

## LITERARY AMBITION AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVEL

This book shows how African American literature emerged as a world-recognized literature: less as the product of a seamless tradition of writers signifying on their ancestors than the product of three generations of ambitious, competitive individuals aiming to be the first great African American writer. It charts a canon of fictional landmarks, beginning with *The House Behind the Cedars* and culminating in the National Book Award-winning *Invisible Man*, and tells the compelling stories of the careers of key African writers, including Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. These writers worked within the white-dominated, commercial, Eurocentric literary field to put African American literature on the world literary map, while struggling to transcend the cultural expectations attached to their position as “Negro authors.” *Literary Ambition and the African American Novel* tells as much about the novels that these writers could not publish as it does about their major achievements.

MICHAEL NOWLIN is a specialist in American literature and chair of the Department of English at the University of Victoria in Canada. He is the author of *F. Scott Fitzgerald's Racial Angles and the Business of Literary Greatness* (2007) and is the editor of editions of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. He has also published articles in *Modernism/Modernity*, *American Literature*, *African American Review*, and *Studies in American Fiction*.

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MICHAEL NOWLIN

*University of Victoria, Canada*



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*To my mother Barbara Hoyt,  
and to the memory of Martin Hoyt*

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## *Contents*

|   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>  | <i>page</i> viii |
| <i>List of Abbreviations</i>  | x                |
| Introduction  | i                |
| 1 “The First Negro Novelist”: Charles Chesnutt’s Point of View<br>and the Emergence of African American Literature      | 25               |
| 2 James Weldon Johnson’s Dream of Literary Greatness and His<br>Groundwork for an African American Literary Renaissance | 49               |
| 3 The Strange Literary Career of Jean Toomer  | 72               |
| 4 Wallace Thurman’s Judgment and the Rush toward Modernism  | 95               |
| 5 Zora Neale Hurston and the Great Unwritten  | 125              |
| 6 Richard Wright’s Compromises: Radicalism and Celebrity<br>as Paths to Literary Freedom                                | 153              |
| 7 “Literary to a Fault”: The Singular Triumph of Ralph Ellison  | 177              |
| Conclusion  | 211              |
| <i>Notes</i>  | 214              |
| <i>References</i>   | 234              |
| <i>Index</i>  | 247              |

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*Acknowledgments*

ix

quotation from the writings of Richard Wright in Chapter 6. While I abide by fair use guidelines, I would still like to thank Jill Rosenberg Jones, literary executor of the James Weldon Johnson Estate, for her permission to cite from unpublished correspondence and other materials from the James Weldon Johnson Papers at Yale University; and the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Yale University for permission to cite from unpublished manuscripts in the Jean Toomer Papers.

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## *Abbreviations*

### **Charles Chesnutt**

- AEC*      *An Exemplary Citizen: Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1906–1932*. Ed. Jesse S. Crisler, Robert C. Leitz, III, and Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- CWCC*      Charles W. Chesnutt Collection. John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Fisk University.
- ES*         *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays & Speeches*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III, and Jesse S. Crisler. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- JCWC*      *Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Ed. Richard Brodhead. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.
- SNE*         *Charles W. Chesnutt: Stories, Novels, and Essays*. Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: Library of America, 2002.
- TBAA*      “*To Be an Author*”: *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889–1905*. Ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Robert C. Leitz, III. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997.

### **James Weldon Johnson**

- ATW*         *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson*. New York: Penguin, (1933) 1990.
- “*LTAF*”      “Letters to a Friend: Correspondence from James Weldon Johnson to George A. Towns.” Ed. Miles M. Jackson. *Phylon* 29 (1968): 182–98.
- JWJP*         James Weldon Johnson and Grace Nail Johnson Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

*List of Abbreviations*

xi

- “PFE” “Preface to the First Edition [1922].” *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Ed. James Weldon Johnson. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Co., (1931) 1969. 9–48.
- SWI *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson*. Vol. I: *The New York Age Editorials (1914–1923)*. Ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- SWII *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson*. Vol. II. *Social, Political, and Literary Essays*. Ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

**Jean Toomer**

- LJT *The Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919–1924*. Ed. Mark Whalan. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006.
- JTP Jean Toomer Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library.
- JTSE *Jean Toomer: Selected Essays and Literary Criticism*. Ed. Robert B. Jones. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996.
- “OBAA” “On Being an American (The Brief History of a Human Position).” c. 1934, JTP, Box 20, Folder 513.
- WS *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer*. Ed. Darwin T. Turner. Washington: Howard University Press, 1982.

**Wallace Thurman**

- CWWT *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*. Ed. Amritjit Singh and Daniel M. Scott, III. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003.
- IS *Infants of the Spring*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, (1932) 1992.

**Zora Neale Hurston**

- ACSS Archives of Charles Scribner’s Sons. Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries.
- FMOW *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. Ed. Cheryl Wall. New York: Library of America, 1995.

- NS* *Zora Neale Hurston: Novels and Stories*. Ed. Cheryl Wall. New York: Library of America, 1995.
- ZNHLL* *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*. Ed. Carla Kaplan. New York: Doubleday, 2002.
- ZNHP* Zora Neale Hurston Papers. Special and Area Studies Collection, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

**Richard Wright**

- CRW* *Conversations with Richard Wright*. Ed. Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993.
- EW* *Richard Wright: Early Works*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Library of America, 1991.
- LW* *Richard Wright: Later Works*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Library of America, 1991.
- RWP* Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.
- RWR* *Richard Wright Reader*. Ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

**Ralph Ellison**

- CERE* *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Modern Library, 1995.
- CWRE* *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*. Ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
- IM* *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, (1952) 1990.
- REP* Ralph Ellison Papers. Manuscript/mixed material. Library of Congress. <https://lccn.loc.gov/mm96083111>.
- TDBS* *Three Days Before the Shooting*. Ed. John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley. New York: Modern Library, 2010.
- TT* *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*. New York: Vintage, 2000.

**Other**

- CVVP* Carl Van Vechten Papers. Manuscript and Archives Division, New York Public Library.