Introduction
African American Literature in Transition, 1980–1990

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December 8, 1987. James Baldwin, New York City's most celebrated Black writer, is being laid to rest in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Harlem. African drummers beat out a raucous, celebratory rhythm as mourners enter the church. Among them are Gordon Parks, the *Life* photographer and children's novelist; Amiri Baraka, the architect of the Black Arts Movement; Maya Angelou, the celebrated memoirist and poet; and Toni Morrison, the author of a recently published novel that many consider to be the greatest in the entire American tradition, and soon to be the first African American recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature. These latter three are, in three distinct ways, the heirs to Baldwin, his slightly younger literary siblings who would carry something of his legacy beyond his untimely death.

In fact, Maya Angelou described Baldwin in her eulogy that day as her "friend and brother," adding that, for Black women, "brothers are hard to come by, and are as necessary as air and as precious as love." Angelou recalls the moment when Baldwin introduced her to his mother; he said, "Just what you don't need, another daughter, but here she is."[1] Baraka, too, in his eulogy says, "As man, he was my friend, my older brother he would joke, not really joking."[2] Morrison's eulogy is written in the second person, directed toward Baldwin himself, giving it a familiarity that also evokes kinship. Although she does not make the sibling analogy explicit, she speaks to him as a younger sibling would:

> I was always a bit better behaved around you, smarter, more capable, wanting to be worth the love you lavished, and wanting to be steady enough to witness the pain you had witnessed and were tough enough to bear while it broke your heart, wanting to be generous enough to join your smile with one of my own, and reckless enough to jump on in that laugh you laughed.[3]

Though all of these tributes are personal, even familial, all three acknowledge a debt to Baldwin's art. Angelou credits him with giving her the

courage to write *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Baraka praises his "word, arranged as art, sparkling and gesturing from the page."[4] Morrison praises Baldwin for bringing her three gifts: courage, tenderness, and "a language to dwell in."[5]

Without question, James Baldwin was the most prominent African American writer of the late 1950s and especially early 1960s, the watershed years of the Civil Rights Movement. He counted as his friends the great assassinated Black leaders Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, who once told him, "I'm the warrior of this revolution and you're the poet."[6] Baldwin brought a fiery passion to his work, not all of which was recognizably connected to the revolution that was the Civil Rights Movement. His first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) was a *bildungsroman* with primary concerns about family relationships in the context of the Black Pentecostal church. His second novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956) was about the consequences of not being courageous enough to love, but it surprised many readers by focusing on a bisexual white protagonist struggling to accept his sexuality in Paris rather than on the Black characters who populate *Go Tell It*. His third novel *Another Country* (1962) also dealt with struggling bisexual characters and interracial romantic relationships in bohemian Greenwich Village. Baldwin was not in any way predictable, or a reliable "spokesman," which is a label many tried to affix to him, and which is a role he sometimes assumed with gusto.

Perhaps this unpredictability – what some would call experimental artistry and passionate honesty – accounts for the fact that Baldwin, at the time of his death in 1987, was not the literary giant he had been two decades earlier. The funeral was a massive celebration, but Baldwin's work after the mid-1960s was either savagely reviewed, neglected by many readers, or both. This later work has been resurrected and appreciated in the twenty-first century, but Baldwin died knowing that, in terms of fame and popularity, his heyday was long behind him. Baldwin, a true artist, didn't care too much for fame and popularity, but he always had something to say, and he of course wanted people to listen. It is clear that critics and readers who hung on his every word through about 1963 had moved on to the works of many, many other African American writers by the 1980s, three of whom delivered his eulogy.

But those three younger siblings were still part of Baldwin's generation, perhaps not fully aware of the budding work of the next. Soon after Baldwin's funeral, a young scholar-novelist named Trey Ellis published a short essay in *Callaloo*, "The New Black Aesthetic" (1989), that would prove to be influential for the way it captured an emerging late 1980s

zeitgeist and anticipated future trends. Ellis begins this essay with an epigraph quotation from Baldwin, misattributed to the late author's collected essays, *The Price of the Ticket*. The quotation is actually from Baldwin's celebrated story "Sonny's Blues" (1957), from the story's lyrical conclusion in which the narrator tries to get at the crux of what constitutes the blues, "the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph" which "is never new" and which reaches "a new depth in every generation."[7] Ellis builds on Baldwin's notion that the urge to retell and revise the African American story (or song) both has roots in previous generations and perpetually demands new means of expression. This homage to the recently deceased Baldwin is at once an acknowledgment of his influence and a record of the way Black artists at the time were moving on in surprising directions. The fact that the quotation is misattributed might be interpreted as an indication that young artists were still aware of Baldwin's influence, but that they weren't paying especially close attention.

Baldwin knew an enormous amount about a lot of subjects. He deeply understood classic film, jazz and blues music, global history, American history, literature, religion, visual art . . . the list goes on and on, and it all fed into his complex and ever-evolving aesthetic. It's safe to say, though, that he didn't know anywhere near as much about the artistic productions Ellis exhibits and appreciates in "The New Black Aesthetic." The essay begins with a brief interview with the filmmaker Spike Lee, who pointedly rebrands his films "joints," perhaps as a warning to critics not to lump his work together with mainstream Hollywood fare. The essay moves quickly to an encounter the author has with a band called Fishbone that (amidst other antics) "tosses dead fish onto its audience" and that Ellis describes expansively as "black West Coast Ska/punk/funkers."[8] The aesthetic as he describes it is daring, combinatory, willing to consider the intersections of white and Black culture (or as he summarizes it, he and his cohort are willing to "admit liking both Jim and Toni Morrison").[9] In what might be a subtle dig at Baldwin and his generation, or even more broadly at the Black aesthetic that evolved from the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s through the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s, he says, "I now know that I'm not the only black person who sees the black aesthetic as much more than just Africa and jazz."[10] He more firmly roots the New Black Aesthetic in "a few Seventies pioneers" who "shamelessly borrow[] and reassemble[] across both race and class lines."[11] The names that start to populate this list include poet and novelist Ishmael Reed, George Clinton (the leader of the otherworldly, conceptual art-funk band Parliament/

Funkadelic), and comedian Richard Pryor, but Ellis points out the influence of white cultural expression on the New Black Aesthetic, too. He describes his generation as "cultural mulattoes" that embrace "supersophisticated black art that either expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness."[12]

Ellis is well aware of what Baldwin accomplished in the 1950s and 1960s, and what Baraka accomplished in the 1960s and 1970s, but he is also eager to see those accomplishments as part of a discernible past era of Black cultural expression, not the present or the future, both of which would be dominated by various forms on the margins of traditional literature, including graffiti, rap lyrics, and spoken word poetry. Again, it's fair to say that Baldwin, fluent in French and English and willing in a late-career essay to defend Black English as a language, might have felt, if he had read this essay, that Ellis was speaking another language altogether. Ellis's frame of reference was outside of Baldwin's ken.

Or, at least, some of it was. Ellis locates a possible beginning of the New Black Aesthetic in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977),[13] and name checks some of the most celebrated literary writers of the decade in the conventional sense of the word "literary," including John Edgar Wideman, Rita Dove, August Wilson, and Alice Walker (though somewhat dismissively in that last case). He also persistently calls the reader's attention to Spike Lee's joints, to stand-up comedians, and to many musical artists in order to push outward from the accepted core of what constitutes lasting cultural production worthy of critical attention: that is, literature. He is willing both to concede the importance of work that was done during the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist eras and to use them as a launching pad to consider rap, avant-garde performance art, or the multiple, daring artistic efforts of the playwright George C. Wolfe as equally worthy of critical attention.

Baldwin's premature death and Ellis's articulation of a New Black Aesthetic may not be the only way to locate the crux of African American literature in transition in the 1980s, but it certainly highlights some changes that clearly took place during the decade. In 1980, rap, for all intents and purposes, didn't exist in the minds of 99 percent of Americans. By 1990 it was a household word already evolving into myriad subgenres, and it would have been impossible to ignore it as a major cultural force. Before 1980, three Black writers had won Pulitzer Prizes in imaginative literature (fiction, drama, and poetry) in the entire history of the award since its inception in 1917. By 1990, six additional Pulitzers were awarded to Black writers in those domains, with August Wilson winning twice.[14] Morrison's career was about to be grandly recognized with the Nobel

Prize in Literature, the first time this prestigious award was given to an African American writer. A film adaptation of one of the decade's most celebrated novels, *The Color Purple* (1982) was nominated for an Academy Award for best picture (a first for a film with an African American producer, Quincy Jones) and its main and supporting actresses, Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey, were nominated for Oscars in their categories. In short, it was a decade in which African American literary production was starting to get the long overdue attention it deserved, but also a decade in which African American artists were emboldened to explore new territory, mainstream recognition be damned. The juxtaposition of Baldwin's funeral and Ellis's essay represents not a mere passing of the torch from the old guard to the avant-garde. Rather, the old guard was flourishing, and younger artists were also getting attention on new frontiers. In an unprecedented way, the 1980s marked an era when Black writers were sought out and recognized, to the point that their work dominated the critical conversation.

To locate the transitional moment of the 1980s at the moment of Baldwin's death and Ellis's essay might be to overlook the key shift in the African American literary tradition: that is, the rise to prominence of Black women writers. Before the 1980s, it's not as though Black women had not established themselves in the canon, from Phillis Wheatley to Harriet Jacobs to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to Nella Larsen to Zora Neale Hurston to Ann Petry to Gwendolyn Brooks to Lorraine Hansberry to Sonia Sanchez to Gayl Jones, and so on; the list of familiar, important names is lengthy. Yet before the 1980s there had never been a cluster of Black female literary stars who outshone their male counterparts in the way they did during this transformational decade. Literary historians who established the importance of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement did not necessarily exclude the great women authors associated with those periods, but men received the top billing. Indeed, one of the most important interventions in terms of redefining the canon in the 1980s was Alice Walker's tireless, successful efforts to get Hurston back into print and into the curriculum of required reading. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a half-century old, became a bestseller in the 1980s as the work of neglected Black women writers from the past was exhumed and reassessed.

This effort would not have been as successful if Walker were not as celebrated and established as she had become in the 1980s. Like Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Maya Angelou, and many others, Walker's work gained notoriety in the 1970s, but she truly hit her stride in the 1980s. These women widened the circle and made room for

younger Black women writers like Gloria Naylor, Rita Dove, Harryette Mullen, and Suzan-Lori Parks to establish themselves and continue the tradition beyond the 1980s into a bright future in which Black women writers would never be overlooked again in ways that had marginalized them historically. The nightstands of anyone hoping to keep up with the most important titles of the 1980s nearly collapsed under the weight of these essential works: *The Cancer Journals* (Lorde, 1980), *The Heart of a Woman* (Angelou, 1981), *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982), *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1982), *Thomas and Beulah* (Dove, 1986), and *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987). I'm not sure whether this era has ever been called another "renaissance" within the African American literary tradition, nor that it needs such a title for its significance to be recognized, but this was clearly a decade of great and unprecedented significance for Black women writers. The confidence they inspired in future generations cannot be underestimated.

All of these achievements were leading toward the long-overdue awarding of a Nobel Prize to an African American writer, which Morrison would claim in 1993. When Ellison won the much more modest National Book Award a half-century earlier for *Invisible Man* (1952), he titled his acceptance speech "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion." The occasion was only startling because Black writers had been so often overlooked, even shut out from publishing opportunities. This situation was clearly changing in the 1980s, even after writers associated with the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s declared that they did not give a damn about the awards and opportunities for widespread distribution offered by the white literary establishment. The tightrope that Black writers found themselves precariously balanced on in the 1980s had something to do with the rise of a broader celebrity culture in which African Americans played starring roles. On the silver screen, Eddie Murphy, Morgan Freeman, and Denzel Washington joined Whoopi Goldberg as some of the biggest names in the business. Spike Lee's work, though famously snubbed by the Academy, was gaining cultural traction and critical accolades by the end of the decade, paving the way for a director like John Singleton to become the first Black director (and youngest nominee ever) to win an Oscar in 1991. On the small screen, it was Bill Cosby's decade: *The Cosby Show* was the top-rated show on television for five years running in the 1980s. Oprah Winfrey hosted the top daytime talk show, and Arsenio Hall was the first Black host of a widely broadcast late-night comedy show. Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Prince were completely dominant musical acts in the MTV era, in their own

firmament, and rap, once concentrated in a few key urban neighborhoods, was firmly on the general populace's radar as the decade closed out. Jesse Jackson made a serious bid for president in both the 1984 and 1988 elections. With all of this attention being given to Black public figures, Black writers had to contend with a few factors: the aforementioned recognition from prestigious societies that handed out awards and grants, the tradition that loudly insisted in the 1960s and 1970s that political action was a necessary, even essential component of imaginative literature, and the new generation that found traditional literary forms in general a little ho-hum.

All of this, as I've suggested, gave Black writers in the 1980s plenty of options, but not necessarily the mandate to make tough choices. The fulfillment of Langston Hughes's famous wish at the end of his 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" had finally come to pass: Black writers could worry less about their audience's expectations and to follow their own intuition, to feel "free within themselves" rather than beholden to a fickle and stingy readership. The biggest problem for Black writers in the 1980s might have been the struggle to get time at the mic. Gloria Naylor's extraordinary novel *Mama Day* (1988), for instance, would probably have gotten much more attention if Morrison's *Beloved* hadn't been the book everyone was reading at that moment.

And "everyone" is barely an exaggeration. The lasting cultural importance of Morrison's masterpiece is profound, and the sensation it caused in the academy upon its publication was nearly unprecedented. Starting in the late 1980s and running through the next decade, the number of articles, monographs, essay collections, and dissertations written about Morrison's work quickly dwarfed that of any other African American writer in history. The challenge was not to let the focus on this phenomenal writer fully obscure the others who were also producing noteworthy work. Morrison's career, after all, began with her efforts to call attention to underrecognized Black writers in the 1970s. Her intent was never to obscure her peers and predecessors with her brilliance. The desired effect was that her rising tide would lift all boats.

The 1980s might be considered a decade of widespread awakening when it comes to African American literature. Not only did sensitive readers have to be attuned to the New Black Aesthetic outlined by Ellis and the high level of critical attention being paid to the decade's literary superstars like Walker, Morrison, Wideman, Dove, and Wilson, but also to consider representatives of traditions that were evolving in the margins. There was an explosion of important writing in the Anglophone Caribbean, for

instance, and a number of these writers – Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff, and Derek Walcott, to name a celebrated few – relocated to the United States, encouraging American critics to reckon with the global diasporic traditions that connect to the African American tradition. The Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Wole Soyinka in 1986 elevated attention paid to African writers in English and American readers who might have only read Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) or works by white South African writers like Athol Fugard, Nadine Gordimer, and J. M. Coetzee[15] developed an overdue curiosity about a previously unseen body of literature.

The chapters that comprise this volume might be understood to represent tradition, innovation, and exploration. The chapters in Part I focus on a topic that was hot in 1980s literary circles: the expanding canon. These chapters honor and explore the major African American authors who left their imprint on the decade, but also invite us to consider the reasons behind their merit. These great Black writers were exploring new contexts for their work, including history, personal history, gender identity, sexuality, and incarceration. The chapters in Part II consider some of the facets of the new aesthetic Ellis and others identify, bringing Hip-Hop, satire, and postmodern pastiche into the conversation. The chapters in Part III look to the confluence of transnational (especially Caribbean) writing with the rapidly evolving African American tradition. The chapters in this third section don't claim to be exhaustive with regard to the many nuances of growth and change in the tradition during this fertile decade, but our hope is that they reflect key trends that serve to capture the essence of this critical moment in African American literary history.

Notes

1. Maya Angelou, "My Brother Jimmy Baldwin," *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 1987. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-12-20-bk-29958-story.html. (last accessed July 7, 2022).
2. Amiri Baraka, "James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered; We Carry Him as Us," *The New York Times*, December 20, 1987, section 7, p. 27. https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/20/books/james-baldwin-his-voice-remembered.html?searchResultPosition=4. (last accessed July 7, 2022).
3. Toni Morrison, "James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered; Life in His Language," *The New York Times*, December 20, 1987, section 7, p. 27. https://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/20/books/james-baldwin-his-voice-remembered-life-in-his-language.html?searchResultPosition=1. (last accessed July 7, 2022).
4. Baraka, 27.
5. Morrison, 27.

6. James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (University of California Press, 1990; 2021), 206.
7. James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 140.
8. Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* no. 38 (Winter 1989), 233.
9. Ibid., 234.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 235, 237.
13. Another detail Ellis unfortunately gets wrong as he identifies the novel's publication date as 1978.
14. Pulitzer Prizes awarded to African American writers in the 1980s: Poetry, Rita Dove, 1987; fiction, Alice Walker, 1983; Toni Morrison, 1988; drama, Charles Fuller, 1982; August Wilson, 1987, 1990.
15. It is noteworthy that both Gordimer and Coetzee also won the Nobel Prize in Literature.