Publishing Blackness
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Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race Since 1850.

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Right now, I am preparing a major anthology of African American literature spanning from the eighteenth century until the present. To be published by Wiley-Blackwell, the anthology requires the consideration of several intellectual and editorial issues, such as the historical value of certain literary works, their ongoing scholarly relevance, their commercial viability, their pedagogic utility, their copyright expenses, and the diversity of their authors, forms, and themes. While conducting research, I have surveyed the opinions of many teachers, students, and scholars who either specialize in African American literary studies or engage this academic field in passing. The ideas and suggestions they have offered are meaningful not only to the anthology itself, but also to the affirmation—which, personally, I was also seeking—that the texts and contexts of African American literature remain exciting topics of inquiry.

The Wiley-Blackwell anthology’s scope testifies, first of all, to the remarkable growth of African American literary studies since its academic expansion and institutionalization in the 1960s and 1970s. Periodized according to race, ethnicity, politics, history, culture, and methodology, the scope ranges from the literatures of Africa, Middle Passage, slavery, and freedom in the early national and antebellum periods; to the modern period of New Negro aesthetics, culture, and politics between the Civil War and World War II; to the contemporary period in which the canon, tradition, and criticism of African American literature have undergone reform. The scope also incorporates either the reassessment of American canons more broadly or the rediscovery and close reading of texts still absent from them. The scholarly field has come to appreciate the hemispheric expanse of American literature beyond the geographic
boundaries and imaginaries of the United States proper; to outline the literature’s transatlantic and transnational dimensions; to identify its documentation of contact between and among writers of putatively different races or ethnicities; and to limn its historical interface of cultural aesthetics with politics, informally and formally understood.\(^1\) Such forays of American literary studies, I believe, should find reflection in any comprehensive yet cutting-edge anthology of African American literature. For that reason, while the Wiley-Blackwell anthology reprints and discusses a particular literary canon or tradition, it is not restricted to the scholarly canon or tradition that has historically focused on it alone.

Compiling the anthology has been challenging so far. I have been grappling with its inherent contradiction: the tension between the political legacy of race in African American anthology-making—a core activity in canon formation—and the “postracial” vogue during which the anthology likely would be marketed, sold, and taught. Subtly, that tension emerges, for example, in the venerable anthology of African American literature, principally edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, first released by W. W. Norton in 1997 and again as a second edition in 2004. In “Principles of Selection,” the second part of the preface to the first edition, we learn that “The Norton Anthology of African American Literature is a celebration of two centuries of imaginative writing in English by persons of African descent in the United States.”\(^2\) The second edition elaborates the anthology’s goal as not solely a “celebration” but also a canonical strategy, implementing “our [or the general and section editors’] argument that the scholars of our literary tradition needed first to construct a canon before it could be deconstructed,” or before that canon’s limitations could be exposed.

Our task, then, was not primarily to bring lost or obscure texts back into print; rather, it was to make available in one representative anthology the major texts in the tradition and to construct a canon inductively, text by text, period by period, rather than deductively—that is, rather than through a priori ideological or thematic principles agreed upon in advance, which would function like a straightjacket for our selections. (My italics)\(^3\)

The peculiarity of this mission lies in the relationship between, on the one hand, the editorial desire to avoid “agree[ing] upon in advance” certain “a priori ideological or thematic principles” and, on the other, the
stated “argument that the scholars of our literary tradition needed first to construct a canon before it could be deconstructed.” What makes something “ideological” (as opposed to philosophical) is the extent that, in order to exist, it does not necessarily require actual, verbalized consent among its purveyors. As political scientist Michael C. Dawson notes, ideology is “a worldview readily found in the population, including sets of ideas and values that cohere, that are used publicly to justify political stances, and that shape and are shaped by society.” Canonical “ideas and values” could well be invisible to the eyes of anthologists but still prescribe their vision. The problem of preparing an anthology, I would argue, is not whether anthologists should or should not agree on and deduce canonical selection from a set of “ideological or thematic principles.” Rather, the problem is how to render that ideology visible, to explain how and why a “worldview” responsible for these principles could become so “readily found in the population” in the first place. More to the point, as an anthology editor, I am more than willing to accept the default a priori status of ideology as a precondition for canonical methodology. I am more concerned about how such ideology could become the “straightjacket” of canon formation and, if we continue with the cynical metaphor, how we could loosen its grip.

For the balance of this essay, I will make the case that the methodology and organization of African American anthologies have been, and continue to be, crucial to understanding and critiquing what I regard as the double-laced straightjacket in question: a priori literary ideologies of race and racism. Loosening its grip requires rendering less familiar, less intuitive, the doctrine that the best African American anthologies are those that authentically portray the cultural expressions and political struggles of African Americans. I aim to cast new light on the “surprising” idea, for example, that “the trade edition [of The Norton Anthology of African American Literature] was purchased in great numbers by nonacademics, often members of the growing African American reading public, hungry for texts about themselves.” While commercial statistics may support this statement—even its claim to an exacting racial demography of the anthology’s readership—I am suspicious of the allegation, applicable to this collection and many others, that an anthology’s appeal to African American readers results from the latter’s aching desire for literary self-portraiture, and that fulfilling this desire could, in turn, become a basis for canon formation. As the new millennium progresses, such an allegation runs counter to the increasing diversity of the African
Diaspora in the United States as well as to the increasing ambivalence, if not contestation, of the nation’s readers over the dominance of race in categorizing this group. The election of Barack Obama, a man born from a black Kenyan father and a white Kansan mother, as the forty-fourth president of the United States has persuaded some that, despite the nation’s checkered past of racial prejudice and discrimination, we are living in a world where race no longer matters—insofar as race no longer prohibits the political success of African Americans as much as it had in the past. How does one usher a canon into a new millennium, then, whose political circumstances, in some ways, undercut that canon’s historical claim to racial politics? Here, I will suggest that editing an African American anthology in a postracial era entails counterbalancing the idea that its readers might be “hungry for texts about themselves” against the idea that they might also be awaiting their own disarticulation from the straightjacket of racial authenticity and representation in African American political history.

We cannot take this political history lightly. To imply, as many anthologies have, that “African American literature” signifies literature by, about, and for African Americans is not merely to utter a definition but also to determine many other things: such as the way authors think about and write the literature, the way publishers classify and distribute it, the way bookstores receive and sell it, the way libraries catalog and shelve it, the way readers locate and retrieve it, the way teachers, scholars, and anthologists use it, the way students learn from it—in short, the way we know it.

In controversial terms, Ward Connerly has alluded to this point. In “Where ‘Separate but Equal’ Still Rules,” a New York Times Op-Ed article published on May 8, 2000, the chairman of the American Civil Rights Institute urges bookstores to resist classifying and judging the content of a book solely by the author’s skin color. Consistent with his relentless agitation against racial preferences in U.S. higher education, the article bemoans the “racial profiling” of his books and of books published by those who share his likeness.

The shelving of their books in a special section [called “African-American Interest”] deprives black authors or “race” authors of significant sales opportunities, putting them at a competitive disadvantage compared with authors whose books are not ghettoized. But the economic harm pales in contrast to the intellectual
and cultural damage caused by the bookstores’ version of racial profiling. They have fallen into the trap of thinking that a writer’s skin color is a reliable guide to judging the contents of his or her books. My book, like those by other writers who happen to be black, is meant for readers of any race interested in the subjects and controversies I address. By relying on a blatant stereotype—that blacks are the only ones interested in the history, culture, and politics of black people—the bookstores marginalize some writers and limit their ability to reach out to a broader audience and to share common bonds and values.  

Let me stress here that quoting Connerly’s words at length does not mean that I endorse his mission to enforce color-blind policies in higher education. Reciting them does begin to show, though, the extent that his frustration with what Katya Gibel Azoulay, a cultural theorist, has termed an “essentialist reification of race” has resonated in a mainstream venue (such as the *New York Times*) and should be taken seriously. Policy motives aside, his reference to a customary racial metonym in bookstores (the “African American Interest” shelf) reveals, to borrow Azoulay’s words again, the “theoretical gap” between the bookstore’s marketing of his work and his identification of his own work.  

The commercial and academic customs of U.S. bookstores and of African American literary anthologies, respectively, are not so different. In U.S. academic culture, the commerce and criticism of African American literature are overlapping enterprises. Both tend to elevate historical conventions of racial politics—that is, the prominent role that race has played in power relations, either in government or in informal society, among people across time—over the individual, and sometimes contrasting, interests of authors whom this history has cast as part of the long African American civil rights struggle. Put bluntly, the pride of African American anthologies lies in its literary compilation of racial politics, which have a lot to do with representations of racial authenticity.  

Since slave narratives were published in the first half of the nineteenth century, literature written by African Americans—or, more precisely, by people who are identified or who identify themselves as African American—must be “the real thing,” a window into the African American experience, in order to have any aesthetic, cultural, social, political, or commercial value. The additional promotion of certain images and tropes through the African American canon typifies a long-standing
and quite anxious effort among the canon’s authors and arbiters, dating back to their intellectual critiques of blackface minstrelsy, to control cultural and political portrayals of the race as much as possible, to shield them from stereotypes and other kinds of racist contamination. While understandable and, on countless occasions, necessary for redressing misconceptions of African Americans writ large, such an obsession with racial representation has perpetuated the wrongful belief that the best and most useful African American literature depicts the race.⁸

In the few decades after slavery, the earliest and most remarkable example of a writer who suffered from the culture of racial authenticity is Paul Laurence Dunbar, whose legacy is enjoying a scholarly renaissance today. A century ago, Dunbar died both separated from his wife and an alcoholic at the young age of thirty-three. By the time he died in 1906, he had published four novels, four collections of short stories, and fourteen books of poetry, as well as many songs, plays, and essays in newspapers and magazines around the world. He was the first professional writer born to emancipated slaves to become a phenomenon in this country. The centennial of his death has led to a recent blitz of publications. Beyond these issues, what makes Dunbar so remarkable today is that the circumstances of his emergence as the first “Negro Laureate” of the United States continue to teach us not to prejudge a book by the author’s skin color.

In the early months of 1896, James A. Herne, a preeminent actor and playwright, returned to his hotel in Toledo, Ohio, where his play Shore Acres was running, and learned that Dunbar had left him a gift with the hotel clerk. After attending and enjoying Shore Acres, Dunbar decided to leave Herne a complimentary copy of his second and latest book of poetry, Majors and Minors. Herne turned out to be well acquainted with the “Dean of American Letters,” William Dean Howells, and Herne passed Majors and Minors on to Howells. Both men were captivated by the frontispiece of the book, an image of Dunbar at age eighteen. Howells found the image so compelling that he decided to review the book in Harper’s Weekly. Howells called Dunbar “the first man of his color to study his race objectively” and “to represent it humorously, yet tenderly, and above all so faithfully.” For the benefit of his readers, he also described Dunbar’s facial features: “In this present case I felt a heightened pathos in the appeal from the fact that the face which confronted me when I opened the volume was the face of a young negro, with the race traits strangely accented: the black skin, the woolly hair, the thick outrolling lips and
A black star was born, but perhaps for the wrong reasons. What Howells did, although in an antiquated and especially racist fashion, is similar to what readers do today: they presume what a book is about based on what the author looks like.

During Dunbar’s time and afterward, it turned out that some of our most celebrated African American authors had written noteworthy, even beautiful, literature resisting prevailing conventions of racial representation, despite the cost of critical dismissal and commercial failure. Certain authors have tried to counteract literary acts of racial profiling. The most famous case is Jean Toomer. Against the advice of publisher Horace Liveright that he mention his “colored blood” in the publicity for *Cane* (1923), Toomer reiterated his autonomy: “My racial composition and my position in the world are realities which I alone may determine.” Toomer preferred to be called a national or American writer; he refused to allow race to determine too much his identity as a person and an artist. Unfortunately, this kind of historical record—of authors’ rebuffing the racial identities thrust upon them—has had little impact on the definition of African American literature. This definition has long imposed a mythical “one-drop rule” on authors, meaning that one drop of African ancestral blood coursing through their bodies makes them black. It has also dictated African American canon formation and misled readers into believing that African Americans write best only about African Americans. And readers continue to have this belief not because they think about it as deeply as they should, but because they focus on the author’s likeness. Although readers know by heart “not to judge a book by its cover,” they are still likely to remain superficial and prejudge the content of a book based on the author’s skin color. And if that book defies their expectations or presumptions, they ignore or devalue it.

Over the past century, anthologies of African American literature have indoctrinated generations of readers into taking for granted this sort of theoretical, or taxonomic, gap between how writers identify themselves and their works and how their readers are inclined to. That gap has led to a host of problems, even when anthologists have appreciated and, in some cases, tried to recover the authors for posterity. According to one relatively recent academic forum, the anthologies indicate “the collective project, ongoing since the late sixties, of expanding the canon and curriculum of American literature, especially in response to the activism and scholarship of feminists and people of color.” While aiming to teach students about the ethnic diversity of American culture, the collections also presume an authentic version of ethnic literature in
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which the representation of ethnic characters must correspond to the actual ethnic identity of their authors. The reason for this tendency has a lot to do with politics.

The political value of canon formation obtains even in something as innocuous as the activity of preparing an anthology. Selecting entries, even as this process accounts for the unavoidable restrictions of textual word count and, if they exist in the private domain, copyright costs, could privilege certain forms, themes, and methodologies in the scholarly fields to which the anthologists belong. In African American canon formation, there has been an ideological consistency, across history, in the exclusion of unconventional or anomalous texts from African American literary anthologies, a consistency resulting from what theorist John Guillory has called a relationship between “a politics of representation in the canon” and “a democratic representational politics” in the U.S. academy. A consequence of ethnic canon formation, however progressive it may be in introducing underrepresented ethnic minorities into American literature, has been the denigration or neglect of a class of writers whose literary works defy the protocols of ethnic authenticity and representation—namely, the casting of ethnic protagonists and the use of their historically associated typologies of vernacular, historical themes, cultural geographies, political discourses, or subjectivities. “African American literature” is no exception: the canonical conditions responsible for the marginality of certain texts come from the presumption that exhibiting African American experiences in authentic and representative ways is necessary—the analogous kind of presumption, ironically, that had justified moving African American literature in the late 1960s from the margins to the center of the larger American canon, precisely because portrayals of African American experiences had been missing from it.

The marginalization of certain literary texts has been a recurring structural consequence of canon formation to the extent that we could even accept it as an unavoidable problem. Yet I would counter that if our preoccupation with authentic political representations of race and racism happens to inspire that marginalization, then we should consider alternative methodologies and organizations of canonical anthologies. At the very least, doing so would mitigate the inherent gravitation of these representations toward reducing the sophistication of literary narratives of human experience. Literary reductionism of this sort should not be inevitable, despite the ostracizing tendencies of canon formation, as long as editorial principles are properly developed to counteract it.

I should state here that my critique does not necessarily intend to
erase the categories of African American literature and, generally, ethnic literature, simply because such reductionist canons exist. Just as certain universities once warranted—and, in some cases, still warrant—the institution of African American studies as a self-contained department or as one program among many underrepresented ethnic Others under the rubric of American studies, African American literature likewise warrants anthologization as an individual entity. Yet, although anthologies work to protect underrepresented ethnic literature from marginality in canons founded on, say, the racism of white supremacy, we still must try to overcome the racial essentialism that may afflict our reading of canons. Put another way, just as we must overcome the erroneous myth that certain races must have certain essential characteristics, we must overcome the one saying that appreciable African American literature must have essential characteristics. I submit that editorial ventures should neither restrict anthologies to these myths, which are often grounded in race, nor forget the ways that certain African American writings, even if not anthologized, could still be noteworthy for trying to move beyond race.

In 2006, I edited a collection, *African American Literature beyond Race: An Alternative Reader*, that sought to demonstrate this canonical philosophy. The book features a number of authors who, though canonical in their own right, wrote literature whose casting of racially white, unmarked, or ambiguous characters in leading roles tended to be a historical aberration. (A number of preeminent scholars, including George Hutchinson, one of the editors of this book, wrote headnotes to introduce and examine these anomalous texts.) Seeking to overcome the critical and commercial demands for racial representation, the published short stories, novelettes, or full novels include Francis Ellen Watkins Harper’s *Sowing and Reaping* (1876–77); Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Uncalled* (1898); Nella Larsen’s “The Wrong Man” and “Freedom” (1926); Jean Toomer’s *York Beach* (1929); Wallace Thurman’s *The Interne* (1932); Ann Petry’s *Country Place* (1947); Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948); Chester Himes’s *Cast the First Stone* (1952); Richard Wright’s *Savage Holiday* (1954); James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956); Samuel R. Delany’s “Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones” (1968); Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” (1983); and Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild” (1984). The challenges these unconventional works of fiction have faced include going unread, undersold, or out of print in the commercial marketplace, while being stigmatized by scholars as anomalous within the authors’ oeuvres or in African American literary history.
African American Literature beyond Race has aimed to recover these books, arguing that African American avoidances of racial representation were not literary failings but innovative ways of investigating our common humanity, in spite and because of racial differences.¹⁵

I would be remiss if I do not reiterate here in 2012, as I did in 2006, that describing any move beyond human difference, such as race, must proceed with caution. The concept of “postrace” has emerged, most notably, in reference to well-educated, exciting, elected, and mostly Democratic African American officials, whose dates of birth reveal that they were only children during the modern Civil Rights movement, and whose credentials at Ivy League institutions highlight their common ability to navigate majority-white societies while excelling in rigorous academic environments.¹⁶ In part, this profile explains why the “appeal” of Cory Booker, mayor of Newark, New Jersey, and President Barack Obama “transcends race,” according to magazine writer Peter J. Boyer: “Both men, reared in the post-Selma era and schooled at elite institutions, developed a political style of conciliation, rather than confrontation, which complemented their natural gifts and, as it happens, nicely served their ambitions.”¹⁷ In the popular imagination, a postracial moment promises a present and a future in which race is no longer the main determinant of social relations and of the nation’s democratic growth.

A more deliberate, scholarly approach, however, would suggest that the idealism of a postracial era should not distract us from the cultural and political realities of race today. We should balance the two, if such a postracial world is worth striving for, and guidance for doing so does not necessarily have to come from our contemporary moment. Words from “The Value of Race Literature,” the lecture Victoria Earle Matthews delivered on July 30, 1895, at the First Congress of Colored Women of the United States, have proven prophetic enough. In the final paragraph, Matthews describes the generational importance of anthologizing “Race Literature,” or what we now call African American literature.

The lesson to be drawn from this cursory glance at what I may call the past, present and future of our Race Literature apart from its value as first beginnings, not only to us as a people but literature in general, is that unless earnest and systematic effort be made to procure and preserve for transmission to our successors, the records, books and various publications already produced by us, not only will the sturdy pioneers who paved the way and laid the
foundation for our Race Literature be robbed of their just due, but an irretrievable wrong will be inflicted upon the generations that shall come after us.

In the century after this address, anthologies of African American literature have met Matthews’s challenge, reprinting an assortment and abundance of literature authored by African Americans. Yet, such textual abundance and generic range, however welcome and necessary, belie the fundamental tendency of anthology editors to ignore Matthews’s assertion in the lecture’s first sentence, of all places: “By Race Literature, we mean all the writings emanating from a distinct class—not necessarily race matter; but a general collection of what has been written by the men and women of that Race.” Race Literature does not have to be blatantly racial to have special meaning to the Race, as Matthews would have put it. She would have urged us to expand our imagination so that our canonical notions of African American literature would not succumb to axioms of racial authenticity. She would have advised that 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. African American literature in diverse genres—“History, Biographies, Scientific Treatises, Sermons, Addresses, Novels, Poems, Books of Travel, miscellaneous essays and the contributions to magazines and newspapers”—indicate well enough the full range and promise of literary authorship.

In today’s terms, I would agree with and advance Matthews’s speech by saying that race should not determine too much the idea of African American literature, and that this stance must bulwark against the axiomatic momentum of racial authenticity that has ingrained the political necessity of racial representation to such a degree in African American canon formation that the literary portrayal of African American experiences has become nothing less than a normative proxy for aesthetic beauty. African American literature deserves more than that. It should be appreciated because it instructs and delights us, breaks the rules of the world we live in, and enables us to grapple with the complexities of humanity, which may or may not invoke race. Just as literary art, in general, is what editor Jerome Beaty calls “the very thing humanity can least afford to do without,” African American literature should be respectfully defined in the broadest way possible: as the literature written by those who identify themselves as African American, but whose ambition to cre-
ate art that touches many readers, sometimes regardless of race, is equally meaningful, if not more, due to the enormous historical political burden of racial representation that African American writers have had to bear.\textsuperscript{19}

Along these lines, Toni Morrison delivered the keynote lecture at the “Race Matters” conference, held at Princeton University in April 1994, urging our sensitivity to valences of literary creativity including but also beyond race. The Nobel Laureate described her vision of literature in terms at once “race-specific,” free of “racial hierarchy,” and celebratory of American cultural nationality: “I have never lived, nor have any of us, in a world in which race did not matter. Such a world, one free of racial hierarchy, is usually imagined or described as dreamscape—Edenesque, utopian, so remote are the possibilities of its achievement. . . . I prefer to think of a world-in-which-race-does-not-matter as something other than a theme park, or a failed and always-failing dream, or as the father’s house of many rooms. I am thinking of it as home.”\textsuperscript{20} Morrison’s imagination of “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter” does not perpetuate a historical denial about “race matters” but actually attends to their historical realities and complexities, to how they bear on contemporary humanity, even as she aspires to create literary worlds challenging the dominance of race.

Let us put Morrison’s words in the broader context of her oeuvre to realize their gravity. Her novels and essays have always asserted the significance of race, but she has also been concerned with the tendency of race to determine too much and reduce the complexity of human identity, relations, and culture, especially as portrayed in African American literature. In her 1989 essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Morrison interrogates the assumptions and definition of African American literature: “The question of what constitutes the art of a black writer, for whom that modifier is more search than fact, has some urgency. In other words, other than melanin and subject matter, what, in fact, may make me a black writer? Other than my own ethnicity—what is going on in my work that makes me believe it is demonstrably inseparable from a cultural specificity that is Afro-American?”\textsuperscript{21} Neither Morrison nor I would discount the fact that, in some way, race matters to us all. Yet, in confronting that fact, in embracing the political salience of canons of African American literature, we should also acknowledge and contribute to that large and ongoing conversation spurred by the fundamental question, “What is African American literature?”\textsuperscript{22}
Morrison’s 1998 novel of postmodern hermeneutics, *Paradise*, also defies the conventional readings of American literature by complicating both “blackness” and “whiteness” in literary characterization. In explaining the racial ambiguity of characterization in this novel—such as its refusal to disclose conclusively the racial identities of the female protagonists—Morrison provides insight not only into her rather unheralded (in comparison to her novels) 1983 short story “Recitatif” but also into her long-standing philosophy about the literary identity of race and about the nature of readers: “The tradition in writing is that if you don’t mention a character’s race, he’s white. Any deviation from that, you have to say. What I wanted to do was not to erase race, but force readers either to care about it or see if it disturbs them that they don’t know.”

The character is “white” not because of the presence but, rather, because of the absence of racial markers. The lack of racial information (or the underdetermination of race) has been just as successful in defining “whiteness” as the excess of racial information (or the overdetermination of race) has been in defining “blackness.” Into that void of identification constitutive of whiteness, according to Morrison, readers often project their usual imagination of universal humanity as “white” humanity. Ironically, Morrison complicates the role of race in literary reading and writing to such a degree that she unsettles the idea of African American literature, even as she has historically been and continues to be celebrated in anthologies and in the public at large as its most accomplished representative.

Years ago, when I edited *African American Literature beyond Race*, I was hoping to devise an alternative to the conventional anthology, presenting intriguing works by canonical African American authors that, over the course of time, consistently became noncanonical. I was seeking to explain how race, representation, authenticity, genre, canon, and tradition factored—and still factor—into the way scholars read, anthologies organize, instructors teach, and students learn African American literature. And I was attempting to take one step toward minimizing the neglect of African American literature experimenting with nonnormative ways of representing race and the real world. Hence the title and even the mere structure of *African American Literature beyond Race* were loaded with political meanings: the word *beyond*, to repeat an earlier point, did not necessarily assert an optimistic belief that we could advance beyond race in our world. To do so would be naive, forgetting the persistence and predominance of racism that continues to cripple African Americans at the most fundamental social, educational, economic, and political levels. And to do so would be ignorant of the historical and ongoing roles of
African American literature in indicting racism, if not also redressing it in actual readers. Nonetheless, the 2006 anthology hoped to force prevailing canon formation to account for African American authors who wrote, or wished to write, literature beyond race. Today, the challenge for anthologists, myself included, is partly to remain aware that readers today may be more ready than ever to understand the literary problems and possibilities of a “postracial” era. That means being prepared to loosen the ideological straightjacket of racial authenticity and representation that has been restraining the African American canon from expressing itself in more ways than one.

Notes


12. “Forum: What Do We Need to Teach,” *American Literature* 65, no. 2 (June 1993): 325–61, on 326. “What Do We Need to Teach” is a forum in which several scholars discuss the academic and cultural politics of the anthologization or canonization of American literature.


14. The second edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, for example, states that it attempts “to make the canon of African American literature accessible to teachers and students” and “essential for the permanent institutionalization of the black literary tradition within departments of English, American Studies, and African American Studies” (Gates and McKay, xxix).

15. See Jarrett, ed., *African American Literature beyond Race*.

16. Booker was born in 1969 and Obama in 1961; Booker earned his degrees from Stanford University, Oxford University (as a Rhodes Scholar), and Yale University Law School, and Obama earned his from Occidental College, Columbia University, and Harvard Law School.


22. In *We Wear the Mask* Rafia Zafar declares that “critics of African American literature must at some point wrestle with the question of what makes a writer, or her texts, black. Can African descent alone establish a writer’s membership in the canon of African American writers?” (6). In *Authentic Blackness* J. Martin Favor pursues this idea from another angle: “Does a person’s racial categorization, the classification of the subject as black, white, or other, necessarily lend a ‘racial’ character to that person’s cultural work?” (5). Finally, Claudia Tate puts the question succinctly in *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*: “What constitutes a black literary text in the United States? Must it be written by, about, and/or for African Americans?” (3). See Rafia Zafar, *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); J. Martin Favor, *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).