Chapter 3

# Celebrating African American Literary Achievements

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In this chapter I offer an introduction to the rich history and literary tradition of African Americans. As such, the chapter represents an attempt to meld together multiple historical and literary contexts with the literature of people of African descent in America. The more than 300 years of writings of African Americans reviewed in this chapter is by necessity selective. A complete review of all the literature written by people of African descent is beyond the scope of this chapter; the literature covered here is primarily fiction appropriate for students in grades 9–12. Therefore, other African American novels, which may well fit comfortably within the label *young adult* but are targeted for grades 6–8, are not included. Historically, the delineation between young adult and adult novels has not always been clear in teaching literature in schools. This is particularly true of the adult literature written by African Americans that is used in grades 9–12. I have selected what I believe to be the major writers and the most important works in each time period. My criteria for inclusion are works that are (a) historically relevant, (b) representative of a specific time period, (c) illustrative of the range of life circumstances and experiences of African Americans, (d) representative of unique cultural or linguistic use, and (e) appropriate for, and used in, grades 9–12.

This chapter is divided into seven chronological periods. A brief historical overview begins each chronological section. The historical overview, told from the perspective of African Americans within a general framework of U.S. history, is offered to help foster understanding and to contextualize the circumstances under which the literature was created. Moreover, the examination of the unique historical conditions in which African Americans lived helps to contextualize the literature produced during each time period and to illustrate the range and breadth of literature produced by African American writers throughout history. Additionally, the literature of each period is examined as it is reflected in the political, social, and cultural lives of the authors. Biographical information is interspersed when it lends a fuller understanding of the circumstances under which literary contributions were made and "within the context of the conditions of its production" (Smith, 1987, p. 5). Original works are used to illustrate the history, culture, language, and emotions of African Americans as expressed in their own time and in their own words.

An extensive review of African American young adult literature indicates that there was no literature written expressly for African American young adults until the 20th century. The roots of African American literature, however, began long ago in the villages of African people during the precolonial period, and this literature continues to influence the writings of African Americans today. This chapter begins by examining precolonial African roots of literature. Next, the earliest recorded writings of Africans brought to the shores of the "New World" are briefly reviewed. These early writings are followed by the literature of the antebellum period through the early 1900s. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Era, the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic Movement, and the New Renaissance Movement of the 1980s and 1990s complete the chapter.

## The Roots of African American Literature

Recent scholarly research by Bennett (1982) and Van Sertima (1976), among others, records the presence of Africans in the Western Hemisphere as early as 1210. Most historians, however, do not acknowledge the presence of Africans until their participation in the expeditions of Spanish, Portuguese, and French explorers in the early 1500s. It is

commonly believed that the vast majority of African indentured servants and, later, slaves were captured and brought to this country from the west coast of Africa. Franklin and Moss (1994) describe the precolonial region of Africa as existing from "the Mediterranean southward to the Gulf of Guinea and from the Atlantic eastward almost to the Nile, . . . the states of Ghana, Mali and Songhay, along with many lesser states" (p. 2). It is difficult to describe with any certainty the lives of Africans before their arrival in the "New World," as Africa, specifically precolonial West Africa, is a vast region. Although diverse languages and cultures existed among the various African nation states, there were some commonalties. Politically, groups were organized along the lines of limited monarchies with numerous advisors. This form of government offered considerable control. Contrary to popular media depictions of wild ungoverned savages, African people were peaceable folk who were governed by religion, rites, and laws.

The family served as the basic social organization. Extensions of the basic family unit included the clan (the allegiance to which was determined along matrilineal or patrilineal lines, depending on the specific clan) and the tribe. Family loyalty and ancestral worship were highly honored. Religions and religious practices included ancestral worship, magic, Islam, and in some northern areas of Africa, Christianity. However, on the whole Christianity was unknown in most of West Africa. Two important aspects of African religion were the prayers and songs used in worship.

The vastness of West Africa makes it difficult to pinpoint any one language as dominant; indeed, numerous spoken languages existed, but there were few written languages. The literature of West Africa during the precolonial period was predominantly oral in nature. The history and literature of the clan or tribe was as follows: "Handed down principally through the kinship group, the oral literature was composed of supernatural tales, moral tales, proverbs, epic poems, satires, love songs, funeral pieces, and comic tales" (Franklin & Moss, 1994, p. 23). Each kinship group had a griot (historian) whose express purpose was to preserve the memories of the tribe (history, law, and traditions). As Bell (1987) has observed, various forms of verbal art were used by Africans to "transmit knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals, and provide psycho-

logical release from the restrictions of society" (p. 16). Many of these verbal art forms were retained when Africans were relocated to the "New World" and can be found in African American literature. Franklin and Moss (1994) suggest the following:

> The literary activities of Africans were tied up closely with their everyday lives. Oral literature, made up of tales, proverbs, epics, histories and laws, served as an educational device, a source of amusement, and a guide for the administration of government and the conduct of religious ceremony. (p. 25)

Although there are few written examples of the literature of Africans during this time period, what does exist suggests that when literacy was accomplished, the result was comparable to literature written by people in other parts of the world.

## "New World" Literature: Early African American Writings

The history of the people of African descent on the shores of the colonies usually begins with the 1619 landing of African indentured servants in Virginia, brought by a Dutch frigate to the shores of the "New World." Historians estimate that more than half the Africans seized in their homeland did not complete the voyage across the Atlantic. The journey aross the Atlantic, known as the Middle Passage, required enduring inhumane treatment, unsanitary living conditions, restraints on hands and feet, near starvation, and an uncertain future in the hands of the captors. Many Africans either died of disease contracted on the slave ships or committed suicide by jumping overboard. Those who did survive the journey were quickly forced into unmerciful working conditions, either on the tobacco (and later sugar cane) plantations on the Caribbean islands or in the fields of the colonies.

Initially, African people were brought to the "New World" as indentured servants, like many European people. The early indentured servants could then work, earn, or purchase their freedom after completing several years of labor. In some instances, African servants who purchased their freedom became voting and landowning members of the colonies (Cowan & Maguire, 1994). Mixed marriages between Af-

rican and European servants and free people (as well as with Native people) were not uncommon. A sizable mulatto population, however, began to trouble the ruling class of European landowners (Franklin & Moss, 1994). This "problem" was dealt with by laws that required children to assume the birthright of their mothers; thus many mixed-race children—fathered by European or European American landowners—became servants like their mothers.

Along with other scholars interested in contextualizing the history of African American literature, I believe that it is important to acknowledge the circumstances of slavery to understand early African American literature. Barksdale and Kinnamon (1972) suggest that "slavery had the negative effect of divesting Africans of a substantial portion of their own culture," and "slavery by its very nature as an economic institution largely denied Blacks the opportunity and the occasion to create written literature" (p. 2). For example, slave codes were enacted and enforced in the Caribbean islands as early as 1694 to curb the liberties and freedoms of slaves. Soon thereafter, the colonies followed the slave-code patterns of the Caribbean islands and restricted the movement and liberties of slaves. Franklin and Moss (1994) argue that "the docility of slaves, about which masters boasted, was thus achieved through the enactment of a comprehensive code containing provisions for punishment designed to break even the most irascible blacks in the colony" (p. 58). Clearly, the transported Africans were undergoing two acculturative processes. First, they were becoming acculturated with Africans from various geographic and language groups. Second, Africans were attempting to understand and learn Western culture "and reinterpreting it with their own experience" (Franklin & Moss, 1994, p. 26). The result of this dual process was a unique set of customs rooted in African tradition in the colonies.

As Africans adjusted to their new lives in slavery, there was little opportunity to learn to read and write. African slaves had to first master the language of the oppressor before considering the notion of literacy. Slave owners were aware of the liberating effect of literacy acquisition. Therefore, while they insisted that African slaves learn and use English (or the language of the slave owner), they were less willing to have slaves acquire the skills of literacy. In fact, most colonies (and later states) adopted laws forbidding the teaching of reading and writing to slaves.

One of the unique responses to the acculturation process was the early writings of Africans in the colonies and England. The limited writings of several slaves suggest that their acquisition of literacy skills was an exception to the laws and customs of the land. Autobiographies and biographies of early authors indicate that the early authors lived atypical lives under slavery. Often taught to read and write through some fortuitous set of circumstances, the writings of African Americans clearly exhibit the language, style, and genres of their European masters, predominantly the English (Barksdale & Kinnamon, 1972, p. 2). The earliest recorded published writings of Africans in English reveal the conversion of Africans to Christianity, the strong influence of Christianity in their thinking, their ability to reconcile the contradiction of the Christian beliefs of their slaveholding masters and their position as slaves, and their hope for a better life in the hereafter.

Chronologically, the earliest recorded published writing by an African in the colonies is a poem composed by Lucy Terry (1746). Kidnapped as a child from her family and home in Africa and brought to the "New World," the young Lucy Terry learned to read and write. Terry's singular recorded work, "Bar Fight," details a scuffle between colonists and Native Americans. Another example of early writing is also a poem, "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ With Penitential Cries," by Jupiter Hammon (1761). Although little is known of him, it is believed that Hammon was born a slave and remained one throughout his life. His poem illustrates the tension that many African and African Americans experienced between the tenets of Christianity and the enslavement of people by Christians. Like so many African American authors that followed him, Jupiter Hammon was able to reconcile the contradiction by relying on salvation and a better afterlife. The idea of an afterlife is in accord with many beliefs in African religions.

The most celebrated and anthologized early African American writer is Phillis Wheatley. Wheatley, like Terry, began her life in Africa. She was captured as a child by slave traders in her native Senegal and brought to the colonies aboard a slave ship. Shortly after her arrival she learned to read and write in English, through informal tutoring sessions given by her master, John Wheatley. Her first published poem, "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield," was written when she was 14. After many unsuccessful attempts at publishing her

poetry in the colonies, the Wheatleys manumitted Phillis and sent her to London with their son to publish her writings. In England Phillis was free, for England had freed all slaves in 1772. Phillis's first book of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, by Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. Wheatley of Boston,* was published in 1773. Given the unusual privileges that Phillis experienced as a manumitted slave, her early writing did little to communicate the evils of slavery. Her poetry was obviously a product of its time, as it emphasized her position as a Christian more than her life as a slave. Her later writings represent a more mature person who is interested in politics and develops a growing sense of nationalism. Wheatley's accomplishments as a young author living under the bondage of slavery and writing in a foreign language cannot be disputed as a great achievement. The writings of Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley also helped to establish the dominant role that African American women would take as writers of African American literature.

## Literature Written in the Antebellum Period

The African American literature produced during the antebellum era began to focus more directly on the evils of the institution of slavery and the fate of African Americans who fled slavery for freedom. Slave narratives make up the bulk of the literature written during this period and include strong religious themes.[1] Many slave narratives were written to appeal to and encourage European Americans in the North to join in the antislavery movement. Fugitive slave narratives and first-person accounts of the horrors of slavery drew upon the life experiences of slaves and were instrumental in evoking public outcry for the abolition of slavery. The slave narrative evolved into a unique form of autobiography, one of the most important genres created by people of African descent. Henry Louis Gates (1987), an African American literary critic, argues that these early accounts of human bondage are "the very foundation upon which most subsequent Afro-American fictional and nonfiction narratives are based" (p. xii). Many early slave narratives were written by "house" Negroes, the mulattos, and the privileged slaves who witnessed the physical brutality of slavery while suffering from the psychological and physical pain of slavery.

Slave narratives have been recorded from as early as the 1700s to as late as 1944. Typically, slave narratives chronicle the life of a slave from the perspective of the victim, detailing kidnapping, transport, sale, acculturation, brutality, escape, and life after slavery. The slave narratives, of which more than 6,000 were written, appear to serve two distinct functions. First, slave narratives gave voice to the secrets and horrors of slavery as experienced by slaves of African descent, who were regarded as human merchandise. Until the publication of the slave narratives, slaves were without a voice or the protection of laws from any and all treatment, no matter how inhumane, that was bestowed upon them by their master, his wife, his surrogates, or his relatives. The slave narratives offered slaves an avenue by which to expose the daily physical, psychological, and sexual abuse that they were made to endure. Often purchased for their stature, size, and strength, the physical abuse of African American men was particularly brutal. Slave masters and overseers sought to break the spirit of the men by making them endure gruesome tortures. African American women were often purchased for the master's lusts. The sexual abuse of the African American female slave was given limited exposure in the writings of this period. Slave marriages were not allowed, and marriage between slave owner and slave was unsanctioned, as miscegenation was illegal in most states. The offspring of these unions—the mulattos, quadroons, and octoroons—were often treated more kindly than other slaves. In addition, African American female slaves endured much psychological abuse. As the victims of forced concubinage, the women were often promised the freedom of their children—a promise that was often broken. The wives of the landowners also harassed the mothers of the mixed-race children or had the mother and the children separated and sold. The opportunity to report these abuses, whether written by an amanuensis or a slave, was liberating.

Second, slave narratives were a means by which various abolitionist groups were able to share their support of fugitive slaves, denounce the unjust treatment of slaves with authentic accounts of the brutality experienced by the slaves, and reconcile their Christian self-worth by exposing the "peculiar institution" with firsthand accounts from those who had endured human bondage. Slave narratives were used to graphically detail the treatment of slaves and to compel Euro-

American Christians in the North to oppose the practice. The language and style of the narratives were strongly influenced by the writing conventions, language, and style of their European and Euro-American contemporaries. The writings of African American slaves, to varying degrees, reflected the ways of the European American masters and the growing sense of "Americanness."

One of the general characteristics of early slave narratives was the use of fictional geographical locations, names, or titles. Among these slave-narrative authors, there was always a need to remain anonymous, as the Fugitive Slave Laws (1789 and 1850) required the return of escaped slaves to their "owners." However, the later slave narratives named their owners and tormentors and supplied geographical information as a way of authenticating their stories. Early slave narratives did not reveal the means of escape or the routes to freedom. Again, the protection of the authors and of those who would come after them was of utmost concern. Themes in slave narratives include the challenge of a slave's humanity; his or her ability to forgive the oppressors; living in constant fear of sexual assault; daily life (working from 4:00 a.m. to after dark) under the watchful eye and temperamental care of overseers; and the pain of white men kidnapping children, separating families, and hunting, torturing, maiming, and killing slaves. Clearly, the slave narrative spoke for the millions of slaves who daily endured the brutality of the slave system and were illiterate and could not openly share accounts of their lives.

The first published slave narrative, written by Olaudah Equiano, was *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, Written by Himself.* The 400-page narrative was published first in London (1789) and later in the colonies (1791). It has recently been republished (1995). It is believed that Equiano's narrative, a vivid and compelling testimony of the horrors of human enslavement, inspired the abolition of America's sanctioned slave trade. Equiano describes the struggle between his longing to return to the land of his birth and the process of acculturation he underwent as a result of his enslavement. Of the early published slave narratives, Equiano's offers a moderate account of the life and fate of slaves under colonial rule, yet it serves to help readers understand the mistreatment of slaves and their daily experiences under the overseer.

While Equiano's work serves as a first among slave narratives, several other celebrated slave narratives were written early. The authors of these narratives are Briton Hamon, 1760; Frederick Douglass, 1845; William Wells Brown, 1847; James Pennington, 1849; Henry Box Brown, 1849; and Harriet Jacobs, 1861. Their works are among the most celebrated of the slave narratives; they were written by former slaves and authenticated by European Americans who knew the authors to be ex-slaves. For example, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, published in 1845, and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, published in 1861, are recognized as authentic and important contributions to American literature.

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, Douglass describes his birth as a slave on a Maryland plantation in 1818. His mother, Harriet Bailey, never revealed the identity of his father, although it was believed to have been the master of the plantation on which Douglass was born. Douglass's original version (1845), *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, was revised twice under the titles *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). Like the writers before and after him, Douglass wrote about many previously untold horrors of slavery. Although he was not the only slave to face inhumane treatment, his tale explicitly illustrates the never-ending torture and threats of life endured by slaves. His articulation of the treatment of African American male slaves exposes the regularity of the brutality of slavery. Douglass's narrative also portrays him as a man who would not allow himself to be broken by slavery. The humanity of the slaves in the face of inhumane treatment and the inability of slaveholders to break the spirit of the slaves are also consistent themes in slave narratives.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), is one of the few slave narratives written by an African American woman that was published. Jacobs describes the harrowing sexual harassment she endured for years in the home of Dr. Flint, where she was a house Negress. Jacobs' narrative was groundbreaking because it was one of the few written by an African American woman that detailed the sexual exploitation of slave women by slave owners. In addition, Jacobs' narrative illustrated how slave families were broken

up by slave owners and often at the request of their jealous wives. She also shared the heartbreak of watching one's children be forcibly snatched and given or sold into a life of human bondage at the whim of the owners. Jacobs' narrative offers the reader a glimpse of the courage and strength of the slave women who had to endure these hardships. Jacobs' narrative also articulates a very different view of the life of the "tragic" mulatto slave woman in contrast to the romanticized "slave" novels written by Euro-American women, who tended to sentimentalize the lives of mulattos, the constant fear of rape, and a life of concubinage.

It is important to note that Jacobs' narrative was written and published with the assistance of a European American abolitionist, Lydia M. Child. As editor, Child was careful to steer Jacobs' narrative so that it would appeal to an audience of Euro-American women in the North. Thus, Jacobs used a style that was popular for fiction in the late 1800s and that was meant to elicit sympathy from its readers. Nevertheless, Jacobs tells her story with great passion, for she had escaped the emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual bondage of slavery. The authenticity of her story has been painstakingly researched and the narrative republished as edited by Jean Fagan Yellin (1987).

Ironically, all slave narratives had to be authenticated by Whites in order to prove their truthfulness. Letters of authentication had to be included with each narrative, since the readers of slave narratives were often European American sympathizers in the North. Abolitionists used the slave narratives to garner support for the antislavery movement. However, not all slave narratives were written by African Americans. Since most slaves were illiterate, many would-be African American slave authors had to rely on Euro-American editors to record their life stories. In the hands of the editor, the life story became fodder from which the editors selectively recorded the slaves' firsthand accounts. Euro-American editors seldom recorded everything dictated by the slaves, especially incidents of miscegenation and sexual exploitation, in an effort to appeal to a Northern, Euro-American, Christian, antislavery audience. Editors freely interspersed abolitionist rhetoric throughout the material. Even more disconcerting than the edited versions of slave narratives were the Euro-American impostors. Two examples were written by European Americans posing as slave authors: Richard Hildreth's *The Slave; or, Memories of Archy Moore*

(1836) and the alleged testimonies recorded in Theodore Dwight Weld's *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839). Publishers were concerned about printing the works of impostors, so they often sought verification of the authenticity of slave narratives. The verification came in the form of letters of support written by White abolitionists and African American free men.

Slave narratives were not the only form of literature written by African Americans during this period. Other forms of writings included letters, speeches, autobiographies of free African Americans or manumitted slaves, newspaper and journal articles, songs, poems, essays, and confessions of criminals. Very few novels were actually written during the antebellum period. Two works of fiction, however, were forerunners of later attempts to capture African American life experiences in prose. First, William Wells Brown's novel, *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853), was first published in London. Brown declares that his novel is fiction based on fact. The most salient, though still disputed, fact is that President Thomas Jefferson fathered children by one of his female slaves, Sally Hemings. The second work of fiction was Harriet Wilson's novel, *Our Nig: Or, Sketches From the Life of a Free Black* (1859). Wilson's novel was the first to be published by an African American in the United States and the first to be written by an African American woman. In fact, the novel was printed for Wilson rather than "published" by a commercial press. The customary tale is that Wilson had the novel printed to raise income for her destitute family. From all scholarly accounts, it appears that Wilson's fictional tale is a semiautobiographical portrayal of the life of a slave girl and the lives of all who "own" her. The story of servitude and the emotional, psychological, and physical abuse at the hands of several of her "owners" is followed by the equally depressing events of a failed marriage, abandonment, ill health, the birth of a son, and poverty. The events of the novel closely parallel those of Wilson's own life, as can be seen from the closing pages of the novel.

## Literature of the Late 1800s and Early 1900s

The Civil War brought with it a renewed attempt by African Americans to learn to read and write and to express their ideas in written

form. There seem to have been numerous opportunities to learn the skills of literacy in Union camps, but very few copies of the letters, articles, and short stories written by African Americans during this period have been recovered. In the years following the Civil War, the U.S. government sought to improve the education and literacy skills of African Americans. Under the direction of the Freedmen's Bureau, hundreds of schools, known as Freedmen's Schools, were established to educate African American children and adults. The Freedmen's Bureau, with the aid of the American Tract Society, developed specially designed curricula to improve the intellectual abilities of African Americans and acculturate African Americans into Euro-American middle-class values. In addition, the thrust for racial equality found that "the freedmen's educational movement represented a unique opportunity to disprove popular theories of racial inferiority and to prepare the former slaves for full citizenship" (Morris, 1981, p. x). The literature used to teach African Americans in the Freedmen's Schools was new or republished works written by Euro-Americans and published by the American Tract Society of Boston and New York. Special care was taken in the design and content of the materials to reflect the goals of the Bureau. For example, materials were written that would encourage readers to desire and value an education; to adopt Christian values of temperance, morality, and forgiveness; and to acquire the middle-class values of hard work, thrift, and self-improvement (Morris, 1981). The titles of the readers beyond the primary level are quite revealing of their content—for example, *Advice to Freedmen* by Isaac Brinckerhoff, *Friendly Counsels for Freedmen* by Jared Waterbury, *John Freeman and His Family* by Helen Brown, and *Plain Counsels for Freedmen* by Clinto Fisk.

Two publications of the Freedmen's books merit special mention. First, Lydia Maria Child edited volume 6 in the series, and in it she used short stories and biographies written by African Americans, a real break from previous editions. Second, one of the most interesting publications used in the Freedmen's Schools consisted of a newspaper written by an enterprising group of African American men. The newspaper, the *Freedmen's Torchlight*, was instructional for all age levels. Its stated goal was to offer instruction created by African Americans for African Americans. The *Freedmen's Torchlight* followed the style of other African American newspapers and journals by offering helpful hints, news articles, stories, and basic literacy lessons.

The African American church has always been a steady rock for African Americans in the tumultuous seas of life in America. During the post–Civil War years, it played a fundamental role in the lives of the freed men and women by supporting the spiritual, cultural, and literary character of their lives. Many of the African American churches owned their own presses and published materials written by African Americans. Church-related publications were concerned with educational and literary as well as religious matters.

The African American press was pivotal in communicating the concerns and issues most central to the African American community. The first African American newspaper was founded in 1827. Since that time the African American press has played an instrumental role in shaping public opinion and recording daily events and concerns in the African American community. A review of these papers offers an uncommon view into African American literary concerns and the accomplishments of African American writers. The editors of African American presses felt compelled to share the unfolding history of the experiences and lives of African Americans from their own perspective—a viewpoint that often contradicted the representation of the same events in the mainstream press. In general, African American newspapers promoted education and "social uplift." They also provided an important outlet for African American writers of fiction and poetry.

Through the efforts of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the New York City Library's Schomberg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers and Oxford University Press have republished several novels written at the close of the 19th century by African American women. This collection includes Amelia Johnson's two novels, *Clarence and Corinne, or God's Way* (1890) and *The Hazeley Family* (1894); Frances Harper's novel, *Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892); Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkin's two novels, *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1898) and *Megda* (1891); Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857); and Pauline Hopkins' two novels, which were serialized in *Colored American Magazine*, and *Contending Forces: A Romance of Negro Life North and South* (1900). According to Gates (1988), Hopkins' serialized novels appeared in magazines intended for the African American professional class. The characters in each of these novels appeared as "unraced" folks; that is, their racial identities are left to the reader

to determine. The female writers wrote in an effort to depict African Americans as "normal" people with desires, hopes, and dreams, but they were aware that the mainstream public was not willing to see African Americans in that light. Thus, they attempted to transcend race by making it a nonissue. For example, their descriptions of the physical qualities of the characters are purposefully left vague, allowing the reader to apply his or her race to the characters. In this way, the books became popular among all races; thus there appears to have been a consciousness in the authors of the buying power of the more prosperous Whites. As literary critic C. Christian (1988) notes in the introduction to the republished *The Hazeley Family*, the characters are "racially indeterminate, which in this country is generally translated as white" (p. xxvii). Like many novels written by women of this period, these novels and short stories center on home, the welfare of children, and Christian values, complete with happy endings that reward virtuous living.

Johnson's novel *Clarence and Corinne, or God's Way* (1890) is most often cited as appropriate for young adults. Many African American churches strongly encouraged its use and suggested that it become part of each church's library. It seems to have been favorably received; it is a story about children who are left destitute by an alcoholic father and an emotionally depressed mother, and it served as a literary example of the effects of alcoholism on the lives of children. Its timely publication articulated the growing national concern for better care of children, the personal and familial damage caused by alcoholism, and the sure reward that accompanies living by Christian values. The desire to instill mainstream middle-class morals and values into African American novels continued through the early years of the 20th century.

The early years of the 20th century evinced a wealth of literature written by and about African Americans. Several interwoven factors appear to have supported this change. First, there were increased educational opportunities during the post–Civil War years that improved the educational level and reading interests of the African American community. Even in the poverty-stricken rural South, African Americans sought educational opportunities, long denied to them in the schools established for them, through the benevolence of Northern churches, philanthropic organizations, and the willpower of African American families.

Second, the Great Migration, or mass exodus of African Americans from the rural agrarian lifestyle of the South, led to African Americans seeking a better life in America. The Great Migration began in 1916 and continued until shortly before the Depression in 1929. It was spurred economically by the boll weevil, floods, low sharecropping wages, agricultural mechanization, and soil exhaustion. It was spurred socially by the repressive Jim Crow laws and customs, as Southern Whites turned to more open and violent means to maintain White supremacy.

Third, there was a nearly insatiable interest in African American folklore by Euro-Americans in the North. The interest was generated by the publication of folktales, spirituals, and work songs of African Americans gathered by Euro-American workers of the North during Reconstruction. The characters of these published works were taken from the oral folktales of Stackalee, John Henry, "Buh Rabbit," Uncle Remus, Tar Baby, Shine, and the Signifying Monkey, among others. The origins of many of these tales, and the way in which they were related, can be traced back to the African oral tradition. The tales often portrayed the desire for freedom, the need to defend oneself, and the use of wisdom to escape from the master (Mullane, 1993). Like their African predecessors, African American folktales were often told to explain natural phenomena, to remember community and familial histories and culture, to educate, and to entertain. Most African American folktales, spirituals, and work songs had not been written down or published, and Euro-American collectors of the North were eager to publish them for Northern audiences.

Finally, there was an increase in the amount of degrading racial stereotyping of African Americans in the literature produced by European Americans. The stereotypes included, but were not limited to, the happy shuffling Negro; the fat, unattractive mammy; the tragic mulatto; the backward, immoral, and primitive Negro; the "aunties" and "uncles"; and the Jezebels and Sapphires. Yet the stereotyping found in literature was only a mirror image of the stereotyping experienced daily by African Americans as they sought employment, education, and entertainment opportunities in a racially divided country. Then, as now, African American writers spoke out strongly against the use of stereotyping in both fiction and nonfiction, attempting to supplant myths, distortions, and misinformation with more factual

and representative information. Numerous works published by African Americans in the early decades of the 20th century reflect the opposition they encountered in every walk of life. Perhaps no other work captures the pulse of African American life under the oppressive status of second-class citizens as eloquently as W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). In this collection of essays, Du Bois offers an introspective look at the experiences of African Americans. He became a spokesman for African Americans of every economic level but especially for an emerging African American intelligentsia. As editor of *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), which was founded in 1910, DuBois also helped to launch the literary careers of many young African American authors. He was not alone in his desire to improve the lot of African Americans. Booker T. Washington, another African American leader, also sought to improve life in America for African Americans through self-improvement, economic opportunities, and social separation. His autobiography, *Up From Slavery: The Autobiography of Booker T. Washington* (1901), was an instant best seller, especially among Euro-Americans, who enjoyed his American success story and welcomed its inspirational, nonaccusatory tone.

One of the few works of literature from this period written by an African American that is used in high schools is James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. This novel was originally published anonymously in 1912 and republished under Johnson's name in 1927. The novel details the story of an African-American man who passes as White in order to participate in mainstream American life. The book has a well-conceived plot, interesting characters, and a realistic message. It was so realistic that many people believed it was an actual autobiography and not a work of fiction. Johnson was also a poet, essayist, critic, anthropologist, and lyricist. He wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which is commonly referred to as the African American national anthem.

## The Harlem Renaissance

Nearly half a million African Americans migrated from the South to northern and western states between 1916 and 1918. The Great Migration created large Negro communities outside the South, especially

in the industrial cities of the North, such as New York and Philadelphia. African Americans moved to the North in the hope of finding greater economic and educational opportunities. Many rural African Americans possessed few job skills and limited educational training, yet both were needed to secure gainful employment in the North. From the years immediately preceding World War I to those directly following its cessation, the United States was fraught with racial tensions between European and African Americans as everyone struggled to better themselves. African American soldiers faced a particularly perplexing time in adjusting to life in the United States upon returning from the war. Unlike many White soldiers, they were not greeted with welcoming parades, although they too had fought in foreign lands for the freedom of all Americans. When they returned "home," they found that they had very little freedom.

The period commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance began in 1915 and continued through 1945. The literature written by African Americans at this time is full of racial pride. Collectively, this body of literature eloquently expresses the feelings and desires of African Americans as they struggled to find a place in American society. Most of the writings point to education as a goal and encourage its readers to "social uplift." A review of the writings also suggests a renewed sense of appreciation for the uniqueness of African American folk ways and literature that had been long abandoned for mainstream, middle-class values. African American writers began to incorporate their knowledge and understanding of African American folklore and folk ways into their writings, which reflected both the African roots of literacy and the African American experience (Mullane, 1993). Ann Petry's historical fiction depiction of the Salem witch trials in *Tituba of Salem Village* (1948), serves as an example.

Folk culture is evident in many writings of African Americans during this period, from the poetry of Langston Hughes to the novels of Zora Neale Hurston. Authors sought to capture a range of African American life, from the rhythm of Harlem to the sweltering heat of the South to the beat of the Caribbean islands. The dialect and pulse of African American people took shape in literature. The literature produced by the young writers of the Harlem Renaissance did not always bode well with more established African American writers. The older writers feared that White Americans would find confirma-

tion of racial stereotypes in the literature produced by the young breed of writers, which vividly portrayed the seedier side of African American life in Harlem. The young writers, however, were defiant and viewed the Harlem Renaissance as a time to express their growing self-awareness, emerging voices, and racial pride with youthful enthusiasm. The younger authors did not seek the approval of Euro-American critics, nor did they adhere to their standards. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance is often anthologized in secondary school textbooks, although the selections that are used often reflect adult literature and not the literature written for younger readers.

An example of a publication aimed at young readers is Elizabeth Ross Haynes's *Unsung Heroes* (1921). Her book was a renewal and continuation of a long tradition in African American literature of emphasizing the lives of very accomplished African Americans as examples to future generations. Clearly, the message in such works is that African Americans can make it in the United States despite racism. This book includes biographies of such heroes as Frederick Douglass, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Booker T. Washington, Sojourner Truth, and Toussiant L'Ouverture. In addition, the book includes biographies of some unsung heroes: Alexandre Dumas, Paul Cuffe, Josiah Henson, and John Mercer Langston.

During this period, W. E. B. Du Bois teamed up with the accomplished literary editor, Redmond Fauset, to edit and publish *Opportunity* (1919) and *The Brownies Book* (1920–1922). *Opportunity* was a literary magazine that showcased the talents of aspiring young African American authors, and *The Brownies Book* was a literary magazine for children and young adults. *Opportunity* became an important outlet for many talented writers during the Harlem Renaissance, for it nurtured and published the early writings of young authors. One of the most popular African American publications of the 1920s was *The Brownies Book*, which was created for African American children ages 6 to 16. The editors referred to them as "Children of the Sun." The magazine expressed the views and hopes of racial pride from the perspective of its well-educated publication staff—W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, and Augustus Dill. According to the authors, a major goal of the magazine was to "seek to teach Universal Love and Brotherhood for all little folk—black and brown and yellow and white." Other goals included "making colored children realize that being colored is a natu-

ral beautiful thing, to make them familiar with the history and achievements of the Negro race; to make them know that other colored children have grown into beautiful, useful and famous persons" (D. Johnson, 1990, p. 15). The editors stressed racial pride, the history and achievements of African Americans, and words of advice and encouragement. The magazine included stories, games, poems, letters from children and parents, biographies of famous African Americans, reports on international cultures, photographs and artwork of African American artists, and accomplishments of African American young people from all over the country.

While there was a proliferation of published works by African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance, very few books were written for young adults. Some of the major authors of the period were Countee Cullen, Nella Larson, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer. Several works by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps were written for children and young adults and their writings dominated the African American children and young adult market. Their writings include poems, folklore, and novels. Bontemps' career began as a poet in 1924 and expanded to include other genres over the next 50 years. His early novels, *Black Thunder* (1936) and *Drums at Dusk* (1939), helped to establish him as an important author of the Harlem Renaissance. His later two novels are a fictional account of the Gabriel Posser slave rebellion in Virginia in 1800 and the Haitian slave rebellion of 1791–1804, respectively. Bontemps was among the first African American authors to write with the young adult in mind. Bontemps also edited several books for young people, including *Golden Slippers: An Anthology of Negro Poetry for Young Readers* (1941). Hughes and Bontemps combined to edit *Book of Negro Folklore* (1958) and *Great Slave Narratives* (1969).

Arna Bontemp's *We Have Tomorrow* (1945) is an important work that encourages young African Americans not to forsake their dreams, regardless of the obstacles. Using the biographies of African American men and women in the early stages of their careers, Bontemps presents the stories of 12 pioneers. He stresses that they are fulfilling their dreams as Americans, not African Americans, yet they realize that they are blazing trails not traveled by African Americans before. The careers of the biographies include cartoonist, milliner, sociologist, nurse, book publisher, sports star, and pilot. Another of

Bontemps's works for young people was *The Story of the Negro* (1948), an easy-to-read narrative history that chronicles the life of Africans from their kidnapping and enslavement on the shores of the "New World" to policies enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Langston Hughes's writings, covering more than three decades, include fiction, drama, history, biography, autobiography, translations, and books for children. He published his first major poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in *The Crisis* in 1921. In 1926 he published his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, in which he articulates the richness of African American folk culture, blues, and jazz. Hughes became known as the Poet Laureate of Harlem for his many works of poetry. However, beginning in 1930 his work focused on protesting social and political injustice. As an author of more than 50 books, Hughes wrote in a wide variety of genres, including two autobiographies, *The Big Sea* (1940) and *I Wonder as I Wander* (1957). Perhaps his most endearing works, certainly suitable for young adults, are his Jesse B. Semple (Simple) stories: *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950), *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953), and the *Best of Simple* (1961). Originally the character Jesse B. Semple in a newspaper column written by Hughes, Semple came to represent the Negro everyman in American society. In simple honest speech and dialect, Semple used wisdom and common sense to share his insight on the affairs of the country and the world. The Simple books were widely read and enjoyed by African Americans.

The works of Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston have also come to represent the writing of the period for secondary school readers. The works of these writers, though not initially intended for young adults, are now included in many high school literature anthologies and book selections. For example, in the waning years of the Harlem Renaissance, the focus of African American writers turned from racial pride to racial protest after two World Wars and the Great Depression had brought little change in the lives of, and opportunities for, African Americans. The writings of Richard Wright, among others, illustrates the frustration of the second-class-citizen status of African Americans during the postwar period. Wright drew upon his own background in a poverty-stricken, poorly educated, dysfunctional family from the rural South. He fled the injustices of the South and his unfortunate circumstances for Chicago, where he joined the Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration. He won acclaim for his

book, *Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas* (1938), stories that depict racial conflict and physical violence. His most powerful novel, however, was *Native Son* (1940), later followed by *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945). Wright's *Native Son* traces the life of Bigger Thomas, a 20-year-old rebellious African American man shaped and hardened by his life on the South Side of Chicago in the 1930s. As he understands his choices in life, he is either to submit to the oppression of Whites or commit some act of violence that will ultimately land him in jail. From the opening pages of the novel, the reader comes to understand Bigger's sense of despair and resentment as well as his internal demons and environmental realities. He is beset by problems of poverty, racism, and a family that appears to be submissive to a hostile White environment. An obvious theme of the novel is Bigger's sense of fear. He is often portrayed as overwhelmed and fearful of the White world. The novel shares Bigger's innermost thoughts as he unwittingly murders his landlord's daughter and later his girlfriend, in whom he has confided. The remainder of the novel shares Bigger's growing sense of a conscious identity and his eventual trial and failed appeal. The novel ends as Bigger is on death row awaiting execution. Much controversy has surrounded the characters in the novel as stereotypical, from the image of Bigger as a "nigger" to the image of Whites as cold, uncaring, and hostile.

Wright's autobiographical work, *Black Boy*, was actually the first installment of a longer work, *American Hunger*; however, the objections of the publishers caused only the first half of the manuscript to be published. The novel is Wright's story of growing up in the racially divided, hate-filled South (Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee) during the early 1900s. The autobiography, which reads like a novel, describes Wright's struggle to find meaning and a sense of self under the oppressive domination of Southern Whites and an unyielding yet dysfunctional family that insists on unthinking obedience. The inability to control any facet of his life was too much for Wright to bear. He wrote, "Because I had no power to make things happen outside of me in the objective world, I made things happen within." Throughout the novel, at home, at school, or at one of his many jobs, Wright fights for his individualism and self-esteem as he elegantly describes the racial, emotional, and psychological oppression endured by African Americans. One constant message to Wright from the onset of the book

is to be silent. As a result, Wright fought to be heard all his life. Now, many years after his death, his work lives on, and his voice continues to be heard.

Like Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston's artistry and giftedness as a writer has only been acknowledged long after her death. Hurston published seven novels between 1931 and 1943: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Tell My Horse* (1938), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (1942), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). She also has more than 70 other written works. The most widely read and praised of her writings is the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston was an anthropologist, a folklorist, and a novelist, and she incorporates each talent in her story of Janie and her loves—Logan, Joe, and Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. Her anthropological training is apparent in her ability to capture the dialect and folk ways of her characters. As a folklorist she weaves a tale of love, humor, mystery, and suspense. The story begins as Janie tells her friend Phoeby how her third husband died during a hurricane, and how she comes to understand the real meaning of the love she has searched for all her life. Hurston often mixes fact with fiction. For example, Eatonville, Florida (her birthplace), is an entirely African American community founded by Joe Starks, Janie's second husband. When first published, the novel was condemned for its use of dialect and an alleged lack of message or theme. However, this novel, along with several other works by Hurston, have been republished and praised in the 1990s for some of the very same reasons that they were criticized in earlier times: the ability to capture the dialect and folk ways of Southern rural African Americans and the universal themes of self-love and the strength of womankind.

During the Harlem Renaissance, the African American press continued to be an important source of information and print media for the African American community. Newspapers, periodicals, and magazines shared the lives of African Americans, their triumphs, accomplishments, and plight. As African American men and women fought on foreign lands for freedoms they were denied at home, the U.S. government, in an effort to officially recognize the African American presence in the armed services, appointed Ted Poston to the position of racial advisor to the Office of War Information. Poston, a seasoned

newspaperman, lent his special talents to coverage of African Americans during the war years. He also wrote short stories, and through the efforts of Kathleen Hauke they have been published in a collection entitled *The Dark Side of Hopkinsville* (1991). The collection includes 10 delightfully funny stories of growing up in the African American community of Hopkinsville, Tennessee, as told by Ted Poston. Poston's stories center on his family and its standing in the African American community as well as on other members of the community. He creates several lifelike characters who engage in the kind of shenanigans, adventures, and community rousing found in many small towns.

Despite Poston's lighthearted appeal, life for African Americans in the United States was still fraught with racial and economic discrimination. By midcentury the struggle for equality had arrived at the doors of the federal courts and would not be denied, as African Americans sought to desegregate schools and reverse the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision (1896), or the "separate but equal" standard. The efforts for equal rights were fought for by both European and African Americans, and they faced fierce resistance. *Brown v. Topeka* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act (1957, 1960), authorized the federal government to force the desegregation of schools and other public facilities. However, the federal government moved slowly to enforce the laws, and African Americans grew impatient for the freedoms that had been denied to them ever since their ancestors' arrival centuries before.

## Literature of the Civil Rights Era

Following the fruitful and productive period of the Harlem Renaissance, publications by African American writers declined dramatically. The already sparse literature written for African American young adults dwindled to almost nothing after 1945. Most notable are Gwendolyn Brooks' books of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), *Annie Allen* (1949), and *The Bean Eaters* (1960), and her novel, *Maude Martha* (1953); James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952) and *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961); Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952); and Paule Marshall's *Brownstones, Brown Girls* (1959).

Gwendolyn Brooks became one of the first African American poets to win the Pulitzer Prize and has led a prolific literary career for more than 50 years. She continues to write and to read from and lec-

ture on her writings today. From the onset, her poetry revealed her commitment to family, community, and race in its descriptions of African American life in the urban cities of the North. Brooks' ability to emulate the sounds and rhythm of African American life can be read in her works, as can her ability to share, in few words, the sights, tastes, and feel of African American life. For example, her novel, *Maude Martha*, is an episodic story of the life of a young African American female from childhood through womanhood. Maude, the main character, is plain-looking, shy, and studious and very unlike her attractive sister Helen, to whom she constantly compares herself. Maude expresses disappointment in her lack of beauty, defined by a White standard that she realizes she will never reach. What appears to be a recurring theme of insecurity is actually a deeper notion of inner strength that Maude has developed over the years. In spite of the oppression and poverty around her and a husband who is self-absorbed and inattentive to her needs, Maude preserves her dignity. Readers come to appreciate her qualities of resistance, hope, and self-love. During the long gray days of her dismal life, she is able to hope for a brighter tomorrow and to see the beauty in her community, her life, and herself. Perhaps Brooks' greatest triumph in this novel is her ability to share the life of the ordinary African American woman, a real departure from earlier novels that have relied on the lives of tragic mulattos, destitute wayward women, or large, nurturing, asexual mammies.

Several novels depict the complexity of the lives of young adults during this period. For example, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952) is an autobiographical first novel. The narrative was an outlet for the psychological wounds inflicted on Baldwin by his stepfather. As a mirror of his life, the story is about John Grimes, a sensitive 14-year-old boy living under the religious rigidity of a mentally ill stepfather. John, like most teenagers, is in search of himself and his place in the world. The novel attempts to explain John's passage from childhood to manhood. Through a series of flashbacks, readers come to understand the history of the Grimes family through the life stories of Gabriel, Florence, and Elizabeth Grimes. Baldwin's personal relationship with religion, as a teenager preacher at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly, is clear as he references biblical passages and uses biblical allusions throughout the novel.

One of the most anthologized works from this period is Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). In this play, Hansberry described the lives of the Younger family and their desire to take hold of the American dream. Another example of coming-of-age and family struggle is found in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). Marshall, the daughter of Barbadian immigrants, also wrote a collection of stories, *Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961), and a second novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969). Her first novel is a coming-of-age story about Selina Boyce, a teenage girl living in Brooklyn, whose parents are immigrants from Barbados. Selina must deal with her cultural island roots, coming-of-age, her parents' disintegrating marriage, and racial conflict. Much of the novel portrays Selina's love and admiration for her easygoing, idealistic father, who inherits money and wishes to return home to Barbados, and her disdain for her mother's strong-willed determination to purchase a house in the United States. In the end, Selina realizes that she is more like her mother, a relationship that is healed as Selina embarks on her own search for self as she returns to her Caribbean roots.

During this period, African American writers joined others in protesting the barriers to entering mainstream American life. As African Americans became more vocal in their demands for equal rights, African American authors also became more vocal as they produced social protest literature. Writers on the political front eloquently expressed the rising discontent of African Americans with the status quo. Typical of these writings were Baldwin's *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963). The 1960s found many African Americans revolting against racial injustice and discrimination by using various forms of nonviolent protest, including sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, and voter registration. Martin Luther King, Jr., exposed the depth of racial hatred and discrimination, as dramatized nightly in media coverage of demonstrators marching and being repelled by water hoses or gas. King's *Letter From Birmingham Jail* (1963) helped to stir national support for the Civil Rights Movement. King calls for a peaceful solution to racial discrimination in the nation, in his "I have a dream" address and his prophetic "I've been to the mountaintop" speech; both are important readings from this period. In addition, Malcolm X, with Alex Haley, published the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1964. This work captures the life of Malcolm and of-

fers readers a broader understanding of the goals of this African American leader than the radical, violent, sterotypical image publicized by the national media.

## Literature of the Black Arts/ Black Aesthetic Movement

In contrast to King's nonviolent stance, the Black Power Movement began in 1966 as some African Americans grew tired of the snail's pace by which the federal government and the nonviolent forms of protest moved, as well as in response to the Watts race riots of 1965. The Black Panther Party came to symbolize and articulate Black nationalism and revolution. Many African Americans turned their thoughts to their African roots and sought to better understand their African heritage. It was during this period that Kwanza was established by a professor of African American studies, Dr. Maulana Karenga, chairman of the Black Studies Department at the University of California. During Kwanza (December 26 through January 1), people celebrate African American culture and community with feasts, storytelling, and symbolic activities. It was also popular during this period to adopt African names, dress, and cultural ways. The natural hairstyle worn by many African Americans was a sign of pride in their African heritage and a sign of protest of Euro-American culture and notions of beauty.

Black nationalist groups demanded control of schools in the African American community and sought to introduce courses that focused on African and African American history, language, thought, and literature. The Black Arts Movement, a sister movement to the Black Power Movement, fought for liberation through art, music, drama, and literature (see the writings of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Don Lee/Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonya Sanchez, among others). The writers of the Black Arts Movement sought to redefine the standards of African American literature; known as the Black Aesthetic Movement, it centered on constructing an African American set of standards by which to evaluate African American writings. The rise of African American female authors was also a result of this movement. The works of African American poets Sonya Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni are a testament to the power of the movement.

If 1920–1960 was a sparse period for African American young adult literature, 1960–1980 more than compensated for it. By the 1960s and 1970s, African Americans had become a visible and vital part of urban life as Euro-Americans fled the cities for the suburbs. In the United States, the rebellious 1960s and early 1970s was a time of open expression of resistance to authority and sexual repression, drug use, and individual freedom. The nation was in the midst of a most unpopular war; it was fought on the battlefields of Vietnam, and resistance to it was fought on college campuses, on city streets, and in government meetings. The media was pivotal in its coverage of the war and the national protests. Every night the war was televised, along with the names of all the soldiers reported missing or dead. The nightly scroll of Americans losing their lives helped to spread despair about the future among young people. Many African Americans managed to maintain their strong religious beliefs, folklore, and sense of community and began to write. For the first time in history a proliferation of young adult African American literature appeared. The literature can be divided into three categories: realistic fiction, historical fiction, and science fiction.

The realistic fiction written during this period dealt with coming-of-age as experienced by teenagers of African descent in urban centers. Collectively, much of the literature reflects life in urban centers, including many of the problems that come from living in poverty. Among the first published writers of young adult literature during this period was Kristen Hunter. Hunter's writings, like those to follow (e.g., Sharon Bell Mathis and Alice Childress) articulate a conscious effort to instill racial pride, affirm cultural beauty, and acknowledge community among African Americans. Their stories are told within and as a part of the communities in which the characters live. There are no excuses or attempts to sanitize the lives of the characters. For example, in Hunter's young adult novel, *Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1976), Hunter describes how 14-year-old Louretta Hawkins begins to understand herself and her world through her involvement in a neighborhood musical group. The story is upbeat and at times unrealistic, yet entertaining. By way of contrast, Sharon Bell Mathis depicts some of the harsh realities experienced by children living in urban ghettos and struggling with poverty in her novels *Listen for the Fig Tree* (1974) and *A Teacup Full of Roses* (1972). Mathis's work is like

another young adult fiction writer, Alice Childress; they both seek to realistically depict the lives of those living in poverty.

Childress was raised by her grandmother, who insisted that she record her thoughts, and her ability to be reflective resonates in the independence of her characters. In an interview about her work, Childress (1956) states, "I write about characters without condescension, without making them into an image which some may deem more useful, inspirational, profitable, or suitable" (p. xii). Childress further argues that it is important to offer a more humane picture of America's underclass, one that is not used as "source material for derogatory humor and/or condescending clinical, social analysis" (p. xii). Her work describes many forms of destruction in the lives of her characters (self, relationships, families, institutions, and society) while challenging the prevailing images of Black characters. She creates vivid, lifelike characters with striking images and careful words. In her book, *Conversations With a Domestic*, Childress created a female counterpart to Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Semple in Mildred, an "ordinary" African American female domestic worker. Childress's 62 stories of Mildred describe how she sees and interacts with the White world with philosophical insight and humor. Mildred was brave and wise enough to speak out against the exploitive working conditions that many African American female domestic workers faced daily in their efforts to care for their families. Several short stories in the collection have been published in high school literature anthologies, most notably "The Pocketbook Game" and "The Healthcard."

Other features of Childress's writings include her straightforward approach to controversial topics and her use of an omniscient point of view. In her first young adult novel, *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich* (1973), the main character is a 13-year-old drug addict named Benjie. Childress helps the reader to understand Benjie by using alternating chapters that show how others in his life view him and his problem. Everyone appears to want Benjie to enter and complete a treatment program; however, as the book ends the reader is not sure of Benjie's decision. In her more recent young adult novels, *Rainbow Jordan* (1981) and *Those Other People* (1989), Childress continues to tackle uncharted areas in young adult literature. Two examples illustrate Childress's willingness to attack contemporary issues such as dysfunctional and changing family relationships, homosexuality, AIDS,

and interracial dating. Her novel *Rainbow Jordan* is dedicated to children who are being raised by someone other than their biological parents. Rainbow, the main character, is a physically and emotionally abused teenage girl living in a single-parent home with an adult who is not gainfully employed—not your typical main character but reflective of the life of some children. In *Those Other People* Childress focuses on teenage homosexuality. The novel centers on the life of a gay teenager who hasn't revealed his sexual preference to his parents. Structurally, these two novels follow Childress's pattern of alternating between the points of view of various characters and sharing the innermost thoughts of the main character. *Those Other People* is also unique in that it describes the difficulties endured by a Euro-American gay male teenager—a departure from Childress's previous works, which have focused solely on the relationships in African American families and communities.

Historical fiction also became a very popular genre during this period for writers of African American literature for young adults. One popular writer of historical fiction is Julius Lester, a prolific writer who has been a constant contributor to the body of young adult literature for nearly three decades. His first book for young adults, *To Be a Slave* (1968), a Newberry Honor Book, was the first book written by an African American to receive that award. In 1972 he was a National Book Award finalist for *Long Journey Home: Stories From Black History*.

Lester's early writings reflect his scholarship and interest in African American history and narrative. For example, *To Be a Slave* is a significant book that records the language, rhythm, and voices of former African American slaves. By using transcriptions of interviews, Lester allows former slaves to speak for themselves about the inhumane treatment they endured. The interviews are written in narrative form and collectively become a story of what it was like to be an African American slave. Lester also includes reprints of published slave narratives, which were written to help encourage support for the antislavery movement. Another example of Lester's work in historical fiction is his second award-winning book, *Long Journey Home*. It includes six short stories based on real-life events with some poetic license. The stories describe the lives and experiences of "ordinary people" doing the extraordinary. Lester (1972) states that "these stories comprise the essence of black history, . . . as individuals who em-

bodied in their lives and actions the ethos of their times, and for that reason stand out above the mass" (p. xi).

A decade later, Lester accomplished a similar feat with his book, *This Strange New Feeling* (1982). Again, he retells three historically documented stories of events in the lives of African Americans during slavery. This book is a collection of romantic stories of African Americans. In the first story, based on an account published in *The Anglo African Magazine* (Vol. 1, No. 10, 1859), Lester used historical documents to tell the love story of William and Ellen Craft. He was inspired to collect and publish these stories after his own chance encounter with their great-granddaughter. *This Strange New Feeling* is unique in that tells both sides of slavery, from the viewpoint of the owners and their perceived needs as well as from the viewpoint of the slaves. For the Crafts, freedom comes in the love that is shared between them and in the ability to live as human beings in the United States. This collection of stories differs radically from the Euro-American depictions of love between African American slaves. The collection helps to dispel the myths that are perpetrated in Euro-American novels of the uncontrollable sexual desires and emotional immaturity of African American slaves. Furthermore, this book explores and illustrates the depths of the romantic love, controlled passion, respect, and commitment of African American couples. Lester describes the tender love and affection that oppressed people displayed despite the fact that their conditions denied them the many pleasures and comforts of life. Finally, Lester's mastery of the genre is seen in his beautifully written novel, *Do Lord Remember Me* (1984), which is poetic in its use of word pictures that capture the rhythm and song of the language and the folk ways of African Americans. Following is a short passage that illustrates the richness of the language:

> Charles, I been knowing you since before you knowed yourself. I knowed your daddy be'ore you was a twinkle in his eye, and I remeber ol' Trembel, your granddaddy, too. Didn't think too highly of him, though. He knew that when old folks started off reciting you family history, they hadn't come to pass the time of day. (p. 13)

Lester was not the only African American author to gain popular support for his work in historical fiction during this period. The works of

two African American female authors, Mildred Taylor and Virginia Hamilton, are legendary. Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) offered a fresh look at the strength, devotion, and courage of the African American family in her description of the adventures of the Logan family during the Depression in rural Mississippi. Taylor has written two sequels about the Logan family, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981) and *The Road to Memphis* (1990). All three books are popular choices of teachers and African American young adults.

The works of Virginia Hamilton represent some of the best African American young adult writing available. An award-winning author, Hamilton is beginning her third decade of writing books for children and young adults. Her many awards include being the first author of children's literature to receive the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship and the first African American woman to receive the Newberry Medal (for *M. C. Higgins the Great*, 1974). She also has received Newberry Honor Book awards, the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Nonfiction, American Library Association Notable Book awards, and American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults awards, among others. Her works center on the lives of African Americans in the United States and includes historical and realistic fiction. She challenges readers to understand the past, as in *The House of Dries Drear* (1968), and to accept the present, as in *Cousins* (1990). She also writes about the struggles of biracial girls and their coming-of-age in *Arilla Sun Down* (1976), a powerful story of a mixed-race African American and Native American girl, and *Plain City* (1993), the story of a mixed-race African American and Euro-American girl seeking to understand her past.

The third genre which African American authors entered during this period is science fiction. Octavia Butler's creative and unique blend of historical fiction and science fiction offered another means of telling our stories. Butler's *Pattern Master* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), and *Kindred* (1979) are exemplary of her creative melding as she address historical struggles of race, gender, and power.

Finally, several other novels from this time period have been used in high school literature classes and have caused concern over the suitability of the works for high school students. These include *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) by Toni Morrison, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

(1971) by Ernest Gaines, and *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) by Alex Haley.

## African American Literature in the 1980s and 1990s

The 1980s and 1990s have been labeled the Second Renaissance of African American literature. Several interwoven factors have contributed to the recognition of the importance of writing and publishing more African American literature, but none has been as influential as the Afrocentrism Movement. The movement began as a response to the demand to include African American history and literature courses in colleges and high schools. In some areas of the country, it has progressed to the point of establishing separate Afrocentric schools in several large cities. Another important factor has been the debate over the place of multicultural literature in the curriculum. The canonical literature taught in high schools has come under attack for its European male-dominated offerings, to the near exclusion of works by people of color and by women. While there has been a renewed interest in African American literature on the whole and a special emphasis on sharing the "classics" in African American literature, its place in the high school curriculum is still uncertain. Finally, the Second Renaissance of African American literature has been "created out of an African American consciousness and experience" (D. Johnson, 1990, p. 81) that does not attempt to compete with or mimic Euro-American experiences.

Today, young adult literature has been positively affected by the greater number and variety of published works that target African American young adults. Themes of African Americanness pervade new novels, prompting D. Johnson (1990) to describe this phenomenon as "telling the stories of Black people as Black people—not the stories of a few representative African Americans depicted in white worlds. In this way, a broader and 'truer,' more inclusive mural of African Americans begins to unfold" (p. 52). Contemporary literature depicts a range of African American life, from urban centers to suburbs to rural settings, that is more representative of life in America for African Americans.

The young adult literature of the Second Renaissance includes republished slave narratives with introductory scholarly essays; for example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s, 1983 reprint of Harriet Wilson's, *Our Nig: Or, Sketches From the Life of a Free Black*; Jean Yellin's 1987 reprint of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; Robert Allison's 1995 reprint of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*; and Nell Painters' *Soujourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (1996). Fictional works of this period can be seen as extensions of an earlier interest in family lineage and generational sagas—for example, *Mama Day* (1988) by Gloria Naylor—and fictional slave narratives—for example, Sherley Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986).

Autobiographies and biographies remain popular genres for African American writers. Publications during this period include the republished Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery: The Autobiography of Booker T. Washington* (1993); memories of those who took part in the Civil Rights Movement, such as Septima Clark's *Ready From Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Brown, 1986); Yvonne Thornton's *The Ditchdigger's Daughters* (1996), and Melba Pattlio Beals' *Warriors Don't Cry* (1994); memories of strong supportive African American families and communities, such as *Betsey Brown* (1985) by Ntozake Shange and *When We Were Colored* (1995) by Clifton L. Taulbert; and those that deal with social issues like divorce, such as *Sweet Summer: Growing Up With and Without My Dad* (1989) by Bebe Moore Campbell.

Julius Lester's autobiographical *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (1988) reveals how he has come to understand himself better since his discovery of his mixed racial and religious heritage. In addition, Lester returns to writing historical fiction in his moving novel, *And All Our Wounds Forgiven* (1994).

Contemporary young adult literature focuses on several recurring themes: parental conflict, intergenerational problems, culture, substance use, sexual encounters, and peer pressure. There has been a bountiful crop of literature published during this period, some of which takes a fresh look at African American life. For example, J. Thomas captures the intimate role of religion in the lives, culture, and history of African Americans in her characters in *Marked by Fire* (1982), *Bright Shadow* (1983), and *When the Nightingale Sings* (1992). In the novel

*Marked by Fire*, Thomas emphasizes the role of the Church in helping to solidify community and form identity, themes often missing in much of the young adult literature. Moreover, Thomas articulates a deep understanding of the love and support that are natural and often unspoken aspects of the richness of African American community life. For example, *Marked by Fire* details the life of Abyssinia Jackson, from the events preceding her birth until her teen years, in a small African American community in the rural Oklahoma town of Ponca City with an insider's heart, soul, ear, and eye for detail. In this novel and in all of Thomas's novels, she includes fathers and father figures; an often unstated concern in young adult fiction is the representation of males in African American families. The use of fathers and father figures has varied from saints to demonlike men, as authors and readers struggle to relate the pressures and constraints upon African American men in the roles of father, brother, relative, and friend. Thomas's writings hint to a recent trend in young adult literature that attempts to understand the psychological as well as societal constraints under which African American men must learn to function and survive in the United States. Thomas's novels encapsulate many of these current trends, as they center around cultural and religious aspects of African American community life. Each of Thomas's novels allows young adults to see themselves and their cultural and religious customs as normal and acceptable by highlighting their importance in our daily lives.

The young adult literature of the 1990s reflects the changing nature of life in America for African Americans. Novels now focus on the social challenges of teenage unemployment, school violence, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual harassment, and HIV infection and AIDS. Several recurrent themes in modern young adult literature include self-identity, conflicts with parents, peer pressure, and the role of African American history in shaping the lives of the characters. Impressively, there are more novels that depict a range of African American experiences, from upper and middle class to rural to urban poor; there are more novels that represented ranges in family composition and relationships; and there are more novels that openly address issues long thought taboo for young adults.

## Summary

The history of African American young adult literature is intimately tied to the history of Africa and African American culture, language, and folk ways. African American literature began shortly after African slaves were brought to this country. Early literature resembled the literature of Euro-Americans in style and content; as African Americans became acculturated, they began to venture into their own unique forms of literature, such as slave narratives. The literature by African Americans has survived in spite of limited opportunities to acquire literacy, publish works, and receive recognition for their writing. The literature of the Harlem Renassiance reflected the growth of literacy opportunities for African Americans and an interest in our lives and writing. The publication of literature especially designed to appeal to young adults can be seen in the growing number of publications during this period. Interest in African American young adult literature increased slowly over the years, culminating in a watershed of materials during the Black Arts Movement. Today, there is a plethora of publications aimed at this audience.

Ironically, the literature used in secondary schools seldom incorporates the available young adult literature. As research in young adult literature attests (Applebee, 1989; Graff, 1992), much of the current literature used in secondary classrooms today was considered adult literature in the past. The African American literature typically used in secondary schools is more adult in nature than much of what has been reviewed here. Missing from this review are the writings of several African American authors who have tremendous appeal to young adults: Rosa Guy (*The Friends, Ruby, The Ups and Downs of Carl Davis III*, and *The Music of Summer*); Rita Garcia Williams (*Blue Tights*); and Walter Dean Myers (*Scorpions, Glory Field*). Their writings are not part of the curriculum. The absence of their work in this chapter is not because these authors' voices are unimportant but because their work has yet to enter the mainstream of young adult literature used in schools in grades 9–12.

More than two decades ago, Stanford & Amin (1978) observed that "the old convention of keeping all literature incorporating sex, other adult themes, and street language taboo until college, regardless of the facts of students' real lives, has given way to a tendency to see

adult reading as appropriate for high school students" (p. 6). The use of adult fiction in high school literature classes appears more prominent with the work of non–European American authors. The adult African American literature often used in secondary schools is far more complex, sophisticated, and graphic in nature than young adult literature. Educators, parents, and community groups have voiced their concern over a number of African American adult novels used in literature classes at the secondary level, including *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, *Middle Passage* (1990) by Charles Johnson, and *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) by Terri McMillian. These are all wonderfully written books, but they are not young adult literature. Clearly, there is an ample supply of African American young adult literature from which one can select that young people will find challenging and enjoyable.

## Notes

1. The slave narrative was not, however, the most influential form of literacy used by the abolitionists to support their cause. Speeches given by ex-slaves were often used to compel audiences to action. Barksdale and Kinnamon (1972) reveal that "not only did Black autobiographers, polemicists, and poets exercise their pens against slavery, but Black abolitionist lecturers ventured across the North carrying the message of freedom to town, hamlet, and cabin. Oratory, it should be remembered, was a major literary form in nineteenth-century America. . . . The best Black oratory still retains considerable emotive power in printed form." (p. 61)
2. Dianne Johnson (1996), with the assistance of Oxford University Press, has edited and republished selections under the title *The Best of the Brownies' Book.*

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