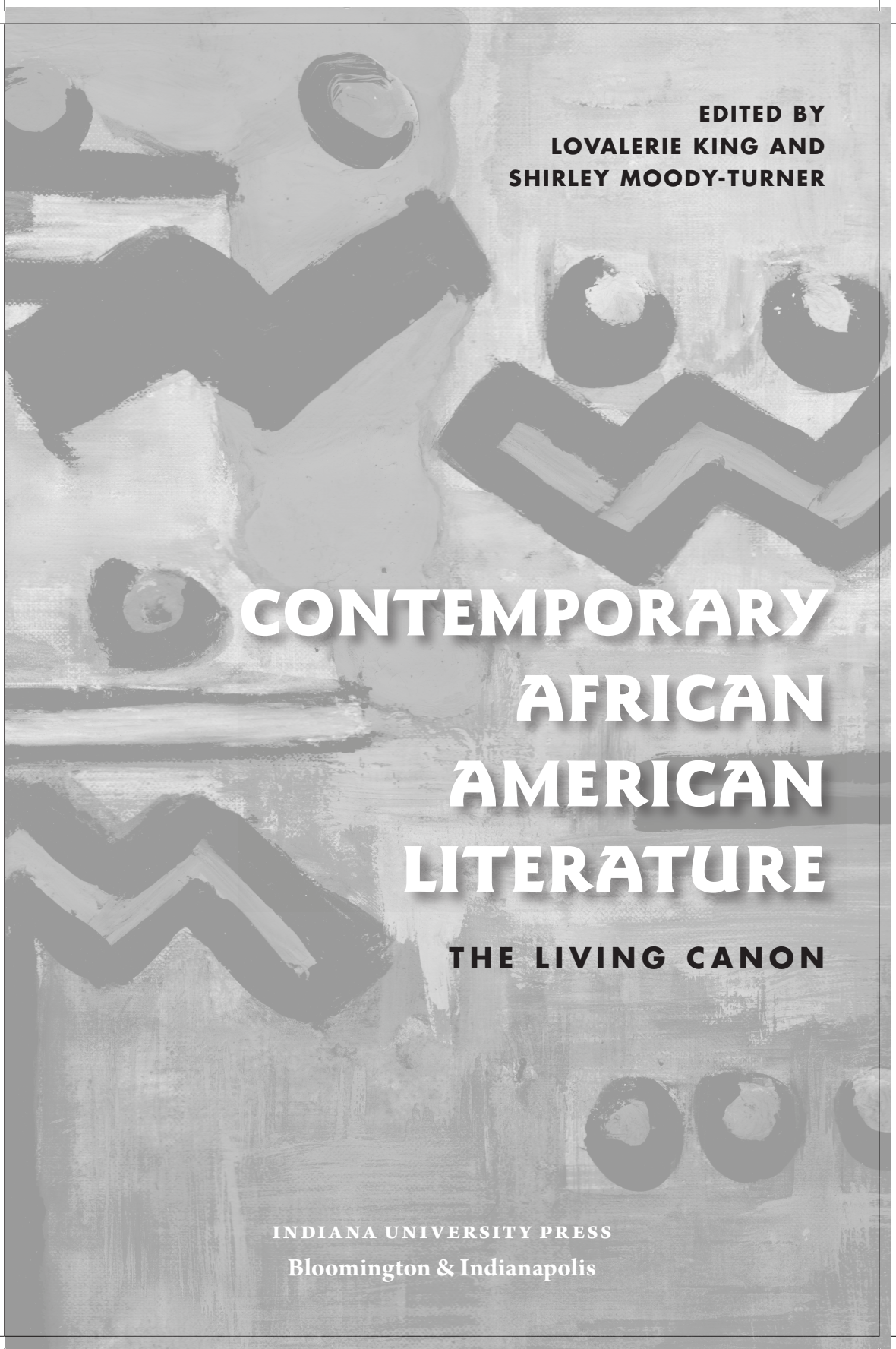

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THREE

BLACK IS GOLD: AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE, CRITICAL LITERACY, AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY PEDAGOGIES

MARYEMMA GRAHAM

> I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that mapto open as much space for discovery . . . as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest.
>
> —TONI MORRISON, *PLAYING IN THE DARK*

INTRODUCTION

The two operative phrases from the Morrison epigraph that serve as a point of departure for the discussion that follows are "critical geography" and "space for discovery." Morrison, by her own example, demonstrates the capacity of language to move beyond the limitations of geography and social predicament, to give the imagination full reign. In the second decade of the twenty-first century we take this as an invitation to map another type of critical space that leads to a different, but no less influential, set of discoveries in a global context. Shifting our attention from writer to reader, and mapping the developments that feed the explosion in print culture—and the extraordinary diversity now reflected within black and other ethnic writing—immediately forces our attention to a broader spectrum of cultural and intellectual practices. No discussion, therefore, of contemporary theory and pedagogy in African American written expression is complete without considering the implications and consequence of the radical shifts occurring in the creation, production, and distribution of literature in particular and the consumption of knowledge in general.

These shifts, in turn, point us to larger questions of literacy, or more precisely *critical literacy,*[1] the conscious and unconscious framing one employs to read and interpret texts, and its corollary, *critical pedagogy,* which focuses more specifically on teaching and learning practices. While raising such matters may be a byproduct of the post–Civil Rights era—which is very much present in today's social justice movement and readily aligns itself with Bakhtinian and Foucauldian theories of discourse, language, and power—digital technology significantly extends and redefines them all. If the global circulation of mass-produced print and media texts produces "divisions and dislikes, instead of opportunities to negotiate shared meaning and value,"[2] as one study reports, then in our reluctance to question accepted models and boundaries of scholarly engagement, we widen the gap between our own academic literacy and the critical literacies of our students. Books take their meaning and sustain their existence through their circulation among readers as much as they do from the criticism that scholars themselves produce and circulate. We who study literature have learned to read and interpret through those theoretical constructs that have informed our training and reaffirm our academic investments.

Our students, on the other hand, have learned to construct meaning and indeed develop critical practices that rarely find space for discussion, let alone recognition inside the classrooms that they enter. What emerges then is a widening gap in an intellectual landscape that historically privileges a particular brand of print literacy ignoring the critical geographies—that is, physical and social spaces—that our students occupy. Without a doubt, what is historically called African American literature (works by self-identified African American authors or those that constitute a specific canon) together with an extensive body of criticism is "in print" more than ever before. Few, at least in the field of black literary and cultural studies, would have it otherwise since it is today a highly marketable academic and commercial enterprise. And yet, a reassessment of our academic and scholarly practices is in order if we are to fully understand how specific gaps in our contemporary media culture help or hinder these practices.

The foremost challenge we face in our critical and pedagogical practice is the ability of our current frameworks to capture the changing definition of what African American literature is and whom it serves. Tech-

nology disrupts the conventions of African American literary study by promoting greater facility with literacies that operate beyond the classroom. How do we conceptualize what we do when questions about research and practice are placed in the larger context of societal and institutional transformations: new graduate and undergraduate programs, new journals and associations, new comparative and cross regional or diaspora studies, as well as wider social networks and spheres of influence? What do we do when the classroom functions less as the place for developing traditional intellectual competencies than it does for ensuring greater access to sustainable employment? The two are not mutually exclusive, but the shift in focus is significant. Widespread exposure to media cultures gives us greater proficiency in negotiating and appropriating technology's meaning and uses.

What drives this dialogue is the reality, whether we like it or not, that our students are forming their own types of critical literacy that are at once beyond our preferred scope of analysis and generated through newer forms of cultural production and communication. Moreover, the explanation cannot entirely be attributed to technology but must take into account the intellectual and social transformations within the mainstream academy with regard to institutional structure, individual and collective agency, and access. All three are critical for understanding how the field of African American literature came to occupy a particular space within the academy. Mapping that history is important for us to consider before we proceed.

THE INTELLECTUAL SPACE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

In some ways, the post–Civil Rights era has become a victim of its own success. Admittedly, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements did NOT meet many essential objectives or go as far as they should have gone in addressing sustained economic inequities and dismantling the more obvious forms of racism, for example. Yet these movements have had a visible and lasting impact on the academy and educational reform. As a preeminent example of the transformation within the academy, black studies, according to Abdul Alkalimat and Ronald Bailey, represents

a "paradigm challenge to the white supremacist framework that dominated the media, schooling and public policy at all levels . . . segregating the intellectual life of the black community into its own black public sphere."[3] Reminding us that the birth of black studies was part of a worldwide trend for radical change between 1967 and 1969, the authors point to the importance of the quantitative shift that lay behind the qualitative one: the overall increase in student enrollment between 1967 and 1974 was 30 percent, but the black student enrollment in Northern white institutions during those same years increased 160 percent.[4]

Generally, we identify black studies with those ideological, political, and physical confrontations that occurred as first-generation college students and others from vastly different backgrounds came together in closer proximity. Correspondingly and subsequently, black studies sustained a distinct set of intellectual, curricular, and institutional changes in U.S. higher education. Thus, nearly fifty years after its birth, responses to the role and function of black studies within the academy continue to be multiple and varied. Moreover, as each new generation of black intellectuals attach new uses and meanings to the intellectual space that their forebears "earned," these uses and meanings can easily subvert, challenge, or otherwise resist what many once held in high regard.

In a 2004 essay, Farah Jasmine Griffin focuses on the changes in African American literature and literary studies, a field that accounts for the largest visible increase in black intellectual production within the academy today. Griffin refers to the "explosion of literary production by people of African descent . . . [as] an era of institutionalizing and diversifying literature, identifying and creating a market for it, and formalizing its study, all resulting from the civil rights, Black Power and black arts movements, as well as a profound response to the latter."[5] We need not limit these observations to the field of literary studies alone. While other disciplines might have been slow to change at first—the sciences, for example—targeted efforts to diversify the academy and challenge the underrepresentation of people of color have had a decisive effect in providing access and opportunities for an African American working class at an unparalleled rate. From the perspective of institutional change and class privilege, the era of desegregation—beginning with *Brown vs. Board of Education*—can record its success in terms of the rise and growth of black educational advancement and achievement, all leading to an expansion of a black intellectual class.[6]

While the transformation of academic culture has both a complicated and gendered history, a discussion for which the present space does not allow, most scholars are generally in agreement today that the paradigm shift that occurred within the academy went against many of the more activist, antiestablishment goals of the black studies foundational era.[7] It was one thing to gain access to the academy but quite another to shake loose the conventional hierarchies that restrict the potential for a level playing field. The larger movement for economic and social justice and equality and the movement for educational reform specific to United States institutions of higher learning may have derived from the same source, but the two approaches to reform did not embody the same goals or outcomes. In this case, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the *presence* of black people in the academy has not necessarily meant any fundamental change for black people *as a whole* in terms of their historical relationship to society. Rather, it has meant a significant increase in the number of professionally trained black intellectuals.

As the preceding discussion suggests, mapping changes and shifts in our current literary and cultural landscape is not simply a matter of publishing more books, along with a flourishing body of literary criticism and theory, and intellectual space within the academy. Equally as fundamental to the map that we draw is an understanding of the dynamics of production and its beneficiaries. Recent trends suggest that a sizeable entrepreneurial market for independent black publishing is the largest it has ever been, even larger than during the Black Arts Movement, when black publishing houses flourished.[8] Moreover, this new market creates its own systems of valuation that are not dependent on academic approval or its protocol. If we acknowledge that the impact of literary theory and desire for intellectual capital might well have been a failure to question high-culture critiques, then we must also accept the subsequent class implications. In other words, it does matter whether one is operating inside or outside the academy or, more importantly, writing for one audience or another, where social and political contexts, experiences and forms of self-representation can vary widely.

One such implication is fairly obvious: most of the reading public (nonacademics) refuses to accept fixed and rigid notions of art or literature, and given the venues for production and distribution that technology now makes possible, the terms of discourse are quickly shifting. For example, while many of us uphold the distinctions between "lit-

erary fiction" on the one hand, and "popular" or "genre fiction" on the other, much writing today crosses these boundaries just as distinctions between and among genres are collapsing. This realignment serves to destabilize established hierarchies of high and low culture, exploiting those dynamics that challenge a dominant white culture. The result is an increased emphasis on subject matter variously identified with "the black underclass" or "the culture of poverty." This realignment is especially visible in the rise of a black music and entertainment industry as a global phenomenon, which many critics welcome as a mixed blessing. Academic critics express widely divergent opinions about these developments associated with postmodernism. New terms such as "New Black Aesthetic" (NBA) emerge as a marker for the paradigm shift that took place for those who came of age in the generation after the Civil Rights era. Although they maintain the moral imperative of the black aesthetic, a newer generation resists its "propagandistic positivism" and the notion of a racial community bound together through cultural nationalist ideals. Their revisionist thinking derives from what Trey Ellis calls their "cultural mulatto" status (raised in a multiracial mix of cultures) and shows little if any concern with the history of racism. In acknowledging a sea change, the participants in the NBA movement pay due respect to their avant-garde elders while fully exploring their own individualism, hybrid identities, and different cultural/aesthetic combinations, which middle-class access and opportunity enabled.[9]

Another expression of the paradigm shift is especially troubling for many: the proliferation of contemporary black urban fiction, most of which enters our classrooms tucked away in student backpacks, rather than on the pages of assigned syllabi. This new kind of cognitive dissonance impairs our ability to understand the shifting terrain in the modes and enactment of literacy. While it would be unfair to attribute the source of this dissonance to one moment or event in particular, it is possible to map certain developments in the institutionalization of literary study that may have contributed significantly to this division.

In their enthusiasm to claim a space to teach and appropriately critique black literature, one group of early black critics engaged, however unintentionally, in certain deliberate acts of exclusion and separation. Their motivation, both honest and sincere, came from a need to draw distinct boundaries that could produce an appropriate body of criti-

cal discourse and to diffuse the heated political debates that the Black Arts Movement (BAM) had generated. Since BAM was on the wane, in the late 1970s, linking art to activism and privileging cultural practices grounded in community transformation was too much a reminder of the spirit of rebellion and revolution that had wrecked the nation, too much a reminder of the "unfinished business" of the Civil Rights movement and the tragedies that it entailed. Noticeable signs of progress and change were essential as a new generation of black scholars took their first posts in mainstream, frequently Ivy League, institutions. For them, newer, more pressing concerns replaced the politicized space of the classroom where "education for liberation" had become a mantra. Moreover, eliminating the possibility of valuations of the literature easily available to the general black reading public—as much black writing in the 1960s and 1970s was—also ensured the development of a certain homogeneity of tastes. Because a large percentage of those black students who entered colleges beginning in the 1970s were urban working class, the purpose of their school re-socialization was unlearning if not devaluing what they brought with them.

In the field of literature, perhaps much less so in the social sciences, the role of education and pedagogy during the era did not serve the purpose of growing organic intellectuals, to borrow from Gramsci,[10] by helping students to make sense of their own social reality, but rather to embrace a new reality altogether. Furthermore, the distinction between criticism and scholarship on the one hand, pedagogy and teaching, on the other, something with which all academics are familiar, has a long and important history as an academic practice. Maria Regina Kecht's summation is useful for understanding the discourse of professional legitimacy:

> By the end of the 19th century, criticism gained professional legitimacy primarily through increased specialization and withdrawal from politically "contaminated" social reality. Criticism thus acquired esthetic idealism, moral superiority, and ostensibly redemptive power by relinquishing social relevance. The following years have shown no fundamental change for the better.[11]

A similar process of professional legitimacy occurred in the field of African American literature and literary study in an effort to establish a

new paradigm. One example provides a portal for understanding how the threads of cognitive dissonance systematically came together.

In 1977, during and following a two-week institute on "Afro-American Literature: From Critical Approach to Course Design," young Robert Stepto began thinking about a way to continue the conversation. He took the institute's lessons—and its message—to the larger academic community in *African American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (1978), which he edited with Dexter Fisher, and published through the Modern Language Association (MLA). The desire for legitimacy was visible in the volume's intent: to refine critical approaches to teaching so as to yield a "literary" (quotes in the original) understanding of Afro-American literature.[12] To ensure this kind of professional legitimacy within the academy meant drawing boundaries for the field and often redefining for its practitioners the meaning of social relevance and community engagement.

The book was not the customary proceedings of a conference, but a charge and a pronouncement. MLA's connection to the book seemed strangely ironic, perhaps even a concerted effort to correct past oversights. With its known history of professional segregation, which Darwin Turner had detailed in a 1971 essay,[13] MLA seemed to have missed an opportunity to form a critical bridge between themselves and the all-black College Language Association. They saw instead a new breed of academics more ready to align with the era's newfound politics of inclusion. From our vantage point today, the book's subtitle "reconstruction of instruction" provided a striking metaphor recalling the complicated nature of the first Reconstruction: its promise of progress, its certain accomplishments, and its failures. The memory of that Reconstruction might well have been a sign to do things a bit differently, but such understanding can only come with hindsight.

In their introduction, the editors presented a deficit model of African American literary instruction, arguing that earlier critical and pedagogical practices were lacking in a consistent application of approaches derived from the discipline of literature. "Even a cursory look . . . reveals this deficiency. Many schools still do not teach Afro-American literature, while other institutions offering courses seem caught in a lockstep of stale critical and pedagogical ideas, many of which are tattered hand-me-downs from disciplines other than literature . . . entrapped in a herme-

neutical web of race and superstructure."[14] The suggested academic models were Northrop Frye, Geoffrey Hartman, and Octavio Paz; Langston Hughes's literary importance was associated with his "international vision" rather than his status as a "North American writer." The value of black literature, according to the editors, lay in its use as a "functional model for further comparativist scholarship and teaching."[15] The volume put the Black Arts Movement on notice by identifying new formations and modalities that made it easier to dismiss the previous period of community-based, black radical politics and those writers associated with such activity.

With the exception of essays on Ralph Ellison, those diasporic movements like Negritude and the prescriptive essays on course design, the subject of Frederick Douglass dominated the volume. The work of only a few scholars appeared in the volume, but nothing by the twenty-four institute participants. The volume signaled the theoretical debut of Henry Louis Gates, then at Yale; he and Stepto authored five of the volume's ten essays, which added to the seeming exclusiveness of the collection. The single essay by Sherley Anne Williams did little to break the overall focus of the volume. She outlined a vernacular theory of Afro-American poetry and the blues aesthetic, taking key ideas from Stephen Henderson's previously published *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973) and introducing her own term, "ethnopoetics." It would have been impossible for Williams not to reference *some* poets of the 1960s, in an essay entitled "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Literature," and she chose her examples carefully. Extensive commentary on Hughes, Michael Harper, and a lesser-known poet at the time, Lucille Clifton, counters a passing reference to Marvin X. Jackman, one of the most innovative and forgotten poets of the 1960s,[16] and the better-known Nikki Giovanni. Giovanni's "Great Pax Whitey," Williams tells us, is "a rather pedestrian and undigested patchwork of folk and personal legends and black nationalist philosophy, [that] becomes, when viewed (or better yet, read) as a poem in which a congregation of voices speaks, a brilliant literary approximation of the collective dialogue . . . of which the blues was an important part."[17]

The volume gave no space to the "furious flowering," as Gwendolyn Brooks called the Black Arts generation. Not surprisingly, *Understanding the New Black Poetry* would remain the only sustained examination of

the poetry of the 1960s until the appearance of *The Black Arts Enterprise* thirty-five years later.[18] *Reconstruction* prophesied a bright future for the institutionalization and professionalization of black literature and literary studies, even as it rendered the Black Arts Movement invisible.

The absence of any reference to the work of the preceding generation of African American scholar/critics is equally glaring. The classic anthologies *Negro Caravan* (1941), by Arthur P. Davis, Ulysses Lee, and Sterling Brown, and *Cavalcade: Negro American Writing from 1760 the Present* (1971), by Arthur P. Davis and J. Saunders Redding, were two of many important interventions in the discourse on the creation and construction of a black literary tradition. While the approaches and goals were different from *Reconstruction,* the editors of *Caravan* and *Cavalcade* were just as concerned about the need for more critical discussions about black literature. Stepto and Fisher, however, believed it was no longer necessary to prove the existence of black literature, "[that] fills bookstore shelves, the stacks of libraries . . . Symposia and seminars are regularly held . . . prominent contemporary black writers give scores of readings. The need is for an advanced volume that presupposes an awareness of the literature," they argued. [19]

Yet, in all honesty, they did more than "presuppose the awareness of a literature." The volume imposed, as if by imperial design, its own particular theoretical perspective through the erasure of others. As a result, a particular method of critical study replaced a more democratic form of critical engagement and its social sphere of influence. The ongoing failure to grasp the range and complexity of literary politics of the three decades before the 1960s and the precariousness of an entire movement of black writers, critics, and poets, which became the focus of Lawrence Jackson's excellent study,[20] endorsed certain historical practices but also privileged certain forms of academic scholarship that followed. Nevertheless, an affinity did exist between the *Reconstruction* school and their predecessors: a shared concern with developing a critical literature that could compete on the world stage. Both generations saw themselves as custodians of black literature and sought to prepare the way for the future, if not the path to mainstream acceptance. The difference, however, is that the generation of critics and scholars between 1934 and 1960 felt the necessity to redeem the historical past "that enabled [them] to challenge more fully the prominence of western artistic tradition . . . [and]

prepare the ground for the militant writers' aggressive rejection of America's liberal ideas."[21] The younger generation of scholars saw rupture rather than continuity.

These actions were certainly understandable, given who the members of the *Reconstruction* project were and what they represented. They were newly trained as academics, hailing mostly from elite graduate institutions, and had neither the social base of Black Arts/Black Aesthetic nor the legacy of historically black institutions as was the case for the earlier generation of scholars and critics. This younger generation wanted and needed its own intellectual space in the academy, and sensing a void, they accepted the prevailing intellectual hierarchies that reinforced normative ideas about literary value and valuation, even in the face of growing dissension. By contrast, practitioners and proponents of the Black Arts Movement, without the mainstream institutional support or any recognized academic legitimacy, continued to operate primarily outside the academy.[22] BAM artists continued to define themselves primarily by their politics that governed their art and aesthetics and took pride in their opposition to the black middle class.

During this period, African American scholarly discourse moved in concert with contemporary critical theories, the most prominent of which was deconstruction. In addition to being a suitable topic for examination, the focus on Frederick Douglass offered sufficient distance from ideological debates of the 1960s. It became fairly easy to separate their views, both in theory and practice, from those of their predecessors, with some exceptions.[23] Focusing attention on the slave narrative and on slavery in general was also logical way to readily identify with peers who were experiencing similar shifts in the discourse in other fields, especially history, where, "new history studies" had opened up critical new areas of inquiry. And yet, as more gendered critiques of Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* began to surface, a most notable one by Deborah McDowell,[24] *Reconstruction* seemed to participate in another kind of reconstruction: the uncritical acceptance of representations of slavery that privileged male slave authority and independence at the expense of female exploitation, brutality, and humiliation.

A more concrete mapping of this cognitive dissonance, as acts of separation and exclusion, lies in the history of black literary journals. The premier journal in black literature today, *African American Review,*

founded in 1967 as *Negro American Literature Forum,* bore the subtitle "For School and University Teachers" and received its support from Indiana State University's School of Education. The first change occurred in the title: *Negro* to *Black* when the journal moved to the College of Liberal Arts. *African American Review,* like many early black journals, followed the conventional practice of subordinating pedagogy to literary criticism, as the need to validate and "credential" black literature increased. A similar case holds for the *College Language Association Journal,* founded ten years earlier in 1957. While the name did not change, a review of the contents over more than five decades shows the progression from discussions of teaching practice, to major essays on traditional British and American literature, to today's focus almost exclusively on African American literary criticism.[25]

|FCC| This institutional legacy has its parallel in our general understanding of artistic and cultural practice. The distinction between high and low art remains, even when a major objective of postmodern culture is to collapse these boundaries. We blame the publishing industry for implementing the distinctions between "literary" and "genre fictions," but we consistently reinforce these classifications by privileging certain kinds of texts over others in our teaching and our research. More difficult still is the differential value we place on orality versus written literacy. Students will receive less praise for their mastery of oral communication skills and literacies than for the preferred academic writing they may or may not master. We do not welcome the "other" kind of writing even when it comes with passion and focus. The distinctions we make between types of writers, speakers, and readers encourage exclusion and invisibility. The preference for the ideal academic student reader or writer can blind us to the student aiming for a career as a writer or academic scholar.

Stepto and Fisher's belief in the necessary *divestment* of the more "elementary" functions associated with academic practice calls to mind Barbara Herrnstein Smith's discussion of "critical problematics." Literary value and evaluation are different for those inside the class and the "reading public," according to Smith, but because we have no record of the latter, we are left with the "social parochialism of academic critics" and rarely question "the social cultural and political functions that [their] evaluative statements perform."[26]

Arguably, the urgency to transform and consolidate a particular "brand" of literary criticism in order to gain credibility and authority within an elitist-driven academy was ambitious, if not radical in its own right. In the twenty-first century it is impossible to fully comprehend the range, intensity, and impact of the battles to counter a history of racist neglect by and within the academy. Indeed, entrenched societal attitudes, persistent exclusionary practices, and multiple forms of emotional and psychological, if not physical violence were responsible for many of the cultural wars in which African Americans were engaged as they became a critical mass in U.S. universities.

The institutionalization of literary study in the academy in the post-1960s era, however, is not the only explanation for the cognitive dissonance that exists. The absence of a more homogeneous racial identity, recalling a time when blacks suffered as a whole from racial discrimination, makes even more apparent certain polarizing tendencies. African American social and economic mobility beyond the academy is visible in expanded employment opportunities, increased political participation, and notable achievements in the corporate and government sectors, all of which disrupts a social and spatial process generally associated with a perceived earlier black community cohesiveness. Recent cultural and class formations, displaying an authority that is rarely compatible with self-critique, likewise exists without the incentive for rigorous examination of relevant ideological, social, or cultural contexts. When a growing elite no longer identifies with the commonality of interests and shared social values of the "traditional" black community, it becomes both victim and perpetuator of increasing intraracial class divisions.

Perhaps none of these formations is more problematic than the public intellectual phenomenon. Those who have taken on this role, according to Madhu Dubey, tend to give uncritical acceptance to the media's "panic-stricken attention to an allegedly growing black 'underclass,' thereby reinforcing [William] Wilson's picture of post–Civil Rights black America as more divided than ever before along the lines of class." Dubey's conclusion is that "African American intellectuals seeking to speak for the race as a whole occupy a position of extreme contradiction in the postmodern era." The central challenge is the need for a "collective racial politics that gives due weight to intra-racial differences."[27] Yet, explanations and contemporary panaceas are extensive, ranging from the call for an

idealized return to a transclass racial community to bell hooks's "Postmodern Blackness."[28]

More to the point of this discussion, however, is Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature?,* which puts the contradictory impulses among black intellectuals in sharp relief. Warren's work looks back to the *Reconstruction* school in efforts to clarify the terms of black literary discourse by establishing boundaries of meaning and interpretation. At the same time, however, Warren is reminiscent of an even earlier generation of scholars, who had contradictory impulses of their own.[29] Sixty years and many careers later, in a crucial turn, Warren's proposal that African American literature is a "post-emancipation phenomenon that gained coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation"[30] sets forth a narrowly circumscribed vision, defining the practitioners rather than the practice. If Redding's generation had feelings of anguish at their racial obligations and the Reconstruction school wanted to ensure the field's academic legitimacy, Warren wishes to draw a line of demarcation, privileging one or maybe two generations, a distinct body of knowledge and a closed curriculum. The limitations he imposes flies in the face of much contemporary scholarship on the origins and development of African American and diaspora literature, as much as it welcomes the forces of marginalization and new forms of essentialism.[31] His view replaces resilience, organicism, and dynamism as fundamental features of cultural change with stasis; it obliterates the relationship between the past and the present; and any future literature becomes culturally insignificant and socially inconsequential.

In a real sense, however, Warren brings us back to the very question that this essay seeks to address: what should be the appropriate response to the changing landscape of African American literature in a technology rich and globally aware world. What lies beneath Warren's provocative claim that "African American literature is over" is a failure to see intellectual opportunities in the current moment that reexamine African American studies more broadly. Warren's proposal suggests the fear of losing authority as we pry African American literature loose from those intellectual assumptions underscoring a more or less uniform field of inquiry, which, by the mid-1980s, had established its own set of hierarchies and controls, and is largely responsible for shaping the careers of

a significant number of late twentieth-century scholars, not only within the United States but abroad.

The real and present danger has more to do with the paradigm shift that is likely to evoke questions, engaging in the kind of work that takes us out of our intellectual or political comfort zones, transcending the class divisions from which many of us have benefitted. Moving beyond Warren's vision that, in effect, sees racial matters "banished as the relic of a bygone era," means recognizing that "racial politics in the postmodern period can no longer be premised on the models of unmediated racial representation or of a monolithic black community."[32] The choice to expand definitions, inviting different, more collective visions, means placing urgent intellectual questions in the larger matrix of cultural influences that can better shape future research, scholarship, and pedagogy. Warrenhas done us a real service in foregrounding the challenges and opportunities that the field confronts.

III. BLACK PRINT CULTURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Foremost among these challenges is the inability of our current frameworks to capture the radical changes in what African American literature is and whom it serves. Technology empowers, gains momentum, expands and redefines literature, creating a contested space where older more traditional paradigms cannot expect to persist unchanged. The most frequently taught canon of African American literature is but one part of our larger print culture,[33] whose driving force today is technology. Students who operate within this larger print culture trouble our understanding of literature *as well as* literacy, which we have typically understood as a specific set of autonomous cognitive skills to be taught rather than as a socially constructed and dynamic practice. The resulting disconnect between our expectations and those of our students may look like racial, gender, class, or generational differences but might be better explained as differences in the meaning of literacy.

The shift from literature to literacy here suggests that understanding today's black print culture cannot be based solely on the ability to read and write. More critical to this changing definition of literacy are the distinct characteristics of media saturation that are multisensory,

and employ image, sight, sound, and kinetic and tactile modes. The most sophisticated users have learned to manipulate the tools of technology for communication, self-expression, and creation. They are, in essence, highly print literate and display a type of competence that is no less cognitive or intellectual but derives from different types of intelligence that these forms embody. Early scholars like Geneva Smitherman, and more recently Keith Gilyard and Adam Banks, have pointed out the existence of language diversity and varieties of linguistic competence as other bases for understanding black literacy, arguing vehemently against the kinds of valuation systems we employ, systems that privilege standard English writers and speakers to the exclusion of all others. That "different" did or does not mean "inferior" has seldom been an easy sell. Banks makes the bridge from print literacy to technology and the potential for eliminating racism and exclusion.[34] The expansion of literacy that has spurred the growth of African American literature, exhibits the same potential for creating a more democratic society, according to Doug Kellner, who proposes that we invest more fully in "the cultivation of print literacy . . . [that] can promote democratic self-expression . . . invigorating debate and participation,"[35] The democratizing of self-expression has led to new contestations of intellectual and cultural space as different sites of cultural production become more visible. Despite the perception that technology has been largely responsible for disabling print culture, black print culture is larger than ever and remains the place where discussions of literacy, culture, and democratic access collide and connect.

The evolution of a new print culture has other social and intellectual implications, reflecting a process of literary production markedly different from and in direct competition with the traditional corporate publishing world. The repositioning in the publishing industry has meant that mainstream publishers no longer dominate the market as they once did. Many have consolidated or closed as the independent publishing sector continues to expand. The publishing "empire," is toppling because the multitier system is not needed to move a book from manuscript to published form. The large editorial staffs, marketing departments, art and design teams, and financial units that once comprised distinct entities in the successful publishing houses have become obsolete. Less-expensive publishing options have replaced the hardcover blockbuster, and distribution mechanisms are easier to access. Books circulate and re-

circulate through Amazon, Google, and eBay, allowing readers to have more control over their choices and to exercise their purchasing power.

These changes are linked with a critique of assorted new types of literature in circulation and the culture that produces it. The growth of popular culture has forced a rethinking of many of the analytical categories for organizing print culture. Terms such as "literary," in contrast to "popular" or "commercial," have little bearing on what people read. Moreover, that these distinctions reinforce an implicit hierarchy serving publishers rather than readers has become increasingly clear. In this context, we do well to remember that African American literature and cultural production have rarely "played by the rules." The need and ability to cross various linguistic and structural boundaries accounts in large part for the distinctive utilitarian and aesthetic qualities in African American literature.

Thus, despite the efforts to prevent the further spread of "extraliterary values, ideas and pedagogical constructions that have plagued literature," the major concern expressed by the *Reconstruction* school,[36] mass distribution of print and media texts has followed its own course. Well-established boundaries become less visible and viable when we move from inside the space of the classroom to the outside. We, like our students, impart and exchange views representing different tastes as we participate in different media practices. Assuming that print literacy does not bind these practices or that students are constructing their identities exclusively through various forms of social networking would be a mistake.

The question to ask then is not about the meaning of communicating and accessing information through the internet but about the relationship between the various forms of literacy to which we have access. Even if the expansion of media culture presents a challenge to traditional print culture, it has not brought about a declining interest in the black book per se. One of the major contributions of the Black Arts Movement publishers like Detroit-based Broadside Press, founded by Dudley Randall, and Chicago-based Third World Press, founded by Haki Madhubuti, is the expansion of the market of readers and writers committed to black literature. Although the goals of Black Arts authors and publishers were different from those of the whiteowners of Holloway House, who entered the market of black popular fiction early, the latter coined the phrase

"Black Is Gold" for its marketing campaign, predicting the commercial potential in black literary production.[37]

Returning to Griffin's 2004 review of African American literature, of the ten trends she notes, three of them are far more relevant now than when the review appeared:

- the rise in the production of black commercial fiction;
- the creation of new literary and artistic institutions outside of the academy, such as Art Sanctuary, founded by Lorene Cary, and the Before Columbus Foundation, founded by Ishmael Reed;
- the emergence of the internet as a site of publication, distribution, and discussion.[38]

The major complaint and prediction in 2004 was that while the number of authors and readers was rapidly increasing, these writers continued to experience marginalization by a mainly white publishing industry. The signs in the larger print culture, however, were pointing in a different direction.

Publishing Trends, an online review that provides "news and opinion on the changing world of book publishing," began to actively map the growth of independent book publishing in 1994. Its lead article for April 2003 reported the explosion in independent publishing, in comparison to the larger publishing conglomerates. According to *Publishing Trends,* Barnes and Noble, for example, saw purchases from the ten largest publishers decline from 74 percent in 1994 to 46 percent in 1997.[39] A little more than a decade later, Borders would file for bankruptcy, following a trend that *Newsweek* and other news media had already begun to predict. As these conglomerates try to adjust and create new strategies to bring themselves out of a deep slump, smaller presses began to pick up the slack, doing precisely what Hyperion's Bob Miller proposed in 2003: "cultivate specialties, pounce on trends quickly to beat out the sluggish large houses."[40] As a result, their sales for the Independent Publishers Group are soaring, with the figures to back it up: more than 30 percent annual revenue increase in nearly two decades, owing to such factors as "desktop publishing, internet ubiquity, come-one-come-all chain bookselling . . . grooming niche markets with direct special sale tactics."[41]

BLACK IS GOLD*
FOR THE AMERICAN BOOKSELLER

Here's why it should be big business for you.

Holloway House Poster courtesy Project on the History of Black Writing Archives.

*Over $92 Billion Retail Market (Ninth largest consumer expenditure market in the world)
—Department of Commerce

Thus while Griffin was correct in her assessment that major publishers were likely less interested in publishing more black authors, what she did not consider was the ability of a rapidly growing independent press to aggressively pursue new voices that, according to *Publishing Trends* "push the envelope."

It is not insignificant that some academic scholars have successfully navigated what many still see as troubled waters. They work across the class and digital divide as they embrace the broader meaning of intellectual and cultural work. For example, Elizabeth Nunez, a provost at Medgar Evers College, publishes academic books and is an award-winning Random House novelist as well. Readers know her, however, through the largest site for commercial black literature AALBC (African American Literature Book Club), where one finds Nunez's seven novels: *When Rocks Dance* (1992), *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (2003), *Bruised Hibiscus* (2003), *Discretion* (2003), *Grace* (2006), *Prospero's Daughter* (2006), and her latest, *Anna In-Between* (2009). With its own search engine (http://thebestblackbookserach.com), AALBC has an impressive author listing, including books by Barack Obama. Logging on to Nunez's books, one can view a podcast of Nunez reading as well as brief descriptions and excerpts from each of the books. The site approaches black print culture holistically, refusing to distinguish between author "types." AALBC markets *all* black authors; they are nonhierarchical. Ben Okra, winner of the Booker Prize, is featured alongside Frank Matthews, a recent discovery of Karen Hunter Publishing, one of the fastest growing contemporary producers of black fiction. Matthews' life behind bars provided the solitude and the motivation for his transformation, extending the long tradition of prison literature, while simultaneously expanding on it for increased accessibility. The power of words and images combined to make *Respect the Jux* successful: a four-minute music video, starring Matthews himself, was undoubtedly a big factor in the book's successful advance promotion. *Twenty thousand* copies sold immediately on the book's 2010 release.

Many authors do well without such a distribution network, however. Gwendolyn Pough, who is not on AALBC's list, is a professor of women's and gender studies, writing and rhetoric at Syracuse University. Pough wrote *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture and the Public Sphere* (2004), a major contribution to cultural

studies and feminist scholarship but elected to write her romance novels under a pseudonym, Gwyneth Bolton. Her access to the romance tradition, historically the domain of women readers, came through her background. Growing up in a working-class community in Paterson, New Jersey, Pough speaks warmly of an attentive mother who was an avid reader of Harlequin romances, the most continuously successful series for women readers. Prolific in the genre, Pough releases a book almost bimonthly through Kimani Books, Harlequin's black romance fiction imprint. According to Pough, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, romance publishers had begun to look for writers and were willing to provide one-on-one editorial attention, which made it relatively easy to get through the publication process: the exact opposite of the conglomerates. Moreover, a separate reward system and support networks provide the necessary incentive to improve and master the craft. Although E. Jerome Dickey takes the lead in black romance fiction sales, Bolton has acquired a name for herself along with a sizeable number of honors. Her independent website announces her awards such as the 2010 Emma Author of the Year Award and provides an intimate space for her readers to communicate directly with her. The social networking phenomenon updates a much older strategy in women's fiction, the art of familiarity, going back to the epistolary novels of the nineteenth century. One thinks of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* for example, who used the language of sentiment to gain her women readers' approval for exercising unauthorized agency as a black woman. Bolton actively builds her network by communicating by email with her readers, sharing personal information on the website, posting questions and answering them publicly. She knows her audience and rarely fails to give what she promises on her site: "sexy romance with an urban flair."

The potential of information technologies as a tool for writing and publishing has its megastar, of course, in Zane, the pen name of the Baltimore-based author, who founded Strebor Books in 1999, a one-woman publishing enterprise. The "Zane phenomena" began with the distribution of her first stories to paid subscribers through her electronic newsletter. The entrepreneurial venture was an immediate success, filling a huge void in books for black women, a market that had exploded following the success of Terri McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (novel, 1992; film, 1995). Zane quickly began to write longer works, watching the sales

figures for her books reportedly reach more than 250,000 for early titles such as *Addicted* (2001) and the ever-popular *The Sex Chronicles: Shattering the Myth* (2002). The innovative use of digital space would become the standard among small independent publishers, the category that includes *all* black publishers without exception.[42] Zane's success did not go unnoticed by mainstream publishers, and Simon and Schuster, which had already begun to distribute her books, acquired Strebor in 2005. By then, Zane had written nine books, published more than 100 titles by other authors, and sold more than three million copies combined, with annual sales of $15 million. In an effort to stabilize their own declining markets, Simon and Schuster acknowledged that Zane represented a "new publishing category for African American readers" and through her, wanted desperately to "grow [their] share of this increasingly vibrant market." Zane was exactly what they needed, "that self-generated gem," the company's spokesman was quoted as saying.[43] The "new publishing category," was of course black erotica. Zane, however, was in good company. A report of best-sellers for September 2004 listed Zane's *Nervous* as number one in the hardcover fiction category, alongside Bill Clinton's *My Life* and Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life,* the top-selling books among hardcover nonfiction. The same issue reported Zane's anthology of black erotica, *Chocolate Flavor,* as the #4 best-selling paperback, ranking above Edward Jones's Pulitzer Prize-–winning *The Known World.*[44] While Strebor Books carried a highly diverse line, including mysteries, police dramas, science fiction, historical fiction, urban fiction, gay and lesbian themes, and religious-themed books, Zane chose to write about sex, she said, "because we freed our bodies from slavery a long time ago, and now it is time to free our minds."[45]

Undoubtedly, an improved print-on-demand technology, e-books, e-marketing, and guerilla marketing (a popular Black Arts Movement strategy), and black distributors like AALBC and Black Books Direct enable black publishers to find and deliver to their audiences. Black print culture today includes books of all kinds: romance novels, mysteries, speculative fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction essays, memoirs, letters, experimental writing, spoken word, graphic novels, self-help books, and Christian fiction. It has also embraced the reader's culture through the cultivation of black book clubs, a longstanding African American tradition, one that did not begin with Oprah, as many have assumed. While

we have always known that black people *read* more than the data suggested, today they are claiming an increasingly larger share of the book-*buying* public.

As best-selling authors Terry McMillan, E. Lynne Harris, and Zane learned—all three self-published their first books—becoming a force in today's print culture is a bottom-up process. This, too, is not new in the history of black writing; many early black authors, the wildly popular nineteenth-century poet Frances E. W. Harper as well as turn-of-the-century authors E. Sutton Griggs and Pauline Hopkins published their first books independently. Hopkins and Griggs, unable to find a publisher, created their own companies and continued to successfully publish and distribute their own books and those of others. They were among the best-selling authors of their times, and their relative invisibility says more about their exclusion from the mainstream discourses than it does about their importance in the history of black writing and publishing.

Within print culture, the fastest growing market is urban fiction, with an assortment of ever-shifting and expanding categories: street lit/hip-hop/gangsta lit, urban fantasy, urban romance, erotica, and Christian or inspirational fiction. Authors of these fictions recognize the particular geography of social relations as well as the reluctance of the academic establishment to incorporate or seriously examine their work. What criticism exists falls within the purview of "popular culture studies." Writers of urban fiction comprehend and claim a space as gendered—male, female, lesbian, gay, bisexual—and black by exploring the particularities of contemporary life. At times they use essentialized discourses that establish a racial, cultural connection with the reader and acknowledge the commodity culture of our postmodern world as their characters navigate complex lives and multiple identities. These authors make themselves known to their readers through a wide array of social networking communication.

Despite the high visibility of contemporary black print culture, we have limited informational resources and even less aggregate or reliable data on which to base our analysis. While short, pithy essays on Zane are available, almost all appeared *after* Simon and Schuster acquired her line of books in 2004/2005, suggesting that she gained a different kind of mainstream access at that point. AALBC and BlackbooksDirect have done extremely well through e-marketing and sales, but even most of

that information is anecdotal. Directories of publishers and writers are even more difficult. The Project on the History of Black Writing (http://www.hbw.ku.edu) maintains a fairly comprehensive electronic database, one that is far more comprehensive up to 1980s, but the growth of independent publishing and self-publishing has made this increasingly more difficult. Grace Adams's *Black Authors and Publishers International Directory,* an invaluable compendium of information published annually since 2006, is also very uneven, since it relies heavily on individual submissions, rather than a systematic search. Nor does it provide composite data. A few case studies exist such as the brief one quoted earlier on Holloway House, but traditional scholarly studies are emerging slowly, although the work of Candice Love Jackson[46] shows much promise.

The lack of "hard" data notwithstanding,[47] enough evidence suggests that African Americans are and will remain wedded to print culture. As the demand for books increases, we expect to see continued growth in black distribution outlets and the number of black authors, as well as more black book clubs, book fairs, and festivals. A technology-rich society levels the playing field, making access less dependent on academic privilege, and more dependent on the utilization of information resources.

IV. CREATING NEW SPATIAL GEOGRAPHIES

This final section of the essay argues for a different kind of discursive space that looks at a multivalent print culture without excising the literacy and literary practices that such a culture implies. The chasm that separates the reality of black print culture from the academic discourses in which most of us are engaged sends mixed if not conflicting messages to those who participate at some level in both. It is this population—especially the students we encounter in our classes—who deserve a space where dialogue and discussion can thrive independent of the dictates of exclusionary critical theories.

Thadious Davis suggests that social/spatial geographies are indeed narratives where issues of power and privilege collide.[48] Using Southern literature as a point of departure, she considers what happens when exclusion becomes an intellectual and cultural practice within the so-

cial geography of segregation, focusing on the works of Richard Wright, Ernest Gaines, Alice Walker, and others as specific cases in point. Following Davis's lead, we might say that postracial culture as having created its own social/spatial geography, one in which black literary production has moved from a constrictive spatial reality to a spatial imaginary. Like other sites of black cultural production, this shift challenges our pedagogical practices and our theoretical assumptions as well. Readers figure prominently in this new spatial geography, pushing against the limits of our current academic knowledge, as well as the power and privilege that it presumes. Using the tools of technology, we extend the range of intellectual and literary production and simultaneously extend the audiences and groups that particular products can reach.

The growing use and application of digital technologies further complicate issues of power and privilege in the field of black studies, however. To fully engage the digital is to have access to independent windows into past and current knowledge, lessening the dependence on the views of any single group. As a key point of continuity within the black experience, the creation of new spatial geographies replicates the push and pull factor identified with the earlier transformation from the rural agricultural South to an urban industrial North. In this instance, the inadequacies of our current pedagogical practices push people away from engagement, while the dynamism and transformative potential of technology pulls people into an awareness of new possibilities. The *eBlack*[49] studies group at the University of Illinois, who have been providing in-depth analysis of black studies for the last four decades, concludes that "everything is being invented and reconnected, as we move from an industrial society to an informational, networked one in a new global system,"[50] confirming the belief in digital technology as a new form of grounding with the capacity to guide the future.

Nevertheless, myths about "the poverty of black print culture," according to Dubey, come frequently from black (postmodern) intellectuals who "aspire to broad-based racial representation but cannot overtly sanction the modern idea of acculturating the lower classes into a print literate tradition."[51] Cornell West draws an even sharper distinction when proposing "the ur-text of black culture is neither a word nor a book . . . [but] the 'guttural cry' and the 'wrenching moan'."[52] Dubey correctly points out that this kind of essentialism "re-enacts all the founding moves

of 1960s black cultural nationalism" in its "attachment to . . . outmoded definitions of racial authenticity . . . [that] reproduces the nationalist hierarchy of (elite, inauthentic) print and (popular, authentic) vernacular culture."[53] These hierarchies, whether intentional or not, reveal a not-so-thinly-veiled class bias that prohibits self-critique, a thoroughgoing analysis of contemporary black print culture—or black culture in general—and renders most scholars incapable of understanding the pivotal role that technology can and does play in redefining, if not expanding, social and intellectual space. This may well be, as Eric Lott suggests, "a defensive posture . . . symptomatic of a situation in which black critics function inside left and intellectual subcultures without enough institutional support from inside the race."[54] In the end, these feed our failure to generate a new critical thinking practice.

At best, most contemporary black writers acknowledge the existence of a double standard, even if academics don't call it that. Reading and writing are valuable enterprises, but not all reading and writing have the same value—something we implicitly accept. A canon of accepted literary texts exists, some popular texts cross over, and other texts exist purely for commercial reasons and do not deserve our attention. Octavia Butler and Tananarive Due as writers of speculative fiction have gained increasing acceptability as crossover authors; they frequently appear on class reading lists and in theses and dissertations. Butler's *Kindred* is now accepted as an important neo-slave narrative. Due's work is linked to discourses on the post-human and Afrofuturism as a literary and cultural aesthetic. Both authors fall into the "popular" category, a contested term, says Candice Jackson, since it is "linked not with time but with taste."[55] This reminder that tastes are cultivated, class specific, and socially conditioned brings us back to the classroom as a critical space, or as Mary Louise Pratt has told us, a "cultural contact zone," the place to allow dialogue between the different tastes, especially as they relate to power.[56] Pratt proposes that we have a decided advantage when we consider the classroom a site of engagement for socially transformative practice. Teaching without awareness of those issues of class and power that underlie the pedagogical choices limits opportunities for any real engagement.

If contemporary black fiction in every genre imaginable disturbs the pedagogical *and* personal comfort zones for many of us, our students

find them compelling because of the ways in which these texts engage the actualities of their lives, real or imagined. These are reader-identified books. Zane argues, for example, that her books help "shatter the myth of sexual dysfunction between black men and women." She hopes that she is imparting "moral lessons in each of her stories, with liberation as the underlying premise." Readers, many of whom are young women, see "strong, take-no-prisoner-type women who learn hard lessons by the end of the book," she tells us.[57] The reader as a subject of analysis is not new; it has given rise to more than one variety of reader response theories and a host of key texts such as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance,* Shirley Samuels's *The Culture of Sentiment,* and more recently Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literature Societies*. Still the pedagogical implications of focusing on readers rather than writers escape us.

Do these writers *deserve* the space we might give them in the classroom, we ask? How seriously do they take themselves as writers? Harlequin author Artist (A. C.) Arthur, with nearly two dozen novels in seven years, specializes in paranormal romances, a popular genre within romance fiction that combines elements of science fiction. Arthur rises at 4:00 AM to exercise and begin her writing routine; writing is for her hard work, and she prepares for it. The challenge is in the development of different characters for her novels that have brought her success, including *Full House Seduction* (2009), *Guarding His Body* (2008), *A Cinderella Affair* (2007), and *Object of Desire* (2003). Several years ago, when her creative energies shifted, she confronted a new challenge, as she began to write multicultural paranormal young adult fiction. This, she argues, is a different kind of story creation, and it has to cross many boundaries. She has written two novels in her new Myxtix series, which stresses greater diversity than her earlier fiction: teenagers facing more than puberty, differences among them, small towns in which they live, and the supernatural. She remains with Harlequin, writing under their young adult imprint, Kimani TRU. The scholarly potential is high as these science fiction works treat young adult themes and cultural conflict. Her response to the question of academic criticism about her work is gracious: after a dozen books, she knows of no articles in academic journals and has only given a few interviews for online magazines.[58]

Arthur's story is not unusual. Like many authors, success with adult fiction is sufficient motivation to test their talents in another genre, often for younger readers. Thus, we must challenge the view that these are not "serious writers of literature" who consistently work at their craft. Some publishers are fighting back, fully aware of their exclusion from academic discourses. The growing interest in romance fiction in particular has encouraged the Romantic Writers of America to initiate a research grant competition to advance academic research.

Writers, too, are fighting back. Marita Golden (*Migrations of the Heart, Long Distance Life, And Do Remember Me*) founded the Hurston/Wright Foundation in 1990 as an independent space to train and cultivate writers of color at early stages of their career. The foundation has held regular summer workshops and gives annual awards for the most promising work in poetry and fiction. In 2002, Golden coauthored, with E. Lynn Harris *Gumbo: An Anthology of African American Writing.* As the title suggests, this book is a collection of all varieties of black print culture. Literary novelists such as Edwidge Danticat, John Edgar Wideman, and Gloria Naylor appear in the collection alongside Eric Jerome Dickey, Terry McMillan, J. California Cooper, as well as more experimental authors such as Mat Johnson *Incognegro, Drop, Dark Rain, Hunting in Harlem, Pym.* The volume includes lesser-known but prolific writers such as David Anthony Durham (*Gabriel's Song, Walk Through Darkness, Pride of Carthage*) and Bertice Berry (*Redemption, The Haunting of Hip Hop*). The book's goal is to teach us by its example, challenging boundaries that exist and divide writers, boundaries we reinforce in our classroom practice. Golden, a writer and teacher, understood that anthologies by definition exclude. Just as the Hurston/Wright Foundation created an independent organization to meet the needs of developing writers, so too does *Gumbo* move toward a purposeful unity within the writing community, intentionally moving beyond genre classifications.

Greater receptivity to the crossing of boundaries exists within contemporary black texts that bear the labels "experimental" or "postmodern." The graphic novel, as a case in point, offers unlimited possibilities for reinvention as a sequential art form, using thematically coherent narrative and comic book design. Contemporary black graphic novelists have used the genre to examine the politics of race and representation just as

early black cartoonists did. The work of Melvin Van Peebles does this and more. Van Peebles made history in 1971 when he wrote, produced, scored, and starred in the independent film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song.* Blaxplotiation films thus made their appearance, and Van Peebles faced a critical environment that deplored his reliance on hypervisibility and stereotype, although his subsequent work, such as *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death,* confirmed him as one of our most innovative and experimental artists. In his first graphic novel *Confessions of a Ex-Doofus-Itchy-Footed Mutha* (2009), Van Peebles extends his reputation for crossing boundaries, disciplines, and traditions and for his skillful blending of literary and visual culture. The story is a coming-of-age narrative in the picaresque tradition; the protagonist experiences black culture through its various modalities (blues, jazz) together with ritualized initiations. He learns the lessons of history that he must take with him to manhood. The story is told through visual frames that include illustrations and photography and uses a narrative style that alternates between poetry and prose. As with all of his work, Van Peebles presents countervisions in complex and contradictory ways that demand a keen critical eye to unpack.[59]

Other blended forms show the potential of contemporary black writing to respond in inventive ways, using both print and digital literacies. J. T. Kemp calls his new genre "prolyretry" and has produced four e-novels thus far: *b'n'b* (beauties and bitchwhores), *Infinite Love, Living Lyrics,* and *Tripolar.* What does it mean for a book to "look like poetry, read like prose, sound like music," he asks? Colleen Dixon has coined the phrase "quadrilogy" as a framing device for her connected fictions (*Simon Says, Every Shut Eye, Behind Closed Doors,* and *Relative Secrets.*) These works push the boundaries of textual form and meaning—whether we use the terms "literary" or "popular" to categorize them—and thus require new pedagogies and critical tools to give them proper attention.

The most important place to begin our dialogue about this new writing is to acknowledge the chasm between our teaching canon and the vast domain of black print culture. Print literacy historically identifies one's status as educated and middle class, but the digital revolution plays a democratizing role by giving greater information freedom, connectivity, and global access.[60] How does understanding this contradiction play itself out in the classroom? What authors do our students know that

we do not? How do our reading choices reflect our interpretations and identities, values, and beliefs that we bring to/take away from the text? What shapes the characters in the stories? How might they act differently depending on the circumstances that they face? What criteria do we use in determining what is good or bad about a text? These dialogues can easily extend beyond the classroom through web-based discussion forums that increase the investment in a process. Such discussions not only invite reflection but often moral and ethical choices. An objective is to get students to see the classroom as a space for "negotiating shared meaning and value through cultural differences."[61] Using pedagogy to achieve critical literacy means risking "safe" answers and allowing more inclusive dialogue and debate to heighten everyone's awareness of those views that others hold and share.

When *Black Issues in Higher Education* did a cover story on "New Literary Lights" in its January 2000 issue, Colson Whitehead, Calvin Baker, John Keane, Danzy Senna, and Natasha Tarpley all appeared on the cover. Since then, many of these authors' books have made it into classrooms, notably Colson Whitehead's *Intuitionist* (1999), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (2000), and Natasha Tarpley's *Girl in the Mirror: Three Generations of Black Women in Motion* (1999). The selection of this particular group of novelists for the issue's cover generated controversy because it appeared to support the myth that literary achievement presumes middle-class privilege, guaranteeing access. A story intended to introduce the future "stars" seemed to say nothing new: Whitehead, Tarpley, and Senna—graduates of Harvard (Whitehead, Tarpley) and Stanford (Senna)—have received the most attention. Whitehead added to his reputational capital by earning a prestigious Macarthur "genius" Award even before his career was in full swing. If we are to challenge these myths, we must begin to question the different frames of interpretation among students who already know well how to make careful distinctions between what is possible for whom.

If the standards that we use today continue to give scant attention to the full spectrum that is today's black print culture, we unknowingly compromise the very history that we have worked so hard to recover, running the risk of leaving a thin or incomplete record of what may well be the last stage of print culture as we know it. More importantly, addressing the disconnect between our students' reading practices and our

teaching canon can ensure that our critical literacy practice transcends the boundaries that reinforce differential power relations. Acknowledging and allowing the cultural, generational, and class differences that may surface provides a useful context for interpreting texts from multiple perspectives, just as shifting our focus from writer to reader can elicit a new critical pedagogy. Challenging traditional conceptions of the domains of literature puts texts and our students in conversation with each other, and our students in conversation with us.

While research and teaching are complementary functions, they do not necessarily share the same social or intellectual space. If we are to restore the unity between them, creating a larger critical space for dialogue could be one of the most important contributions we can make. Rather than a call for an uncritical unity, this is a call for making our intellectual production the guide to our work, without privileging one component over the other, and allowing for their substantive reintegration.

V. CONCLUSION

Critical literacy is a dialogue that reeducates and reinvents as we enter new cultural contact zones. It comes into being when there is a shift in the space occupied by those ideas we have routinely advanced, ideas that may exclude and marginalize. Critical literacy derives from the employment of effective pedagogies that take us beneath the surface of those texts that collectively may tell us how different cultural beliefs, values, and practices mediate interpretations. The recognition that we were readers before we were writers, scholars, or critics requires us to respect this trajectory in our students, placing it at the center of our debates. We must deplore and condemn those discourses that pathologize our students and what they read—even if *we* aren't actively participating in them. It is a pathology, according to Dubey, that "fuels disturbing assumptions that a group's cultural practices should have some bearing on the question of its right to public resources and social justice."[62] Such assumptions are likely to further discourage any trust in our authority.

Because our students can engage in online discussion groups, post reviews on Amazon.com, or find a willing publisher for that romance novel they have been dying to write, they have agency, independent of

what we teach. Our acceptance that "Black Is Gold" should not be a disparaging comment on the rise in black commercial fiction but a way to engage more sophisticated forms of literary and pedagogical practice through the active use of technology.

We want to enter this new space of learning and critique—the new cultural contact zone—fully aware of the forms of social stratification that accompanied a highly successful hierarchical compartmentalization within the academy. When and if we do, we can prepare our students and ourselves to comprehend a different social geography that does not normalize exclusion in order to support a viable print culture. Making the classroom a real place of learning and critique and not another stage in the culture wars can restore our faith in the kind of social transformation that brought most of us to the academy in the first place. We can indeed chart the map of a new world "without the mandate for conquest."

NOTES

1. Various definitions for the term "critical literacy" abound, from Freire (1987), Lanksheer and McLaren (1993), Shannon (1992), Morgan (1997), Furstenburg (2005). Two specialized journals *Literacy* and *Language Learning and Technology,* as well as Phipps and Guilherme's 2004 *Critical Pedagogy: Political Approaches to Language and Intercultural Communication,* provide useful surveys of the topic.

2. Jamie Myers and Fredrick Eberfors, "Globalizing English through Intercultural Critical Literacy, *English Education* (January 2010): 149 [148–168].

3. Abdul Alkalimat and Ronald Bailey, "From Black to eBlack: The Digital Transformation of Black Studies Pedagogy," *Fire!!! The Multiple Media Journal of Black Studies* 1:2 (2012):10.

4. Christopher Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Press: 1994), 241 ff.

5. Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Thirty Years of Black American Literature Studies: A Review," *Journal of Black Studies* 35:2 (November 2004): 165–166.

6. Derrick Darby provides an important intervention in the dialogue about ongoing educational inequality in his article "Educational Inequality and the Science of Diversity," *University of Kansas Law Review* 57 (2009): 755–793.

7. I use the term "black studies" here in its broadest sense, i.e., the reformation of the academy, however reluctant, in response to the presence of black students in its midst. Numerous contemporary examples remind us how sharply drawn some of these ideological battles were and continue to be, obscured perhaps by the changing social landscape of the academy. Decisions at Cornell University and Medgar Evers College over the disposition and dismantling of black studies and related programs have generated acrimonious debate among various sectors.

8. See James Smethurst and Howard Rambsy, "Reform and Revolution, 1965–1976: The Black Aesthetic at Work," in *The Cambridge History of African American Litera-*

ture, Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 405–451.

9. Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 38 (Winter 1989): 235 ff.

10. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* ed. and trans. Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

11. Maria Regina Kecht, *Politics Is Pedagogy: Literary Theory and Critical Teaching* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 1.

12. Robert Stepto and Dexter Fisher, eds., *African American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (New York: MLA, 1978), vii.

13. In his essay "Afro-American Literature Critics: An Introduction," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 33, Trudier Harris and Thadious Davis, eds. (Detroit: Cengale Gale, 1984), Darwin Turner tells us that "no more than two or three black scholars read papers at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association between 1949 and 1965," and that "as early as 1939 black scholars felt that they had so little opportunity to present papers at the regional or national MLA meetings that they formed an organization for black teachers of language and literature—the College Language Association," (310).

14. Stepto and Fisher, *Reconstruction,* 1, 2.

15. Stepto and Fisher, *Reconstruction,* 2.

16. Marvin X. Jackman, former associate editor of *Black Theatre,* was a seminal member of the Black Arts Movement with publications beginning in 1967: *Sudan Rajuli Samia,* 1967; *Sudan Rajuli Samia, Fly to Allah,* 1969; *Son of Man,* proverbs, 1969; *Flowers for the Trashman,* a play, 1965, and *Parable of the Black Bird,* 1968. He is credited with having created new genres of American literature. In 1969, he was refused a teaching position at Fresno State College.

17. Sherley Anne Williams, "The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry," in *Reconstruction,* Stepto and Fisher, eds. 81.

18. Howard Rambsy, II, *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

19. Stepto and Fisher, *Reconstruction,* 1.

20. Lawrence P. Jackson, The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

21. Jackson, *Indignant Generation,* 9.

22. Rarely did Black Arts poets receive invitations to teach at mainstream universities. An exception was Haki Madhubuti, still Don L. Lee at the time, who became writer-in-residence at Cornell following the highly publicized student takeover there in 1968. His main base of operation remained Third World Press.

23. I note here that scholars such as Charles Davis, J. Saunders Redding, Arna Bontemps, and Darwin Turner ended their careers in white institutions while others like Sterling Brown, William Leo Hansberry, Nick Aaron Ford, and Therman O'Daniel remained at HBCUs. I do not intend to suggest, therefore, that there was no contact or intellectual exchange between the younger scholars and their predecessors, either in the course of their graduate education or early in their careers.

24. McDowell contends that part of the popularity of Douglass lies not only in its condemnation of slavery but also in its ubiquitous image of the brutal beating of (naked) slave women (Douglass's Aunt Hester), which Douglass observes and on which he comments. Douglass, as both "witness and participant," according to McDowell,

suggests a "voyeuristic relation to the violence against slave women" (192) in his depiction of these events. Deborah McDowell, "In the first place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition," in *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass,* ed. William Andrews (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991), 192–214. The argument is extended by Hartman who elected not to include the Aunt Hester scene in her book, arguing that these kinds of representations allow the slave narrative to serve as pornography of the period. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

25. These trends are not peculiar to black literature but reflect the divisions in broader professional practice. One does literature, literary studies, and the modern languages at MLA but focuses on teaching of English at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (4 Cs). English departments have made little progress in altering these standard practices. Traditional divisions between the teaching of writing and literature call for graduate students and nontenured faculty to be almost exclusively tied to the former.

26. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.

27. Dubey, "Postmodernism," 4.

28. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

29. J. Saunders Redding, for example, one of the most eloquent critics of African American literature, had said near the end of his publishing career that he no longer wished "to live with the race problem . . . It has itself been an imperative, channelizing more of my energies than I wished to spare through the narrow gorge of race interest." He, like those of his generation, had produced a body of work dedicated to the "race question" not because he wanted to, he had said, "but because, driven by a daemonic force, I had to." Saunders Redding, *On Being Negro in America* (New York: Harper and Row: 1969 [1951]), 18.

30. Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1.

31. See "Introduction," Graham and Ward, *The Cambridge History.*

32. Dubey, "Postmodernism," 5.

33. Print culture generally refers to the process for interpreting, producing, circulating, and consuming texts and images that create a connected community.

34. See Adam J. Banks, *Race, Rhetoric and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum and NCTE, 2006).

35. Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (New York: Routledge, 2003 [c1995]), 336.

36. Stepto and Fisher, *Reconstruction,* 1.

37. Justin Gifford, "'Harvard in Hell': Holloway House Publishing Company, *Players Magazine* and the Invention of Black Mass-Market Erotica," *Melus* 35: 4 (Winter 2010): 111. Holloway House, founded in 1959 by two Hollywood publicists, Ralph Weinstock and Bentley Morriss, originally published an eclectic mix of Hollywood biographies, skin magazines, and the literature of Casanova and the Marquis de Sade. Following the 1965 Watts rebellion, says, "the white owners, Morriss and Weinstock, recognized the uprisings across the country as a crisis of representation, and they capitalized on this crisis by creating a culture industry that catered to a large-scale black

readership). The first mass marketed "black experience fiction," complemented the blaxploitation films of the period. Among their most successful authors were Iceberg Slim (David Beck) and Donald Goines.

38. Griffin, "Thirty Years,"166.

39. *Publishing Trends* X: 3 (March 2003): 3

40. *Ibid*.

41. *Publishing Trends* X: 4 (April 2003), 1, 6. I wish to thank Elisabeth Watson for combing through a decade of non-indexed back issues of the review for this valuable data.

42. Traditional black independent publishers like Third World Press, unable to meet the needs of newer readers, continue to find their sales declining.

43. Wayne Dawkins, "Buying Zane," *Black Issues Book Review* (September/October 2005): 10.

44. *Black Issues Book Review,* accessed March 23, 2011. http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Flying+off+the+shelves.-a0121572362

45. Lynette L. Holloway, *Ebony* (March 2005): 104.

46. See Candice Love Jackson, "From Writer to Reader, Black Popular Fiction," in *Cambridge History* ed. Graham and Ward, 655 ff.

47. *Behind Those Books,* a new documentary by Mills Miller and Kaven Brown, was released in 2011. The film takes a critical look at urban fiction as a genre and the industry it has spawned, and features Cornell West, Teri Woods, Zane, Terry McMillan, Kwan, and Michael Eric Dyson, along with representative book publishers.

48. Thadious Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

49. eBlack Studies formed from a group that began working together in 1971, producing one of the major introductory textbooks in the field of black studies, *Introduction to African American Studies, A Peoples College Primer,* now in its fifth edition. *Introduction* models the transformation of technologies from print to digital and is now available online as a series of free ninety-minute lectures.

50. Abdul Alkalimat and Ronald W. Bailey, "From Black to eBlack: The Digital Transformation of Black Studies Pedagogy" (Unpublished essay, 2011).

51. Dubey, "Postmodernism," 11.

52. Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Cornell West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 81.

53. Dubey, "Postmodernism," 11.

54. Eric Lott, "Response to Trey Ellis' 'The New Black Aesthetic,' *Callaloo 38* (Winter1989): 246.

55. Jackson, *Indignant Generation,* 655.

56. Mary Louise Pratt, *Profession 91* (New York: MLA, 1991): 34.

57. Holloway, *Ebony,* 104.

58. Telephone interview with the author, September 2009.

59. I wish to thank Deborah Whaley, University of Iowa, for bringing to my attention the role of comic art as launching pads for thinking through the politics of race and representation that both prefigured and extended to film and television.

60. eBlack Studies, "Draft Manifesto" (2008).

61. Jamie Myers and Fredrik Eberfors, "Globalizing English through Intercultural Critical Literacy," *English Education* (January 2010): 149.

62. Dubey's essay provides an excellent overview of these debates and discourses.

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