

In its burgeoning years, HBW, then named the Computer Assisted Analysis of Black Literature (CAABL), focused solely on identifying all published novels written by African Americans in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Members of CAABL--Jerry W. Ward, Jr., Norris Clark, Norman Harris, Vashti Lewis, Maria Mootry, Sterling Plump, Maryemma Graham, and Richard Yarborough--compiled a draft of the African American Novel Study Guide to usher a future literature-based research project on the work of African American writers. A planning grant from the Ford Foundation helped to lay the foundation for the new project.

To reflect its research focus, CAABL adopted The Afro-American Novel Project (AANP) as its new name. Housed in the Department of English at the University of Mississippi, the staff began to expand the original study guide into a comprehensive checklist and database of African American novels. In 1985, AANP published the first edition of *The Afro-American Novel: A Guide for Teachers and Students*.

Though the members of AANP were diligently researching, compiling, and documenting the work of African American writers, they were also committed to producing more public scholarship and increasing access. In 1985, AANP Director Maryemma Graham and the University of Mississippi's African American Studies Program Director Ronald W. Bailey organized the Project's first public program with funding from the NEH: "Mississippi's Native Son: An International Symposium on Richard Wright." Held at the University of Mississippi on November 21st through the 23rd, 1985, the event marked the 25th anniversary of Wright's death.



**EARLY PROJECTS:
1983-1985**



RESEARCH & RECOVERY: 1986-1988

In 1988, the Project received a three-year grant for “The Afro-American Novel Project: Building a Database for African American Literature” from the Division of Preservation and Access, National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). University of Mississippi graduate students Weigung Wu and Susanne Dietzel worked with the project’s first professional librarian Dr. Barbara Hunt to begin securing hard copies of over 800 novels and developing a program for storage and retrieval.

In addition to the Project’s work on the pre-digital database, Project members also researched and recovered the work of Kentucky’s earliest-known Black poet Effie Waller Smith. Project Director Maryemma Graham also worked on the first collected edition of the poetry of 19th century writer and activist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Both projects, at the invitation of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., became a part of the Schomburg Library of 19th Century Black Women Writers. In 1988, both were also published in the Oxford series as *The Collected Poems of Effie Waller Smith*, edited by staff member Jennifer Kovach and Pikeville, Kentucky resident David Deskins, and *The Collected Poems of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*, edited and with an introduction by Maryemma Graham.

AFRICAN

Literature: from Phillis

EXPANDING OUR SCOPE: THE NORTHEASTERN YEARS 1989-1998

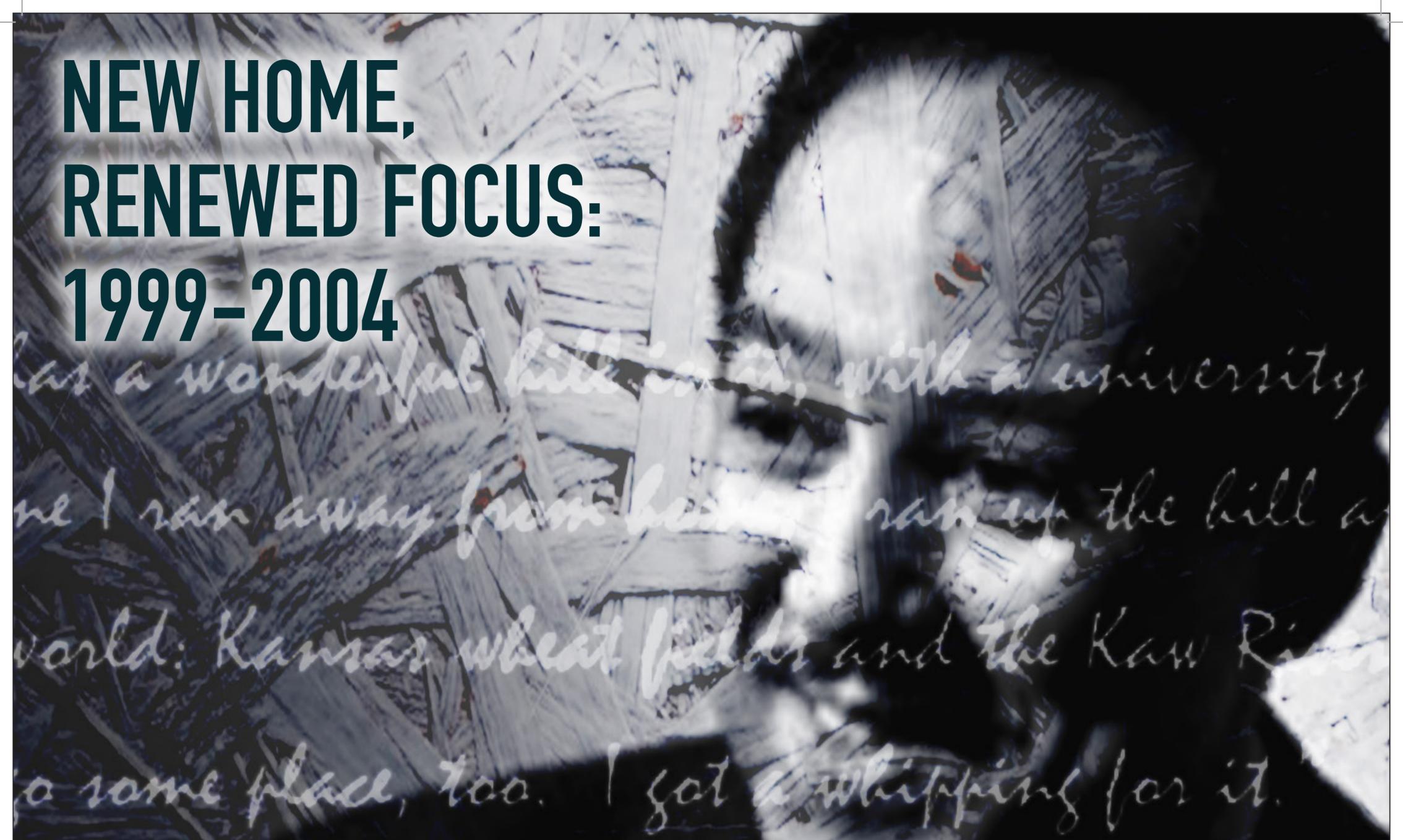
Project Director Maryemma Graham moved to Northeastern University in 1989, allowing the newly named Project on the History of Black Writing (HBW) to connect with a wider group of scholars and researchers, many of whom were at Harvard's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute. Graham accepted a fellowship with the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) in Worcester, Massachusetts, that provided multiple avenues for increasing the project's research output and public engagement.

In 1990, a partnership with AAS led to a curated exhibit "African American Holdings in the American Antiquarian Society." The exhibit catalog served as a guide to early African American literary history. That same year, HBW continued its practice of attending the College Language Association Conference, building an important and supportive academic network for its student staff and expanding work. The relationship with Harvard provided another opportunity when Graham directed an NEH summer institute on "The Great Migration" in 1991. Building on the success of the NEH Richard Wright Symposium, that same year Jerry W. Ward and project Director Graham co-founded the Richard Wright Circle. Also in 1991, HBW published the inaugural issue of the Richard Wright Newsletter with the support of the Wright family and the late Ralph Ellison, who served as honorary board member.

With its official move to Northeastern University, HBW increased its focus on professional development and public outreach. A series of NEH grants for summer institutes on African American literature allowed thirty teachers to learn and practice new methods of teaching bolstered by a greater historical and literary understanding of the work of foundational Black writers. "Teaching African American Literature: From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison, Part I," was held in summer 1992, with Part II held in summer 1993. Both institutes had the guiding hand of scholar-activist Dr. Marianna White Davis, best known for her work with the NCTE Black Caucus. Partly at Davis's request but also eager to share what they had learned, institute teachers wrote and collaborated on the publication *Teaching African American Literature: Theory and Practice* in 1998, a compendium of teaching methods and relevant criticism. Two additional summer institutes entitled "Middle Passage: The Making of the Atlantic World" I and II were held in 1995 and 1997 respectively in partnership with the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History and hosted by Howard University.

HBW continued to advance its work in what would soon become a household term, the Digital Humanities. In 1996, the Project's cutting-edge, exploratory work resulted in *Neither Bond Nor Free: An Anthology of Rare African American Texts*, a collaboration between grad student researchers at the University of Virginia and scholars from James Madison University. Supported with funding from the Lemelson Foundation, James H.W. Howard's little-known 1886 novel became the prototype for the first fully digitized novel from HBW's collection.

NEW HOME, RENEWED FOCUS: 1999-2004



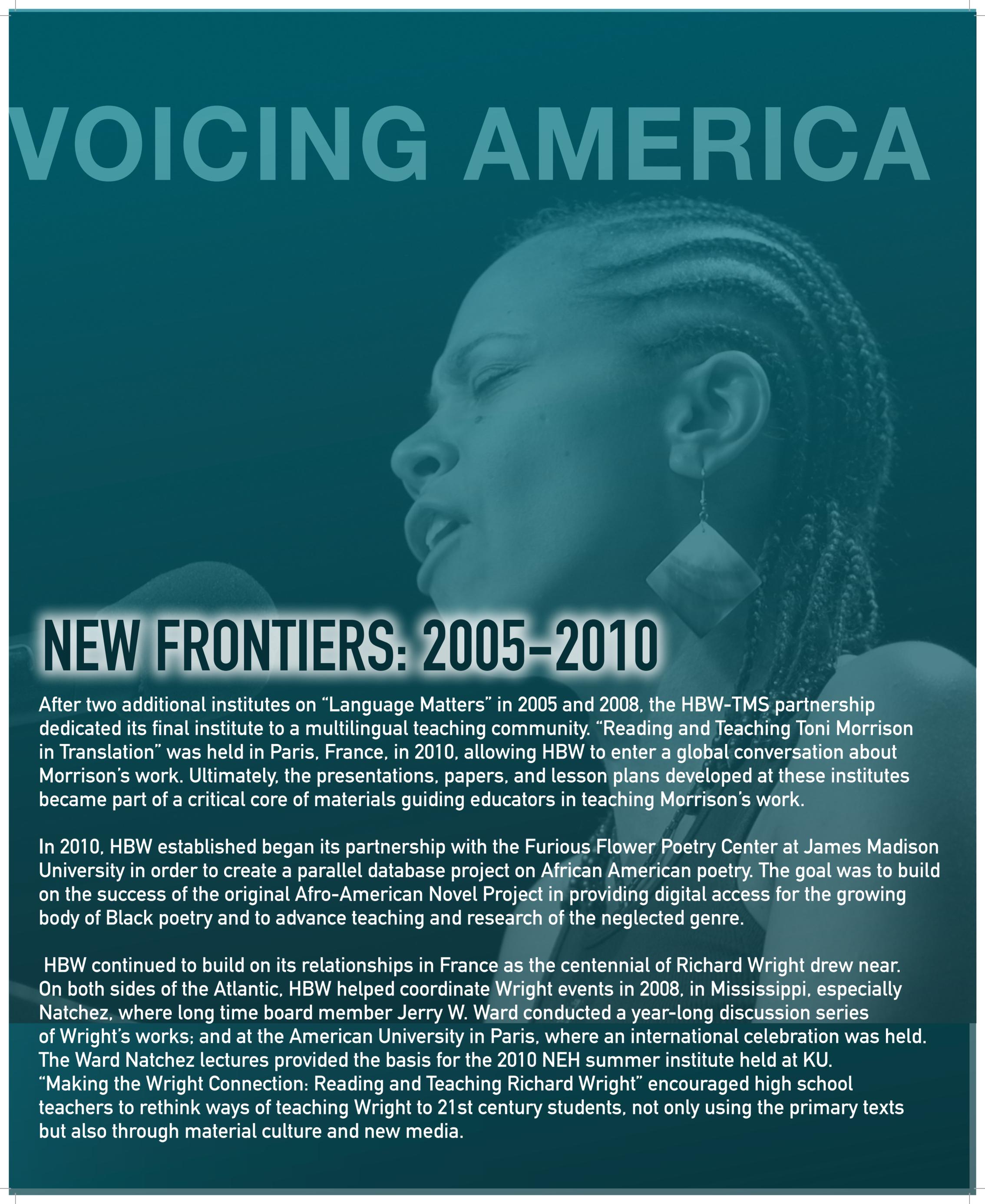
*...as a wonderful hill in it, with a university
...ne I ran away from here, ran up the hill a
...world: Kansas wheat fields and the Kaw River
...a some place, too. I got a whipping for it.*

In 1999, HBW moved to its current home at the University of Kansas. Original staff members, English grad students Doretha K Williams and Tony Harris, completed the first major KU project by researching and compiling the novels section of Encarta Africana: The Library of Black America. Funded by Microsoft, the first comprehensive digital encyclopedia of Black history was published in 2000. In the following year, HBW launched its new website and blog, establishing a major online presence in discussions of Black literature and culture.

With funding from the NEH, the Alfred P. Knopf Foundation, and the Kaufman Foundation, in 2001 HBW began planning the Langston Hughes National Poetry Project (LHNPP). The first major undertaking for the LHNPP, "Let America Be America Again: An International Symposium on the Art, Life & Legacy of Langston Hughes," was held on the occasion of Hughes' 2002 centennial. Co-chaired by Bill Tuttle, Professor Emeritus of American Studies, the conference remains the largest ever held devoted to the legacy of Langston Hughes with over 1000 people in attendance. The three-year LHNPP-NEH grant supported Hughes-related programming throughout the US with more than fifty library and other organizational partners.

HBW celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2003 and project members continued to expand their research scope and public programming. Partnering with the Toni Morrison Society to create the Language Matters Teaching Initiative, HBW and TMS held in the summer of 2003 the first of four Language Matters Teaching Initiatives, "Reading and Teaching Toni Morrison." The core research recovery work continued, however, as indicated by the 2004 publication of The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel, utilizing HBW's collected research.

VOICING AMERICA



NEW FRONTIERS: 2005–2010

After two additional institutes on “Language Matters” in 2005 and 2008, the HBW-TMS partnership dedicated its final institute to a multilingual teaching community. “Reading and Teaching Toni Morrison in Translation” was held in Paris, France, in 2010, allowing HBW to enter a global conversation about Morrison’s work. Ultimately, the presentations, papers, and lesson plans developed at these institutes became part of a critical core of materials guiding educators in teaching Morrison’s work.

In 2010, HBW established began its partnership with the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University in order to create a parallel database project on African American poetry. The goal was to build on the success of the original Afro-American Novel Project in providing digital access for the growing body of Black poetry and to advance teaching and research of the neglected genre.

HBW continued to build on its relationships in France as the centennial of Richard Wright drew near. On both sides of the Atlantic, HBW helped coordinate Wright events in 2008, in Mississippi, especially Natchez, where long time board member Jerry W. Ward conducted a year-long discussion series of Wright’s works; and at the American University in Paris, where an international celebration was held. The Ward Natchez lectures provided the basis for the 2010 NEH summer institute held at KU. “Making the Wright Connection: Reading and Teaching Richard Wright” encouraged high school teachers to rethink ways of teaching Wright to 21st century students, not only using the primary texts but also through material culture and new media.



RAISING THE BAR: 2011–TODAY

As HBW approached its 30th anniversary, project and board members sought to establish new research initiatives. HBW re-launched its African American Literary Blog and added new social media platforms which continue to expand. In 2011, HBW established the Black Literary Suite, a series of public exhibits showcasing HBW's collection and research to present the history of African American writers and novels in new and innovative ways. Since 2011, HBW has hosted eight Black Literary Suites: "Books Talking Back" (2011), "Black Literary Suite: New York Edition" (2011), "The Black Literary Suite: Wikipedia Edition" (2012), "Black Writers with a Kansas Connection" (2015), "Sports Figures with a Kansas Connection" (2016), "Mississippi Renaissance" (2017), and "Reclaiming the Black Body: Women Writing Women" (2017).

While BLS was campus based, the GEMS Initiative began in 2012 to allow project staff to focus on the work and legacy of one lesser-known Black writer through personal interviews and research. The resulting videos highlighting the distinctive contributions of these foundational figures are made publicly available. HBW has completed three GEMS Initiatives: Mari Evans (2012), Eugene Redmond (2013), and John A. Williams (2014). The latest GEMS Initiative focuses on the writer, educator, and poet Naomi Long Madgett and will be completed in Spring 2019.

RAISING THE BAR: 2011–TODAY



For HBW's third series of NEH Summer Institutes, the Project turned to their new partnership with the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University. HBW hosted "Don't Deny My Voice I: Reading and Teaching African American Poetry" in 2013 and "Don't Deny My Voice II: Black Poetry After the Black Arts Movement" in 2015. HBW was able to secure the rights to re-print valuable texts on Black poetry currently unavailable, including Eugene B. Redmond's *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, A Critical History* (1970) in 2013 and two books of poetry—*Looka Here, Now!* and *Other Poems from the Fifties and Poems* (both 1996)—by the late Allen Polite, who died in Sweden, where he has been an expatriate since the 1960s. In recent years, these institutes have flourished through international partnerships. HBW has also hosted and organized the ten-day University of Kansas-Beijing Foreign Studies University (KU-BFSU) summer institutes in 2016 and 2017, providing Chinese graduate students broad exposure to American higher education and America's culturally diverse heritage.

By 2011, HBW was attracting graduate staff whose interests aligned with one goal that had yet to be accomplished: the completion of our digital archive of African American novels. After a pilot project in 2012 and KU funding in 2014, The Black Book Interactive Project (BBIP) received its first national funding from NEH in 2016 to create a metadata schema that accounts for race and race-related issues, correcting the digital divide in Black-authored texts. The success of this effort garnered a second round of funding from the American Council of Learned Societies, which allows the BBIP team to complete the corpus of 1200 mostly understudied novels. Through a partnership with the University of Chicago's Chicago Text Lab, BBIP will complete the conversion of HBW's original African American Novel Collection, becoming the first and only digital archive of African American novels in existence. In addition, this project will help train a new generation of researchers, now known as BBIP Scholars. HBW also initiated the Digital Inclusion Network Initiative (DIGIN) in order to address the digital divide by identifying hidden collections and promoting digital literacy training inside and outside the academy. This project offers ongoing and former HBW staff the opportunity to continue their work with HBW even as they begin their own careers. Creating a bridge between new knowledge production, increased access and training will allow HBW to have a more lasting impact on current and future generations.