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978-1-107-05983-2 - The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature

Edited by Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS LITERATURE

*The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* brings together leading scholars to examine the significant traditions, genres, and themes of civil rights literature. While civil rights scholarship has typically focused on documentary rather than creative writing, and political rather than cultural history, this *Companion* addresses the gap and provides university students with a vast introduction to an impressive range of authors, including Richard Wright, Lorraine Hansberry, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Morrison. Accessible to undergraduates and academics alike, this *Companion* surveys the critical landscape of a rapidly growing field and lays the foundation for future studies.

Julie Buckner Armstrong is professor of English at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg. She is the author of *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* and editor of *The Civil Rights Reader: American Literature from Jim Crow to Reconciliation*. Armstrong has also contributed to such journals as *African American Review*, *Mississippi Quarterly*, *MELUS*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Flannery O'Connor Review*, and *Georgia Historical Quarterly*.

*A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.*

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JULIE BUCKNER ARMSTRONG

University of South Florida St. Petersburg



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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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JULIE BUCKNER ARMSTRONG is professor of English at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, where she teaches African American, American, and women's literatures. She is the author of *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (2011), editor of *The Civil Rights Reader: American Literature from Jim Crow to Reconciliation* (2009), and co-editor, with Susan Hult Edwards, Houston Roberson, and Rhonda Williams, of *Teaching the American Civil Rights Movement: Freedom's Bittersweet Song* (2002).

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JEFFREY LAMAR COLEMAN teaches American literature at St. Mary's College of Maryland. He is editor of *Words of Protest, Words of Freedom: Poetry of the American Civil Rights Movement and Era* (2012) and author of *Spirits Distilled: Poems* (2006). Coleman is a founding associate editor and poetry editor for *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies*; he is currently completing a manuscript of poems titled *Peace, Love & Soul* and a chapter on African American protest music for *The Black Intellectual Tradition in the Twentieth Century*.

BARBARA MCCASKILL is associate professor of English and co-director of the Civil Rights Digital Library at the University of Georgia. She has co-edited two collections of essays about nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American literature and culture, and she has edited the 1860 narrative of black abolitionists

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William and Ellen Craft. Her book about the couple is titled *Love, Liberation, and Escaping Slavery: William and Ellen Craft in Cultural Memory* (2014).

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SHARON MONTEITH is professor of American Studies at the University of Nottingham and was a Rockefeller Humanities Fellow at the University of Memphis. Her publications include *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Southern Fiction* (2000); *American Culture in the 1960s* (2008); *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* with Peter Ling (1999/2004); *South to a New Place: Region, Literature and Culture*, with Suzanne Jones (2002); *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Media*, with Allison Graham (2011); *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South* (2013); and *SNCC's Stories: Narrative Culture and the Southern Freedom Struggle of the 1960s* (2014), as well as articles and essays on interdisciplinary southern studies.

BRIAN NORMAN is associate professor of English at Loyola University Maryland, where he also founded the program in African and African American Studies. He specializes in twentieth-century American and African American literature and their relationships to social movements. He is the author of *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature* (2013), *Neo-Segregation Narratives: Jim Crow in Post-Civil Rights American Literature* (2010), and *The American Protest Essay and National Belonging* (2007). He is also co-editor of *Representing Segregation* (2010) and is currently working on a book about collaboration in American literature and culture.

ROBERT J. PATTERSON is associate professor of English and director of the African American Studies Program at Georgetown University. His first book, *Exodus Politics: Civil Rights and Leadership in African American Literature and Culture* (2013), reflects his research and teaching interests in African American studies, literature, civil rights historiography, and black religious studies. Patterson has published articles in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Black Camera*, *Religion and Literature*, and the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*; he also co-edited a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Black Literature, Black Leadership*. He is currently working on a second book, *Between Resistance and Reinscription: Black Popular Culture and the Intimacy of Politics*.

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## CHRONOLOGY

The following chronology of publication dates and major events situates this volume's literary discussions within a broadly defined civil rights history. The one-hundred-fifty-year time span (1863–2013) reflects changing ideas of freedom, equality, and citizenship from slavery's end until just before the book went to press. Only a few literary works appear here; for a lengthier list, see the Guide to Further Reading.

- 1863 On January 1, Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves from the states that had seceded from the Union; many do not receive the news until the Civil War's end in 1865.
- 1865 Post-Civil War Reconstruction begins; Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlaws slavery; the first Ku Klux Klan is formed in Pulaski, Tennessee; former Confederate states establish Black Codes (laws that proscribe African American public behavior) to begin the "Jim Crow" era.
- 1866 The first Civil Rights Act counters Black Codes.
- 1868 The Fourteenth Amendment grants citizenship and "equal protection" under the law to all citizens, including former slaves.
- 1870 The Fifteenth Amendment protects African American men's right to vote.
- 1871 The Civil Rights Act or "Ku Klux Klan Act" temporarily suspends Klan activities.
- 1875 The Civil Rights Act of 1875 prohibits discrimination in public transportation, accommodations, and jury selection.

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- 1877 The Compromise of 1877 signals Reconstruction's end; federal troops leave the South.
- 1892 Tuskegee Institute (now University) records a record number of lynchings at 230; later, historians will refer to this year as the "nadir" of race relations: Frances E. W. Harper publishes *Iola Leroy*, a novel that describes black life before and after the Civil War.
- 1896 In the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court institutionalizes racial segregation by allowing for "separate but equal" public facilities; the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) is formed.
- 1901 Charles Chesnutt publishes *The Marrow of Tradition*, based upon massive white-on-black violence in Wilmington, North Carolina, during 1898.
- 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*, which proclaims, "the problem of the Twentieth century is the problem of the color-line."
- 1909 The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is formed.
- 1910s The "Great Migration" of African Americans from the Jim Crow South to urban centers of the North and Midwest begins.
- 1910 Du Bois founds the *Crisis* magazine, an important venue for civil rights writing.
- 1915 After the success of D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, the Ku Klux Klan re-forms in Stone Mountain, Georgia; Carter G. Woodson founds the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) to promote black accomplishments.
- 1916 The NAACP produces Angelina Weld Grimké's anti-lynching play *Rachel*.
- 1919 During "Red Summer," white-on-black violence spreads across U.S. cities; the Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) is founded; the first Pan-African Congress is convened.
- 1920 The Nineteenth Amendment gives women the right to vote.

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- 1920s The Harlem or “New Negro” Renaissance signals an explosion of African American cultural and political activity.
- 1922 The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill passes the U.S. House of Representatives but fails in the Senate under threat of filibuster; subsequent anti-lynching bills proposed over the next two decades also fail.
- 1925 The Krigwa Little Theater Company forms (it closes in 1927).
- 1931 Nine African American youths are falsely accused and convicted of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama; the case becomes an international symbol of Jim Crow justice.
- 1937 Abel Meeropol publishes “Strange Fruit”; Billie Holiday’s later recording of this anti-lynching song will become highly popular.
- 1940 Richard Wright publishes *Native Son*.
- 1941 A. Philip Randolph organizes the March on Washington Movement.
- 1942 The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) is founded.
- 1946 President Harry S. Truman establishes the President’s Committee on Civil Rights; Ann Petry publishes *The Street*.
- 1947 CORE initiates the Journey of Reconciliation to challenge segregation on interstate buses; the Committee on Civil Rights issues a report, “To Secure These Rights.”
- 1948 President Truman desegregates the U.S. military.
- 1950 Gwendolyn Brooks becomes the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize (for her book of poems, *Annie Allen*).
- 1951 The Civil Rights Congress issues a petition to the United Nations, “We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government against the Negro People.”
- 1952 Ralph Ellison publishes *Invisible Man*.
- 1954 In *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that segregation in public schools is unconstitutional; the first White Citizens’ Council is formed shortly afterward in Indianola, Mississippi.

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- 1955 In *Brown II*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that schools should desegregate “with all deliberate speed”; in December, Rosa Parks is arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person; a resulting boycott of the city bus system lasts more than a year and catapults a local minister, Martin Luther King Jr., into the national spotlight; fourteen-year-old Emmett Till is killed in Money, Mississippi, after allegedly whistling at a white woman; an all-white jury finds two local men not guilty in his death and, later, the men confess to killing him; James Baldwin published *Notes of a Native Son*.
- 1956 Southern congressmen issue a “Southern Manifesto” opposing integration.
- 1957 The Civil Rights Act of 1957 protects African American voters; nine African American students integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, under the protection of federal troops; the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) is formed.
- 1959 Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* becomes the first play by an African American produced on Broadway.
- 1960 The Civil Rights Act of 1960 protects voting registration; in Greensboro, North Carolina, four African American youths initiate the sit-in movement at a Woolworth’s lunch counter; the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is formed; Harper Lee publishes *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- 1961 Inspired by CORE’s 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, Freedom Riders test segregation laws in interstate bus travel across the South; surviving attacks in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, they persist until they are arrested in Jackson, Mississippi; SNCC initiates a direct action campaign in Albany, Georgia; Hoyt Fuller revives the periodical *Negro Digest*.
- 1962 Riots erupt at the University of Mississippi to prevent James Meredith from enrolling.
- 1963 Civil rights protests take place across the South throughout the year; in Birmingham, Alabama, nonviolent protestors – many of them part of the “Children’s Crusade” – are attacked



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with police dogs and fire hoses; while there, Martin Luther King Jr. is arrested and writes “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” to defend direct action tactics; in June, NAACP organizer Medgar Evers is murdered in Jackson, Mississippi; Eudora Welty writes “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” in response and publishes it a few weeks later; in August, 250,000 attend the March on Washington, where King delivers the “I Have a Dream” speech; in September, a bomb explodes in Birmingham’s Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, a hub of civil rights activity, killing four girls; in November, President John F. Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

- 1964 During Freedom Summer, young adults from across the country converge on Mississippi for voter registration drives; three civil rights workers are murdered in Neshoba County; the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is not seated at the Democratic National Convention, calling attention to local voting rights and other abuses; the Twenty-Fourth Amendment abolishes the poll tax, originally instituted after Reconstruction to prevent poor African Americans from voting; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and national origin; Martin Luther King Jr. is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his civil rights work; *Dutchman*, by Amiri Baraka (writing as LeRoi Jones), opens off-Broadway; Malcolm X delivers “The Ballot or the Bullet” address in Detroit, Michigan; Malcolm X and Alex Haley publish *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.
- 1965 Malcolm X is assassinated in February; in March, Alabama state troopers beat back an attempted Voting Rights March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama; a second one, weeks later, is successful; in August, President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act into law; other important legislation includes “affirmative action” for federal employees and government contractors; during the summer, riots erupt in the Watts section of Los Angeles; also this year, Dudley Randall launches the Broadside Press and Amiri Baraka opens the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS).
- 1966 James Meredith organizes the “March against Fear” in Mississippi; after he is shot, SNCC, CORE, and the SCLC continue the march; SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael

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popularizes the phrase “Black Power” during a Greenwood rally; the Black Panther Party for Self Defense is founded in Oakland, California; Martin Luther King Jr. initiates an anti-poverty campaign in Chicago; the National Organization for Women (NOW) is formed.

- 1967 In *Loving v. Virginia*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that laws banning interracial marriage are unconstitutional; former NAACP head council Thurgood Marshall is sworn in as the first African American Supreme Court justice; Carl Stokes becomes the first African American mayor of a major city (Cleveland, Ohio); riots erupt in Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan; John O. Killens publishes *Sippi*; Douglas Turner Ward, Robert Hooks, and Gerald S. Krone found the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC) theater group in New York; Don L. Lee (later Haki Madhubuti), Johari Amini, and Carolyn Rogers found Third World Press; Hoyt Fuller and others form the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), a collective of writers, artists, historians, educators, intellectuals, and activists.
- 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in April while participating in a sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis; U.S. senator Robert Kennedy is assassinated; the Civil Rights Act of 1968, known as the Fair Housing Act, is passed; Ralph Abernathy leads 50,000 demonstrators to Washington, D.C., for the Poor People’s Campaign; Ann Moody publishes *Coming of Age in Mississippi*; Eldridge Cleaver publishes *Soul on Ice*; Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal publish *Black Fire*, a Black Arts Movement anthology; Tom Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam found the poetry and theater collective BLCKARTSOUTH.
- 1969 Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton is killed by Chicago police; the first Black Studies Department is founded at San Francisco State University; massive demonstrations against the Vietnam conflict are held in Washington, D.C.; the Stonewall Riots in New York galvanize the gay rights movement.
- 1970 Protests against the Vietnam War at Kent State University in Ohio and Jackson State College (now University) in Mississippi result in the shooting deaths of unarmed students; feminist rallies across the nation call for passage of an Equal Rights

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- Amendment and highlight the need for reproductive freedom; Toni Cade (Bambara) publishes *The Black Woman: An Anthology*.
- 1971 News reports reveal that the FBI conducted a secret operation, called COINTELPRO, to discredit and disrupt civil rights and other domestic political groups from 1956 to 1971; the Congressional Black Caucus is formed; Morris Dees and Joseph J. Levin Jr. found the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).
- 1972 Shirley Chisolm becomes the first African American woman to run for president; the first National Black Political Convention is held in Gary, Indiana; Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments provide equal opportunities in funding for males and females in public schools.
- 1973 In *Roe v. Wade*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that a woman's right to an abortion in the first or second trimester is protected under the Fourteenth Amendment.
- 1976 ASALH establishes National Black History Month; Ntzoke Shange's experimental play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* opens off-Broadway; Alice Walker publishes *Meridian*; Robert S. Hayden becomes the first African American to be named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (later the position is renamed "U.S. Poet Laureate").
- 1977 Robert Chambliss becomes the first of several men to be tried and convicted for his role in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing that killed four girls, the first of many similar civil rights "cold case" prosecutions.
- 1982 A public battle against a Warren County, North Carolina, toxic waste dump draws national attention to the issue of environmental racism; ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment fails.
- 1983 President Ronald Reagan signs legislation creating a federal holiday to honor Martin Luther King Jr.
- 1984 Jesse Jackson founds the National Rainbow Coalition (later renamed Rainbow/PUSH) – a political organization connected

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to his 1984 U.S. presidential campaign that embraced voters from a broad spectrum of races and creeds.

- 1986 The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 establishes a 100:1 sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine, resulting in a discrepancy in punishments between races.
- 1987 National Women's History Month is established.
- 1991 The Civil Rights Act of 1991 is enacted to help prevent employment discrimination; Clarence Thomas replaces Thurgood Marshall on the U.S. Supreme Court after controversial hearings focus on allegations that he sexually harassed a former employee, Anita Hill; Los Angeles, California, police beat Rodney King, an African American, during his arrest; the next year, when the officers are found not guilty of using excessive force on King, the city erupts in violence.
- 1993 Toni Morrison becomes the first African American awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.
- 1994 Florida state legislature passes the Rosewood Claims Bill, compensating survivors of a 1923 massacre for the loss of their town; President Bill Clinton institutes a policy of "Don't Ask Don't Tell" (DADT), which allows gays and lesbians to serve in U.S. military forces but forces them to keep their sexual orientation secret.
- 1995 The Nation of Islam sponsors a Million Man March in Washington, D.C.
- 1996 California's Proposition 209 bars affirmative action in public hiring, contracting, and college admissions, an important test case for the practice; President Clinton signs the Welfare Reform Bill (known formally as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996); Clinton also signs the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which bans federal recognition of same-sex marriage.
- 1997 President Clinton begins the Initiative on Race, a yearlong dialogue in local communities across the country.
- 1998 James Byrd, an African American, is chained to the back of a pickup truck by two white men and dragged to his death in

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- Jasper, Texas; Matthew Shepard, a gay white man, is beaten by two men and left hanging on a fence to die in Laramie, Wyoming; both incidents draw widespread attention to the problem of hate crimes.
- 2000 During the close, and later disputed, presidential election between George W. Bush and Al Gore, thousands of African Americans are prevented from voting in Florida because their names have been accidentally purged from voting lists.
- 2001 On September 11, al-Qaeda-coordinated airplane hijackings and attacks bring down the World Trade Center in New York, damage the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and crash United Airlines Flight 93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing approximately three thousand, and renewing national debates on the meaning of “freedom” and “civil liberties”; Anthony Grooms publishes *Bombingham*.
- 2005 The U.S. Senate apologizes for its failure to enact anti-lynching legislation during the twentieth century; Hurricane Katrina floods the city of New Orleans and devastates the Gulf Coast, calling attention to the relationship between economics and the federal government’s response to national emergencies.
- 2007 Virginia’s state legislature issues an apology for slavery, making it the first of several states to do so; a rally in Jena, Louisiana, draws tens of thousands to protest the prosecution of six African American youths known as the Jena Six for assaulting white youths who hung nooses in a local tree; before the year’s end, between fifty and sixty noose incidents throughout the country recall this powerful symbol of Jim Crow violence; in two decisions, the U.S. Supreme Court prohibits assigning students to public schools solely for the purpose of achieving racial integration and declines to recognize racial balancing as a compelling state interest.
- 2008 U.S. Senator Barack Obama, from a racially mixed background, is elected president; the U.S. Congress apologizes for slavery and Jim Crow laws.
- 2009 President Obama is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act expands the U.S. federal hate crimes law to include crimes

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motivated by a victim's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability.

- 2010 President Obama signs federal legislation allowing openly homosexual Americans to serve in the U.S. armed forces; the Fair Sentencing Act reduces the disparity between crack and powder cocaine to an 18:1 ratio; statistics released the next year show increases in the U.S. federal prison population of nearly 800 percent since 1980; Arizona passes a strict anti-illegal immigration law; although the U.S. Supreme Court strikes down portions of the law as unconstitutional, the measure prompts other states to pass equally strict laws of their own.
- 2012 An unarmed Florida teenager, Trayvon Martin, is shot and killed by volunteer neighborhood watch patrolman George Zimmerman, calling attention to issues of racial profiling and "stand your ground" defense laws; Zimmerman is found not guilty the following year.
- 2013 In *Shelby County v. Holder*, the U.S. Supreme Court strikes down sections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act as unconstitutional; in *Windsor v. the United States*, the Court grants federal recognition of same sex marriage.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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