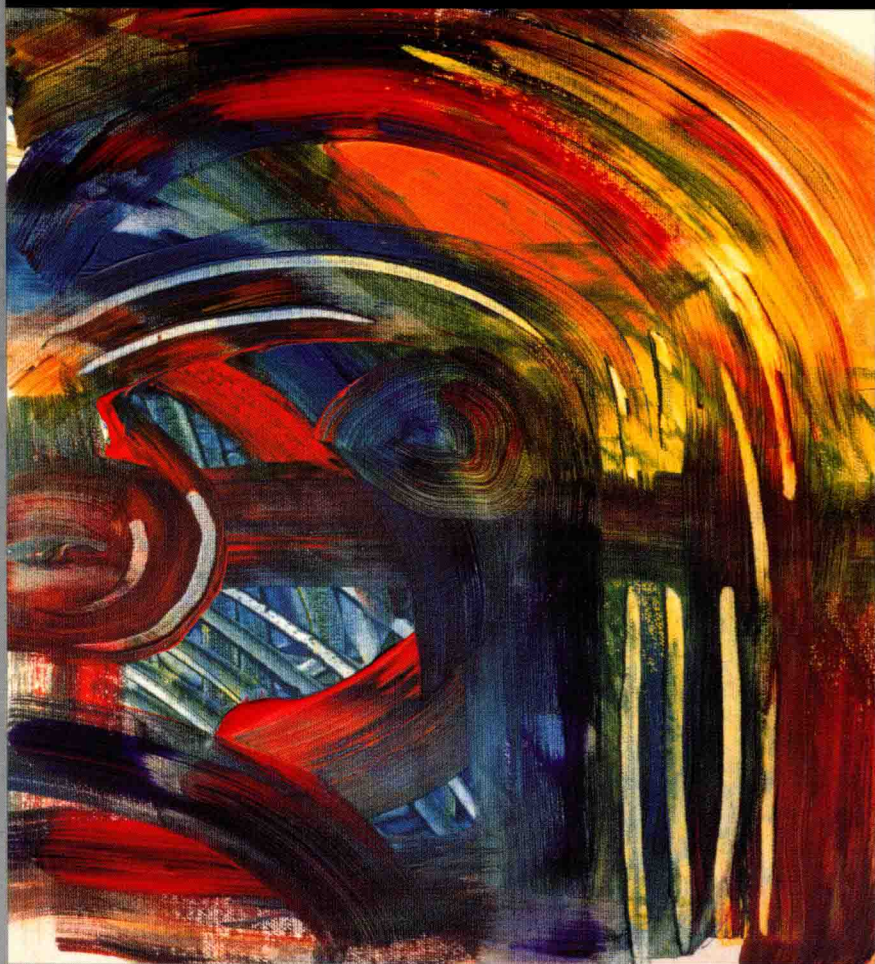




PENGUIN ACADEMICS

# AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

KEITH GILYARD • ANISSA WARDI



# African American Literature

**Keith Gilyard**

*The Pennsylvania State University;  
Department of English*

**Anissa Janine Wardi**

*Chatham College,  
Department of English*



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# Advance Praise for *African American Literature*

"This anthology succeeds in engaging young undergraduate scholars not only in a reading of key texts but in a critical/intellectual interaction with those texts as well."

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"The text is highly readable, engaging and thought-provoking for my African American literature students."

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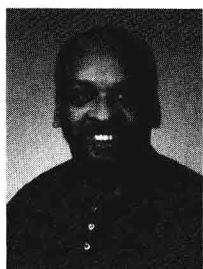
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# About the Authors



**Keith Gilyard** is Professor of English at The Pennsylvania State University. He has written and lectured widely about language, literature, and education. A writing teacher (and teaching writer) for more than a quarter century, his books include *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*, for which he received an American Book Award in 1992; *Let's Flip the Script: An African American Discourse on Language, Literature, and Learning*; *Liberation Memories: The Rhetoric and Poetics of John Oliver Killens*; and the edited collection *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*. Gilyard has also published the poetry volumes *American 40*, *Poemographies*, and *How I Figure*, and edited *Spirit & Flame: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*. Long active in professional organizations, he has served on the executive committees of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on English Education (CEE), and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). Gilyard served as Chair of CCCC in 2000. He resides with his family in State College, Pennsylvania.



**Anissa Janine Wardi** is Assistant Professor of English and Director of Cultural Studies and African American Studies at Chatham College in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has lectured and published in the area of twentieth-century African American literature, focusing on literary constructions of the American South. She is the author of *Death and the Arc of Mourning in African American Literature*, which examines gravesites and death as modes of memory in the work of Jean Toomer, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Ernest Gaines. She is a past contributor to *African American Review*, *Griot*, *College Language Association Journal*, and *Melus*, and has published in anthologies including *Gloria Naylor: Strategy and Technique*, *Magic and Myth*, and *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition*. She lives in Pittsburgh with her husband, Casey Kurtz.



# Preface

“Communication is only important because it is the broadest root of education. And all cultures communicate exactly what they have, a powerful motley of experience.” Amiri Baraka, writing as LeRoi Jones, stated this realization in 1963. Baraka understood that literature, as well as other aspects of expressive culture like visual design, culinary arts, and celebratory traditions, has been a central element of the collective African American cultural and political statement. The folklore, stories, songs, poems, speeches, essays, and plays created by African Americans represent a brilliant and forceful assertion of African American humanity in the face of enduring hardship. This written and verbal output speaks poignantly of the complex sociohistorical circumstances of being Black in America, but its intense, powerful, and insightful testimony also enriches our understanding of human drama in general.

*African American Literature* is a fairly comprehensive, thematic treatment of the African American literary tradition, and it is intended primarily for use in one-semester, introductory college courses. We feel this text offers two distinct advantages. First, because this book is organized primarily around theme rather than by chronology, we feel it affords a more coherent examination of the literature than chronologically driven collections. We focus on the connective tissue, or intertextuality, that helps to bind a wide array of texts. Intertextuality is one of the primary characteristics of the tradition, because texts speak to one another in multiple ways, whether it is by authors recycling themes, repeating images, or even revising characters created by other authors. African American writers, in short, habitually participate in literary conversations that transpire over lengthy stretches of time, even centuries. We remained acutely aware of this reality as we compiled this book. One result, to give an example of how our thematic approach shapes this collection, is that Ishmael Reed’s poetry is included in the same chapter as some of the much older folklore that directly informs it. In a lengthy

book organized strictly by historical period or authors' birth dates, these works might be separated by hundreds of pages, without commentary that reveals and stresses the links that exist between and among them. So, while some sequential principle is at work in this anthology—it makes historical sense to have a chapter on the Middle Passage precede one on migration, feminism, or the Black Aesthetic—the reader will find that each chapter is a blend of traditional and contemporary selections that are united around their distinguishing characteristics. The reader will find the writing of Olaudah Equiano in relatively close proximity to the words of Julie Dash; Paul Laurence Dunbar's work near Ralph Ellison's and Toni Morrison's; and that Langston Hughes shows up in the vicinity of Nikki Giovanni and Kenneth Carroll.

Second, we feel that a thematic approach, calibrated to the rhythm of a semester, provides a more concise, yet balanced, overview of African American literature than the approach of anthologies whose major aim is to establish a canon. Such works typically run several thousand pages and prove physically and intellectually unwieldy for a single course. Of course, all anthologies participate in canon formation, but we do not claim that we have featured all of the noteworthy writers or texts in the African American literary tradition. We have tried, instead, to develop a book that is more manageable for students and their instructors while still providing enough choices to allow teachers some flexibility when structuring their syllabi.

We believe that, ideally, the best use of this volume is during the first half of a two-semester survey course, which is available on some campuses and allows for wider or deeper examination of African American literary texts. We feel that this book would comprise a strong core for the first semester of study, while the second semester could build upon the knowledge developed during the first semester and be devoted to the study of full-length texts.

We have identified 12 themes around which African American literature coheres, namely, 1) the Middle Passage/mourning rituals, 2) the infusion of the Spirituals, 3) representations of the South, 4) folklore traditions, 5) the incorporation of blues and jazz, 6) migration, 7) urban landscapes, 8) social protest, 9) jeremiadic discourse, 10) Black nationalist discourse, 11) feminist discourse, and 12) the Black Aesthetic. Of course, this arrangement is only one of many possible arrangements, but we feel these topics and this ordering of them allow us to include a sufficiently impressive range of texts while maintaining the cohesiveness necessary for fruitful inspection. Recurring elements resonate through the selections in this volume, transcending not only chronolog-

ical divisions, but chapter demarcations as well, allowing both instructors and students to map alternative reading paths through the anthology. The book fosters close reading practices by enabling students to locate similarities among chronologically disparate texts and recognize the myriad ways in which recurring tropes or patterns accumulate textual meaning over time. Moreover, the very construction of the anthology, with its particular literary selections, encourages intertextual analysis and, therefore, introduces students to a fundamental approach to the study of African American literature.

Not lost in this thematic approach, however, is the historical undergirding of the literature. The editors' chapter introductions, which precede each grouping of literary selections, disclose significant historical and cultural contexts, including, for example, conditions aboard slave ships, religious practices, lynching rituals, the Harlem Renaissance, and folk customs. To promote further study, biographical and framing headnotes accompany each selection, and each chapter includes suggestions for further reading, for research, and for writing.

Because we have organized this anthology through the prism of intertextuality, that is, tracing the manifold ways texts call and respond to one another, it is apt that we incorporate a wide range of oral texts. Indeed, one of the most notable features of the book is its inclusion of oral performances, which contextualize African American literary arts within a larger expressive tradition. Threaded throughout the volume are numerous examples of verbal arts, ranging from formal speeches and oratorical performances, such as the dozens, signifying, and toasts, to blues songs and hip-hop lyrics. The infusion of oral texts into the thematically based chapters highlights a more comprehensive trajectory of African American artistry and foregrounds the import of the spoken word throughout the tradition. The imprint of oral practices is indelible in African American literature; therefore, introducing students to the vitality of oral literature will enhance their examination of the selected texts in this volume and broaden their understanding of the larger African American literary tradition.

In addition, students can strengthen their grasp of the tradition by reading several books that could not be included—or included in full—in *African American Literature* but are being made available at reduced rates to users of the book. These works include *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, and Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*. Moreover, print supplements, like *Analyzing Literature* by Sharon James McGee and *Glossary of Literary Terms* by Heidi Jacobs, also are available to students and can serve as important study aids.



Finally, we wish to thank several people whose insights and energy made this book possible. Joe Terry and Lynn Huddon (even when she was supposed to be working on something else!) helped us to see important possibilities in the early stages of this project. We remain in their debt. Michele Cronin admirably managed the growing manuscript, getting the right things sent to the right places—no easy task. We wish to thank our production manager, Denise Phillip, and production editor, Jim Hill, for as smooth a passage through the production process as one can imagine. Big thanks also to copy editor Kay Mallett and permissions editor Doug Hernandez for performing gargantuan tasks with efficiency and grace. Several reviewers provided indispensable feedback, including Sandra Carlton Alexander, North Carolina A&T; Barbara J. Hunt, Washtenaw Community College; Maxine L. Montgomery, Florida State University; Jennifer Palmgren, Saint Paul's College; and Kristine Yohe, Northern Kentucky University. Our spouses—Sharyn Gilyard and Casey Kurtz—sacrificed much to allow this project to happen. We are especially grateful for their cheerleading and for the additional support given by our entire families.

Keith Gilyard

Anissa Janine Wardi

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