Contemporary African American Fiction
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NEW CRITICAL ESSAYS

Edited by Dana A. Williams
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Introduction

The discourses raised in and by contemporary African American fiction are as varied as the ideologies, themes, tropes, and discourses the fiction engages. While each of these discourses holds its own significance for readers and writers alike, the intertextual dialogues that hold especial significance for me are those that attempt to answer the question Sonia Sanchez raises in 1975 in the subtitle of a play: “How do it free us?” The play’s full title—Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us?—asserts a particular stance before the it ever opens, before the first line is uttered. The affirmation—uh huh—acknowledges (if somewhat sarcastically) an unstated position; something has indeed been achieved. The inquiry—but how do it free us?—however, highlights the need for clear connections to be made between general progress or achievement and communal and personal liberation.

The essays collected here investigate the ways in which contemporary African American fiction attempts to free us. Sensibly, they acknowledge that this attempt is not a new one. The African American literary tradition, as the emancipatory narratives remind us, has always been about survival and liberation. It has similarly always been about probing, challenging, changing, and redirecting accepted ways of thinking to ensure the wellness and the freedom of its community cohorts. In their acknowledgment of these truths’ always, already-ness, the essays thus identify new ways contemporary African American fiction continues the tradition’s liberatory inclinations; they interrogate the ways in which antecedent texts and traditions influence contemporary texts to create
new traditions; and they reveal the ways in which contemporary African American fiction dialogues with broader literary and cultural traditions to better accommodate the complexity of the African American living in the contemporary moment.

While each of the essays deals with the broad concept of liberation, each does so quite differently. Liberation in the essay that purposefully opens the collection, for instance, has to do with finding ways to free the literature from its critics and their self-interested concerns. In “Theoretical Influences and Experimental Resemblances: Ernest J. Gaines and Recent Critical Approaches to the Study of African American Fiction,” Reggie Scott Young enters into discussions of contemporary African American literary criticism, particularly as it relates to misreadings of contemporary writers’ fiction. He begins his discussion by contextualizing the late-1980s debate between Joyce Ann Joyce, Houston Baker, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. about the future of black literary studies. His essay then moves into a discussion of canon formation, particularly as it relates to Henry Dumas’s omission from *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, an omission that, according to Young, “marks him as a causality of the lingering critical wars of the previous decades.” Like Dumas, who still rests on the periphery of the African American canon, Ernest J. Gaines did not become a canonical writer until the publication of *A Lesson Before Dying*. Forced to find ways to deal with him critically, scholars began to highlight similarities between Gaines and major black authors like Ellison, Wright, and Baldwin, despite Gaines’s frequent comments that he did not read any of these writers while he was developing his skill as an author. A crucial recognition that Young makes in this regard is how such readings reduce Gaines’s texts (and other contemporary texts read primarily in terms of their intertextuality with antecedent texts) to little more than acts of textual revision. Thus, a central task of Young’s essay is to highlight how critics overuse and oftentimes exploit the politics of textual revision, insisting that all black writers have been influenced (almost exclusively) by earlier major black authors. Ultimately, Young argues effectively that “when the act of reading a literary text is done for reasons other than to seek an understanding of the work in relationship to the author and to the culture from which it was produced, we must question if the critical exercise offers any real illumination of the subjected work.” It is only when we read the work in the context of its broad culture (and this often exceeds narrowly conceived ideas of African American culture) that we can ensure “the advancement of the literature in its relationship to the plight of African American people.”
I would argue that Jennifer A. Jordan’s essay, “Ideological Tension: Cultural Nationalism and Multiculturalism in the Novels of Ishmael Reed,” especially meets Young’s call for scholarship that reads literary texts to seek an understanding of the works as they relate to both the author and to the culture out of which they emerge, thereby offering real illumination of the texts. Jordan conducts close readings of Reed’s novels to investigate whether Reed’s representation of himself as a multiculturalist rather than as a cultural nationalist is one that his fiction supports. Arguing that “a careful examination of Reed’s novels from *Free-Lance Pallbearers* to *Japanese by Spring* reveals an ongoing cultural nationalism which is consistent with many of the precepts of the Black Arts Movement and which deconstructs the multiculturalism that coexists with it,” Jordan points out that even *Japanese by Spring*, Reed’s last novel, “despite a continual attempt to reinforce cultural diversity, returns to a black cultural nationalism which represents African culture as a solution to the trauma inflicted by an increasingly aggressive and global conservativism.” To develop her argument, Jordan conducts, first, a thorough review of the varied representations of the black nationalism of the 1960s, citing both primary and secondary texts, and, second, an equally effective examination of the advent and subsequent growth of multiculturalism. She then traces Reed’s struggle to balance his nationalist impulses with what she calls his eclectic “intellectual and social inclinations” before highlighting Reed’s use of satire and parody in his novels to critique the Black Arts and Black Nationalist movements. After the decline of these movements, Reed shifts his most aggressive critique to global capitalism, which, as Jordan points out, he presents as “the major source of racism,” even as his “responses to the problem of the domination of global capitalism vary greatly.” Finally, she investigates how effectively or ineffectively Reed’s fiction promotes the multiculturalism he claims to espouse.

Multiculturalism assumes a broader meaning in Mildred R. Mickle’s essay “The Politics of Addiction and Adaptation: Dis/ease Transmission in Octavia E. Butler’s *Survivor* and *Fledgling*.” Here, Mickle highlights how Butler uses alien species and their struggle with humans for dominance to critique humans’ relentless quest for power and their obsession with discrimination as a way of asserting superiority. In her examination of these novels, Mickle uses “addiction as a lens for exploring human dis/ease” and argues that “Butler’s point in focusing on the addictiveness of racism in *Survivor* and *Fledgling* is to stress that if humans continue to engage in racial addiction, they will not progress.” In this sense, Butler’s novels have liberating possibilities, as they encourage
the reader to recognize the concept of race and racial deviancy as an
addiction that causes and feeds dis/ease. If there are to be survivors in
the fictional worlds of *Survivor* and *Fledgling* or in the real world that is
Earth, unfruitful addictions must be replaced with adaptation and with
respectful tolerance of Others.

The essay that follows Mickle’s focuses less on the communal lib-
eration and survival that informs Butler’s two novels and more on the
personal liberation the protagonist in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes,
Memory* seeks as she tries to achieve psychological healing. Examining
the mother-daughter relationship and its corresponding connection to
healing in the novel, Tara T. Green’s “‘When the Women Tell Stories’: Healing in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*” invokes other texts
by black women writers with similar interests (Paule Marshall’s *Prais-
esong for the Widow*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, for example) to show how Danticat’s text,
unlike its counterparts, insists on the existence of a working mother-
daughter relationship in order for the daughter’s healing to take place.
“Unlike the authors of [earlier] novels where the mother-healers are
not the biological mothers of the women they nurture,” Green argues,
“Danticat reenvisions the role of the biological mother as being essential
in her daughter Sophie’s movement toward renewal and healing.” Thus,
it is only from her mother that Sophie can learn that “healing cannot
occur without removing herself from the site of sexual violation nor
without acknowledging the abuse and thereby confronting the abuser.”
To develop this point, Green conducts, first, a close reading of Martine’s
failed journey toward healing and, then, one of Sophie’s more successful
journey toward healing, highlighting how Martine’s failure to transcend
her sexual violation and to move toward healing actually helps her facil-
itate Sophie’s healing. Accordingly, Green’s essay makes a considerable
contribution to both scholarship on mother-daughter relationships and
the varied ways they are portrayed by black women writers and to
scholarship on healing as it is illustrated in their texts.

My essay, “The Coming-of-Age of the Contemporary African Amer-
ican Novel: Olympia Vernon’s *Eden, Logic*, and *A Killing in This Town,*”
looks to an emerging novelist to investigate ways contemporary fiction
continues the tradition’s propensity to alter discourses and thereby to
be liberating. Vernon, like our most valued writers, insists upon finding
ways to make old stories new. To do so, she carves out her own niche
within the broader literary tradition, even as her writing inevitably
remembers and redirects its antecedent American texts. It is the carving
of space, in fact, that I argue has become a central undertaking of con-
temporary fictionists like Vernon. Borrowing Eleanor W. Traylor’s interpretation of African American literature as “discourse altering,” I suggest ways Vernon’s novels engage three American literary traditions—the female pastoral, the Southern gothic, and lynching as trope—to highlight these novels’ willingness to challenge traditions that support the falsity of American myths of innocence and purity and their corresponding oppressiveness. I chose Vernon’s novels not only because of my confidence in the inevitability of her eventual emergence among critics as a major writer, but because of her willingness to investigate the beauty and the horror of the human condition and to offer alternative ways of seeing and being that critically and authentically reflect contemporary African American experiences. The central achievements of the essay, as I see them, are its critical engagement of three of the most innovative novels published in this millennium and its willingness to read Vernon’s novels within varied traditions without limiting the achievements of the novels by imposing neat categorizations upon them.

The final three essays, written by Madja R. Atieh, Sandra Y. Govan, and Eleanor W. Traylor, highlight the ways in which contemporary African American fictionists express their knowledge of world traditions, the ways in which these writers situate their texts among these traditions, and the ways in which broader traditions can be useful in projects of liberation. Atieh’s “Another Night, Another Story: The Frame Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah* [The Arabian Nights]” illustrates how *Paradise* emerges as “a new frame narrative, how it adopts and adapts the taxonomic characteristics of the frame by employing innovative techniques, all the while linking *Paradise* to the heritage of the life-giving fame narratives and showing how *Paradise* is a new version of the celebrated Arabic story cycle of *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah*.” Atieh grounds her analysis in an especially useful review of the characteristics of framing as a narrative device. She then highlights the ways in which *Paradise* fashions new techniques to engage the taxonomies of the frame narrative, before moving into a comparative reading of *Paradise* and *Alf Laylah Wa Laylah* as exemplary frame narratives. This comparative reading is significant on two corresponding levels. First, it highlights the “affinity between the Arabic and African American modes of narration and organization,” suggesting how “the kinship between these two modes is based on the Arabic and African American traditions and experiences, which are linked through the African culture, and on their oral and communal art of storytelling.” Second, it highlights the similar ways women of different cultures use storytelling both as a device of resistance and a tool for survival. Significantly, Atieh’s com-
parative reading of the texts ultimately suggests that two seemingly disparate cultures are as much alike as they are dissimilar.

In “A Stranger on the Bus: Reginald McKnight’s I Get on the Bus as Complex Journey,” Govan offers one of too few insightful readings of McKnight’s first novel. Govan centers her reading of the novel on its engagement of DuBoisian notions of double-consciousness. The novel’s protagonist, Evan Norris, is an American-born Peace Corps volunteer who finds himself in Senegal, West Africa. As Govan notes, Evan’s narrative voice and syntax, as revealed in the novel’s opening pages, offer readers the first indication that the novel will likely explore its protagonist’s psychological state in its subtext, especially since Evan is literally making the figurative journey “back to Africa.” What the early pages do not suggest, however, and what Govan points us to in her essay is McKnight’s manipulation of the familiar trope to present it differently. The novel transcends more traditional interpretations of double-consciousness. “In several instances,” Govan notes, “[Evan] unaccountably finds that his consciousness has shifted and he has fused with another person, actually becoming the other. This transit of souls, so to speak, affectively illustrates DuBois’s [double-consciousness] in a manner quite distinctive” (emphasis in original). Having examined the ways in which the novel consciously and unconsciously engages double-consciousness as trope, the essay then moves into an investigation of the ways in which the novel explores questions of identity, particularly as they relate to antecedent texts’ similar questioning. Invoking Countee Cullen’s “Heritage,” James Weldon Johnson’s Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, for instance, Govan notes how McKnight situates Evan firmly in the African American tradition. Yet McKnight does not limit himself to this tradition. He willingly admits to Govan that “I Get on the Bus is almost a virtual rewriting, under the guise of blackness, of Albert Camus’s The Stranger,” and it is on the basis of this admission that Govan conducts a fascinating comparative reading of the two texts at the end of her essay. Ultimately, the essay proves quite effective its argument that I Get on the Bus—perhaps both because of and despite its characterization of its protagonist as a lost, existential African American in the tradition of Camus’s Meursault rather than Richard Wright’s Cross Damon (from The Outsider)—is a novel that will change and enrich the canon of African American literature.

Finally, Eleanor W. Traylor’s “Re-Imagining the Academy: Story and Pedagogy in Contemporary African American Fiction” takes a forward look at what literary historians of the next century will find when they begin to investigate the “generative power of language” as it manifests
itself in our contemporary moment. What they will find, she argues, is a focus on story rather than on myth. They will similarly find a narrating posture of interrogation rather than one of declaration. Probing Toni Cade Bambara’s avowal to tell stories that “save lives,” Traylor also posits that historians will find pedagogies of survival embedded in “fictions.” In their determination to save lives, these fictions are not only what Traylor calls “discourse altering”; they are “discourse making.” To support these claims, Traylor peripherally engages Bambara’s The Salt Eaters and Henry Dumas’s “Ark of Bones,” both of which are aggressively concerned with (meta)fiction as a way of conveying knowledge and of negotiating survival through cultural memory. The essay then moves into an astute reading of Morrison’s Paradise as an exemplary text of fiction as pedagogy. Inherent to this reading of the novel, however, is Traylor’s recognition of antecedent texts that teach characters and readers alike “how to learn to see yourself for yourself” in hopes of ushering in transformation, rebirth, and survival. Among this essay’s many strengths, then, is Traylor’s awareness of world literary traditions—she effortlessly engages Plato’s cave; the Zoroastrian vision of redemption; Homeric and Virgilian travelers; Cartesian, Aristotelian, and Acquinian oppositional binaries; “infernal and paradisical visions of Dante, Milton, and Goethe”; and the “modern angst” of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. Of even greater value, perhaps, is her ability to situate contemporary African American fiction within this tradition, all the while rememoring W. E. B. DuBois’s veil, Charles Chestnutt’s conjurer, Langston Hughes’s river, Ralph Ellison’s invisibility, Richard Wright’s native son, Amiri Baraka’s slave, and Toni Morrison’s bluest eye. Smartly, she closes the essay with the subtle contention that what literary historians will likely find upon their investigation of our contemporary moment are the many ways in which contemporary African American fiction acts as this moment’s guiding light toward universal manifestations of and investigations into the human condition.

As the preceding summaries reveal, the essays collected here are varied. A select few are overtly theoretical, while others are more probing and analytical. Still others—Young’s and Traylor’s, for example—are more assertive than they are exploratory. The diversity of the critical approaches utilized here is among the collection’s strengths, as more can be learned from different approaches to the literature than from uniform approaches to it. In this sense, the book inherited the obvious benefits an edited collection has over a single-authored book, particularly the willingness to offer varied insightful perspectives and its corresponding ability to cover a wide range of ideas in broad yet focused analyses. The contributors’ range of interests and their differing professorial ranks undoubt-
edly enhanced the collection’s overall effectiveness as an offering of commentary on contemporary African American fiction and its relationship to earlier African American, American, and broader literary traditions. In the sense that the essays included here investigate many of the key inquires that inform discussions about this fiction and examine the trends and ideas that loosely characterize it, the strength of the collection rests more with its articulation of suggested ways of reading, seeing, thinking, writing, and being than with its comprehensiveness.

By engaging the authors examined here and other authors whose fiction is significant but not examined here—authors like William Melvin Kelley, John Edgar Wideman, Clarence Major, Gloria Naylor, Gayl Jones, Leon Forrest, Charles Johnson, Alice Walker, Percival Everett, Edward P. Jones, Nathaniel Mackey, Samuel Delany, and Tananarive Due, among others—scholars of contemporary African American fiction, using the discourses these essays raise and the critical approaches they initiate, must continue to ask the hard questions if we are to garner from this literature all it has to offer. The range of queries is, and ever must be, wide and varied. How does African American fiction represent the changing times in America and in the world? How are these changes reflected in narrative strategies or in narrative content? How do contemporary fictionists engage diasporic Africanisms, or how do they renegotiate Americanisms? In what ways do these fictionists invoke vernacular forms such as oratory, myth, and music in ways that are different from antecedent authors? On what traditions are they building? In what ways are they reconstructing traditions or constructing new ones? What is the impact of cultural production, gender, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity on this fiction? What is the impact of popular culture fiction and what Bernard Bell refers to as paraliterature (science/speculative fiction; gay and lesbian fiction; and detective, mystery, and romance fiction) on more traditional literature and their literary forms? All of these questions and more must be probed further.

While the essays included here do, indeed, attempt to initiate (in some cases) and to participate in (in others) much needed conversations about contemporary African American fiction, even a cursory review of the literature on scholarship specific to contemporary African American fiction reveals just how much work there is to be done to explore fully its complexity, even as such a review also reveals how the hard work of this scholarship has already begun. It was a literature review, in fact, that birthed the idea for this collection initially. After reviewing a number of texts for the specific purpose of identifying the wide-ranging though innately connected tendencies of contemporary African American fiction, I was somewhat surprised to find that no such collection as this one (which focuses specifically on fiction written and published from 1970 to the present) existed. Earlier collections and books that attempt to investi-
igate the latest movement(s) in African American literature examine texts that date back as early as 1940 (with the publication of Wright’s *Native Son*) and end in the mid-1990s (typically with a Morrison novel). Thus, this collection has filled a void in scholarship on contemporary African American fiction, particularly as it relates to established literary traditions and to a new one that is emerging. Heretofore, this void could be justified largely by contemporaneity, following the traditions of scholarship that typically allow primary texts to lie dormant for years before returning to them critically. The critical examination of these texts is now imminent.

In the tradition of critical texts emerging from the Harlem Renaissance, the Protest Movement, and the Black Arts Movement that identify these movements’ aesthetics, much of the work here begins to chart the course of scholarship on contemporary African American fiction and to reveal responses to the questions raised above. Building on these essential questions, future scholarship is likely to reveal the many ways this fiction offers fruitful responses to the overarching Sonia Sanchez title-as-query that loosely frames this text: *Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us?* As scholars of liberation, we must take Toni Cade Bambara’s words literally when she intuits that she and many of her contemporaries write stories that save lives. Our job, then, is to query and to preserve their stories.
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