


The Norton Anthology of
**AFRICAN AMERICAN
LITERATURE**

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR. *and*
NELLIE Y. MCKAY, *General Editors*



SECOND
EDITION



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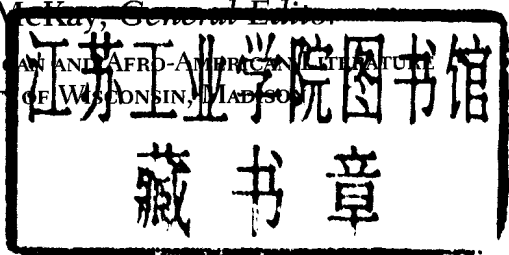
SECOND EDITION

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Preface to the Second Edition

In the fall of 1986, eleven scholars gathered on the campus of Cornell University to discuss the need for a *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* and to consider how best to execute the mammoth task of editing such a historic anthology, should we collectively decide to embark upon it. These scholars, chosen for their leadership in the field, represented a wide array of methodological approaches to the study of literature; each had a particular expertise in at least one historical period in the African American literary tradition. We were accompanied in our deliberations by M. H. Abrams, the “father” of Norton Anthologies, and John Benedict, vice president and editor at Norton, both of whom had championed our project during its two-year gestation period from proposal to approval.

Two things struck us all, we think it fair to say, about our discussions. First was a certain sense of history-in-the-making, in which we were participating by the act of editing this anthology. While anthologies of African American literature had been published at least since 1845, ours would be the first Norton Anthology, and Norton—along with just a few other publishers—had become synonymous to our generation with canon formation. Because of its scope and size, a Norton Anthology could serve as “a course in a book,” as John Benedict was fond of saying. So, in spite of the existence of dozens of anthologies of black literature—a tradition of which we were keenly aware since we had closely studied the tables of contents and editorial introductions of each of these and photocopied and bound them for each of our prospective editors—none was ample enough to include between two covers the range of the texts necessary to satisfy the requirements of an entire survey course. To meet this need was our goal.

This was crucial if we were going to make the canon of African American literature as readily accessible to teachers and students as were, say, the canons of American or English literature. Too often, we had heard colleagues complain that they *would* teach African American literature “if only the texts were available” in a form affordable to their students, meaning in a one- or two-volume anthology, rather than in a half dozen or more individual volumes. Were we successful in our endeavor, we believed, then not only could teachers teach African American literature, but they would do so eagerly, and new courses would be created in four- and two-year institutions and at the high school level. A well-edited, affordable anthology democratizes access. And broader access was essential for the permanent institutionalization of the black literary tradition within departments of English, American Studies, and African American Studies.

The second surprise of our Ithaca meeting was how “un-theoretical” the process of editing would be. Many of us were deeply engaged in the passionate theoretical debates that would define “the canon wars,” as they came to be called. It soon became apparent to us that editing an anthology is not

primarily a process concerned with *theorizing* canon formation; rather, it is about *forming* a canon itself. If we were successful, we would be canon-makers, not canon-breakers. Our theories about the canon, no matter how intricately woven, were not as important as the actual practice of agreeing upon the periodization of African American literature published (principally in English) in England and the United States between 1746 and the present and then selecting the signal texts in the tradition that comprise its canon.

Ironically, we were embarking upon a process of canon formation precisely when many of our poststructuralist colleagues were questioning the value of a canon itself. Our argument was that the scholars of our literary tradition needed first to *construct* a canon before it could be deconstructed! And while the scores of anthologies of African American literature published since 1845 had each, in a way, made claims to canon formation, few, if any, had been widely embraced in the college curriculum. And that process of adoption for use in college courses is a necessary aspect of canon formation.

So, setting aside our individual passions for theorizing, we collectively got down to the nuts and bolts of editorial policymaking, addressing fundamental questions such as how many pages to devote to each period, where those periods should start and stop, and what principles of selection would lead us to the gathering of works that were essential both in the formation of our tradition and to its teaching and explication. Though readily available elsewhere, certain core texts, such as Frederick Douglass's 1845 slave narrative, we agreed, must be included, since our goal was to respond to our Norton editor's challenge to produce "a course in a book." Our task, then, was not primarily to bring lost or obscure texts back into print; rather, it was to make available in one representative anthology the major texts in the tradition and to construct a canon inductively, text by text, period by period, rather than deductively—that is, rather than through *a priori* ideological or thematic principles agreed upon in advance, which would function like a straitjacket for our selections. Further, through carefully edited introductions and headnotes, we wanted to help students see how these texts "speak to," or signify upon, each other, just as they had "spoken" to each other across time, space, and genre, as authors read and revised each other's representations of the experiences, feelings, and beliefs of persons of African descent pondering the ironies of being at once black, American, and human. We wanted the anthology to give full voice to the key tropes and topoi that repeat—are echoed and riffed and signified upon—so strikingly across the African American literary tradition, thereby allowing formal linkages to be foregrounded in the classroom. Most importantly, we agreed that each period editor would have the final say about the texts selected for her or his period. A full decade would follow our organizational meeting in Ithaca, but in 1997, the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* was born.

To our surprise, the anthology was widely reviewed in both trade and academic publications, commencing with a major feature in *The New York Times*. Perhaps even more surprising, the trade edition was purchased in great numbers by nonacademics, often members of the growing African American reading public, hungry for texts about themselves. Within the academy, 1,275 colleges and universities worldwide have adopted the anthology since publication in 1997. The first anthology to allow the oral tradition to "speak" for itself through the music and spoken-word performances on

the Audio Companion CD, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* has proved popular with students and a helpful teaching tool to instructors. This innovation, now imitated by others, enabled us to make an important statement about the crucial role of the vernacular in shaping our written tradition.

The Second Edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* has benefited from a wealth of suggestions from instructors and students using the book in the classroom. It includes the work of 123 writers, representing African American vernacular literature, poetry, drama, short fiction, the novel, slave narratives, essays, memoir, and autobiography. In keeping with the practical goal of offering "a course in a book," we have included the following longer texts in their entirety: Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa*; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*; James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*; Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*; Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground"; Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha*; Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*; Amiri Baraka, *Dutchman*; Ed Bullins, *Goin' a Buffalo: A Tragifantasy*; Adrienne Kennedy, *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White*; and August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Likewise, we continue to make available, where possible, texts that we believe represent the origins of a genre: among these "firsts" are Lucy Terry's only poem, "Bars Fight" (1746), the earliest known poem by an African American; Victor Séjour's "The Mulatto," the earliest short story by an African American (published in Paris in 1837), here published for the first time in English; and selections from the first African American novel, William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853). We have also tried to select texts that most fully reflect the technical and rhetorical development of the various genres over time.

The Second Edition includes a wealth of new selections. Responding to instructors' requests, "The Literature of Slavery and Freedom, 1746–1865" introduces four important early voices: Jupiter Hammon, Venture Smith, Martin R. Delany, and Elizabeth Keckley. To "Literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance, 1865–1919" have been added journal entries by Charles W. Chesnutt and Pauline E. Hopkins's short story "Talma Gordon." Now included in its entirety, Nella Larsen's compelling novel *Quicksand* has been added to "Harlem Renaissance," along with new selections by Sterling A. Brown and by Langston Hughes, who is much enriched by the addition of fourteen poems. "Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, 1940–1960" now includes Chester B. Himes's story "To What Red Hell," Robert Hayden's poem "Those Winter Sundays," a trio of teachable nonfiction writings by Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin's much-taught "Going to Meet the Man." Retitled and reperiodized, "The Black Arts Era, 1960–1975" provides a broadened conception of that dynamic era; these shifts are discussed in the new period-introduction section "Expanding the Black Arts Movement." Six writers—Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, June Jordan, Michael Harper, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Cade Bambara—now appear in this period, which includes new selections from the works of Lorde, Jordan, and Bambara, as well as Nikki Giovanni.

With this Second Edition, Cheryl A. Wall, Rutgers University, succeeds our colleague Barbara Christian as the editor of "Literature since 1975."

Sadly, Professor Christian, a brilliant scholar and editor and a pioneering figure in African American women's literary studies, died in 2000. We dedicate this Second Edition to Barbara's memory. Keeping pace with the contemporary scene, five new authors have been added to the section—fiction writers Gayl Jones, Caryl Phillips, Edwidge Danticat, and Colson Whitehead and poet Harryette Mullen—and works by several others have been reselected, notably the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson, newly represented with *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. The revised period introduction pays fresh attention to the historical roots of contemporary writing in the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, its renaissance—both commercial and critical—in the 1980s and 1990s, and its trends and innovations at the start of the new century.

Finally, we have dramatically expanded our selections of oral literature, music, and the spoken words of authors themselves. Building on our conviction that vernacular expression lives in performance (not merely on the page), with the Second Edition the original Audio Companion CD has been expanded to a two-CD set: Disc 1, *Music*, includes vocal and instrumental pieces—with newly added recordings by Billie Holiday, Martha and the Vandellas, and Aretha Franklin, among others. Disc 2, *Spoken Word*, offers speeches, readings, and performances, ranging from a rare sermon parody by turn-of-the-century comedian Bert Williams to Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka and Rita Dove. In addition, "The Vernacular Tradition" has been strengthened by three new print sections—"Rhythm and Blues," "Hip Hop," and "Songs of Social Change"—as well as Robert G. O'Meally's excellent liner notes, now included as an appendix in the anthology for easier reference.

Editorial Procedures

In each literary period, the anthology presents the writers in the order of their birth dates and the works of each writer in the order of their publication. Thus, the anthology's organization facilitates a chronological approach to African American authors as well as generic or thematic approaches. Each editor has been responsible for defining the canonical writings of his or her period and for writing introductory essays, headnotes, and footnotes reflecting the best available scholarship. As in other Norton anthologies, period introductions and author headnotes are meant to be self-sufficient, thereby minimizing the student's need for supplementary biographical, political, or cultural material. After each work, we cite (when known) the date of composition on the left, and the date of first publication on the right. Annotations gloss words that have special meanings in the black vernacular. When a work has been excerpted, "From" appears before the title; the omissions are indicated in the text by three asterisks; and, when necessary, summaries of deleted material are provided. The Selected Bibliographies for each period and author have been updated, and an entirely new and extensive Selected General Bibliography now opens the bibliographic materials. The timeline, included as an appendix, has been enlarged and updated. For instructors, the course guide to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Second Edition, by Joycelyn K. Moody, University of Washington, offers a

wealth of thematic approaches to teaching with the anthology, including discussion topics, research projects, and bibliographic references for each author, as well as a special section on teaching vernacular works. A copy can be obtained on request to the publisher.

Producing and revising this anthology has been a truly collaborative effort. The project has moved forward with the help of hundreds of colleagues in the field, who evaluated its general merits, made early recommendations for individual selections, and later proposed refinements and expansions based on their and their students' classroom experience. The editors are deeply indebted to these teachers. A list of Acknowledgments names advisors who prepared detailed critiques of the selections and responded to the extensive user survey that helped us shape the Second Edition.

The editors would like to thank M. H. Abrams and the late John Benedict for believing in this project and supporting it from its inception, as did Donald Lamm, then chairman of W. W. Norton & Company. The late Barry Wade eagerly accepted editorship upon the untimely death of John Benedict. Julia Reidhead, our third and current inhouse editor, not only has been a tireless advocate of this project but also has displayed a dazzling attention to detail. Without her support, this project would not have been realized. We also give special thanks to Marian Johnson, whose skillful and tactful development work has greatly enhanced this book. We thank too Candace Levy, manuscript editor; Diane O'Connor, production manager; Erin Dye, coordinator of the audio CD; Joanne Kendall, assistant extraordinaire; and Katrina Washington and Nancy Rodwan, permissions experts.

We have attempted to reconstruct the African American literary heritage, at the turn of the twenty-first century, without pretending to completeness. Limitations of space and prohibitions on copyright have prevented us from including several authors whose texts are important to the canon and whose level of excellence warrants inclusion here. Despite these limitations, we believe that we have represented justly the African American literary tradition by reprinting many of its most historically important and aesthetically sophisticated works. The authors of these works (whose birth dates range from 1730 to 1969) have made the text of Western letters speak in voices and timbres resonant, resplendent, and variously "black." Taken together, they form a literary tradition in which African American authors collectively affirm that the will to power is the will to write and to testify eloquently in aesthetic forms never far removed from the language of music and the rhythmic resonance of the spoken word.

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Introduction

Talking Books

The lesson to be drawn from this cursory glance at what I may call the past, present and future of our Race Literature apart from its value as first beginnings, not only to us as a people but literature in general, is that unless earnest and systematic effort be made to procure and preserve for transmission to our successors, the records, books and various publications already produced by us, not only will the sturdy pioneers who paved the way and laid the foundation for our Race Literature be robbed of their just due, but an irretrievable wrong will be inflicted upon the generations that shall come after us

—VICTORIA EARLE MATTHEWS, 1895

In the history of the world's great literatures, few traditions have origins as curious as that created by African slaves and ex-slaves writing in the English language in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. In the stubbornly durable history of human slavery, it was only the black slaves in England and the United States who created a genre of literature that, at once, testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge to be free and literate, to embrace the European Enlightenment's dream of reason and the American Enlightenment's dream of civil liberty, wedded together gloriously in a great republic of letters.

For what could be more peculiar to the institution of human slavery than liberal learning, than "the arts and sciences," as the French philosophes put it? Slavery, as Lucius C. Matlock argued in 1845 in a review of Frederick Douglass's now classic *Narrative of the Life*, "naturally and necessarily" is "the enemy of literature." Despite that antagonistic relation, Matlock continued, slavery had by the middle of the nineteenth century "become the prolific theme of much that is profound in argument, sublime in poetry, and thrilling in narrative." What's more, he concluded with as much astonishment as satisfaction, "the soil of slavery itself"—and the demands for its abolition—had turned out to be an ironically fertile ground for the creation of a new literature, a literature indicting oppression, a literature created by the oppressed: "From the soil of slavery itself have sprung forth some of the most brilliant productions, whose logical levers will ultimately upheave and overthrow the system." It will be from "the pen of self-emancipated slaves," Matlock predicted, that "startling incidents authenticated, far excelling fiction in their touching pathos," will "secure the execrations of all good men and become a monument more enduring than marble, in testimony strong as sacred wit. . . ."

African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American bellettristic tradition. To say that

they did so against the greatest odds does not begin to suggest the heroic proportions that the task of registering a black voice in printed letters entailed. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, the author of the first full-length black autobiography, *A narrative of the most remarkable particulars in the life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince* (1770), and the source of the genre of the slave narrative, accounted for this animosity, as well as the slave's anxiety before it, in the trope of the talking book:

[My Master] used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and then I saw him read. I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master had done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes that it would say something to me; but I was sorry, and greatly disappointed, when I found that it would not speak. This thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despised me because I was black.

The text of Western letters refused to speak to the person of African descent; paradoxically, we read about that refusal in a text created by that very person of African descent. In a very real sense, the Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write. With Gronniosaw's *An African Prince*, a distinctively "African" voice registered its presence in the republic of letters; it was a text that both talked "black," and, through its unrelenting indictment of the institution of slavery, talked back.

Making the text "speak" in the full range of timbres that the African enslaved in England and America brought to the process of writing became the dominant urge of the ex-slave authors. So compelling did Gronniosaw's trope of the talking book prove to be that, between 1770 and 1815, no fewer than five authors of slave narratives used the same metaphor as a crucial scene of instruction to dramatize the author's own road to literacy, initially, and to authorship, ultimately. John Marrant in 1785, Cugoana in 1787, Equiano in 1789, and John Jea in 1815—all modified Gronniosaw's figure of the talking book as the signal structural element of their autobiographical narratives, thereby providing the formal links of repetition and revision that, in part, define any literary tradition. So related, in theme and structure, were these texts that by 1790 Gronniosaw's Dublin publisher also included John Marrant's *Narrative* on his list and advertised its sale on Gronniosaw's endpapers.

Still, the resistance even to the idea that an African could create literature was surprisingly resilient. As early as 1680, Morgan Godwyn, the self-described "Negro and Indian's Advocate," had accounted for the resistance in this way.

[a] disingenuous and unmanly *Position* had been formed; and privately (*as it were in the dark*) handed to and again, which is this, That the

Negro's though in their Figure they carry some resemblances of manhood, yet are indeed no men . . . the consideration of the shape and figure of our Negro's Bodies, their Limbs and members; their Voice and Countenance, in all things according with other mens; together with their *Risibility* and *Discourse* (man's *peculiar* Faculties) should be sufficient Conviction. How should they otherwise be capable of Trades, and other no less manly employments; as also of *Reading* and *Writing*, or show so much Discretion in management of Business; . . . but wherein (we know) that many of our People are *deficient*, were they not truly Men?

Godwyn's account of the claims that Africans were not human beings and his use of the possession of reason and its manifestations through "Reading and Writing" to refute these claims were widely debated during the Enlightenment, generally at the African's expense.

The putative relation between literacy and the quest for freedom provided the subtext for this larger debate over the African's "place in nature," his or her place in the great chain of being. Following the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina, the largest uprising of slaves in the colonies before the American Revolution, legislators there enacted a draconian body of public laws, making two forms of literacy punishable by law: the mastery of letters, and the mastery of the drum. The law against literacy read as follows:

And *whereas* the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attending with great inconveniences; *Be it enacted*, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.

The law against the use of the talking drum was just as strong:

And for that as it is absolutely necessary to the safety of this Province, that all due care be taken to restrain the wanderings and meetings of negroes and other slaves, at all times, and more especially on Saturday nights, Sundays and other holidays, and their using and carrying wooden swords, and other mischievous and dangerous weapons, or using or keeping of drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes. . . . And whatsoever master, owner or overseer shall permit or suffer his or their negro or other slave or slaves, at any time hereafter, or beat drums, blow horns, or use any other loud instruments, or whosoever shall suffer and countenance any public meetings or seatings or strange negroes or slaves in their plantations, shall forfeit 10 current money, for every such offence.

In the Stono Rebellion, both forms of literacy—of English letters and of the black vernacular—had been pivotal to the slave's capacity to rebel.

Writing, many philosophers argued in the Enlightenment, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of "genius," the visible sign of reason itself. In this subordinate role, however, writing, although second-

ary to reason, was nevertheless the *medium* of reason's expression. We *know* reason by its representations. Such representations could assume spoken or written form. Eighteenth-century European writers privileged *writing*—in their writings about Africans, at least—as the principal measure of the Africans' humanity, their capacity for progress, their very place in the great chain of being. As the Scottish philosopher David Hume put it in a footnote to the second edition of his widely read essay "Of National Characters".

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient *Germans*, the present *Tartars*, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular.

Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are *negro* slaves dispersed all over *Europe*, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In *Jamaica* indeed they talk of one negro as a man of parts and learning [Francis Williams]; but 'tis likely he is admired for every slender accomplishment, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, responding to Hume's essay a decade later, had this to say.

The negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from the countries, although many of them have been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between these two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color. The religion of fetishes so wide-spread among them is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply into the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature. A bird feather, a cow horn, a conch shell, or any other common object, as soon as it becomes consecrated by a few words, is an object of veneration and of invocation in swearing oaths. The blacks are very vain but in the Negro's way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.

Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), echoed this discourse in his disparaging remarks about Phillis Wheatley's book of poems:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. Love is

the peculiar oestrus of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.

To test assertions such as these, various Europeans and Americans educated young black slaves along with their own children. "El negro Juan Latino," who published three books of poetry in Latin between 1573 and 1585, was one of the earliest examples of such an experiment, followed by Wilhelm Amo, Jacobus Capitein, and Francis Williams, in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. The first black person to publish a book of poetry in English, Phillis Wheatley, was also the subject of such an experiment. But whether Wheatley had the capacity to write, *herself*, poems of such accomplishment, was a matter of considerable controversy in Boston in 1773.

Let us imagine a scene. One bright morning in the spring of 1761, a young African girl walked demurely into the courthouse at Boston to undergo an oral examination, the results of which would determine the direction of her life and work. Perhaps she was shocked upon entering the appointed room. For there, gathered in a semicircle, sat eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens. Among them was John Erving, a prominent Boston merchant, the Reverend Charles Chauncey, pastor of the Tenth Congregational Church; and John Hancock, who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence. At the center of this group would have sat His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the colony, with Andrew Oliver, his lieutenant governor, close by his side.

Why had this august group been assembled? Why had it seen fit to summon this adolescent African woman, scarcely eighteen years old, before it? This group of "the most respectable characters in Boston," as it would later define itself, had assembled to question closely the African adolescent on the slender sheaf of poems that she claimed to have written by herself.

We can only speculate on the nature of the questions posed to the fledgling poet. Perhaps they asked her to identify and explain—for all to hear—exactly who were the Greek and Latin gods and poets alluded to so frequently in her work. Perhaps they asked her to conjugate a verb in Latin, or even to translate randomly selected passages from the Latin, which she and her master, John Wheatley, claimed that she "had made some progress in." Or perhaps they asked her to recite from memory key passages from the texts of John Milton and Alexander Pope, the two poets by whom the African seems to have been most directly influenced. We do not know.

We do know, however, that the African poet's responses were more than sufficient to prompt these eighteen august gentlemen to compose, sign, and publish a two-paragraph "Attestation," an open letter "To the Publick" that prefaces Phillis Wheatley's book, and which reads in part:

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

So important was this document in securing a publisher for Phillis Wheatley's poems that it forms the signal element in the prefatory matter printed in the opening pages of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, which was issued in London in the fall of 1773 because Boston printers remained skeptical about her authorship and refused to publish the book. Without the printed "Attestation," Phillis Wheatley's publisher claimed, few would have believed that an African could possibly have written poetry all by herself. As the eighteen put the matter clearly in their letter, "Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of PHILLIS."

This curious anecdote, surely one of the oddest oral examinations on record, is only a tiny part of a larger, and even more curious, episode in the Enlightenment. At least since the end of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African "species of men," as they most commonly put it, could ever create formal literature, could ever master "the arts and sciences." If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave, rightly relegated to a low place in the great chain of being, an ancient construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale ascending from plants, insects, and animals through human beings to the angels and God himself.

By 1750, the chain had become minutely calibrated, the human scale rose from "the lowliest Hottentot" (black South African) to "glorious Milton and Newton." If blacks could write and publish imaginative literature, then they could, in effect, take a few "giant steps" up the chain of being, in a pernicious metaphysical game of "Mother, May I?" For example, reviewers of Wheatley's book argued that the publication of her poems meant that the African was indeed a human being and should not be enslaved. Indeed, Wheatley herself was manumitted soon after her poems were published. That which was only implicit in Wheatley's case would become explicit fifty years later. George Moses Horton had, by the mid 1820s, gained a considerable reputation at Chapel Hill as the "slave-poet." His master printed full-page advertisements in northern newspapers soliciting subscriptions for a book of Horton's poems and promising to exchange the slave's freedom for a sufficient return on sales of the book. Writing, for these slaves, was not only an activity of mind, it was also a commodity that gained them access to their full humanity—Horton literally bought freedom with his poems.

Two centuries separate the publication of Phillis Wheatley's curious book of poems and Toni Morrison's reception of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Morrison's success is part of a larger phenomenon. African American literature has been enjoying a renaissance in quality and quantity for the past few decades, even vaster than the New Negro, or Harlem, Renaissance of the 1920s, spurred on to a significant extent since 1970 by the writings of African American women such as Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, Gloria Naylor, Jamaica Kincaid, and Terry McMillan, among a host of others. The number of literary prizes won by black authors in the last twenty years, including Pulitzer Prizes, National and American Book Awards, far exceeds the total number of such honors won by African Americans during the previous hundred years. And several times since 1990, as many as three or four black authors have appeared simultaneously on the

best-seller list of the *New York Times*. While the audience for this magnificent flowering of black literature crosses all racial boundaries, black readers have never been more numerous: in June 1996 the *Times* reported that African Americans purchase 160 million books a year.

This prominence in the marketplace has had its counterpart in the curriculum. Black literature courses have become a central part of the offerings in English departments and in departments of American studies, African American studies, and women's studies. Maya Angelou's appearance at President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993 (she was the first poet to read at an inauguration since Robert Frost did so for John F. Kennedy in 1961) and Rita Dove's unprecedented two-term appointment as Poet Laureate of the United States are further signs of the pervasive presence of African American literature in American society, just as the sustained popularity of rap poetry has revitalized a "Spoken Word" movement in cafés, the postmodern heir to poetry readings by Beats in the coffeehouses of the 1950s.

This broad acceptance of the authority of African American writing was, of course, not always the case. Leonard Deutsch, a professor of English at Marshall University, recalls the harsh resistance that greeted his request to write a Ph.D. dissertation on Ralph Ellison at Kent State University in 1970. When his prospectus was approved, a member of his thesis committee—a well-known Melville scholar—resigned in protest, arguing that

To write this dissertation is bad on two counts: for Len Deutsch himself, and subsequently for the university. A doctoral dissertation implies substance, weight (stuffiness often accompanying this), and spread, and not concentration upon the wings of a gnat. If it be concentration, the dissertation must by concentration bring together and sum-up worlds of thought and material—the dissertation as metonymy or synecdoche, which it generally is. One could, for instance, write about Hemingway, Faulkner, or Bellow (recently living or still kicking) because men like them have established a respectable and accepted corpus of work ranging sufficiently to call for comment.

Ellison's work, he concluded, was not of the stature to warrant being studied for a Ph.D. in English. Other stories of white professors and predominantly white institutions of higher education discouraging scholarly interests and careers in African American literature abound in contemporary academic folklore.

The resistance to the literary merits of black literature, as we have seen, has its origins in the Enlightenment and in the peculiar institution of slavery. The social and political uses to which this literature has been put have placed a tremendous burden on these writers, casting an author and her or his works in the role of synecdoche, a part standing for the ethnic whole, signifying who "the Negro" was, what his or her "inherent" intellectual potential might be, and whether or not the larger group was entitled to the full range of rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. Because of the perilous stature of African Americans in American society, their literature has suffered under tremendous extraliterary burdens.

Writing in the "Preface" to *An Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929), V. F. Calverton, a Marxist critic, argued that black literature was primarily a reflection of the Negro's historical economic exploitation.