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## To Belong or Not to Belong?: A Literature Review to Determine the Past, Current, and Future States of the African American Canon

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Although surveying literature on a particular research topic is often considered incidental because the process has become more simplified with advances in technology, conducting and crafting such a literature review are crucial steps to a researcher's/scholar's preparation for entrance into current discussions in his or her field. This process, as it provides an accounting of what has been published on a topic, acknowledges accredited scholars and researchers; therefore, because the literature review does not function as merely a list of resources with summaries (which is the sole function of databases), it conveys to the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established on a topic, as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

The following literature review is a critical appraisal of a common and longstanding debate in African American literary history: a disagreement over the primary role of African American Literature, how this role relates to America's culture and history, and the tenets by which the texts of the American canon have been scrutinized. This review suggests that much of what has been produced in the way of contemporary African American literature will receive very little scholarly discussion from either side of the debate because contemporary African American literature does not seem to function as propaganda, which is to some degree associated with both sides of the debate.

### **The Debate from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement**

Some critics believe that the primary function of Black literature is as propaganda that uplifts the Black community (Baraka, 1963; Du Bois, 1926; Joyce, 1987; Karenga, 1968; Neal, 1968; Wright, 1937). On the other hand, some writers and critics believe this is an unfair burden and artists should not be bound by a political agenda, and that art should be for art's sake<sup>1</sup> (Baldwin, 1949; Baldwin, 1951; Ellison, 1963-1964; Johnson, 1921; Locke, 1928).

Gerald Early 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:

[E]ach [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. (279)

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

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of propaganda does not suggest that the information tied to an agenda must be political in nature. In fact, it merely states that the ideas must be spread in a deliberate manner. Therefore, it can be argued that "creating art for art's sake" is in fact propagandizing the concept that there is African American literature that can be elevated to the degree of being called art.

regard to politics” (Gates and McKay, “Harlem Renaissance” 934). However, this freedom did not mean that these writers did not feel a racial obligation. For example, Langston Hughes felt it was the duty of the African American writer through his or her art form to change the aspirations within the Black community so that the Black 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” (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 (1267).

Hughes asserted that self-love and love of community must start within the writer and each must choose his or her 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 (Gates and McKay, “Harlem Renaissance”). In his essay, “The Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), Du Bois clarified the inextricable link between truth and beauty. He explained that it is the duty of all Blacks to create beauty that preserves the Black experience. The most important tool in reflecting beauty is truth. DuBois described truth as the “highest handmaiden of imagination” (757). He was adamant that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be...I stand in utter shamelessness and say whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy” (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. The polarized viewpoints of Du Bois and Hughes elucidate the longstanding debate concerning the role of African American literature.

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 (Gates and McKay, “Realism”). Three years earlier, Wright wrote the essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in which he discusses his frustration with the Black writers of the Renaissance. Wright 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” (1380). Wright was moving in the direction of the protest novel. He used 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” (1321)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that this is a common theme and a common character in contemporary African American literature. Gadney asserts that there are three important characteristics of contemporary African American art. (He labels this as Hip Hop. We would like to tentatively date Hip Hop’s existence from 1978, which marks the year of the release of the first official Hip Hop album, to 1999, the year that *XXL*, the leading Hip Hop magazine, says that Hip Hop died, noting the deaths of some of Hip Hop’s greatest rappers and the purchase of Black Entertainment Television by Viacom.) One of these characteristics deals with anger and rage. Iceberg Slim can be used to exemplify both periods, Black Arts and Hip Hop, because although popular with the Hip Hop community, his seminal text, *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1969), was written at the height of the Black Arts Movement. Later, it would be argued that these texts were not in fact reaching their target audience. Haki Madhubuti suggests that the move toward street fiction was falling upon deaf ears, arguing that African American literature had lost its readership to the street:

Critics such as Irving Howe believed Wright changed American culture with a single text. On the other hand, some found the protest novel and the use of urban realism restrictive in content and form (Gates and McKay, "Realism"), a criticism often associated with contemporary street fiction. This objection was exemplified by Ralph Ellison in his impetus to write *Invisible Man*. Ellison spoke of the protest novel as the "hardboiled" novel and believed "the need for another approach was unmistakable...there must be a possible fiction which, leaving sociology and case histories to the scientists, arrives at the truth about the human condition" (158). Ellison wanted a balance between social responsibility and attention to aesthetics and form.

During the **Black Arts Movement** (1960-1975), many writers emphasized literature as a tool for social empowerment. In fact, the Black Arts Movement paralleled and often worked together with the social movements of the 1960s to bring about political reform (Gates and McKay, "Black Arts"). Larry Neal defined the Movement as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (702).

In the opening paragraph of the "The Black Arts Movement," Neal 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 (702). Neal argues that performing this task requires a "radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic," which includes "a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (702). Furthermore, he believed it was impossible to write anything meaningful within the decaying structure of the Western aesthetic and called for a Black aesthetic. The Black aesthetic he referred to believed an artist's aesthetics and ethics were one and the idea of considering the two as separate was a symptom of Western society's dying culture. It is not surprising that Neal viewed the concept of art for art's sake—or art without a social function—as the decadent attitude of Western society. However, he was also dissatisfied with protest literature, believing that it was an appeal to White morality.

Additionally, Neal took a clear stand in rejecting the Harlem Renaissance as "a failure" (711). He went so far as to assert that questions such as "What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?" had never been asked by previous intellectuals (711), although issues of truth were central concepts in essays by Du Bois during the Harlem Renaissance as well as Baldwin and Wright during the era of Realism and Modernism.

Later, Neal stated, the Renaissance "failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of the community, to become its voice and spirit" (711). Nevertheless, Phillip Harper argues 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 offers as rebuttal to Neal's argument a passage in which Alain Locke is championing new poets that "stopped speaking for

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Street culture is a culture of containment. Most young people do not realize that it all too often leads to a "dead end." "Street culture," as I am using the term, is a counterforce to movement culture. Street culture in contemporary urban reality is synonymous with survival at all costs. This world view is mostly negative, because it demands constant adjustment to circumstances that are often far beyond young people's control or understanding, such as economics, education, housing, employment, nutrition, law, and so forth. (73)

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 466).

In the introduction to *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle, Jr., 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 considered the perspective of the serious artist as new. The serious artist knew he was at war with society, spoke honestly, and, unlike artists of the past, did not take up the task of trying to convert the White audience. According to Gayle, the new artist must point out the extent to which the Black community was controlled by American society in order to begin the process of de-Americanization.

He 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 an 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” (719). Therefore, Gayle viewed the Black aesthetic as a corrective in helping the Black community out of “the polluted mainstream of Americanism” (719). He also looked to Black critics to create critical methodologies that evaluated work from the perspective of transforming the life of the individual Black man. However, Gayle was clear that he did not have the authority to speak for others; it was the right of the individual to define function of Black artists and his or her 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 (Gates and McKay, “Black Arts Movement”). These are the two forms that Amiri Baraka is most known for producing. Harper views Baraka’s 1969 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. (1883)

Harper views 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” (462).

Furthermore, Baraka 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” (63). Also, Baraka implies that the Negro bourgeois learned to use words for social strength at the price of disassociating from Black culture. The idea is implied in the former essay but directly stated in the next. In his 1963 essay, “Enter the Middle

Class,” Baraka complains that previous Negro literature had no emotional concern for the Black community. He argues,

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. (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’” (695).

In his essay “Revolutionary Theatre,” Baraka 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” (1899)). Baraka argues that Revolutionary Theatre will see through the eyes of the victims in order to show them their own strength and also to empower them; victims will be changed to heroes. In other words, Baraka emphasizes an art with the function of empowering the Black masses.

In the essay “*Black Poems, Poseurs and Power*,” Nikki Giovanni 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” (Gates and McKay, “Nikki Giovanni,” 1982). Furthermore, Giovanni was 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. (714)

Giovanni 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 a difference between Black arts ideology and what is being practiced. A collective unity is being sacrificed for individual gain. Some individual artists may be more concerned with individual gain than producing work that is responsive to the needs of the Black community.

As the 1970s ended, some critics continued their rejection of the political framework associated with several writers of the early years of the Black Arts movement, particularly Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal. Instead, these writers and critics began relying more heavily on form and structure for both creativity and critical discussions of the African American community. Reginald Martin describes this movement as basing its “very existence on motivating human

beings to be morally better” (3). Martin suggests that knowledge of a particular experience becomes essential in disclosing the wrongs of a society and, in accord with Addison Gayle in *The Black Aesthetic*, art should function for human expression.

### **Balancing Both Sides: The Black Arts Movement to Hip Hop Literature**

The civil rights movement and the frustration with its slow progress were the primary influences of content during the Black Arts Movement. Early argues that the literature of this movement 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 (Gates and McKay, “Black Arts”). Drama<sup>3</sup> was commonly used as a vehicle to reach the Black masses. The product was literature “blazingly simple in language and virtually impossible to misunderstand” (Gates and McKay, “Black Arts” 1840). Some critics complained that the texts produced were too didactic or oversimplified because of the focus on “black mass communication” (Gates and McKay, “Black Arts” 1839). Some literary critics debated whether it was “too oriented toward protests and propaganda at the expense of structure and form” (Temple 766). 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. This argument could also explain the limited acceptance of street fiction to the African American canon.

For example, Iceberg Slim, in trying to express the rich, dramatic Black culture, must first write in the language of these people, but in order to get Americans to understand this culture he must translate what he has written. This dual voice could detract from the coherence of narrative, making the texts less aesthetically valuable. However, because his texts decenter the meaning of *Blackness* from the racially oppressive American society and posit it within the realm of the oppressed, his texts do function as vehicle of protest. Slim’s texts force American society to read his texts from a marginal position, where academics and critics are mere voyeurs to Black culture versus being the targeted audience. For example, he offers obligatory and appeasable translations and explanations; controlling the meaning in his text will control how America sees *Blackness*. Reflecting on Ellison’s desire for balance, Slim’s narrative voice can be seen as socially responsible as well as innovative. For Ellison in *Invisible Man*, the innovation was in controlling how Black Americans view other Americans and how this perspective creates the invisibility of Black Americans. Similarly but in the reverse, much of contemporary literature and criticism attempts, like Slim, to control how Americans view the Black community, marking the turn from the Black Arts movement to the New Hip Hop movement..

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<sup>3</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” argues, “The Negro’s universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is *drama*. His very words are actions words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile” (61, emphasis added). Therefore, the African American writer employs the standard English language as a way of expressing his or her identity, but in so doing the language often has to be reinterpreted in order to represent the drama that surrounds his or her existence. Accordingly, although Early is using the term “drama” here to refer to the genre, as it is used here it could also reference the idea of conflict that is associated with oppression.

This phenomenon of contemporary African American literature (for a lack of a label, we will use Gadney's descriptor and refer to it as Hip Hop Literature) is described by bell hooks thus:

One mark of oppression was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could be better, less threatening servants. An effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered around white control of the black gaze. Black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the white they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see. To be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality. (35)

Through art, like Slim, these writers attempt to reverse the power dynamic of the gaze in American society.

### **Canonical Implications**

Central to this debate and the role African American literature will play in the African American community as well as the larger American society is the transmission of the canon, which largely takes place in the college classroom (Gates & McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*). The most popular anthology used in teaching African American Literature is *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (Hong; Marable; "New Anthology"; and Mason). *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology* is arguably close to or equally as popular due to its Black aesthetic framework (Eichelberger; Hong; Hubbard; and Temple).

*Norton's* first edition was released in 1997 after ten years of publicity (Eichelberger). Houghton Mifflin released *Call and Response* several months later, though it was arguably overshadowed due to *Norton's* earlier arrival (Eichelberger). While both books are comprehensive texts for the teaching of African American Literature, they offer two different frameworks. Dolan Hubbard 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. (267, original emphasis)

*Norton's* editors, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie McKay, used a framework closely aligned to the Western aesthetics (Hubbard); Jerry Ward, co-editor of *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*, describes it as preserving "a certain kind of status quo" (Qtd. in Hong, 130). 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). 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” (Hill & Bell xxxiii, our emphasis).

However, the Black aesthetic framework does produce slanted viewpoints in *Call and Response*. Some introductions 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). 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.” 1467). This implies that he sold his culture and its literary tradition for popularity and success in the mainstream. The author also states, “Sometimes his theoretical intelligence supersedes his common sense” (“Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” 1467); the statement is presented on the page before his article begins. This may undermine Gate’s authority or at least skew a student’s impression.

Review of the literature could not locate any substantive, qualitative social science studies defining the essential elements of African American Literature. Research in this area often focuses on canonization and hermeneutical analysis of an individual text or groups of texts. This canonization process is not limited to African American literature; instead, it is an essential part of the study of literature within academia, particularly American institutions.

In American institutions of higher education and K-12, students are introduced to the “classics.” However, often texts that seem to qualify as classic go unrecognized. Toni Morrison, in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” recognizes this dilemma when she writes,

There is something called American literature that, according to conventional wisdom, is certainly not Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature, or Asian-American literature, or Native American, or...it is somehow separate from them and they from it, and in spite of the efforts of recent literary histories, restructured curricula, and anthologies, this separate confinement, be it breached or endorsed, is the subject of a large part of these debates. (16)

Looking at the canonical debate represents the latest trends in African American literary studies. The argument seems to be that just as certain books are canonized, certain ways of discussing them become canonical. Accordingly, criticism has to participate within the boundaries of current beliefs and criticism (i.e. this literature review).

Therefore, this literature review attempts to not only reveal the method African American scholars and critics use to judge an African American text’s merits, but also strives to demonstrate how the field of African American literary review is relevant to marginal discussions related to race, gender, sex, and class. One discovery is that although scholarly in its scope, African American criticism is closely linked to the essay style of cultural critics. Accordingly, hooks quotes the definition provided by Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and The Politics of Cultural Studies*: “cultural studies combines theory and practice in order to affirm and demonstrate pedagogical practices engaged in creating

a new language, rupturing disciplinary boundaries, decentering authority, and rewriting the institutional and discursive borderlands in which politics becomes a condition for reasserting relationship between agency, power, and struggle” (as cited in hooks, 4). Critics and scholars of African American literature must choose to recognize and discuss how many African American texts are afforded only marginal recognition, which could explain why the early debates present only vague definitions of African American literature. One conclusion that seems to cross both sides of the debate is that African American literature is not American literature because it does not fit snugly into the canonical texts of American ideologies. Terry Eagleton warns, “The unquestioned ‘great tradition’ of the ‘national literature’ has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time” (10).

In other words, a lot of African American literature has not been canonized, because it is not deemed consequential because the canon supposedly reflects the norms of the society from which it emanates, and even many academics who acknowledge reading non-canonical African American literature are left regarding this literature as mere folly. In essence, it is then often suggested that canonization of any sort propagates the ideals and norms of its societal power structure at any given time. The power structure is all too often quite narrowly limited to maintain a pretentious but necessary elitism that gives a sense of order in society.

In trying to place African American literature within the current framework of American literary studies, academia has primarily chosen texts that only relate to the struggles African Americans have had with becoming fully actualized Americans. This oversight has been the case with street fiction. These texts, if reviewed at all, have often been labeled as criminal literature, and the study of them has been limited to such discourse. In addition to this discussion, street fiction offers rhetoric that limits the means by which this acquisition can be achieved and has offered counter rhetoric questioning if becoming a fully actualized American is a productive goal, all while reconstructing a new lens by which African American critics and scholars view and define Blackness. Accordingly in *Dick, Jane, and American Literature: Fighting with Canons*, Morris posits that, “They [canons of literature] don’t invite rethinking. It seems no accident that *canon* sounds so much like *cannot*” (2, original emphasis). In other words, the very nature of the canon resists any real critical rethinking within traditional literature programs because they have established a set of rules that keeps certain texts in, while simultaneously keeping the other texts out.

However, the literature review reveals that this set of rules is debatable and not so well-established. It can also be discerned, particularly in critiques of those critics who favor the concept of a literature that propagandizes, that the African American canon also shoots down any proposal wherein (1) the rhetoric is a formidable opponent to the canonical texts and (2) whose very existence implies that rules were made to be challenged as well as broken. In the same way, Virginia Woolf argues that the mass—the leaders—utilizes canonization to propagandize, brainwash, and further subjugate the masses—the followers. Inevitably, not only does academia reject more contemporary street fiction, but critics outside of this elite group who have been allowed to cross over also reject such texts. These individuals do not seek to change the institution, but they seek to find acceptance within the institution, which explains the absence of such discussions in the review of literature.

These African Americans are referred to by bell hooks as *gatekeepers*. She declares that these African Americans “have for the most part become skilled at repressing our rage” (hooks 12), referencing rage as Black Americans’ violent internal or external response to “racial apartheid” in America. According to hooks, “In the nineties it is not just white folks who let black folks know they do not want to hear our rage, it is also the voices of the cautious upper-class black academic gatekeepers who assure us that our rage has no place” (12). Therefore, a text, scholarly or academic, that is popular with the Black masses may not be popular with White America.

As a result, all writers who can find representation or acceptance within this society and who can participate within the accepted mode of theory can be considered canonical. However, many writers are marginalized into subcategories as appendages to the canon. Furthermore, as the literature review clearly suggests, the African American anthologies are also quite limited in their representation of African American literature because the critics and scholars have either created definitions that are too limited or these definitions are too broad based on the larger society and not the needs of the smaller community.

According to bell hooks, “Among black intellectuals, critical thinkers, writers, and academics there is clearly an elite group...accorded status by the degree to which an individual garners the regard and recognition of a powerful white public...determining who should speak where and when, what needs to be written when and by whom...” (68). Therefore, not only will seemingly subversive texts, those which do not share or respond to American relevant ideologies, not reach crossover success and become a part of America’s literary heritage, but they will also find little representation in African American literary heritage.

Rather than write in response to the conformists of both literary heritages, contemporary African American writers use these contradictions to validate a new norm, “creating a new language, rupturing disciplinary boundaries, decentering authority, and rewriting the institutional and discursive borderlands” (as cited in hooks, 1996, p. 4). Additionally, many canonical writers write in response to the canon because the established canon is all they are allowed to know; therefore, they have always expanded upon or detracted from the basic but not-so-clearly-defined tenets. This is termed by bell hooks (1994) “border crossing” (15). She remarks that in the past border crossing has been “evoked simply as a masturbatory mental exercise that condones the movement of the insurgent intellectual mind across new frontiers...or become the justification for movements from the center into the margin that merely mimic in a new way old patterns of cultural imperialism and colonialism” (5). However, contemporary African American writers do not seek inclusion and focus primarily on literature that deliberately articulates the Black experience as an experience in its own right disregarding the larger society.

Therefore, based on the review of literature, five 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.

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