

Distinguished Professor Emeritus Dr. Maryemma Graham: Short Biography —

There are 4 generations of educators in my family, and I can go back to at least one member who taught in one-room schools in the early part of the century. They were amazing storytellers, and in my child's mind, I associated being educated with the ability to tell stories to people inside and outside the classroom. Because I was such an avid listener, a reader and extremely curious, I saw early how stories empowered people, imparting wisdom and guiding their actions in one way or another. The more I advanced in my own education, the more I left these stories behind. An important connection came in the form of a battered copy of a first edition of *Negro Caravan* and a Royal typewriter, circa 1950 (both belonging to my deceased father). This background provides the context for my own engaged scholarship, whether it is the teaching of autobiography as a structured way to give meaning to memory, my passion for recovering and promoting the history of literacy and literature through *The Project on the History of Black Writing* (1983--); or my international collaborative work, like *The Cambridge History*, a book 10 years in the making or the Language Matters Initiative.

It also explains the motivation for my recent biographical book, *The House Where my Soul Lives: The Life of Margaret Walker* (Oxford 2023), which brings together my recovery work--exploring the life of the "most important person that nobody knows"--and my theories on invention and innovation as African American literary practices. Walker illustrates the kind of creative tension that occurs in so much of African American literature, the demonstration of mastery in the use of specific narrative, lyric and dramatic modes and the need to push beyond these boundaries to address larger intellectual questions, specific conditions, as well as traditions. Living between 1915 and 1998, Walker saw her work evolve in a way that provides useful commentary on developments in the 20th century regarding advances in criticism and cultural theory. She was keenly aware of how vexed the search for meaning and order could be when faced with the ongoing challenges to a literature still struggling for recognition and unbiased interpretation. My concern as a scholar takes note of the difficulty of subjecting African American authors like Walker to a strictly binary analysis that opposes the folk and written traditions. I, therefore, look at the interconnections among forms, public events, changing developments in technology and creative choices to provide an interpretive framework, realizing that writers are not the sole shapers of literature. My current work in the digital humanities expands upon this idea by examining the process of cultural transmission and its effect upon literature and literacy. What happens when media and technology become organizing principles?