Prize for *Elbow Room* (1977)
- 1979 Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*, kicks off controversy over Thomas Jefferson's mistress; Octavia Butler's *Kindred*
- 1980 Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists*, first major study of African American women's literary tradition
- 1981 David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*
- 1982 Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*; Gloria Hull and others, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*
- 1983 Alice Walker awarded Pulitzer Prize for *The Color Purple* (1982); Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*
- 1984 Houston A. Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, groundbreaking study of a blues-based literary tradition; death of Chester Himes; Trudier Harris's *Exorcizing Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*, first major interdisciplinary study of African American fiction
- 1985 Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism*
- 1987 Rita Dove awarded Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah* (1986); deaths of John Oliver Killens and James Baldwin; Bernard Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*; Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Black Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*
- 1988 Toni Morrison awarded Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* (1987); Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of*
- 1989 *Afro-American Literary Criticism*, represents a major contribution to literary theory and criticism
- 1990 Charles Johnson wins National Book Award for *Middle Passage*; death of Sterling Brown; Robert Stepto's *From Behind the Veil* proposes influential theory of African American narrative
- 1990 Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*; New Black Aesthetic era begins
- 1991 Death of Frank Yerby, bestselling African American author to date
- 1992 Terri McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* is international bestseller and blockbuster movie; death of Audre Lorde
- 1993 Yusef Komunyakaa wins Pulitzer Prize for *Neon Vernacular*; Toni Morrison is first African American to win Nobel Prize for Literature
- 1994 Death of Ralph Ellison
- 1995 Nation of Islam organizes Million Man March in Washington, DC; death of Toni Cade Bambara
- 1997 Death of Leon Forrest
- 1998 Death of Margaret Walker; Claudia Tate's *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race*; death of Kwame Toure (Stokeley Carmichael), who popularized the term "Black Power"
- 1999 Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*, published posthumously; *Encyclopedia Africana*, largest digital encyclopedia of publications from the black world; Rosa Parks awarded Congressional Medal of Honor
- 2000 Million Women March; death of Gwendolyn Brooks

## Freeing the voice, creating the self: the novel and slavery

The list of early African American fictions is unexpectedly provisional. Presently it includes "The Heroic Slave" (1853) by Frederick Douglass, *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown, *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) by Frank J. Webb, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (1857?) by Hannah Crafts, *Our Nig* or, *Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) by Harriet E. Wilson, *Blake, Or the Huts of America* (1859–62) by Martin R. Delany, and "The Two Offers" (1859) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. But the list has been evolving. The full text of *Blake* was not made available until 1969.<sup>1</sup> *Our Nig* was not identified as an African American novel until 1982; *The Bondswoman's Narrative* was not discovered to be an African American fiction until 2001. It has been identified by several kinds of forensic and scholarly tests as a manuscript written by an escaped slave woman.<sup>2</sup> On the authority of its finder, Henry Louis Gates Jr., it is proper to treat that manuscript as authentic, but it is so newly found that it is also proper to retain the possibility that it might prove to be otherwise.

Early African American fiction is a decidedly unstable field. *Our Nig* had been thought to be a novel by a white woman. Another title which had been thought to be a novel by a white woman was shown in 1981<sup>3</sup> to be a genuine slave narrative written by an African American woman whose name is now on its cover: Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.<sup>4</sup> The border between fact and fiction is a broad territory, not a dividing line, and an item in the September 1859 issue of the New York *Anglo-African Magazine* illustrates the vagueness of the border. "Patrick Brown's First Love" reports the story of a slave who has become free by default.<sup>5</sup> So many of his masters have met violent deaths that nobody wants to buy him. Patrick Brown tells the reporter that he has secretly killed all the white men who mistreated him. It is remarkable that a slave should spend a lifetime concealing the fact that he is a murderer and then allow his story to be told in a newspaper. "Patrick Brown's First Love" may in fact be the first African American short story, but it is only one of many items purporting to

be true stories which appeared in anti-slavery newspapers and magazines. In the London *Anti-Slavery Advocate* in 1852, William Wells Brown wrote an article he called "A True Story of Slave Life." It is an account of the sale of a beautiful mulatto woman on the auction block in Richmond, Virginia.<sup>6</sup> The details are reproduced the following year as chapter 1 of *Clotel*, "The Negro Sale."<sup>7</sup> Fiction was emerging everywhere in African American writing in the decades before the Civil War, and there may be no definitively first story.

When African Americans made the move from the writing of narratives to the writing of novels, they were stepping across a void no matter how close the last narratives were to the first novels. At that moment the writers were giving up the authenticity of life for the authenticity of imagination, and the guarantee to the reader had to be of a different order. For Addison Gayle, that moment was one of failure because "ignoring their own history and culture, the early black writers attempted to create a literature patterned upon that of whites."<sup>8</sup> In the 1970s, Gayle was voicing an anger provoked by the ambiguities of early African American fiction: Was it black or was it white? Was it African or American? Was it a proud development of an authentic slave tradition or a poor imitation of the Victorian novel of manners? Did it help or did it hinder the African American cause? Answers depend on what you read as well as how you read. Gayle was reading a list of titles different from the titles now available, and the first answers come in response to another question: Where did early African American fiction come from?

Texts come from texts, and two answers have been given for the starting point of these texts: the black slave narrative and the white popular novel. The fact is that the African American fiction is rooted in both, but it owes its distinctiveness to the slave narrative. The greatest slave narrative is the eighteenth-century masterpiece, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*,<sup>9</sup> but it is not this treasure that was the direct model for the fictions being written in the 1850s. Equiano's voice – aristocratic, genteel, Augustan, and deferential, more English than American – was not the voice being heard in the thirty years before the Civil War. The classic American slave narrative is democratic, businesslike, plainspoken, and self-assertive.

*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston, 1845)<sup>10</sup> and the *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1847)<sup>11</sup> work through a pattern of realization, resistance, flight, survival, and deliverance focusing on actions and themes that were not the commonplaces of the Victorian novel.<sup>12</sup> They spoke of the human body with a directness which gave them an unrivaled impact in the nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" takes off from his *Narrative*

to work through the story of a fellow fugitive whose acts of liberation bring death to his wife and freedom to his people. William Wells Brown's *Clotel* has as part of its subtitle *A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*. Its introduction, "Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown," is a version of his 1847 narrative, and it stands as a guarantee of the authenticity of the fiction that is to follow. Frank Webb was a Free Colored man living in the North, but he begins *The Garies with the Flight of two families*, and he goes on to show that fugitives from the South must keep running in the North. Hannah Crafts might have provided a classic slave narrative, one to stand alongside Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, but she chose not to tell her story in that form. Instead Hannah Crafts's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* makes fiction out of three escape attempts in ways which contradict as well as confirm the slave narrative pattern. Harriet Wilson was a Free Colored woman living in the North, and there are no slave codes where the heroine of *Our Nig* lives, but "she was indeed a slave, in every sense of the word; and a lonely one, too."<sup>13</sup> Wilson's novel presents another evolution of the slave narrative by universalizing the virtual slavery of so many caught in segregation's trap and from which escape was less easy than from the plantation. Martin Delany develops the patterns of the slave narrative in *Blake* so that the escape from the plantation becomes a mission to "establish a Negro government."<sup>14</sup> Of the early stories and novels, only Frances Harper's "The Two Offers" shows no link with the slave narrative.

Self-liberating African Americans produced first their own factual accounts of slave life and second, their own fictionalized versions of that life. But when Douglass and Brown impelled themselves into print in 1853, they did so because the most successful of all New England novels had appropriated their narratives and outstripped their sales. In 1851, Harriet Beecher Stowe began publishing *Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life among the Lowly* in serial form in the abolitionist *National Era*. At the end of 1852, she published it in book form,<sup>15</sup> and over 300,000 copies were sold.<sup>16</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an anti-slavery novel and not the first example of its kind. That had appeared in 1836 with the publishing of Richard Hildreth's *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore*.<sup>17</sup> It described the experiences of a free black man kidnapped into Southern slavery. At first readers believed they were reading an authentic slave narrative, but the author was a white abolitionist.

*The Slave* was the most successful of fourteen anti-slavery novels published before *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,<sup>18</sup> and Stowe's novel was remarkable not for its invention but for its success. She brought the anti-slavery novel to the attention of the whole world and at the same time exposed the limits of the genre. Part of her success arose from the fact that *Uncle Tom* was ambiguously placed between the anti-slavery novel and the plantation



novel – celebrations of slavery which, beginning in the 1830s, constituted the first white Southern fiction. Despite Stowe's support of the abolitionist cause, it was not clear to all her readers which kind of novel she was writing. In 1852, Lydia Maria Child wrote to a friend: "It is really droll to see in what different states of mind people read *Uncle Tom*. Mr. Pierce, Senator from Maryland, read it lately, and when he came to the sale of Uncle Tom, he exclaimed with great emotion, 'Here's a writer that knows how to sympathize with the South! I could fall down at the feet of that woman! She knows how to feel for a man when he is obliged to sell a good honest slave!' In his view the book was intended as a balsam for bereaved slave-holders."<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary African Americans saw Stowe as the strongest white fighter in their cause, and responses to her are everywhere evident in their fiction. Douglass's master-murdering slave in his 1853 short story is the antithesis of Stowe's master-submissive slave of 1852, and it is too easy to presume on the exact nature of contemporary African American responses to Stowe. Martin Delany headed the two parts of his novel, *Blake*, with epigraphs from Stowe's poem "Caste and Christ,"<sup>20</sup> and in the 1930s, Vernon Loggins, with only half the novel in front of him, presumed it was "among the numerous analogues of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."<sup>21</sup> But the full text of *Blake* shows that any initial likenesses between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Blake* were superficial. Frank Webb took advantage of Stowe's name to have her write an encouraging preface to *The Garies*, but his novel is not anti-slavery; it is anti-segregation. Stowe was generous with her support, and African American writers were keen to take advantage of her name. At the same time, the source of Stowe's success was the genre that had come to perfection in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* and the *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*.

Questions raised by the conflict between narrative and novel, between support and subversion of slavery, between collaboration and appropriation, entangle African American texts as much as they entangle Stowe's text. Issues of authenticity have been central to the critical debate from the beginning: Have the texts been written by persons who are authentically African American? Have the texts been misrepresented by the mediation of white helpers and editors? Have the African American writers been true to black thinking and black values? These questions mix racial and literary issues in ways that obstruct theoretical rationalization. They were not resolved in the 1850s; they cannot be resolved now. The fictions and the questions require readers to negotiate, mediate, and judge. And when readers make their decisions, they will find they have had to compromise.

The first question – have the texts been written by persons who are authentically African American? – provides simple answers if the term

"African American" is taken to mean an American with some degree of descent from a person of black African origin. It is in these terms that *Our Nig* and *The Bondswoman's Narrative* have been declared African American texts. The second question – have the texts been misrepresented by the mediation of white helpers and editors? – raises questions that require a different kind of answer. Henry Louis Gates says of *The Bondswoman's Narrative*: "never before have we been absolutely certain that we have enjoyed the pleasure of reading a text in the exact order of wording in which a fugitive slave constructed it."<sup>22</sup> The authenticity of Crafts's voice seems to promise a great deal, but there are two important qualifications to be made. The first is that no one in the nineteenth century was writing in a literary vacuum. As Gates points out, "Dickens – and *Bleak House* in particular – was a fertile source for Hannah Crafts."<sup>23</sup> Literary and classical allusions are frequent, and her novel shows a full awareness of the contemporary white novel. Crafts trained in the same school of self-education as Douglass and Brown and was influenced by what she read, as they were.

The second qualification to any special claims for *The Bondswoman's* unmediated condition is that there were a number of African American printers and editors in the 1850s. They set up business to trade for themselves and to be independent of white influence. Frederick Douglass's *Frederick Douglass' Paper* depended on some white financial support, but independence was his aim. Thomas Hamilton's New York *Anglo-African Magazine* had no white support, and he told the readers of the January 1859 first issue that African Americans "must speak for themselves; no outside tongue, however gifted with eloquence, can tell their story."<sup>24</sup> Hamilton was an African American who encouraged other African Americans. He published a revised version of *Clotel* under the title of *Miralda*, he published *Blake*, and he published Harper's "The Two Offers."

Douglass and Hamilton failed commercially, but the fictions embedded in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* or *The Anglo-African Magazine* took on the color of their papers. It was in the September 1859 issue of *The Anglo-African* that Hamilton published "Patrick Brown's First Love." The last sentence reads: "It was a strange feeling of horrid pity that reached back through my fingers, as I drove my sheath-knife through and through that man's bowels." Then the words "What is the matter with you, Laura, this morning?"<sup>25</sup> as the reader is beginning "The Two Offers." Hamilton radicalized its reading by linking Harper's discussion of white women's lives to Brown's discussion of white men's deaths. The bleaching power of Anglo-American culture takes effect when the Anglo-African frame is removed, and only Martin R. Delany's *Blake* maintains its radical tone undiminished when read in isolation from the anti-slavery journal in which it was published.

The third question raised in relation to the authenticity of early African American fiction – have the African American writers been true to black thinking and black values? – implicates the most complex ideas, mainly relating to race. It is not a question that can be given any one answer at any one time. In 1854, in *The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered*, Frederick Douglass wrote: “The relationship subsisting between the white and the black people of this country is the vital question of the age.”<sup>26</sup> Early African American fiction, recognizing that fact, is fundamentally about race, and race generates the oppositions on which the form is constructed. In the introduction to *Clotel*, William Wells Brown said, “there appears to exist a deadly antagonism between the white and coloured races” (22), and his use of the word “appears” is a signal to difficulties of meaning. Like Douglass, Brown believed that the human race was a single entity and that it was only in their own time that men had begun to argue otherwise. “I say it is remarkable,” said Douglass, “– nay, it is strange that there should arise a phalanx of learned men – speaking in the name of *science* – to forbid the magnificent reunion of mankind in one brotherhood.” His conclusion, one that Brown shared, was that the men who needed to deny the unity of the human race were slaveholders who wished to maintain a belief in the Declaration of Independence (*Claims* 10–11). The unexpected effect of the Declaration was the theme of *Clotel*; or *the President's Daughter*, provocative not because it pointed to the promiscuity of a president but because it pointed to the lie on which the American Republic was founded.

In *Our Nig* and *Blake*, slavery is presented as the white appropriation of black labor, but in *Clotel*, *The Garies*, and *The Bondswoman*, slavery is presented as the white ownership of the black body. It is an emphasis that leads repeatedly to the subjects of black–white sexual relationships, the mulatto, and passing. Those were radical subjects in the 1850s. Paradoxically, the preoccupation with plantation sexuality over plantation economics meant that in the twentieth century what had once appeared radical was seen to be reactionary. The action of *Clotel* focuses on five mulatto heroines: daughters and granddaughters of Thomas Jefferson. For constructing such a plot, Addison Gayle accused William Wells Brown of surrendering “his racial identity to the American Mephistopheles for a pittance that Faust would have labeled demeaning.”<sup>27</sup> But when Brown chose to write about mulattoes, he was not turning away from his condition but towards it, and it is only by the standards of an absolute black nationalism that he can be accused of denying his people. Like Frederick Douglass, Brown hated what his white father had done to his black mother, but the mulatto's repudiation of whiteness was not an option offered in *Clotel*. Brown's “racial identity” was not a single matter. In 1853 and living in England, he was rejecting

a world divided into black and white. By 1860 and living in the United States, he had begun to abandon the hope that his selves – white and black – could be accepted by both black and white. The introduction in *Miralda* of a “perfectly black” hero<sup>28</sup> in place of the hero of *Clotel* (2.22) “as white as most white persons,” represents Brown's reactions to a renewed experience of American racism. The hero and heroine of *Clotel* live happily in England as white; the hero and heroine of *Miralda* live happily in France as black. So do the hero and heroine of the third version of the novel – *Clotel*, 1864. The hero and heroine of the fourth version of the novel – *Clotel*, 1867<sup>29</sup> – return to take part in the Civil War during which the hero is killed. In none of the versions does Brown imagine his couple living peacefully in the United States.

Four of the five white-skinned heroines of the 1853 *Clotel* die unhappily, and the type came to be called “the Tragic Mulatto,” but William Wells Brown did not invent the type. He took his model directly from Lydia Maria Child's story, “The Quadroons.”<sup>30</sup> In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, Werner Sollors shows that Child in turn took her model from a tradition that traced its origins to a story published in London in 1711.<sup>31</sup> Sollors believes that Sterling Brown was the first critic to identify the tragic mulatto as a literary stereotype, and Brown thought it was more attractive to white writers than to black. As Sollors says, that is not the case.<sup>32</sup> The mulatto character appeared in African American fiction from the beginning, and William Wells Brown was followed by Webb, Crafts, and Wilson in making the mulatto the focus of attention.

Unlike Brown, Webb makes no attempt to create a space in which the mulatto might exist between the black and white races. *The Garies* explores the question through the stories of a brother and sister. The boy accepts the advice of white friends to repudiate all black links, is exposed before marriage to a white woman, and dies of symbolic fever. The girl accepts the advice of black friends, marries a black man, and lives out a useful life. The novel's reiterated advice is: “You'll have to be either one thing or other – white or coloured. Either you must live exclusively amongst coloured people, or go to the whites and remain with them.”<sup>33</sup> Webb denies the existence of the space that Brown failed to find, but that space is where the action of Crafts's novel takes place. She describes seven versions of a type that she calls the “beautiful quadroon”<sup>34</sup> – women who can pass for white. Some of them end their lives tragically but not all, and the heroine achieves freedom and happiness. The quadroons contrast with a character who “was a dark mulatto, very quick motioned with black snaky eyes, and hair of the same color” (203). This woman tries to destroy the heroine, and her coloring is emphasized to reduce the reader's sympathy. The complex of meanings

Crafts generates around black and white is deeply conflicted and worth a study in itself, but Crafts seems to have believed that a happy life between black and white was possible in the North.

The possibility of there being any such space is not debated by Harriet Wilson's study of the mulatto. Her orphaned heroine comes to cultural consciousness in a white world which tells her she is black. She is set going on a process of slow destruction in a casually brutal community which can hardly bring her into focus. *Our Nig* owes nothing to the stereotyping of either Crafts's "beautiful quadroon" or her "dark mulatto," and Wilson rejects sentimental reverberations, romantic auras, and Gothic mysteries. It is the two Northern novels which hold out least hope for the mulatto. They are also the novels at a greater remove from the slave narrative. The fugitive's formula for happiness – escape to the North – did not work in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts.

Wilson makes little of many issues that might be raised by the sexual union of black and white as she plausibly describes how a destitute white woman (the heroine's mother) takes up with a less destitute black man (the heroine's father). But though the focus of Wilson's attention is on the destructive social and economic effects of white exploitation of black labor, still *Our Nig* is a novel about the mulatto. And even Delany, who does not focus on the mulatto and who expressed a dislike for "the lighter refusing to associate with the darker,"<sup>35</sup> weds his black hero to "a dark mulatto of a rich, yellow, autumn-like complexion, with a matchless cushion-like head of hair, neither straight nor curly, but handsomer than either" (5). Why was there such a preoccupation with a group that made up little more than 10 percent<sup>36</sup> of the African American population in the 1850s?

"The trope of appearance – the metaphor of the mulatta – was an awkward artifice that in some instances inadvertently constructed slavery as the greater tragedy of the nearly white," says Ann duCille in *The Coupling Convention*.<sup>37</sup> In *The Foremother Figure in Early Black Women's Literature*, Jacqueline K. Bryant questions William Wells Brown's attitudes to both race and gender, coming to the conclusion that Brown's characterization of his heroines has "more to do with the way white men chose to perceive black women than the way black men perceived them or black women perceived themselves."<sup>38</sup> Jane Campbell attempts to save Brown (and by association Webb and Crafts, too): "The modern reader may react with anger and dismay at Brown's dependence on the tragic mulatto motif, and rightly so. But for Brown, mythmaking was impossible without this motif."<sup>39</sup> It was not immaterial that five out of the seven writers of early African American fiction might have been counted "mulatto" in the census of 1850, but beyond that is the argument that Sollors develops in *Neither Black Nor White Yet*

*Both*: "the literary representation of biracial characters, whatever their statistical relevance may have been, does not constitute an avoidance of more serious issues, but the most direct and head-on engagement with 'race,' perhaps the most troubling issue in the period from the French Revolution to World War II."<sup>40</sup> In support of this, Sollors quotes Alain Locke's argument that, by focusing on the mulatto in the pre-Civil War period, African American writers were exposing the myth of the South and striking where they considered the moral and political claims of the American South were weakest.

Those claims made the sexual politics of the plantation a shaping force in the plots of *Clotel*, *The Garies*, *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, and *Blake*. With variation those politics shape *Our Nig* since its plot equates the Northern home with the Southern plantation, and its story is put in motion by the liaison most denied on the plantation: the love of white woman and black man. Jim in *Our Nig* is the equal of President Jefferson in *Clotel*, Mr. Garie in *The Garies*, Mr. Vincent and Mr. Cosgrove in *The Bondswoman* and Colonel Franks in *Blake*. A restraining romance structure was trying to contain an uncontrollable politics, and African American writers needed to amplify a repertoire of inherited characters to reflect actualities and ambitions not accommodated in the white novel and only hinted at in the slave narrative. In order to do this and to make a match for the tragic mulatto, early African American fiction introduced the character type of the noble African. This too was a creation of the English novel. In 1688, Aphra Behn fixed the type with her verbal portrait of the African prince Oroonoko: "He was pretty tall, but of a shape the most exact that can be fancied: the most famous statuary could not form the figure of a man more admirably turned from head to foot. His face was not of that brown rusty black which most of that nation are, but of perfect ebony, or polished jet."<sup>41</sup> Behn's model was adapted to become the type of the heroic slave: reluctantly violent, uneasily Christian, magnificently male, and very black.

Crafts, Wilson, and Harper seem not to have met him, but the male African American writers celebrated the type: "Madison was of manly form . . . His face was 'black, but comely.' His eye, lit with emotion, kept guard under a brow as dark and as glossy as the raven's wing" – Douglass in "The Heroic Slave"<sup>42</sup>; Jerome "was of pure African origin, was perfectly black, very fine-looking, tall, slim, and erect as any one could possibly be" – Brown in the *Clotel* of 1864<sup>43</sup>; "Mr. Walters was above six feet in height, and exceedingly well-proportioned; of jet-black complexion, and smooth glossy skin" – Webb in *The Garies* (121–122); "Henry was a black – a pure Negro – handsome, manly and intelligent" – Delany in *Blake* (16). The heroic slave as the violent slave was not a type found in either anti-slavery or plantation novels.

It represented an innovation when imported and adapted from English literature by Douglass in 1853. Madison, Jerome, Mr. Walters, and Henry were African American answers to Uncle Tom, men who refused to be beaten, and some of them ready to kill.

The heroic slave was not the only figure in this literature to stand in contrast to the tragic mulatto. The field woman provided another opposition. Black-skinned women are infrequently developed as characters, infrequently given a name, and are infrequently made to speak. There are so many bit-part characters in the four versions of *Clotel* that Brown does have black women break the general silence in a way which reflects well on them, but more commonly he offers a character such as Dinah, a black cook, who appears briefly to make a cruel remark about the mulatto heroine (153). Webb has Aunt Rachel, another black cook, act the role of the mean and lazy servant on the watch for her stealthy mistress (74). Crafts does not give names to black female characters unless they are mulatto, and the black-skinned women only come into focus in ways which amuse the heroine – “fat portly dames whose ebony complexions were set off by turbans of flaming red” (119) – or distress her – “promiscuous crowds of dirty, obscene and degraded objects” (207). Wilson has no black women characters in *Our Nig* other than the mulatto Frado, and Harper has no black women in “The Two Offers.”

Only Delany breaks out of the conventional model to permit his hero to treat field women as his equals: “They allow you Sundays, I suppose. ‘No sir, we work all day ev’ry Sunday.’ ‘How late do you work?’ ‘Till we can’ see to pick no mo’ cotton; but w’en its moon light, we pick till ten o’clock at night’” (*Blake* 74–75). Although Delany treats his field women with respect, he has them speak in a dialect different from the hero, who speaks like a gentleman. The conventions of the nineteenth-century novel required that refined characters talk in a refined English and that common characters talk in common English. Refinement could be a matter of the soul as well as of rank, but the rule was observed in all English and American literary productions in the 1850s. Not to follow the rule was to show a lack of education. Robert Bone says that “dialect distinguishes the comic (folk) characters from the serious (middle-class) characters, who of course speak only the white man’s English,”<sup>44</sup> but he overlooks the difficulties faced by writers breaking into the literary world of the 1850s.

Black English<sup>45</sup> is used extensively for the speech of field blacks in early African American fictions though it is not used in all of them. Douglass does not use it for his non-heroic black characters, but he does give his low white characters dialect speech; Wilson hardly uses it; Harper has no call for it. Frank J. Webb alternates speech registrations so well in *The Garies*

that he begins to show the way in which African American writers could solve a problem caused by a literary convention designed to express English class prejudice. But Brown and Crafts use Black English in a different way. Brown relishes the opportunities it gives him for comic writing. Some of his characters speak in a language so exaggerated that they become caricatures. Sam, the slave valet, and Pompey, the slave assistant, are examples. Brown has strangely purposive variations on the dialogue convention so that he makes the heroine’s mother speak Standard English when she lives independently with her daughters but makes her speak Black English when she becomes a kitchen slave. In *The Bondswoman* white-skinned characters speak in Standard English; black-skinned characters speak in Black English. There is one exception. A character, described as a “black man” (215), speaks Standard English. His exceptional language is matched by his exceptional character, and he is instrumental in helping the heroine in her final escape. Like Brown and Delany, Crafts was following English literary convention as they all would have found it in Dickens and the Brontës.

The earliest African American fiction is a literature of fusion. It fused slave narrative, Gothic mystery, satire, pastoral, novel of manners, document, and polemic. It fused black and white character, speech, and behavior, and it fused the African and the American in religion and belief. The Christian religion was one shared with slave-owners – a bond and a barrier. A solution was to contrast true religion with deformed religion, and Brown makes the hypocrisy of the slave-owning Christianity of the United States a theme parallel to the hypocrisy of the slave-owning democracy of the Constitution. He devotes nine chapters of *Clotel* to describing the world of a slave-owning minister who hires an even-more-degraded minister to preach pro-slavery Christianity to his slaves. The slaves fall asleep during a long sermon (93–98). Delany took the theme of deformed religion further. Asked by two pious old slaves to put his trust in religion, Blake answers: “‘Don’t tell me about religion! What’s religion to me? My wife is sold away from me by a man who is one of the leading members of the very church to which both she and I belong! Put my trust in the Lord! I have done so all my life nearly, and of what use is it to me?’” (16). Blake does not only speak religious defiance; he also acts it. In the Red River Country he meets slaves whose driver makes them work Sundays. “The next day Jesse the driver was missed, and never after heard of” (79). Murder becomes a religious duty in an ironic reinforcement of the Sabbath commandment. Rennie Simson argues that in early African American novels “neither the authors nor their black characters rejected the Christian religion; in fact, they displayed a deep faith in the principles of Christianity.”<sup>46</sup> But Douglass, Brown, Webb, Wilson, and Delany display a formal Christianity with little warmth or religious feeling. *The Bondswoman’s*

*Narrative* is an exception. Christianity pervades the work, and in the middle of the novel the focal point of the heroine's world is a slave-owning minister, of whom she writes: "what language could portray the ineffable expression of a countenance beaming with soul and intelligence?" (124). The difference between her Christian slave plantation and Brown's is striking. Ironic readings do not seem to be invited because signifying on Crafts's minister involves signifying on Crafts's Christianity.

For Brown religion functioned as a cultural as well as a spiritual resource — one that worked most effectively in the absence of white clergy and white people. Religion could then become a manifestation of the world which the slaves reserved to themselves. After the slaver's sermon, the slaves hold their own more meaningful service (*Clotel* 99–100). Brown and Delany give the best access to this enclosed world, and *Clotel* and *Blake* are rich resources for black folkways, providing details of slave entertainments, dress codes, hierarchies, songs, and rhymes. There is a song to celebrate the master's death — "He no more will hang our children on the tree" (*Clotel* 150). There is a rhyme to mock the master's greed — "The big bee flies high" (*Clotel* 138) — possibly the first reference to this slave satire.<sup>47</sup> Like Brown, Delany recorded African American song, and perhaps the most important recording of all is Delany's rendition of the "men of sorrows" singing "Way down upon the Mobile river" (100) — possibly the first reference to sorrow songs.<sup>48</sup>

These fictions enter worlds so remote that in them slave hunters abandoned pursuit. Brown imagines a figure called Picquillo, who "had been two years in the swamps, and considered it his future home. He had met a Negro woman who was also a runaway; and, after the fashion of his native land, had gone through the process of oiling her as the marriage ceremony" (212–213). Brown gives the swamps a mysterious quality, a quality that Delany makes at once more exotic and more concrete. As Blake travels through North Carolina recruiting rebel slaves, Delany has him meet "some bold, courageous, and fearless adventurers, denizens of the mystical, antiquated, and almost fabulous Dismal Swamp, where for many years they have defied the approach of their pursuers" (112). These figures are High Conjurers, who "were regularly sent out to create new conjurers, lay charms, take off 'spells' that could not be reached by Low Conjurers, and renew the art of all conjurers of seven years existence" (114). Blake agrees to be anointed by the Swamp's "ambassadors," and his encounter with the "goombah" religion is as close to Africa as he comes before his actual voyage to the Gulf of Guinea. Chapter 52, "The Middle Passage," starts Blake on his return to the New World as a crew member on a slave ship, and Delany has his hero listen to "the wailing and cries, groaning and moaning of the thirsty, hungry, sick,

and dying, in tones of agony, such to rend the soul with anguish" (228). *Blake* is the first title in the great tradition of African American fiction which reenacts the ancestral tragedy, but before the Civil War it was being reenacted as a thing of the present, not of the past. Delany's combined themes of the African American holocaust, the African homeland, and the black nation resonated powerfully in the 1970s at the time of the rediscovery of *Blake*, but they had helped to bury the novel in the 1860s when they timed out in the new political context created by the Civil War. Readings of these early novels and stories have been sensitive from the beginning to attendant conditions.

Their reception has been further affected by critical silence, title loss, and the late development of scholarly interest. As a result, it is only now that the title list is being rebuilt. The process cannot be presumed to be over, but it does mean that modern readers have a fuller knowledge and a fuller list than any previous generation. At the same time it implies that the inherited tradition of the African American novel has been damaged. Critical silence meant that William Wells Brown and Martin Delany were not reviewed in the white press. Racial isolation meant that Frank Webb in London, Harriet E. Wilson in New England, and Hannah Crafts in New Jersey could have no impact on their contemporaries. Silence and isolation prevented normal writerly exchanges of example, inspiration, and competition. Modern readers can bring the titles together and see patterns and influences, but there is a sense in which all of these titles stand apart. Each one represents a fresh start. The only title which has generated an uninterrupted pattern of creative action and critical reaction is the *Clotel* of 1864.

Even so, in the long years from the end of the Civil War to the end of the Depression, *Clotel* effectively dropped below the critical horizon. In a review of African American culture which W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1913, William Wells Brown is treated as a historian. No mention is made of his work as a novelist.<sup>49</sup> When commentary begins to focus on early African American fiction in the survey work of the 1930s, it is negative. Vernon Loggins dismissed all African American novels with the remark: "When a really noteworthy American Negro novel is written, it will probably be on the theme which Webb attempted."<sup>50</sup> Sterling Brown followed suit: "*Clotel* is not well written or well constructed, but these failings are common to its type."<sup>51</sup> In the 1940s, Hugh M. Gloster passed over early African American fiction because "William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, Martin Delany, and Frances E. W. Harper . . . generally exhibit the methods and materials of Abolitionist propaganda."<sup>52</sup> In the 1950s, Robert Bone presumed that there were only three full-length novels published before 1890 — in fact the number is thirteen — and judging by what he read, he came to the conclusion that

"The early novel was an aesthetic failure largely because it never solved [the] problem of rounded characterization."<sup>53</sup>

Serious study of early African American fiction, or study that took it seriously, did not begin until the 1960s and 1970s with the impact of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. It needed the appearance of the full edition of Delany's *Blake* in 1969 to fire critical reaction, and it came most powerfully with Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), and *The Way Of The New World: The Black Novel in America* (1975). The new *Blake* was the book that Black Power critics were looking for: "Had Henry Blake become the symbol of black men instead of Mr. Walters, Bigger Thomas and his cousins would not have been necessary."<sup>54</sup>

The 1980s saw an increasing development of scholarly resources; more and better edited texts were available. At the same time the expansion of the 1970s Black Studies programs into a network of African American departments throughout North America meant that there was an ever-growing body of studies of all kinds, but particularly historical, which gave the field breadth and depth. John W. Blassingame's study *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the AnteBellum South* (1972)<sup>55</sup> not only revised the way that the plantation was to be treated by historians, but it also led to a recognition of the value of the slave narrative, first as a historical source and then as a literary genre. The rehabilitation, identification, editing, and publication of slave narratives have been instrumental in redirecting attention to early African Americans as writers of genius. One important effect has been the development of more inclusive and more sympathetic ways of reading texts. Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction* (1978)<sup>56</sup> not only gave a new impetus to the reading of the popular fiction that she treated but also showed a new way of reading *Clotel* and *The Garies*. With Henry Louis Gates's recovery in 1982 of *Our Nig* as an African American text and his use of Baym to interpret the "new" novel, the strength of the feminist's readings became apparent.<sup>57</sup> Gates did more. *The Signifying Monkey* (1989) provided a new tool for reading early African American fiction. "Signifyin(g) is so fundamentally black," he argued, that the potentiality for ironic reading must be held open for any black text of any period.<sup>58</sup>

Early African American fiction has profited from new scholarship that has seen the subject finally supported by the research tools with which other literatures have been supplied for the past fifty years. It has profited from newly generous readers willing to accept the fictions in the terms they set themselves. It has profited from a new appreciation of a literature of crossing, passing, and mixing.<sup>59</sup> In its own language, it is a "mulatto" literature. It is a literature that does not wish to make clear distinctions between black

and white, between African and American, between authentic and fictitious. Instead, it offers a complex view of life that speaks directly to the twenty-first century, a century in which we are all mulatto.

## NOTES

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22. I borrow these terms from Leonard E. Barrett Sr.'s *The Rastafarians: Sounds of Cultural Dissonance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).
23. Here I am referring to the late Bob Marley's famous song "Positive Vibration" from the *Rastaman Vibration* CD (Islands, 1976).
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## Spaces for readers: the novels of Toni Morrison

These visions are traditional. I knew them by heart as did the rest of the congregation, but it was exciting to see how the converts would handle them. Some of them made up details. Some of them would forget a part and improvise clumsily or fill up the gap with shouting. The audience knew, but everybody acted as if every word of it was new.

— Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

Every literary work *faces outward away from itself*, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent thus anticipates possible reactions to itself.

— Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel"

I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate.

— Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation"

In the introduction to one of Toni Morrison's often-cited interviews, critic Claudia Tate observed that "while her stories seem to unfold with natural ease, the reader can discern the great care Morrison has taken in constructing them."<sup>1</sup> Over the span of nearly thirty years, from *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 to *Paradise* in 1998, the Nobel Laureate has not only continued to take great care in the construction of each novel, but she has also commented on the role of the reader in the construction of meaning. In fact, in one interview, Morrison says, "[t]o make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken — to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book — is what's important. What is left out is as important as what is there."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as readers have attempted to explicate, analyze, critique, and evaluate Toni Morrison's writings, some have lamented about the challenges her novels pose for the reader, while others take pride in filling in the hermeneutic gaps with the historical, cultural, and political meanings they believe her stories invoke. To assess the significance of Morrison's novels, it is critical to interrogate how her narrative aesthetic



and cultural politics have shaped spaces for readers to enter her texts and how an even larger, diverse body of interpretations have emerged from the community of readers than she might have ever anticipated. An examination of the seven novels published between 1970 and 1998 reveals that the narrative and literal spaces of her texts are a window into her narrative poetics, her cultural politics, and many of her ideas on the meaning of life itself.

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), actually focuses the reader on domestic space as represented in an elementary school primer. The meanings of house and home circulate throughout all of her novels, but in the first novel of her literary career, the house has some particular meanings that foreshadow the story inside the body of the novel. First, it frames the story of how racial difference affects the social dynamics of the community where the MacTeers and Breedloves live. Most readers recall Dick and Jane primers with pictures of blond-haired white people and no people of color whatsoever. The novel can be read as an exploration of the psychic consequences, particularly for black girls, of being marginalized, not only in the earliest textbooks used in elementary schools, but also in their everyday lives both in and outside school. The domestic space of their home, therefore, was a possible refuge, unless, of course, the inhabitants of the household had internalized the racial and racist views of the larger society, as the Breedloves did. Second, the references to house and home in the opening passage inscribe, through the literal spacing of words on the page, the ways in which language shapes, mirrors, and defies reality. Third, references to house and home in Morrison's first novel focus on the space in which a black girl's identity first comes into manifestation. Ironically, *The Bluest Eye* directs the reader's attention to the act of reading itself; and the elementary primer suggests the schoolhouse as the space second to home where language takes on meaning, where a child must connect the signs and symbols with what they mean for her life. Thus, the movement from a perfectly grammatical passage, with appropriately placed spaces and punctuation, gives way to less space and appropriate punctuation, to no spaces between words. The order and apparent logic of the primer gives way to chaos, total disorder, and a loss of meaning that foreshadow Pecola Breedlove's descent into madness after she endures incest, rape, pregnancy, and the illusion that blue eyes will make her beautiful.

Yet we enter the novel through the narrative voice of Claudia MacTeer, and it is through this narrator and her retrospective reading of Pecola's demise, and the community's complicity in that demise, that the reader learns the layers of meaning inscribed in this novel. The narrator's ability to assess the fate of Pecola and the community, to tell the story in all its complex beauty

and tragic ugliness, creates a new space for her to go on with her own life based on her illumined perspective, in sharp contradistinction to Pecola, whose descent into madness represents a freedom in her own mind, but a tragic enclosure inside the narrow spaces of disconnection from community and the larger society forever. By the time readers finish the novel, they have ventured into domestic spaces where economic depravity dictates when and how people love, where taboos of rape and incest traumatize and sabotage black girlhood, where racism in the larger world shapes and constrains the options men and women have to imagine themselves as whole, acceptable human beings, and where people both in and outside the community exploit the most vulnerable. But Morrison's readers are not permitted the luxury of venturing into Claudia and Pecola's respective worlds unscathed, as disinterested spectators or as mere eavesdroppers on someone else's tragic story. Morrison deftly creates an intimacy between the narrator and the reader that she then disrupts with the plural pronouns, "we" and "our." Of course, Claudia understands, at the end of the narrative, how she and her community are implicated in what happened to Pecola, but the repetitious, insistent use of the plural pronoun in the final paragraphs of the novel suggest that the reader may too be implicated:

All our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength.<sup>3</sup>

By the time the reader comes to the end of this passage, she discovers how she may also be complicit in the condemnation and demise of an innocent child who has internalized the racial gaze into what Morrison calls "racial self-loathing."<sup>4</sup> In many regards, the novel lulls the reader into Pecola's story only to shift, in the final pages, into exposing how the familiar phenomenon of scapegoating operates in the society at large. In other words, the reader is not allowed to get off the hook as a mere voyeur. Instead, Morrison writes the conclusion of the novel in such a way as to invite the reader to come to terms with his or her own "complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to."<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the beauty of the prose and the clarity of the narrator's understanding in retrospect what she did not understand as a

child, all point to Morrison's ability, even in her first novel, to help readers discern how art could be both "unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time."<sup>6</sup>

In Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973), she creates a different kind of time and space. She leaves the world of children, literacy, and the complications that racism and poverty create for young people and moves on to the adult world of female friendship. But even this novel begins with an aesthetically riveting description of a place called the Bottom and illustrates how space gets racialized and shapes our understanding of our identity and the options available to us. Even before the reader meets Nel and Sula, the two protagonists, she learns about the social space that has transformed a black neighborhood into an exclusive country club. In a passage that describes a familiar form of regentrification, in which less economically able citizens are displaced by those who can afford to buy the land and force those who once claimed it as their own to relocate, Morrison seems almost prophetic in anticipating how urban phenomena are changing public and private spaces. Indeed, the text mirrors how many communities have had to grapple with the implications of such relocations of people and the attendant redistribution of resources throughout much of the last three decades of the twentieth century and the early months of the twenty-first century as well. The novel introduces the "nigger joke," and the black people who were the brunt of it, to provide a historical and geographical context for the narrative that will follow. Having established this racialized context, however, she writes that the people had little time to be preoccupied with the racism that contributed to their fate or their location. Instead:

[t]hey were mightily preoccupied with earthly things – and each other, wondering even as early as 1920 what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about, and what they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom.<sup>7</sup>

With these words, Morrison creates two different spaces at once for her readers. On one hand, the readers get a window into how black people in Medallion were reading the text of their own lives; on the other hand, readers learn that the text of their lives is much more complex than any racialized reading of it could contain. Thus, as early as her second novel, Morrison was already creating a space for her readers to consider simultaneously how race does and does not matter for the stories she needs to tell.

Once she introduces her readers to Medallion and to Shadrack, its most eccentric citizen, a shell-shocked World War II veteran who, when he returns from war, institutes a National Suicide Day, she then introduces Nel Wright,

the friend of the woman for whom the novel is named. Morrison organizes this novel, therefore, by gradually moving the reader in from the neighborhood and its history into the particular story of two households and the daughters that emerge from them respectively. The reader learns about Nel's oppressive household through her mother, through the layers of meaning available in how Helene treats her daughter, teaches her to conform, and contains her emergent sense of her identity. Morrison introduces the Peace household as one that is the antithesis of the order and containment of the Wright home. Sula's wild and chaotic household with its seemingly endless stream of boarders and male lovers taught her virtually nothing about intimacy and love, but a great deal about sex and using men for entertainment purposes. While Nel is described as a girl whose strict mother "drove her imagination underground," Sula's personality is best summed up in the following description:

In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.<sup>8</sup>

Each an only child, when Nel and Sula meet, they feel the "ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph were forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other 'to grow on.'"<sup>9</sup>

At the center of the novel, of course, is the story of a friendship gone awry, of gender politics both in and out of marriage, and of the consequences of life decisions. In prose that is at times poetic and riveting, Morrison enables her readers to bear witness to how these two women have read the choices their culture and community made available to them. Inside the text of the novel, she reveals how familiar intimate spaces such as home, marriage, and even friendship can estrange one from oneself and from others. By rendering such familiar spaces unfamiliar through a pariah figure such as Sula, Morrison challenges the readers' notions of right and wrong, good and evil, even love and hate. For example, on her deathbed, despite the fact that she has slept with Jude, her friend's husband, and broken the connection that made them friends, Sula asks Nel to consider that maybe she, not Nel, is the good one. Like Nel after Sula's death, Morrison's readers are left to question their own