Introduction: The Problem with the Title of this Volume

The title of this study was selected by the publisher. As I began writing, however, I found the term *African American* resonated differently with each novelist discussed in this volume. For some, it was not common usage in their time; for others, it was too restrictive because it connoted a vexed racial category or it did not take into account the variety of ethnicities to which people with African antecedents belong; still others felt it aptly described who they were. The varying responses to the nomenclature showed cultural identity to be less a fixed entity and more a process of coming to terms with the legacies of African encounters with Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. The many events, considerations, and reconsiderations that went into creating an identity variously called black, colored, negro, Negro, African American, Afro-American, African American again, and black again, over the course of the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, reveal much about how different nations and ethnicities were coalesced into a race.

In the United States, the region at the core of this study, much history underlies these changes in terms. For those raced as white, "black" solidified the dominant identity of whiteness that art, politics, and popular culture made synonymous with American. "Colored" and "negro," used as segregationist terms, vivified for many whites on the social margins what freedom and privilege meant. For those raced as black, the advocacy implied in changing designations recorded responses to the end of enslavement, the demand for civil rights, and the reshaping of larger American culture. This advocacy further suggested metaphors and strategies for other marginalized groups, from the nineteenth-century women's movement to twentieth and twenty-first century LGBTQ activism, as each mounted their efforts for social recognition and enfranchisement. Throughout these cultural metamorphoses, novels produced by writers raced as black made clear that once the significances of these terms were understood, so too was much of human political, social, economic, and historical dynamics.

As this study developed, the term "black" rang truer for me than African American because the former seemed more consistent with social history in conveying a cultural amalgam of social identities and resulting products. That said, both terms – black and African American – appear here used interchangeably, to refer to a racial group, but with black having the greater preponderance because it embraces links to geographies beyond the United States. I use both terms to characterize the novels produced by writers of varying degrees and configurations of Africanness, as they manifest their understandings of enslavement, constructions of race in the United States, and a composite, complex culture. The novels discussed here solidified a group, while reverberating with tensions of caste, ethnicity, geographic origins, and negotiations across these lines of difference. Coming out of this body of work is a record of self-articulation characterized by valences within collective identity.

This study seeks to do more than record the publication of African American novels; it endeavors to consider the ideas contributing to their development. Underlying discussions of particular novels are the questions, What makes a novel African American or black? How do we handle the relationship between writer and novel when a writer's race is unknown? When a writer chooses to identify as other than black? Or when a writer once thought to be black is somehow identified as other?

A History of the African American Novel is divided into two parts: the first, a consideration of the development of the novel and the second a consideration of its major genres. Chapter 1 begins by examining what sources beyond the slave narrative contributed to forming the novel, among them legends, prenational black writings, and black periodicals. It then moves to novels of the pre-emancipation moment and how these expanded received traditions as they shaped a genre that would cement group identity. The writings of Hannah Crafts, Harriet Wilson, William Wells Brown, and Martin Delany reveal that what it meant to be black in America was very much in flux, but the engagement and reengagement of their subject matter by readers and other writers went far to solidifying early notions of African American community.

Chapter 2 considers the challenges faced by turn-of-the-twentieth-century novelists such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Sutton E. Griggs, and Charles Chesnutt as they attempted to break into the world of mainstream publishing. Post-emancipation novels built a foundation of characters, themes, and plots unique to the culture they wished to preserve, but because they created a space where African American writers could imagine a different reality, and because in some cases such imagining resulted

in transgressive content, bringing a black novel to print was not an easy endeavor. Charles Chesnutt experienced repeated rejection of his novels and had to rewrite his work to fit the demands of Houghton Mifflin. In 1901 Sutton E. Griggs found the Orion Publishing Company to make his books available for a black readership. African American periodicals continued to serialize novels and were joined by publishing houses such as T. Hamilton, formed by the publisher of *The Anglo-African Magazine*; the Colored Co-operative Publishing Company; and Du Bois and Dill Publishers. Their efforts facilitated the popular embrace of novels at an early time in their evolution.

As publishing outlets opened to Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Jessie Fauset, novels explored the differences between race and culture, and Chapter 3 examines the ways novelists assessed what elements identified blackness and how this identity should be portrayed. The varying opinions that resulted manifested themselves in growing experimentation with literary forms. Vernacular elements indigenous to black culture found an increasing presence in novels, and writers adapted popular forms to portraits of black life. The popularity enjoyed by black novelists during the 1930s is frequently said to have reached a nadir with the economic privation of the Depression, but as Chapter 4 observes, the success of Richard Wright, William Attaway, and Ann Petry suggests otherwise. Ann Petry's *The Street* was the first novel by an African American to sell more than a million copies. Richard Wright's *Native Son* became a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection, and Frank Yerby saw two of his historical novels adapted as films. During the post–World War II period, black novels' critiques of class and expression of malaise resonated with a variety of audiences wearied by war and insecure in their own economic footing.

Throughout its history, the African American novel has found itself in an art-politics dyad. The rhetoric of the debate as to whether the genre was protest or art became strident during the 1960s and 1970s. As so many reviews written during this period indicate, most works were perceived as social protest. Chapter 5 will consider the limitations of this duality and the breadth of aesthetics in novels by Clarence Major, William Melvin Kelley, Colleen Polite, John Oliver Killens, Rosa Guy, and John A. Williams. While novel writing was often theorized as intricately intertwined with community building, the artistry of these works is clearly visible in their use of montage, fantasy, and stream-of-consciousness.

Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto's edited volume *Afro-American Literature: the Reconstruction of Instruction* (1979), Houston Baker's

Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory (1984), Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifyin(g) Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), and Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (1980) are just some of the critical studies contributing to recognition of an African American canon. Chapter 6 considers the confluence of literature and criticism that gave the novel an increased presence in the academy and increased cultural esteem. The 1970s–1990s was a watershed moment when black novels received national and international accolades. A record number made frequent appearances on *The New York Times* best-seller list, and many won prestigious awards including the Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the Nobel Prize. Amid the canon wars that engulfed the academy, a body of critical theory identified the structures that constituted African American literary tradition.

Chapter 7 considers the group of writers who would fall under Greg Tate's term "Bohemian Cult Nats," among them Trey Ellis, Mat Johnson, and Danzy Senna. At the turn of the twenty-first century, their novels question much of the received understandings of African American literature and its relation to racial identity. In the nineteenth century, slavery and black disenfranchisement necessitated consensus on the existence of black community. Fissures in this consensus became apparent and gained overt expression from the 1920s to the 1980s. Where contention was problematic for earlier eras, in the epoch many term postmodern, creative inspiration seems to thrive without a clear consensus as to what blackness is, and a generation of novels converses about essentialism, post-blackness, and hybridity. Freed from the constraints of their progenitors who had to argue first for the existence of black humanity, then for the existence of black art, their postmodernist practices produce novels that are heterogeneous, multivalent, and indeterminate, terms that reflect the nature of black existence since its beginnings in the United States, but are now less problematically acknowledged.

The deeper investigation of form is the concern of the second part of the history as its chapters look at the prominent genres of African American novels: neoslave narratives, detective fiction, speculative fiction, graphic novels, pulp fiction, and the adaptation of novels from page to screen. Unique to African American fiction, the neoslave narrative engages contemporary concerns while illuminating how tied slavery was not only to American historical development, but also to conceptions of national identity. Like the reconceptualization of form accomplished in the neoslave

narrative, the African American detective novel takes the popular forms of crime novels, police procedural, and American noir, and constructs detective figures illuminating race, racism, and the dynamics of authority. Reconstruction is again evident when writers make the legacies of a forced transatlantic crossing and social domination into black speculative novels. Science fiction, futurism, and fantasy embrace futuristic ideas to challenge traditional ways of seeing. In "ghetto novels," "black pulp fiction," "black romance," "urban fiction," or "street fiction," all terms for popular black novels, the increasing class divide within black communities is apparent. The controversy surrounding the forms and representations employed by popular genres provide a fertile site for contemplating self-conception, composition, canon formation, and audience, at a time when these categories are increasingly complex. Racial complexity is literally seen in black graphic novels. Mixing text and image underscores how cultures diagram race. The nuances of representation are also discoverable in looking at the many African American novels adapted to the screen. From Oscar Micheaux's *The Homesteader* (1917), to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), to Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), filmic treatment of black novels reflects the nation's moods as it engages race, gender, class, and sexuality. Part II closes with considering the influence of African American novels on black diasporan writers not born in the United States. Transnational inquiry reveals the impact African American novels have had on literature acknowledging a shared history. Considering the implications of diaspora sheds light on the mutations within a racial consciousness of kind.

Richard Wright once defined a novel as "a way of enlarging and increasing our sense of life" (Wright, *Conversations* 214). This is particularly true of the African American novel. It gave a people a means of understanding their racial and cultural selves, and later gave them arenas to contest these understandings. The genre helped a culture cohere itself. As definitions of authorship, genres, and periods are always changing, as new information and archives are discovered, no literary history can or should be definitive. This work contributes to the discoveries of those before it, and hopes to be a bridge to those that will come after. The critical framework within this history derives primarily from examining cultural moments of the novels and their authors' ideas on writing. There is copious scholarly work on African American literature, and some of these are referenced in endnotes and the appendix accompanying this volume. Within the text, I have chosen to foreground writers' voices.

Any history of the African American novel is, in essence, a history of African American intellectual thought. The more we understand the production and reading of these novels and the discussions they generate, the more we can augment an understanding of black cultural history in the Americas.