

7-17-2012

# Art for whose Sake?: Defining African American Literature

Ebony Z. Gibson

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# ART FOR WHOSE SAKE?: DEFINING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

EBONY Z. GIBSON

Under the Direction of Jonathan Gayles

## ABSTRACT

This exploratory qualitative study describes the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. Maulana Karenga's black arts framework shaped the debates in the literature review and the interview protocol; furthermore, the presence or absence of the framework's characteristics were discussed in the data analysis. The population sampled was African American Literature professors in the United States who have no less than five years experience. The primary source of data collection was in-depth interviewing. Data analysis involved open coding and axial coding. General conclusions include: (1) The core of the African American Literature definition is the black writer representing the black experience but the canon is expanding and becoming more inclusive. (2) While African American Literature is often a tool for empowerment, a wide scope is used in defining methods of empowerment. (3) Black writers should balance aesthetic and political concerns in a text.

INDEX WORDS: African-American literature, Black aesthetics

ART FOR WHOSE SAKE?: DEFINING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

EBONY Z. GIBSON

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

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2012

ART FOR WHOSE SAKE?: DEFINING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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August 2012

## **DEDICATION**

To my father and his memory. You died long ago but your love still lives.

To my mother. You support me in whatever I do.

To my best friend. You are my sister, my support system, and my voice of reason.

To all black writers who give voice to the voiceless. And to all teachers and scholars who share their stories.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to all my members of my thesis committee for your support during this long process.

A special thanks to Jonathan Gayles for his patience in my writing process and his willingness to support me in a project outside of his comfort zone.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. This chapter describes the background of the research problem and includes a problem statement. The significance of the study and the nature of the study are also addressed. Next, the Afrocentric conceptual framework is explained. Finally, operational definitions, assumptions, and limitations are presented.

### 1.1 Background

A common and longstanding debate in African American literary history is a disagreement over the primary role of African American Literature (“Bound No’th Blues,” 1998; Eichelberger, 1999; Gates, 1987/1998; Early, 2000; Jarrett, 2006; McDowell & Spillers, 1997; Napier, 2000; Rampersad, 1997; Warren, 2011). Some critics believe that the primary function of black literature is the social and political empowerment of the black community (Baraka, 1963/2011; Du Bois, 1926/1997; Joyce, 1987/1998; Karenga, 1968/1997; Neal, 1968/2011; Wright, 1937/1997) and therefore they often posit three main tenets:

- writers should create literature the black community can understand and therefore be empowered by it;
- literature should be used to describe the black experience and improve the social conditions of the black community; and
- literature should always be used as a tool for political resistance.

On the other hand, some writers and critics believe this is an unfair burden and artists should not be bound by a political agenda (Baldwin, 1949/1997; Baldwin, 1951/1997; Ellison, 1963-1964/2011; Johnson, 1921/1997; Locke, 1928/2011). They assert that:

- writers should be able to exert individual freedom in subject matter;

- literature should be appreciated for and pay considerable attention to aesthetics;
- literature should include a variety of perspectives on the black experience and all are valid interpretations.

Elements of this debate can be seen in a review of historical time periods of the African American Literary Canon.

Texts produced by African Americans from 1746 to 1865 were often acts of resistance. Slave narratives were used as political tools to show the horrors of the enslaved (Andrews, 1997; Early, 2000; “Go Down,” 1998). Andrews (1999) explains the abolition movement demanded narratives that exposed the graphic details in order to support “the movement’s call for immediate and unconditional emancipation” (p. 2). However, these writers were also conscious of aesthetics. In the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, William Andrews (1997) observes in the introduction entitled “Literature of Slavery and Freedom” that:

fugitive slaves such as William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and James W. C. Pennington reinforced the rhetorical self-consciousness of the slave narrative by incorporating into their stories trickster motifs from African American folk culture, extensive literary and biblical allusion, and a picaresque perspective on the meaning of the slave’s flight from freedom to bondage. (p. 134)

Additionally, spirituals were used by the enslaved to reflect on their sorrow and their hopes for freedom (Gates & McKay, 1997; “Go Down,” 1998); however, they were also used in planning escapes. Slave masters and overseers would allow the songs because they did not understand their importance and reduced them to “religious sorrow songs” (“Go Down,” 1998, p. 15).

During the Reconstruction era (1865-1919), blacks viewed literacy and literature as tools to prove intellectual equality of blacks. Reconstruction brought new schools to the South paid for

by the Freedman's Bureau and Northern philanthropists. These schools sought texts that described the black experience. Most common were postbellum slave narratives and autobiographies meant to show individual achievement among blacks. These texts had the dual political agenda of trying to show white readers their intellectual capabilities as well as inspire and inform African Americans (Foster & Yarborough, 1997). However, writers also were concerned with aesthetics. Black writers were conscious of the white mainstream challenge to show "aesthetic sophistication" and show "familiarity with the literary canon" (Foster & Yarborough, 1997, p. 467). In this case, canon can be read as the white Western canon. Black writers "strove to produce literary works that both pleased and taught" (Foster & Yarborough, 1997, p. 467); in other words, they were concerned with political function of a text and the aesthetic form in which it was presented.

During the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1940), a strong conflict arose among writers about the duty of an artist to use a political agenda as a primary influence in their work. Many of the younger writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen believed "the essence of the renaissance was freedom—freedom for them to create as they saw fit, without regard to politics" (Rampersad, 1997, p. 934). However, this freedom did not mean that these writers did not feel a racial obligation. For example, Hughes (1926/1997) felt it was the duty of the African American writer through his art form to change the aspirations within the black community so that the masses had a greater love of self. Nonetheless, Hughes was greatly concerned that the writers would choose subject matter based on a fear of their "un-whiteness" (p. 1271). In short, he was concerned that assimilation—or what he referred to as "American standardization"—had taken its toll on black writers and that they might avoid black subjects out of shame (Hughes, 1926/1997, p. 1267).

Hughes asserted that self-love and love of community must start within the writer and he must choose his own path from the richness of black culture to express it; however, the older generation of critics and writers felt propaganda must always be the cornerstone of creative work. The most powerful scholar of the older generation was W. E. B. Du Bois (Rampersad, 1997). In his essay, "The Criteria of Negro Art," Du Bois (1926/1997) clarifies the inextricable link between truth and beauty. He explains it is the duty of all blacks to create beauty that preserves the black experience. The most important tool in reflecting beauty is truth. Du Bois describes truth as the "highest handmaiden of imagination" (p. 757). He is adamant that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be...I stand in utter shamelessness and say whatever I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (p. 757). For Du Bois, there was no middle ground. Art's role was to describe the black experience and improve the social conditions of the African American community.

In the era of Realism and Modernism (1940-1960), Richard Wright published *Native Son*. The novel, published in 1940, was the first by an African American writer to be both critically and commercially successful at the same time (McDowell & Spillers, 1997). Three years earlier Wright wrote the essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing." He discusses his frustration with the black writers of the Renaissance. Wright (1937/2007) argues, "Rarely was the best of [Negro] writing addressed to the Negro himself. Through misdirection, Negro writers have been far better to others than they have been to themselves. And mere recognition of this places the whole question of Negro writing in a new light and raises doubt as to the validity of its present direction" (p. 1380). Wright was moving in the direction of the protest novel. He combined his urban sociology training to create the character Bigger Thomas—a victim of environmental

determinism, a “juvenile delinquent mired in the unforgiving straits of urban blight and deprivation” (p. 1321).

Critics such as Irving Howe believed Wright had changed American culture with a single text. Some found the protest novel and the use of urban realism restrictive in content and form (McDowell & Spillers, 1997). It is exemplified by Ralph Ellison in his impetus to write *Invisible Man*. Ellison (1953) speaks of the protest novel as the “hardboiled” novel and believes “the need for another approach was unmistakable...there must be possible a fiction which, leaving sociology and case histories to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition” (p. 158). Ellison (1953) wanted a balance between social responsibility and attention to aesthetics and form.

During the Black Arts Movement (1960-1975), the Civil Rights Movement and the slow frustration with its progress were the primary influences of content. Early (2000) argues that the literature was not simply a reflection of events but often was a factor in change. Writers used literature as a vehicle to voice their anger about social and economic oppression. Poetry thrived more than longer prose forms because it could usually be written more quickly than short stories and novels; it also could be used for immediate reactions (Baker, 2003). Drama was commonly used as a vehicle to reach the black masses. The product was literature “blazingly simple in language and virtually impossible to misunderstand” (Baker, 2003, p. 1840). Some critics complained that texts produced were too didactic or oversimplified because of the focus on “black mass communication” (Baker, 2003, p. 1839). Some literary critics debated whether it was “too oriented toward protests and propaganda at the expense of structure and form” (Temple, 2006a, p. 766). Therefore, while it was clear that the primary audience was the black

community; it was debated whether the aesthetic form suffered in order to disseminate the message of liberation to the black masses.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the effects of social movements and affirmative action were reflected in the increasing number of African American scholars that were visible in the academy. Furthermore, African American Literature was being studied as well as new criticism being created (Christian, 1997). Griffin (2004) explains that critics were beginning to reject some of the paradigms of Black Arts writers and critics. Scholars such as Henry Louis Gates were “encouraging a move away from so-called sociological readings.” (p. 167). Professor Joyce A. Joyce was critical of several of Gates’ concepts including his use of Western theoretical frameworks in analyzing black literature. Another point of contention was the role of black writers and literary scholars. Joyce (1987/1998) argued that their “function was to serve as intermediary in explaining the relationship between Black people and those forces that subdue them” (p. 1462). In a replying essay, Gates (1987/1998) examines Joyce’s argument and the general resistance among the black literary tradition to the use of Western theory. He referred to it as “critical masturbation to praise a text simply because it was black” and that it was “irresponsible to not make use of developments” (such as new frameworks and paradigms) in evaluating texts (p. 1470). Furthermore, Gates (1987/1998) argued that there was a space for work in the black tradition that was not easily understood by the black community.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

A review of the literature shows that literary critics have a variety of viewpoints on what elements are essential for a text to be considered African American Literature. Reoccurring themes include conflicts concerning the “duty” of a black text as a liberating force for the black community, the value of aesthetic form, and the appropriate use of Western theory. This study



interviewed professors because they create a large body of scholarly work on African American Literature. These scholars define and evaluate texts commonly labeled as part of the canon as well as marginalized texts that are less studied but still have essential elements. The professors pass this knowledge on to their peers in publications, presentations, and conferences as well as the students they teach and therefore have a substantial impact on shaping perceptions in the field.

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

Review of the literature could not locate any qualitative social science studies defining the essential elements of African American Literature. African American literary theory is usually studied within an English or humanities framework. It often focuses on canonization and hermeneutical analysis of an individual text or groups of texts; less work focuses on analyzing what elements unite all texts that are labeled African-American Literature. Scholars in the field have a variety of viewpoints on what elements are essential, although a dominant theme in both black literary history and black studies is the liberation of the black community.

This exploratory study was a first step in creating a framework that can be used in assessing texts labeled as part of the canon and support for marginalized texts that are understudied. It may also be useful to future scholars in understanding the overlapping themes between black studies and black literature.

### **1.4 Nature of the Study**

An exploratory qualitative study was appropriate for the study. The study described and interpreted viewpoints of scholars to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential elements of African American Literature. Furthermore, the study used purposeful sampling. The population was African American Literature professors in the United

States who have no less than five years experience teaching African American Literature. Five years of teaching experience was used because it gives scholars time to evaluate their ideas not just as students but as teachers. In other words, after this period of time scholars have spent a significant amount of time learning to communicate their ideas in “teachable” units that can be effectively passed on to students. These scholars will be able to clearly articulate their viewpoint and provide examples. The sample size consisted of eight professors. There were three black males, three black females, and two white males.

The primary source of data collection was in-depth interviewing. However, Creswell (2007) encourages the use of multiple data sources in a qualitative study. Secondary sources include the curriculum vitae of each professor and additions to the transcript made after the original interview. Interviews lasted 35 to 50 minutes. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts in Microsoft Word, clarify statements, and add additional examples.

For data analysis I used an open coding phase to determine categories. After an initial set of categories were established, I identified categories from the open coding list that are elements most commonly discussed as essential. The next step was axial coding; categories established as essential elements were considered the central phenomenon. Finally, a visual diagram and table were created to aid in showing the elements.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were:

- (1) What elements make a text African American Literature?
- (2) What elements of the black aesthetic are considered essential elements of African American Literature?

## 1.6 Afrocentric Concept

Maulana Karenga's (1968/1997) "Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function," clearly defines how and why art should function as social and political empowerment for the black community and it also addresses the black arts perspective on the artist's concern for individuality and aesthetics. Furthermore, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* describes Karenga's (1968/1997) "statement of purpose of the Black Arts movement" as "judged by many as the clearest and most accessible statement of the Black Aesthetic aims and was widely distributed during the 1960s and afterwards" (p. 1973)

Karenga's framework shaped the study in several ways. The characteristics of his black aesthetics framework which requires that all black art be functional, collective, and committed framed the literature review; debates on these elements in African American Literature were introduced in the background and were further developed in Chapter Two. Additionally, the characteristics of the framework were used in the interview protocol. Lastly, the presence or absence of the characteristics was discussed in the data analysis.

Key passages defining Karenga's (1968/1997) black aesthetics framework are presented below.

- *Revolution.* [Black art] must become and remain a part of the revolutionary machinery that moves us to change quickly and creatively...[T]he battle we are waging now is the battle of the minds of Black people...It becomes very important then, that art plays the role it should play and not bog itself down in the meaningless madness of the Western world wasted. In order to avoid this madness...what is needed is an aesthetic, a black aesthetic...(p. 1973)

- *All art can judged on two levels—social and artistic.* [T]he artistic level involves a consideration of form and feeling...[However,] artistic consideration, although, a necessary part, is not sufficient. What completes the picture is the social criteria for judging art. And it is this criteria that is the *most important* criteria. (emphasis added) (p. 1973)
- *African Art has at least three characteristics.* Tradition teaches us, Leopold Senghor [president of Senegal 1960-80, poet, and co-founder of the Negritude movement in the 1930s] tell us, that all African art has at least three characteristics: that is, functional, collective and committing or committed. Since this is traditionally valid it stands to reason that we should attempt to use it as the foundation for a rational construction to meet our present day needs. (p.1973-1974)
- *Functional.* It must be functional, that is *useful*, as we cannot accept the false doctrine of “art for art’s sake.” For, in fact, there is no such thing as “art for art’s sake.” For if the artist created for himself and not for others, he would lock himself up somewhere...On the contrary, he invites us over, even insists that we come to hear him or see his work; in a word, he express a need for evaluation and/or appreciation...(p. 1974)
- Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution. (p. 1974)
- *Collective.* [Black art] must be from the people and must be returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life. For that is what art is: everyday life given more form and color. And in relationship to that, the Black artist can find no better subject than Black People themselves, and the Black artist who does not choose or develop this subject will find himself unproductive. (p. 1974)

- To say that art is collective raises four questions: Number one, the question of popularization versus elevation; two, personality versus individuality; three, diversity in unity; and four, freedom *to* versus *from* (emphasis in original) (p. 1974-1975)
- *Popularization versus Elevation*. Our contention is that if art is from the people, and for the people, there is no question of raising people to art or lowering art to the people for they are one and same thing....And what one seeks to do is to do then is use art to as means of educating the people and being educated by them, so that it is a mutual exchange rather than a one-way communication. (p. 1975)
- *Personality versus Individuality*. [I]ndividualism is, in effect, nonexistent. For since no one is any more than the context to which he owes his existence, he has no individuality, only personality. Individuality by definition is “me” in spite of everyone, and personality is me in relation to everyone. The one, a useless isolation and the other an important involvement. (p. 1975)
- *Diversity in Unity*. [T]here can be and is unity in diversity, even as there can be diversity in unity. What one seeks, however, is not standardization of every move or creation, but a framework in which once can create and avoid the European gift of trial and error...[T]wo partners dance together the same dance and yet they provide us with a demonstration of that which is unique in each of them. But that is not individuality—that is personality. (p. 1975-1976)
- *Freedom to versus from*. [Art is] social first and aesthetic second. Art does not exist in the abstract just as freedom does not exist in the abstract... And an artist may have the freedom to do what he wishes as long as it does not take the freedom from the people to

be protected from those images, words and sounds that are negative to their life and development. (p. 1976)

- *Committing*. [This commitment] includes the artist and the observer. We cannot let each other rest; there is so much to do, and we all know we have done so little. Art will revive us, inspire us, give us enough courage to face another disappointing day. For all art must not teach us resignation. For all art must contribute to revolutionary change and if does not it is invalid. (p. 1976)

## 1.7 Definitions

Operational definitions of terms that I have identified as being key to this study are presented in the following section. The definitions are listed in alphabetical order and are as follows:

- African American/black: African American and black will be used interchangeably; this is a common practice of texts in the field (Collins, 2009; Gates & MacKay, 1997; Gates & MacKay, 2003; Hill & Hatch, 2003). Terms such as Negro, Afro-American, and Afro-American appear when quoted or appropriate to the historical period discussion.
- African American community: the entire population of the United States that self-identifies or governmentally identified as African American; Collins (2009) also includes the “set of institutions, communication networks, and practices that help African-Americans respond to social, economic, and political challenges confronting them” (p. 319)
- Black aesthetic: Anderson & Stewart (2007) believe the essence of the black aesthetic is that “the arts and writings of the African Americans can be judged based on their own cultural, political, and economic history. [Furthermore,] Black arts and literary works are

most authentic when they creatively reconstruct the conditions, experiences, and core values of African Americans in relation to broader society and the world” (p. 301); may also be referred to as the black arts framework

- Black experience: representations and descriptions of the black community; it may focus on “past and present experiences, characteristics, achievements, issues, and problems” (Anderson & Stewart, 2007, p. 4)
- Black Revolution: belief, especially in varying black nationalist ideologies, that a war would take place in which blacks overthrow white political, economic, and social systems; viewpoints vary from a figurative war to overthrow Western ideologies to a literal war that will consume the country (Kelly & Esch, 2005/1999); in the case of this study, unless specified, it focuses on the overthrow of Western aesthetic literature and theory as the “yardstick” for evaluating the black arts (Anderson & Stewart, 2007; Gayle, 1971/2011; Karenga, 1968/1997; Neal, 1968/2011).
- Canon: unless otherwise specified, it refers to the African American Literary Canon; also refers to representative literature commonly labeled as part of the African American Literary Canon by scholarly essays and inclusion in anthologies
- Critics: refers to a group of people made up of scholars, writers, and journalists with critical feedback on the text, canon, or concept in question
- Literature: when capitalized as a proper noun, it refers to African American Literature
- Writers: refers to creative writers of prose—such as fiction and non-fiction narratives, poetry, and drama

## **1.8 Assumptions**

Creswell (2007) also explains that qualitative research is often informed by the researcher's philosophical assumption. This study embraces a rhetorical assumption, which means "the writing needs to be personal and literary in form." Furthermore, "The language of the qualitative researcher becomes personal, literary, and based on definitions that evolve during a study rather than being defined by the researcher...[Additionally,] terms as defined by participants are of primary importance" (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). The rhetorical assumption influenced the structure of the literature review in the use of extensive quotations to explicate and enrich the debates being discussed. It influenced the researcher bias section of Chapter Three as well as the presentation and analysis of the data.

It was also assumed due to the participants' education and teaching experience that they would be knowledgeable about African American literary history and texts commonly studied in the field. Finally, it was assumed they answered all questions honestly and provided accurate historical details and examples.

## **1.9 Scope and Limitations**

This was a qualitative exploratory study. The goal was not generalizability. It is limited to a narrow population with expertise in African American Literature. Later studies could include black writers and readers in the black community.

This study focused on literary history and criticism as opposed to theory; in other words, the majority of the texts reviewed are foundational works in the field (Napier, 2000) as opposed to theories and paradigms based on these works. Moreover, the nature of the study seeks to describe and identify essential elements in African American Literature, which is a broad area.



Therefore, the literature review primarily focuses on debates examining the black aesthetic elements requiring that all black art be functional, collective, and committed.

### **1.10 Summary**

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. This chapter described the background of the research problem and includes a problem statement. The significance of the study and the nature of the study were also addressed. Next, the Afrocentric conceptual framework was explained. The framework's characteristics of functionality, collective unity, and commitment will be the primary themes for the literature review; debates on these elements in African American Literature were introduced in the background and will be further developed in the next chapter. Finally, operational definitions, assumptions, and limitations were presented.

## **2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. In other words, the goal was to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to defining the Literature. The research questions that guided this study were:

(1) What elements make a text African American Literature?

(2) What elements of the black aesthetic framework are considered essential elements of African American Literature?

### **2.1 Literature Searches**

The literature presented in this chapter is representative of humanities and literature disciplines and their related databases such as JSTOR, EBSCOhost, and WorldCat. However, there is an absence in the literature of approaching the topic using a social science methodology. Therefore, the majority of the literature is reprints of primary sources republished in anthologies, chapters from monographs, and books on literary history and theory related to the topic of defining African American Literature.

### **2.2 Overview**

A black aesthetics framework requiring that all black art be functional, collective, and committed will be the primary themes for the literature review (Karenga, 1968/1997). The continual debates about each of these themes will be organized by literary periods; therefore, the literature review will separately consider each period. Early (2000) proposes that there have been three “crucial periods” of conflicts on the purpose of African American literature: the Harlem

Renaissance, early Civil Rights era of the 1950s (which is the latter half of the era of Realism and Modernism), and the Black Arts movement (during the late 1960s). He explains:

each [period] occurred during or immediately after a major American war; and in each instance, as has been the case for African Americans in their struggle in the United States since the end of Reconstruction, the major political concerns about citizenship and community are tied, often expressly so, with the meaning and function of African-American art, generally, and African-American literature, in particular. (p. 279)

Therefore, the first three sections will focus on debates during these periods that shaped the definition of African American literature. Section four will examine one of the most notorious debates of the contemporary period in African American literary criticism (Griffin, 2004; Napier, 2000) between Joyce A. Joyce, Henry Louis Gates, and Houston Baker concerning the role of Western theory in black literature as well as the roles of the black scholar and the black writer. The chapter concludes with a brief description of several anthologies. The most popular anthology used in teaching African American Literature is *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (Hong, 2010; Jarrett, 2006; Marable, 1998; “New Anthology,” 1998; Mason, 1998). *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology* is commonly used due to its black aesthetic framework (Eichelberger, 1999; Hong, 2010; Hubbard, 2000; Temple, 2006a). The alternative reader *African American Literature Beyond Race* offers a less traditional framework (Temple, 2006b).

### **2.3 Harlem Renaissance**

During the Harlem Renaissance, critics and writers debated the required balance of aesthetics and social change in black literature (“Bound No’th Blues,” 1998; Rampersad, 1997; Warren, 2011). W.E B. Du Bois (1926/1997) argued that the social conditions of the black

community require that all art be propaganda. Alain Locke (1925/1997) and James Weldon Johnson (1921/1997) advocated the importance of art improving the black community, but disagreed with Du Bois on the strictness of the political purpose, believing propaganda may negatively affect the creative process and product.

In some cases, there was even a disagreement over the existence of a black aesthetic. Conservative critic George Schuyler (1926/1997) insisted that there was no distinct black cultural art form; spirituals, work songs, and jazz were simply American cultural products. Poet Langston Hughes (1926/1997) insisted that a black cultural form existed and further insisted that young black writers should be inspired by this cultural form and turn to the richness of black community for “a lifetime of creative work” (p. 1269).

Du Bois used his position as editor of *The Crisis* magazine to discuss his viewpoints on a variety of political ideas, including the role of black literature (Napier, 2000). *The Crisis* was established in 1910 by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The magazine served as a source of general and political information for the black community as well as an important vehicle of exposure for many black writers (Napier, 2000). Du Bois was most active in literary criticism during the Harlem Renaissance period (“Bound No’th Blues,” 1998). He also explored his theories within his own creative projects, writing poetry as well as two novels *Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Dark Princess* (1928). The latter is described in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* as “an attempt to exemplify the idealistic, politically engaged fiction that he preferred” (Rampersad, 1997, p. 935).

Du Bois conducted a symposium in *The Crisis* entitled “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” In the February issue, he proposed seven questions concerning negative representations of blacks in literature and the pressure on young black writers to follow popular

trends of writing about the black “underworld” (Du Bois et al., 1926/2011, p. 347); in other words, work that focuses on the criminal world and negative elements. Responses were published for the next seven months.

His introduction to the questionnaire illustrates his position on the subject. Du Bois (1926/2011) states:

Most writers have said naturally that any portrayal of any kind of Negro was permissible so long as the work was pleasing and the artist sincere...But the Negro has objected vehemently...In general, they have contended that while the individual portrait may be true and artistic, the net result to American literature to date is to picture twelve million Americans as prostitutes, thieves, and fools and that such “freedom” in art is miserably unfair. (p. 346)

In addition, Du Bois’ (1926/2011) questions are not impartial and show his belief that a more accurate image of the Negro is the educated middle class. For example, “Is there not a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying the Negro underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class?” (p. 347).

In “Criteria of Negro Art” his position is not veiled: the black community—and the white community—need positive images of blacks as opposed to the “tawdry and flamboyant” (Du Bois, 1926/ 1997, p. 753). He argues that the white public demands from white writers, images of black people that distort the truth. This was worst side of Negro life and they focused so heavily on the worst qualities of blacks that it makes the black community self-conscious and ashamed of negative portrayals (Du Bois, 1926/ 1997). Furthermore, it makes young black

writers feel “hemmed in” about how to present an accurate portrayal (Du Bois, 1926/ 1997, p. 758).

Du Bois (1926/ 1997) believes it is the duty of black writers to present an image of the beauty of black community. They were several tools that artists “of times gone by” have used to present this beauty (Du Bois, 1926/ 1997, p. 757). The first is truth, which he considers a key to imagination and “one great vehicle of universal understanding” (Du Bois, 1926/ 1997, p. 757). Secondly, goodness is key in gaining sympathy and interest in the subject (Du Bois, 1926/ 1997). Therefore, beauty becomes inextricably linked with truth. Black writers are bounded by this truth to pursue the ideal of justice for the black community (Du Bois, 1926/ 1997). He is emphatic that “...all Art [sic] is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of purists” (Du Bois, 1926/ 1997, p. 757).

Warren (2011) describes Du Bois perspective as viewing literature as both instrumental and indexical. In other words, black literature was an instrument to discuss black social conditions, show evidence of a rich black history, and highlight social advancements. Furthermore, it was indexical in that existence of creative products could be pointed to as signs of African American intellect and therefore proof of racial equality.

While disagreeing with Du Bois’ viewpoint on the strictness of the political purpose, Alain Locke advocated the importance of art improving the black community and their social identities (Locke, 1925/1997; Napier, 2000); he also supported the artistic freedom of young black writers (Napier, 2000). Locke was one the most powerful critics of the period (“Bound No’th Blues,” 1998; Rampersad, 1997).

Locke was editor of the landmark anthology *The New Negro*, a seminal text in defining the Harlem Renaissance (“Bound No’th Blues,” 1998; Rampersad, 1997). In his introduction to

the anthology, Locke (1925/1997) celebrates a new sense of pride among young writers and the literary movement: “By shedding the old chrysalis of Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation” (p. 962). He recognized the change in identity that was taking place in the Negro population as well as those who wrote about the Negro community. Furthermore, Locke (1925/1997) observes the Great Migration as a catalyst in this movement:

The migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook, with the additional advantage of course, of the poise and the greater certainty of knowing what it is all about. (p. 962)

Locke (1925/1997) acknowledges that mental or “inner life” goals of the “New Negro” are still forming. However, he is clear that objectives are moving beyond simply repairing a damaged group psychology and changing the social perspective of blacks (Locke, 1925/1997). The new outlook moves beyond using sentimentality to improve the black social image and focus on self-respect and self-reliance (Locke, 1925/1997). In finding a new confidence and understanding of self, the “Negro today wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults or shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not” (Locke, 1925/1997, p. 966). Therefore, unlike Du Bois who often focuses on negative images of blacks in literature (Du Bois 1926/1997; Du Bois, 1926/2011) and chastises writers who concentrate on them in a creative work (Du Bois 1928/1997), Locke (1925/1997) believes in creating a balanced representation of the black community that represents the complexity and variety within the race. This entails showing the good and bad, because focusing nearly

exclusively on the good keeps alive sentimentality for stereotypes of the old docile Negro (Locke, 1925/1997) as well as shame for the darker sides of the black experience.

In “Art or Propaganda?” Locke (1928/2011) disagreed with art for the sake of propaganda, warning that it perpetuates a feeling of inferiority:

My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it leaves and speaks under the shadow of the dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens or supplicates. It is too extroverted for poise or inner dignity and self-respect. (p. 334)

Furthermore, Locke (1928/2011) argued that art should be rooted in self-expression and self-contained. However, he did prefer propaganda to the younger writer trying to imitate others or who was writing in order to please the public’s desire for the exotic (Locke, 1928/2011).

Locke (1928/2011) also recognized the role of propaganda in subsidizing art. Three magazines were the platform for most writers presenting their work during the Renaissance: *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *Messenger* (“Bound No’t’h Blues,” 1998; Rampersad, 1997; Locke, 1928/2011). All three were publications of black social and political organizations. “Art or Propaganda?” was written in the premiere—and what was to be the only issue of the journal *Harlem*. Locke’s (1928/2011) hope was for *Harlem* to fill the gap and offer “a sustained vehicle of free and purely artistic expression” (p. 335).

James Weldon Johnson (1921/1997) also believed that obligating the artist to write propaganda was suffocating. Johnson was a scholar, activist, and writer. He is most often remembered as the first African American president of the NAACP, for writing the lyrics to “Lift



Ev'ry Voice and Sing"—which is considered the black national anthem, and for writing the novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

As editor of the seminal anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson (1921/1997) asserts his support for young writers and artistic freedom. He feels that the young poet was often under severe pressure to be propagandic: "He is always on the defensive or offensive. The pressure upon him to be propagandic is nigh irresistible. These conditions are suffocating to breadth and to real art in poetry" (p. 880). Furthermore, Johnson (1921/1997) encourages poets to find a distinct form of expression, arguing that many poets felt pressured to use Negro dialect. He urges poets "to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols within rather than by symbols without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation" (Johnson, 1921/1997, p. 881). His issue is not with dialect itself but the restrictions the convention has placed on the poet to present the Negro in degrees no more varied than humor and pathos (Johnson, 1921/1997). Finally, Johnson (1921/1997) also clearly states that the Negro poet should not feel limited to racial themes, believing the black poet should be able to naturally incorporate American subject matter and conventions. However, he is not arguing for total assimilation, believing that "the richest contribution the Negro poet can make to the American literature of the future will be the fusion into it of its own individual artistic gifts" (Johnson, 1921/1997, p. 881)

During the Renaissance, conservative critic George Schuyler (1926/1997) insisted that there was no distinct black cultural art form; spirituals, work songs, and jazz were simply American cultural products. He did not debate the role or valuable forms of black aesthetics but argues that a separate black aesthetic did not exist (Schuyler 1926/1997). However, poet Langston Hughes (1926/1997) insisted that a black cultural form existed and further insisted that

young black writers should be inspired by this cultural form and turn to the richness of black community for “a lifetime of creative work” (p. 1269). In four issues of *The Nation*, Schuyler and Hughes debated the issue.

In “The Negro-Art Hokum,” Schuyler (1926/1997) insists the idea of a black aesthetic perpetuates the myth of “fundamental” and “inescapable” differences between whites and blacks (p. 1174). Moreover, Warren (2011) reminds us that Schuyler was writing during a time period when most blacks were leading lives that were “significantly constrained by racist assumptions and practices”; however, “the intellectual and scientific tide had shifted away from biological justifications of racial difference toward an understanding of racial difference as the result of economic processes” (p. 32).

Critics and writers such as Zora Neale Hurston (1934/1997) and James Weldon Johnson (1921/1997) labeled spirituals, work songs, and jazz as distinct black art forms, but Schuyler (1926/1997) labeled them as simply American. He insists these forms are:

no more expressive or characteristic of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders or the Dalmatian peasantry are expressive of Caucasian race...Any group under similar circumstances would have produced something similar. It is merely coincidence that that this peasant class happens to be of a darker hue than other inhabitants of the land. (Schuyler, 1926/1997, p. 1172)

Therefore, Schuyler connects the production of these cultural forms to economic class and not racial experiences.

One week later, Langston Hughes’ rebuttal “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” was published. Unlike Schuyler’s (1926/1997) denial of a black arts forms, Hughes (1926/1997) encourages young writers to embrace their blackness and not feel pressured by assimilation,

which he referred to as “American standardization” (p. 1267). While Schuyler (1926/1997) labels jazz as simply American, Hughes (1926/1997) highlights the importance of the art form in his poems and sees it as an inherent expression of Negro life. Furthermore, Hughes (1926/1997) asks black writers to fight against the internal conflict of viewing blackness as inferior and to show all of its complexity. Unlike Du Bois (1926/1997; 1926/2011) and similar to Johnson (1921/1997), Hughes (1926/1997) did not feel a black writer should be obligated to write about race, but a writer should never be afraid to choose to write about it.

Hughes (1926/1997) also takes a strong stand on a writer’s obligations to his audience. He insists that a writer not be led by desires of the white nor the black community and states, “If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter... We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand free within ourselves” (Hughes, 1926/1997, p. 2171).

Three weeks later, Schuyler’s response to Hughes was published. Schuyler (1926/2011) reemphasized the point that the Negro masses are no different from whites. He goes on to explain the millions of dollars that blacks spend on hair straightener and skin-whitener is proof of blacks trying to reach American standards of physical appearance (Schuyler, 1926/2011). He adds that “Negro propaganda-art, even when glorifying the ‘primitiveness’ of the American Negro masses, is hardly more than a protest against a feeling of inferiority, and such a psychology rarely produces art” (Schuyler, 1926/2011, p. 368).

In response to the argument that whites and blacks are no different, Hughes (1926/2011) asserts:

Fundamentally, perhaps all people are the same. But as long as the Negro remains a segregated group in this country he must reflect certain racial and environmental

differences which are his own. The very fact that Negroes straighten their hair and try to forget their racial background makes them different from white people. If they were exactly like the dominate class they would not have to try so hard to imitate them. (p. 368)

This highlighted Hughes (1926/1997) concern addressed in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” that in seeking the trappings of whiteness, the Negro reveals dissatisfaction with himself. Instead of embracing Negro culture, he imitates the white characteristics for acceptance in the dominant class. Hughes (1926/1997) asked black writers to embrace their racial and environmental difference, believing these differences held the truth and beauty of the black experience that should be expressed in literature.

## **2.4 Realism and Modernism**

Many writers became frustrated with literature that focused on themes and desires of the black middle class during the Great Depression; they found the dark, violent realism ushered in with Richard Wright’s *Native Son* essential to their literary viewpoint (McDowell & Spillers, 1997). Wright (1937/1997) delivered a manifesto demanding black writers to focus on the perspective of the black working class as subject and audience in order to raise the social consciousness of the black masses. In his novel *Native Son*, he created the prototypical protest novel, which defined much of the 1940s era by critics’ embracement or rejection of it (Howe, 1963/2011; Jordon, 1970/2011; McDowell & Spillers, 1997). James Baldwin (1949/1997; “James Baldwin,” 1997) was a close friend of Wright, but was also highly critical of the protest novel as a narrative mode. Baldwin was among the writers that found it aesthetically restrictive and philosophically limited (McDowell & Spillers, 1997).

White critic Irving Howe (1963/2011) believes Baldwin and Ralph Ellison owe much of their literary success to Wright's courage in bringing to life the dark and brutal protagonist Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Howe (1963/2011) argues that *Native Son* was a stepping stone that both used to further their writing careers. However, Ellison (1963-1964/2011) disagrees with Howe, believing his creative work is less shaped by Wright than other white American writers as well as his own experiences. He supports Baldwin in seeking a more pluralistic vision of the Negro experience (Ellison, 1963-1964/2011).

Finally, Zora Neale Hurston (1928/2011) offers a perspective of the era focused on the individual and much different than the urban realism and anger of *Native Son* and the protest novel. However, June Jordan (1974) asserts that Wright and Hurston's visions of the black experience complement each other.

In "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright (1937/1997) delivers a manifesto critiquing the failures of the Harlem Renaissance and outlines a new agenda for the direction of black writers. He is frustrated with black writers, especially previous generations and during the Renaissance, pleading to a white audience for justice or to prove their humanity (Wright, 1937/1997). He wants writers to shift to raising the consciousness of the black community and create values (Wright, 1937/1997). It is imperative that black writers change their perspective and view the world through the eyes of the working class (Wright, 1937/1997). Additionally, writers should add to their social conscious an understanding of the "nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa, and of the long, complex (and for the most part, unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a *whole* culture again" (emphasis in original) (Wright, 1937/1997, p. 1386). However, Wright (1937/1997) supports the autonomy of the writer and insists that propaganda could interfere with art and must be properly balanced.

Wright's execution of these principles can be seen in his collection of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children*, which were published a year after the manifesto. Early (2000) describes the stories:

The stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*, all about black rebellion against the violent white power structure, move from heroes who are unconscious of any political significance in their acts, largely buffeted by the tides and whimsies of a cruel, indifferent world, trying separately to extricate themselves from a seemingly inescapable fate, to more politically aware heroes...whose revolts are self-consciously motivated. But even in the most restricted circumstances, Wright gives his black characters choices. Wright was never to abandon his Marxist/existentialist belief that man makes his world, makes his circumstances, and makes his fear. (p. 273)

Wright's collection won first prize in a WPA Federal Writers' Project competition as well as a Guggenheim, which allowed him to focus exclusively on his writing (McDowell & Spillers, 1997). However, Wright (1940/1993) is disappointed with his work. He labels it a "naïve mistake" and observes: "I had written a book that even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so deep and hard that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (p. 531) Two years later, Wright's *Native Son* was published.

With *Native Son*, Wright was the first African American writer to have both critical and commercial success at the same time ("Richard Wright," 1997). Early (2000) argues it is "the most vehement critique against the idea of a welfare-state liberalism ever written by a black at that time" (p. 272). Set in the slums of Chicago, the reader follows Bigger Thomas. The character is not at all likeable and is not meant to be (Rampersad, 1993; Wright, 1940/1993).

Bigger is detached from his community, his family, and detest himself nearly as much as whiteness (Baldwin, 1951/1997; Wright, 1940/1993); he lives in state of impotent rage, that leads to his killing two women (Baldwin, 1951/1997; Wright, 1940/1993). The first is Mary Dalton, the daughter of his white employer, and it is arguably an accident but he later finds pride and empowerment in the act and tries to profit from it; the second is the rape and murder of his girlfriend Bessie (Wright, 1940/1993). Bigger is sentenced to die for Mary's death (Wright, 1940/1993).

The novel earned Wright the reputation "as a protest writer who dared to expose the stresses and pathologies of the urban ghettos" ("Richard Wright," 1997, p. 1377-1378). Although the concept of social protest was not new, Wright's success created shift towards the use of protest as an aesthetic form during the 1940s. However, writers such as Baldwin (1949/1997, 1951/1997) and Ellison (1953, 1963-1964/2011) found the form to be aesthetically and philosophically limiting (McDowell & Spillers, 1997).

In "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin (1949/1997) explores the limitations of the protest narrative, using Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Wright's *Native Son* as examples. Baldwin (1949/1997) argues that writers must move past the sentimentality that characterized Stowe's narrative to truth. In this case, Baldwin (1949/1997) defines truth as "a devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted" (p. 1655). He is clear that that this devotion should not be confused with devotion to a cause, reminding us that "Causes, as we know, are notoriously blood thirsty" (Baldwin, 1949/1997, p. 1655).

Baldwin (1949/1997) explains the tragic flaw of Bigger Thomas as a character and connects it to his criticism of the protest novel. Bigger "has accepted a theology that denies him

life...he admits the possibility of being sub-human and feels constrained therefore to battle for humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed to him at his birth” (p. 1659). Baldwin (1949/1997) connects *Bigger* to flaws of using protest as a form: “The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, insistence that it his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended” (p. 1659). Therefore, Baldwin (1949/1997) is insisting that the limitations for mental and spiritual growth in *Bigger* reflect the limitations of the narrative mode.

Two years later in “Many Thousands Gone,” Baldwin (1951/1997) offers a more extensive critique of *Native Son*. He explores the possibility that the novel does not reflect the complexity of the Negro experience:

*Native Son* does not convey the altogether savage paradox of the American Negro’s situation...It is not simply the relationship of the oppressed to the oppressor, of master to slave, nor is it motivated merely by hatred; it is also, literally and morally, a *blood* relationship, perhaps the most profound reality of the American experience, and we cannot begin to unlock it until we accept how very much it contains of the force and anguish and terror of love. (emphasis in original) (Baldwin, 1951/1997, p. 1669)

While Baldwin (1951/1997) concedes that all Negroes have a *Bigger* Thomas living within them, he seeks a more complex character to tell the story of being Negro.

White critic Irving Howe revisits the argument in “Black Boys and Native Sons.” Howe (1963/2011) characterizes Baldwin as the younger writer attacking the work of his famous elder in order to launch his writing career. However, Baldwin made clear in essays and interviews that he was not attacking Wright; he insisted “I knew Richard and I loved him... I was not attacking him; I was trying to clarify something for myself” (Lester, 1984).



Howe (1963/2011) also brings Ralph Ellison into the argument, suggesting that like Baldwin he owed his literary success to *Native Son*: “If such younger novelists as Baldwin and Ralph Ellison were to move beyond Wright’s harsh naturalism and toward more supple modes of fiction, that was possible only because Wright had been there first, courageous enough to release his anger” (p. 660).

In addition, Howe (1963/2011) acknowledges Baldwin’s desire to show in his work the diversity and richness of the black experience that Baldwin felt was not possible with protest narratives. “He wished to show it as a living culture of men and women who, even when deprived, share in the emotions and desires of common humanity” (Howe, 1963/2011, p.665). He believes Baldwin’s first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was unsuccessful at showing it; however, Ellison was successful with *Invisible Man*. (Ellison’s novel and its influence will be discussed later in the review.) Finally, Howe (1963/2011) points to Baldwin’s novel *Another Country* (published in 1962) as an example of a protest novel and proof that Baldwin finally discovered that “to assert his humanity he must release his rage” (p. 669).

Ellison responds to Howe in “The World and the Jug.” Ellison (1963-1964/2011) rejects the idea that Baldwin and Ellison have betrayed Wright and addresses some of Howe’s implications. Ellison (1963-1964/2011) observes that Howe considers Baldwin and Ellison “phonies” and “black boys” because they “pretend to be mere American writers trying to react to something of the pluralism in their predicament” (p.673). Ellison (1963-1964/2011) asserts his individuality through examples from his writing process and defends his right to approach subject matter as he sees fit. He states:

If *Invisible Man* is even ‘apparently’ free from ‘the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country,’ it is because I tried to the best of my ability to

transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape or hold back but to work through; to transcend as blues the painful conditions with which they deal. The protest is there not because I was helpless before my racial condition but because I *put* it there.

(emphasis in original) (p. 684)

Early (2000) explains the sizeable impact of *Invisible Man*. White critics often described black literature as being “nothing more than social protest, ‘or mere sociology,’ or a literature without technique, style, or innovation. It was not until the 1952 publication of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*...that a black fictional work was considered without question to be of superior literary merit, equal to the best white literature” (Early, 2000, p. 277-278).

Ellison (1963-1964/2011) is most troubled by Howe’s implication that as a Negro writer, he should aspire to be like other Negro writers. In response, Ellison (1963-1964/2011) acknowledges the contributions of white writers to his values and ideas, emphasizing that “Books which seldom, if ever, mentioned Negroes were to release me from whatever ‘segregated’ idea I might have of human possibilities. I was freed not be propagandists or the examples of Wright...” (p. 675). Ellison sought plurality of vision in his creative work and embraced the plurality of voices and races that influenced him as a man and a writer.

Like Baldwin and Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston searched for the complexity of the black experience and offered her viewpoint and personal experiences as an alternative to Wright. In “How It Feels to Be a Colored Me,” Hurston (1928/2011) explains that she does not feel “tragically colored” (p. 472). Wright’s desire to capture rage and anger (Howe, 1963/2011; Wright, 1940/1993) is quite different from Hurston’s (1928/2011) contention that:

There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I don’t mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature

somehow has given them a lowdown dirt deal and whose feelings are hurt about it. (p. 472)

While Wright came of age in the Jim Crow South and the urban poverty of Chicago (Jordan 1974/2011; Wright, 1940/1993), Hurston was raised in the in the black community of Eatonville, Florida –where her father was a minister and for some time the mayor (“Reconciling,” 2011). This most likely influenced Hurston’s individualistic perspective of discrimination. In the essay, when treated unfairly due to her race, she emphasizes her astonishment that someone would deny themselves the pleasure of her company (Hurston, 1928/2011).

Wright (1937/2011) wrote a harsh review of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel tells the story of black female protagonist Janie Starks. As Jordan (1974/2011) observes, “whites do not figure in this story” (p. 721). Wright (1937/2011) claimed that the *Their Eyes Were Watching God* had “no theme, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro” (p. 480-481). Moreover, he argues that her characters “swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears” (p. 480). This may have recalled for readers James Weldon Johnson’s (1921/1997) frustration that the Negro poets are often asked to portray Negro life in one of two contexts: “humor and pathos” (p. 880).

June Jordan (1974/2011) offers a perspective in which Wright and Hurston can be viewed for their commonalties. During Wright and Hurston’s lifetime, Wright received critical acclaim and supportive followers while Hurston “suffered from devastating critical and popular neglect” (Jordan, 1974/2011). Jordan (1974/2011) attributes Hurston’s marginalization to views of the protest novel and states, “I believe we were misled into the notion that *only one kind* of writing—

protest writing—and that *only one kind* of protest writing—deserves our support and study” (emphasis in original) (p. 721).

Applying Hoyt Fuller’s framework that protest and affirmation are necessary to appreciate black art, Jordon (1974/2011) ties together *Native Son* and *Their Eyes Are Watching God* as the prototypical examples for novels of protest and affirmation, respectively. Jordon (1974/2011) also asserts that although *Their Eyes Are Watching God* is the prototypical black affirmation novel, the novel offers an important vision: “Black life freed from the constraints of oppression; here we may learn of ourselves if we ever could escape the hateful and alien context that has so deeply mutilated our rightful efflorescence—*as people*” (emphasis in original) (p. 722).

Jordon (1974/2011) argues that we should not have to choose between Bigger and Janie, because “our lives are as big and as manifold as the two of them put together...one without the other is dangerous and leaves us vulnerable to the extinction of body and spirit” (p. 722). Therefore, Jordan offers in Hurston an alternative as well as a companion to the protest novel, which dominated much of the literary period.

## **2.5 Black Arts Movement**

The Black Arts Movement paralleled and often worked together with the social movements of the 1960s to bring about political reform (Baker, 2003). Neal (1968/2011) defines the movement as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” (p. 702). Maulana Karenga’s (1968/1997) black arts framework requiring that all black art be functional, collective, and committed was reviewed in Chapter One as the Afrocentric Concept for this study. Larry Neal (1968/2011) argues the western aesthetic is a decaying structure that must be reevaluated and a black aesthetic must be developed. Addison Gayle (1971/2011) asserts that

blacks must “de-Americanize” themselves and uses Du Bios as an example. Amiri Baraka discusses his distrust and dislike of the middle class as out of touch with the needs of the black community (1963/2000; 1963/2011); furthermore, he describes his desire to widen the consciousness of the black community through theater by showing the world through the eyes of black men (1969/1997a).

However, Nikki Giovanni (1969/2011) points to the use of black women as the scapegoat for the social issues as well as the growing disconnect within the black community. Phillip Brian Harper (1993/2000) analyzes the intraracial conflict caused by the movement as well as the homophobia connected to strict interpretations of maleness and black identity.

In the opening paragraph of the “The Black Arts Movement,” Neal (1968/2011) defines two aspects of the movement: it must maintain a close connection to the black community and the creative work produced should speak to “the needs and aspirations” of the community (p. 702). Neal (1968/2011) argues to perform this text requires a “radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic,” which includes “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” (p. 702). Furthermore, Neal (1968/2011) believes it was impossible to write anything meaningful within the decaying structure of the Western aesthetic and called for a black aesthetic. The black aesthetic views an artist’s aesthetic and ethics as one and the idea of considering the two as separate was symptom of western society’s dying culture (Neal, 1968/2011).

It is not surprising that Neal (1968/2011) viewed the concept of art for art’s sake—or art without a function—as the decadent attitude of Western society (Neal, 1968/2011). However, he was also dissatisfied with protest literature, believing that it was an appeal to white morality (Neale, 1968/2011).

Additionally, Neal (1968/2011) takes a clear stand in rejecting the Harlem Renaissance as “a failure” (p. 711). Neal goes so far as assert that questions such as “What is truth? Or more precisely whose truth shall we express that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?” were never asked by previous intellectuals. However, issues of truth were central concepts in essays by Du Bois (1926/1997; 1926/ 2011) during the Harlem Renaissance as well as Baldwin (1949/1997) and Wright (1940/1993) during the era of Realism and Modernism.

Later, Neal (1968/2011) states the Renaissance “failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of the community, to become its voice and spirit” (p. 711). However, Harper (1993/2000) believes that there was a powerful need in the Black Arts Movement to disassociate itself from the Renaissance and assert the black arts strategy as unique. Harper (1993/2000) offers as rebuttal to Neale’s argument: a passage in which Locke is championing new poets that “stopped speaking for the Negro—they speak as Negroes. Where formerly they spoke to others and tried to interpret, they now speak to their own and try to express” (as cited in Harper, 1993/2000, p. 466).

Harper (1993/200) theorizes that the Movement’s desire to disassociate from the Renaissance may also be connected to homosexuality. To frame his argument, Harper points to Baraka’s characterization of white males as “weak,” “trained to be fags,” and out of touch with reality (as cited in Harper, 1993/2000, p. 469); homosexuality was the prime signifier of failed manhood (Harper, 1993/2000). He then explains:

Given this categorical invalidation of Euro-American manhood by virtue of a perceived disengagement from the pressing demands of the physical world that supposedly constitute “real life,” the comparable disengagement that Black Aestheticians [sic] discerned in the Harlem Renaissance (for instance) would indicate not only an

inadequately developed black consciousness...but a similarly inadequate masculinity that is coextensive with it (p. 469)

Several of the most influential figures during the Renaissance were gay, such as Countee Cullen, Alain Locke (Harper, 1993/2000), and Langston Hughes (“On ‘Negro Art,’” 2011). Therefore, Harper (1993/2000) implies that due to the sexuality of these figures, which the Movement viewed as examples of “inadequate masculinity” and also associated with undeveloped “black consciousness,” the Movement may have desired to invalidate the literary criticism and creative works produced by gay artists and critics.

In the introduction to *The Black Aesthetic*, Gayle (1971/2011) points out that despite remarks from critics, certain elements of the black aesthetic were not new to black literature: black anger, black nationalism, and animosity. Gayle (1971/2011) considers the perspective of the serious artists as new. The serious artist knows he is at war with society, speaks honestly, and unlike artists of the past does not take up the task of trying to convert the white audience (Gayle, 1971/2011). The new artist must point out the extent the black community is controlled by American society in order to begin the process of de-Americanization (Gayle, 1971/2011).

Gayle (1971/2011) points to Du Bois as an example of de-Americanization and explains, “His denunciation of America and his exodus back to the land of his forefathers provides and appropriate symbol of the man who has de-Americanized himself...His act proclaimed to the black men world over the price for becoming an American was too high” (p. 719). Therefore, Gayle (1971/2011) saw the black aesthetic as a corrective in helping the black community out of “the polluted mainstream of Americanism” (p. 719). He also looks to black critics to create critical methodologies that evaluate work from the perspective of transforming the life of the individual black man (Gayle, 1971/2011). However, Gayle (1971/2011) is clear that he does not

have the authority to speak for others; it the right of the individual to define function of black artists and his own idea of the black aesthetic.

Poetry and drama were especially popular during the black arts period because of its accessibility to the masses as a tool of racial empowerment (Baker, 2003). These are the two forms that Amiri Baraka is most known for producing. Harper (1993/2000) views Baraka's (1969/1997b) poem "SOS" as a call to the black community for racial solidarity:

Calling black people  
 Calling all black people, man women child  
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent come in  
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling  
 you, calling all black people  
 calling all black people, come in, black people, come  
 on in. (p. 1883)

Harper (1993/2000) viewed the poem as "a synecdoche for all of his [Baraka's] poetic output of the 1960s...As the sources of this influential call, Baraka can certainly be seen as the founder of the Black Aesthetic and 'SOS' as representative of the standard to which his fellow poets rallied" (p. 462).

Furthermore, Baraka (1963/2000) recognized the power of speech in maintaining a cultural hegemony. In the essay "Expressive Language," he explains, "Words have users, but as well, users have words. And it is users that establish the world's realities. Realities being those fantasies that control your immediate span of life" (Baraka, 1963/2000, p. 63). Also, Baraka implies that Negro bourgeois learned to use words for social strength at the price of disassociating from black culture (Baraka, 1963/2000).

The idea is implied in the previous essay but directly stated in the next. In his essay "Enter the Middle Class," Baraka (1963/2011) complains that previous Negro literature had no emotional concern for the black community. He suggests:



The middle class black man, whether he wanted to be a writer, or a painter, or a doctor developed an emotional allegiance to the middle class (middle-brow) culture of America that obscured or made hideous, any influences or psychological awareness that seemed to come from outside what was generally acceptable to a middle class white man... The black middle class wanted nothing that could connect with the poor black man or the slave. (Baraka, 1963/2011, p. 695)

He goes on to emphasize the sense of divide: “To be a [black] writer was to be ‘cultivated,’ in the stunted bourgeois sense of the word. It was to be a ‘quality’ black man, not merely an ‘ordinary nigger’” (Baraka, 1963/2011, p. 695).

In his essay “Revolutionary Theatre,” Baraka (1969/1997a) emphasizes that the theatre must force change. The black community must be taught the importance of widening consciousness and “strike back against *any* agency that attempts to prevent this widening” (emphasis in original) (Baraka, 1969/1997a, p. 1899). Baraka (1969/1997a) argues that Revolutionary Theatre will see through the eyes of the victims in order to show them their strength and also to empower them; victims will be changed to heroes. Like Karenga (1968/1997), Baraka (1969/1997a) emphasizes an art with the function of empowering the black masses.

In the essay “*Black Poems, Poseurs and Power*,” Nikki Giovanni (1969/2011) shows some of the flaws in the Black Arts Movement. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* describes Giovanni as “one of the first Black Arts movement poets to achieve stardom. Her unabashed advocacy of murderous militancy as a proper black response to white oppression brought her instant fame” (“Nikki Giovanni,” p. 1982).

One of Giovanni's (1969/2011) concerns is that that black men of the movement are making black women scapegoats for the black community's problems. She explains, "They have made Black women the new Jews while they remain the same old niggers. We have got to do better than this" (Giovanni, 1969/2011, p. 714). An example of this can be seen in Neale's (1968/2011) essay, "The Black Arts Movement." It describes plays by Baraka as well as other playwrights that represent the black arts movement (Neal, 1968/2011). Men are always the protagonist. If mentioned at all in the description, the women are at best considered weak but usually man-hating and somehow interfere with protagonist's progress (Neal, 1968/2011). For example, one mother is described as having "a deep seated hatred of black men" and another mother "understands, but holds her men back" (Neal, 1968/2011, p. 710).

Furthermore, Giovanni (1969/2011) is concerned about the disconnection between the community and the artist as well as the black artist's growing concern for popularity. She complains:

We need to know where our community is going and give voice to that... We are in grave danger of slipping away from our roots. The new hustle, starting with Claude Brown and brought to its finest point by Eldridge Cleaver with his hustle of Huey Newton, seems to be who can get the ear of the enemy for enough money or prestige to float on a pink damn cloud to the concentration camps. (Giovanni, 1969/2011, p. 714)

Giovanni (1969/2011) asserts inconsistencies are present in the movement; artists are using the sacrifices and stories of the movement for short term fame and fortune. In other words, there is difference between black arts ideology and what is being practiced. A collective unity was being sacrificed for individual gain. Some individual artists may have been more concerned with individual gain than producing work that is responsive to the needs of the black community.

## 2.6 Contemporary

Conflicting perspectives on the role of black writers and critics in serving the needs of the black community continued in the contemporary period. The division became even more strained in the contemporary period as more black scholars entered the academy (Griffin, 2004)—and as scholar Joyce A. Joyce (1987/1998) argued—moved farther away from authentic interpretations of the black experience.

Joyce A. Joyce (1987/1998; 1987/2000) takes issue with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker's use of post-structuralism as framework for critiquing black literature. She believes the use of theory that focused on analyzing the language of a text does not capture the black shared experience and estranges the black poststructuralist from the black community (Joyce, 1987/1998). Joyce states: "The black creative writer understands it is not time yet—and it may never be possible—for a people with hundreds of years of disenfranchisement and who since slavery have venerated the intellect and the written word to view language as merely a system of codes or as mere play" (p. 1464).

The debate took place in four essays that were originally published in the same Winter 1987 issue of *New Literary History*. At the heart of the debate is the battle over the balance between political function and aesthetics and the perceived value of each in black literature; it also examines the role of the critic and the writer and their obligation to the black community.

In "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," Joyce (1987/1998) asserts that the function of the writer and the literary scholar is to "guide" the black community and "to serve as an intermediary in explaining the relationship between Black people and those forces that attempt to subdue them" (p. 1462). She insists that the rejection of this role by some contemporary literary criticism reflects an individualistic perspective that she associates

with elitist American values that widen the gap between scholar and the masses (Joyce, 1987/1998).

Joyce (1987/1998) argues that black literary critics should question the values that will be conveyed in their work and understand their long term impact, especially if they write with the intention of fitting into the academic mainstream. She implies this path may have negative repercussions for the black aesthetic and this is the path that Gates and Baker are taking (Joyce, 1987/1998).

Joyce (1987/1998) admits that she agrees with Gates that the polemical and social functions in black literature have “superseded” or “repressed” the function of structure (p. 1464). However, she disagrees with his methodology (Joyce, 1987/1998). She insists: “It is insidious for the Black literary critic to adopt any kind of strategy that diminishes or in this case—through allusions to binary oppositions—negates his blackness” (p. 1464). She goes on to include that black creative writers for nearly two hundred years have consistently discussed issue of slavery, racism, pride, and self respect—and not self-abnegation or even self-veiling (Joyce, 1987/1998). Joyce is implying that Gates is doing the latter.

Furthermore, Joyce (1987/1998) cites Terry Eagleton to highlight her dislike of poststructuralism:

...nothing is ever fully present in signs: it is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you and what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite one with itself. (p. 1464)

She reaches the conclusion, though acknowledging that it is extreme, that poststructuralist thinking impedes meaningful communication between black people by limiting it to language and not shared experiences embodied in black history; therefore, it may be a reason why

contemporary society finds it difficult to sustain commitments and take responsibility for their actions (Joyce, 1987/1997).

In the closing of her essay, Joyce defines black art as "...an act of love which attempts to destroy estrangement and elitism by demonstrating a strong fondness or enthusiasm for freedom and an affectionate concern for the lives of people, especially black people" (p. 1465). In "'What's Love Got to Do with It?': Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom," Gates (1987/1997) opening contains Joyce's above excerpt as well as lyrics from the Tina Turner song that reduces love to a "secondhand emotion" (p. 1469). The use of this phrase foreshadows his later discussion that he must "defamiliarize" or distance himself from a black text in order to see the formal workings. To preserve the integrity of the text he tries to avoid confusing his experience an African American with the "black act of language which defines the text" (p. 1474).

Gates (1987/1998) divides his response to Joyce in two parts. First, he traces the historical reasons that African Americans are resistant to theory and in the section he rebuts specific points of Joyce's essay (Gates, 1987/1998). Gates (1987/1998) explains that black literature has been commonly put to use for reasons that were not primarily aesthetic. The black literary tradition was catalyzed by the desire to disprove inferiority and focused on the nature of being black and his or her role in society (Gates, 1987/1998). Because the literary tradition began as a response to white criticism that blacks could not write prose, it created a problematic relationship with the use of literary theory (Gates, 1987/1998). Furthermore, it points to contemporary debates about the use of theorizing:

Theory, as a second order reflection, upon a primary gesture such as 'literature,' has *always* been viewed with deep mistrust and suspicion by those scholars who find it

presumptuous and perhaps even decadent when criticism claims the right to stand, as discourse, on its own, as a parallel textual universe to literature. (emphasis in original) (p. 1471-1472)

However, Gates (1987/1998) emphasizes that he tries to use relevant cotemporary theory not for the sake of simply applying them to a text but to “*transform by translating*[black literature] into a new rhetorical realm” (emphasis in original) (p. 1473)

This goal is defended in the second half of the essay. Gates (1987/1998) focuses on a particular excerpt that Joyce cites from one of his earlier works:

“Blackness” is not a material object or an event but a metaphor; it does not have an “essence” as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity. ..The black writer is the point of consciousness of his language. If he does embody a “Black Aesthetic,” then it can be measured not by “content,” but by a complex structure of meanings. The correspondence of content between a writer and his world is less significant to literary criticism than is correspondence of organization or structure, for a relation of content may be a mere reflection of prescriptive, scriptural canon...(Gates, 1979/2000, p. 162).

Joyce (1987/1998) cites this as proof of Gates’ denial of blackness or race as important element of literary analysis. However, it highlights Gates (1987/1998) search for the black aesthetic through tangible means, believing that to identify culture or “to know it, to find it, to touch it, one must locate its manifestations [in forms such as texts]...not in the realm of the abstract...” (p. 1476)

In the essay, “In Dubious Battle,” Baker (1987/2000) opens with anecdote that took place recently at a conference, the English Institute. He states that before a nearly exclusive white

audience, Professor Deborah McDowell attacked his new position on the need for further investigation in Harlem Renaissance (Baker, 1987/2000). She argued that the investigation was misconceived and that the Renaissance should be limited to the four years of 1925 to 1929 and should only be evaluated through study of the artist such as the poets, playwrights, and novelists of the period and exclude the viewpoint of scholars, visual and musical artists as well as political leaders (Baker, 1987/2000). Baker (1987/2000) found her resistance surprising since she had discussed work the previous year on a Harlem Renaissance novel and her explication defied traditional methods. Furthermore, Baker (1987/2000) was frustrated that this “battle” took place in front of a white audience full of blank faces that were not only unfamiliar with the secondary sources, they also “did not have a clue about the primary sounds, voices, and Afro-American products being analyzed” (p. 318)

Baker (1987) takes the time to set up this anecdote to position it as a parallel to his reading of Joyce’s essay after the editor of *New Literary History* contacted Baker and offered him an opportunity to respond. He describes *New Literary History* as a “quite fine, ‘white’ journal” (Baker, 1987/2000, p. 318). He theorizes that Joyce’s article was published, even though it contained a number of errors—that Baker (1987/200) describes in detail—because “the journals editors were victims of a too casual reader’s report” or, more likely, many readers share Joyce’s animosity about recent critical and theoretical modes used in black literature (p. 315). He believes this animosity exists because the “new critical and theoretical modes marking investigations of the black expressive culture so clearly escape the minstrel simplicity that Anglo-Americans have traditionally imagined and assigned...as the farthest reaches of the black voice in the United States” (Baker, 1987/2000, p. 316).

Baker (1987/200) challenges her interpretation of texts by Locke and Wright as well as the primary goal of structuralism. Moreover, he belittles her theory about the ability of black academics to enter the mainstream: “Like myths of ‘self and other,’ redeemed ‘master’ and irredeemable ‘slave,’ the myth of an exclusively white mainstream into which Afro-Americans can ‘merge’ by choice is utter and patent nonsense...” (p. 315). Furthermore, he argues poststructuralism is not in harmony with the mainstream but with an avant garde in contemporary world literature.

In “‘Who the Cap Fit’”: Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,” Joyce (1987/2000) returns to Gates’ (1987/1998) reference to Tina Turner and her song “What’s Love Got to Do with It?” Joyce believes it supports her belief that the black community is in a predicament of being “spiritually impoverished” (p. 320). She asserts the song has the negative affect of suggesting “sex for sex’s sake, (like writing for writing sake or “the ‘free movement’ of writing itself”) is a legitimate and healthy attitude, but also that the biological satisfaction the sex act brings is the ultimate fulfillment...” (p. 320). Consequently, Joyce (1987/2000) implies there is a spiritual impoverishment in a black writer who writes primarily for the sake of art or their own satisfaction.

To call into question Baker’s creditability, she also points out his inflaming of the events at English Institute, explaining “After a number of inquiries, I learned that the question posed was *not* directed to Baker, but to any of the three panelists—Baker himself, Eleanor Traylor, and Arnold Rampersad—during the question and answer session...” (emphasis in the original) (Joyce, 1987/2000, p. 321). All three panelists had presented various definitions of the Harlem Renaissance and discussed only male writers; McDowell’s question was to the entire panel and



she asked them to discuss their definition in relation black women writers of the period (Joyce, 1987/2000).

Joyce (1987/2000) also address Gates' (1987/1998) comment: "I must confess that I am bewildered by Joyce's implied claim that to engage in black critical thought theory is to be antiblack" (p. 1469). Joyce (1987/2000) highlights two issues that she has with the statement; one is that she does not consider his mode of critical theory to be black and secondly that she does not believe him to be antiblack. In supporting her viewpoint, she explains:

A significant difference exists between being "not" Black and antiblack. Of course, the real issue, the one that Gates refuses to let surface, and I might add a very old one, concerns whether being a Black person who writes about literature makes one a Black critic, especially if blackness is a trope, as Gates surely would argue. He clearly understands that my answer to this question is an emphatic "No."... For the Black writer/writer/critic, blackness has always been—until recently and except for the few exceptions that can always be expected—a matter of perspective, commitment, involvement, and love-bonding. (Joyce, 1987/2000, p. 327-328)

Joyce's (1987/2000) definition of a black critic hints at elements similar to Maulana Karenga's (1968/1997) black arts framework requiring that all black art be functional, collective, and committed.

Joyce (1987/2000) insists that black literature is rooted in allegiance to the black community and Baker and Gates have "relinquished the allegiance" (p. 328). She argues that they failed to attack her essay through subversion, which is an important code of the signifying tradition. Gates (1983) was well known for his work on signifying. Joyce (1987/2000) argues Baker and Gates did not demonstrate love for a "Black sister" (p. 328) and should have

approached her about strategies for revision instead of protecting their egos. Therefore, Joyce (1987/2000) is implying their behavior is another example of their lack of allegiance to the black literary tradition.

## 2.7 Anthologies Used to Teach African American Literature

In order to create an anthology, choices must be made as to what texts best represent an entire literary tradition. As Jerry Warren, co-editor of *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* recently pointed out in an interview, “It’s mission impossible” (Hong, 2010, p. 129). In any attempt to be comprehensive means something is omitted (Hong, 2010). Therefore the editors of anthology must create a framework; in this case, they must define African American Literature.

The most popular anthology used in teaching African American Literature is *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (Hong, 2010; Jarrett, 2006; Marable, 1998; “New Anthology,” 1998; Mason, 1998). *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology* is arguably close to or equally as popular due to its black aesthetic framework (Eichelberger, 1999; Hong, 2010; Hubbard, 2000; Temple, 2006a). The alternative reader *African American Literature Beyond Race* offers a less traditional framework (Temple, 2006b).

*Norton’s* first edition was released in 1997 after ten years of publicity (Eichelberger, 1999). Houghton Mifflin released *Call and Response* several months later and was arguably overshadowed due to *Norton’s* arrival (Eichelberger, 1999). While both books are comprehensive texts for the teaching of African American Literature, they offer two different frameworks. Dolan Hubbard (2000) observes:

The difference in these two anthologies can be summed up in a word: *beginnings*. The Norton begins on the Western Atlantic with the degradation of the African; the Riverside

begins on the Eastern Atlantic with the elevation of the African (*The Epic of Sunjata*) and follows the continuum across the centuries in song, sermon, and story. (emphasis in original) (p. 267)

*Norton's* editors Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay used a framework closely aligned to the Western aesthetics (Hubbard, 2000); Warren describes it as preserving “a certain kind of status quo” (Hong, 2010). It tells the black experience from the viewpoint of American adaption and subversion against the Enlightenment ideals that questioned whether blacks were capable of producing “literature” (Eichelberger, 1999). On the other hand, *Call and Response* explains in its preface that it is the *first comprehensive* anthology of literature by African Americans presented according to the Black Aesthetic” (emphasis added) (Hill, et. al 1998).

An example of how these different frameworks functioned in the anthologies is in the approach to the oral tradition. *Norton* includes a single section (Vernacular) in front to discuss texts such as folktales, spirituals, work songs, and rap. *Call and Response* includes it in each time period as well as gives more background on origins and context (Eichelberger, 1999). Hubbard (2000) argues the effect of the former approach is “aesthetic segregation” of the oral tradition and gives “the unintended consequence” of “privileging of the written over the spoken word” (p. 267).

However, the black aesthetic framework does produce slanted viewpoints in *Call and Response*. Some introduction to chapters and debates as well as biographies of authors should not be unsigned, for they may give beginning students the impression that these ideas are facts and not opinions of the anthology’s editors (Eichelberger , 1999). One example is the biography of Gates, which includes statements such as, “Skip Gates discovered that his several years in journalism and business proved to be crucial in his ability to market racial discourse for public

consumption” (“Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,” 1998, p. 1467). This implies that he sold his culture and its literary tradition for popularity and success in the mainstream. It also states, “Sometimes his theoretical intelligence supersedes his common sense” (“Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,” 1998, p. 1467); the statement is presented on the page before his article begins. This may undermine Gates’ authority or at least skew a student’s impression.

*African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* does not make an attempt to be comprehensive, but offers a less traditional framework for viewing African American Literature. Gene Andrew Jarret (2006), the reader’s editor, explains that anthologies too often allow “race to *overdetermine* the idea of African American Literature” and argues that African American Literature “should be defined in the broadest ways possible” (emphasis in original) (p. 2).

The reader presents excerpts and stories from fifteen African American authors, including well known writers Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Octavia Butler, but it contains less well-known or studied works that include raceless characters and/or stories where race is not centralized in the story (Jarrett, 2006). In her review, Temple (2006b) highlights the critical essays paired with each reading that give insightful biography, historical context as well as textual analysis with each piece and observes that they are written by “an impressive representation of many of the leading scholars in African American literature” (p. 414). However, Temple (2006b) argues that it best serves as a supplement instead of an alternative. She believes that the contents “do not replace the substantial core of African American literature that is self-determinedly responsive to Black life...” (p. 415).

## 2.8 Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. In other words, the goal was to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to defining the Literature.

The literature presented in this chapter was representative of humanities and literature disciplines. However, there was an absence in the literature of approaching the topic using a social science methodology. Therefore, the majority of the literature was reprints of primary sources republished in anthologies, chapters from monographs, and books on literary history and theory related to the topic of defining African American Literature.

A black aesthetics framework requiring that all black art be functional, collective, and committed were the primary themes for the literature review (Karenga, 1968/1997). The continual debates about each of these themes were organized by literary periods. The literature review was presented in five sections. The first three sections focused on debates during Harlem Renaissance, early Civil Rights era of the 1950s (which is the latter half of the era of Realism and Modernism), and the Black Arts movement (during the late 1960s) periods that shaped the definition of African American literature. Section four examined one of the most notorious debates of the contemporary period in African American literary criticism (Griffin, 2004; Napier, 2000). The chapter concluded with a brief description of several anthologies commonly used in teaching African American Literature.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. In other words, the goal was to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to defining this literature. This chapter first discusses research design. Next, it outlines approaches to sample selection and data collection. This is followed by a discussion of validity as well as research bias. Finally, the chapter described data analysis.

#### 3.1 Research Method and Design Appropriateness

Qualitative design is the most appropriate to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. Creswell (2007) states that qualitative research is used when “we need a *complex* detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we read in the literature” (p. 40).

In addition, Creswell (2007) presents characteristics that are common to qualitative research. I will identify how six of those relate to my study. First, qualitative research takes place in a natural setting (Creswell, 2007). In other words, researchers do not usually bring the participant to a lab or send out instruments (Creswell, 2007). This method gathers data “talking directly with people and seeing them behave and act within their own context” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). This study will attempt to interview all individuals in person at their work settings.

Second, the researcher is the key instrument (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) explains, “The qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing

behavior, and interviewing participants...[R]esearchers are the ones who actually gather the information. They do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by others researchers” (p. 38). I will be interviewing African American Literature professors. Every effort will be made to interview them in person, and their curricula vitae will be used to enrich data. I have developed open-ended questions for the study. This concept will be further discussed in Data Collection.

Third, qualitative research focuses on the participant’s perspective of the issue (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) asserts the researcher “keep[s] a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature” (p. 39). This study seeks to find how the *participants* define African American Literature. Open-ended questions will allow for a focus on the participants’ meanings as opposed to the researcher.

Fourth, qualitative research often uses emergent design. Creswell (2007) explains, “the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data” (p. 39). In this case, qualitative research allows for flexibility needed in data collection such as interviewing. This study will use Rubin and Rubin’s (2005) model of *responsive interviewing*, which views “qualitative interviewing [as] a dynamic and iterative process and, not a set of tools to be applied mechanically” (p. 15). Every interview is different and should allow for adjustments and follow up questions that help in collecting rich and thick descriptions. This concept will be further discussed in Data Collection.

Next, qualitative researcher often uses a theoretical lens (Creswell, 2007). As discussed in Chapter One, this study used Karenga’s (1968/1997) black arts framework requiring that all

black art be functional, collective, and committed. This influenced data collection, data analysis, and discussion.

Finally, qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture—or holistic account—of the issue (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) explains, “This [research] involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges. Researchers are ...identifying the complex interaction of factors in any situation” (p. 39). As shown in the literature review, writers and critics have multiple perspectives of African American Literature. Qualitative research embraces multiple perspectives and data analysis in qualitative research is flexible enough to account for rich and varied factors as well as the larger picture.

In addition to these characteristics, Creswell (2007) also explains that qualitative research is often informed by the researcher’s philosophical assumption and worldview. Philosophical assumptions “reflect a particular stance that researchers make when they choose qualitative research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). My stance of a rhetorical assumption is addressed in the Assumptions sections in Chapter One.

Creswell cites Guba’s (1990) definition of worldview, which is “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 19). Furthermore, multiple paradigms may be used in a study if they are compatible (Creswell, 2007). In this case, elements of social constructivism and pragmatism are influential in this study. The relevant elements of social constructivism are:

- [Researchers] seek [an] understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading



the researcher to look at the complexity of the views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas.

- The goal of research...is to rely as much as possible on the participants' view of the situation. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (Creswell, 2007, p. 20-21)

Relevant elements of pragmatism are:

- Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality.
- Truth is what works at the time; it is not based in a dualism between reality independent of the mind or within the mind.
- Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political and other contexts. (Creswell, 2007, p. 20-21)

After considering the characteristics as well as the philosophical assumption and worldview, I decided that an exploratory qualitative study would be appropriate for the study. The study described and interpreted viewpoints of scholars to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential elements of African American Literature.

### **3.2 Sample Selection**

Qualitative research employs purposeful sampling. Creswell (2007) describes it: "This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p. 125).

Key considerations are who should be sampled, what form the sampling will take, and how many people need to be sampled (Creswell, 2007).

The population being sampled was African American Literature professors in the United States who have no less than five years experience teaching African American Literature. Five years of teaching experience was used because it gives scholars time to evaluate their ideas not just as students but as teachers. In other words, after this period of time scholars have spent a significant amount of time learning to communicate their ideas in “teachable” units that can be effectively passed on to students. These scholars will be able to clearly articulate their viewpoint and provide examples. The sample size consisted of eight professors. There were three black males, three black females, and two white males.

The “form the sampling will take” refers to identifying the sampling strategy (Creswell, 2007). This study used a criterion strategy, meaning all participants meet specific qualifications. In addition to being scholars that identify as African American Literature professors and having five years teaching experience, the scholars also had to be comfortable communicating by computer and using Microsoft Word to review their transcripts. Potential participants were chosen based on consultation with my thesis committee and contacted by email to see if they were willing to take part in the study.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

The primary source of data collection was in-depth interviewing. However, Creswell (2007) encourages the use of multiple data sources in a qualitative study. Secondary sources included the curriculum vitae of each professor and additions to the transcript made after the original interview.

## *Interviews*

Interviews are a frequently used source of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). I chose interview as the primary sources because as Rubin and Rubin (2005) observe:

Though ordinary life roots you in one position, when you are interviewing, you see life in the round, from all angles, including multiple sides of a dispute and different versions of the same incident. Observing life from separate yet overlapping angles makes the researcher more hesitant to leap to conclusions and encourages more nuanced analysis.

(p.4)

Rubin and Rubin (2005) use the model of *responsive interviewing*. I will review characteristics from this model influential in developing my interview protocol:

- *Two Human Beings*. Both the interviewer and the interviewee are people, with feelings, personality, interests, and experiences. Interviewers are not expected to be neutral or automatons, and who they are and how they present themselves affect the interview... On the other hand, because the interviewer and interviewee interact and influence each other, the interviewer has to be self-aware, examining his or her biases and expectations that might influence the interviewee. (p. 30)
- *Self-Reflection*. Researchers need to continually examine their own understandings and reactions. (p. 31)
- *Research Relationship*. The interviewer and the interviewee are in a relationship in which there is mutual influence, yet in which individuality needs to be recognized. Though the researcher initially establishes the general direction of the project, the conversational partners set the more specific path. Initial questions are expressed in a broad way to give

the opportunity to answer from their own experiences. The answers then suggest to the researcher what to pursue and what to ignore. (p.33)

- *Depth of Understanding and Flexibility of Design.* The goal of responsive interviewing is a deep understanding of what is being studied, rather than breadth. Depth is achieved by going after context; dealing with the complexity of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting themes; and paying attention to the specifics of meanings, situations, and history. To achieve this depth, the researcher has to follow up, asking more questions about what he or she heard. Research design must remain flexible to accommodate new information, to adapt to the actual experiences that people have had, and to adjust to unexpected situations. (p.35)

These characteristics lead to the development of the following questions for the interview protocol:

- (1) What elements make a text African American Literature?
- (2) What are some examples that meet these criteria?
- (3) What excludes a text from being African American Literature?
- (4) What texts fall on the margin?
- (5) What texts are generally considered a part of the canon but you believe should not be?
- (6) What texts have influenced your framework defining African American Literature?
- (7) Have any personal experiences influenced your perspective?
- (8) Have any pedagogical experiences influenced your perspective?
- (9) How do you feel about the notion that African American Literature should function as a tool for political and social empowerment for the black community?
- (10) Should political and social considerations outweigh aesthetic concerns in African American

Literature?

(11) Does the black writer have a responsibility to the black community?

### *Curriculum Vita*

Each participant was asked to supply a curriculum vita to establish that he or she has five years of teaching experience. The vita also provided information on the professor's academic training and research interests that were used in their participant description.

### *Revised Transcripts*

Interviews were digitally voice recorded and transcribed verbatim into text files by the researcher using Express Scribe. Afterwards, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts in Microsoft Word to clarify statements and add additional examples of texts. This also enriches data as well as encourages collaboration with the participants in making sure their ideas were accurately represented.

### *Process for Collecting Data*

I completed an IRB (Institutional Review Board) application at Georgia State University and obtained permission to interview human subjects. After, approval from my thesis committee, I begin the process of recruiting participants. I recruited eight African American Literature professors with at least five years teaching experience. There were three black males, three black females, and two white males. Participants received an email invitation to participate in the study. Their university email address was obtained from the university directory. The email included a copy of the interview protocol and the informed consent. If there was no response in two weeks, a reminder email will be sent to the participant. If the subject chose to participate, the consent form was signed in front of the researcher before beginning the interview.

The participants had to agree to be identified by their real name. Their gender, age, and race were identified. Identification of their previous work and academic background is tied to their name and enriches the data collection. Due to this focus of this study, it is also more likely that the study actually benefits their day to day life by extending their impact as scholar. However, scholars were informed that they have the right to discontinue their involvement with the study at any point. All electronic data (the interviews, transcripts, and coded transcripts) were kept under password protection on two flash drives (one original and one back up copy of data). The flash drives as well as all hard copies of transcripts were kept in my home in a locked storage container.

Interviews lasted 35 to 50 minutes. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts in Microsoft Word and clarify statements and add additional examples. The amount of time to review the transcripts may vary depending on how much they choose to add. An estimated amount of time is two to three hours.

### **3.4 Internal Validity**

Creswell (2007) employs the term “validation’ in qualitative research to be an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and participants” (p. 207). Furthermore, Creswell (2007) uses the term “validation” to emphasize a process as opposed to the term “verification” which he argues has “quantitative overtones” (p. 208). Eight strategies are presented for validation and Creswell (2007) insists that at least two be used. I employed the following three:

- *Peer review or debriefer.* The peer debriefer acts a “devil’s advocate,” an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides opportunities for catharsis by sympathetically listening to

the researcher's feelings. This reviewer may be a peer, and both peer and researcher keep written accounts of the sessions called "peer debriefing sessions." (Lincoln & Guba as cited by Creswell, 2007, p. 208)

- *Clarifying researcher bias.* In this clarification the researcher comments on past experiences, biases and prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to study. (p. 208) (see Researcher Bias below)
- *Rich, thick description.* It allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability. With such detailed description, the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred "because of shared characteristics" (Erlandson et. al as cited by Creswell, 2007, p. 209)

### **3.5 External Validity**

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) describe "threats to external validity" as "effects that obstruct or reduce a study's comparability and transferability" (p. 51). This was an exploratory qualitative study; therefore, the goal of the study was not to generalize but provide a detailed description of African American Literature's essential elements as given by these eight professors. It should however be noted (and is mentioned above) that a thick, rich description is a tool in helping readers decide if findings are transferable.

### **3.6 Researcher Bias**

I have been a creative writer for fifteen years. I earned a Masters of Fine Arts in Fiction Writing five years ago. I consider myself a black writer even though some writers and critics would not agree, including any following Karenga's (1968/1997) black arts framework. I write primarily for a black audience but my work focuses on identity and family informed by black social, historical, and economic experiences. My characters are primarily the black middle class.

I attempt to deconstruct social and historical traditions in the black community. However, I am unsure if Karenga (1968/1997) would see my point of view as commitment or my work as a truly functioning to uplift the black community.

I have taught African American literary texts while teaching full-time at the university level but I do not consider myself an African American Literature professor. When I was teaching full-time I considered myself a writer who was teaching literature and writing skills to the average college student; in other words, the great majority of my students did not have my love of literature and were only in my class because it was a required course. Most of my students were not English majors and I wanted to expose them to a wide range of voices because it was most likely the only exposure they would have in their college career. Therefore, I taught texts that I identified as part of the African American Literary canon in introduction to literature courses alongside texts commonly taught as American Literature and narratives of other marginalized groups. Due to these experiences, I have an established perspective of what elements are essential to African American Literature and believe that the canon is often too narrow. During data collection and analysis, I have to separate my views as both a writer and professor from those of other scholars and be careful not to give too little time or too much time (by over compensating) to perspectives different than my own.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

I used methods suggested by Creswell (2007) in order to analyze the data collected from the interviews, revised transcripts, curricula vitae, and scholarly work. First, I used an open coding phase to determine categories. I used the constant comparative approach of attempting to “saturate” the categories; in other words, “to look for instances that represent the category and to continue looking (and interviewing) until the new information obtained does not further provide



insight into the categories” (p. 60) After an initial set of categories were established, I identified the elements from the open coding list most commonly discussed as essential.

The next step was axial coding; categories established as essential elements were considered the central phenomenon. The data was reviewed for examples that clarify and show the relationships connected to the central phenomenon. These examples were used to create thick, rich descriptions. Finally, a visual diagram and table were created to aid in showing the elements.

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter discussed research design. I decided that an exploratory qualitative study would be appropriate for the study. The study described and interpreted viewpoints of scholars to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential elements of African American Literature. Next, sample selection and data collection procedures were described. The population being sampled is African American Literature professors in the United States who have no less than five years experience teaching African American Literature. The primary source of data collection is in-depth interviewing. This was followed by a discussion of validity as well as research bias.

Finally, the chapter described procedures for data analysis. After an initial set of categories, the categories from the open coding were identified. The next step was axial coding; categories established as essential elements were considered the central phenomenon. Examples of the phenomenon were used to create thick, rich descriptions, a visual diagram, and a table.

#### 4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. In other words, the goal was to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to defining this literature. The research questions that guided this study were:

(1) What elements make a text African American Literature?

(2) What elements of the black aesthetic framework are considered essential elements of African American Literature?

The study used an exploratory qualitative design and was conducted from February 2012 to March 2012. The population sampled was African American Literature professors in the United States who have no less than five years experience teaching African American Literature. Participants received an email invitation to participate in the study. Their university email address was obtained from the university website. The email included a copy of the interview protocol and the informed consent. If there was no response in two weeks, a reminder email was sent to the participant. If the subject chose to participate, the consent form was signed in front of the researcher before beginning the interview.

The primary source of data collection was in-depth interviewing. After the interview, participants received a copy of the transcript and were able to make amendments to their original statements. Secondary sources were the revised transcripts and the curriculum vitae of the participant. After an initial set of categories, the categories from the open coding were identified. The next step was axial coding; data was reviewed to provide insight into the categories established as essential elements and were considered the central phenomenon.

## **4.1 Overview**

This chapter presents the results and analysis of the findings. It presents detailed data from the interviews conducted with the eight participants. First, the chapter describes each participant and the settings of the interviews. Afterwards, an overview of the findings is presented. Next, the data and analysis of the findings is presented in two sections. First, the elements commonly used to define African American Literature are presented in a diagram; it shows which elements are most common to each participant's definition and categories that are less commonly included or considered on the margin. Then data is presented to support the findings. In the next section, the elements of the black aesthetics framework and their influence in African American Literature are presented in a table and categorized by interview questions. Afterwards, data is presented to support the findings. The final section provides a summary of the chapter.

## **4.2 The Participants**

Eight African American Literature Professors were interviewed at their respective universities. Six were located in the metro Atlanta area. The other two were located in Watkinsville and Gainesville, Georgia. Teaching experiences ranged from 7 to 35 years and ages ranged from 33 to 50+. The participants included three black females, three black males, and two white males (including one born in Switzerland). Two professors teach at a historically black university, two teach at a state university with a significant black undergraduate population (38%), two teach at a predominately white two year college outside of the metro Atlanta area, and two teach at a private predominately white university. It should be noted that the real names of the participants are used in the study. Identification of their previous work or research area and academic background is tied to their name and enriches the data collection. Their full name

will be used in the description and their last name will be used in the presentation of data.

Descriptions will be presented in the order of the interviews. As a final note, Table 4.1, which can be seen in Appendix F, provides a summary of the participants.

Brennan Collins is a 39-year-old white male and is an Academic Professional at Georgia State University with 14 years of teaching experience. Georgia State is a state university with a significant black undergraduate population (38%) located in downtown Atlanta.

Collins received his PhD from Georgia State. His scholarship explores African-American literary perspectives of the South, often comparing and contrasting oral storytelling with written literary production. On teaching African American Literature, Collins explains: "...the stakes are high just because race in America is such an important issue and such a difficult thing for so many people to talk about. And that is such a heated thing and...it is more difficult to teach regardless of how much knowledge you have." Moreover, he believes the Hurston/Wright debate had a significant impact on him as a teacher and a person as well as the work of Toni Morrison (especially the male characters of her early years) because of the concept of representation versus authenticity, which is a the large influence on how he teaches any survey literature survey class.

Lawrence Jackson is a 43-year-old black male and is a Professor at Emory University with 15 years of teaching experience. Emory is a private predominately white university in Atlanta, Georgia.

Jackson received his PhD at Stanford University. His recent scholarship includes *Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*, which provides insights into black writers' literary and personal experiences of an understudied period. His current research interests include work on Chester Himes. Jackson believes that *Invisible Man* was the text that "opened everything for me." He explains that it is "Because

Ralph Ellison explains the way that riots break out. He explains the death of a young man's friend. And he explained police brutality. And those were things that were happening to me in my life when I was 20 and 19 and I didn't understand them. I didn't have a framework to understand the way that racism operated in the United States." Furthermore, he argues that canon formation is "a complicated kind of thing." Jackson describes it as "something that keeps shifting and changing. It's never set. It's never a solid body. It's always in relation to the needs of whatever we understand as the contemporary group of black people."

Osizwe Raena Harwell is a 33-year-old black female and is a Visiting Lecturer at Georgia State University with 7 years of teaching experience.

Harwell received her PhD at Temple University. Her teaching and research interests include Contemporary Black Women's Activism, Contemporary Black Fiction, and Black Gender and Sexuality Studies. In describing her love of literature, Harwell insists: "When I begin to love literature I wasn't thinking about it as a category and I wasn't reading in any one genre...[B]eing a broad reader has allowed me to see the impact that writing can have, that literature can have. So I don't think there are single texts. I think that it's in the act of reading African American writers broadly that I can see how they add value." Equally important, Harwell uses African American Literature as pedagogical tool that extends beyond her literature classes. She explains, "When I'm teaching history, when I'm teaching black childhood development—even if I'm teaching film, I might use a novel, I might use a classic piece or contemporary novel to elucidate some type of social, historical, political person or issue that I think would be more clearly illustrated through narration—through narrative. And my experience is that students always love it."

Jürgen Grandt is a 43-year-old white male (Swiss born) and is an Assistant Professor at Gainesville State College with 17 years of teaching experience. Gainesville State College is a predominately white two year college outside of the metro Atlanta area.

Grandt received his PhD at the University of Georgia. His most recent book *Shaping Words to Fit the Soul: The Southern Ritual Grounds of Afro-Modernism* explores the implications of the modernist jazz aesthetic in the African American literary tradition. His most recent publication is “Into a Darker Past: James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* and the Anxiety of Authenticity” in the *CLA Journal*. Grandt’s interest in African American Literature was catalyzed by an “immersion in and fascination with—obsession with jazz.” He remarks, “That’s how I got into the field in the first place. I was a jazz buff before I started studying the African American literary tradition...Now these are personal experiences that didn’t have a direct, if you will, impact on my scholarship. I don’t quote Mike Stern anywhere in my writing...But these are invaluable experiences that I was fortunate to share. That indirectly most definitely shaped the way I think about African American cultural production, and ...the ever shifting borders of the canon and the ever shifting borders of the tradition...” Additionally, Grandt discussed the influence of his race on teaching African American Literature: “My position is, I guess it’s fair to say, a little bit unique. Having been born and raised in Switzerland, believe me I milk my background for all it’s worth, particularly when I teach African American Literature...[M]y position as a cultural outsider is of tremendous value to me in winning over to the discipline traditional students who as I’ve said can often be intimidated by or dismissive of the black literary tradition.”

Mark Sanders is a 48-year-old black male and is a Professor at Emory University with 20 years of teaching experience.

Sanders received his PhD at Brown University. His most recent publication is "Toward a Modernist Poetics" in *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*. He describes his current research interest: "What I'm trying to do in my own work is to push the national borders to look at the ways in which blacks across the Western Hemisphere—potentially participate in a common literary tradition." Furthermore, Sanders describes the household he grew up in which everyone was a "very avid reader" and remembers their discussions being "very forthright about racial politics." Furthermore, he explains the influence of his family's discussions on his viewpoint of the literary tradition: "My parents were active in the Civil Rights Movement and that was always a part of our family discussions. So there was always a link between letters and politics or letters and the way in which African Americans have pursued civil rights in a larger sense—not just confined to '55 to '65 but thinking about the very first acts of liberation for blacks on the continent of Africa facing enslavement during the Middle Passage and here in the new world. So I've always thought about reading, thought about writing—on the part of African American writers—as political acts. Either implicitly or explicitly."

Georgene Bess Montgomery is 48-year-old black female and is an Associate Professor at Clark Atlanta University with 22 years of teaching experience. Clark Atlanta is a historically black university in Atlanta.

Bess Montgomery received her PhD from University of Maryland. Her recent book publication is *The Spirit and the Word: A Theory of Spirituality in Africana Literary Criticism*, which uses the African spiritual system Ifá to create a paradigm for analyzing Africana Literature. Bess Montgomery discusses the influence of her childhood in her view of literature: "Well as a country girl, I grew up out in the woods out in the country on a farm. So of course I pay close attention to landscape because I grew up barefooted, picking plums off trees. So the

outdoors was very much a part of my life. Once we left the house, we couldn't be in and out—not even to use the bathroom... So being a country girl helps make me—and I think I'm much more attracted to your Southern texts.” She adds to that the influence of her mother reading to her and her siblings. “Mommy would read to us, made us read—and reading the dictionary. Mommy always made us think about things. She was always asking us questions. So I think texts that make us question, makes me; this playing with words that incorporates the landscape, that tells a good story. First and foremost it has to tell a good story. And then you have those other things along with it that incorporate those various African aspects in the texts.”

Alma Vinyard is “50+”-years-old black female and is an Associate Professor at Clark Atlanta University with 35 years teaching experience.

Vinyard received her PhD from the University of Tennessee. Vinyard remembers the influence of local librarian in her childhood who introduced her to African American Literature. The librarian rewarded the students who read the most during the summer with a blue ribbon and cash prize. She also emphasizes that the Black Arts is an “intimate part” of her past. She explains, “That’s when I lived.” Vinyard participated as an actress in the plays such as the *Amen Corner* and *Day of Absence*. In describing her pedagogical techniques for teaching African American Literature, she emphasizes she tries to make it “come to life.” She provides examples: “When I taught Caribbean Lit, I took my class to Jamaica... For my last Harlem Renaissance class—my graduate class—we actually went to Harlem. We visited the Schauburg and had the archivist bring out original documents of the Harlem Renaissance writers. We went into the photo archives and the archivist there brought out original documents. We had to put on these special gloves to handle it and everything, but it was amazing. They also took us in the



stacks of archives so we could see *all* of these documents that they'd collected for decades and decades.”

Darren Rhym is black male and is an Assistant Professor at Gainesville State College with 20 years teaching experience.

Rhym received his M.A. in English from The Pennsylvania State University. Currently, he is working on his doctorate in Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia.

Rhym explained his passion for the Black Arts Movement and its connection to his current research: “I cut my teeth on the Black Arts Movement. To me, that literature and the political nature of that literature. Nikki Giovanni wasn't very complex technically but her message was clear. To me, I read it for the message. I could understand it. How empowering that was that I could read poetry and understand it. He was also attracted to “the historical power of people defining themselves for the first time. To me, that's why I fell in love with the literature and that's going to be hopefully one of my research topics in the very near future. I'm going to be looking at hip hop artists and try to find out what they're experiences were in the classroom. How did the English class help or hamper you in your development of your artistic voice?” Furthermore, Rhym observes canon formation is a “subjective experience.” He reasons, “Your canon isn't my canon—nor should it be. Just like your experience isn't my experience. I wouldn't disrespect you by trying to define yours. Don't step up in mine.”

### **4.3 Overview of Definitions and Elements**

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. Data analysis revealed three categories in regards to essential elements of African American Literature. The most common and agreed upon category was African American writers who wrote about black characters and

the black experience. The second category contained three common areas of expansion for the types of texts being accepted in the canon: (1) commercial fiction; (2) literature written by African American writers but not about black characters and the black experience; and (3) African Diasporic Literature. Seven of the eight participants included at least one of these categories in their definition. Third, most participants considered the possibility of white writers writing about black characters and the black experience, but ideas varied on when it would be possible to include them in the canon and potential examples. These categories have been illustrated in Figure 4.2 on the next page. Also, it is important to note that because of the small sample, outliers in the data related to elements of the definition will be discussed.

In investigating elements of the black aesthetic framework that are considered essential elements of African American Literature, findings revealed three areas: (1) African American Literature as a tool for social and political empowerment; (2) balancing aesthetics concerns with social and political considerations; (3) responsibility of the black writer to the black community. In Area 1, two categories emerged. Most participants reported that literature should function as a tool for empowerment; however, some felt that it often does function as a tool but participants did not believe it has to or it could have other purposes. Area 2 produced two categories and several outliers. Most participants felt that aesthetic concerns and political and considerations should be balanced. Two participants felt it is an individual decision of the writer. Also, due to the small number of participants, the outlier will be included in the findings: one person placed aesthetics first. In Area 3, three categories emerged: some participants felt that the black writer has a responsibility; some felt the black writer's responsibility is to self and the craft of writing; and some felt that it is a responsibility but it is an unfair and imposed position. These categories

can be found in Table 4.3, which is located in section 4.5 Elements of the Black Aesthetic Framework.

#### **4.4 Defining Elements of African American Literature**

In order to investigate what elements the participants used to define African American Literature, I asked a number of questions regarding how participants defined the canon, examples of what belonged in the canon, examples of what did not, and what texts were on the margin. I also asked about personal and pedagogical influences in defining their framework for African American Literature.

Also, it should be repeated that my rhetorical assumption includes the goal of “rely[ing] as much as possible on the participants’ view of the situation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 20); therefore, to let the scholars create a rich description in their own words and because of the complexity of the subject being defined, a significant number of long quotations are used in presentation of the data. While I frame the data, the focus is on the words of the participants.

**Figure 4.2 Defining Elements of African American Literature**



*African American Writers Writing about Black Characters and the Black Experience*

The most common and agreed upon category was African American writers who wrote about black characters and the black experience. Sanders, a black male at Emory University, states it most succinctly: “My sense of African American Literature is really pretty expansive and very simple. African American Literature is simply literature written by black people. And so, I don’t have a prescription for certain kinds of elements that have to be in the literature.”

Jackson, a black male at Emory University, includes a similar definition but also emphasizes that he would include a writer, even if the writer does not identify as black:

The way that I am teaching classes in writing literary history, the text has to be written by a black person—a person who identifies themselves as African American. At any period in time or maybe too by any document. As I am responding I am thinking about Anatole

Broyard, whose criticism I use and consider a part of African American Literature, but who after the mid-1950s never self-identified as an African American. When he published in the 90s, deliberately—it seems to me—he was trying to erase his racial ancestry.

Harwell, a black female at Georgia State University, also comments on the issues of self-identification:

I think that if a person self-identifies an African American writer or considers themselves a writer of African American Literature, I think that's a starting point. I think there are some people who argue that they don't want to be associated with a label or limited. I would think of people like Jean Toomer in the Harlem Renaissance. There are writers who want to write for a broad audience. I think you can still do so and have it considered African American Literature.

Moreover, Harwell presents a definition that not only includes race but also added a reference to the black experience: "For me, generally I consider it African American Literature [if] it's written by an African American author and deals broadly with any subject matter related to African American life, history, or culture."

Collins, a white male at Georgia State University, also focuses on the writer's race. He explains, "I guess there's the obvious...that the author in some way identifies as African American....It's not an easy absolute but the writer is African American, identifies themselves as African American, or is identified as..." However, Collins makes a distinction about the presence of the black experience based on what examples he would teach in a class and what he consider a part of the canon:

I think there's a difference between what I might call African American Literature and what I teach in African American Literature. Like if there is a writer who doesn't at all deal with African American culture, life, history. I think that it wouldn't be unreasonable if that person is African American to consider their work African American Literature but it not be all that useful in an African American Literature class.

In this case, Collins' personal definition is more expansive than what he may choose to teach to students in a survey course of African American Literature. Although he is concerned with expanding the margins:

And I think if you're teaching a survey course in African American Lit you do have a certain responsibility to... Hurston's work should be there. Ellison should be there. Morrison should.... You've got that. But I think it's not unreasonable and actually, probably should on the periphery bring in some writers to start asking those questions [about writers on the margin]... I would argue that you should have canonized writers but there should be room for those discussions on the margins that some things are the same and have been for a long time. Some things are changing to some degree, so that needs to be worked out in classrooms and academic discussions and on the Barnes and Noble rack, or whatever. Regardless of what side you stand on in those issues, it's a real discussion to be had.

In another case, Bess Montgomery, a black female teaching at Clark Atlanta University, also discusses the race of the writer in her core definition: "I think ultimately one of the first characteristics would be a text written by African Americans. Because no matter how much people try to pretend there's no sensibility, there is one." In this case, Bess Montgomery points

out the presence of a black sensibility; later in the interview she would associate that sensibility with an African-centered perspective but admits a clear definition of that is problematic:

if you talk about mother-daughter relationships, friendships those are all human issues that every group experiences. So it's different with issues from an African-centered perspective—but even that becomes problematic. Because if you're saying that it's African-centered, it doesn't necessarily have to be African-centered. It's complicated. When you put it out there, then you realize, well that ain't quite it either. So some of the constant themes that you have in African American Literature—Why don't we look at it that way? Certainly relationships that are often times problematic. Relationships that are also informed by the various -isms: sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, etc.

She continues by giving examples of black characters, the black community, and the black experience that are a part of a black sensibility:

So when you talk about the black community, there are things that are happening in the black community. You've got the funerals. You've got love. You've got loss. You've got broken hearts. You've got the hoodoo man, the conjure woman. You have the leader in the community, so you have all those characters of the community that are going to be represented in the text.

Rhym, a black male at Gainesville State College furnishes a definition that focuses on the black experience and overlaps with Bess Montgomery in expressing a black sensibility and shared experience that Bess Montgomery seeks to describe:

I was trained in a specific way when I was at Penn State. I worked with Bernard Bell.... In his text [*The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*], he states in the introduction that it's our shared experiences which make us who we are. That is how we come to be

known as black or African American. I have to always defer to that. That it is those experiences that we don't chose. That are a part of who we are. That are a part of our culture that make us what we are... That has to be part of the nature of the story of the struggle or some aspect. The texture of the story has to be negotiated in the experience.

Finally, it is important to note two outliers regarding the core definition of African American writers who wrote about black characters and the black experience. First, Grandt, a white male at Gainesville State College, refuses to provide a definitive answer and instead embraces the fluidity of the canon and focuses on the issue of authenticity. Grandt states:

Well, this is a question you can answer definitively only if you subscribe to either an Essentialist approach or a Structuralist approach. It all comes down to authenticity, doesn't it? Or as Ralph Ellison called it: "the blackness of blackness." I think that on the one hand—I think most critics would agree—authenticity is a sociocultural construct. But at the same time many of us are reluctant to just discard that concept completely because if we get rid of any and all notions of "authentic blackness" —for lack of a better term—are we not also getting rid of cultural difference, and by extension are we not also getting rid of history? So, I think that there is a curious dynamic at play there, and how I have tried to approach this question and this problem is to think of the blackness of blackness not as a normative yardstick or an absolute category but as a process that plays out in a field of tension. That is, as a flexible narrative posture in time, an ontological process of revelation and renegotiation. So that this is a very fluid concept. After all, in the sermon, the prologue of *Invisible Man*, Ellison's preacher who gives the sermon on the blackness of blackness says, "Blackness is and blackness ain't." But he doesn't tell us what is and what ain't.



Secondly, Vinyard, a black female at Clark Atlanta University, discusses language as “very significant” to her definition. She provides an example:

If you are standing and observing two African Americans just talking on the corner. You’re going to see all kinds of hand gyrations. You’re going to see moving in, moving back. Hands on the hip and all of that as part of the conversation. Where as you can observe people of other ethnicities standing and talking. And it’s just—they’re talking. You just know they’re talking. There is nothing. Even if the conversation between the two African Americans is the same topic as the top with other ethnic groups, it’s going to be delivered differently. The non-verbal language that comes through in the text. The range of the language. It’s not all formal language. It’s not all urban language. It’s not all political language. It’s a mixture. Most of the African American Literature, the African American texts—it’s just different.

Therefore, Vinyard expects an integration of the black sensibility into the language. In the next chapter, her definition will be discussed in context to the core definition and the literature.

### *Common Areas of Expansion*

Nearly all the participants included at least one of three common areas of expansion in their definition: (1) commercial fiction; (2) literature written by African American writers but not about black characters and the black experience; and (3) African Diasporic Literature. Also of note, in the case of this study, commercial fiction is used to cover a broad variety of genres, such as urban street fiction, mysteries, romance, and science fiction:

- *Commercial fiction*

Collins uses commercial fiction in the classroom and is open to variety of genres for tools in teaching students:

I think interesting work is being done on African American romance fiction. I wouldn't necessarily balk at someone teaching a class in or including it. I wouldn't necessarily include it in my class. Though I would include certainly Mosley who is Crime Fiction. And I could see science fiction. Yeah, I could see the possibility. Would I choose?— That's just based on taste and I like Moseley. [Laughter] So I would bring in Moseley. In that Contemporary Ethnic American Lit class I brought in *A Red Death* [a novel by Moseley]. I think it was the first African American text I was using and then I moved to *Jazz* and then I moved to *Appalachee Red* by Raymond Andrews.

Rhym sees urban fiction as an important part of the canon. He believes it reaches an important audience:

One of my close friends, she does her research on what she calls “those trashy novels”— urban lit. And she's like: “This is literature.” It is literature. It's important literature. It's motivating these girls to read. They are emotionally involved. There's pathos in it. And they are enjoying it. It is an experience. Of course that's literature and it's necessary.

Therefore, Rhym sees its value in reaching a community within the black community—young black girls.

Harwell also considers urban fiction a part of the canon. She states, “And there's the question of popular—what were now calling street literature, urban hip hop fiction. People may debate the quality of [it] but I still think it should still be a part of the conversation.” Later in the interview she discusses why she includes urban fiction and, like Rhym, mentions its impact on young black girls:

What we like is subjective. Right? If there's a significant audience for it, I think that it is worthy of examination in the canon. Particularly a significant African American

audience. All of my girls are reading—my college girls or my high school girls—are reading *True to the Game* or *The Coldest Winter Ever*. It's having social impact. And we're at a point where in academia we're giving intellectual attention to popular culture as meaningful and relevant. So I think to decide what is worthy of scholarly critique, what is worthy of going down in history in the literary canon is a little bit elitist.

Harwell also offers the example of Bebe Moore Campbell's *72 Hour Hold* as an example of commercial—or popular—fiction that is relevant to the canon:

...there was a way I saw Bebe Moore Campbell talking about mental illness in a way that I was really clear about the nature of the social issue. And when I thought about author's purpose, I said there's something deliberate. She's not really just trying to write what we perceive black women's literature [as]—something to read on the beach. Something just to enjoy, have fun with, and read about relationships, sex, and girlfriend time. But it was actually something intentional and it made me want to know more about who and why she was writing literature. I felt the same way in a class when I read like Ann Petry's *The Street*. It was like what a wonderful way to talk about the social issues that black women faced in urban areas in the 1940s. And so the writer just never simply seems to be just trying to tell a story or even if they set out to just tell a story, in the process—somehow, along that journey—[they] represent black culture, represent black experiences, represent black history.

Sanders also provides examples of commercial fiction authors that are not often taught but should be included as a part of African American Literature:

What we don't teach often are books say by Frank Yerby—one of the most prolific and bestselling black authors in history. But he didn't write exclusively about black subjects.

And he wrote romances, so they weren't politicized in the ways in which the academic approach to African American Literature has selected for. Someone like Frank Yerby I would include as African American Literature. Or someone like Samuel Delany, who's a science fiction writer; I think that's African American Literature as well, although it doesn't fit the traditional academic frame for African American Literature.

Furthermore, Sanders assesses the reasons commercial fiction does not receive more critical attention:

I use Zane as an example of the kind of erotic soft pornographic writing by particularly black women writers. For the most, the criticism hasn't dealt well with issues of the erotic that's not politicized in a particular way. The erotic for its own sake—for the pleasure of reading—is something that African American Literary criticism has not been set up [for]—doesn't have the tools to deal with it in a very substantive way. E. Lynn Harris in particular, on the other hand, brings up for me an equally charged issue around sexuality. I think relatively recently, particularly as a result of black feminist or black womanist criticism, the larger field of African American Literary Criticism has been able to deal with homosexuality, bisexuality, lesbian relationships, etc. But that's a relatively late development. And this development is in reaction to that original moment where certain kinds of identities were actively excluded from the politics that charged the moment, that informed how those original frames were created. Sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and a reluctance to address allegedly a-political texts all informed the creation of that original critical frame. So, we're still catching up with the literature. As critics we're still building the tools to really read these writers and texts critically.

- *Non-black characters*

Jackson includes African American writers who write about non-black characters and do not focus on the black experience in his definition. Jackson mentions Frank Yerby as an example, who Sanders discussed earlier in the section in the context of commercial fiction:

I don't want to say books that have either exclusively African American characters or African American themes because I think it's important to discuss people like Willard Motley or Frank Yerby—to include them—because the conversations that they were having and the things that they were saying and the way that they were formed as writers is just incredibly valuable.

Furthermore, Jackson discusses the dangers of not including a figure such as Alice Walker, who has written texts that focus on non-black characters and not the black experience. He uses the example of her novel *Meridian*, which focuses on “the recovery of Native American past.”

Jackson asserts that he would include all of her texts in the canon:

To me, someone like Alice Walker who has such a historic role in the freedom struggle, especially the women's freedom struggle, women's liberation movement, you've got to include all of her books. Otherwise she will be seen as *that* one has a black theme and *that* one doesn't, because you want to understand the totality of her contribution. You don't want to cut off the parts of her. She winds up being too significant an artist for that. And the same would be true for others.

Grandt discusses finding the balance of including works with non-black characters in the classroom. He uses several texts of James Baldwin as an example:

And I really do think that some of the essays of *Notes of a Native Son* undergraduate students in particular should be exposed to before they are exposed to, let's say,

*Giovanni's Room*. Also because many of the essays—I'm thinking of "Stranger in the Village"—also because I know that village. That's where I'm from. "Stranger in the Village" or "Equal in Paris" are essays that deal with whiteness as much as they deal with blackness. Does that make them less black? No. On the contrary, I think that it was his experience of being black in America that allowed Baldwin to write about whiteness in the way that he did in *Giovanni's Room*.

Therefore, Grandt argues that he would use texts to represent Baldwin—texts that represent the core definition—before texts by Baldwin that contain no black characters and are not explicitly about the black experience. In other words, when introducing Baldwin to undergraduates, he would focus on more 'traditional' texts of the canon to establish a foundation before exposing them to a text, arguably, on the margin.

Bess Montgomery assesses a similar pedagogical dilemma on how to place Baldwin's text in the canon but she decides to "cautiously" exclude a text such as *Giovanni's Room*:

I don't know if anyone's ever considered James Baldwin's *Another Country* or even *Giovanni's Room* not an African American text because it's written by an African American male but he does not have any black characters in that text. So would a text be African American if there are no African American characters in the text but it's written by an African American? And I would want to say not really but I would be cautious to say that. Because, once again, James Baldwin's *Another Country* has not. *Giovanni's Room*, set in Paris, has no African American characters in this text. Right? Do we include [them] because many of his other texts do? And one would never consider excluding James Baldwin from our canon. But I think that if I were teaching an African American Literature course and I were teaching James Baldwin, I probably wouldn't teach

*Giovanni's Room* or *Another Country*. I'd teach *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, or one of the other texts that incorporate African American characters. So, cautiously, for me, I would want them [African American literary texts] to have African American characters and to also deal with African American issues.

However, unlike Bess Montgomery, Grandt also argues in his last statement that he believes a text such *Giovanni's Room* is African American Literature because it is seen through an author who has lived the black experience. Moreover, Rhym takes a similar position, insisting that what makes it a black text is the "lens" through which the narrative is seen. He argues, "Just by the fact that they [writers] define themselves as African American. It doesn't matter what they're writing about. It's still coming from that lens. Coming from the lens of the African American experience."

Furthermore, Vinyard explains that she would also include *Giovanni's Room*. She also ties it to her reasoning for theoretically including a white author in the canon:

I would still place that [*Giovanni's Room*] in the context [of African American Literature] because in reading it I get the sense that the narrator, the writer, the author has had enough of the experience that he's writing about to give it an African American perspective in the writing. I mean the same way I mentioned in the beginning that a person of another ethnic group could be genuinely certified to write about the African American culture, if indeed he or she has a context to place that piece of work. I think that James Baldwin had a context or an experience or a perspective in which to place that.

Therefore, once again the lens of the author is used as the key criteria in defining the text as African American Literature.

- *African Diaspora*

Sanders was the only participant that explicitly includes writers in the African Diaspora in his definition of African American Literature. He explains:

For African American Literature, on the ground as I practice it—my criticism, my teaching—focuses on African American Literature written by blacks. I also expand it beyond national borders to the extent to which most people hear American and think US, I don't. I think Caribbean writers and Afro-Latino writers should be part of that larger tradition...

However, Rhym appears ambivalent in where to place the texts of writers in African Diaspora in the canon: "How do we respond to the whole Pan-African thing in terms of what brothers and sisters are doing who have experience with colonialism—the way they see imperialism?" Rhym's position is unclear but he seems open to the possibility of including them. Furthermore, Rhym's logic in including other texts on the margin, such as text of some white writers, which is discussed later in the section, leads to speculation that he may include texts of African Diasporic writers if they contain a strong parallel experience to his own.

Even though Collins and Bess Montgomery do not place writers from the African Diaspora in the African American literary tradition, it is valuable to note how they negotiate the margin. Furthermore, Sanders is including Africans still living in the Diaspora of the Caribbean and Latin America, while Collins and Bess Montgomery focus on members of the African Diaspora who immigrate to America.

Collins and Bess Montgomery offer examples of what they find problematic by placing the issue in context of an author. For example, Collins struggle can be seen in his discussion of teaching Edwidge Danticat:



If I had to come down on is Edwidge Danticat African American Lit? Is her work African American Lit?...once again I would default to it would be an interesting discussion in the classroom. I don't exactly know how I feel about coming down on one side or the other. I could see arguments on either side. I would lean to saying no though, unless she specifically defines herself in that way. But it might be interesting to bring her into the classroom. I teach the Contemporary Ethnic American Lit and so it gives me a chance to explore some of these issues within that context. But I teach her as a Haitian American writer. I don't teach her as an African American writer though certainly many issues, many parallels are there.

Therefore, Collins acknowledges the parallels but makes a clear distinction between the black experience and the experience of other members of the African Diaspora who have immigrated to America.

Bess Montgomery also struggles with the issue and illustrates her position and the intricacies of the margins through a discussion of Caribbean writer Elizabeth Nunez:

I have a friend, Elizabeth Nunez, who's a Caribbean writer. She's written texts about African American characters. Would that be excluded from the African American canon? Would that be considered African American Literature? She's a Caribbean writer, which means she's diasporic. Her female character is born here; their parents might be Trinidadian. She's from Trinidad. So maybe Caribbean but the characters themselves—the main characters are born here in America. But most often that text would be considered a Caribbean text, because it's written by a Caribbean writer. Although you have it centered in America with African American characters, but written from the sensibility of a Caribbean writer, which is different perhaps. When you're talking about

African American, what is specific to African American, then that distinguishes it from African diasporic. So it's not just enough to say that it has African American characters. Similar to Collins, Bess Montgomery makes a distinction between the black sensibility and the sensibility of the Caribbean writer. However, she highlights that black characters are not enough to make a text African American Literature and desires a black sensibility.

### *Inclusion of White Writers*

Most participants considered the possibility of white writers writing about black characters and the black experience but there was not a consensus on issues such as when it would be possible to include them in the canon, how to evaluate the "authenticity" of the text, and potential examples of texts that would be included. I will highlight the range and present findings from all the participants.

Jackson excludes whites from his definition and clearly explains why he takes that position:

I guess more or less I just make a personal decision about excluding white writers who write books with all black characters because I still think—I disagree with a colleague like Kim Warren—I disagree that we're at a place where our literary history is intact enough, that we've spent enough time covering enough of the African American writers who have been forgotten by history, [and] that we have the time and the resources really to develop the white writers—the Carl Van Vechtens.

However, he offers possible examples of white authors that may eventually be included:

In my own work I talk a lot about Bucklin Moon and Lillian Smith who published novels, but Moon especially—featuring black characters. I don't think we are at a place yet where we need to include them. Though ultimately I think they probably will wind up

being included: Bucklin Moon, Warren Miller. There are probably a number of people who've written books with all black characters and all black settings.

Moreover, Jackson theorizes that someday in the future it may be possible to include white writers after a more thorough research has been done on past African American writers and “we have that broad narrative in place.” He insists, “Then we can afford to spend more time on writers outside of the race—what was understood as the race for most of the 20th century at least. And then start to include them.”

Bess Montgomery argues that white sensibility is what generally prevents inclusion of white writers:

I think even if you have a text that's grounded in the African community about African's people, I don't know if that makes it an African American text. For example, *The Help*; I would scarcely qualify that as an African American text, although its primary characters [are] African Americans, but it is still written from a white sensibility. And I think the most texts—that whatever texts it is would be written from the sensibility of that writer.

However, Vinyard argues, it may be possible for a “significant” experience to provide a non-black writer with a black sensibility:

I know there are a lot of us who feel that the texts of African American Literature cannot be created by someone who is not African American. In some sense I feel that way, that one of the significant aspects of it is the writer/the author. If they are not African American, they should have a significant African American experience somewhere in the life or their background or their growing up. Not just observing afar. They have to have some element of *the* experience in their life. Therefore, it would guide them to that

language, that style, that text that will make it more genuine than one who does not have that experience.

In this case, it appears a white writer must have the ability to capture the “genuine” black experience. It is clear Vinyard is open to the possibility but she was unable to provide examples.

Moreover, near the end of the interview as we discussed the responsibility of the black writer, Jackson also refers to the need for the writer to have a connection to the black community. In his reflection he adds to his definition a need for an “organic connection” to the black community, which he realizes “would wind up including maybe a huge percentage of white writers and would exclude very many black writers but I think that an organic connection to a black community is an abiding consequence.”

Harwell provides two examples of texts by white writers to illustrate her perspective. She explains, “I would recognize the subject as relevant but I would not necessarily say that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is African American Literature. I would think of it as a part of history or relevant content. Or like *The Help*. Is *The Help* African American Literature?” However, Harwell adds that it is possible but indicates it is about “the depictions, the relevance, vantage point such that African American people are given agency” in the text. In other words, it is “theoretically” possible; however, she could not provide examples of texts.

On the other hand, Rhym argues there are texts by white authors that he considers black texts and explains why:

Shakespeare wrote about Moors; it didn’t make him African or African American but that is a black text. *Othello* is a black text because it helps us to look at the black experience. It is a tool by which I can help understand myself and my experience. Even though it is not written by—I teach *Moby Dick* as a black text. I can’t teach a text that’s not a black

text because it's coming from my experience. Right? So that's reader response. There's so much that goes into how do you define something as.

Therefore he includes in the criteria a text's ability to help him define his black experience. He does also offer examples of texts by white writers he would *not* include and explains why:

Anything by Emily Dickinson... That doesn't touch me in any way. I think there's—and a lot of my thoughts are political—things that I would label as Eurocentric. Anything that Joseph Conrad has taught us we can make fun of. Anything that—Tarzan. Because that is just—it has an intent to uplift something that is against the very foundation of what my experience is. It is total of rejection my ability—the audacity to walk upright on two legs.

This can be juxtaposed against *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he classifies as a black text. He states:

I teach that text [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*]. I teach it as a black text. I definitely think it's a black text. There's nothing wrong with Uncle Tom. The text is very American. It's a text that's so important because it taught a lot of people. It's kind of the text that keeps on giving. It taught people at that time what was going on...

Later in the interview, Rhym also offers his framework and perspective of Harriet Beecher Stowe:

I can't really talk about Stowe until I understand how, why, when she wrote this. I can't come at it from the perspective 2012 and start analyzing it. I have to come at it from the perspective of this is a woman [in] 1850, who wanted to be a preacher but couldn't be a preacher because she was a woman. This is the way she told the world that slavery was wrong and she didn't do it to try to clown black men. She wasn't a writer, so what did she do? She researched and learned about this cat Josiah Henson and wrote this story from that. So that's why Uncle Tom does this. Not because he's an 'Uncle Tom.' Because she

saw him as the black Christ. He was a Christ-like figure. He was sacrificing himself. It's not until we get the lens from the Black Power movement—well from the black conservative Christian movement through Nation of Islam and Malcolm X that we get that interpretation that he's a 'Tom.' That's a political statement from a religious man. That's a deep way to read the text. But a text can have many different meanings.

Therefore, Rhym offers a more inclusive canon that gives agency to the reader in assessing a white writer's text. He also includes the intention of the author—not just the product that is produced. Rhym frankly admits:

I love that text. I hate reading it but I love talking about. It's one of the most boring things you can ever read but it's a history lesson. It teaches you to understand the novel. The way the novel was crafted. What we were doing in America versus what Dickens was doing in England. I make my students read it. Like I said, I hate reading it but I love teaching it.

Grandt, one of the two white males, was forthcoming about the issues of race in teaching; it is outside the scope of this study but is mentioned in his participant's description. However, the subject of white writers was not discussed in context to what he considers African American Literature. Later in this chapter, white authors are discussed by Grandt in comparison to the unfair burden of responsibility placed on black writers.

Collins, like Grandt, also discusses the context of being a white male teaching African American literature. However, he is clear that "someone who is white" is an "exclusionary" element of African American Literature. He also provides an example of a white author writing about the black experience that he excludes: "I wouldn't say the *Confessions of Nat Turner* is African American Literature as in [William] Styron. I wouldn't include that in African American

Literature. I wouldn't define that as African American Literature. I guess that's where I would draw pretty absolute lines." Therefore, Collins clearly rules out white writers and offers the example a text that received mixed reviews; it won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize winner but also spawned such dislike it prompted the writing of *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.

#### 4.5 Elements of the Black Aesthetic Framework

In order to investigate elements of the black aesthetic framework that are considered essential elements of African American Literature, I asked questions regarding African American Literature as a tool for social and political empowerment; balancing aesthetics concerns with social and political considerations; and the responsibility of the black writer to the black community.

**Table 4.3 Elements of the Black Aesthetic Framework**

Area of Black Aesthetic	Categories
African American Literature as a tool for social and political empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tool for Empowerment</i>. Literature should function as a tool for empowerment.</li> <li>• <i>It Often Does—But</i>. Literature often does function as a tool but participants do not believe it has to or it could have other purposes.</li> </ul>

Balancing aesthetic concerns with social and political considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>It Should Be Balanced.</i> Aesthetic concerns should be balanced with social and political considerations.</li> <li>• <i>Individual Decision.</i> It is an individual decision of the writer.</li> <li>• <i>Outlier: Aesthetics First.</i> Aesthetic concerns should outweigh social and political considerations.</li> </ul>
Responsibility of the black writer to the black community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Responsibility.</i> The black writer has a responsibility.</li> <li>• <i>Self and craft.</i> The black writer's responsibility is to self and the craft of writing.</li> <li>• <i>Imposed.</i> It is a responsibility but it is an unfair and imposed position.</li> </ul>

### *Tool for Social and Political Empowerment*

Most participants reported that literature should function as a tool for empowerment; however, some felt that it often does function as a tool but participants did not believe it has to or it could have other purposes.

- *Tool for Empowerment*

Jackson, a black male at Emory University, believes African American Literature does function as a tool for political empowerment. In fact, he believes it is an imperative:

Well, it's got to as long as the black community is at the bottom where we are. So to me it's not—I know that it's a real question, especially for people who aren't teaching in African American Studies Departments. I know that it's actually a real question for them and it's a struggle. And it's a struggle in places where there's not a lot of black people perhaps but that's not something that I'm wrestling with... We're still dealing with the



legacy of slavery, which I don't think is news. I don't think it's a surprise. So I think that that our literature and the way that we study and talk about our literature has to do something for us and our broad community group.

Collins, a white male at Georgia State University, also believes literature should be a tool for empowerment and qualifies that he often focuses on political issues no matter the type of literature he is teaching. His course of action to find balance with aesthetics in the classroom will be discussed later in the section.

Vinyard, a black female at Clark Atlanta University, considers it in an important tool, insisting: "I am passionate about that. As I said, I always made sure I participated in those peripheral kinds of activities [in the Black Arts movement]." As described in Vinyard's participant description, she was active in the Black Arts Movement, even participating in productions of plays. She believes this influences the way she teaches and empowers her graduate students. For example, she describes, "The last day of class we have food and talk about our academic papers, where we plan to go for future research. It's easy to talk about things as you socialize and bring in issues outside of what you've researched." Vinyard connects it to the black arts, pointing out: "... that comes probably from having so much involvement during the '60s and '70s because there was never a time that you didn't get to together that you also talked about the academic aspects of what was going on in your life and all of the other social aspects—educational, everything else."

Bess Montgomery, a black female at Clark Atlanta University, argues that literature should be empowering but places it in a reciprocal bond with telling a good story. She explains:

Well I think foremost, African American Literature should tell a good story. If it doesn't tell a good story, then what's the point? And what makes it different from somebody's

essay that's dealing with those issues, so I think that first it has to tell a good story. And I think that first in telling that good story, it's going to have to deal with those issues.

Because part—for me—of what makes a good story is that it's art imitating life and it's reflecting stuff that I know about. That I can identify with.

Therefore, Bess Montgomery, similar to Rhym's discussion in the previous section is looking for a personal connection with the content. That seems to be an important tool in evaluating its connection to the black experience.

Additionally, Bess Montgomery also looks at how a text can function as a tool for social empowerment in the form of catharsis and creating a safe place for its readers.

I think that literature is a source for catharsis. That literature provides a safe place to have painful discussions. Tina McElroy Ansa said when she wrote *Ugly Ways* that was the most painful book tour she'd ever been on. Because it created a safe place. That was one of the first texts that dealt with the crazy black mama. 'Cause in literature generally the black mama is Big Mama. She's sacred. You don't talk about the mama.

One can also see empowerment in her description of African American Literature as a tool for healing:

I think when writer's write, they're writing in a state of grace. And that they're not just writing a story. They're writing a story of healing. Because when we're reading those texts, those texts in turn can become healers. They can force us to deal with issues we find painful. We can talk about these issues in a safe place because we're talking about this text.

Harwell, a black female at Georgia State University, also offers an example connecting empowerment and healing. She states:

Daniel Black's *Sacred Place*...[looks] at a fictitious account of the Emmet Till lynching. It imagines what would have happened if black people retaliated aggressively when their children were lynched. Which I think is extremely empowering and it has deep spiritual undertones that I think allow for some healing in terms of the African-American experience.

- *It Often Does—But*

However, in assessing *should* African American Literature function as tool for political and social empowerment, Harwell believes there is value in entertaining. Furthermore, Harwell connects texts to social influences it could have, even if not the original intention of the author. She explains:

I think that it *could*. I have said in the past that it *should*. But I think that there is a value in just entertaining. I do believe in social responsibility. But I think that that can really be broadly defined. If you just want to write romance and you write really, really vivid, amazing and descriptive romance, and that what you're doing is excellent, you may be inspiring love...I put something on it that the author may not want, in terms of healthy models of romance or an opportunity to examine unhealthy habits in romance or anything.

She describes why her perspective changed from "should" to "could." Now, she is:

...less about controlling artists and how they present their work, because I think as people evolve and mature they figure that out themselves. And more about how do you cultivate an audience and critical readership. So that whether the work has a social meaning or not or whether the social meaning is complex or complicated or taboo, that the reader then

knows how to consider or engage it critically. While I do support social responsibility, I'm not as interested in policing artists in their endeavor of some kind of social meaning. Therefore, she places the responsibility with the writers to cultivate their audience and discover their own intentions as they mature as creative artists. This intention may or not include social responsibility.

Grandt, a white male at Gainesville State College, argues that African American Literature is a tool for political and social empowerment and that it “does this simply because it exists.” He believes his task as a critic is not to decide whether it should. He insists, “. . . my task is to try and figure out how it can and why it can do this.” Therefore, he moves beyond the fact that a text should focus on the elements that help it to be a tool for empowerment.

Rhym, a black male at Gainesville State College, also believes that “it should” but insists it is important to remember that African Americans are “not monolithic.” Therefore, he focuses on the variety of viewpoints:

We have very different experiences. Theoretically that would be awesome but that's a very American question. People are raised on the concept of freedom but freedom is impossible. No one can be free and there are limitations on everything. Literature should be a tool to empower people but we're not all motivated to be empowered. Some of us want to be oppressed. Some of us enjoy being oppressed. Some of us revel in it.

Rhym is also pointing out that even if the intention of a text is to be a tool for empowerment it also important to remember that not all members of the audience will be open and receptive to the text as a tool for empowerment. Therefore, it highlights much of the power of the text as a tool lies in the reader—not the intention of the author.

Sanders, a black male at Emory University, argues that: “It can and it does. Should it—is touchier.” He declares that writers should “be licensed to write the project that’s in their head” and should not “feel pressured when they’re in front of the computer or putting pen to paper that there’s a particular political agenda that they are supposed to be executing.” Also, he reasons why writers often feel pressure:

I think that has been a real problem for black writers. And to some extent it’s understandable. The longer history of black letters has been politicized for good or ill—implicitly and explicitly in the ways in which I have suggested. So, propaganda and rhetoric are enormously important but I think it’s also important, particularly as we’re getting into the 21st century, that black writers should feel licensed to write whatever it is they feel compelled to write, and that it’s up to the audience, critics, and a broader audience combined to read it in multiple ways. So, that’s a roundabout answer to say I want my cake and eat it too.

Sanders understands the tradition and expectation of writing intentional political work. He recognizes the goals and pressures on black literary critics before their large presence in the academy, and especially as critics established themselves in the academy. A clear definition of African American Literature was needed:

But I think getting back around to the critical enterprise of that originating moment; it makes sense [to focus on political empowerment]. Particularly as that first generation of critics in the academy were trying to make an argument for this field being part of the academy. Where the older tradition of criticism on African American Literature had existed beyond the academy; it’s really kind of a recent phenomenon of the sixties where it’s become part of literary studies in a larger sense. Much of that was in response to New

Criticism and much of that required a certain set of overt politics for the canon we were suggesting. [Critics were saying:] “This is African American Literature.” For the moment that was fine, but to the extent to which it excluded black writers—certain black writers—that’s something we have to correct.

Furthermore, he also states that areas of the African American literary tradition must expand beyond an expectation of “overt politics” in order to embrace previously excluded black writers. Thus, he is arguing for critics to broaden their framework and to consider the inclusion of text previously marginalized.

#### *Balancing Aesthetics Concerns with Social and Political Considerations*

Most participants felt that both concerns should be balanced. Two participants felt it is an individual decision of the writer. One person placed aesthetics first.

- *It Should Be Balanced*

Rhym seeks a balance in the texts he chooses to teach but does not have the same standards for his personal selections: “What is the text for? Is it for me to teach or is it for my pleasure. If I’m teaching, then yeah. That’s a different purpose.” In other words, Rhym seeks a stronger balance when presenting the text to students as a representation of the canon.

Collins also suggests that it is important to have a balance. He provides Richard Wright as an example: Wright’s “demand on others was to just focus on the political” and offers that “even Richard Wright who would only talk about that—aesthetics were important to him.”

However, Collins admits to struggling with inclusion of the aesthetic in the classroom and explains:

I realized that almost never was I talking about the aesthetics that I was only talking about the political, only talking about the cultural... But I find that I have had to reign

myself in heading just that direction because I think it is extremely problematic not to talk about the aesthetics.

He created an email assignment. Students are required to email before class Collins and their classmates their general impression of the reading; students can discuss things such as: an interesting passage from the text, a personal experience, a critical reading discussed in class, a question about the reading—or respond to a classmate’s comment. The goal is to give students a space for their viewpoints before Collins brings in his perspective, and he often uses their impressions to bring in elements of the aesthetic.

If there is not proper balancing in teaching a text, Collins insists that “it diminishes the impact.” He illustrates using Paul Laurence Dunbar:

If we’re just talking about the politics of it, there’s often: “I know why the caged bird sings.” And we could talk about that one line and der der der da [i.e. so on] but it diminishes the work and doesn’t allow the full, complex political aspects that are underlining that you can’t get at without talking about the aesthetics of it and talking about this mixture of hope and total despair that are constantly combined with “flinging prayers to heaven” which sounds like an attack but fling is also birds flying up in the air. And if you don’t discuss that with students, you’re not getting at the complexity of the politics... And I try to talk about the aesthetics more and the art because that allows for a more complex discussion of the political.

Therefore, balance is not a consideration only in the text itself but how you present it to students. Otherwise, it lessens the complexity of the impact which is tied to recognition of the balance between aesthetics and the political.

Jackson also feels there should be a balance between aesthetic concerns and social and political considerations:

It's a balance. This is one of our longstanding but very productive debates. How do you balance the aesthetic with the social?... But I think that when you look at the power of the narrative voice. [Zora Neale] Hurston, Claude Brown, Nathan McCall. When you look at the power of narratives, I don't think we really have to worry about the aesthetic and the social. It's really right there. I know that people say Sister Souljah. I didn't read Sister Souljah so I can't say Sister Souljah. I understand that she has a very compelling narrative.

Therefore, Jackson believes a natural balance exists in strong narratives. In other words, there is no need to be concerned because a well written story will have both.

Harwell argues that a writer should find balance and insists that “an excellent writer does not compromise quality for propaganda or for their message. And they are also able to match the sophistication of advancing some kind of sociopolitical ideal in a way that's not obvious or contrived or messy.” Harwell also discusses how this carries over to when she chooses a text for the classroom:

If there's a writer who has a sociopolitical message and the writing is poor in my opinion, I will probably pick something else. If there are no other options, I would probably be honest about the fact that writing is poor but I like sociopolitical issues. If I feel like it's irresponsible but there's some excellent form aesthetic to the writing, I'm less likely to engage it personally or to endorse it. But I would acknowledge it.

Vinyard also seeks a balance but emphasizes that texts should be more than just entertainment:



I think it should balance. I don't think one should outweigh the other. That's one of the criticisms I have about the new genre—urban literature as they call it. And I guess even with the hip hop generation. I don't think it should just be for entertainment purposes only. There should be a way to use that for teaching the young people. There should be a way of using it to say what kinds of issues should be addressed in the political area. It should be used—multi-faceted. So I think just for entertainment purposes only; I think it far outweighs and should not outweigh the aesthetic, the lessons—all of the other aspects of literature.

- *Individual Decision*

Sanders believes that it is a writer's decision to decide how to address aesthetic concerns and that it is the critic's responsibility to "attend to both the aesthetics and the politics." In other words, writers should have freedom in the use of aesthetics but critics must analyze the balance of the aesthetic and the political in the piece. In explaining the role of the critic, Sanders emphasizes:

Given the history of literary criticism in particular, we're better equipped for attending to the aesthetics. The politics become trickier in that criticism needs to be open to political implications for a particular text that might not be immediately evident on a first reading or at first blush. Critics have to be open to the aesthetics and politics the text offers; critics should be reluctant to impose a certain set of politics on any particular text or corpus of text by a particular writer.

He suggests that a critic come to a text with an open mind about a text's political intentions or possibilities.

Grandt argues that the individual black writer has to answer that question for him or herself. He emphasizes the unfairness in having to make that choice:

Well, that's the old argument between Du Bois and Locke. I think that's not a judgment call for me to make. But generally, and I go back to Baldwin, who said several times, and I think he's very right, that white readers often approach black literature with the presumption that the black writer is going to give them a representative slice of the blackness of blackness. And that's kind of the double standard that the American writer of color is faced with. Not just African American writers I'm sure. I don't know—Amy Tan or Judith Cofer have encountered that same expectation that somehow parts of their audience expects that there are getting the real deal, the skinny on what it means to be yellow in America or what it means to be brown in America. And that's a question that for example, Henry James was never asked. No one ever asked him what does it mean to be white in America. Right? So that is a kind of double standard. I'm not quite sure if it's fair to ask the African American writer to make a choice one way or the other. And that's a question that every writer would have to answer for him or herself to begin with.

Therefore, Grandt is frustrated by the “double standard.” He also does not limit the experience to African Americans but connects it to the larger experience of writers of color who face the task of satisfying the curiosity for white readers of what is like to be the Other.

- *Outlier: Aesthetics First*

Bess Montgomery stands out in that she alone indicates that she places aesthetics first. However, due to the limited sample, it is important to include her perspective. In larger pool it is arguable that others may offer similar perspectives:

I think aesthetics first. I am very much for the black arts movement. By us, for us, and all of that. But still, tell a good story. Use beautiful language. Let me qualify that. Real language. Alice Walker was criticized. In *The Color Purple* she said, “He put his dick in my pussy.” They said, “Oh. You should not use that language.” She said: “That was such an ugly act. I could not clean it up.” It’s kind of like writing about “nigger” and then you say “the n-word.” That ain’t the same. The impact isn’t the same. So beautiful language—I mean lyrical language. Language that tells the story no matter how poignant or painful it is that you’re telling it. ‘Cause I don’t like texts that are didactic. That I *know* you are preaching to me... Because if you make it too much of the political, too much of that, then it becomes too didactic. Or it becomes a Cornel West essay...

Therefore, Bess Montgomery’s concern is that a narrative not become so laden with the political that it becomes “didactic” and loses its aesthetic beauty.

*Responsibility of the Black Writer to the Black Community*

Three categories emerged: some participants felt that the black writer has a responsibility; others felt that it is an individual decision of the writer; and some felt that it is a responsibility but it is an unfair and imposed position.

- *Responsibility*

Jackson argues that for a black writer to be considered a part of black literary the tradition than she must take on a responsibility to the community. He explains: “I mean if the black writer wants—the whole discussion that we’ve been having—if you want to continue to be included in the tradition, in the canon than they definitely do.” However, he adds that “the responsibilities can vary greatly.” This implies that a black writer has variety of paths in choosing how to empower and support the black community.

Bess Montgomery believes the writer “absolutely” has a responsibility. She explains that: You have a responsibility to be that community’s voice if you’re a part of that community. That you have been blessed with this gift to give voice to the voiceless. To write about things we may not be able to write about. To write texts who reflect who we are so that when we reading these texts we can see who we are and because that then validates who we are. I want my daughter to pick up a book and see herself in it. Toni Morrison did an excellent job in *The Bluest Eye* showing us what happens when we don’t see ourselves in texts. We don’t have sense of who we are. And they have a responsibility to themselves as a writer.

However, she understands the dilemma of a writer being characterized by race. She explains:

...you don’t want to say Toni Morrison’s the greatest black writer. Because you’re saying there are writers that are better than she who are not black. But at the same time you don’t want to separate Morrison from her blackness because she says she writes about who she knows. I think [the] 1974 review of *Sula*—Sara Blackburn in the *New York Times* wrote: “If Morrison’s to ever become the great writer that she could be destined to become, she has to leave her little parochial area and step out and start writing about real people.” Which meant white people. Right? So she was asking Morrison not to write about those whom she knows most—and best. Thank God Morrison didn’t listen to her and here she is winning the Nobel Prize for Literature years later because she stayed true to who she was. So she feels this obligation to tell her people’s stories. Even as painful as they may be. So there you have *Beloved*. So they have been given this gift and that’s what they should use it for. Do they make money? Yes. They should. Tell a good story,

yes. But whose story I think you've got to tell? Black folk's story. So yes, they do have that responsibility.

In other words, Bess Montgomery believes the black writer has the responsibility to use their "gift" to tell the stories of their community.

Vinyard emphasizes that the black writer has responsibility to "the black community and the world." She highlights the reciprocal relation between the black writer and the black community. She argues:

I think the black writer has a responsibility, as I said, teaching and also learning. Writers should learn something from the black community that should be reflected in that writing. It should not be lecture. It should not be all entertainment. It should not be all giving morality—disposition on everything in life. It should be a complexity of all of that. The reader should gain something from it also as the reader takes something to the text.

Vinyard appears to place responsibility on the part of both the community and the writer to empower and learn from the other.

- *Self and Craft*

Harwell argues that the black writer's greatest responsibility is to herself. She explains that black writers have the responsibility "To cultivate and develop their art. To cultivate and develop their gifts." However, what she emphasizes is that the black writer must engage in a process of critical feedback:

...in your commitment to yourself as a writer, are you able to hear the critique about your work? Even if the critique is your work has a negative impact on this segment of the population. Or your work is horribly inaccurate about this. Or your work really, really blows when it comes to metaphor and plot. Are you committed to yourself enough to

redress those issues and put it into your writing practice? These are for living artists obviously and living writers. I think when you do that, the social responsibility is a byproduct.

Harwell also believes it difficult to define a black writer's responsibility in a time "where people debate on being post-racial, where our African American communities are sometimes divided—or just sometimes multiple," which makes it difficult to define the black community and thereby makes it difficult to "negotiate" responsibility to the black community. She adds, "I don't think there's a cohesiveness enough to uphold that kind of expectation, but I do think there is space to press someone to the highest standard of their art in their own work."

Sanders agrees with Harwell on three major points. First, he also believes critics are negotiating the definition of the black community. Second, he concurs that the negotiation of that question is necessary to determine to some extent what, if any, a writer's responsibilities might be. Finally, he also supports Harwell's position that a writer's main responsibility is to his craft:

I think the primary responsibility of a writer is to write—this is coming right out of Ellison for me receiving him through my dissertation advisor Michael Harper. The primary responsibility for writers as I understand it is to master his or her craft, to master the form. And that has a certain kind of communal responsibility, but it's not overt.

In this case, these two scholars take similar viewpoints in suggesting that black writer's primary responsibility is to self and craft

- *Imposed*

Collins offers Percival Everett's *Erasure* as example of the black writer negotiating the dilemma of being obligated to the black community. He explains:

Because the whole novel is almost saying, “No. Fuck you for demanding that of me.” But then by the time it gets to the end, even though he’s still kind of saying that he realizes the damage that he’s done; he realizes how problematic and ridiculous it is of his demand to say, “No demands should be placed on me.”

Collins also believes that “a writer would be foolish to imagine that they don’t have to at least think about the question.”

Collins returns to Richard Wright to illustrate his stand on the issue:

Looking back at Wright. Wright in many ways is such a nasty figure because of his demands that he placed on other writers, but how much of it was Wright just recognizing the political realities of that necessity. The way he does it is horrible. What he does to Hurston and other writers, but is there some reality to it? Yeah, absolutely there’s some reality to it. So, a writer demanding that they have the right to just focus on their art and not be concerned with representation or how their work is going to be perceived, how it’s going to affect things, at a certain point I think that deserves kind of an eye roll. But at the same time do we insist that white writers [do this]—no, we don’t. Is it unfair for a black writer to say you must do this? Yeah, of course it’s unfair but there’s a reality to it too.

Grandt argues that imposing that responsibility on a black writer is unfair. He insists that it’s “a decision for the individual writer to make” in regards to his responsibility.

He also draws parallels with white societal pressures and expectations outside of the literary tradition:

The black writer, along similar lines, often has that responsibility placed upon him or her. Willy nilly. Because of that expectation that is often placed upon the black writer that he or

she is a spokesperson for the community as a whole. And I think that it goes beyond literature. Prior to the election of Barack Obama, mainstream America—for lack of a better term—was for two, three decades on the lookout for the political spokesperson of the black community. And then being confused: “Well, is it Jesse Jackson or is it Al Sharpton?” But there is the expectation beyond the field of literature almost as if all black people more or less think alike, and therefore more or less write alike. The expectation that there’s got to be somebody we white people can go to and more or less ask, “So what’s it really like to be black in America?” I think in a way that ironically too is part and parcel of the African American literary tradition. You go back to Langston Hughes and “Godmother” Charlotte Osgood Mason. You go back to Frederick Douglass and his abolitionist benefactors. And then fast-forward to the Cash Money Millionaires and the pimply-faced 18-year-olds in the white suburbs who purchase their music. It’s one thing that fascinates me. As Amiri Baraka put it: it’s “the changing same.”

Grandt provides examples of implied and explicit pressures on the black artist or intellectual to provide a product but focuses more on the expectations of the white community than the pressures from within the black community. These implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### **4.6 Summary**

This chapter presented the results and analysis of the findings. It presented detailed data of the interviews conducted with the eight participants. First, the chapter described each participant and the settings of the interviews. Afterwards, an overview of the findings was presented. Next, the data and analysis of the findings was presented in two sections. First, the elements commonly used to define African American Literature; it showed which elements are



most common to each participant's definition and categories that are less commonly included or considered on the margin. In the next section, the elements of the black aesthetics framework and their influence in African American Literature were presented.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. In other words, the goal was to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to defining this literature. The research questions that guided this study were:

(1) What elements make a text African American Literature?

(2) What elements of the black aesthetic framework are considered essential elements of African American Literature?

The study used an exploratory qualitative design and was conducted from February 2012 to March 2012. The population being sampled was African American Literature professors in the United States who have no less than five years experience teaching African American Literature. Participants received an email invitation to participate in the study. Their university email address was obtained from the university website. The email included a copy of the interview protocol and the informed consent. If there was no response in two weeks, a reminder email was sent to the participant. If the subject chose to participate, the consent form was signed in front of the researcher before beginning the interview.

The primary source of data collection was in-depth interviewing. After the interview, participants received a copy of the transcript and were able to make amendments to their original statements. Secondary sources were the revised transcripts and the curriculum vitae of the participant. After an initial set of categories, the categories from the open coding were identified. The next step was axial coding; data was reviewed to provide insight into the categories established as essential elements and were considered the central phenomenon.

Data analysis revealed three categories in regards to essential elements of African American Literature. The most common and agreed upon category was African American writers who wrote about black characters and the black experience. The second category contained three common areas of expansion: (1) commercial fiction; (2) literature written by African American writers but not about black characters and the black experience; and (3) African Diasporic Literature. Seven of the eight participants included at least one of these categories in their definition. Third, most participants considered the possibility of white writers writing about black characters and the black experience, but ideas varied on when it would be possible to include them in the canon and potential examples.

In investigating elements of the black aesthetic framework that are considered essential elements of African American Literature, findings revealed three areas: (1) African American Literature as a tool for social and political empowerment; (2) balancing aesthetics concerns with social and political considerations; (3) responsibility of the black writer to the black community. In Area 1, two categories emerged. Most participants reported that literature should function as a tool for empowerment; however, some felt that it often does function as a tool but participants do not believe it has to or it could have other purposes. Area 2 produced two categories and several outliers. Most participants felt that both concerns should be balanced. Two participants felt it is an individual decision of the writer. Also, due to the small number of participants, the outlier was included in the findings: one person placed aesthetics first. In Area 3, three categories emerged: some participants felt that the black writer has a responsibility; some felt the black writer's responsibility is to self and the craft of writing; and some felt that it is a responsibility but it is an unfair and imposed position.

This chapter includes discussion regarding the general conclusions of the study. Second is a discussion of the limitations of the study. Afterwards are the implications for teaching practice of African American Literature. Finally, recommendations for future research are provided.

## 5.1 Conclusions and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data, four general conclusions were drawn from the findings. The conclusions are:

- The core of the African American Literature definition is the black writer representing the black experience but the canon is expanding and becoming more inclusive.
- While African American Literature is often a tool for empowerment, a wide scope is used in defining methods of empowerment.
- Black writers should balance aesthetic and political concerns in a literary text.
- Black writers still have a responsibility to be a voice for the black community.

*The core of the African American Literature definition is the black writer representing the black experience but the canon is expanding and becoming more inclusive.*

In reviewing the definition of black literature provided by *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (Gates & McKay, 1997), its core definition includes race—“imaginative writing in English by persons of African descent in the United States” (p. xxxvi). However, the other elements used to “define the tradition” are “repetitions, tropes, and signifying” (Gates & McKay, 1997, p. xxxvi).

Gates & McKay (1997) explicate on repetition: “...writers in the black tradition have repeated and revised figures, tropes, and themes in prior works, leading to formal links in a chain of tradition...” (Gates & McKay, 1997, p. xxxvi). Repetition of themes and figures is discussed

by Bess Montgomery. Rhym also briefly discusses Gates & McKay's (1997) concept of "signifying upon previous works" (p. xxxvi) in order to explain that works by poets such as Nikki Giovanni provided a stepping stone that made hip hop possible. However, the concept is only implied and signifying is never specifically mentioned by Rhym or any other participant.

The use of tropes is not discussed by any participant. In fact, Vinyard is the only participant to mention the "style" of language as "significant" and describes it as "non-verbal language that comes through in the text," and she focuses on a connection to black sensibilities. Therefore, findings from this study do not support elements such as tropes as essential to the definition.

On the other hand, *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African Literary Tradition* (Hill, et. al 1998) mentions the black writer and the black experience in its introduction. As discussed in Section 2.7, *Call and Response* describes itself as "The first "comprehensive anthology of literature by African Americans presented according to the Black Aesthetic" (Hill, et. al., 1998, p. xxxiii). This includes a belief that African American literary tradition originates in the "African and African American cultural heritages and in the experience of enslavement in the United States and kept alive beyond slavery through song, sermon, and other spoken and written forms" (Hill, et. al 1998, p. xxxiii). Therefore, the findings of the core definition from the study align with elements discussed in *Call and Response*.

Participants discussed expansion of the canon into several areas. No participant wanted to remove anything from the canon and most discussed a need for expansion and further inclusiveness. One area of such inclusion was the literature in the African Diaspora. Sanders even includes in Afro-Latino and Caribbean writers in his definition. Others such as Collins struggles with where to place Caribbean writers such as Edwidge Danticat. However, two well-

known Caribbean authors are included in *Norton's* first edition and *Call and Response*—Claude McKay and Jamaica Kincaid. Both like Danticat eventually became naturalized citizens. However, it is possible that Danticat's absence from the first edition of *Norton* is also a matter of age. The youngest writers in *Norton* and *Call and Response* were born in 1957 and 1963 respectively, while Danticat was born 1969. Furthermore, Danticat was added to the second edition of *Norton* in 2003, along with Colson Whitehead, who was born the same year. They are the youngest writers in *Norton*. Therefore, contemporary writers may slowly be added to the canon. While *Norton* provides evidence of growing inclusion of Caribbean writers, it also supports the marginality due to the limited number of Caribbean writers present in the anthology.

Further study should be done on inclusiveness of and margins drawn with other members of the Diaspora as well as the reason for inclusion of Caribbean writers. Participants in this study such as Collins make a distinction between the black experience and the American immigrant experience. Bess Montgomery while recognizing the beauty and richness of literature throughout the Diaspora also considers this literature as a separate entity from the African American literary tradition.

Vinyard, Grandt, Harwell, Jackson, and Rhym discuss the inclusion of black writers writing about non-black characters and that do not focus on the black experience. This is supported by the *African American Literature Beyond Race: An Alternative Reader*, in which Jarret (2006) argues for the inclusion of texts by black writers that do not focus on the black experience. He argues that it is “not entirely true” that the “canon, or the ‘best,’ of African American literature only portrays the realities of black life, or practices what I call racial realism” (p. 2). The reader includes the first chapter of *Giovanni's Room*, which is the text most often discussed by participants as an example of a text by a black writer with no black characters.

Jarret (2006) also discusses “non-canonical” author Frank Yerby and includes a selection of his work in the reader. Additionally, Yerby as well as Willard Motely—both offered as examples by Sanders as marginalized writers—are discussed in *Call and Response*. The authors are included in descriptions of literary time periods with their contemporaries and for essays that provide descriptions of longstanding literary debates. In the section “Call: Integrationist Poetics or Black Poetics?” the authors are used as examples in the debate:

In 1949, [Saunders] Redding, in his article “American Negro Literature,” applauded Frank Yerby and Willard Motley, who used white materials in their novels to attract a large white audience. Yerby’s *the Foxes of the Harrow* (1946) and Motley’s *Knock on Any Door* (1947) represented the possibility of commercial success by focusing on the lives of white rather than black characters (p. 1078)

Yerby and Motley’s work represent the intersections of debates on commercial fiction and non-black characters. In this case, the authors are used to discuss the debate concerning authors choosing to not write about the black experience. Moreover, while they are recognized as authors of the time period, their work is not included in the anthology as representations of African American Literature. This supports the findings that black authors writing commercial fiction and black authors writing about non-black characters sit on the margin of African American Literature. *Call and Response* acknowledges the presence of these authors but, in this anthology using a black aesthetic framework, they are not included.

Also of note, Collins discussed Walter Mosley’s inclusion on the margins of the canon. A text by Mosley is included in *Norton* but not in *Call and Response*.

Harwell and Sanders both discuss a need for more critical attention to urban literature. Rhym is emphatic about its inclusion. He argues, “Street lit is no less important than *Invisible*

*Man*. They're both equally important." However, urban literature is not included in either *Norton* and *Call and Response*. In fact, a search on WorldCat found no anthologies on urban literature published by an academic press. The few texts labeled "anthology" were a collection of four to six shorter works combined into a single edition. However, a call for submissions for an anthology of Urban/Hip Hop Literature was found on the Humanities & Social Sciences Online website, which is hosted by Michigan State University. (The same announcement was also found on The University of Pennsylvania's Department of English website.) A request was made for:

critical essays and short stories (or novel excerpts) for inclusion in an anthology of Urban /Hip Hop literature. The book will explore the genre of hip hop literature, specifically fiction, through essays that focus on and examine its: origin, its validity as a form of literary text, thematic commonalities, validity as social text, and style. A portion of the book will be comprised of examples (previously published and unpublished works) of the genre. (Gray, 2008, ¶ 1)

The submission deadline was February 2009. Nothing more recent could be found in reference to the anthology online. Therefore, while efforts are being made to bring urban literature into the academy, it is arguably the most marginalized among the areas of expansion discussed in the study.

Next, most participants considered the possibility of white writers writing about black characters and the black experience. Participants' perspectives varied on issues such as when it would be possible to include white writers in the canon. Jackson feels it will not be possible until more time is invested in researching understudied African American writers. Professors such as Harwell and Vinyard believe it is currently possible but struggle with examples.



White writers nor a debate on the inclusion of white writers is not discussed in *Norton* or *Call and Response*. Additionally, no recent scholarly work could be found on JSTOR or WorldCat that focused primarily on the investigation of white writers and black characters. However, it is currently a popular subject in print and web media due to the popularity of the Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (Witherspoon, 2011); the debut novel published in 2009 was adapted to Academy Award nominated film for Best Picture in 2011. The text is written by a white author and includes white female protagonist who drives the action forward as well as two black female protagonists who are maids in Mississippi. Harwell uses it as an example of a text by a white author that she would not consider African American Literature because of the lack of agency of black characters.

This ties to the core of the considerations on the inclusion of white writers, which seems to be agency and authenticity. Thus, participants debate whether a white writer can represent the black experience; moreover, they seek examples of white writers that give an authentic representation of the black experience that empowers black characters and give “voice to the voiceless” of the black community. Therefore, the expectations are similar to those of the black writer under the framework of black aesthetics.

Rhym addresses the issue of agency in texts by white writers. He is the only participant who teaches white writers as African American Literature. He offers the examples of *Othello*, *Moby Dick*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A discussion of why he makes these choices can be found in Chapter 4. His criteria for African American Literature are not simply connected to the intention or lens of the writer but to the lens of the reader. Therefore, agency is largely focused on the experience that the reader brings to it. If the text helps to define his black experience,

Rhym includes it African American Literature. Therefore, Rhym empowers the reader to create agency instead of focusing primarily on the intentions of the writer.

The issue of agency and responsibility of the reader is also discussed by Vinyard. She creates a reciprocal relationship between the reader and writer. She argues, “The reader should gain something from it also as the reader takes something to the text.” However, her description focuses on the relationship between the black writer and the black community. Nevertheless, it should be an area of future study to consider the agency of the reader in defining the elements of the black experience contained within a text.

Related to the subject of agency, Rhym discusses being a part of the black experience as a choice. Rhym addresses the issue of the black experience by separating culture from race. He explains, “I see blackness like Judaism. It’s a choice.” Therefore, blackness is not necessarily tied to race. Which taken a step further means being a certain race may not be a necessity to embrace a culture. In fact, Vinyard argues it is possible for a white writer to represent the black experience if they have had a “meaningful experience” connected to black community.

Moreover, the topic of writing about black experience is discussed by Gates & McKay (1997) in their definition of African American Literature. They argue that that ““blackness”” is a “socially constructed category” that “must be learned through imitation and its literary representations must also be learned in the same way—like jazz—through repetition and revision” (p. xxxvi). Therefore, if “blackness” is something that can be learned through imitation, it seems possible that white writers can write about blackness.

Saunders offers an example of the complexity of this issue:

...what’s interesting is thinking about white writers who write about the black experience as it were and whether or not we include them. For the most part we don’t. But someone

like Susan Straight really does raise those kinds of questions. When people read her books and don't know who she is, they assume she's black. And then people have to rethink their assumptions about African American literature.

The reader must reconsider their cultural contexts and perspective when they realize Straight is a white writer; in other words, readers are forced to evaluate their assumptions about race and its connection to representing the black experience.

*While African American Literature is often a tool for empowerment, a wide scope is used in defining methods of empowerment.*

Most participants stated that African American Literature is often a tool for empowerment. Some assert it should. Others argue it usually is. While some feel its very existence means it was a tool for racial empowerment. However, participants do not discuss empowerment only in terms of social and political empowerment; it is discussed in terms of healing and improved understanding of romantic relationships. The diverse perspective of empowerment is supported by June Jordan's (1974/2011) description of Hurston's *Their Eyes Are Watching God*.

In "On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston: Notes Toward a Balancing of Love and Hatred," June Jordan's (1974/2011) analysis of *Their Eyes Are Watching God* offers a perspective that is different from the classic protest novel—or by implication a strongly political viewpoint of the black experience. Jordan (1974/2011) offers an affirming vision of: "Black life freed from the constraints of oppression; here we may learn of ourselves if we ever could escape the hateful and alien context that has so deeply mutilated our rightful efflorescence—as people" (emphasis in original) (p. 722). Jordan (1974/2011) juxtaposes Hurston's work with Wright's to show the value of both in representing the black experience. As discussed in the literature

review, during Wright and Hurston's lifetime, Wright received critical acclaim and supportive followers while Hurston "suffered from devastating critical and popular neglect" (Jordan, 1974/2011). Jordan (1974/2011) attributes Hurston's marginalization to views of the protest novel and states, "I believe we were misled into the notion that *only one kind* of writing—protest writing—and that *only one kind* of protest writing—deserves our support and study" (emphasis in original) (p. 721). In other words, Jordan argues that there is more than one literary path to empower the black community. In the examples below, Harwell and Bess Montgomery present examples of empowerment focused on healing, catharsis, and improved romantic relationships.

Harwell offers an example with Daniel Black's *Sacred Place* and focuses on empowering through healing. She explains, the novel:

...[looks] at a fictitious account of the Emmet Till lynching. It imagines what would have happened if black people retaliated aggressively when their children were lynched.

Which I think is extremely empowering and it has deep spiritual undertones that I think allow for some healing in terms of the African-American experience.

Bess Montgomery expresses a similar perspective in explaining: "I think when writer's write, they're writing in a state of grace. And that they're not just writing a story. They're writing a story of healing. Because when we're reading those texts, those texts in turn can become healers." In addition to a tool for healing, she extends the way literature can empower: "I think that literature is a source for catharsis. That literature provides a safe place to have painful discussions."

Harwell also expresses that empowerment comes in many forms: "I do believe in social responsibility. But I think that that can really be broadly defined. If you just want to write romance and you write really, really vivid, amazing and descriptive romance, and that what

you're doing is excellent, you may be inspiring love..." In this case, extends empowerment beyond literary fiction commercial fiction and beyond political to "healthy models of romance or an opportunity to examine unhealthy habits in romance or anything." She also divorces it from the author's intention and focuses on the empowerment the reader finds in it.

Like Jordan, Harwell and Bess Montgomery articulate forms of empowerment beyond the political. The examples Harwell and Bess Montgomery use to illustrate empowerment moved beyond social and political. The varying images of empowering the black community should be further studied.

Grandt offers another important perspective of African American Literature as a tool for empowerment. He argues that offered African American Literature functions as a tool of empowerment "simply because it exists." This position is supported by Jarret (2006) who makes a similar remark in the introduction to the reader *African American Literature Beyond Race*: "... the mere fact that African American Literature even exists, that African Americans over the centuries have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the idea and act of literary writing is enough to signify racial progress" (p. 2). Therefore, Jarret (2006) supports the position that there is something intrinsically empowering about the texts produced by African Americans simply because African American continue to produce literary work.

*The scholars believe black writers should balance aesthetic and political concerns in a literary text.*

Most participants desire a balance between the aesthetic and the political concerns. Harwell argues that "an excellent writer" finds a balance and "does not compromise quality for propaganda or for their message. And they are also able to match the sophistication of advancing some kind of sociopolitical ideal in a way that's not obvious or contrived or messy." In the "The

World and the Jug,” Ellison (1963-1964/2011) illustrates a clear desire to balance aesthetics and political concerns. He states:

If *Invisible Man* is even ‘apparently’ free from ‘the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country,’ it is because I tried to the best of my ability to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape or hold back but to work through; to transcend as blues the painful conditions with which they deal. The protest is there not because I was helpless before my racial condition but because I *put* it there. (emphasis in original) (p. 684)

The impact of black creative work finding a balance of aesthetic and the political is evident in Early’s (2000) discussion of *Invisible Man*. Early (2000) explains that white critics often described black literature as being:

nothing more than social protest, “or mere sociology,” or a literature without technique, style, or innovation. It was not until the 1952 publication of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* nearly one hundred years after the publication of the first African-American novel that a black fictional work was considered without question to be of superior literary merit, equal to the best white literature” (p. 277-278).

In this case, Early connects finding balance to critical acclaim within the canon that was recognized for its “superior literary merit” even outside the canon. Furthermore, he ties it to the longstanding internal battle of the black writer to find balance:

Black writers who were serious about the craft of making good literature have always been sensitive to the charge from whites of writing second-rate, race-bound works. But they have been equally sensitive to the needs of their black audience and of their group and general, understanding that African Americans would not be interested in a literature

that was given over to “mere aesthetics”...which most would think a frivolous indulgence and not a serious engagement with life and art as they saw those matters. (Early, 2000, p. 278)

Therefore, Early’s stance as critic—as well as Ellison’s stance as both critic and writer—support the study’s finding for seeking balance in a text.

Also of note, even the outlier disagrees with the black aesthetic framework of placing political concerns first. Bess Montgomery places aesthetics above the political concerns. She asserts: “I think aesthetics first. I am very much for the black arts movement. By us, for us, and all of that. But still, tell a good story.” In other words, the story must be a clear and well written vehicle for the message.

In the passage on the previous page, Ellison (1963-1964/2011) is not only showing his purposeful decision to balance the aesthetic and the political, he is defending the right to make that decision and approach subject matter as he sees fit. This supports Sanders’ and Grandt’s position that asserts the decisions related to balance should be the individual decision of the artist. This runs counter to the black aesthetics framework of considering the black community’s needs before the individual. According to the framework, all art must “reflect and support the Black Revolution” or it is “invalid” (Karenga, 1968/1997, p. 1973). However, in “Reform and Revolution: The Black Aesthetic,” Smethurst and Rambsy (2011) emphasize an important concept that may address participant’s positions running counter to the framework: “Karenga was the founder of a militant organization [Us] and not a literary artist. His prescriptive approach to what African American artistic creations should look like was linked to his position as an activist organizer. Understandably, he was inclined to favor art that advanced an activist agenda.” (p. 417). In this case, Smethurst and Rambsy (2011) imply that Karenga lacks a

connection to the practice of literary production. Karenga views creative work as a cultural product that is primarily a tool of for political and social advancement of the black community.

However, Collins highlights the danger of not keeping an appropriate balance with aesthetics, even when you are primarily concerned with the political: “If we’re just talking about the politics of it, there’s often: ‘I know why the caged bird sings.’ And we could talk about that one line and der der der da [i.e. so on] but it diminishes the work and doesn’t allow the full, complex political aspects that are underlining that you can’t get at without talking about the aesthetics of it...” Therefore, he argues that aesthetics are a necessity in teaching and demonstrating the full political impact of a literary text.

*Black writers still have a responsibility to be a voice for the black community.*

In “The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism,” Joyce (1987/1998) asserts that the function of the black writer and the literary scholar is to “guide” the black community and “to serve as an intermediary in explaining the relationship between Black people and those forces that attempt to subdue them” (p. 1462). In this study, findings support the position that the black writer has a responsibility to the black community; however, participants focus less on being an intermediary and more on using their gift to be a voice for the community.

For example, Bess Montgomery maintains, “You have a responsibility to be that community’s voice if you’re a part of that community. That you have been blessed with this gift to give voice to the voiceless. To write about things we may not be able to write about.” Therefore, she gives black writers the responsibility of describing the black experience *for* the black community and *to* the black community.



Grandt and Collins, however, recognize the black writer has a responsibility but believe it is an unfair burden that is imposed on black writers that is not an expectation of white writers. In the first case, Grandt focuses more on the societal pressures of the white community. He asserts there is an:

expectation that is often placed upon the black writer that he or she is a spokesperson for the community as a whole. And I think that it goes beyond literature. Prior to the election of Barack Obama, mainstream America—for lack of a better term—was for two, three decades on the lookout for the political spokesperson of the black community.

It is also important to remember that the black literary tradition has a deep and complicated history of responding to white America. For example, Gates (1987/1998) asserts that the black literary tradition began as a response to white criticism that blacks could not write prose. Furthermore, the tradition was catalyzed by the desire to disprove inferiority and focused on the nature of being black and his or her role in society (Gates, 1987/1998). This connects to Grandt's discussion of a continued expectation of black writers and black leaders to be "a spokesperson" for the race. With this mind, the black writer's responsibility may need to be investigated in two key ways: the responsibility to the black community *and* the connection of these expectations to white critics and mainstream America.

On the other hand, Collins focuses on the burden as internal battle that the black writer must face: "So, a [black] writer demanding that they have the right to just focus on their art and not be concerned with representation or how their work is going to be perceived, how it's going to affect things, at a certain point I think that deserves kind of an eye roll. But at the same time do we insist that white writers [do this]—no, we don't." Though acknowledged as unfair, it is an

internal battle that every black writer must face. Even if a black writer chooses not to write about race or the black community. It is still a choice that must be considered and decided.

In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes (1926/1997) insists that a writer not be led by desires of the black community and states, “If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter... We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand free within ourselves” (Hughes, 1926/1997, p. 2171). Hughes’ statement supports and illustrates Collins’ statement. In acknowledging the idea of wanting to “please” the black community, Hughes describes the internal struggle of the black writer to support his community yet respect his own creative process. In the end, Hughes supports the need for individual freedom.

## **5.2 Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this research rest in the methods employed in conducting the study. The findings may have been affected by the small number of participants, limited geographical location, and lack of candor in being identified by real names.

This was an exploratory qualitative study in which participants’ thoughts were represented in words and not in numbers. There were in-depth interviews but the sample size is small as compared to most quantitative studies. I used purposeful sampling and sought even gender representation as well as sample variation in race, the type of college that the participants taught at, and the years of teaching experience; therefore, this findings of this study are not generalizable in a statistical sense. The goal of this study was to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to defining this literature African American Literature; however, I am aware some critics may see the lack of generalizability as a limitation.

Furthermore, the limitation of sampling from the same geographical region may have affected the results. Participants were picked that were in reasonable driving distance due to the limited time to collect and the lack of financial means to travel farther distances. This minimized the ability to interview a wide range of professors from different regions of the country. Perhaps a wider range of schools would influence the types of students encountered in the classroom and therefore the scholars' experiences in teaching and their viewpoint in the definition.

The findings may also have been hindered by participants' lack of candor due to the use of real names in the study. I used real names because academic reputation and credibility is connected to a scholar's name, and I believe that was important part of presenting the data. However, it is my hope that participants' ability to review and edit the transcript allowed them to speak freely and frankly.

### **5.3 Implications for Teaching Practices of African American Literature**

In this study, the discussion of the elements of African American Literature includes a desire to describe, examine, and give "voice" to the black experience. Many also seek a sense of social or political empowerment in the content; although, the definition for empowerment varies greatly. The examples the scholars commonly refer to as representations of the definition are found in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* and *Call and Response*; longer works that are not practical to include in even a comprehensive anthology are thoroughly discussed and put into context of their respective literary period. And in most cases a chapter of the longer work is included, or some other shorter work by the author is included. Examples of this include Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison. These authors and their work are most often talked about as representations of the tradition.

Participants also discussed the marginal texts that they teach as part of the canon. These include Tina McElroy Ansa, Bebe Moore Campbell, Daniel Black, Anatole Broyard, and even Harriet Beecher Stowe. Although, it should be noted that the work of these artists may not be included in the “traditional” canon for a variety reasons, such as the contemporary nature of the work, the work being labeled as commercial fiction, the race of the writer, or the self-identified race of the writer.

For the canon to expand, it is vital for marginal texts to be taught often and consistently in the college classroom and connected to the black literary tradition. In the preface to the second edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Gates and McKay (2003) addresses the connection between a text being taught and inclusion in the canon:

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

Therefore to enter the canon, a text must first consistently enter the classroom—even if it is with the label of a marginal text.

A tool to aid in the consistent use of marginal texts in the classroom may be through implementation and promotion of readers such as *African American Literature Beyond Race*. As a reader it offers a practical and functional text that can be taught as extension to a traditional

anthology such as *Norton* in a survey course (Temple, 2006b) or a class dedicated to expanding perceptions of the canon. In the case of *Norton*, it was a ten year project (Eichelberger, 1999; Gates and McKay, 2003). However, the creation of a reader that addresses an area of expansion may be a more a reasonable and productive project in expanding the canon.

#### **5.4 Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to defining African American Literature. A qualitative methodology was used to facilitate exploration. Based on these research findings, the following recommendations are proposed for future research:

- Explore further the relationship between participants' academic training and their definition of African American Literature.
- Repeat this study with black writers.
- Repeat this study with black readers of African American Literature.
- Use a case study design and observe an undergraduate survey class of African American Literature.

A discussion of each of these recommendations is included below:

*Explore further the relationship between participants' academic training and their definition of African American Literature.*

It is not surprising that there is a connection between a scholar's academic training and their definition of African American Literature. However, research should be conducted that investigates the academic training of African American Literature professors. It should include a wide array of programs, time periods, and specialties. Their academic training should then be compared to a scholar's current framework for teaching the canon and their areas of interest in

research. It would provide evidence on how a scholar's definition evolves over time and what were key catalysts for its evolution.

*Repeat this study with black writers.*

It is apparent that much of the definition of African American Literature is tied to the writers who produce the creative work. Further research should be done on how writers define the work they produce and their perception of responsibility to the black community, if any. It may be especially enriching to explore black writers' creative writing process and see what elements of the black aesthetic emerge.

*Repeat this study with black readers of African American Literature.*

While scholars' and critics' definitions of African American Literature are taught and presented to students and the larger black community, it should be investigated what the readers of black literature take away from it. Also, a main goal of the black aesthetics framework is to empower the black audience. It should be investigated if readers are seeking empowerment in their literature and why or why not. Furthermore, if they are seeking empowerment, it should be investigated how they define empowerment.

*Use a case study design and observe an undergraduate survey class of African American Literature*

This study utilized individual interviews of scholars and, although the findings were detailed, further exploration using a case study could provide a greater understanding in many of the categories described in Chapter Four. For example, a case study design could compare the definition presented by the scholar to the researcher to the definition presented by the scholar in the syllabus. Furthermore, the researcher could observe the texts chosen to represent the canon and what elements are focused on in the chosen texts. Moreover students' perspectives of

African American Literature and the black experience before the class as well after class could be recorded. Additional investigation in these areas could produce useful data.

## 5.5 Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe the criteria that African American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. In other words, the goal was to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to defining this literature. The research questions that guided this study were:

(1) What elements make a text African American Literature?

(2) What elements of the black aesthetic framework are considered essential elements of African American Literature?

This exploratory study was the first step in creating a framework that can be used in assessing texts labeled as part of the canon and support for marginalized texts that are understudied.

Based on the analysis of the data, four general conclusions were drawn from the findings. The conclusions are:

- The core of the African American Literature definition is the black writer representing the black experience but the canon is expanding and becoming more inclusive.
- While African American Literature is often a tool for empowerment, a wide scope is used in defining methods of empowerment.
- Black writers should balance aesthetic and political concerns in a literary text.
- Black writers still have a responsibility to be a voice for the black community.

These conclusions along with the limitations of the study, implications for teaching African American Literature, and recommendations for future research were provided.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Professor [Insert Name] :

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study. Ten African American Literature professors in the United States who have no less than five years experience teaching African American Literature will be invited to participate in this study.

The purpose of this study is to describe the criteria that African-American Literature professors use in defining what is African American Literature. In other words, the goal is to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to the genre.

You will participate in an interview scheduled to last 45 minutes to one hour. Afterwards, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and to clarify or expand on your responses. Interviews will be digitally voice recorded and transcribed verbatim into text files by the researcher. The amount of time to review the transcripts may vary depending on how much you choose to add. An estimated amount of time is two to three hours. Therefore, your total participation time is three to four hours.

You will be identified by your real name in the research and any presentations of the data. Identification of your previous work and academic background is tied to your name and enriches the data collection.

I have attached the interview questions and the Informed Consent document for you to review. Please contact me if you are interested in participating or if you have questions or concerns. If I have not received a response in two weeks, I will send you an email reminder. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ebony Gibson, MFA  
African-American Studies, MA Candidate  
Georgia State University

## Appendix B: Reminder Email

Professor [Insert Name] :

Two weeks ago, I sent you an invitation to participate in a research study. I am sending you a friendly reminder. Please contact me if you are interested in participating or if you have questions or concerns.

The purpose of this study is to describe the criteria that African-American Literature professors use in defining what is African-American Literature. In other words, the goal is to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to the genre.

Ten African-American Literature professors in the United States who have no less than five years experience teaching African-American Literature will be invited to participate in this study. Keep in mind, you will be identified by your real name in the research and any presentations of the data. Identification of your previous work and academic background is tied to your name and enriches the data collection.

Your total participation time is three to four hours. Participation would require a 45-minute to one hour interview by phone or in person. Afterwards, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and to clarify or expand on your responses. Interviews will be digitally voice recorded and transcribed verbatim into text files by the researcher. The amount of time to review the transcripts may vary depending on how much you choose to add; an estimated amount of time is two to three hours.

I have attached the interview questions and the Informed Consent document for you to review. I look to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ebony Gibson, MFA  
African-American Studies, MA Candidate  
Georgia State University  
egibson6@student.gsu.edu  
404-416-8471

**Appendix C: Demographics**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender : \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

University Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Professional Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Teaching Experience: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Consent Form

Georgia State University  
African American Studies Department  
Informed Consent

Title: Language or Liberation?: Defining the African-American Literary Canon

Principal Investigator: Jonathan Gayles

Student Investigator: Ebony Gibson

### I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to describe the criteria that African-American Literature professors use in defining what is African-American Literature. In other words, the goal is to create a rich description of the elements commonly viewed by scholars as essential to the genre. The study adds to the body of literature that assesses and evaluates the canon as a whole.

Fifteen African-American Literature professors in the United States who have no less than five years experience teaching African-American Literature will be invited to participate in this study.

### II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to supply a curriculum vitae to establish that you have five years of teaching experience as well as identify your gender, age, and race for demographic purposes. You will also be asked if you are proficient in using Microsoft Word. The vitae should include pertinent background information such as academic training, previous published work, and areas of research interests. If any of the above information is not included, it will be collected at the time of your interview.

You will participate in an interview scheduled to last 45 minutes to one hour. Every effort will be made to conduct the interview in person; however, if schedule conflicts or financial limitations prevent it, the interview may be conducted by phone. If the interview is conducted in person, you will sign this consent and receive a copy before the interview begins. In cases where the interview is conducted by phone, you will give consent by signing an electronic copy of the consent form before the interview is conducted and email it to the researcher.

Interviews will be digitally voice recorded and transcribed verbatim into text files by the researcher. You will review the transcripts in Microsoft Word and be given the opportunity to clarify statements and add additional examples of texts. The amount of time to review the transcripts may vary depending on how much you choose to add; an estimated amount of time is two to three hours. Therefore, your total participation time is three to four hours.

### III. Risks:

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

### IV. Benefits:

It is possible that the study actually benefits your day to day life by extending your impact as scholar.

### V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### VI. Confidentiality:

You will be identified by your real name in the research study and any presentations of the data. Identification of your previous work and academic background is tied to your name and enriches the data collection. All electronic information will be kept under password protection on two flash drives (one original and one back up copy of data) and password protected. The flash drives as well as all hard copies of transcripts will be kept in my home in a locked storage container. Additionally, information may be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly like the GSU Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).

### VII. Contact Persons:

Contact persons are Jonathan Gayles at 404-413-5142 or through his email at: jgayles@gsu.edu; and Ebony Gibson at 404-416-8471 or through her email at: egibson6@student.gsu.edu. Please contact researchers if you have questions about this study. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

### VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

I will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you would like to participate in this research and agree to be audio-taped, please sign below.

---

Participant

---

Date

---

Principal Investigator Researcher Obtaining Consent

---

Date

**Appendix E: Interview Protocol**

- (1) What elements make a text African American Literature?
- (2) What are some examples that meet these criteria?
- (3) What excludes a text from being African American Literature?
- (4) What texts fall on the margin?
- (5) What texts are generally considered a part of the canon but you believe should not be?
- (6) What texts have influenced your framework defining African American Literature?
- (7) Have any personal experiences influenced your perspective?
- (8) Have any pedagogical experiences influenced your perspective?
- (9) How do you feel about the notion that African American Literature should function as a tool for political and social empowerment for the black community?
- (10) Should political and social considerations outweigh aesthetic concerns in African American Literature?
- (11) Does the black writer have a responsibility to the black community?



**Appendix F: Demographics**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Years of teaching experience</b>
Jackson	M	43	Black	Emory	Professor	15
Bess Montgomery	F	48	Black	Clark Atlanta	Associate Professor	22
Vinyard	F	50+	Black	Clark Atlanta	Associate Professor; Immediate Past Chair	35
Sanders	M	48	Black	Emory	Professor	20
Harwell	F	33	Black	Georgia State	Visiting Lecturer	7
Grandt	M	43	White	Gainesville State	Assistant Professor	17
Collins	M	39	White	Georgia State	Academic Professional	14
Rhym	M	Not given	Black	Gainesville State	Assistant Professor	20