INTRODUCTION

Historical and Cultural Recovery

Eighteenth-Century Scholarship
and the Politics of Visibility

Black Aesthetic Unbound

*The Black Aesthetic Unbound* (“Unbound”) rearticulates the early black aesthetic that operates alongside the European-American colonial literary traditions by recovering suppressed African worldviews in the earli est American literature. Two central themes unite this study. First, it draws upon the concept of *dilemma* as developed in Ghanaian playwright Christina Ama Ata Aidoo’s 1964 play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, which dissects the problematic relationship and historical disconnections between Africa and African America in the fictional marriage of a West African man and African American woman. Second, it invokes the notion of a *Black Aesthetic Unbound* to expose how theoretical attempts to free black texts from white envelopes have created yet another dilemma for early black texts—that of proving that the texts are representatively black enough. Rather than attempting to free the eighteenth-century black text from either its literary or literal black or white self, “Unbound” liberates additional African lenses through which Afro-British American literature in the eighteenth century might be interpreted.

During the era of the slave trade, more than twelve million Africans were brought as captives to the Americas. With them they brought memories, ideas, beliefs, and practices, which forever shaped the histories and cultures of the Americas. However, even the expanding and
exciting field of early African American literature has yet to sufficiently confront the undeniable imprints of West African culture and consciousness on this early black writing. This book offers a sustained study of the relationship between specific West African modes of thought and expression and the emergence of a black aesthetic in eighteenth-century North America. It explores how Senegalese, Igbo, and other West African traditions provide striking new lenses for reading poetry and prose by Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Lucy Terry, James Albert Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Venture Smith. In so doing, this work confronts the difficult dilemma of how to use diasporic, syncretic, and vernacular theories of black culture to inductively think through the massive cultural transformations wrought by the Middle Passage.


“Unbound” traces one of the most culturally diverse historical periods of African American literature—the eighteenth century—through its triangular engagement with the languages, cultures, and experiences of Africa, Europe, and North America. It does so first by exploring the paradoxical implications of the multiple positions of Africanity in early Afro-British America, both real and imagined. Next, by drawing upon the immensely eclectic and interdisciplinary range of scholarship available—across disciplines from one side of the Black Atlantic to
the other—I locate elements of a developing eighteenth-century black aesthetic. Finally, this book offers new ways of incorporating existing Western and Afro-Western critical tools alongside new Africanist ones to relocate Africa (both real and imagined) within African American literature.

The Black Aesthetic

Long before current scholarship could begin to forge new paths in black American literature, it often did so by bracketing, castigating, and worse yet exiling early black aesthetic critics’ African-centered scholarship to an intellectual and cultural nomad’s existence. As a result, the significant impact of the work of scholars such as Addison Gayle, Hoyt Fuller, and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) toward the foundation of what we now laud in progressive interdisciplinary movements has not been fully appreciated. Understandably, it is fitting to invite them back to the table, to participate in a meal they not only helped prepare, but also one for which they supplied many of the essential ingredients. Notably, texts such as Dudley Randall’s The Black Poets, Abraham Chapman’s New Black Voices, Stephen Henderson’s Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References, and Leroi Jones and Larry Neal’s Black Fire are representative of a range of black literary history, major themes, and conventions of black aestheticism.

These critical foundations have been defined and articulated in one of the most fundamental studies of the work of the early black aestheticians, Addison Gayle’s The Black Aesthetic. Drawing upon historically powerful literary antecedents from Pauline Hopkins to Richard Wright, the scholars represented in this groundbreaking collection—many political icons, some reaching near-demagogue status during the era of what has come to define black activism and nationalism, the late 1960s and 1970s—constructed a frame of reference for identifying, analyzing, and evaluating black art and culture, thus defining an aesthetic dimension of black or African identity that remains with us today. These black artists, scholars, activists, and innovators unapologetically and diligently created the contexts and carved the necessary spaces within which to name, create, and celebrate blackness. Their words announced the cultural wars between blacks and whites already centuries in progress. More important, they articulated in distinct black voices the sociopolitical and historical implications of those wars. They refused to be silenced, even
by one another, and indeed many of the early debates remain at the center of today’s discussions of black literature, aesthetics, politics, art, music, and nearly any subject or issue which impinges on the conditions, lives, and experiences of black people.

Paradoxically, while these early black aestheticians spoke representatively in a diversity of voices, which inaugurated a context within which to celebrate as never before the language, the sensibility, the art, politics, psychology, sociology, history, and the meaning of black existence, they regrettably left effectively silenced other black voices. In so doing, they forfeited a rich cultural heritage of black aesthetics, which they dismissed as being irrelevant and steeped in white culture. If it is true, as Hoyt Fuller claims, that “the new black writers have decided that their destiny is not at the mercy of the white man” (346), it is also true that their destinies are tied to other equally oppressive dilemmas. As Fuller amply identifies, black people are burdened with negative images of themselves upon which myths about black inferiority are erected. Further, compounding this dilemma faced by these new writers as inheritors of the black aesthetic is the necessarily “vast” gap between “white and black interpretations of those values” (330) which underlie their divergent yet intersecting experiences in a racially divided world. As Larry Neal argues in “The Black Arts Movement,” the onus is on the black writer to create through her literature a new “symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconography” (257). Importantly, this new aesthetic must speak to and for the global and local issues affecting the “first” and “third” worlds inhabited by people of African descent.

This book addresses the implications of black aesthetics for eighteenth-century black writers, who at best have been tolerated and condescended to, and at worst exiled and otherwise banished from the canon of “real” or “authentic” black literature. To that end I would like to offer three extensions of a bridge from the eighteenth-century Afro-British American authors in this study and their literary and cultural descendants who consciously constructed the black aesthetic. First, the existing cultural traditions that constitute the basis of the black aesthetic are present in the diverse worldviews and ways of knowing brought forward in the earliest black literature. Second, the “desire for self-determination . . . nationhood . . . the relationship between art and politics; [and,] the art of politics” (Neal, 257) are of primary (not secondary) concern to eighteenth-century black artists. Moreover, I contend that without their deliberate attempts to craft a humanity and positively alter and affect first their own black consciousnesses through a “reordering of
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Western" aesthetics, they would have been unable to effectively prick the conscience and raise the consciousness of a white slaveholding and oppressive society. Third, while there can be no doubt that it would have been impossible for these early black writers to write solely for, and speak to, black people and their concerns, as the fundamental project of the twentieth-century black aesthetic has insisted upon, we should not assume that these eighteenth-century writers were not consciously aware of the need to alter a reality—symbolically or otherwise—that did not correspond with their own experience of black humanity.

In “‘Total Life Is What We Want’: The Progressive Stages of the Black Aesthetic in Literature” Reginald Martin elaborates on the critical contexts, concepts, and historical factors impacting formations, and attempts to reformulate black aesthetics. He explains that the “elucidation of the term black aesthetic will only come with the acquisition of a clear understanding of what it meant to its originators, its progressive stages, and where the term uncomfortably rests in the world of literary thought today” (49). Part of that reformulation will also require us to relocate eighteenth-century black writers as an important (albeit uncomfortably situated) stage in the development of a black aesthetic.

The Scholarship of Visibility

The dilemma for contemporary scholarship on eighteenth-century literature by black English-speaking authors, though not unrelated to the very predicaments faced by the early black authors themselves, is not quite the same. Like them we (scholars) mourn the loss of an Africa buried under a palimpsest of European and Anglo-American ways of knowing. Further, we remain similarly moored to methods of unraveling and celebrating cultural hybridity and diversity that produce equally troubling structures and systems. However, unlike our eighteenth-century literary predecessors, we are bound in different ways, constrained and compelled through distinct historical and aesthetic moments that oblige us to disentangle the very quandaries left by these early black writers.

Significantly, as studies of the past ten years make clear and visible, the scholarship around eighteenth-century Afro-British America is caught in a web of contemporary criticism, theory, and history that undermines attempts to unconditionally recover the literature of this period from the white and black envelopes that continue to enclose it. Not surprisingly, the conditions of recovery are complicated by remnant
proscriptions from all corners. Importantly, much critical work has been done of late to uncover problems, debates, and conflicts associated with the historical, cultural, and literary knowledge that impacts Afro-British America. Consequently, such scholarship confronts predicaments—some deeply imbedded and others lingering just beneath the surface—in a way that enables us to more clearly extract meaning from hidden texts of Africa, Britain, and America present in this early black literature. This tendency in current scholarship to engage formerly bracketed impasses in the study of early Afro-British American literature has forged new and expansive paths for scholarly advances in the field. Thankfully, these significant advances and inroads in early black historical and cultural studies have made possible work such as mine. Indeed, discernable changes in early black literary studies can be marked by an unbounded approach that discloses issues that have been traditionally excepted, deferred, underanalyzed, or (un)consciously omitted.

To be sure, while not wholly representative of the field of eighteenth-century black literary studies, the work of Rafia Zafar, Katherine Clay Bassard, Joanna Brooks, David Kazanjian, Phillip Gould, and Vincent Carretta offer much to my rendering of an unbinding of the black aesthetic through a theorizing of the dilemma of self and identity in the eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature. Principally, their scholarship provides key points of entry into some of the most heavily debated issues in a relatively small but far-reaching and diverse area of study. Consequently, each of these scholars cracks interdisciplinary windows that I more fully open throughout this text. Each identifies an aesthetic, or contributes to the location of a crucial component of an existing or developing aesthetic, operating in the worlds and works of eighteenth-century Afro-British American authors. It is therefore fitting that I introduce this book, in the tradition of the literary ancestors to whom it is dedicated, by an invocation of these scholarly muses. More to the point, I want to acknowledge the critical space their work has left for my own. While I have both agreed and disagreed with them on more than a number of critical occasions, their engagement with the multivalent ghosts that haunt eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature has troubled my own theorizing about the literature. Not surprisingly, their innovative and controversial literary and cultural work—as well as the wealth of scholarship they carry forward in their work—highlights the strength of early black literary studies.

Surveying the critical paths they have laid, I attempt to map out how and what their scholarship makes visible about the impingement of intersecting forces—from Africa, England, African America, and Afro-
British America—on early black writers and their texts. Further, I reflect on diverse dilemmas each scholar confronts as she or he attempts to unearth complex nationalized historical realities alongside equally problematic racialized political strivings. While I have resisted the impulse toward any superficial categorization of this body of scholarship, I have located a common thread. Because their work necessarily exposes the irresolvable gulfs and divides created as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, like the writers they study, these scholars have all participated to some extent in an invention of Africa.

Similarly, not unlike the eighteenth-century Afro-British American writers whose works they study, these scholars find themselves in a catch-22 situation. At least two impossible scenarios present themselves: First, in exposing the very obstacles that impede complex contemporary analysis of Afro-British American literature, one risks rendering (by default) Africa invisible. Second, one’s attempt to correct the first scenario—by replacing or renaming a previously displaced Africa—risks arrival on a slippery slope toward origins, roots, and essentialism. “Unbound” offers yet another scenario, one that neither brackets nor wholly defines an African self in early black literature. Rather, I submit Africa—invented, imagined, and real—as a visible manifestation of the dilemma these writers faced and the means by which they attempted to reorder tricontinental identity. Clearly, the critical playing field is anything but neutral: visibility is a political move—intentional or not. Far more exciting and valuable than any attempt to reconcile the two scenarios—caught between the need to theorize Western ways of knowing and the desire to actualize African ones—is what we produce as a result of such critical confrontations. Notably, in their decisions to unmask black captivity, to spiritually interrogate divine interventions, to raise Lazarus from the shadowy depths of American Awakenings, to mourn what and how history remains, to aestheticize the poetics and narrative economies of commercial and cultural conversion, and to reauthenticate documents, these scholars have identified and thus contributed critical strands to the uncovering of an eighteenth-century black aesthetic.

Out of a seemingly “whitewashed” eighteenth-century black literature Zafar uncovers black aesthetic elements: masking, capture, and renaming. Specifically, black American writers donned masks as self-consciously empowering moves to inscribe and rename the terms of their humanity. Moreover, by “capturing the captivity” these early black writers “changed permanently the meanings of the genres they appropriated” (10). Equally important, Zafar’s scrutiny of how identity politics was conflated with the politics of canon formation exposes “race”
as a gatekeeping mechanism that codes blackness in such a way as to render an eighteenth-century black text white. Drawing a line between Jeffersonian politics and twentieth-century black aesthetic criticism, she exposes how DuBoisean double consciousness was misapprehended, the effects of which have been to misname and displace the earliest black American literature. Problematically, writers like Wheatley have been subsumed under the racialized, nationalized terms of one historical period (eighteenth century) and the politics (or politicized aesthetics) of another (post-1960s and 1970s Black Aesthetic, and Black Arts Movement). Behind the “contemplative girlish countenance [that] announces . . . then, as now, that Wheatley has resolved to take on the ghosts and models of European culture” (38), is a mature and equally determined poetic voice confronting “then as now” the specter and symbol of Africa.

Bassard locates Wheatley’s Africa within the discourse of African Americanism and the language of survivorship, exposing early black women’s works as viable instruments and channels through which foundational strategies for the assumption of pre-emancipation agency can be analyzed. In doing so, she unpacks a great deal of historical, theoretical, cultural, and discursive baggage as she confronts aesthetic and cultural processes that both enable and provide obstacles for early black women’s writing. In particular, Bassard’s “practice of reading black women’s intertextuality”—what she terms “spiritual interrogations”—stands prominently on the concept of divine authority as being undergirded by the interrogative rather than the imperative mood. Thus, subjectivity, agency, and racial and gendered configurations of culture are expressed as a kind of divine dialogue that produces power through a regeneration of knowledge about black women and their texts. This textual matrix contains, transforms, releases, and regenerates the very power it describes, and thus enables birth and rebirth, through poetic narrative recovery and revision. Looking out beyond her frontispiece, ready to do battle with American, European, and African ghosts, we are reminded of Wheatley’s transformation by means of spiritual interrogations—a call to spiritual and cultural conversation. Transformed by looking inward, Wheatley now has a subject in view, and that subject is her own spiritual and African self.

Brooks highlights the significance of this type of Christian conversion as that which links the spiritual and cultural self—as both a personal and communal event reinforced through personal testimony and reenacted in spiritual resurrection of an entire community, through
her attention to the prevailing “tropes of revival and resurrection . . . [in] the story of Lazarus” (10). In so doing, she points to the way that black writers like Wheatley used existing religious “formulas such as conversion, revival, and resurrection” to confront internal and external crises resulting from the “alienating and mortifying effects of slavery, colonialism and racial oppression” (9). Consequently, the “physical performances of death and rebirth” that “signified” individual, communal, and cultural transformation as manifested in the Lazarus figures provide a key to unlocking early black writers’ engagement with African and other (nonwhite) discourses. Despite claims of “literary ‘whiteface’” (14), black and Indian texts speak as much to one another, and their own respective black or Indian communities, as they do to white communities. More important, an “understanding of how race was lived and how racial identities were formed in the eighteenth century” (14) provides a clear map and a progressive strategy for theorizing the dilemmas presented by issues that define, recover, and reconstruct race.

Kazanjian argues for a reorientation of established methods of dealing with trauma, and the traumatic circumstances to which such concepts of loss are affixed. Namely, loss is viewed as an abundant social process rather than an individual pathological one (ix). Mourning is thus constructed as a political agent doing battle with an unsettling and essentializing history (2) that underscores the irresolvable nature of loss—the “mourning without end” (3). Thus, it is mourning itself, rather than the lost object, that signifies a recurrent and self-producing object to be mourned. Such a focus enables a consideration of how African writers construct imaginative realms that function as literal spaces of conflict resolution and analysis—developing corrective and survivalist strategies through which imagination can be used to provide practical solutions for changing current conditions. Considered thus, the imagination, like loss, mourning, and melancholia is seen as an equally valuable tool, but for different purposes and to different if equally important ends. Beyond merely bringing the past to history (or history to the past), one must also acknowledge that mourning not only recovers what remains but mourning also affixes itself to historical fragments and vestiges—like barnacles that adhere (are moored) to the bottom of a ship.

Affixed to antislavery writing and its aesthetic product, the commercial jeremiad is a genre that reverses the terms under which Africans were deemed savages and barbarians in comparison to the supposedly more cultured and civilized white men and women. Gould invites
dialogue about the implications of an anti-slavery discourse which “effectively made ‘beasts’” of slave-trading “Europeans and Americans”—whites (19). Gould’s attention to what this literature reveals about the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world and its relationship to nation, race, and commerce lays bare important secular tensions that existed on both sides of the Atlantic. Less about ending slavery than justifying commercialism, sentimental rhetoric about the barbarity and viciousness of the slave trade was to define—by negation—a more civilized commerce. Concurrently, anti-slavery literature projected a simple and unaffected guise for the enslaved African whose innocence was juxtaposed against callous unremorseful man stealers. In so doing, he demonstrates yet another dilemma faced by eighteenth-century Afro-British American writers, the double-edged sword made evident in their simultaneously negative and positive varnishing of dual self-images, and the subsequent questions such polishing invokes about issues of black literary agency and empowerment. As such, Gould invites a productive revisiting and expanded understanding of the way signifying languages are liberated.

Carretta’s call to contemporary scholars to confront the “powerful conflicting evidence” (xv) that the recovery of Equiano’s baptismal and naval records demand, highlights the dilemmas posed by any attempts to recover Africa in eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature. Namely, because these documents contradict Equiano’s narrative claims to an African birthplace, through their authentication of him as an American-born South Carolinian, those who privilege Equiano’s account of his pre-Middle Passage African experience must justify their continued reliance on his narrative in the face of other—officially sanctioned—forms of evidence. Further, Carretta’s claim that “the author of The Interesting Narrative was an even more profoundly self-made man than [Benjamin] Franklin if he invented an identity to suit the times” (xvii), while it reinforces and validates an African man’s claims to agency, is based primarily on the fact that he was not in fact African by birth, but rather by invention. Clearly, Carretta’s biography offers compelling evidence that must be grappled with, but the evidence, like the argument it implicitly makes about African identity, must be grappled with as well. Specifically, equally impenetrable are the codes and multiple paradoxes in which eighteenth-century black texts such as Equiano’s are enshrouded. One great paradox remains: To be a “citizen of the [African] world” (367) an African-descended person must continually engage the dilemma of a ghost.
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Without early black history and cultural studies the work I undertake would be impossible. Indeed, the historians whose work informs mine exhibit a shared interest in compiling, presenting, and analyzing a body of knowledge about the African continent as a means to enable viable connections between the slavery era of black American history and its pre-Middle Passage origins. Thus, these scholars have enabled a direct challenge to the bracketing of seemingly irresolvable cultural gulfs and divides among Africa, Europe and the West, and the North American colonies. In particular, the pioneering and trailblazing efforts of Sterling Stuckey, Mechal Sobel, Michael Gomez, and Craig Wilder have yielded viable maps for African recovery—despite the tensions inherent therein. Importantly, their unapologetic historical and cultural recovery of Africa emboldens my own efforts to interrogate what is African in Afro-British American literature. Moreover, their work, which rigorously reconstructs Africa and African ways of knowing through a variety of archival, primary, and secondary sources, is part of an ongoing project of imagining Africa through new—and necessarily African-centered—lenses.

Sterling Stuckey locates the origins of Afrocentrism in pre-eman- cipation slave culture by identifying the wealth of sources from which African-descended people were able to draw, the extent to which they were conscious of indigenous African practices and ways of knowing, and how early blacks used such knowledge to survive and resist their conditions under slavery. In particular, Stuckey’s sketches of African religious practices, rituals, and such cultural practices as dancing, drumming, placing of hands on the dead, singing, and shouting spirituals, burial rituals, and especially the symbolic and practical use of the circle and the ring are critical to understanding the seeds of an early black aesthetic—with both the forms and the rituals they accompany sharing equal importance. Hence, “for the slave, the retention of important features of the African cultural heritage provides a means by which the new reality [sacred and secular] could be interpreted” (24). Such an articulation of the powerful influence of African aesthetics in spiritual and secular contexts is critical to unbinding a black aesthetic that may reveal eighteenth-century black writers’ assumption of yet another level of agency and aesthetic self-sufficiency through their reconnection with Africa. Mechal Sobel’s exploration of the independent nature of relationships between blacks and whites in American culture troubles the space
of reciprocity. In so doing, she points to one of the dilemmas faced by attempts to reconnect with African ways of knowing—the vexing problem of how to capture cultural reciprocity and interdependency while acknowledging ideological and political extensions of power that are both facilitated and restricted by models of shared cultural influences. Sobel points to such coded assemblages as time, work, place, space, death, causation, spirituality, nature, naming, family society, and ancestors as evidence of how black and white colonial America attempted to construct a coherent world in the face of such irresolvable and volatile forces as slavery. Like the transplanted Africans of different ethnicities who invented African cultural and political identities to meet this and otherworldly needs, eighteenth-century Virginians (and by extension all of the British-American colonies) created a cultural identity shaped by three continents—Africa, Europe, and North America. The question of how Africa influenced the West suggests serious implications both for how we view black intertextuality and how we interpret Afro-British American appropriation of Anglo-British-American ways of knowing.

Michael Gomez utilizes sources from anthropological archives to runaway slave notices to expose “this basic dialect—the adoption of an identity forged by antithetical forces from both without and within the slave community—[as] itself emblematic of the contradictory mechanism by which the African American identity was shaped” (12). This way of viewing identity informs an understanding of early black literature as necessarily marked by deliberate confrontation with seemingly irresolvable and incompatible African, British, and African American structures of meaning. Such a perspective has important implications for the analysis of Afro-British American literature that begins long before the critic, editor, or amanuensis enters the conversation. Namely, early black writers maintained African cultural retentions by refusing to be fully acculturated by “coercive” forces from without, by subverting dominant culture through “reinterpretation” and constructing a composite of racialized African identity based on ethnic fragments borrowed from within. Importantly, these fragmented representations of Africa contradict totalizing narratives that distort and monolithically construct Africa. Thus, Gomez unpacks discrete and invaluable elements of an eighteenth-century black aesthetic.

Recovering Afro-British-American agency in Pan-African nationalism as one of the early manifestations of collective black consciousness, Craig Wilder calls attention to African-descended people as active agents in their own history. Rather than “conflate or dissect the histories of
people of African descent,” his work troubles static notions of universal African “collectivism” (3). Essentialism, neither celebrated nor vilified, is constructed as an inevitable consequence of the transatlantic slave trade. Confronting the catch-22 situation of blacks as simultaneously victims and culpable agents in their own enslavement, Wilder resists engaging history as the story of “what was happening to them” (3). Instead, he presents a historical narrative of Africans in the New World from the perspective of “what they were constructing for themselves” (4). As a result, he complicates simplistic views of the connection between black oppression and unity. More importantly, Wilder compels the scholar to confront dilemmas posed by reconnecting with African ways of knowing. Early blacks had to sift through shards and remnants of Africa, not merely as signs of an irretrievable universal or particular African identity, or as a purely black reaction to white victimization. Quite the contrary, blacks acknowledged and celebrated what slavery was unable to wholly divest them of—their African cultures—however fragmented.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: “The Dilemma of a Ghost: Early Black American Literature and Its Mournings/Moorings” analyzes the displacement of Africa in prevailing theories of African and black American literature, historicizes the dysfunctional relationship between Western- and African-centered theories, and outlines my integrative approach to reading an eighteenth-century black aesthetic back into black American literature. Drawing upon twentieth-century West African playwright Christina Ama Ata Aidoo’s The Dilemma of a Ghost (1964), this chapter argues that themes of loss, horror, reconciliation, restoration, and harmony are central to the literatures of the African Diaspora. Further, I explain how a syncretic blend of Senegalese poetics and an Igbo duality discourse are used as organizing structures for theorizing the dilemma of eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature.

Chapter 2: “What a Difference a ‘Way’ Makes: Wheatley’s Ways of Knowing” highlights the dilemma involved in attempting to rewrite both the spiritual and political histories upon which enslaved and nominally free African-descended people, especially African-descended women, have been constructed. Wheatley’s choice of form and subject matter reveals a complex matrix of signification and syncretization: the poet’s choice to take on—especially in the neoclassical and elegiac forms—the
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simultaneously sacred and profane suggests a very sophisticated understanding of the conventional history of the use and development of both forms, and in multiple contexts. This chapter’s reading of Wheatley’s “Niobe” poem reveals an eighteenth-century Afro-British American aesthetic steeped in spiritualization of the secular and secularization of the spiritual.

Chapter 3: “Kaleidoscopic Re-Memory in Equiano’s Interesting Narrative: Shifting the Lens to Replace the Landscapes” argues that the question of “What is ‘African’ in African American literature” emerges in the consideration of an imagined or invented Africa in the context of The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African written by Himself. I identify African ways of knowing that underlie Equiano’s vision and his relationship to the selves and the societies he inhabits: the concept of chi, its related Igbo concept of duality, mbari, and the complementary discursive mode of palava. Thus, I use the model of the Owerri Igbo mbari problem-solving structure as one way of theorizing the dilemmas that face Equiano’s attempts to use his life story to both reclaim an authentic Igbo heritage and recount a narrative of progress in the New World. In so doing, Equiano’s narrative defines an eighteenth-century black aesthetic that is both submerged in and emerges from the Dilemma of a Ghost.

Chapter 4: “Reading ‘Others’ in Eighteenth-Century Black American Literature: The Promise and Dilemma of New Ways of Reading” concludes this study by revisiting the dilemma of the unanswerability of the question of what is “African in African American.” Applying both the African and Afro-Western elements outlined in chapter 1 to brief readings of the works of Lucy Terry, James Albert Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Venture Smith, this chapter offers conclusions about the promise and dilemma of a culturally specific reinterpretation of Africa that recovers a nonstatic and dynamic African cultural and critical presence. Thus, in the spirit of Sankofa, The Black Aesthetic Unbound is pleased to carry forward what remains, that which has been both glaringly present and absent, Africa.

Rather than presenting new cultural connections between African American and African knowledge bases, I have tried to shed more light on those cultural connections which already exist on both sides of the Atlantic. Throughout this work I try to avoid uncritical assumptions that cultural traditions which are shared in common between Africans and African Americans are a given. I hope to have avoided a reliance on one way of understanding what “black is” or “ain’t.” I have also tried
to ground my interpretations in the literary and life texts of the eighteenth-century African-born (or descended) British-American writer, and where authentication was not possible, I have identified that as an area for future research.

Finally, I have tried to resituate black intertextuality within a mode of self-talk or intratextual dialogue in order to privilege, as does Henderson, “the other [within]” (119). My understanding of “other” is neither wholly grounded in, nor dependent on, Western philosophies of other/self dichotomies, regardless of their critical strengths. Rather, I have acknowledged useful aspects of the Western and African-centered interpretive strategies I appropriate, while remaining grounded in a duality discourse that both mourns and is moored to an Africanist *palava*. I have shown that using intratextuality or self-talk precipitates simultaneous ongoing and continuous dialogue between women, children, men, and between the ancestors in this world and the other. It is in this way that what we have come to understand as the black aesthetic may be unbound. And, as a result, perhaps this newfound aesthetic freedom, modeled in and emerging from an Africanist *palava* tradition, will allow sufficient room for an imaginative space through which African, American, and Afro-British American ancestors, living and dead, might pass.