Preface

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To plan to write a book about the way in which three different continents have impacted the literature of a people, captured, enslaved, transported, and oppressed by the very same three continents, was never my intention. The seeds of this book began at a time when I could scarcely imagine theorizing the dilemmas into which I had been born as an African American woman. Years after Langston Hughes’s “Theme for English B” freed me to express my black and beautiful self, and long before the day I stood up in my fourth-grade class and dared to give my teacher and fellow classmates a lesson in black history for which I was promptly and physically removed from class, I knew how it felt to be a problem. Literally, decades before I was first introduced to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, in an Introduction to Graduate Studies course, I knew firsthand the internal prison he described. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X, Giovanni’s Room, If They Come in the Morning, The Spook Who Sat by the Door,* and *Black Boy:* With few exceptions, my first experience of literature was with black United States literature written during the era of the Black Power movement—the period between the mid-1960s and late 1970s. This literature offered wisdom of the ages, as it foretold everything, knew from whence every ail sprang, and provided the curative texts to fix the world that came crushing down on me—a disenfranchised young black woman growing up in (sub)urban “ghettos” from New York City to Los Angeles.
As a result, when I later encountered Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, I could not help but notice how much it reminded me of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. When I read William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, I thought immediately of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. It was the way Morrison just let her characters be and how, because of what seemed to me at the time a more natural or realistic way of narrating things, her characters interconnected while separate histories unfolded, and each from a different character’s point of view. This way of inviting a reader into the lives of each character from different vantage points was the quality I thought made Faulkner’s writing seem so like Morrison’s. When I read Mark Twain’s *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*, I couldn’t help but notice that the voices of Tom, Chambers, and Roz echoed an ironic humor that seemed similar to the sentiments of a character with which I was most familiar—Langston Hughes’s Jess B. Simple. It mattered not that the white canonical texts preceded the black ones. To my mind I could only wonder in amazement at how these white writers managed to capture what I would later understand as a black aesthetic. The more I read these canonical white and black texts and the more comparisons I made between them and many others, the more I began to realize that my earliest experience of literature had not been a conventional one. Years later, an English professor would refer to this way of reading and understanding literature as backing into the canon.

Perhaps the only exceptions to my unconventional engagement with literature were two works that I had been weaned on since a small child—the Bible and key plays in the corpus of William Shakespeare. Nonetheless, I maintain that my experiencing of literature was quite traditional for black children growing up in New York City in the 1960s—during a time when everything was racial and political and nearly every text—by a white or black author—was meant to convey some underlying message about freedom from oppression. We—young black people—were in the middle of a revolution that in the words of Gil Scott Heron “would not be televised.” We had witnessed the repercussions of the deaths of two great martyrs—Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—and had witnessed the suppression and violence against those organizations and persons who resisted being silenced and restricted. The most vivid manifestation of the Black Power era was seen in the imprisonment of Angela Davis, an image that only served to further drive home the point that to be young, gifted, and black carried with it a great responsibility—to save the race.
All this to say, that race mattered and it mattered that black people were not merely the great-grandsons and -granddaughters of slaves. It mattered that black people were a people with a history beyond the transatlantic triangular trade, beyond their enslavement, colonization, and emancipation in the United States, the British colonies, Britain, and other western European colonies and countries. For it was in this historical moment of the 1960s that I, like other black people, discovered my geographical, historical, and philosophical roots in Africa. Thus, as we metamorphosed from Negroes, Coloreds, and blacks, we were transformed into African Americans—a people with history, land, and ties to ancient cultures and civilizations, whose universal contributions to all civilizations represented a force with which to be reckoned. Romantically, I was Eulalie,¹ and years later I regretted that I did not discover Christina Ama Ata Aidoo and other African writers when I was a child—it most certainly would have mattered and in ways that might have changed my life forever.

Three decades later—as a scholar of African American literature—I continue to grapple with the same dynamic forces, this time neither looking for nor expecting full reconciliation. Consequently, I have had to admit that the only way to recover with more honesty and clarity a heritage that black people in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and indeed 1990s had been claiming for themselves is to directly confront (in the twentieth century) the glaring impossibility of such an undertaking. This project represents my attempt to hypothesize about how to break out of such historical impasses—located ironically in the tension between verifiable realities of slavery and colonization of people of the African Diaspora, throughout the Black Atlantic, and the attendant psychoses that have resulted in romanticized responses to post-emancipation and postcolonial conditions.

Thus, I have had to address some very personal and political questions about what it means to be African, American, and the descendant of Afro-British Americans in the United States of America. Because of my love of literature and my somewhat naïve faith in the value of all forms of literature for humanity, I wanted to begin my literary journey at the beginning and close to home—all of them real and imagined, in the United States, somewhere on the African continent, and throughout the Black Atlantic. I have made three critical assumptions: First, because the black experience literally and figuratively encompasses Africa, Europe, and America, we cannot continue to operate as though only two of these locations matter—Europe and America. The continent of Africa
matters significantly. And, to conflate Africa within a limited framework of African America, Europe, or America is to risk rendering Africa as nonexistent—and even (especially) metaphorical and abstract renderings matter. Second, although African American identity is inextricably tied to Africa, it is both dishonest and irresponsible to superficially offer Afro-America as a stand-in or representative for Africa. We must not conflate Africa with Afro-America—one is not equivalent to the other. Third, because the narrative of the black experience is laden with as much fiction as are narratives of the Western worlds’ encounters with African worlds, which translate sometimes rather loosely into the narrative of the unnamed but nonetheless white experience, we must recognize the ways in which distortions and romanticizations of truth from either direction function similarly—and we are all culpable, though to be sure, not always equally so.

This, the boundless recovery of an invented but nonetheless real Africa, is the dilemma I am willing to face, the journey I am willing to undertake, and that for which I gladly and freely plunge into the mythic and literal Atlantic to recover what is mine. This is my sojourn—I am returning—to recover Africa from African America, to return myself to myself. The call to acknowledge and deal with *The Dilemma of a Ghost* has long since been issued and addressed. This book represents a visible manifestation of an inward and ongoing response to the question . . . What is African in African American?