

The Freedom to Choose: The Aesthetics of Choice in Short Stories by Zora Neale Hurston,  
Richard Wright, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Cade Bambara

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**Abstract:** Black Arts' writer Amiri Baraka observes in his essay "Northern Iowa: Short Story and Poetry," that "For black people, freedom is our aesthetic and our ideology." The focus on liberation has artistic and political resonance for African Americans. Freedom—as communal aesthetic and ideology—provides a useful starting point for better understanding major themes in black writing. A closer look at short stories, which have typically received less critical attention than novels in the study of African American literature, can yield valuable information about the diverse ways in which writers present varying degrees of what I am calling "freedom aesthetics" in their works. Overall, my project will examine the context of choice in selected African American short stories. To what ends do the works by Hurston, Wright, Bambara, and Baraka emphasize the "choices" African Americans make in the face of social barriers? Addressing this question will help to better explain how characters, within specific short stories, make specific decisions to gain higher degrees of social agency and what authorial judgments black writers use to create varied conceptions of freedom for diverse sets of black characters. The short stories selected in this study reflect struggles against constraints that are racially, socially, sexually, economically or politically motivated. These choices, I argue, help explain why those works have remained so well known and most frequently reprinted in anthologies that privilege freedom as a unifying theme.

Black Arts' writer Amiri Baraka observes in his essay "Northern Iowa: Short Story and Poetry," that "For black people, freedom is our aesthetic and our ideology." The focus on liberation has artistic and political resonance for African Americans. Freedom—as communal aesthetic and ideology—provides a useful starting point for better understanding major themes in black writing. A closer look at short stories, which have typically received less critical attention than novels in the study of African American literature, can yield valuable information about the diverse ways in which writers present varying degrees of what I am calling "freedom aesthetics" in their works. Those aesthetics can be defined by its historical connections to African American folklore, social connections to black people's unique position in relation to their white counterparts in America, as well as an artistic tradition identified with the performative culture of West Africa, the point of origin for many Africans in America. The phrase might be reframed as an "aesthetics of choice" since "choice" demonstrates a greater degree of agency and awareness for characters who inhabit these narratives. But, the reference to choice has a second meaning as well. Editors and publishers filter, if not shape, the reception of black writers, their works, and in some cases, larger views of African American literature. In this project, I consider selected short stories by Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Cade Bambara and examine the particular ways that black characters achieve higher degrees of freedom by making specific choices.

Overall, my project will examine the context of choice in selected African American short stories. To what extent do the works by Hurston, Wright, Bambara, and Baraka emphasize the "choices" African Americans make in the face of social barriers? Addressing this question will help to better explain how the characters in specific short stories make specific decisions to gain higher degrees of social agency and what authorial judgments black writers use to create

varied conceptions of freedom for diverse sets of black characters. The use of quantitative methods can enhance this overall approach. For instance, identifying the frequency with which certain geographic regions appear across short stories by different authors and analyzing the use of dialect used in specific stories can better inform the time, place, condition and nature of choice as a critical component of our literary traditions.

I interpret Baraka's phrase "freedom aesthetics" to mean notable aspects of African American cultural traditions, including the pursuit of literacy, resistance against oppressive forces, and artistic production. In the introduction to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay note that "African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belletristic tradition" (xxxvii). "The putative relation between literacy and the quest for freedom," they argue, "provided the subtext for this larger debate over the African's 'place in nature,' his or her place in the great chain of being" (xxxix). For Gates, McKay and other critics, the quest for freedom is foundational in African American literature.<sup>1</sup> The quest for freedom and the desire for liberation from oppressive forces over time came to inform the rhetoric of African American literature. In other words, struggles for freedom eventually became a rhetorical strategy publishers would foreground as they marketed black writers to larger, mostly white, reading audiences. The rhetoric of freedom aesthetics as a communal ideology "not only refers to the suasive discourse but also to a method for thinking about communication, especially its heuristic concerns for invention" (Hauser 33). The rhetorical interactions between publishers,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Stepto reveals how slave narratives had a direct bearing on how reading audiences interpret the thematic content of African American literature. He notes black writing is "this perilous assertion of mobility after the assault of bondage assumes the properties of an ascension ritual, especially when the journey is a quest for literacy as well as for freedom" (*From Behind the Veil*, 1967, p. 67)

readers, and scholars of black writing create a triadic relationship that influences how we read and view writers such as Hurston, Wright, and Bambara.

Not surprisingly, Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed works in both the African American and American literary traditions. The production and popular reception of Douglass's narrative, along with a range of other works such as Douglass's *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper, David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829), Jupiter Hammon's "Address to the Negroes of the State of New York" (1786), William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), helped to solidify the thematic representations of struggles for liberation in African American literary and cultural discourses. These works were important in advancing the discourse about slavery and helped to make freedom a recurrent and unifying theme in African American literature.

The appearance of short stories by Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Zora Neale Hurston during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also brought attention to language, social interactions, and political awareness of African Americans to help solidify the themes of freedom and reveal how character choices had a heavy bearing on the lives of black people. Moreover, these recurring themes affirm that the "collective participation in rhetorical processes constitutes individuals as a public" (Hauser 34), which I take to mean the editors, anthologies, and readers/scholars of African American and American literature.

Sheena Iyengar's *The Art of Choosing* offers principles that scholars might consider in examining specific choices black writers make in representing African American life, including characterization, story setting, and language. In addition, for Iyengar "choice" refers to decisions writers make when composing a narrative as well as the decisions a protagonist makes within the

context of a particular short story. She writes, “True choice requires that a person have the ability to choose an option and not be prevented from choosing it by any external force, meaning that a system tending too far toward either extreme will limit people’s opportunities” (63-4). For Iyengar, choice derives from a larger concern. “Choosing helps us create our lives,” she concludes. “We make choices and are in turn made by them. Science can assist us in becoming more skillful choosers, but at its core, choice remains an art. To gain from it, we must embrace uncertainty and contradiction. . . . Therein lies its power, its mystery, and its singular beauty” (268). A focus on the implications of writers’ selections of geographic locations, social settings, and character traits as well as on the decisions that main characters in the stories shows us how the art and consequences of choosing informs short fiction by black writers.

Freedom aesthetics, then, in the context of this study, is indeed an “aesthetics of choice:” the decisions authors make to present characters and the forces that shape their environments as well as the particular choices publishers made to frame black writing in specific contexts. The focus on geographic locations within a text, economic conditions, and historical circumstances are all factors that underlie specific choices. The short stories selected in this study reflect struggles against constraints that are racially, socially, sexually, economically or politically motivated. These choices, I argue, help explain why those works have remained so well known and most frequently reprinted in anthologies that privilege freedom as a unifying theme.

This study begins with an examination of choice as a crucial element in the determination of theme for African American short stories. An empirical-based study of factors pertaining to the literary representations and critical discourses will illuminate the significance of choice as expressed in black literature. Four factors will be considered: character, setting, gender, interracial conflicts, and intra-racial conflicts in the stories by Zora Neale Hurston, Richard

Wright, Amiri Baraka, and Toni Cade Bambara. My project makes a contribution to literary studies by providing a new point of entry and a site of inquiry into African American literature using quantitative and qualitative methods.

### **Author and Character Choices**

#### ***Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright***

The presentation of African American characters striving to overcome troubled circumstances in short stories reveals how authors such as Hurston, Wright, Baraka, and Bambara conceive of and depict problems and what they view as possible avenues for escape or resolution. Unlike novels, which tend to present a range of issues with multiple characters, scenes, and subplots, short stories typically offer relatively brief but concentrated action and include fewer characters. In addition, these four writers demonstrate how the concept of freedom changes depending on social interactions, environment, economic status, and race. The stories under examination here show characters seeking safety, mobility, or a desire to express themselves in distinct ways in order to achieve greater autonomy in their particular environments. In each of the stories African Americans characters struggle to liberate themselves from troubled circumstances just as they exercise multiple forms of freedom and social agency.

The focus on language, freedom, and race in the scholarship on African American literature provides a meaningful paradigm for describing the overall cultural significance of different forms of writing. In the context of American culture, the story of black people yearning to be free is one of the most common narratives, stemming from the tragic history of slavery.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Hope Franklin describes how slave narratives and black newspapers largely defined for print culture the thematic focus of African American literature. Hope writes, “The largest and perhaps most significant group of black writers consisted of ex-slaves—fugitive or manumitted—who told the stories of their experiences in narratives...and, most black newspapers of the period were concerned mainly with the anti-slavery crusade” (*From Slavery to Freedom*, 2000, 183-4).

The concept of freedom has had various interpretations. It can refer to liberation from physical bondage and social conditions, overcoming economic hardships or escape from abusive lovers.

Erich Fromm notes, “the concept of freedom characterizes human existence...and furthermore, its meaning changes according to the degree of a man’s awareness and conception of himself as an independent and separate being” (24). Fromm defines freedom in two ways—“freedom from” and “freedom to.” “Freedom from” suggests that a person is exempt from being under the control and influence of political, financial, and religious regulations and guidelines. “Freedom to” implies that a person has the opportunity to attain certain outcomes by actualizing and capitalizing on his or her full potential (3-6). In the context of African American literature then, writers have often underscored the processes of gaining “freedom from”: slavery, illiteracy, as well as other social and economic oppressive circumstances. In other instances, the writers have demonstrated an interest in asserting the “freedom to” express their ideas, publish their works, and engage black vernacular English and distinct African American cultural practices in their works.

James Nagel argues in *The Contemporary Short-Story Cycle* that “On the social level, there is the effort to create a community of tellers and listeners who share a nucleus of concerns and values inherent in the tales of the culture through short stories” (255). “American” short stories, according to Nagel, “often involve the process of immigration, acculturation, language acquisition, identity formation, and the complexities of formulating a sense of self that incorporates the old world and the new world” (15). “On the social level,” he adds, “there is the effort to create community of tellers and listeners who share a nucleus of concerns and values inherent in the tales of the culture” (255). Hurston’s and Wright’s most anthologized short stories in particular correspond to Nagel’s observations about brief narratives that display “progressive

intensity of action.” These authors’ short stories concentrate on a relatively brief series of moments where a central protagonist makes a few consequential choices.

Set in a small all-black Florida town, Hurston’s “Sweat,” (1926) tells the story of a washwoman, Delia Jones, who works to support her physically and mentally abusive husband, Sykes. Sykes is adamantly opposed to Delia earning a living by white people’s clothes and disrupts her week’s work throughout the short story. In addition, Sykes plays on Delia’s fear of snakes by not only scaring her with a leather whip but also adopting a rattlesnake as a pet. In the end, Delia frees herself from the brutal abuse of her husband by simply refusing to help him escape the fatal attack of his “pet” rattlesnake.

Hurston utilizes biblical allusions and folklore to present a central character who makes a “passive choice.” Delia does not inform Sykes that a rattlesnake he brought home to frighten and bite her remained in their house and thus makes it possible for Sykes to meet a fatal end. Her silence is in fact a choice, although in this case choosing “not to” seems less assertive than Sykes’s original acts of “choosing to” put his wife in danger. The use of silence as a weapon for confronting violence and danger can be linked to the passive resistance strategy during the Civil Rights Movement. Similar to the defiance of civil rights protestors and their active decision to not engage in physical resistance methods, Delia’s seemingly passive decision leads to Sykes ultimate demise. Perhaps, a passive choice by Delia leads the way for more “assertive choice” to take place in the end.

Snakes, actually, serve as a dominant visual metaphor throughout the story.<sup>3</sup> Near the story’s conclusion, Sykes’s pet snake is the vehicle of her liberation, the means by which she

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<sup>3</sup> Diane Morgan’s study of the mythology of snakes points to the Aesop fables as having a bearing on how American and African American folk culture view snakes. She recounts the tale of “The Farmer and the Freezing Viper” where after the farmer took compassion on a serpent and brought the snake into his house, the snake bit him bring about his death. The moral of the story is “the greatest kindness will not bind the ungrateful.” Morgan indicates “this cross

finally escapes the physical and mental abuse of her husband. Delia does not befriend the snake; nor is she lured by its charm like Eve is in the Bible. Hurston's technique here seems to be an inversion of the biblical plot. Delia's reflexive defiance of the serpent also suggests a doubling: not only does she gain the upper hand in the situation, but she also leaves many of the events of the story to the universe of her spiritual guardians.<sup>4</sup>

Hurston makes distinct authorial choices in her characterization of Delia and in the story's plot development. She highlights the relationship between the characters' choices and the judgments passed down by the universe. After an intense argument with Sykes, Delia comments to herself, "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing." Delia prays for change, announcing, "His shells could no longer reach me. *Amen*" (76). Sykes's association with snakes links him with the devil. Moreover, Hurston's inversion of the Adam and Eve story and of justice places the responsibility for evil on the man, rather than the woman. In the biblical story, Eve leads Adam to sin. Here, it is Sykes, the male figure who succumbs to the wiles of the snake, leading to his own destruction.<sup>5</sup> Delia separates herself from Sykes and from the evil that he represents. Delia places faith in her spiritual universe, believing that appropriate retribution will come in due time. Here, Hurston inverts the customary Judeo-Christian story where Adam and Eve—both man and woman—are banished from the Garden of Eden. Instead, Hurston

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cultural tale" paints snakes as sly and treacherous creatures in the cultural memory of diverse groups of people (*Snakes in Myth, Magic, and History*, 2008, 47).

<sup>4</sup> Jason Frydman proposes that Hurston's short fiction was like that of a black preacher who "mediates back and forth between the King James Bible and the vernacular culture of black and white communities." Particularly, in "Sweat," Hurston fuses folklore and Judeo-Christian traditions to describe Delia's social position in the narrative and the options by which she may address her hardships ("Zora Neale Hurston, Biographical Criticism, and African Diasporic Vernacular Culture," 2009, 106).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Bone suggests that the foundations of folk tales, which serve as the foundation of African American literature, is "profoundly anti-Christian." He describes Christian principles as embodying "the official morality to which the bondsmen formally subscribed, while the folktales have immortalized the survival ethic that they actually practiced. If this code ran counter to Christian values that was because the slave system which gave it birth was itself demonic" (*Down Home*, 1988, 26).

allows for Sykes to be killed: he is banished from the garden because of his disobedience. In contract, Hurston allows Delia to live, suggesting she has not disobeyed the larger forces at play.

Delia's characterization suggests that the moral codes people follow to free themselves from troubled circumstances—in Delia's case, an abusive lover—sometimes run counter to normative conceptions of justice, morality, and spirituality.<sup>6</sup> Even though she presumably prays to a Christian God, she makes a conscious decision to follow a belief in vengeance grounded in folk belief rather than accept the idea of Christian forgiveness since the snake made her “grow bloodier for every second that she regarded the creature that was her torment” (81). She does take active steps on her own—first, her prayer affirms her decision to change; second, her defiance of the snake represents her internal growth; and, finally, her choice not to help Sykes because of her legitimate fear of snakes. In electing “freedom from” Sykes, she exercises her “freedom to” live a life without physical and mental abuse from him in the context of the story.

Hurston, in many ways, serves as the ultimate judge: she decides what can happen to a man who mistreats his wife. Delia may appear passive, but Hurston certainly does not. In fact, she presents a rather meek character in order to justify Sykes' fatal downfall. For Hurston and perhaps according to the laws of the universe of black folklore, those who mistreat others will receive their deserved retribution.<sup>7</sup> Hurston's narrative indicates that those who choose to harm others are making a decision that can have dire consequences. Hurston's authorial choices emphasize both the free will of her characters and the higher order of the universe. Her

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<sup>6</sup> Trudier Harris argues that African American literature employs the use of folklore to emphasize a concern with the “effect of the past upon the present. With the individual's place in the larger community, and with questions of good and evil, right and wrong, that transcend traditional morality” (*Fiction and Folklore*, 1993, 14).

<sup>7</sup> Hurston draws on supernatural elements in many of her short stories. For instance, in “Spunk,” Hurston shows a system of law and order to be more powerful than the worldly court system. The title character Spunk publically humiliates Joe, by taking Joe's wife and killing him. Still, Joe comes back from the dead in order to get revenge and kill Spunk. Spunk states, “It was Joe, ‘Lige—the dirty sneak shoved me” (“Spunk,” 1995, 26-32).

characters are free to make their own decisions, but are still held responsible for the consequences of their choices because they subscribe to a higher, more divine order.

For Richard Wright and the protagonists of his short stories, choices are, among other things, matters of life and death as they often lead to violent and tragic situations.<sup>8</sup> Wright's short fiction presents interracial conflicts and depicts the challenges that shape and restrict the lives of southern black people. "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1936) focuses on a teenage boy who has to flee for his life after he kills a white man in self-defense. To avoid the revenge from whites that follows the incident, Big Boy, with the support and encouragement of the community, must leave his southern home on a train bound for Chicago. Wright emphasizes immediate action in order to preserve the life of Big Boy and to underscore the rapid speed of violence and injustice when black-white conflicts occur.<sup>9</sup>

The threat of white violence makes flight or escape an important choice for black people in the story.<sup>10</sup> What begins with a group of innocent boys having fun swimming in a creek turns into fatal encounter when a white man kills two of Big Boy's friends, leading Big Boy to make an immediate decision to defend himself. In a struggle to protect himself and his friend, Big Boy wrestles the gun away from the white man and kills him. Big Boy and his family subsequently must face crucial and urgent decisions to help him gain "freedom from" white violence. The fear

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<sup>8</sup> Robin Lucy characterizes Wright's short fiction as being "being defined by geographical location, class, and gender—as southern and rural, poor, and most often male—and that this construct underwrote a discourse of black difference and, therefore, of racial identity" ("Flying Home," 2007, 258).

<sup>9</sup> In J. F. Gounard's analysis of Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground," he suggests that Wright frequently used black male protagonists because Wright possibly thought that "The condition of this Black man is not only symbolic of all Black Americans, but also of anyone who is oppressed" ("Richard Wright's 'The Man Who Lived Underground,'" 1978, 384).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Wright uses "flight" as a recurring thematic trope throughout his writing. For instance, his novel *Native Son*'s second section is titled "Flight" as the story's protagonist Bigger Thomas tries to escape before detectives discovered he is responsible for the death of Mary Dalton. Similar to Bigger Thomas, Big Boy also chooses "flight" as a means of escaping punishment for a murder (*Native Son*, 1998).

of white-inflicted violence dominates the decision-making of the black people in the story and shapes the events that follow.

With the presence and anticipation of violence and murder in the story, Wright gives “Big Boy Leaves Home” a high level of intensity. After plans are made for Big Boy to escape, his family wishes him well as he runs off to the getaway point stumbling “over the ties, for his shoes were tight and hurt his feet. His throat burned from thirst; he had no water since noon.” (40). The narrator vividly describes Big Boy’s nervousness and uncertainty: either he will live, or get captured and be killed. Big Boy arrives safely at the getaway point (a hole in the thick of the woods) only to stumble upon a snake that attacks Big Boy “viciously, with his eyes red and his teeth bared in a snarl” (42). The possibility of a snake-bite accentuates an already tense and deadly situation. Placing Big Boy in a series of troubling and potentially fatal situations allows Wright to capture the very real horror that a young, southern black man might face.

Wright, though, does emphasize the collective abilities of community members to help Big Boy gain freedom from the threat of physical harm. The community members influence Big Boy’s decision and help to design a plan for his escape. Big Boy’s father, Brother Morrison, enlists the help of Brother Sanders, Brother Jenkins, and Elder Peters pleading, “Big Boy’s done gone n killed a white man. Yuh-alls gotta help me...” (37). After much deliberation, Brother Sanders proposes, “Mah son, Will, the one whut drives fer the Magnolia Express Comny, is takin a truck o goods t Chicawgo in the mawnin. If we kin hide Big Boy somewhere till then, we kin put him on the truck...” (39). The community rallies together to save Big Boy in the face of impending danger. These men put themselves at great risk to aid Big Boy since if they are caught they could face jail time or even worse, they could be killed. Big Boy can only make decisions

with the aid of his community, suggesting that family and church members actively contributed to shaping the outcomes of his life.

The choices of the community members also play a role in both Delia's and Big Boy's fates. In Hurston's "Sweat," the community men sympathize with Delia, but tend to stay out of her marital affairs while in Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home," the men sympathize and actively discuss and support Big Boy's escape. The elder men of both communities represent varying conceptions of the interworkings of black communities: in each study a group of men passes judgment, but take different positions on the appropriate intervention. The question of "who is the enemy?" changes within the context of the two stories and dictates how the men will respond (or not respond) to the conflicts in each story.

Gender and racial dynamics elicit particular responses from the men in each story. In "Sweat" the conflict is intra-racial, between a husband and wife and. In the mindset of the men, this is an internal conflict that does not require them to come to Delia's defense. Perhaps Hurston is critiquing the tacit acceptance of domestic violence even when it is fully acknowledged by the men themselves. They can only comment on the situation from a distance. In contrast, the threat in "Big Boy..." is perceived as external and interracial conflict. For the men in this community, keeping Big Boy safe from the white mob is a responsibility of the entire black community and immediate action is required. Even though the action revolves around the lives of Delia and Big Boy, the input and levels of action or inaction from various others confirm the roles of families and communities in decision-making.

Hurston also uses the community to give readers key information that invites sympathy for Delia and foreshadows her eventual escape from a degrading husband. Hurston's characterization of Delia and Sykes comes primarily from the descriptions community members

offer instead of comments from the narrator of the story. Onlookers—Joe Clarke, Joe Lindsay, Jim Merchant, Walter Thomas, Elijah Moseley, and Moss—actually appear as townsfolk in a number of Hurston’s stories. This group of men gossip about the social happenings of their town, without getting directly involved in its affairs<sup>11</sup>. The folks of the community inform readers that Sykes “done beat huh ‘nough tuh kill three women, let ‘lone change they looks.” They also comment on Sykes’s sexual transgressions commenting, “How Sykes kin stommuck dat big black greasy Mogul he’s layin’ round wid, gits me. Ah swear dat eight-rock couldn’t kiss a sardine can Ah done thowed out de back do’ ‘way las’ yeah” (77). Sykes behavior towards Delia is demeaning and insulting: not only does he abuse her physically but he also makes her live with the public shame of his adulterous acts with a another woman. Even though Hurston depicts the community members as indifferent, all talk and no action, they nonetheless set the tone of the story and encourage the readers’ sympathy for Delia.

Even though the community onlookers actively sympathize with Delia, they are also passive, a common practice within the community that Hurston foregrounds for us here.. For contemporary readers, this type of apathy can be somewhat disturbing. Through the commentary of the community onlookers, Hurston shows black men who are unwilling to reprimand other black men for their actions towards their wives. Certainly, the community disapproves of Sykes actions towards Delia, but they are not concerned enough to take action to assist Delia. Their actions suggests that Delia’s well-being is not an immediate threat that will disrupt the social, economic, and political well-being of their community.

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<sup>11</sup> J. Gerald Kennedy notes “In some cases...reiterated themes or recurrent characters signal a conscious design.” Kennedy suggests that writers deliberately employ these features as a means of reinforcing motifs and thematic content. In the case of Hurston, the recurring characters throughout her short stories help to establish a sense of community and link her diverse set narratives to one another (*Modern American Short Story Sequences*, 1995, viii).

The language practices of Hurston and Wright in these stories represent a connection to the unique position of black people in American society. While “Sweat” and “Big Boy Leaves Home” are narrated in Standard English, the characters speak in Southern Black Dialect offering readers a perspective on language choices that writers make.<sup>12</sup> The constant transition between Standard English and black vernacular is a subtle acknowledgment of the complexity of black identity as well as the shifts black people make when navigating different aspects of society.<sup>13</sup> For example, in the opening scene in Hurston’s “Sweat” when Sykes frightens Delia with the leather whip, the narrator describes the scene as “Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her.” Delia, however, voices her frustrations with Sykes by using regional dialect responding, “Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me—looks just like a snake, an’ you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes” (73). Standard English Dialect is used to distinguish the author from the character and assigns literary authority to the author when communicating with the reader.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, writers from 1899 (notably Charles Chesnutt and his publication of *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*) to the 1940s (which is marked by Richard Wright’s publication of *Native Son*) could achieve greater social realism by presenting black characters

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<sup>12</sup> Geneva Smitherman indicates that what was once thought of as Southern Black Dialect has evolved into a more comprehensive language form, complete with grammatical conventions, known as African American Vernacular English. Smitherman defines AAVE as “an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America’s linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America. Black Language is Euro-American speech with Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gestures...It has allowed blacks to create a culture of survival in an alien land, and as a by-product has served to enrich the language of all Americans” (*Talkin and Testifyin*, 1985, 2-3).

<sup>13</sup> W.E.B. DuBois coined the phrase “double-consciousness,” which refers to the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” The “twoness” of being both an American and an African American also comes forward in the language aspect and author’s use of AAVE and Standard English dialect (*Souls of Black Folk*, 1999, 214).

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Heard suggests that, through language, Hurston helps “us examine how an author may communicate successfully to multiple audiences, some of which may not understand or even care about differences in language and cultural values.” Hurston is more interested in writing about black-on-black conflicts and the particular social and spiritual negotiations that groups of African Americans people govern their lives by such as the folk traditions and higher order of justice (“Dancing is Dancing No Matter Who is Doing It,” 2007, 130).

speaking their regional dialects. Southern Black Dialect acknowledges the cultural traditions and political ideologies embedded within the black community while Standard English is considered the more formal mode of expression. The choices of these writers to employ both constructs a world for their readers at the same time it maintains the connection to what is most familiar to their largely white audience.<sup>15</sup>

While Hurston's and Wright's stories share many common features, especially in certain aspects of characterization, social representation, and the need for freedom, their depictions of violence contrasts sharply. Hurston actually describes Wright's collection of short stories, which included "Big Boy Leaves Home," as being "a book about hatreds." In her 1938 review of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Hurston explains, "Mr. Wright serves notice by his title that he speaks of people in revolt, and his stories are so grim that the Dismal Swamp of race hatred must be where they live. Not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass in the entire work" (Hurston, "Uncle Tom's Children"). Hurston felt that this approach to fiction limited him as a writer because of his decisions to represent interracial conflict in such violent terms. Hurston suggests that even though extenuating circumstances may limit black characters' choices, a writer could and should represent a wider range of possibilities, not all of which are so bleak.

Whereas Hurston felt Wright could produce more lighthearted and less violent stories, Wright felt that Hurston presented black people as oversimplified and too humorous. In 1937, Wright reviewed Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and critiqued her work, noting that, "Miss Hurston can write, but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley." He continues, "Her dialogue manages to

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<sup>15</sup> Trudier Harris argues that the short stories of African American folk culture by Joel Chandler Harris helped contribute to the development of a written literary structure "in which an educated narrator created an opportunity for a less-educated person to related a (usually humorous) tale" (*Fiction and Folklore*, 1993, 3).

catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes" (Wright). Wright seems to be wary of Hurston's desire to capture the "Negro folk-mind" at the risk of giving expression to the impending threats, both physical and social, that her African American characters faced. In some respects, Wright feels that Hurston failed to address the racist and violent barriers that black people confronted in their lives.

Wright's was concerned to use literature as a weapon, a means of expressing the constant threats that impede upon the lives of black people, which he believed to be of little concern to Hurston. Instead, Hurston's main concern was to defend folk traditions and analyze the inner dynamics of African Americans communities and relationships, where the presence of whites is much less a factor. Even though the fierce opposition to the particular writing styles of each author stems from the different authorial vantage points on representations of black life, we need to pay attention to other factors in order to fully understand this argument. Certainly, both representations are needed to gain a more comprehensive view of the various negotiations black people make when operating between black and white realms of life.

I would argue that the intense conflict between Hurston and Wright derived more from both writers' desire to uncover the defining features of black expressive culture at a time when public interest in black life and culture was on the rise. Their personal differences aside, both Hurston and Wright explored different components of black life, which necessarily resulted in widely varying perspectives. Hurston's short story "Sweat" appeared in *Fire!!* in 1926, ten years before Wright's the publication of "Big Boy Leaves Homes," but there appears to have been no published reviews of Hurston's earlier work. Hurston's 1938 critique of Wright's collection of short stories appeared one year after his unfavorable review of her 1937 novel. The public airing of their fundamentally different perspectives took on the appearance of personal counter attacks.

More likely, this reflects the intensely ideological nature of the 1930s and the debates over the role and function of art that were raging among America's public intellectuals and within the left movement more generally.

### *Amiri Baraka and Toni Cade Bambara*

As members of a new generation of short story writers who emerged during the 1960s, Amiri Baraka and Toni Cade Bambara address the need to fashion new methods for defining black artistic culture. Most aesthetic evaluations of black culture failed to take into account the historical, social, economic, and political realities that affected African American life. In the 1969 anthology *Black Fire* James T. Stewart wrote, "The black artist must construct models which correspond to his own reality." Stewart's claims "We must turn these values in on themselves. Turn them inside out and make ineptitude and unfitness desirable, even mandatory." Stewart, similar to other Black Arts' critics including Addison Gayle, Larry Neal, and Stephen Henderson suggest that black people should be active suitors in defining black political and artistic standards in connection to working class values instead of subscribing to Eurocentric standards and assimilationist values.<sup>16</sup> The creation of this black aesthetic went beyond the simple black and white binary.

Writers during the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s and 1970s sought to reject Eurocentric standards that suppressed and all too often judged the work of black writers, musicians, and artist inferior.<sup>17</sup> In addition, during this period, BAM writers also rejected the

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Ramsby notes during the Black Arts Movement, "Highlighting the connections between musical and literary forms was especially important for black poets, many of whom preferred to align themselves and their work with African American sonic traditions as opposed to what they perceived as the more restricting conventions of white or Eurocentric literary traditions." The impetus for the Black Arts Movement stemmed from black artists beliefs that African American culture must be defined and validated by what black writers saw as important to the larger literary and cultural tradition. (*The Black Arts Enterprise*, 2011, 4).

<sup>17</sup> Tony Bolden poses a series of questions that were at the forefront of Black Arts writers' ideology when developing a black aesthetic: "Who constructs the parameters in which black art is conceptualized? And why are some models privileged over others in society?" (19). Bolden describes the pursuits of black artists and their pursuits

cultural vantage point of the traditional black middle class whom they believed were tied too closely to the values of mainstream American culture. Instead, these writers emphasized how living and operating within an American context had fashioned nuanced modes of expression for black people that were typically misunderstood and misrepresented.<sup>18</sup> The goal for these writers was to mine this expressive culture, to challenge the validation system of high art. Therefore, the Black Arts Movement stood notably in opposition to the artistic practices of bourgeois artistic culture.

Baraka's short story "The Screamers," (1967) is a pointed illustration of this class conflict. The story opens as the unnamed protagonist in a Newark, New Jersey club waits on famed musician Lynn Hope to perform.<sup>19</sup> During his time in the club, he ruminates over black people's predicament in American culture. In particular, he thought about the shame that African Americans feel toward their own culture and their failure to see its liberating possibilities, electing to embrace white middle class values and its culture instead. The protagonist, himself, comes from a middle class black family and observes the diverse customers present—specifically, commenting on the many types of black people from different socio-economic backgrounds.

In the story, the music is so powerful that it moves the protagonist and other black people who are in attendance, prompting them to leave the club and take to the streets as an act of

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to bring to the forefront of artistic conversations how "African Americans have distinct artistic traditions and formulated theories to illustrate the beauty of black art" (*Afro-Blue*, 2004, 22).

<sup>18</sup> Tony Bolden notes, in terms of defining black art and black aesthetics, "Part of the problem stemmed from the limited scope of the debates which prescribed a single aesthetic rather than a multitude of interrelated aesthetics that reflect and refract transposed African cultures in American in various geopolitical contexts." As a result, many problems "there were regional problems of regional privilege as well as masculinism, which culminated in the marginalization of gender issues" (*Afro-Blue*, 2004, 22).

<sup>19</sup> Amiri Baraka believes that black music has revolutionary implications and that liberation is not solely physical. He writes, "But evolution is not merely physical: yet if you can understand what the physical alludes to, is reflexive of, then it will be understood that each process in 'life' is duplicated at all levels" ("The Changing Same," 1991, 189).

rebellion. This defiance for the unnamed protagonist, stems from a lingering frustration in his life as he is surrounded by people who aspire to middle class status with a goal of assimilating into a broader, much whiter American culture. He seeks a “freedom from” the restrictive nature of middle class social decorum—what others call “proper behavior”— by becoming the leader of the band’s spontaneous actions. At one point, the protagonist comments, “We screamed and screamed at the clear image of ourselves as we should always be. Ecstatic, completed, involved in a secret communal expression” (176). The group finally disperses after the police arrive and attempt to restore order in the Newark streets. Hope’s performance and the actions by the crowd represents a disregard for middle class American values and acknowledgment of the power of black music to encourage revolutionary behavior in its listeners. Baraka’s story essentially speaks to the rousing effect of R&B music and its possibilities for motivating black people to define themselves and their art in a new way.

Music provides the story’s protagonist with the opportunity to gain “freedom from” stifling artistic traditions such as religious practices, white –collared professions, and musical forms that disregard black life. The protagonist often voices his frustrations with the restrictive nature of the art forms he has had to experience, explaining how, “They rivaled pure emotion with wind-up record players that pumped Jo Stafford into House Economics rooms.” He continues, “And these carefully scrubbed children of my parents’ friends fattened on their rhythms until they could join the Urban League or Household Finance and hound the poor for their honesty” (173). His conscious choice to reject public decorum and laws of Newark by taking to the streets in a riot-like fashion is his attempt to embrace black vernacular traditions—music and culture specifically. The experience at the club and the music in particular are the vehicle for the narrator’s transformation. His interaction with the crowd and the band allows him

the opportunity to actualize a new identity. The identity is also associated with an ideology that speaks to the unique historical, social, economic, and political realities of black people.

Moreover, the narrator seems to suggest—even though not entirely clear to him—that there are alternatives to the current life that he lives. For the protagonist, music provides a possible avenue for developing a new kind of thinking and way of being. The music is a break away from traditional models in society and opens up a different culture with which the protagonist more readily identifies (or wants to identify)

The music moves both the band and the unnamed protagonist, inspiring him to relinquish his ties with white middle class values and protest the standards and exclusionary practices that govern society. After the band members leave the stage and take off marching in the streets,<sup>20</sup> the protagonist, energized by their performance and defiance, “then fell in line behind the last wild horn man, strutting like the rest of them” since “the thing they wanted was right there and easily accessible” (176). The “thing” the protagonist refers to is elaborated on in Baraka’s essay “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music).” Baraka argues that “the total function of ‘free music’ can be understood” through working class social functions (190). For Baraka, music contains a transformative and revolutionary element. In the story music leads to the protagonist’s artistic awakening, just as it gives those in the audience the courage to give full expression to the release through screams and chants.

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Dumas’s 1966 short story “Will The Circle Be Unbroken?” also attests to the transformative power and potential of jazz music. In the story, the sounds of music from the musician’s “afro-horn” kill three white people who have forced their way into an all black club. Jazz music plays a significant role during this period when influencing the thematic work of writers of the Black Arts Movement as well as theorizing about black artistic and social culture (2003). Actually, Baraka references this particular short story in his essay “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)” and talks about how this story concentrates on the transformative power of music.

Given Baraka's longstanding interest in and writings on black music, its potential as a revolutionary force as a setting for the story is significant.<sup>21</sup> Langston Hughes, one of the most canonical poets, based a large body of his work on black music and musicians. In 1963, Baraka published *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, a landmark work in the study of African American music, history, and culture, and in 1967, *Black Music*, a notable collection of essays on jazz and prominent musicians such as John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, and Archie Shepp. Baraka and his fellow writers in the Black Arts Movement saw a direct connection between their work, the social movement and black music. For example, in the afterword to *Black Fire*, Larry Neal encourages poets to emulate James Brown in their presentations (653). Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic*, one of the most important essay collections of the Black Arts Movement, includes an entire section dedicated to music. A number of the essays in Baraka's collection *Black Music* highlight his time and experiences in clubs listening to music, all of which he likely drew upon for "Screamers."

An African American nightclub in Newark, Baraka's hometown and long-time artistic base of operations, is an ideal setting to raise issues about revolution and new possibilities for black people. In his play *The Dutchman*, Baraka's main character Clay had famously referred to Bessie Smith and Charlie Parker as repressed black revolutionaries. "The Screamers" reveals Baraka's vision of how liberated, non-repressed musicians might stir black people to action. Baraka proposes that musicians and their music contain revolutionary sentiments that have the potential to prompt cultural and artistic awakenings and revolutions. In "The Screamers," black

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<sup>21</sup> Amiri Baraka has a long standing interest in black music and its larger connections to the psyche of black people. He explains, "Blues (Lyric) its song quality is, it seems, the deepest expression of memory. Experience re/feeling. It is the racial memory. It is the 'abstract' design of racial character that is evident, would be evident, in creation carrying the force of that racial memory" ("The Changing Same," 1991, 189).

music and musicians are central to the processes of igniting mass movement and decisive actions that will ultimately serve the interests of African Americans.

In contrast to Baraka's "Screamers," Toni Cade Bambara's "Raymond's Run," (1971) considers the choices available in a female coming-of-age narrative. Most coming of age stories previously had been told from the point of view of black men, black women, and teenage black boys, but rarely had readers encountered fictive accounts by black girls.<sup>22</sup> The story follows the protagonist Squeaky, or, Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, as she navigates the complicated social terrain of childhood. Her life is defined by her two major roles throughout the story: caring for her autistic and slightly older brother, Raymond, and being the fastest runner in her age group. When other girls in the story challenge her ability as a runner or her brother, she becomes defensive leaving her to become wary of her peers. Squeaky thinks to herself, "Girls never really smile at each other because they don't know how and don't want to know how and there's probably no one to teach us how cause grown-up girls don't know either" (27). Her words signal that she probably has had very few, if any, successful relationships with other black girls and few examples of black women whom she could consider as examples.

Squeaky attends a May Day race determined to keep her title as the fastest runner. After running the race and waiting on the results, Squeaky notices Raymond running alongside her with a very polished form and technique, leading her to think: "I've got a roomful of ribbons and medals and awards. But what has Raymond got to call his own?" (32). Actually, Squeaky's thoughts may also mirror her ideas about her own relationships with her peers. She, like her brother Raymond, is somewhat isolated; she has no friend to call her own. After the announcer

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<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in 1970, just one year prior to the publication of "Raymond's Run," Toni Morrison published her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, which focuses on the coming age experiences of a young black girl and her yearning to be beautiful. Throughout the story, she wishes for blue eyes since she associates those physical features with beauty (*The Bluest Eye*, 1994).

proclaims Squeaky the winner, she smiles sincerely at Gretchen, “Cause she’s good no doubt about it” and thinking that “maybe she’d like to help me coach Raymond” (32). Squeaky’s responsibility to take care of her brother typically leads her to be very defensive when other people approach her in public. Past experience had taught her that most people will try to bully her brother. In addition, Squeaky’s competitive nature about running causes her to distrust other black girls she encounters, seeing only their desire to challenge her position as the fastest girl. At the story’s end, Squeaky shows signs that she will probably take steps to free herself from these restrictive social circumstances. Her growth signals that she will possibly free herself from these restrictive social circumstances. Squeaky maturely decides that tough facades prevent girls and women from engaging in positive interactions with one another.

In “The Black Arts Era, 1960- 1975” section of the *NAAAL*, Houston Baker describes Bambara as “an activist writer who championed African American communal traditions, especially the spoken language and storytelling patterns of black folk” (2075). Bambara’s emphasis on the social and political realities of “black folk” helped to fill the literary void that typically brushed over black women’s concerns. Similar to Zora Neale Hurston who sought to capture the vibrant spirits of African American Vernacular English, Bambara presented witty, verbally dexterous characters in her works. Bambara was part of a generation of writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, who were interested in exploring those coming of age or childhood experiences that shaped the outlook of black people—specifically, black women.

Squeaky allows Bambara to offer commentary on the problematic ways that women, from the time they are girls, treat one another. After her win, Squeaky smiles at Gretchen, thinking to herself, “It’s about as real a smile as girls can do for each other, considering we don’t practice real smiling every day, you know, cause maybe we too busy being flowers or fairies...”

(32). Bambara suggests that more attention should be given to encouraging young girls to be “honest and worthy of respect... you know... like being people” (32). Squeaky needs women to serve as better models, which Bambara considers important for giving young girls the freedom to foster more positive and genuine relationships with other women. Having a young girl herself as the story’s protagonist emphasizes the medium and the message as choices that Bambara made to promote her views on the importance of black women’s identity as independent from men and yet in relationship to other women.

In the introduction to her edited collection *The Black Woman*, Bambara noted that the “impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or racism: men, maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism” but instead black women’s “energies now seem to be invested in and are in turn derived from a determination to touch and to unify.” Aspects of that vision would emerge in her short stories. According to Bambara, the short story examines the maturation process and the select experiences of young black girls. Bambara wanted to “illuminate the struggles that women must confront to exist as people in their own right, apart from the men in their lives,” and was especially concerned that too little attention was being placed on the coming-of-age experiences that shape the outlook of black women. Bambara freed the short story from the mostly male-dominated narratives by creating Squeaky. Bambara’s decision to use Squeaky gave writers after her the necessary literary agency, in other words, to explore further the lives of young black women.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In an interview for the National Visionary Leadership Project, Morrison explains her motivations for writing *The Bluest Eye* stemmed from the male dominated narratives that seemed to not focus and spotlight young black girls. Morrison claims, “I wanted to have a little, hurt black girl at the center of this story.” She continues, in-depth, discussing aspects of the Black Arts Movement and its thematic focus. She explains, “Most of what was being published by black men were very powerful aggressive revolutionary fiction or non-fiction and also they had a very positive racially uplifting rhetoric to go with it. All of which was stimulating...and I thought, “yea, but why so loud?” Then, I thought wait a minute, they’re going to skip over something and no one is going to remember that is wasn’t always beautiful. No one is going to remember how hurtful a certain type of interesting racism is.”

Baraka's emphasis on a middle class black man seeking an opportunity to define himself outside of American bourgeois standards and Bambara's story about the particular childhood experiences of a pre-teen black girl represent a wide spectrum of concerns for Black Arts writers. Still, Baraka's and Bambara's short stories share many similarities in terms of the authorial choices. Both writers choose urban settings as the backdrop for their short stories. Their emphasis on more urban environments coincides with Second Great Migration from 1940 to 1970 during which approximately five million black people moved to urban cities. By the end of the Second Great Migration, more than 80 percent of African Americans lived in cities (Frey 1). Baraka and Bambara reflect sentiments of the working class in their short fiction as they seek to depart from the pastoral writings of their black literary predecessors.

Both Bambara and Baraka have chosen to represent the social challenges and opportunities black people face living in cities. The "black aesthetic," as Stewart describes the concept, called for black artists to create "our own conventions, a convention of procedural elements, a kind of stylization, a sort of insistency which leads inevitably to a certain kind of methodology—a methodology informed by the spirit (Stewart 6). The writing of Baraka and Bambara unsettled the broad category of "black" and sought to present more layered considerations of race. Their works called attention to the class divisions among black people as these evolved in the context of an urban life. Baraka and Bambara, like other short story writers during the period including Henry Dumas, Larry Neal, and Julia Fields, revealed through their fiction the economic, political, and social diversity of black inner-city life.

The gender of the characters in these two short stories is an important way in which the authors show the complex nature of inner-city life. Certainly, the choices that Baraka's unnamed protagonist and Bambara's Squeaky make have gendered consequences. "The Screamers" is

male-driven narrative, told from the perspective of an man yearning to validate his manhood and his blackness. Even though the group of people who take to the streets includes both men and women, the unnamed protagonist describes his environment in gendered terms. As he considers his role as a middle class black man he confesses that he “was too quiet to become a murderer, and too used to extravagance for their skinny lyrics.” Still he makes a somewhat passive choice to disappear “into the slums, and [fall] in love with violence, and [invent] for myself a mysterious economy of need” (Baraka 173). Baraka’s “choice to” narrate this story from the perspective of this unnamed male protagonist signals the internal struggles for black men that exist well beyond slavery and Jim Crow laws. The protagonist is conflicted about his own unwillingness to assimilate into mainstream American culture.

Bambara, on the other hand, considers the consequences of black girls and social barriers which prevent them from developing sincere and lasting relationships with each other. The competitive nature of young girls is often overshadowed by their male counterparts. Bambara’s decision to use Squeaky as the narrator provides her with the “freedom to” focus on these social barriers. At the beginning of the story, when Squeaky encounters a group of girls, she thinks “I’ll just walk straight on through them or even over them if necessary” (Bambara 26). Squeaky’s abrasive nature towards her peers represents a series of more complicated interactions between young black girls that often extend into adulthood. Gaining higher degrees of freedom, in Bambara’s view, sometimes involves providing solutions to intra-racial conflicts between persons of the same sex. Squeaky’s inability to interact with her peers stifles her socially.

The conclusion of each story, however, is telling in terms of the implications of specific character’s choices on their subsequent identities. For the unnamed protagonist in “Screamers”, the active choice to gain “freedom from” assimilationist class values and join the movement

sparked by the band seems to be short lived. At the end of the narrative, the protagonist breaks away from the group “to save whatever it was each of us thought we loved” (Baraka 177). The protagonist’s rebellious nature seems to be quelled when he considers the economic and social lifestyle he has become used to, retreating back to that lifestyle. Bambara chooses to give Squeaky and Gretchen an opportunity to cast aside their competitive attitudes in order to form a friendship at the story’s end, allowing both girls to “stand there with big smiles of respect” (Bambara 32). From Squeaky’s actions, readers become more optimistic that she may develop a meaningful relationship with Gretchen. Bambara’s choice to foreground black girls and their concerns in black literature contrasts sharply with Baraka’s choice of a male protagonist and an all male-band, suggesting that the source of revolutionary spirit not only lies within black music, but that it is also male centered. The two different outlooks of the Black Arts Movement would become more sharply defined with the emergence of Black feminism only a few years later. For my purposes here, Baraka and Bambara display the diverse representations of black writers during this period.

### *Circulation of Black Short Stories*

Literary critics regularly comment on the thematic content of a specific genre and its contributions to the larger field of African American literature; however, less scholarly attention has been devoted to the circulation of African American short stories through various print mediums.<sup>24</sup> Leon Jackson’s extensive article, “The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print—The State of the Discipline” addresses how scholarship that only offers an analysis of the stylistic and thematic features of a work neglects a

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<sup>24</sup> Jackson gives various examples ranging from Nat Turner’s specialized techniques for making paper; William Wells Brown, William Cooper Nell, and William Stanley Braithwaite’s occupations as printers; Frederick Douglass’s obsessions with typography, and Charles Chesnutt and Pauline Hopkins work as stenographers; he also mentions Toni Morrison’s work as an editor for Random House (“The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian,” 2010, 252-3).

crucial feature of literary scholarship—how the publication process influences the reception of a work.<sup>25</sup> Jackson sheds light on how “Scholars of slave culture and print culture have rarely shared agendas, nor have, more broadly, African American social, cultural, and literary historians and those within the community of book historians” (252). Jackson’s examination of African American “cultures of print” clarifies the necessity of considering the contexts through which works are presented. Editors of anthologies participate in constructing impressions of black writing by selecting and promoting writings by authors and thus suggesting what counts as the writers’ most representative works.<sup>26</sup>

It will be necessary in a future study, a look at the consequences of frequently anthologized short stories such as “Sweat,” “Big Boy Leaves Home,” “The Screamers,” and “Raymond’s Run” as they related to authors’ choices and a work’s reception. All, except Baraka, appear in standard collections.<sup>27</sup> More specifically, the three stories discussed here by Hurston, Wright, and Bambara have been anthologized in more than forty anthologies over the past two decades<sup>28</sup> The choices of anthology editors have not only aided in making these stories canonical, but also in making them representative of these writers’ literary careers. The recurring appearance of “Sweat,” “Big Boy Leaves Home,” and “Raymond’s Run” indicates a pattern of selection about which we might make useful observations.

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Mullen discusses “the unique role of black newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses in creating a mass and working-class black readership.” The context and mediums through which a text enters the public sphere is significant to who reads it and how it is received (“Breaking the Signifying Chain,” 2001, 156).

<sup>26</sup> James Nagel’s scholarship suggests that there is an inherent need to study the publication histories of short stories, similar to Jackson. Nagel writes, “Because the constituent stories of cycles often appear individually in magazines before being anthologized, they pose special interpretive problems for scholars...For this and other reasons, the analysis of publication history is particularly important in the study of the genre” (*The Contemporary American Short-story Cycle*, 2001, 14).

<sup>27</sup> David Llorens describes Amiri Baraka as having received “the literary baton that had passed from Richard Wright to Ralph Ellison to James Baldwin.” In addition, he calls Baraka “the prototype of the poet as the newest cultural hero in the black community.” Referring to Baraka is a key distinction. His larger literary legacy has been shaped primarily by his poetry. Many anthologies only contain Baraka’s poetry and present that as being representative of his literary career. The majority of Baraka’s short stories appear in collected works (*Ebony Magazine*, 1969, 75 and 83).

<sup>28</sup> See Appendix I- IV for a listing of how many times the stories have been anthologized over the past twenty years.

Gates and McKay, in the introduction of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* claim that black slaves “created a genre of literature that, at once, testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge to be free and literate” (xxxvii). In a similar fashion, *Call & Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition (Call & Response)* editor Patricia Liggins Hill describes black people’s motivations to write as stemming from “a multipurpose and unique culture that not only reaffirmed their humanness but also allowed them to construct pathways of ethereal and temporal escape” (2). In the *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature (Prentice Hall)*, Rochelle Smith and Sharon L. Jones explain that black writers, over a three-hundred year literary tradition, use “the theme of slavery versus freedom to unite the authors featured in this anthology, illustrating a common link among the chorus of voices comprising the African American literary tradition” (1). The *NAAAL*, *Prentice Hall*, and *Call & Response* thus point to slavery as being an integral point of entry for interpreting black writing. The editorial choices are significant in the framing of black writing. Even though the anthologies are different, their methods of presentation are similar.

In each anthology, the editors address the “talking book trope,” which refers to dual-voiced texts that “talk” to other texts.<sup>29</sup> In the *NAAAL*, specifically, the introductions and table of contents indicate that early black writers’ chief concerns were with how “Western letters refused to *speak* to the person of African descent” (xxxviii). The *NAAAL* notes that early black writers were in search of a “voice” that had the ability to “talk ‘black,’ and, through its unrelenting indictment of the institution of slavery, talk back” (xxxviii). Literary voice, the *NAAL* tells us, is the process by which black people were able to condemn slavery and develop a literary tradition.

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<sup>29</sup> Henry Louis Gates claims, “The black tradition is double-voiced.” He defines the Talking Book Trope as “double-voiced texts that talk to other texts.” This particular reference to black writing has been a defining feature of black writing over the past twenty years as many anthologies have used this concept to explain the larger historical implications of black writing (2004, xxv).

Many of the pieces selected for inclusion exemplify these qualities and display the progression of black writing from spirituals, folk tales, and speeches to poetry, slave narratives, and short fiction.<sup>30</sup>

Anthologies play a crucial role in arranging the thematic content of these authors and shaping distinct ideas about African American short stories. Anthologies act as voices in the presentation of black writing, and “the dominant voices that seem to mold public opinion are less those of citizens engaged in public deliberation than those of elites who possess access to the forums that court public support” (Hauser 26). The “access to the forums” might actually relate to editors utilizing anthologies over the years to shape or solidify views of authors. In addition, publishing houses have the access and resources to display and assist in defining the works by major writers that audiences will encounter and view as “literature.” Moreover, the editorial choices of these editors go hand-in-hand with the authorial choices of black writers. The thematic choices made by these writers act in concert with one another to present varied, yet similar, ideas about freedom and African American literature.

In the stories by Hurston, Wright, Baraka, and Bambara, choice empowers characters to achieve higher degrees of freedom as they escape destructive forces or embrace a new awareness and opportunity. In many respects, the choices that they make are themselves struggles for freedom. Like authors, editors, also contribute to the presentation of freedom aesthetics through grouping writers in specific historical periods, showcasing specific genres, and drawing on particular themes—namely, stories about freedom—to create larger impressions of African

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<sup>30</sup> Ian Reid notes, “the impulse to combine individual tales into wholes has its origins in the very nature of imagination itself... To group separate stories together cohesively, two sorts of constructive method may be used: internal linking and external framing.” Over time, editors have used numerous factors to create the African American literary canon by extending the talking book trope and connecting diverse literary pieces to historical periods such as slavery (*The Signifying Monkey*, 1977, 46).

American and American literature. This examination can expand our understanding of how editors participate in shaping views of major black writers and their places in literary traditions.

### **Conclusion**

Even though freedom is used as a major unifying concept in much of black writing, upon closer analysis, what becomes especially notable are the specific choices characters make to gain higher degrees of social agency within distinct geographic and communal contexts. The choices of anthology editors play a further role in promoting how reading audiences engage black writing. Forrest Ingram writes, “The motion of a wheel is a single process. In a single process, too, the thematic core of a cycle expands and deepens as the elements of that cycle repeat themselves in varied contexts. The dynamic pattern of recurrent development affects the themes, leitmotifs, settings, characters, and structures of the individual stories.” (21). The repetitive thematic representations of black characters struggling against oppressive forces has helped to “expand and deepen” the concept of freedom aesthetics as a unifying theme for black short stories across a number of anthologies. Hurston’s, Wright’s, Baraka’s, and Bambara’s short stories are connected by a larger tradition of freedom aesthetics presenting narratives where African American characters must make pivotal decisions as they struggle against oppressive or at least restrictive forces. Moreover, these authors’ stories share the distinction of appearing regularly in anthologies.

The short story form complements African American cultural history because of its direct relationship to oral narratives. The short stories differ from the novels, whose origins, at least in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are primarily urban and bourgeois.<sup>31</sup> The larger tradition of African American

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<sup>31</sup> Ian Reid notes, “the short story found its province more often than not among small groups of working men, especially in those many areas of the American continent which by early nineteenth century had come to consist of

literature and its use of short stories reveals how short fiction “directly illustrate the sensibilities of people from a given ethnic background, expressing their unique concerns and aspirations as well as their more generalized participation in the human condition” (Nagel 257). For black people, oral narratives and short stories helped to provide fictional snapshots for particular literary and historical moments. Despite these factors, novels seem to be privileged in literary culture and society.

According to Robert Elliot Fox, “With the exception of the so-called new literatures, most canonical anthologies seem based on an assumption of the greatness of previous writings to which we are perpetually appending footnotes and an occasional new monument.” These writings place black freedom struggles—in terms of physical, political, and artistic liberation—as the unifying theme for an oral and written history that dates over 200 years. Similar conversations about the defining features of black writing have surfaced in more recent conversations about African American literature. In his February 2011 article “Does African American Literature Exist?” Kenneth Warren relies on similar perceptions as he proclaims that black writing, or what has come to be known as African American literature, in fact no longer exists. He explains, “African-American literature was the literature of a distinct historical period, namely, the era of constitutionally sanctioned segregation known as Jim Crow... Like it or not, African-American literature was a Jim Crow phenomenon, which is to say, speaking from the standpoint of a post-Jim Crow world, African-American literature is history.” He concludes, “. . . what produced African-American literature as we know it was that, in a Jim Crow society, black writers and their works could plausibly be perceived as voices for a largely silenced

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regional settlement still lacking social cohesion.” This description of early American life relates to black people. Similarly, black people existed outside of the established literary sphere and used short stories to create national literary identities that reflected the consciousness of African Americans (*The Short Story*, 1977, 29).

population.”<sup>32</sup> Warren assumes that the wide body of black writing produced from the Antebellum to the Civil Rights Era in the United States derived solely from the point of view of black writers’ responding to and condemning the culture of Jim Crow society.<sup>33</sup> If one takes his premise as valid, Warren’s argument would seem correct and, from this vantage point, African American literature, indeed, does not exist anymore.<sup>34</sup>

I reject Warren’s premise and propose that he commits a logical fallacy. Essentially, Warren makes a hasty generalization by neglecting to consider all of the variables and examines African American literature from limited point of view. A closer look at selected short stories by Hurston, Wright, Baraka, Baraka, and Bambara reveals a wide range of thematic concerns African American writers have used to express similar and dissimilar visions of black life. Warren does not suggest that African American literature did not exist; instead, he suggests that the motivations for black writers was limited solely to Jim Crow era concerns. The work of the short fiction of these writers disrupts his argument and shows how black authors’ artistic sensibilities draw on a number of cultural and historical sources for inspiration. Particularly, the language, content, and form used by these writers compliment a larger history and tradition of the oral narrative, which has continued to provide a rich resource for innovation and invention .

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<sup>32</sup> In Kenneth Warren’s February 2011 essay, he proclaimed that what scholars know as African American literature does not, in fact, exist anymore (“Does African American Literature Exist?” 2011).

<sup>33</sup> In 1937, Richard Wright questioned the goal of black writers as he described how what literary critics considered noteworthy African American literature, in reality, seemed to be “the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice.” Wright, in fact, believed that African American literature on the whole was more complex than simply responding to Jim Crow. He explains, “Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations... And, the mere recognition of this places the whole question of Negro writing in a new light and raises a doubt as to the validity of its present direction.” Wright, in essence, was calling for a more nuanced and expansive views of black writing in order to move beyond this narrow classification (“Blueprint for Negro Literature,” 2004, 1403).

<sup>34</sup> Kenneth Warren suggests in *What Was African American Literature?* defines African American literature as the creative and critical responses by black writers to Jim Crow barriers in America. He argues that because Jim Crow has been outlawed, in essence, African American literature does not exist anymore (“What Was African American Literature?” 2011).

Moreover, these four writers demonstrate interracial and intraracial conflicts and concerns, having to do domestic life, class conflicts, and coming of age.

Since 1973 to as recent as 2004 writers such as Alice Walker, Charles Johnson, Paule Marshall, Octavia Butler, Edwidge Danticat, and Edward P. Jones have written short fiction that extend beyond the traditions associated with African American of a Jim Crow Era. These writers have produced short stories that expand upon notions of freedom to demonstrate how oppressive financial, social, political and environmental barriers still intrude upon the realities of their characters. Moreover, the “freedom from” concept continues to reference slavery, as is evident in the persistence of the neoslave narrative in contemporary black narrative literature. Edward P. Jones’s “Old Boys, Old Girls” (2004) examines the culture and consequences of violence and prison life as symptomatic of black urban life. His story’s protagonist, Ceaser Matthews, makes an active choice to take steps toward maturity after he is released from jail by developing meaningful social relationships. This lead him to provide a proper and respectable burial for his friend Yvonne. Jones confirms for us that black writers are continually engaging freedom aesthetics as their characters have to make choices to gain “freedom from” oppressive circumstances.

I believe black writing extends a much more complex artistic tradition drawing from Euro-American as well as African oral and cultural practices. African American folk tales, for instance, represent a history of the short, concise tales that influence black writing and the distinct stylistic and structural features of African American literature. A greater emphasis on short fiction—specifically, short stories—can reveal more nuanced practices of black writing and help better define African American literature as more than just a body of writing written by black people.

Perhaps short stories serve as a model—or sketch pad—for authors to experiment with structural features of writing and develop distinct stylistic approaches. Or, maybe short stories serve as stand-ins for writers’ longer workers. Toni Morrison’s only short story, the 1983 “Recitatif” seems, in retrospect, like a precursor to those questions she asked in her novel *Paradise* (1999). Since literature courses typically have only one semester to cover the entire breath of African American and American literature, this may lead course instructors to assign Hurston’s “Sweat” instead of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home” instead of *Black Boy* or *Native Son*. Many acclaimed short story writers have expressed a preference for the short story form, including Jones and Bambara. Still, short stories typically do not provide writers with enough space to fully develop characters and scenes and complicate the story line, with the aid of multiple flashbacks and extensive foreshadowing. A key factor appears to be the publishing industry, which tends to favor novels, while producing disincentives for writers of short stories.<sup>35</sup> An awareness of these advantages and limitations of short stories underscores and value and significance of African American short fiction in different contexts.

Ultimately, my research on African American short stories foregrounds the choices that writers employ and the approaches that editors and anthologies take when presenting works in their collections. Examinations of character choices in Hurston’s “Sweat,” Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home,” Bambara’s “Raymond’s Run,” and Baraka’s “The Screamers” suggests that the concept of freedom is contingent upon a wide range of choices that characters make as they follow a new or different life path. These choices involve the “freedom from” as well as the “freedom to,” and can include actions both passive and active in nature. Hurston’s Delia decides

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<sup>35</sup> Although Edward P. Jones is well-known for his two short story collections; his novel *The Known World* (2003) was awarded the Pulitzer and thus received widespread coverage (“The Known World of Edward P. Jones,” 2009).

not to intervene at a key moment, thus leading to the demise of her abusive husband. Wright's Big Boy elects to leave home and the South in order to escape impending violent reprisals from white people. Baraka's unnamed protagonist decides to use jazz music as an outlet to rebel against middle class values and social norms by taking to the streets to express himself. Bambara's Squeaky decides to take a step towards maturity and develop a genuine friendship with another black girl. My exploration of different character choices does not suggest that one thematic style or presentation is better than another. Rather, my goal is to make a case for paying more attention to the complexity and outcomes of character and authorial choices in the study of short fiction.

## **Description of Appendixes**

The Following Appendixes illustrate the larger publication history of short stories covered in this study as well as other short stories by black writers that have received considerable attention in anthologies.

Appendixes I- IV are a compilation of the anthologies that include Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat," Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home," Amiri Baraka's "The Screamer," and Toni Cade Bambara's "Raymond's Run," from 1992 to 2012.

Appendix V reveals a list of twenty short stories and their publication histories (publication dates and where the stories made their first appearance). The stories included in this list also present narratives about black characters making distinct choices to gain higher degrees of social, economic, and political freedom.

## Appendix I

### Chronological List of Anthologies Containing Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat," 1992-2012

#### 1992

Oates, Joyce Carol, Ed. *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories*. Oxford [England: Oxford UP, 1992. Print.

#### 1993

Charters, Ann, Ed. *Major Writers of Short Fiction: Stories and Commentaries*. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's, 1993. Print.

Worley, Demetrice A., and Jesse Perry, Eds. *African American Literature: An Anthology of Nonfiction, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook, 1993. Print.

#### 1994

Andrews, William Leake, Ed. *Classic Fiction of the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.

#### 1995

Charters, Ann, and William E. Sheidley Eds. *Resources for Teaching The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's, 1995. Print.

Wagner-Martin, Linda, and Cathy N. Davidson, Eds. *The Oxford Book of Women's Writing in the United States*. Oxford [England: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.

#### 1996

Gates, Henry Louis., and Nellie Y. McKay Eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 1996. Print.

Koppelman, Susan, Ed. *Women in the Trees: U.S. Women's Short Stories about Battering and Resistance, 1839-1994*. Boston: Beacon, 1996. Print.

Ward, Candace. *Great Short Stories by American Women*. New York: Dover Publications, 1996. Print.

#### 1997

Duncan, Charles, Ed. *Global Literature: One World, Many Voices*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1997. Print.

Maney, J. P., and Tom Hazuka, Eds. *A Celestial Omnibus: Short Fiction on Faith*. Boston: Beacon, 1997. Print.

## 1998

Andrews, William L, Ed. *The Literature of the American South: A Norton Anthology*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. Print.

## 2000

Copage, Eric V, Ed. *Soul Food: Inspirational Stories for African Americans*. New York: Hyperion, 2000. Print.

## 2001

Howes, Kelly King., and Christine Slovey, Eds. *Harlem Renaissance*. Detroit: U X L, 2001. Print.

Patton, Venetria K., and Maureen Honey, Eds. *Double-take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001. Print.

## 2002

Gioia, Dana, and R. S. Gwynn Eds. *The Longman Masters of Short Fiction*. New York: Longman, 2002. Print.

Gwynn, R.S., Ed. *Fiction : a pocket anthology*. New York: Longman, 2002. Print.

Lauter, Paul, and Richard Yarborough, Eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. Print.

Sisko, Yvonne Collioud, Ed. *American 24-karat Gold: 24 Classic American Short Stories*. New York: Longman, 2002. Print.

## 2003

Baym, Nina. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2003. Print.

## 2006

Gioia, Dana, and R. S. Gwynn, Eds. *The Art of the Short Story*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006. Print.

## 2007

Madden, Frank, Ed. *Exploring Literature: Writing and Arguing about Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and the Essay*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007. Print.

## 2009

Reed, Ishmael, and Carla Blank, Eds. *Pow Wow: Charting the Fault Lines in the American Experience : Short Fiction from Then to Now*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2009. Print.

## Appendix II

### Chronological List of Anthologies Containing Richard Wright "Big Boy Leaves Home," 1992-2012

#### **1991**

Abbott, Dorothy, and Susan Koppelman, Eds. *The Signet Classic Book of Southern Short Stories*. New York: New American Library, 1991. Print.

#### **1996**

Gates, Henry Louis., and Nellie Y. McKay, Eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 1996. Print.

#### **2000**

Kellman, Steven G, Ed. *Masterplots II*. Pasadena, CA: Salem, 2000. Print.

#### **2002**

Hitchcock, Bert, Virginia M. Kouidis, and Eugene Current-García, Eds. *American Short Stories*. New York: Longman, 2002. Print.

#### **2003**

Kennedy, Caroline, Ed. *A Patriot's Handbook: Songs, Poems, Stories, and Speeches Celebrating the Land We Love*. New York: Hyperion, 2003. Print.

#### **2006**

Trodd, Zoe, Ed. *American Protest Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2006. Print.

#### **2010**

Lauter, Paul, Richard Yarborough, and James Kyung-Jin. Lee, Eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010. Print.

## Appendix III

### Chronological List of Anthologies Containing Amiri Baraka's "The Screamers," 1992-2012

#### **1992**

Charters, Ann, Ed. *The Portable Beat Reader*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1992. Print.

Jones, Gayl, Ed. *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*. New York: Penguin, 1992. Print.

#### **1995**

Boyd, Herb, Robert L. Allen, and Tom Feelings, Eds. *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America*. New York: One World, 1995. Print.

#### **2009**

Feinstein, Sascha, and David Rife. *The Jazz Fiction Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009. Print.

## Appendix IV

### Chronological List of Anthologies Containing Toni Cade Bambara "Raymond's Run," 1992-2012

#### 1993

Goodman, Burton, Ed. *Conflicts: 15 Masterpieces of Struggle and Conflict : With Exercises to Make You Think*. Providence, RI: Jamestown, 1993. Print.

Mazer, Anne, Ed. *America Street: A Multicultural Anthology of Stories*. New York: Persea, 1993. Print.

Rochman, Hazel, and Darlene Z. McCampbell, Eds. *Who Do You Think You Are?: Stories of Friends and Enemies*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1993. Print.

#### 1994

Emra, Bruce, Ed. *Coming of Age: Short Stories about Youth & Adolescence*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook, 1994. Print.

Harris, Raymond, Ed. *Best Short Stories. 10 Stories for Young Adults with Lessons for Teaching the Basic Elements of Literature*. Lincolnwood, IL: Jamestown, 1994. Print.

#### 1995

Schinto, Jeanne, Ed. *Show Me a Hero: Great Contemporary Stories about Sports*. New York: Persea, 1995. Print.

#### 1996

Gates, Henry Louis., and Nellie Y. McKay, Eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 1996. Print.

#### 1997

Sandoz, Joli, Ed. *A Whole Other Ball Game: Women's Literature on Women's Sport*. New York: Noonday, 1997. Print.

Wilson, Kathleen, Marie Lazzari, Tim Akers, Jerry Moore, Ira Mark. Milne, Michael L. LaBlanc, Jennifer Smith, Carol Ullmann, and David Galens, Eds. *Short Stories for Students. Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Short Stories*. Detroit, MI: Gale, 1997. Print.

#### 1999

Hamilton, Carole L., and Peter Kratzke, Eds. *Short Stories in the Classroom*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1999. Print.

Williford, Lex, and Michael Martone, Eds. *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction: Fifty North American Stories since 1970*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1999. Print.

## **2001**

Holder, Victoria, Ed. *Inside out outside In: Exploring American Literature*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. Print.

## **2004**

Solomon, Barbara H., and Eileen Panetta, Eds. *Once upon a Childhood: Stories and Memoirs of American Youth*. New York: New American Library, 2004. Print.

Williford, Lex, and Michael Martone, Eds. *Contemporary Fiction: 50 Short Stories since 1970*. New York: Touchstone Book Published by Simon & Schuster, 2004. Print.

## Appendix V

| <u>Authors</u>            | <u>Short Story Title</u>        | <u>Publication</u>  | <u>Publication Date</u> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Charles Chesnutt          | “The Wife of His Youth”         | <i>Atlantic Monthly</i>   | July 1898               |
| Rudolph Fisher            | “The City of Refuge”            | <i>Atlantic Monthly</i>   | February 1925           |
| <b>Zora Neale Hurston</b> | <b>“Sweat”</b>                  | <b><i>Fire!!</i></b>  | <b>1926</b>             |
| Zora Neale Hurston        | “Spunk”                         | <i>The New Negro</i>  | 1925                    |
| <b>Richard Wright</b>     | <b>“Big Boy Leaves Home”</b>    | <b><i>The New Caravan</i></b>                                     | <b>1936</b>             |
| Richard Wright            | “The Man Who Lived Underground” | <i>Cross Section</i>  | 1944                    |
| Ralph Ellison             | “Battle Royal”                  | <i>Horizon</i>  | October 1947            |
| James Baldwin             | “Sonny’s Blues”                 | <i>Partisan Review</i>  | 1957                    |
| Ernest J. Gaines          | “The Sky is Gray”               | <i>Negro Digest</i>   | August 1963             |
| <b>Amiri Baraka</b>       | <b>“The Screamers”</b>          | <b><i>The Moderns; An Anthology of New Writing in America</i></b> | <b>1963</b>             |
| <b>Toni Cade Bambara</b>  | <b>“Raymond’s Run”</b>          | <b><i>Tales and Short Stories for Black Folks</i></b>             | <b>1971</b>             |
| Toni Cade Bambara         | “The Lesson”                    | <i>Gorilla My Love</i>  | 1972                    |
| Henry Dumas               | “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”  | <i>Negro Digest</i>   | 1966                    |
| Alice Walker              | “Everyday Use”                  | <i>In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women</i>                | 1973                    |
| Charles Johnson           | “The Education of Mingo”        | <i>Mother Jones</i>   | August 1977             |
| Paule Marshall            | “Reena”                         | <i>Reena and Other Stories</i>                                    | 1983                    |
| Toni Morrison             | “Recitatif”                     | <i>Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women</i>       | 1983                    |
| Octavia Butler            | “Bloodchild”                    | <i>Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine</i>                    | 1984                    |
| Edwidge Danticat          | “Seven”                         | <i>The New Yorker</i>   | October 01, 2001        |
| Edward P. Jones           | “Old Boys, Old Girls”           | <i>The New Yorker</i>   | May 03, 2004            |

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