

CHAPTER I

*Introduction to a Genre*

Speak this because I exist.  
This is my voice  
These words are my words, my mouth  
Speaks them, my hand writes.  
I am a poet.

Calvin C. Hernton, "The Distant Drum"

African American poetry pre-dates the nation that became the United States of America and is a central part of its identity and expression. It is a major touchstone of the American literary tradition and deserves recognition for its aesthetic quality and influence on world culture. Yet this extraordinary body of writing remains under-explored as a topic of research, study, understanding, and appreciation. *A History of African American Poetry* seeks to provide critical and historical insight into this genre from its origins to the present with the hope of stimulating new ideas. As a critical study, this book does not aim to replicate or synthesize existing scholarship. It is "a" history, not "the" history. There is no pretense or possibility of being exhaustive in such an immense field, or of implying that there is a uniform perspective on issues about this diverse body of writing. Questions and controversies will be neither avoided nor resolved: they will, and should, remain alive and vital by the end of this book. My publications often have addressed formal innovation in poetry of the black diaspora. I will bring that interest to bear here in sharing the insights that I have gained through the process of researching and writing this book. A wealth of excellent critical, bibliographical, and biographical resources is readily available in this field. Most cover the poets and poems that are viewed as canonical, but a rising number address the writers and writings that have been deliberately or inadvertently excluded or forgotten. Often, these overlooked texts display qualities that affiliate them with new forms and concepts, features that would categorize texts in other forums as avant-garde, experimental, oppositional, innovative,

or difficult. A central motive is to examine the theoretical and practical implications of why these texts are “missing” or invisible, and how their inclusion might impact the existing canon. This book is designed to offer a summative and illustrative overview of the genre from its origins to the present, but it has a strong mission towards revision and recuperation. Readers will be directed to many materials on commonly accepted and respected information and interpretations, as well as figures and trends that have been unjustly disregarded and which often reveal hidden continuities and progressions.

A major goal of this book is to raise questions about how and why we have inherited a fundamentally conservative canon and to think about how it might be imagined differently. I was originally drawn to the field of African American literature because it provided examples, ideas, perspectives, and encounters which struck me as essential American voices that were excluded from my education. As I looked more deeply into this rich body of writing, the texts that often seemed most compelling and revelatory were not part of the African American canon as it had evolved. This book invites attention to valuable poets and poems that have been marginalized or forgotten from the African American, American, diasporic, and Anglophone literary corpus. Since many of these writings were well known in the past, we gain important insight into which texts became alternately validated and excluded in varying iterations, which provokes speculation about the reasons.

The foundations of the African American literary tradition are in its poetry. Although this body of poetry is as diverse and varied as its individual creators, some common themes and threads appear which justify its consideration as a literary tradition: attention to both orality and print culture; themes and impacts of migration, diaspora, and transnationalism; the location and meaning of home and family; African survivals and the role of Africa; imagery of enslavement and freedom; the purpose of art as social and political action; art as defining a relationship between the individual and the community; music and musicality; art as a bridge between the present and the past; the deep and spiritual significance of land and place; play with multiple audiences and levels of address; creative and hybrid senses of diction; concerns with assimilation and authenticity; a clear pattern from the time of its origins of self-referencing, citationality, and allusion, even as it is in dialogue with the Anglo-American canon; and concern with the best critical tools to evaluate and appreciate African American poetry, including the question of whether a special theoretical lens should be developed and applied to this

writing, which reflects its features, goals, and identity. This book is organized chronologically to discuss a range of poetic styles and critical perspectives, representing both oral and literary traditions, from the arrival of the first Africans in America to the current moment. Key ideas – for example, politics, race, religion, duality, identity, performance, oratory, slavery, freedom, music, Africa, America, and discrimination – recur in the chapters to demonstrate traits that define this field as cohesive and special, yet also part of larger traditions of literariness.

Two of the most important critical texts in this field are now more than forty years old: *Understanding the New Black Poetry* by Stephen Henderson and *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History* by Eugene B. Redmond, both written during one of the most active periods of production of African American poetry and scholarship. Redmond and Henderson invited increased attention to be paid to the connections and advances in this field that reveal its fundamental cohesiveness while recognizing its tremendous diversity. Both critics call for the reconciliation of various critical commonplaces about this genre, which are sometimes perceived as schisms or parallel paths, such as its relationship to oral and English literary traditions, and its address of dual audiences. According to Henderson, “an attempt should be made in which the continuity and the wholeness of the black poetic tradition in the United States are suggested. That tradition exists on two main levels, the written and the oral, which sometimes converge.”<sup>1</sup> Redmond writes, “From the ditties, blues, spirituals, dozens, sermons, and jokes, the poet fashioned an endless stream of poetic forms and fusions.”<sup>2</sup> The statements by Henderson and Redmond articulate some of the fundamental premises of this book: sound, performance, visuality, and inscription are integrally connected in this tradition, which is characterized by wholeness and continuity. The wholeness indicates its central core of values and identity, and the continuity reflects its capacity to navigate change and continuously refresh itself for new times and conditions.

It is impossible to mark the precise genesis of African American poetry, but its history of documentation must begin no later than the poetic expressions of the first kidnapped Africans landing on American soil, which is often dated to 1619. Although it can only be hypothesized and

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene B. Redmond, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1976), p. 420.

imagined, as discussed in Chapter 2, I consider the African American poetic tradition to have started with the slave songs forged from African survivals, synthesized with the trauma of the Middle Passage, and radically impacted by the experience of enslavement in American plantation culture. This body of oral poetry was not transcribed until the nineteenth century – probably two hundred years or more after it was first created – but its rhythms, dictions, perspectives, rhetorical strategies, and themes initiate a context for an authentic canon to which future generations of readers and writers could refer and allude from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. Starting with slave songs as its roots – as I have discussed in *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry* – the poetry of African Americans has been viewed as something “unique” and with a distinctive capacity to impact audiences.<sup>3</sup> This level of “difference” has been a significant factor in both the valuation and the depreciation of this body of poetry, which is reflected in the intertwined development of the canon and curriculum. It has generated a history of contention and claims about how best to respond to and critically evaluate this body of poetry – how and what it signifies. It has long been debated whether it should be regarded as original, authentic, and apart, or as reactive, conventional, and imitative, as only two – but abiding – perspectives. Is it a central and essential part of the larger American cultural panorama, or does it represent voices of “outsiders” coming from “the margins” to speak truth and independence to a perceived national mainstream? In the earliest eras of its critical evaluation, the enthusiasms and skepticisms in judgment reflected the fears, values, and prejudices of now distant and different times. External commentators wondered whether African American poetry and its original sources were primitive or sophisticated, high or low art, American or “foreign,” random or structured, tricky or sincere, wily or childish, true “poetry” or meaningless noise. As we will see, the kernel of these lingering questions can remain implicitly buried in the discourse.

Early auditors described the slave songs as “weird,” “wild,” “unique,” “strange,” and “different” in ways that were hard to define.<sup>4</sup> Even

<sup>3</sup> See Lauri Ramey, *The Heritage Series of Black Poetry: A Research Compendium* (London: Routledge, 2008) and *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Some of the early important collections and commentaries expressing this perspective on the poetry known as Negro spirituals, slave songs, or plantation verse are William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), William E. Barton, ed., *Old Plantation Hymns* (1899), E. P. Christy, ed., *Christy's Plantation Melodies* (1851), and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment and Other Writings* (1870).

W. E. B. Du Bois, who called them “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” also referred to them as “weird old songs” containing “strange word[s].”<sup>5</sup> Though these slave songs were considered curiosities, critics disregarded their quality and originality. Some attributed their strangeness to being poor imitations of white hymns or verse. Others raised suspicions about the “foreignness” of their unknown words, sounds, and phrases. Efforts were made to “translate” these unfamiliar expressions into “comprehensible” messages. Observers were baffled by their semi-improvisatory, performative, and physical style of oral delivery and communal participation. These features contrasted with contemporaneous ideas of poems as fixed printed texts by sole authors.<sup>6</sup>

From its origins, African American poetry had to be inventive and cleverly subversive. Communication was an immediate challenge for kidnapped Africans, brought together on slave ships from multiple cultures, who needed to establish linguistic and social common ground. When they arrived on plantations in America, many of the enslaved people were legally deprived of literacy. Slave songs needed to be transmitted orally and serve diverse purposes efficiently. The oral tradition of Africa would have served as a strength. These sung lyrics offered the enslaved peoples a means of expressing their own theology, preserving African survivals, building community, keeping hope alive, communicating during work, relaxing with entertainment, sending messages of resistance to oppression, sharing local and political news, and carrying practical information. It is rare for a body of art to be called upon to mean so much for so many.

The perception of African American poetry as being unlike mainstream Anglo-American verse has been a double-edged sword that has followed the genre from its roots and into the present. It is expected to be “different” but only in particular ways. The peculiar criterion of “authenticity” has gone hand in hand with “otherness.” The more African American poetry is viewed as “odd,” the more it has seemed to be considered an “authentic” expression of the language, ideas, and experiences of its creators. As we will see with the poets who are often credited with originating this tradition, such as Phillis Wheatley, the ability to work

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Patricia Liggins Hill, gen. ed., *Call & Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 749. The text is widely available in multiple whole editions and excerpted.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *Methodist Error Or, Friendly, Christian Advice to those Methodists, who indulge in extravagant religious emotions and bodily exercises* (1819), authored anonymously by “A Methodist,” and later attributed to John F. Watson.

within English poetry's conventions has generated negative comparisons. Yet, ironically, when African American poetry is the most original and distinctive, it has been criticized as primitive, unsophisticated, or strange. It seems as if African American poetry has been judged by two sets of standards and it cannot gain respect from either of these alternative views. As a result, this body of poetry has had a long history of exclusion from the lyric poetry and literary canons, until very recently. Critically speaking, African American poetry has long been framed as the marked term, reflecting the circumstances of a population that has fought for equality for more than four centuries. Inevitably, the issue of racial discrimination in America is integrally related to perceptions of African American poetry. As Paul Robeson wrote in "The Negro Artist Looks Ahead" (1951), "America is a nation based upon oppression, where black artists in all fields have suffered discrimination, exploitation, and limited opportunities for success and recognition." Despite the vast influence of African American artists on world culture, Robeson offered numerous examples to show how "the fruits have been taken from us."<sup>7</sup>

Canons are not eternal verities of quality, but mutable and competitive, and change to reflect the current values of times, places, institutions, and sociopolitical forces. In *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Alastair Fowler identifies three primary kinds of literary canon: potential, accessible, and selective. Potential refers to all works in existence, accessible means that a reader can discover it, and selective is the authoritative choice of texts with some special value to preserve and revere. As Fowler describes it, canon formation is a somewhat unruly and changing power struggle to control the official version of literary esteem. He writes, "The official canon is institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism ... Someone must be first to see merit in an experimental work."<sup>8</sup> That is true, but those seeing merit are not necessarily those with the power of institutions behind them. Before the 1997 appearance of the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, which was a long-awaited signal event of canon-establishment for educators, few African American and black

<sup>7</sup> Paul Robeson, "The Negro Artist Looks Ahead," in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, eds., *Let Nobody Turn Us Round: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 353.

<sup>8</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 213–16.

diasporic poems entered the canon. Those few that were included tended to reinforce the mainstream national narrative in style and content, or to serve as an acceptable version of alterity which also reinforced the dominant culture's vision. To give an idea of the momentousness of the preparation and publication of the Norton anthology, in *Drumvoices* in 1976, Redmond specifically decried the absence of the imprimatur of a Norton anthology for African American literature. In the Preface to his 1922 *Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson wrote that no group that produced great art had been disrespected. Was the Norton meant to be such a display of respectability? Did its birth perpetuate the idea that there might be a separate and equal canon of African American literature that was somehow different and tangential from "American literature?" Yet it was an important and necessary move because it sought, in the esteemed academic venue of a Norton anthology, to establish the bona fides of the literature of African Americans. That it followed firmly in the conventional tradition of Norton anthologies also perpetuated the problems of how restrictively this canon came to be defined.

A parallel signal event in its own way was the re-release in 1999 of *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, edited by Donald Allen. Originally published in 1960 with its iconic four red waving lines evoking the bent stripes of the American flag, the anthology was indeed a counter-cultural bombshell or breath of fresh air, as has been thoroughly documented and discussed. Its re-release by new publisher University of California Press almost forty years after its original publication by Grove Press coincided with the publication of the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. University of California Press's website states:

With more than 100,000 copies sold, *The New American Poetry* has become one of the most influential anthologies published in the United States since World War II. As one of the first counter-cultural collections of American verse, this volume fits in Robert Lowell's famous definition of the raw in American poetry. Many of the contributors once derided in the mainstream press of the period are now part of the postmodern canon: Olson, Duncan, Creeley, Guest, Ashbery, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Levertov, O'Hara, Snyder, Schuyler, and others.<sup>9</sup>

One problem with this anthology, described as representing the "counter-cultural," "the raw," and others "derided in the mainstream press" was its inclusion of only one African American among forty-four poets: LeRoi Jones

<sup>9</sup> [www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520209534/the-new-american-poetry-1945-1960](http://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520209534/the-new-american-poetry-1945-1960) (last accessed August 19, 2018).

(later to become Amiri Baraka). In the history of American literature, it appears that only certain kinds of counter-culturalism and difference have been acceptable or even visible where issues of race are involved.

Until late in the twentieth century, few African American poets entered the canon, and the token representation of the Allen anthology had become the norm. When a few black poets were included in anthologies used in the classroom, the selections were typically formally and conceptually accessible, written in either urban slang or conversational diction and free verse, and depicted African Americans' alienation and struggles to surmount oppression, such as "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes and "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, African American poetry appears in much greater quantity and variety, which proves the point that potential and access – existence and presence – are the paths to selection, but that also depends on the terms of selection. Things have come a long way, especially in quantity, towards including more African American poets in the canon, but not necessarily in range and diversity.

Published in 2006, the *Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Jay Parini, presents a substantial representation of African American and black diasporic poetry: "The Bars Fight" by Lucy Terry, "On the Death of Rev. Mr. George M. Whitefield 1770" by Phillis Wheatley, "The Slave Mother" by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "Douglass" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Paul Laurence Dunbar" by James David Corrothers, "O Black and Unknown Bards" by James Weldon Johnson, "I Sit and Sew" by Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson, "America" by Claude McKay, "Yet Do I Marvel" by Countee Cullen, "For My People" by Margaret Walker, "For Mack C. Parker" by Pauli Murray, "A Poem for Black Hearts" and "A New Reality is Better Than a New Movie!" by Amiri Baraka, "malcolm" by Lucille Clifton, "Double Elegy" by Michael S. Harper, "Parsley" and "David Walker" by Rita Dove, "The Black Clown," "Harlem," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Esthete in Harlem," and "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes, "Middle Passage" and "A Plague of Starlings" by Robert Hayden, "Telephone Conversation" and "Night" by Wole Soyinka, "Beautiful Black Men" and "Poetry" by Nikki Giovanni, "For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide" by Etheridge Knight, "Negro Hero" and "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell" by Gwendolyn Brooks, "Poetics" by Yusef Komunyakaa, "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall, "Ballad from Childhood" by Audre Lorde, "In the Mountains of the Moon, Uganda" by Lorna Goodison, "homage to my hips" by Lucille Clifton, "As from a



Quiver of Arrows” by Carl Phillips, “Twenty-Year Marriage” and “Killing Floor” by Ai, “Prelude” by Kamau Brathwaite, “Come Thunder” by Christopher Okigbo, “Stowaway” by Olive Senior, and “African Sleeping Sickness” by Wanda Coleman.

In this massive anthology of 712 pages, covering all poetry in English or influencing the English tradition, the percentage of African American and black diasporic poets may be slim, yet I list all poems and poets canonized by Parini because it is a legitimately thoughtful and well-chosen selection that does reinforce the international links. It appears to indicate progress. Yet of all the choices available, a conventional cultural ideology abides with the accompanying exclusions and oversights. Unsurprisingly, the largest selection given to any black poet belongs to Langston Hughes, who is represented by five poems. Considering the wealth of possibilities, this anthology selects Charles Simic but not Ed Roberson, Jorie Graham but not Harryette Mullen, Walt Whitman but not James Monroe Whitfield, William Carlos Williams but not Jean Toomer, Ezra Pound but not Melvin B. Tolson, Robert Service but not James Edwin Campbell, Anne Carson but not Russell Atkins. Of course, the list of choices and absences could go on and on, but even with a good-hearted and relatively generous taste of the black poetry genre, the issue of style appears to be less important than who is using it based on who they are. As written in the same year by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey in the Introduction to *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*, “Despite what you’ve been reading, there’s more and better reading.”<sup>10</sup>

Mostly locked out of the canon until recently, African American poems existed mainly as “potential” literature, occasionally as “accessible,” and very rarely as “selective.” When poems do enter the “selective” category by way of volumes like the *Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry*, *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *Longmans Anthology of Poetry* and others, they typically do not represent the boldest, or the most innovative, self-possessed, experimental, oppositional, disruptive, or interventionist choices. In short, the ignored or marginalized poetries and poetics are precisely those that may be of greatest threat to the literary and cultural status quo and power center of taste. A very partial listing of some formally, thematically, and conceptually innovative poets who were actively publishing in the 1960s and 1970s includes Lloyd Addison, Russell Atkins, Jayne Cortez,

<sup>10</sup> Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, eds., *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p. xix.

Julia Fields, De Leon Harrison, David Henderson, Calvin C. Hernton, Ted Joans, Percy Johnston, Stephen Jonas, Jones/Baraka, Bob Kaufman, Clarence Major, Oliver Pitcher, Norman H. Pritchard, Ishmael Reed, Ed Roberson, A. B. Spellman, Lorenzo Thomas, Melvin B. Tolson, Tom Weatherly, and Jay Wright.

The next generations of progressive and visionary African American poets followed in the footsteps of these predecessors, who were in turn examining and extending the legacies of their own predecessors. Some of the most innovative and challenging poets of the last two decades include Will Alexander, Ron Allen, T. J. Anderson III, Tisa Bryant, Pia Deas, Latasha N. Nevada Diggs, Tonya Foster, C. S. Giscombe, Renee Gladman, Duriel E. Harris, Harmony Holiday, Erica Hunt, Kim D. Hunter, Geoffrey Jacques, Douglas Kearney, John Keene, Nathaniel Mackey, Dawn Lundy Martin, Mark McMorris, Tracie Morris, Fred Moten, Harryette Mullen, Mendi Lewis Obadike (often working with her husband Keith Obadike as keith+mendi obadike), Julie Ezelle Patton, Claudia Rankine, Deborah Richards, Evie Shockley, giovanni singleton, Tyrone Williams, and Ronaldo V. Wilson. What have they been modeling, representing, and voicing when compared with the group that has been taken as exemplary of the mainstream practices and conventions of the genre?

White experimental writing has been a subject of production and scholarly attention since the early modernist works of the historical avant-garde movements of Dada, futurism, and surrealism. An academic industry has been devoted to the innovations of long-canonical figures such as T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. Two even earlier figures often viewed as the founders of the American poetry tradition – Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman – displayed (now) well-accepted inventive practices that convey an “American” voice and spirit of independence, individuality, and freedom. The issue of acceptance does not appear related to the oppositional, challenging, or unfamiliar poetic modes themselves. It appears to be based on ideas about who the author is, and specifically the author’s race. One of this book’s major threads is to reveal the continuing and integral presence of avant-garde practices in the African American poetry tradition, such as formal innovation, deliberately placed obstacles of production and reception, and resistance to – not ignorance of – conventions. This tradition has always been “experimental” and original.

Experimental poetry and African American poetry have historically been viewed as unrelated fields – meaning that truly original poetry,

ironically, has been considered the domain of the poets with the greatest access to centers of cultural power which they have the authority to challenge and disrupt with eventual acceptance. Those factors include race, class, education, sex, and other signifiers of conventional control. The limited quantity of African American poetry that has entered the canon has too often been considered “predictable” in specific ways which will be addressed. In the 1980s and 1990s, most anthologies and scholarship on experimental writing focused almost exclusively on white poets. Anthologies of and scholarship on African American poetry have rarely discussed innovative and avant-garde practices. Why has so little attention been paid to the skillful originality and purposeful innovativeness of African American poetry? If this diverse body of poetry were more available and better known, how might it change the African American poetry canon – and even the canons of American and Anglophone poetry? Connected to its stylistic diversity, which includes a long lineage of formal innovation, many African American poems address a body of recurring themes, figures, events, and experiences that still provide cohesion as a canon. This history of direct references and allusions reveals an African American literary identity that is inextricably connected to the imaginary of “America” – including themes, people, and events that have fought to rise to visibility in the national consciousness, beginning with slavery and progressing through the fight for human rights even in the present. African American poems to and about America from all chronological periods include well-known but also less famed poems deserving of recognition. Some examples are “Bury Me in a Free Land” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, “America” by Claude McKay, “Pilate in Modern America” by George Leonard Allen, “An Anniversary Poem Entitled the Progress of Liberty” by James Madison Bell, “To the White People of America” by Joshua McCarter Simpson, “I, Too” by Hughes, “America” by Henry Dumas, “Can I Write You an Anthem” by William J. Harris, “right on: white america” by Sonia Sanchez, “American” by Nayo Barbara Malcolm Watkins, “Blue Ruth: America” by Michael S. Harper, “Junglegrave” by S. E. Anderson, “Belly of America” by Lisa Tarrar-Lacy, “September 11th” by Kevin Powell, “AMERICAN LETTERS” by giovanni singleton, “National Song” by Alfred Gibbs Campbell, “Blue Magic” from Jay Z’s *American Gangster* album, “Homestead, USA” by D. L. Crockett-Smith, “My Blackness is the Beauty of this Land” by Lance Jeffers, Wanda Coleman’s *American Sonnets*, “Thanksgiving” by Patricia Spears Jones, and perhaps the most famous of them all, “Let America Be America Again” by Hughes. Poetic tributes to African American literary

precursors and role models offer an alternative pantheon to those usually revered in the Anglo-American tradition, such as Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois, Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, John Coltrane, Frederick Douglass, Emmett Till, Bobby Seale, Nat Turner, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Examples are replete and discussed in each chapter.

Most studies of African American poetry start with a “literary tradition” as the launching point, but I suggest that we start a full century earlier based on the premise that slave songs – encompassing religious songs or “spirituals,” “folk seculars,” and “field songs” – are the founding documents. By considering slave songs to be the roots of the African American – and American – poetry tradition, we can appropriately consider African American poetry and culture in national, transnational, and diasporic contexts from the time of its origins. Slave songs – the verses created by enslaved African Americans on Southern plantations – are rarely categorized as lyric poetry, and often overlooked as foundational sources of the African American lyric poetry genre. Yet their influence on modern and contemporary African American poetry is pervasive, which calls for a reexamination of their place in African American poetry, and the scope of the African American poetry canon itself. Based on the pattern of allusions and citations of slave songs, this focus also offers an opportunity to recognize that the poems created by enslaved African Americans are more diverse and original than is often acknowledged. Their national and international impact has been hidden but omnipresent. They have been suppressed as part of a pattern of ignoring or rejecting messages seen as different or uncontrollable. This book hopes to show that the origins of African American poetry are rooted in a body of diasporic literature integrally connected to methods and motives associated with innovative practices.

Slave songs, created and performed by anonymous enslaved African Americans, are essential to the foundation of the African American poetry tradition, and among the most original artistic products created in America. Combining African survivals with the experiences of enslavement in the American South, they very probably date to the early seventeenth century as oral texts but were not transcribed until the early nineteenth century. This brilliant body of sung verse, encompassing some 6,000 or more examples, has not been fully credited for its influence on American or African American literature and culture, or its rightful place in the lyric poetry tradition. Wrote John Lovell, Jr., the brilliant and

impassioned Howard University Professor of English and ardent literary defender of slave songs,

And so we still have 800 to 1,000 original songs, comprising an epic tradition in the class of the Iliad, the Songs of Roland, or the Lays of the Nibelungs, with no clear analysis of the soil from which they sprung or the process of their growth. In other epic traditions, patient scholars have found seeds of racial and national culture. They look there first. And yet for how many years have the dabblers in American “Negroitis” ignored or treated with disgraceful cavaliness the heart of the Negro spirituals!<sup>11</sup>

This volume pays respect to the epic monument of slave songs as the seeds and creative progenitors of African American poetry. It is a common practice for African American poetry of the last hundred years to cite and allude to slave songs, but these foundational poems are not typically regarded as part of the canon. Many modern and contemporary African American poems are infused with phrases, forms, themes, techniques, and rhetorical strategies of slave songs. Through greater awareness of their presence, function, and influence, readers can better understand both the continuities and progressions in African American poetry, including its most innovative manifestations. This pattern of marginalizing slave songs as lyric art and a major source of textual appropriations also shows how an exclusionary and ideological canon has developed that misrepresents and limits the scope of African American poetry.

Since they first were discussed in print by musicologists, critics, scholars, clergy, slavers, seafarers, and other auditors, there have been curiosity and debate about the messages and creators of these unique songs, and what to call them. Eileen Southern explains that they were originally called “hymns,” but it quickly became clear that they differed significantly from conventional Protestant church music.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting the dilemma of how to describe these unusual lyrics, *Slave Songs of the United States*, one of the earliest compilations, uses the term “slave songs” in its title and “speichils” in its introduction.<sup>13</sup> Nineteenth-century abolitionists commonly

<sup>11</sup> John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Spiritual Got Hammered Out* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 130. When Lovell made this statement in 1972, the figure of 800 to 1,000 was believed to be accurate, though it now appears that there are some 6,000 slave songs.

<sup>12</sup> Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd edn. (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States* [1867] (New Bedford: Applewood Books, n.d.), p. ii.

portrayed the enslaved African Americans as free of any malice or resentment about their status, and solely concerned with Christian patience and piety. By popularizing the term “spirituals,” abolitionists reinforced the message that the enslaved people were innocent and compliant, and former slaves, after Emancipation, would bear no anger and pose no threat towards their former oppressors.<sup>14</sup> But the word “spirituals” fails to reflect the critique and mockery in these lyrics, which rebuked slaveholders who considered themselves to be Christians. Slave songs were not exclusively Christian hymns of praise, politeness, patience, forgiveness, and sanctity. Examples in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University, which remain uncollected even today in compilations of slave songs, display a normal human variety of desires, passions, and emotions, which are especially suitable and understandable for the circumstances of enslaved people. A small sampling of “work songs” sometimes appears in anthologies in separate categories from “spirituals” rather than placed together in a single category of authorship, as we would expect with other esteemed bodies of writing. There is no indication that the enslaved people maintained such rigid barriers between their sacred and terrestrial lives or reserved certain songs for specific contexts. They would sing “spirituals” while working in the fields, and “work songs” interspersed with religious songs during “ring shouts” while in relatively private space.

The term “spirituals” covers up the full humanity of the enslaved African Americans by presenting them as emotionally partial human beings, and childlike followers in the practice of their obedient faith. Extending the griot function into the New World, these verses encompassed a range of topics, purposes, and attitudes, many of which were not religious in content or tone or meant for devotional purposes. Even those songs that conveyed messages of Christian piety did not express the same interpretation of Christianity as Southern slaveholders. Slave songs most typically conveyed dual messages directed towards black and white audiences and expressed coded ironic commentaries on the hypocrisy of slaveholders who claimed to be pious.

Although the best known and most commonly reprinted slave songs are religious in nature, at least tangentially, this situation results from the systematic exclusion of counter-examples. The “slave songs” that convey protest, resistance, anger, impatience, social and political critique, sexuality, and social interactions have largely been omitted from compilations of

<sup>14</sup> Ramey, *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry*, pp. 10–11.

the songs created by the enslaved African Americans.<sup>15</sup> If such examples had been included in nineteenth-century collections, they would have undermined characterizations like those of Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “Almost all their songs were thoroughly religious in their tone ... The attitude is always the same, and, as a commentary on the life of the race, is infinitely pathetic. Nothing but patience for this life, – nothing but triumph in the next.”<sup>16</sup> Comments by Higginson and others that the tone of slave songs is “always the same” and that they are “monotonous” contrasts with descriptions by others in the nineteenth century, such as Fredrika Bremer and John F. Watson, stressing their “difference.”<sup>17</sup> The history of critically evaluating African American poetry is full of such contradictory and conflicting expectations from the origins of this genre.

An additional critical dilemma raised by slave songs is the correspondence of these poems with the perceived identities of their creators. The issue of authorship inevitably would be problematical for an enslaved and oppressed population that was legally deprived of literacy in many states during slavery. Curiosity about the origins of slave songs was coupled with a belief that an important part of their significance was as an anonymous and communal oral expression of a homogeneous population, rather than as the voices of distinctive individual authors. In reviews of public performances following Emancipation, commentators noted their anonymous and collaborative composition as a central part of their meaning. As a result, slave songs have been consistently marginalized from poetry canons, which give cultural esteem to printed texts, authorial individualism, and pride of ownership. James Weldon Johnson’s famous poem “O Black and Unknown Bards” makes a common claim that the bards of slave songs “sang a race,” implying that they were the voice of a unitary population. It is often overlooked that Johnson also expressed a more nuanced assessment in the preface to *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*: “Some of them may be the spontaneous creation of the group,

<sup>15</sup> For further background on spirituals and slave songs, useful resources include Lovell, *Black Song*, Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), John W. Work, *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular* (Mineola: Dover Press Reprint, 1998), and Ramey, *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry*.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment, and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 154.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Fredrika Bremer, *The Homes of the New World: Impressions of America*, trans. Mary Howitt (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853) and John F. Watson, *Methodist Error, Or, Friendly, Christian Advice, to those Methodists, who indulge in extravagant emotions and bodily exercises* (Trenton: D. & E. Fenton, 1819).

but my opinion is that the far greater part of them is the work of talented individuals influenced by the pressure and reaction of the group.”<sup>18</sup>

This focus on slave songs’ romantic and irretrievable origins – and the misperception that they are anonymous folk or cultural products, and not works of art created by talented individuals – has generated patronizing, objectification, depreciation, exoticization, and sentimentality. Nineteenth-century auditors and observers commented on their peculiarity compared to white Christian hymns even when they noted similar phrases and concepts. “Wild and strangely fascinating,” were the words of Allen, Ware, and Garrison in 1867.<sup>19</sup> In his conflicted assessment, author George McDonald described the “rude hymns” as a “mingling of the pathetic with the unconscious comic ... shot here and there with a genuine thread of poetry.”<sup>20</sup> Commentators found them consummately “other,” and called them both childish and mesmerizing, weird and poetic, cheery and mournful, and pious and blasphemous. Firsthand reports often referred negatively to the exuberant physicality of their performance, and their oddly mystifying turns of phrase and diction. A major debate hinged on the issue of whether slave songs were original and authentic, or poor imitations of white religious and cultural products. They were embraced by some as the only true flower of American culture, and by others as meaningless and alien nonsense. A letter by Theodore Ledyard Cuyler in *The New York Tribune* reported that, when hearing slave songs at the Jubilee Singers’ performance at his church during their December 1871–January 1872 New York tour, “grey-haired men wept like little children” because they were so moved.<sup>21</sup> In trying to make sense of the disparities among these responses, it is useful to draw on F. Abiola Irele’s contention in *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* that difference or distinctiveness, on several grounds, is an inherent feature in the production and reception of African and African diasporic literature.<sup>22</sup> Here we have a case study

<sup>18</sup> James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States*, p. viii.

<sup>20</sup> Rev. Gustavus D. Pike, *The Singing Campaign for Ten Thousand Pounds: Jubilee Singers in Great Britain*, rev. edn. (New York: American Missionary Association, 1875), p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in J. B. T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers; with their Songs*, 4th edn. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875), p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> F. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See especially chapter 2, “Orality, Literacy, and African Literature,” pp. 23–38, which addresses the sources of inevitable distinctiveness, including the pre-dominance of orality.



in the literature that forms the roots of the African American poetry tradition.

Recent developments in conceptual poetry, and critical reexaminations of the conventional bifurcation of ethnicity and avant-garde practices, now open the way to reimagine the African American poetry canon, starting with slave songs at the foundation. From the late nineteenth century to today, slave songs have been alluded to and cited in diverse forms and styles of African American poetry, including some of the most formally challenging. They have been an irresistible resource for postmodern experimentation from the mid-twentieth century onwards because of their identity as a gnostic source, amenability to deconstruction, double voicing, metaphysical and ethical questioning, linguistic and conceptual ambiguity, use of language as an inherently creative material, semiotic ontology, signifier of Pan-African identity and community, and symbol of the African American experience. The complexities of their role as the expression of an individual, as well as the universalized and anonymized voice of a group, remain central to their power and critical interest.

How does one speak for one's people and still speak in the voice of an individual poet? This dilemma was exemplified by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), widely regarded as America's first black man of letters, whose poems are replete with both veiled and explicit references to slave songs. In his pivotal role as a bridge to modernism, Dunbar both uses and progressively constructs an authentic African American poetry tradition from the roots of these early verses. It might seem likely that slave songs' influence would emerge during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This was an era when the identity of the individual black poet often was fused with social awareness, when poetry was determinedly affiliated with music, performance, populism, political action, and human rights. African American poetry was looked on to express the key issues of contemporary politics, serve as a vehicle of political action, reach a large black audience, call for art to effect social change, and use stylized representations of black speech as an aestheticized simulacrum of poetic diction. In fact, there was recognition at that time of the influence of slave songs as cultural touchstones and rallying cries for civil rights, but not of their determinative role as the foundational body of lyric poetry, despite their active use by figures including Margaret Walker (1915–98), Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), Baraka (1934–2014), Nikki Giovanni (born in 1943), Alice Walker (born in 1944), and the Last Poets, among many others.

The pattern of erasure continues into the present: the influence of slave songs on African American poetry since the 1970s remains a fruitful

topic that is drastically underexplored. Slave songs play a particularly determining role in breaking down perceptions of African American poetry as homogeneous, aesthetically conservative, and the product of diasporic but not avant-garde influences. They are bold in structure, tone, function, and concept. In bringing together orality and textuality, Redmond and Henderson both called for increased awareness of the essential role of speech and song in African American poetry. Slave songs resist being reduced to either and only the voice of an individual or the voice of a people. By integrally entailing both identities and impulses, a major source of the power and impact of this individualized and universal poetry is revealed. In this way, one of the most abiding and unique features of African American poetry is shown, with slave songs as the bedrock of this genre.

Russell Atkins (born in 1926) is a member of the older generation of post-World War II avant-garde poets whose long and productive life spans the modern and postmodern eras conceptually, stylistically, and chronologically. Following in the footsteps of predecessors including Dunbar, Melvin B. Tolson (1898–1966), Sterling A. Brown (1901–89), Langston Hughes (1902–67), and countless others, Atkins often uses folk materials to link current practices to African American origins, including a series of musical as well as literary spirituals. Since the earliest recorded African American writing, in the eighteenth century, there has been a critical split – the repercussions of which are still felt today – between the diasporic “oral” or “folk art” and “literary” or “high art” verse. This perspective of dualism was exemplified at the turn of the twentieth century by Dunbar, who famously produced two styles of verse: standard diction and dialect poetry. While this perspective of dualism has been perpetuated – Ishmael Reed (born in 1938) has even produced a poem by this name, “Dualism in ralph ellison’s invisible man” – there are greater benefits in recognizing that most poets have integrated these traditions. Figures such as Atkins, Reed, Hughes, Harryette Mullen (born in 1953), Douglas Kearney (born in 1974), Evie Shockley, Tracie Morris, and Baraka/Jones, among many others, have worked in the interstices joining oral and written language.

The avant-garde poetry of the 1960s and 1970s often is regarded as following a separate path from literature that is perceived as “diasporic” in its focus – which is to say Pan-African, concerned with issues such as racism and oppression, politically engaged, populist, performing resistance and race, viewing art as a mechanism of progressive politics, and privileging oral modes of expression over textuality. By looking at their common

foundations in slave songs, we see that formally innovative poetry and Black Arts activist products are generated by the same roots and need not be considered mutually exclusive. The historical avant-garde movements, certainly, were motivated by a strong principle of political action through formal means. Kearney, a younger generation inter-media experimentalist, also shows the continuing presence of the oral and folk traditions in postmodern avant-garde African American poetry. Kearney frequently incorporates folk materials in his writing, often positioning them, both rhetorically and spatially, as alternately familiar and precarious.

A 1997 poetry anthology edited by Jerry W. Ward, Jr. is titled *Trouble the Water*, an allusion to the slave song called “Wade in the Water,” one of the most frequently cited slave songs in modern and postmodern African American poetry. In Ward’s volume, once we are alerted to look for them, we find numerous poems – typical of virtually all collections of African American poetry – where slave songs play a dominant role in establishing the central themes, prosody, formal structures, imagery, characterizations, diction, and rhetorical modes. *Trouble the Water* is replete with direct references and allusions to slave songs. Examples of poems that use them directly and/or indirectly – from a wide range of chronological periods and literary styles – include “O Black and Unknown Bards” by James Weldon Johnson, “On Listening to the Spirituals” by Lance Jeffers, “Song of the Son” by Jean Toomer, “Calvary Way” by May Miller, “Go Down Moses!” by Marcus B. Christian, “Runagate Runagate” and “O Daedalus, Fly Away Home” by Robert Hayden, “For My People” and “Harriet Tubman” by Margaret Walker, “Harriet Tubman aka Moses” by Samuel Allen, “Gabriel” by George Barlow, and “Medicine Man” by Calvin C. Hernton.

A similar pattern of influence and presence occurs throughout modern and contemporary African American poetry – but, if slave songs have not been valued as poetry, they will be illegible and invisible as an influential body of writing with the capacity to create an authentic canon and to forge allusions and direct references, which too often go unseen. Understanding that slave songs are both highly innovative and the founding body of the African American poetry tradition enables us to do nothing less than clearly recognize the full diversity, innovations, and lineage of African American poetry as a self-determined body of writing based on a past and present of sparkling originality. From its origins to the present, a continuous feature of African American poetry – derived from slave songs – has been a tendency to forge and negotiate a set of bold, diverse, and individualistic styles and forms that bear witness to the circumstances of the community. We see it echoed in the performative

communal presentation, and in the call-and-response structure. We see it in the exhortations to others to survive and move ahead while, simultaneously, such encouragement is poignantly offered to the self. We can't even dream of asking the question "What was African American poetry?"<sup>23</sup> without understanding what it has been all along.

African survivals are clearly present in slave songs' structure, style, rhetoric, themes, and presentational modes. After Emancipation, slave songs were favorably received internationally in formal concerts by choirs from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), notably the choir of Hampton Institute (later Hampton University) and the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, who used performance proceeds to "sing up" buildings on their campuses. Slave songs were spread internationally by black American troops stationed abroad during both world wars. They have maintained a role of high impact for cultures throughout the world, especially those dealing with issues of ethnic and racial oppression. For example, slave songs are greatly treasured as part of the repertoire of the Armenian National Philharmonic Orchestra. For decades, they have been sung in American and global places of religious worship, community organizations for children and adults, and schools, often without the singers realizing that these songs were created by black Americans in a state of enslavement. "Kumbaya," "This Little Light of Mine," "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore," "Go Down, Moses," "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Go Tell It on the Mountain," "Let Us Break Bread Together," "When the Saints Go Marching In," and countless other examples of the 6,000 or more slave songs have become staples of the world's songbook.

Since it first began four hundred years ago with slave songs, the poetry of African Americans has been evaluated both positively and negatively – but always with a sense of "other" – as "unique," "curious," and "amusing," and with a distinctive and unusual capacity to reach audiences. In one of the earliest descriptions, published in *Atlantic Monthly* and *Army Life in a Black Regiment and Other Writings* (1870), Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson used the metaphor of "strange plants" for the songs sung by black soldiers under his command. Even the black collector of early African American music, John Wesley Work, described slave

<sup>23</sup> This reference paraphrases the question in Kenneth Warren's book, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), which claims that "African American literature is not a transhistorical entity" (p. 9) and now appears to be over "as a distinct entity" (p. 8).

songs as “exotic” and “at all time weird,” in a possible appeal to popular perceptions.<sup>24</sup> In 1875, J. B. T. Marsh wrote that the slave songs, “furnished a refined and wholesome entertainment, which Christian people who did not care to visit the theatre and other kindred places of amusement could attend and enjoy.” Quoted in the same book, Henry Ward Beecher provided this endorsement: “They will charm any audience ... They make their mark by giving the ‘spirituals’ and plantation hymns as only they can sing them who know how to keep time to a master’s whip. Our people have been delighted.”<sup>25</sup> This postbellum appreciation is uncanny in its echo of the attitudes of plantation culture. The positive responses during both the antebellum and postbellum eras were based on theatricalizing the experience. Distance was maintained between the performers and auditors: auditors, including Higginson, transcribed the lyrics while hiding themselves and overhearing in secret. On plantations, enslaved singers, dancers, and musicians performed for entertainment at social events, or were overheard by watching overseers when they were performing their work. Formal performances, of course, reinforced the divided relationship between performers and audiences. Many of the positive responses were motivated by feelings of sentimentality, dramatization, and pity for the painful suffering of the singers. A literary example of this external gaze is found in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, “The Slave Singing at Midnight,” in which “a Negro and enslaved” sings both “sweetly” and “wildly” with the semantically opposed rhyming pair of “glad” and “sad” to fill the auditor with “strange emotion.”

He, a Negro and enslaved,  
Sang of Israel’s victory,  
Sang of Zion, bright and free.

And the voice of his devotion  
Filled my soul with strange emotion;  
For its tones by turns were glad,  
Sweetly solemn, wildly sad.

This pattern of white society looking to black culture for “strange entertainment” continues into the twentieth century and beyond, including the popularity of the minstrel tradition and white visitors to exotic Harlem during the Negro Renaissance. This level of aesthetic and

<sup>24</sup> Higginson, *Army Life*, p. 160; Work, *American Negro Songs*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Marsh, *Story of the Jubilee Singers*, pp. 38–9 and p. 32.

experiential “difference” has generated a history of critical debate about whether this body of poetry is naïve or cunning, original or imitative, folk product or art, American or alien, profane or pious, and many other elusive categories where this writing refuses to be easily placed.

African American poetry is a major touchstone of the American literary tradition, and deserves recognition for its aesthetic quality, exceptional diversity which is only increasing, and influence on Anglophone literature and culture. This body of literature unquestionably has played a unique role in identifiable moments in American history in chronicling specific types of American experience. For example, the slave songs had an indelible impact on the American character during slavery and after Emancipation, and the poetry of protest of the Black Arts Movement radically shaped the political texture of America during a time of general national turmoil. Slave songs have provided a clarion call for the cause of abolition and human rights in the United States and internationally, and community-building sustenance to enslaved and other oppressed populations. They always have been an internal medium of self-definition, self-respect, and self-determinacy, and an external mechanism of resistance, protest, and critique. Their theology of liberation questioned a formal policy separating Church and State by calling out hypocritical white slave owners who used the Bible to justify slavery. Slave songs were an important manifestation in the development of the African American Christianity that historically has revealed the evils of racism. They also established a tradition of African American poetry that criticizes America’s failure to live up to its founding principles and fulfill its promise to all people because it upheld political policies and social practices that allowed oppression, racial violence, and discrimination. Dunbar, Joshua McCarter Simpson (1820?–76), James Monroe Whitfield (1822–71), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1824–1911), Albery A. Whitman (1851–1901), Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr. (1861–1949), James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), Fenton Johnson (1888–1958), Jean Toomer (1893–1967), Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr. (1895–1919), Melvin B. Tolson (1898–1966), Marcus B. Christian (1900–1976), Robert Hayden (1913–80), Margaret Walker (1915–1998), Lance Jeffers (1919–85), Raymond R. Patterson (1929–2001), Carole Gregory Clemons (born in 1945), Mullen, Baraka, Atkins, and Kearney are only a sample of countless African American poets – not to mention black and minority ethnic British and poets from throughout the black diaspora – who allude to or signify on aspects of slave songs. Slave songs, themselves the product of extraordinary creativity, have provided the inspiration, form, and content

to generate creative material throughout the history of African American poetry in all periods and styles. Tracing and analyzing their appearances, operations, and purposes will form one of this book's major emphases.

After Emancipation, the position of slave songs became more equivocal for black and white society, which viewed them as negative reminders of plantation culture, the world of slavery, the Civil War, and the failures of Reconstruction. But perpetuated by organizations such as African Methodist Episcopal Churches (AME) and the newly established HBCUs, slave songs continued to be an important articulation of the creativity, assertiveness, resistance, humor, intellect, and survival of the voices of African Americans. They became an emblem and a constant reminder that slavery did occur as an indelible mark on American history, and African Americans surmounted these terrible conditions to produce independent works of art. In fact, slave songs are the first African American protest songs. They are justified to be considered the foundation of this tradition in terms of their chronological primacy, the enormity of this canon, and their technical operations, which originate the principle of the central duality which abides throughout the genre. Slave songs helped generate such uniquely American art forms as ragtime, gospel, blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, and hip-hop. In addition to their central role in musical history, they have maintained a prominent place in religious services of varied faiths, and remained potent during later eras of cultural change and turmoil, including the supposed "rediscovery" of black folk products during the Negro Renaissance, and the perceived "protest era" of the 1960s and 1970s during the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, and Vietnam War, where we even find Bob Dylan singing one of the oldest slave songs, "No More Auction Block for Me."<sup>26</sup> Today, slave songs continue to be routinely performed and recited as symbols of such virtues as the human spirit's tenacity, the value of community, and the eventual conquest of evil by good.

This book is organized chronologically, by which I mean sequentially and progressively, rather than being locked into rigid dates and eras. It addresses a range of poetic styles and critical perspectives – representing both oral and print traditions – from the arrival of the first Africans in America to the current moment. Some traditional ideas about periodicity will be questioned where artificial boundaries uphold interpretations

<sup>26</sup> Bob Dylan, born Robert Zimmerman, is an American Jew and therefore a member of a diasporic population. Dylan's affinity for this song is another example of the relevance of slave songs for other exilic and oppressed groups of people.

that may be misleading, bear rethinking, or obscure connections among time frames that sometimes are presented as separate and self-contained. How do we justify starting the tradition with figures like Phillis Wheatley when we know the oral tradition of slave songs came first, and had greater allusive utility and influence? Later, the question of periodization occurs with the eras often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, and the gap in scholarship between them. Where do we position figures like Atkins, Du Bois, and Baraka who lived in and impacted multiple eras? As a result of such complications, periods and categories have been rationalized but construed with the maximum latitude to allow links and patterns to emerge rather than arbitrarily disrupt them.

It is a special concern in this book to examine the issues of chronology and periodization as they impact canonization, and, in turn, perceptions, stereotypes, and discrimination. People of black diasporic origin had been in America since colonial times, so it is illuminating to compare survey courses in “American” and “African American” literature. The originating point of American literature courses typically is placed far earlier than African American literature, which is logically difficult to defend, particularly if it is understood that oral products, such as song lyrics, are literature. Survey courses in American literature sometimes start in 1492 with Columbus but certainly no later than the seventeenth century. The periods that are typically covered are colonialism/settlers/Puritans, Romanticism, transcendentalism, and realism, followed by two twentieth and twenty-first century periods, modernism and postmodernism.

University classes in African American literature most often start at the twentieth century. Occasionally, brief preliminary attention is paid to an “early” document, such as a nineteenth-century “slave narrative,” David Walker’s *Appeal*, and/or a Phillis Wheatley poem, which reinforces erroneous impressions that African Americans were not generally literate, artists, or contributors to American culture until the twentieth century. African American literature survey courses typically open with “the Harlem Renaissance,” skip over the middle decades of the twentieth century, move ahead to a period referred to as “the Black Arts Movement,” and close with a view of “today,” the contemporary moment. Survey courses in American literature have covered a massive swath of periods and styles before arriving at the point where African American literature courses usually begin. Then the American literature courses do a tidy two-part glide through the twentieth century while the African American twentieth century is typically chopped into at least three periods with a



literary desert in the middle. How can this structure not have an impact on perceptions? A strong argument is presented throughout this book that African American poetry is best analyzed by theories designed to interpret these texts, so “difference” is not an inherent concern: it is the type of and motivation for the difference that matters in this comparison. In the teaching of American literature, the division of the twentieth century into “modern” and “postmodern” periods, following at least three or more prior periods (and attendant media and styles), suggests a linear path of steadily forward progress for the relatively unified and orderly American literature canon. The contrasting treatment in African American canon formation tends to suggest a legacy that is late, disrupted, and comprises a series of discrete slow steps moving indeterminately (where?) rather than the “continuity and wholeness” so accurately emphasized by Henderson.

The history of African American poetry has been preserved through a distinguished legacy of anthologies, many of which contain selections of poems and critical essays discussing major figures, moments, movements, and themes. The earliest antebellum volumes mainly address slave songs, which have been primarily collected as “folk products,” and have been wrongly excluded from the African and American poetry canons from the origin of the genre to the twenty-first century. The early anthologies explicitly correlate lyrics with music, performance, and Christian worship, such as Richard Allen’s *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns* (1801), Edwin F. Hatfield’s *Freedom’s Lyre: or, Psalms, Hymns and Sacred Songs, for the Slave and his Friends* (1840), and E. P. Christy’s *Christy’s Plantation Melodies: Originators of Ethiopian Minstrelsy and the First to Harmonize Negro Melodies* (1851). The postbellum fascination was reflected in and built by compilations and commentaries such as William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison’s *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), Higginson’s *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1869) and *Atlantic Essays* (1871), Theo. F. Seward’s *Jubilee Songs As Sung by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University* (1872), J. B. T. Marsh’s *The Story of the Jubilee Singers with their Songs* (1875), Rev. Gustavus D. Pike’s *The Singing Campaign for Ten Thousand Pounds: Jubilee Singers in Great Britain* (1875), Rev. M. Taylor’s *Plantation Melodies* (1882), and William E. Barton’s *Old Plantation Hymns: a collection of hitherto unpublished melodies of the slave and the freeman, with historical and descriptive notes* (1899), as well as magazines such as *Dwight’s Journal of Music*.

These collections were followed by others that extended and expanded the attention paid to plantation culture and its verse, including adding

sophisticated musical arrangements. Many segments of black and white society, for differing reasons, shared ambivalence and hostility towards slave songs in the post-Civil War years and at the turn of the twentieth century. For some African Americans, they represented the degradations of slavery and were best left in the past. In the context of America's abiding racial divides during Reconstruction and entering the twentieth century, these songs were often considered primitive ditties beneath the level of serious attention that reinforced pernicious stereotypes of African Americans. Yet important collections continued to preserve these treasures, including Thomas P. Fenner, Frederic G. Rathbun, and Miss Bessie Cleaveland's *Cabin and Plantation Songs as Sung by the Hampton Students* (1901), W. H. Thomas's *Some Current Folk-Songs of the Negro and their Economic Interpretation* (1912), Henry Edward Krehbiel's *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music* (1913), John Wesley Work's *Folk Songs of the American Negro* (1915), Howard Odum and Guy B. Johnson's *The Negro and His Songs: A Study of Typical Negro Songs in the South* (1925), the classic two-volume *Book of American Negro Spirituals* edited by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson (1925, 1926), R. Nathaniel Dett's *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute* (1927), selections in V. F. Calverton's *An Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929), and Augustine T. Smythe et al.'s *The Carolina Low-Country* (1931). Their perspectives and motives ranged from generally well intended though historically conditioned curiosity (such as Thomas and Krehbiel), to cultural and educational preservation (such as Fenner and Work), and to supercilious racism (such as Odum and Johnson). HBCUs, black literary societies, and churches were instrumental in maintaining interest in the slave songs, especially with the development of the concert tradition that removed them – or that was thought to elevate them – from their original styles and performative roots. Another generation of song selections followed to help respectfully preserve and perpetuate the tradition through the twentieth century, such as John W. Work's *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular* (1940) and Moses Hogan's *The Oxford Book of Spirituals* (2002).

Early works of critical analysis such as *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States* by Benjamin Brawley (1918) and *To Make a Poet Black* by J. Saunders Redding (1939) established African American poetry and poetics as a worthy subject of study early in the twentieth century. Subsequent important critical studies have aimed to identify what makes African American poetry distinctive and/or part of the

Anglophone or American lyric poetry traditions. Landmark works by anyone's measure are Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) and the extended treatment of poetry in *Negro Poetry and Drama and The Negro in American Fiction* by Sterling A. Brown (1972). Several important early collections do not address poetry exclusively but consider it in the larger context of African American literature, cultural expression, and history. Such seminal volumes now out of print include the legendary *The Negro Caravan*, edited by Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee (1941), and *Cavalcade: Negro American Writing from 1760 to the Present*, edited by Arthur P. Davis and J. Saunders Redding (1971), later followed by the two volumes of *The New Cavalcade*, edited by Davis, Redding, and Joyce Ann Joyce (1991).

The field was progressively augmented by landmark poetry anthologies – many with critical essays or introductions – including James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927), selections in Calverton's *An Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929), Robert Thomas Kerlin's *Negro Poets and Their Poems* (1935), and Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes's *The Poetry of the Negro 1746–1949* (1949). A bumper crop was published in the 1960s and 1970s, including *American Negro Poetry*, edited by Bontemps (1963), *New Negro Poets, USA*, edited by Hughes (1964), *Kaleidoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets*, edited by Robert Hayden (1968), *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (1968), *We Speak as Liberators: Young Black Poets*, edited by Orde Coombs (1970), *Dices or Black Bones: Black Voices of the Seventies*, edited by Adam David Miller (1970), *Soulscrip: A Collection of African American Poetry*, edited by June Jordan (1970), *Natural Process: An Anthology of New Black Poetry*, edited by Ted Wilentz and Tom Weatherly (1970), *The Black Poets*, edited by Dudley Randall (1971), and *The Poetry of Black America: Anthology of the 20th Century*, edited by Arnold Adoff (1973). Two 1970s collections display consciousness of African American poetry in the international context of the African diaspora: *You Better Believe It: Black Verse in English*, edited by Paul Breman (1973), and *3000 Years of Black Poetry*, edited by Alan Lomax and Raoul Abdul (1970). Breman's editorial perspective was unusual, especially for its era. This prescient volume was early to connect the origins of the African American poetry tradition, including some of its most innovative practitioners, to poets from Africa, the United Kingdom, and the Caribbean. Containing a brief preface and editorial introductions to each poet, this book opens with one of the first African American

poets, George Moses Horton, and ends by expanding this potential canon with the inclusion of figures such as Kamau Brathwaite, locating African American poetry in a transnational, transcultural, and migratory context.

Since the late 1990s countless important critical studies and anthologies have been produced that have aimed to identify what makes African American poetry distinctive and/or part of the Anglophone or American lyric poetry traditions. Some of the later anthologies of African American poetry have specific topics of focus, demonstrating the increasing levels of knowledge and interest in this genre. *African-American Poetry: An Anthology, 1773–1927*, edited by Joan R. Sherman (1997), is a Dover Thrift Edition which covers a wide swathe of the field but ends at the Harlem Renaissance. Similarly, *Selected African American Writing from 1760 to 1910*, edited by Arthur P. Davis, J. Saunders Redding, and Joyce Ann Joyce (1995), is another substantial and inexpensive anthology that omits most of the twentieth century. Twentieth-century poetry is the exclusive focus of Clarence Major's *The Garden Thrives: Twentieth-Century African American Poetry* (1996), *I am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by African Americans*, edited by Arnold Adoff (1997), *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945*, edited by Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton (1994), and Bontemps's *American Negro Poetry*, which focuses on twentieth-century poetry (last revised in 1974). Joan R. Sherman has edited two magnificent collections which shed important light on African American poetry of the nineteenth century: *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (1974, and republished in a 1989 second edition), and *African-American Poetry of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (1992). Adoff's 500-page *Poetry of Black America* offers in-depth coverage but is restricted to a seventy-five-year period. As indicated by the publication dates, many of these excellent collections do not represent either the oldest or the most current African American poetry, or the full range of the genre, nor is it their intention to do so.

Several recent poetry anthologies are in print and readily available which cover a full chronological spectrum of the genre. These volumes include *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (2005), *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African-American Poetry*, edited by Jerry Ward, Jr. (1997), and *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry*, edited by Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton (2000). Other superb African American poetry anthologies that focus on specific styles or themes include *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, edited by Camille Dungy (2009) and

*One Window's Light: A Collection of Haiku*, edited by Lenard D. Moore (2018). *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, edited by Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey (2001), provides a valuable perspective of the contribution of women writers during the Harlem Renaissance. *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans* (2006) and *What I Say: Innovative Poetry by Black Writers in America* (2015), edited by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, concentrate on formally innovative African American poetry from the middle of the twentieth century to 2015. *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, edited by Charles Henry Rowell (2013), provides a stylistically diverse selection of the contemporary period. Increasingly from the second half of the twentieth century to the first two decades of the twenty-first, a distinguished roster of varied new critical writings has grown in tandem with the dramatic increase in the quantity and diversity of African American poetry. These include single author studies, texts driven by varied themes or theories, and works of historical recuperation. Reflecting the historically marginalized status of African American writers, mainstream publications have hardly provided an open venue for these poets. Many poems throughout the genre's history appeared in publications sponsored by churches, such as the Quakers, and in the critically important forums of black owned, edited, or oriented newspapers, journals, little magazines, and broadsides, including *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, *The Anglo-African Magazine*, *Voice of the Negro*, *The Crisis*, *Champion Magazine*, *The Favorite Magazine*, *The Crusader*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Messenger*, *Fire!!*, *Phylon*, *Negro Digest/Black World*, *Opportunity*, *Yugen*, *Yardbird Reader*, *Umbra*, and *The Southern Workman*. Equally important has been the development since the early nineteenth century of black owned, operated, or focused presses, such as Dudley Randall's Broadside Press, Naomi Long Madgett's Lotus Press, Breman's Heritage Series, Don L. Lee/Haki Madhubuti's Third World Press, and Renee Gladman's Leon Works. The great majority of poetry chapbooks published before and even into the twentieth century were privately printed limited editions. A plethora of literary journals has traditionally been published by black literary societies and HBCUs. Unpublished manuscripts that were hand-circulated or privately held can be found in private and special collections, such as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York and the Mayme A. Clayton Library and Museum in Culver City, California.

In addition to material in special collections and archives, relevant poetry and essays also appear in a number of anthologies produced for

academic purposes, including *Call & Response*, edited by Patricia Liggins Hill (1998), three editions of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay – and most recently Valerie Smith (the third edition was published in 2014), the classic volume *Black Writers of America*, edited by Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon (1972), and *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Rochelle Smith and Sharon L. Jones (2000). This book respectfully builds on the foundation of these and other materials, suggests the wealth of past and current resources, and provides an analytical map to interested readers at both the introductory and advanced levels. In fulfilling its mission to provide a history of both African American poetry and critical ideas about the field, it also draws on numerous scholarly studies on individual authors and relevant topics, specialized anthologies and essay collections, and resources of poetry and poetics that are out of print or difficult to access. These materials span the major periods of African American literary history, starting with early compilations and unpublished manuscripts of oral poetry and plantation verse, and encompassing some of the more recent forums such as publications produced by or related to *Callaloo*, Cave Canem, The Dark Room Collective, the Black Took Collective, the Carolina African American Writers Collective, and the Affrilachian Poets.

In recent years, the spectrum of new critical writings has paralleled the dramatic increase in the quantity and variety of African American poetry. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the many influential studies have included *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual was Hammered Out* by John Lovell, Jr. (1972), *Afro-American Poetics* (1988) and *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) by Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* by Aldon Lynn Nielsen (1997), *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* by Lorenzo Thomas (2000), *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* by Fred Moten (2003), and *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* by Nathaniel Mackey (1993). Two valuable collections of African American critical theory that include key essays on poetry and poetics are *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Angelyn Mitchell (1994), and *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier (2000). It is significant that both volumes are restricted to essays written from the Harlem Renaissance to the present, which offers telling

insight into the main eras of research and attention in African American literature. These compilations have been supplemented by *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (2011), an essay collection that aims to cover four centuries and offers an enhanced scope that incorporates recent perspectives in this tradition. These and many other important works have generated an increasingly interested and varied readership and appreciation for this genre.

The focus and goals of these studies demonstrate the diversity that has always existed in this field and continues to grow. In his exhaustive 684-page study, Lovell's primary focus is the poetics of the slave songs, or spirituals, as he identified these "black songs" as the progenitors of the African American poetry tradition, with the key themes of African survivals, diasporic syncretism, and international influences. A distinguished body of critical writing is available on the Harlem Renaissance, with such notable volumes as *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, edited by George Hutchinson (2007), and the marvelous work done by David Levering Lewis in the anthology *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (1994) and his revelatory critical-historical study *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981). Another burst of attention has been paid in recent years to the larger period that subsumes the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements, and the transition into the contemporary period. Nielsen, Mackey, and Lorenzo Thomas share interests in avant-garde, marginalized, and formally innovative movements and practices, with Thomas addressing modernism and postmodernism, Mackey connecting African American poetry and poetics to interracial and diasporic poets and practices, and Nielsen illuminating the existence of a marginalized tradition of innovation reflected in postmodern African American poetry. Baker's studies have been justly lauded for his transformative address of issues of the black aesthetic, especially, but hardly limited to, applications to modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.

With exceptions such as Keith Leonard's *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2006), many of the excellent recent studies that have opened the field to closer scrutiny have attended largely to modernism and postmodernism. Some of the highly recommended titles that have progressed the attention to this period – and that, not coincidentally, emphasize the integral connection between poetry and music – include Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (2011), Meta DuEwa Jones's *The Muse is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance*

to *Spoken Word* (2011), Gordon E. Thompson's edited essay collection *Black Music, Black Poetry: Blues and Jazz's Impact on African American Versification* (2015), Howard Ramsby's *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry* (2011), Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014), Jean-Philippe Marcoux's *Jazz Griots: Music as History in the 1960s African American Poem* (2012), Adam Bradley's *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (2009), Tony Bolden's *Afro-Blue: Improvisations in African American Poetry and Culture* (2004), and Harryette Mullen's *The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be* (2012), which contextualizes her own literary practices within the larger tradition. Even Thompson's collection, which aims to cover the full scope of African American poetry, opens with Paul Laurence Dunbar presented as an early modern figure.

Understanding the relationship between African American poetry and performance has been progressed by signal works which have become critical classics, such as *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African American Modernism*, by Kimberly W. Benston (2000) and *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture*, by Fahamisha Patricia Brown (1999). Numerous major critical studies have been produced on individual figures, such as Arnold Rampersad's magisterial two-volume biography of Langston Hughes (1986, 1988), and biography of Ralph Ellison (2007). African American poetry also has escalated in prominence in the context of postcolonial, transatlantic, and global studies. Landmark work in theory and application appears in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* by Brent Hayes Edwards (2003), which also focuses on modern and post-modern writing. The international influence of the genre is reflected in a comprehensive anthology of "black" British poetry, *Red*, edited by the diasporically oriented poet Kwame Dawes (2010), whose preface opens by citing Hughes. The influence of African American women poets similarly is unmistakable in *Bittersweet*, edited by Karen McCarthy (1998), an expansive anthology of contemporary black diasporic women's poetry, which prominently features African American figures such as Maya Angelou (1928–2014), Jayne Cortez (1934–2012), Nikki Giovanni (born in 1943), Alice Walker (born in 1944), Ntozake Shange (1948–2018), Rita Dove (born in 1952), and bell hooks (born in 1952). The focus on the contribution of women to the African American poetry tradition from its origins is represented in numerous critical studies and volumes, such as *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*, edited



by Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor (2009), and an excellent anthology with expansive historical range, *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Women's Literature*, edited by Valerie Lee (2006).

It is astonishing that the book regarded by scholars as the definitive critical history of African American poetry appeared more than four decades ago: Redmond's ground-breaking *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History* (1976), which covers slightly more than a century, the period from 1865 to 1975. Its singular position is a testimonial to the magnificent quality of care and detail in this book. For any reader interested in African American literature, and certainly poetry, it is an essential resource. Especially considering when it was written, long before digital methods of access and research were routine, the book truly is a wonder of preservation of the century of black poetry that it meticulously addresses. From the major to the most minor figures and texts, there is hardly one that is not mentioned, and Redmond's knowledge, opinions, and wit infuse each page. The only existing "complete" history of African American poetry ends in the mid-1970s. A superb volume, naturally it does not cover the full flourishing of postmodernism and, additionally, it necessarily omits the future directions of parallel critical scholarship and the cultural and historical developments in the following era. Times and methods have changed, and those changing insights can beneficially update the information in Redmond's foundational text. To put it in context, Redmond's book was published in the same year as Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and the first production of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*.

Since *Drumvoices* was published, a large quantity of valuable poetry and scholarship has been produced reflecting creative modes and technological developments that did not exist in the middle of the twentieth century, from digital poetics to the future impact of the period in which this book was written. A massive quantity of important historical and literary material has been discovered, recuperated, and made accessible. Substantial new critical and cultural writing has been generated that explains why African American poetry deserves special focus and preservation. Academic fields have shifted and reconfigured in an age of true interdisciplinarity. Of compelling interest is this genre's place in the contexts of critical paradigms of border, multicultural, ethnic, transnational, class, race, diaspora, gender, ethnomusicology, and minority studies – growing fields, as indicated by educational and employment statistics, conferences, and publications. The world in which African American

poetry exists and is published also has changed dramatically since the 1970s. Even Kenneth Warren's provocative study *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), which was the subject of a special session at the 2012 Modern Language Association annual convention, has drawn dynamic questions about the necessity and ontology of this field, generating spirited dialogue to determine its scope and role in the present and future. Today we inherit and build on this field, which differs in significant ways from the one so brilliantly encompassed by Redmond, though his work will remain a permanent cornerstone.

A key issue in this book is the relationship between African American poetry and American poetry – to what extent the latter has shaped the former, and to what extent the latter is an integral part of the former. Another dominant theme is music and musicality, which has long been considered one of the hallmarks of African American poetry. Imaginaries of Africa, migration, diaspora, trans- and multi-nationalism, and race slavery are historical themes with ongoing ramifications that are addressed as touchstones of identity formation, sociopolitical influence, and aesthetics. An additional topic throughout this book is the question of canonicity itself: how has a body of African American poetry developed over time? How has its allusive dialogue functioned? How have certain poets and poems come to be considered essential? How has the American poetry canon evolved to either marginalize or embrace certain voices in different periods of time? This book discusses the recognized canon of African American poetry; but considering the general disregard and neglect of this genre, it also stresses the recuperation of lost and overlooked poetries and poetics demonstrably worthy of attention. This motive is consistent with the current reconsideration and re-envisioning of American literature owing to increased recognition of minority writing and viewpoints in recent decades. An integral part of this book is to address the current composition of the genre, and to consider which poems and poetics may have been more and less acceptable to wider audiences based on the political and social conditions in which they were created. In examining these and other issues, the ideas of brilliant poet-critics Tyrone Williams, Mark McMorris, Fred Moten, Harryette Mullen, Nathaniel Mackey, Lorenzo Thomas, Claudia Rankine, and Evie Shockley have been invaluable in building a substantial body of criticism about experimental poetics to speculate on how and why the current canon has developed and consider some alternatives. I mention additional original and skilled poet-critics who are less well known. Their inclusion could spin the canon on its axis for a more expansive, diverse,

bold, original, and demanding portrait of the full range of African American poetry – more self-determined, self-aware, authentically revolutionary, and challenging than the tradition that has been accepted.

A related goal in a comprehensive history of this nature is the careful contemplation of lesser known works that can beneficially be joined or rejoined to the canon. Poetry often is acknowledged to be on the margins of literature, and poetry associated with ethnicity, exclusion, and other forms of political and cultural “outsider” status – including African American – is generally neglected. African American poetry historically has been a voice of critique and, as such, an especially marginalized genre.

As a history of the genre, this book addresses the span of African American poetry from at least the early seventeenth century to the present. It identifies the origins of the genre in oral modes evolving into performative and spoken poetics, and early typographical experiments developing into contemporary conceptual practices. A selection of poets is highlighted in relevant chapters, with several figures spanning more than one period in their lifetime and impact. Each chapter presents literary analysis, combined with biographical and bibliographical information on poets and background on their major works, and draws on published and archival materials from a range of periods and approaches. This field contains landmark texts by towering scholars and poet-critics, many of which have been named in this chapter, whose ideas and approaches are discussed where relevant. This book seeks to identify earlier roots than 1760, the date used by Arthur P. Davis, J. Saunders Redding, and Joyce Ann Joyce – among many others – to reference the “Pioneer Writers” of the genre. As such, I address many writers who have been determined over time to be considered canonical for each major period. This designation refers to poets whose writing can be defended as being of the first order of quality or having been highly influential. In conjunction with critical commentaries on poetry, this book addresses the historical and cultural circumstances in which it was produced and its record of critical evaluation. It also discusses figures who previously were better known, or deserve fuller attention than they later received, and invites readers to reintegrate them with more familiar contemporaneous poets. Deliberate attention is paid to the range of styles and purposes for which African American poetry has been used over time to highlight the diversity and expansiveness of this field in a stimulating way to prompt further research and study at all levels.

By these criteria, there are certain poets that inarguably must be incorporated. These include Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, George Moses

Horton, the anonymous poets of the slave songs, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Robert Hayden, Margaret Walker, Jean Toomer, Melvin B. Tolson, Frank Marshall Davis, Fenton Johnson, and Gwendolyn Brooks. The picture becomes more complex as we near the present for reasons that are proposed and discussed. Some of these figures must be included based on recognized measures of literary merit and influence, others through their cultural or historical significance, and, for some, these categories coincide. There are additional poets who may readily be included with little expectation of challenge. Full inclusivity is beyond the scope or possibility of this book, and many worthy and important figures must necessarily be omitted. Many other sets of figures could have been chosen, and the limitations of space are regretful. Thrilling research by many scholars on a variety of poets is underway and to be produced in the future.

In the current climate, with strong and increasing interest nationally and internationally, this book aims to respectfully broaden and update Redmond's magisterial study, while there is no need or aim to duplicate its phenomenal and meticulously reliable attention to encyclopedic biographical and bibliographic detail. The wealth of new poetry that has appeared in the interim is coupled with seismic cultural and political shifts, not least of which has been the appointment of African Americans to key political posts, including the appointment of the first black President of the United States, Barack Obama, whose inauguration was launched by a black poet's writing, Elizabeth Alexander's "Praise Song for the Day" (2009). In 2003, the idea was approved for an African American museum in the nation's capital. Thirteen years later, in 2016, the National Museum of African American History and Culture officially opened its doors, auspiciously at the end of the Obama administration. Robert Hayden was the first African American to serve as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress – the role that pre-dated the Poet Laureate of the United States – from 1976 to 1978, the period of the United States' deeply symbolic Bicentennial. It took a decade for his appointment to be followed by another African American poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, who served in 1985–6. Appointments to this politically prominent position now have rapidly accelerated, building on the foundations of these esteemed predecessors. From 1993 to 1995, Rita Dove was the first African American to hold the official post and title of Poet Laureate, succeeded by Natasha Trethewey from 2012 to 2014, and Tracy K. Smith starting in 2017. These figures and their positions

reinforce the centrality of women to the history of African American poetry.

There is frequent mention of the many texts and figures that previously were better known, and to compare them to canonical texts. Certain poets are acknowledged as essential to the canon in each period. Diverse media and forms are considered, from the origins of the genre in oral practices to today's spoken word, and from early typographical experiments to twentieth and twenty-first century formal innovations.

Chapter 2 addresses the earliest period of African American literature, which is presented here as the era extending from the first arrival of Africans – including their capture and journey to enslavement – until the end of slavery in 1865. In addition to slave songs, key figures and texts of this period include ephemera, notes, messages, diaries, hymnals, oratory, sayings, stories, folktales, proverbs, lore, political statements, and autobiographies and memoirs by authors, auditors, and transcribers, representing both oral and print-based culture. The history of critical evaluation has artificially perpetuated a split between a black “folk” tradition and a print “literary” tradition that emulates learned models, a dual perspective that I acknowledge but vehemently argue against in favor of a holistic reality. Examples of this split are easy to find if we consider the treatment of slave songs, which have generally been relegated to the “folk” category. As I discuss elsewhere, “folk literature” has usually been considered more primitive, less sophisticated, and not truly canon-worthy as “literature,” even if such judgments are enacted but not directly stated. In the resoundingly influential *The Negro Caravan*, editors Brown, Davis, and Lee have a section called “Poetry,” and relegate slave songs to a separate section called “Folk Literature,” where they are divided into “Spirituals” and “Slave Seculars.” Similarly, Dudley Randall, in another popular anthology, *The Black Poets*, has a section called “Literary Poetry,” and places slave songs in a separate (but not equal?) section called “Spirituals.”

The “literary” texts of the earliest period tend to include poems and other writings by Hammon, Wheatley, Harper, Horton, and Lucy Terry Prince, all of whom have received well-justified critical attention with new and important studies emerging. The founding role of women in African American poetry is present from the outset, very clearly through the positions of Prince, Wheatley, and Harper, followed by successive generations of women who display a tradition within a tradition, as Joanne M. Braxton has suggested in relation to African American women's autobiography. In Chapter 2 and throughout this book, readers are encouraged to consult the wealth of available material on canonical

figures, which does not need to be duplicated here. One of the major purposes of Chapter 2 and this book is to look closely at the development of the canon, raise questions about the inclusions and exclusions, draw attention to lesser known figures of great interest, and propose a redrawn and expanded canon that reveals continuities and features that have been previously hidden.

Of the so-called “slave poets,” Hammon typically gets the harshest treatment, Horton the most consistent respect, and judgments on Wheatley vacillate the most. Terry is a special case since she has left only one known poem instead of a larger body of writing to evaluate. Jean Wagner found the historical importance of Hammon to be more significant than the quality of his writing, but also acknowledged that his poem “An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries” (1760) “represents a halfway stage between the guileless art of the unknown composers of spirituals and the already much wordier manner of the black popular preacher.”<sup>27</sup> Redmond also stated that such “literary poetry” should be examined in the context of other contemporaneous products like slave songs. *The Negro Caravan* calls Hammon “a curiosity to his age, and he remains a curiosity. His religious doggerel and pious platitudes have no significance other than historical.”<sup>28</sup> The editors of that important volume explain the failure of these early poets: “They had to be living proofs that the race was capable of culture ... It was therefore only natural that they should imitate too closely the approved American and English writers” (p. 275). Why do we have a canon that is based on figures whose quality has been judged with such ambivalence? And what are the explanations for those mixed reviews? These questions are asked in Chapter 2 and throughout the book. Chapter 2 discusses slave songs, as well as Alfred Gibbs Campbell, creator of what is probably the first concrete poem written in America, and Dr. Joshua McCarter Simpson, who produced an incendiary body of abolitionist protest poetry that – along with slave songs – helps locate the origins of revolutionary poetry far earlier than is typically recognized, and establishes a more visible lineage for the twentieth century “era of movements” in the poetry of modernism, the mid-Wars period, and the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, tr. Kenneth Douglas (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 17.

<sup>28</sup> Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, eds., *The Negro Caravan* (New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times*, 1970), p. 274.

Chapter 3 focuses on the difficult closing decades of the nineteenth century and addresses the pivotal time from Emancipation through Reconstruction to the advent of the early twentieth-century era variously known as the Harlem Renaissance, African American modernism, or New Negro Renaissance, among other appellations. This challenging post-Emancipation pre-modern era laid the foundation for the famous and prescient prediction to follow of W. E. B. Du Bois: the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line. Equally renowned is the claim by historian Rayford W. Logan that this period encompasses “the Nadir” of racial relations in America, though recent scholarship argues persuasively that the period defies that stereotype in some respects by having generated an impressive record of creative and literary products. However, the reality still proved to be ironic considering the high expectations for racial harmony and equality brought about by Emancipation and national reunification after four long and bloody years of war.

Important poets of this era include some who are marginally well known, such as W. S. Braithwaite, Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson, Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., James Edwin Campbell, and Albery Allson (sometimes referred to as Alston) Whitman. The period also includes many poets who deserve to be far better known for their individual literary contributions, as the generation to inherit and use the legacy of the tradition’s originators, and as significant precursors to the first generations of poets in the twentieth century. As Joan R. Sherman has written, there is a perception that no African American poets existed between Wheatley and Dunbar, and we can see that this false view is another pitfall in the existing canon. Sherman has done superb work in collecting and calling attention to African American poets of the nineteenth century, and some of the fine poets that she has written about include Alfred Islay Walden, George Marion McClellan, and Josephine Delphine Henderson Heard. These poets often addressed such topics as minstrelsy, post-slavery racial oppression, and the horrific status of human rights. Close attention is paid to figures on the cusp of the Negro Renaissance, such as Walter Everette Hawkins, and Fenton Johnson, addressed in Chapters 3 and 4, whose life was long, but whose known brilliant poetic output took place early in his life. Information also is offered in Chapter 3 that hopes to rectify erroneous preconceptions about early African American literacy and interest in poetry by discussing the journals and newspapers that often served as the means of expression.

Only one figure of this era is a truly renowned poet, Dunbar, who remains in the eyes of many as the greatest poet of the African American poetry tradition. This is an especially crucial period in the progressive development of an African American critical tradition side by side with its impressively expanding body of poetry. The publication in 1918 of the bellwether study *The Negro in Literature and Art* by Benjamin Brawley arguably establishes the presence of an aesthetic tradition and its founding figures. This era sees the self-defining presence of an African American poetry canon through patterns of inter-referencing and allusion. Themes that were pronounced in the earliest period emerge with increasing urgency in postbellum poetry: separatism versus integration, an authentic recording of African American experience and history, the proper educational and cultural standards appropriate for African American culture, African return and the symbolic meaning of Africa, ways to enforce legal rights and freedoms for African Americans, and the role – and the best means to achieve it – for African Americans in the American national imaginary and operation. Specific issues that also are seen to retain their importance from earlier periods include the relative values placed on speech-based versus print-based poetry and poetics, the pros and cons of writing for dual race-determined audiences, the use of vernacular diction versus ornate poetic language, and the relationship between African American poetry and music, as exemplified in this early period by slave songs, with ragtime, gospel, blues, and jazz soon to follow on the horizon. The presence of slave songs in African American poetry of all eras is demonstrated here in numerous examples as a continuous theme in this book. Allusions appear in the work of poets using many different forms and styles, and their uses and appearances are especially interesting among poets associated with experimentalism, subterfuge, indirection, and layers of multiple meaning, which slave songs achieve so adeptly.

Chapter 4 brings together the two periods often called the first and second “Renaissances.” African American modernism is embedded in the pivotal era referred to most often as the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance, which is usually dated from the teens to the Depression. This period, which is also described as Afro-modernism, Afro-centric modernism, and other designations, produced indisputably significant poetry by well-known poets such as Hughes, Cullen (1903–46), James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), Sterling A. Brown (1901–89), Claude McKay (1889–1948), and Jean Toomer (1894–1867), as well as lesser known figures. More recent critical terminology such as the New Negro



Renaissance (which harkens back to earlier usages) and African American modernism more appropriately broadens this literary period geographically and conceptually, removes this poetry from perceptions of ghettoization or isolation from the literary mainstream – as has been the case throughout the history of this genre – and places it more accurately and revealingly in dialogue with the British, American, and international Anglophone canons as they have developed. The self-confident voices and perspectives, and levels of verbal dexterity and formal innovation, are tied closely to the past of the genre instead of being presented, as is often the case, as unprecedented and anomalous. Rather than the first flowering of African American artistic originality, as it is often perceived, the New Negro Renaissance follows in a long tradition of self-possessed and self-assured originality, as demonstrated at the outset and throughout this book. From the roots that were already established, this era sees the further growth of African American poetics and criticism with towering critics such as J. Saunders Redding (1906–88), Brown, Alain Locke (1885–1954), and Johnson. Although the long life and monumental impact of Du Bois (1868–1963) resulted in multiple decades of lasting influence, his voice enters the tradition as early as 1903 with *The Souls of Black Folk* and its timeless chapter on “The Sorrow Songs,” as he called the slave songs, the implications of his concept of “double consciousness,” his bold statement about the color line, and his own under-appreciated poetry.

Typically characterized as a relatively brief era of spectacular literary production, this period also displays more diversity and a closer connection to national and international modernism than typically is recognized. As the product of a diaspora, the international dimension of African American poetry throughout its history is another under-examined feature that becomes especially prominent in this era of travel and expatriation. Surrealism and Negritude, and the ideas of Darwin and Marx, influenced many poets of this era. We again find little-known, forgotten, and under-appreciated poets who were working in highly original terrain, such as Will Sexton, Jonathan Henderson Brooks, Marcus B. Christian, Helene Johnson, and the full range of poetry by Bontemps and Waring Cuney, who often are viewed mistakenly as “single poem poets” – Bontemps for “Nocturne at Bethesda” and Cuney for “No Images.” Other themes of the era are the literary impacts of cosmopolitanism, urbanization, Northern migration, and reactions against agrarian Southern society.

Just a few of the landmark publications that illustrate the new aesthetic directions of this period are Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), James Weldon

Johnson's *American Negro Poetry* (1922) and *Books of American Negro Spirituals* (1925, 1926), Locke's *The New Negro* (1925), Hughes's *The Weary Blues* (1926), and two important single magazine issues, *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life* (1928) and *Fire!!* (1926), both edited by Wallace Thurman (1902–34), which place the New Negro Renaissance in the tradition of modern little magazines that were publishing avant-garde manifestos. In the New Negro Renaissance, and through the mid-century transition to postmodernism, we also see the evolution – and traceable lineage – of African American poetry into disparate threads that are still perceptible today, and whose origins date back to the start of the genre.

By viewing modernism as extending from approximately 1910 to the era of World War II, we see the “New Negro” and “Black Arts” poets as part of an extended dialogue rather than separated by the middle of the century. In their essay “Foundations of African American Modernism, 1910–1950,” Craig H. Werner and Sandra G. Shannon argue persuasively for this inclusive and expansive view of periodization based on similar motives and continuities in the earlier and later figures.<sup>29</sup> Other critics claim that the modern era ended in the 1960s, and still others agree with Mark A. Sanders that the early twentieth-century flowering of African American creativity continues today and has never ended. We may also call on Jean-Michel Rabaté, who considers the earliest wave of postmodernism to be a fulfillment of the need and desire to resolve the incomplete creative project begun in the first waves of modernism and interrupted by two world wars.

It is a common belief that African American protest poetry is a product of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, but if we look at the full range of foundational literature in the African American tradition, we see protest, self-articulation, self-empowerment, and originality from the start. Thereby we have the foundation of a culture that prizes music and language in combination as a central social activity, and, in ironic tandem, white images of Africans as paid entertainers in exploitation of this trait. From the moment of their capture, the prominence of music, physical expression, and language in communication has been used both by and against African American poets. The 1950s and 1960s – contrary to stereotypes – reflected substantial social and political transformation and foment within the black literary community, including heightened empathy between African American writers such as Hayden and Dodson,

<sup>29</sup> Craig H. Werner and Sandra G. Shannon, “Foundations of African American Modernism, 1910–1950,” in Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., eds., *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 241–67.

and European Jewish World War II survivors such as Rosey Pool, who engaged in a speaking tour of the HBCUs after the war. The 1960s and 1970s displayed tendencies that were formalist and accommodationist, as well as internationalist and formally innovative in their associations with Negritude, setting the scene for the surrealist experimentation to follow in figures such as Will Alexander (born in 1948) and Nathaniel Mackey (born in 1947). Such a readjusted perspective amplifies the fact that a fully operational and original African American literary canon was in active existence well before twentieth century writers came on the scene.

Issues of the oral tradition and performativity, introduced at the start of this book as part of the roots of the African American poetic tradition in the slave songs, become reinforced during the 1960s and 1970s, as black theatre and poetry became more aligned. From Dunbar to Margaret Walker, the performative component of this genre has been a recognizable trait. Don L. Lee's *Dynamite Voices: Black Poets of the 1960's* (1971) and Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* are shown to be touchstones that articulate the aesthetic traits not only of this era, but also of its lineage within a black poetry tradition. Shange's "choreopoem," *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975), reinforces the defining force of African American women poets during this period as much as any other, although questions have been raised about discrimination against women during the Black Arts Movement. With the full-blown emergence of performance poetry, hip-hop, spoken word, rap, and poetry slams, we see performance and orality reach a pinnacle of importance in the 1980s, and become organically reconnected to the genre.

This era may reflect the drama and power of the Black Arts Movement, but it also contains great diversity. In addition to creating poems during this period that are some of the centerpieces of the African American poetry canon, Hayden achieved two political milestones by winning the grand prize at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar (1966) and being named the first African American Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (1976). This period still afforded relatively few publication and review opportunities in mainstream venues for African American poets. According to Melba Joyce Boyd's calculations, "From 1945 to 1965, only thirty-five poetry books by African Americans were published in the United States, and only nine of those were published by presses with national distribution."<sup>30</sup> For lack of other options, Hayden's

<sup>30</sup> Melba Joyce Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 21.

first full-length collection was published in Breman's Heritage Series of Black Poetry, which was founded to publish Hayden. Dudley Randall (1914–2000), the US distributor of Heritage Press, was able to publish a collection of his own love poems, *Love You* (1971) with the Heritage Series rather than with his own more militant Broadside Press. Other publishing opportunities and venues, though limited, did exist. Jones/Baraka's resounding *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* was published in 1961 by Eli and Ted Wilentz's Beat-oriented Corinth Books. Ishmael Reed (born in 1938), Audre Lorde (1934–92), and Clarence Major (born in 1936) are examples of three African American poets during this era who exhibited sustained ingenuity, originality, and a nuanced approach to individual literary artistry and dissemination of their work during a time of perceived ideological dogmatism.

The lives, literary production, and influence of many poets in this tradition spanned several eras. For example, the aesthetic sensibilities of poets born around the time of World War I were heavily influenced by the New Negro Renaissance. The momentous project of Breman's Heritage Series provides a helpful case in point by demonstrating the hidden links between these two high profile generations. The series includes a number of poets who are worthy of far greater attention, including Atkins, Lloyd Addison (1931–2014), Fenton Johnson (1888–1958), Conrad Kent Rivers (1933–68), Ray Durem (1915–63), Calvin C. Hernton (1932–2001), Allen Polite (1932–93, whose personal papers were donated by his widow to Special Collections in the University of Connecticut Library), Cuney (1906–76), Ellease Southerland/Ebele Oseye (born in 1943), and others. The Press also exemplifies the international framework for African American poetry, which provided a more welcome environment than within America. Breman's project demonstrates the international dialogue that continues to be a prominent theme, partly as a result of the massive representation of African American soldiers serving in World War II. As disenfranchisement and alienation reached boiling points – in delicate tension with pressures to assimilate and accommodate – the anthemic poetry of Durem and Raymond Patterson (1929–2001) shows how the tone was set for the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. We also encounter two particularly important female voices during this era in Margaret Walker (1915–98) and Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000), and experience a perhaps unprecedented expansion of formal variety, from prose poems to sonnets to late modernist innovations signaling the coming explosion of postmodern experimentalism. In addition to the Black Arts Movement

as the aesthetic wing – so perceived – of the Black Power Movement, key issues of that era include the relationships of both of those movements to the Civil Rights Movement, other literary/artistic organizations including Umbra, Free Lance, and Dasein, and themes of American nationalism/self-empowerment and Pan-African internationalism, separatism, and diasporic consciousness. Little magazines and presses – many black-owned – rose to special prominence during this era, notably the literary magazines of HBCUs, and journals such as *Negro Digest/Black World*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Phylon*, *Umbra*, and *Black Dialogue*, along with the advent of four noteworthy black-oriented presses – Broadside, Third World, Heritage, and Lotus – to create an ever-expanding readership for African American poetry that continues to grow in the period covered by Chapter 5.

The book's final chapter addresses the contemporary period from the last decades of the twentieth century to the first two decades of the twenty-first. To demonstrate their inextricable links and parallels, this chapter examines the aftermath of the dialogue between the two most iconic periods of the African American poetry tradition, which are too often artificially separated. With Nielsen, in his brilliant and pathbreaking book, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism*, I situate a shift following World War II that marks a movement into a different – a postmodern – era, which does not necessitate drawing a rigid temporal or even stylistic boundary. It is an avant-garde motive and result that I am ascribing to the marginalized poets in this volume. As Chapter 5 discusses in detail, experimental poetry and African American poetry are often viewed as unrelated phenomena. Anthony Reed, Nielsen, Timothy Yu, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Shockley are among those critics who represent a new wave of interest in correlating innovative or experimental poetry with race, when it is true that lineages of experimental poetry have historically overlooked poets of color. When Nielsen published *Black Chant* in 1997, it was a novel perspective that a black author might use related forms of resistant, disruptive, oppositional, or “anti-absorptive” practices, to use the terminology of Charles Bernstein, as white authors.<sup>31</sup> Such an idea is no longer a novelty, in part because of Nielsen's body of critical writing, but there has still been slow progress in recognizing that an unimpeded range of creative freedoms is available to all poets regardless of their race.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Charles Bernstein, *Artifice of Absorption* (Philadelphia: Singing Horse Press, 1987).

The challenges of rationalizing possibilities of canon formation and periodization for African American poetry parallel that of modern and postmodern studies in mainstream Anglo-American literature, which has tended to center on the creative ferment inaugurating the twentieth century and the critical explosion in its final decades. Efforts at periodization have been stymied by how to categorize the century's middle decades, and even whether it has produced much work of value relative to the extended era in which it was produced. The gap in scholarly attention is perplexing since this tumultuous era encompasses a second world war and political events with lasting consequences. One recent solution within the academy has been to discuss the long twentieth century by shifting to an economic model to recalibrate measurements of aesthetic and cultural value. The same dilemma applies to mid-century African American poetry, which makes it important to counteract impressions that little of value was produced in mid-century.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, we see a continued increase in presses specializing in black literature, and new receptivity to publishing black poets in non-race-based forums. There is further growth of African American poetry in an international, diasporic, and postmodern framework. Reflecting curricular changes in American universities that now stress the value of ethnic, minority, and multicultural studies, there has been a wave of reconsideration and re-envisioning of American literature with increased recognition for the experiences, viewpoints, and expressions of various groups of minority and underrepresented poets. Poetry often is acknowledged to be on the margins of literature, and minority poetry – including African American – has been particularly, and deliberately in some corners, neglected. As the voice of correction and critique, African American poetry historically has been an especially marginalized genre.

Since the 1970s, African American postmodernism has reflected trends of neo-realism, verbal jazz improvisation, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry-inspired textual innovation, visual and conceptual poetics, hip-hop-inflected lyrics, sound environments and experiments, conceptual and multi-media projects, documentary poetics, music and poetry explorations, and an extraordinary expansion and extension of four centuries of prior creativity. There have been many artistic advances in this body of writing since the 1980s that pay tribute to and move forward the features discussed in the first four chapters of this book. By the contemporary period, we clearly see the very wholeness and continuity that Henderson asked to be noticed and honored. Progress does not indicate loss of

memory. Instead, as we see African American poetry become increasingly influential nationally and internationally, a resounding case is made that this genre has fully articulated its own identity as a body of writing with distinctive features that remain engrained in consciousness of their origins, which they have the capacity to evolve meaningfully. Critical race theory grows in relevance in the context of a contemporary environment of racial mixing and claims of post-racialism, and in conjunction with pressing issues of American nationalism, ownership, migration, and identity. This book offers brief summaries of the existing canon but proposes a new alternative by placing special emphasis on the threads that have continued from the start of the tradition. Chief among these are a history of African American poetry as social and political action, the integral connection of innovation to tradition, stylistic and thematic diversity which have expanded and flourished with unprecedented variety since the closing years of the twentieth century, the massive recent growth of a racially diverse readership, changes to higher education that require sensitivity and exposure to ethnic studies, and all indications that these trends will continue. This body of writing is special and unique, while at the same time, it has played an integral role in the American and Anglophone literary and cultural tradition, though its contribution often is not fully recognized. It is a cohesive body of literature with its own tradition, worthy of study for its own value, and indispensable to any vision of American identity, literature, and culture.

This is an important moment to recognize the essential contribution of African American poetry to the Anglo-American literary canon. At this moment in time, HBCUs face unprecedented threats to their survival, African Americans face ongoing challenges to obtain equal treatment by law enforcement agencies, the prison-industrial complex has created what many consider to be a new system of enslavement, and issues of racial discrimination remain unresolved. As expected, African American poetry remains a potent venue to express outcry over these conditions with an increasing variety of platforms from the Internet to café settings. African American poetry has maintained its traditional role by articulating both individual and communal concerns, using music, language, and performance to convey resistance, and creating unity and self-determined expression. It also has expanded in a wide array of styles and forms. A constant in African American poetry has been a belief that art can produce social change and challenge the status quo. African American poetry holds an inextricable role in reflecting and defining the truth and totality of American experience, expression, and identity.