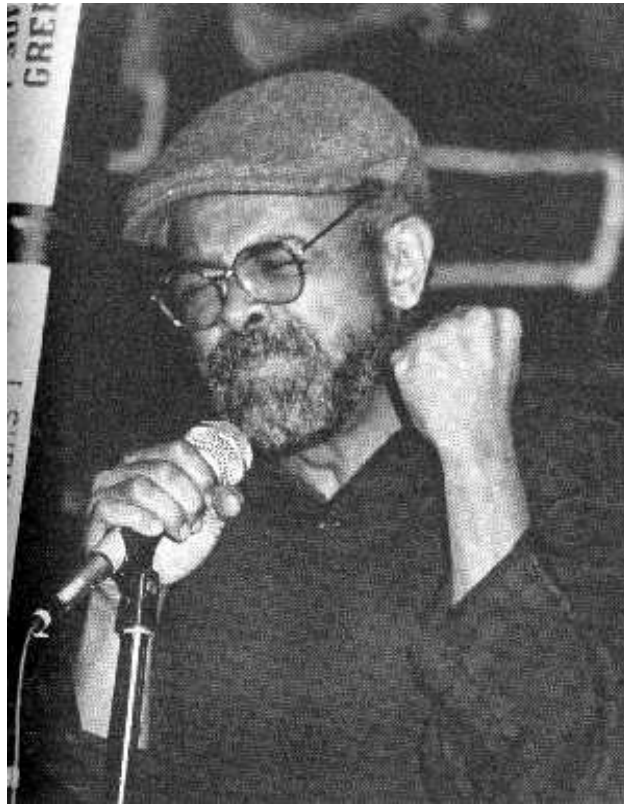


NOTABLE BLACKS IN RECENT HISTORY



Amiri Baraka Biography

Born in Newark in 1934, Amiri Baraka is the author of several dozen collections of poetry, fiction, drama, essays and criticism. He is widely known for collaborating with numerous jazz musicians and for his involvement with Black Nationalism and other politically active groups. Baraka, known as LeRoi Jones in his youth, studied at Howard University and Columbia University, gaining national attention in 1964 with the Obie Award-winning play *Dutchman*. After the death of Malcom X, he founded the Black Arts Movement. Formerly a professor at SUNY-Stony Brook and Rutgers University, Baraka presently resides in Newark where he spearheads the Unity and Struggle Collective and co-hosts with his wife, Amina, a monthly salon, *Kimako's Blues People*, at his home. He regularly travels internationally to perform his work. In 1997, Baraka appeared in Warren Beatty's film *Bullworth*. His recent publications include *Allah Mean Everything*, a special edition of the NJIT periodical *Newark Review*.

NOTABLE BLACKS IN RECENT HISTORY



Poet Jayne Cortez

Poet Jayne Cortez was born in Arizona grew up in California and currently lives in New York City She is the author of ten books of poems and has performed her poetry with music on nine recordings Her voice is celebrated for its political, surrealistic, dynamic, innovations in lyricism and visceral sound. Cortez has presented her works and ideas at universities, museums and festivals in Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, the Caribbean and the United States. Her poems have been translated into many languages and widely published in anthologies, journals and magazines.

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James Baldwin (1924 - 1987)

Although he spent a great deal of his life abroad, James Baldwin always remained a quintessentially American writer. Whether he was working in Paris or Istanbul, he never ceased to reflect on his experience as a black man in white America. In numerous essays, novels, plays, and public speeches, the eloquent voice of James Baldwin spoke of the pain and struggle of black Americans and the saving power of brotherhood.

James Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924. The oldest of nine children, he grew up in poverty, developing a troubled relationship with his strict, religious father. As a child, he cast about for a way to escape his circumstances. As he recalls, "I knew I was black, of course, but I also knew I was smart. I didn't know how I would use my mind, or even if I could, but that was the only thing I had to use." By the time he was fourteen, Baldwin was spending much of his time in libraries and had found his passion for writing.

During this early part of his life, he followed in his father's footsteps and became a preacher. Of those teen years, Baldwin recalled, "Those three years in the pulpit -- I didn't realize it then -- that is what turned me into a writer, really, dealing with all that anguish and that despair and that beauty." Many have noted the strong influence of the language of the church on Baldwin's style, its cadences and tone. Eager to move on, Baldwin knew that if he left the pulpit he must also leave home, so at eighteen he took a job working for the New Jersey railroad.

After working for a short while with the railroad, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, where he came into contact with the well-known writer Richard Wright. Baldwin worked for a number of years as a freelance writer, working primarily on book reviews. Though Baldwin had not yet finished a novel, Wright helped to secure him a grant with which he could support himself as a writer in Paris. So, in 1948 Baldwin left for Paris, where he would find enough distance from the American society he grew up in to write about it.

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After writing a number of pieces that were published in various magazines, Baldwin went to Switzerland to finish his first novel. *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN*, published in 1953, was an autobiographical work about growing up in Harlem. The passion and depth with which he described the struggles of black Americans was unlike anything that had been written. Though not instantly recognized as such, *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN* has long been considered an American classic. Throughout the rest of the decade, Baldwin moved from Paris to New York to Istanbul, writing *NOTES FOR A NATIVE SON* (1955) and *GIOVANNI'S ROOM* (1956). Dealing with taboo themes in both books (homosexuality and interracial relationships, respectively), Baldwin was creating socially relevant and psychologically penetrating literature.

Being abroad gave Baldwin a perspective on his life and a solitary freedom to pursue his craft. "Once you find yourself in another civilization," he notes, "you're forced to examine your own." In a sense, Baldwin's travels brought him even closer to the social concerns of contemporary America. In the early 1960s, overwhelmed with a responsibility to the times, Baldwin returned to take part in the civil rights movement. Traveling throughout the South, he began work on an explosive work about black identity and the state of racial struggle, *THE FIRE NEXT TIME* (1963). For many, *NOTES FOR A NATIVE SON* and *THE FIRE NEXT TIME* were an early and primary voice in the civil rights movement. Though at times criticized for his pacifist stance, Baldwin remained throughout the 1960s an important figure in that struggle.

After the assassinations of his friends Medgar Evers, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, Baldwin returned to France where he worked on a book about the disillusionment of the times, *IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK* (1974). Many responded to the harsh tone of *IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK* with accusations of bitterness. But, even if Baldwin had encapsulated much of the anger of the times in his book, he always remained a constant advocate for universal love and brotherhood. During the last ten years of his life, Baldwin produced a number of important works of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, and turned to teaching as a new way of connecting with the young. By his death in 1987, James Baldwin had become one of the most important and vocal advocates for equality. From *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN* to *THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN* (1985), James Baldwin created works of literary beauty and depth that will remain essential parts of the American canon.

NOTABLE BLACKS IN RECENT HISTORY



Sonia Sanchez (b. 1934) is a prolific writer, serious, and original. Her poems depict the struggles between black people and white people, between men and women, and between cultures. She is innovative in her use of language and structure, sometimes using Black speech in her poetry. She too has a brilliant sense of history, and a vision of her people being truly free. "right on: white america" is one of her best poems. America, she writes, was once 'a pio/neer land', but it had systematically eliminated through intolerance all those that it saw different. Thus, "there ain't ./no mo/ indians', 'no mo real/white allamerican/bad/guys. The only ones left now are the black people and they had better 'check out', for the guns and shells are falling to decimate them and a bleak future awaits them unless they do something about it.

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Albert Murray

When Albert Murray arrived at Tuskegee Institute in 1935, Ralph Ellison was an upperclassman who was, in Murray's words, "dressed like a 'Joe College' right out of Esquire Magazine." According to Murray, Ellison "represented the type of aspirations that I had been expecting for myself."

While their paths split geographically, the two kindled an emotional and intellectual friendship that gained momentum during the era of Ellison's creative peak, when his timeless novel of identity *Invisible Man* was being written, distributed, reviewed, and rewards reaped upon. They honored successes, encouraged intellectual growth, and shared a deep love of music. They were best friends.

Now 85, Murray remains active as a director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, and as a cultural critic, biographer, essayist, and novelist. His work includes *The Omni-Americans*, *South to a Very Old Place*, *Train Whistle Guitar*, *The Blue Devils of Nada*, *The Seven League Boots* and the American masterpiece, *Stomping the Blues*. A recent publication of correspondence between Ellison and Murray, *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, exhibits their special friendship.

In our exclusive interview, Murray focuses on his relationship with Ellison, talks of their collective literary mentors, their view of bebop and the arts, and his take on "Ken Burns' Jazz."

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James Langston Hughes (1902 - 1967)

(February 1, 1902 - May 22, 1967)

Born in Joplin, Missouri, James Langston Hughes was a member of an abolitionist family. He was the great-great-grandson of Charles Henry Langston, brother of John Mercer Langston, who was the first Black American to be elected to public office, in 1855. Hughes attended Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio, but began writing poetry in the eighth grade, and was selected as Class Poet. His father didn't think he would be able to make a living at writing, and encouraged him to pursue a more practical career. He paid his son's tuition to Columbia University on the grounds he study engineering. After a short time, Langston dropped out of the program with a B+ average; all the while he continued writing poetry. His first published poem was also one of his most famous, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", and it appeared in Brownie's Book. Later, his poems, short plays, essays and short stories appeared in the NAACP publication Crisis Magazine and in Opportunity Magazine and other publications.

One of Hughes' finest essays appeared in the Nation in 1926, entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". It spoke of Black writers and poets, "who would surrender racial pride in the name of a false integration," where a talented Black writer would prefer to be considered a poet, not a Black poet, which to Hughes meant he subconsciously wanted to write like a white poet. Hughes argued, "no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself." He wrote in this essay, "We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they aren't, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how

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and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

In 1923, Hughes traveled abroad on a freighter to the Senegal, Nigeria, the Cameroons, Belgium Congo, Angola, and Guinea in Africa, and later to Italy and France, Russia and Spain. One of his favorite pastimes whether abroad or in Washington, D.C. or Harlem, New York was sitting in the clubs listening to blues, jazz and writing poetry. Through these experiences a new rhythm emerged in his writing, and a series of poems such as "The Weary Blues" were penned. He returned to Harlem, in 1924, the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. During this period, his work was frequently published and his writing flourished. In 1925 he moved to Washington, D.C., still spending more time in blues and jazz clubs. He said, "I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street...(these songs) had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going." At this same time, Hughes accepted a job with Dr. Carter G. Woodson, editor of the *Journal of Negro Life and History* and founder of Black History Week in 1926. He returned to his beloved Harlem later that year.

Langston Hughes received a scholarship to Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania, where he received his B.A. degree in 1929. In 1943, he was awarded an honorary Lit.D by his alma mater; a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1935 and a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1940. Based on a conversation with a man he knew in a Harlem bar, he created a character know as My Simple Minded Friend in a series of essays in the form of a dialogue. In 1950, he named this lovable character Jess B. Simple, and authored a series of books on him.

Langston Hughes was a prolific writer. In the forty-odd years between his first book in 1926 and his death in 1967, he devoted his life to writing and lecturing. He wrote sixteen books of poems, two novels, three collections of short stories, four volumes of "editorial" and "documentary" fiction, twenty plays, children's poetry, musicals and operas, three autobiographies, a dozen radio and television scripts and dozens of magazine articles. In addition, he edited seven anthologies. The long and distinguished list of Hughes' works includes: *Not Without Laughter* (1930); *The Big Sea* (1940); *I Wonder As I Wander*" (1956), his autobiographies. His collections of poetry include: *The Weary Blues* (1926); *The Negro Mother and other Dramatic Recitations* (1931); *The Dream Keeper* (1932); *Shakespeare In Harlem* (1942); *Fields of Wonder* (1947); *One Way Ticket* (1947); *The First Book of Jazz* (1955); *Tambourines To Glory* (1958); and *Selected Poems* (1959); *The Best of Simple* (1961). He edited several anthologies in an attempt to popularize black authors and their works. Some of these are: *An African Treasury* (1960); *Poems from Black Africa* (1963); *New Negro Poets: USA* (1964) and *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1967).

Published posthumously were: *Five Plays By Langston Hughes* (1968); *The Panther and The Lash: Poems of Our Times* (1969) and *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Social Protest* (1973); *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* with Roy DeCarava (1984).

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Langston Hughes died of cancer on May 22, 1967. His residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York has been given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission. His block of East 127th Street was renamed "Langston Hughes Place" .

By: Andrew P. Jackson



Toni Morrison (1931-)

American author, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. In her works Toni Morrison has explored the experience of black women in a racist culture. She has been a member of both the National Council on the Arts and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Morrison has actively used her influence to defend the role of the artist and encouraged the publication of other black writers.

"Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company." (from Nobel Lecture, 1993)

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio. Her parents had moved to the North to escape the problems of southern racism and she grew up relatively unscarred by racial prejudices. Her family were migrants, sharecroppers on both sides. She spent her childhood in the Midwest and read voraciously, from Jane Austen to Tolstoy. Morrison's father, George Wofford, was a welder, and told her folktales of the black community, transferring his African-American heritage to another generation. In 1949 she entered Howard University in Washington, D.C., America's most distinguished black college. There she changed her name from "Chloe" to "Toni", explaining once that people found "Chloe" too difficult to pronounce. She continued her studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Morrison wrote her thesis on suicide in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, and received her M.A. in 1955.

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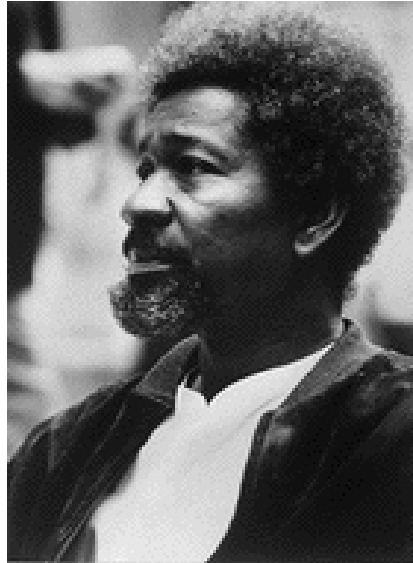
During 1955-57 Morrison was an instructor in English at Texas Southern University, at Houston, and taught in the English department at Howard. In 1964 she moved to Syracuse, New York, working as a textbook editor. She was transferred after eighteen months to the New York headquarters of Random House. There she edited books by such black authors as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones. She also continued to teach at two branches of the State University of New York. In 1984 she was appointed to an Albert Schweitzer chair at the University of New York at Albany, where she nurtured young writers through two-year fellowships.

While teaching at Howard University and caring for her two children, Morrison wrote her first novel, *THE BLUEST EYE* (1970). With the publication of the book, Morrison also established her new identity, which she later in 1992 rejected: "I am really Chloe Anthony Wofford. That's who I am. I have been writing under this other person's name. I write some things now as Chloe Wofford, private things. I regret having called myself Toni Morrison when I published my first novel, *The Bluest Eye*". The story is set in the community of a small, Midwestern town. Its characters are all black. The book was partly based on Morrison's story written for a writers' group in 1966, which she joined after her six years marriage with the Jamaican architect Harold Morrison broke up. Pecola Breedlove, the central character, is a black girl, who prays each night for the blue-eyed beauty of Shirley Temple. She believes everything would be all right if only she had beautiful blue eyes. The narrator, Claudia MacTeer, tries to understand the destruction of Pecola. *SULA* (1973) depicts two black woman friends and their community of Medallion, Ohio. It follows the lives of Sula, considered a threat against the community, and her cherished friend Nel, from their childhood to maturity and to death. The novel won the National Book Critics Award.

With the publication of *SONG OF SOLOMON* (1977), a family chronicle compared to Alex Haley's *Roots*, Morrison gained an international attention. It was the main selection of the Book-of-the-month Club and the first novel by a black writer to be chosen since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1949. Morrison wrote the book from a male point of view. The story dealt with Milkman Dead's efforts to recover his 'ancient properties', a cache of gold. After the success of *Song of Solomon* Morrison bought a four-story house near Nyack, N.Y. In 1998 Morrison was named Robert Goheen Professor at the Humanities at Princeton University.

In 1988 Morrison received the Pulitzer Prize for the novel *BELOVED* (1987), after an open letter, signed by forty-eight prominent black writers, was published in the *New York Times Book Review* in January. The novel failed to win the National Book Award in 1987, and writers protested that Morrison had never been honoured with either the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize.

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Wole Soyinka was born on 13 July 1934 at Abeokuta, near Ibadan in western Nigeria. After preparatory university studies in 1954 at Government College in Ibadan, he continued at the University of Leeds, where, later, in 1973, he took his doctorate. During the six years spent in England, he was a dramaturgist at the Royal Court Theatre in London 1958-1959. In 1960, he was awarded a Rockefeller bursary and returned to Nigeria to study African drama. At the same time, he taught drama and literature at various universities in Ibadan, Lagos, and Ife, where, since 1975, he has been professor of comparative literature. In 1960, he founded the theatre group, "The 1960 Masks" and in 1964, the "Orisun Theatre Company", in which he has produced his own plays and taken part as actor. He has periodically been visiting professor at the universities of Cambridge, Sheffield, and Yale.

During the civil war in Nigeria, Soyinka appealed in an article for cease-fire. For this he was arrested in 1967, accused of conspiring with the Biafra rebels, and was held as a political prisoner for 22 months until 1969. Soyinka has published about 20 works: drama, novels and poetry. He writes in English and his literary language is marked by great scope and richness of words.

As dramatist, Soyinka has been influenced by, among others, the Irish writer, J.M. Synge, but links up with the traditional popular African theatre with its combination of dance, music, and action. He bases his writing on the mythology of his own tribe-the Yoruba-with Ogun, the god of iron and war, at the centre. He wrote his first plays during his time in London, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* (a light comedy), which were performed at Ibadan in 1958 and 1959 and were published in 1963. Later, satirical comedies are *The Trial of Brother Jero* (performed in 1960, publ. 1963) with its sequel, *Jero's Metamorphosis* (performed 1974, publ. 1973), *A Dance of the Forests* (performed 1960, publ. 1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (performed 1965, publ. 1967) and *Madmen and Specialists* (performed 1970, publ. 1971). Among Soyinka's

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serious philosophic plays are (apart from "The Swamp Dwellers") *The Strong Breed* (performed 1966, publ. 1963), *The Road* (1965) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (performed 1976, publ. 1975). In *The Bacchae* of Euripides (1973), he has rewritten the *Bacchae* for the African stage and in *Opera Wonyosi* (performed 1977, publ. 1981), bases himself on John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* and Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. Soyinka's latest dramatic works are *A Play of Giants* (1984) and *Requiem for a Futurologist* (1985).

Soyinka has written two novels, *The Interpreters* (1965), narratively, a complicated work which has been compared to Joyce's and Faulkner's, in which six Nigerian intellectuals discuss and interpret their African experiences, and *Season of Anomy* (1973) which is based on the writer's thoughts during his imprisonment and confronts the Orpheus and Euridice myth with the mythology of the Yoruba. Purely autobiographical are *The Man Died: Prison Notes* (1972) and the account of his childhood, *Aké* (1981), in which the parents' warmth and interest in their son are prominent. Literary essays are collected in, among others, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1975).

Soyinka's poems, which show a close connection to his plays, are collected in *Idanre, and Other Poems* (1967), *Poems from Prison* (1969), *A Shuttle in the Crypt* (1972) the long poem *Ogun Abibiman* (1976) and *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* (1988).

From *Les Prix Nobel. The Nobel Prizes 1986*, Editor Wilhelm Odelberg, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 1987

This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and later published in the book series *Les Prix Nobel/Nobel Lectures*. The information is sometimes updated with an addendum submitted by the Laureate. To cite this document, always state the source as shown above.

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John Alfred Williams

John Alfred Williams was born December 5, 1925, in Jackson, Mississippi. He served in the U.S. Naval Reserves as a pharmacist's mate in the Pacific from 1943-46, and earned a B.A. from Syracuse University in 1950. Throughout his diverse career, he has worked as a journalist for a number of publications and media organizations, including CBS, Ebony, Jet, and Newsweek, and he has taught at a number of colleges and universities, including the City University of New York, University of California at Santa Barbara, La Guardia Community College, the University of Hawaii, Boston University, and Rutgers University, where in 1990 he was named the Paul Robeson Professor of English.

James L. de Jongh, a contributor to the Dictionary of Literary Biography, has said Williams is "arguably the finest Afro-American novelist of his generation," although he "has been denied the full degree of support and acceptance some critics think his work deserves." Williams believes part of the reason for this may be racial discrimination. In 1961, for instance, he was awarded a grant to the American Academy in Rome based on the quality of his novel *Night Song*, but the grant was rescinded by the awarding panel, possibly because he was black and because of rumors that he was about to marry a white woman, which he later did.

Many of Williams' books explore what it means to be a black in America. His first three novels — *The Angry Ones*, *Night Song*, and *Sissie* — relate attempts by black men and women to come to terms with a nation that discriminates against them. In *The Man Who Cried I Am*, a novel that brought Williams international recognition, Williams further explores the exploitation of blacks by a white society in a plot in which the protagonist, Max Reddick, uncovers a plot by western nations to prevent the unification of black Africa and an even more sinister plot code-named

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“King Alfred,” a genocidal plan to end the race problem similar to Hitler’s “Final Solution.”

(Article first posted October 2001)

Related Links & Info

John A. Williams,
from the African American Literature Book Club

Publications

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- * Night Song. Farrar, Straus (New York City), 1961.
- * Sissie. Farrar, Straus, 1963, published in England as Journey out of Anger, Eyre & Spottiswoode (London), 1965.
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- * Captain Blackman. Doubleday (New York City), 1972.
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- * The Junior Bachelor Society. Doubleday, 1976.
- * !Click Song. Houghton (Boston), 1982.
- * The Berhama Account. New Horizons Press (Chico, CA), 1985.
- * Jacob's Ladder. Thunder's Mouth (New York City), 1987.
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- * This Is My Country Too. New American Library (New York City), 1965.
- * The Most Native of Sons: A Biography of Richard Wright. Doubleday, 1970.
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- * Yardbird No. 1. Ishmael Reed (Berkeley, CA), 1979.
- * The McGraw-Hill Introduction to Literature. McGraw (New York City), 1985, 2nd edition, 1994.
- * Bridges: Literature across Cultures. McGraw, 1994.
- * Approaches to Literature. McGraw, 1994.

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- * The History of the Negro People: Omowale — The Child Returns Home (television script; filmed in Nigeria). National Education Television, 1965.
- * The Creative Person: Henry Roth (television script; filmed in Spain). National Education Television, 1966.
- * Sweet Love, Bitter (screenplay). Film 2 Associates, 1967.
- * Last Flight from Ambo Ber (play; first produced in Boston, 1981). American Association of Ethiopian Jews, 1984.

Media Adaptations:

Television Productions:

- * The Junior Bachelor Society was adapted for television by National Broadcasting Corp. (NBC) as Sophisticated Gents in 1981.

Bibliography:

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- * Cash, Earl A. Evolution of a Black Writer. Third Press, 1975.
- * Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series, Volume 3, Gale (Detroit), 1986.

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- * Contemporary Literary Criticism, Gale, Volume 5, 1976, Volume 13, 1980.
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- * O'Brien, John, ed. Interviews with Black Writers. New York: Liveright, 1973. 225-43



Toni Cade Bambara

1939-1995

Toni Cade Bambara is the author of two short story collections, *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Seabirds Are Still Alive*; a novel, *The Salt Eaters*; and a collection of fiction, essays, and conversations, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* (all of which are available from Vintage Books). A noted documentary filmmaker and screenwriter, Bambara's film work includes the documentaries *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* and *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography in Four Voices*. She died in 1995.

by: Maureen Schirack

Toni Cade Bambara, born Miltona Mirkin Cade on March 25, 1939, lived the first ten years of her life in Harlem. Bambara credits the Harlem community as having a significant influence on her writing. She learned the power of the word from "the speakers on Speaker's Corner in Harlem" (Tate 28) and credits the musicians of the forties and fifties with giving her "voice and pace and pitch" (Tate 29). Living on 151st street between Broadway and Amsterdam, Miltona changed her name to "Toni" around kindergarten. The rich diverse population of the area contributed much to Bambara's life lessons. Always willing to "stop and talk," Bambara "adopted people" to fill the place in her life for relatives, especially grandmothers. (*Deep Sightings* 208-209). Although the neighborhood was instrumental in forming an important part of Bambara's identity, the author's greatest influence and inspiration was her mother: "My mother

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had great respect for the life of the mind" (Deep Sightings 212). In a poignant dedication to her mother in *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara writes: "Mama, Helen Brent Henderson Cade Brehon, who in 1948, having come upon me daydreaming in the middle of the kitchen floor, mopped around me."

In 1959, Toni Cade graduated from Queen's College with a B.A. in Theater Arts/English. She published her 1st short story, "Sweet Town" and received the John Golden Award for fiction. From 1962 to 1965, Bambara completed her master's degree while serving as program director at Colony Settlement House in Brooklyn. After receiving her master's degree, she began teaching at City College of New York in 1965 and continued working there until 1969. During that time Bambara became involved in many socio-political issues and community groups. Bambara also attributes her mother's influence as key to shaping her political being: "My mother gave us the race thing. [In school] we were to report back to her any stereotypic or racist remark" (Deep Sightings 216).

In the highly charged political atmosphere of the civil rights and women's movement, Toni Cade Bambara edited and published an anthology of non-fiction, fiction, and poetry entitled *The Black Woman*. An important product of the Black Arts Movement, *The Black Woman* was the first major feminist anthology featuring work by Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, and others. The genesis of Bambara's anthology "grew out of impatience," the author said, with the lack of writing for Afro-American women by Afro-American women. Within the anthology Bambara herself contributed three essays. In one of her essays, "On the Issue of Roles" the author's feelings that "in a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer of goods" (*Black Woman* 102) not only epitomizes the themes of many of the works within the anthology, it also explicitly reflects the emerging attitudes of the times.

In 1971, Bambara edited her second anthology entitled *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* while teaching at Rutgers. The first seven stories of the book fall under the category Bambara calls "Our Great Kitchen Tradition" in reference to "stories of the family" that are an inextricable part of the African-American heritage and tradition of orality. Stories about "how Cousin Cora met and married the preacher from Atlanta, how Uncle Bubba would play the harmonica for country picnics, [or] how Granddaddy Johnson used to ride the Baltimore and Ohio . . ." became the meaningful heritage of memories passed on "in the family kitchen among elders" (*Tales* "Preface"). These stories are also representative of the kinds of stories "I wished I had read growing up," remarks Bambara (*Sturdy Black Bridges* 240). Included within the anthology, a work by Bambara herself, "Raymond's Run" resonates with community, family, and a girl named Squeaky who takes a giant leap of personal growth. As Martha Vertreace states in "The Dance of Character and Community," Squeaky becomes Bambara's metaphor for an aggressive approach to life that involves problem solving within a communal context" (*American Women* 160). Bambara's contribution within the collection underlines the need to write a bildungsroman (coming of age) story in which actions speak louder than words.

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A year after editing *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, Bambara released her first book written entirely on her own—a collection of short stories entitled *Gorilla, My Love*. The short story genre is Bambara's favorite mode of written expression. Bambara says for her the short story "makes a modest appeal for attention, slips up on your blind side and wrassles you to the mat before you know what's grabbed you" (Sternburg 164). The stories in *Gorilla, My Love*, as described by Bambara are "on-the-block, in-the-neighborhood, back glance pieces" (Tate 24) that argue the strength and empowerment of community. Not only does community fare as a common thread that binds the stories in the collection together, but also the identity of women within the context of community appears as a significant theme throughout. Bambara is deeply concerned with how the wisdom of the community passes on from generation to generation and how it "manifests itself in the living" (Tate 66).

One of the stories entitled "My Man Bovanne" reflects Bambara's strong belief in the African American oral tradition as a conduit for keeping the "strength of [the] past, available in the present, able to move our future" (Tate 69), while also embracing the value of elders to the younger generation of the community. The protagonist of the story, Miss Hazel, a mother pushing sixty, is confronted by her children about "makin a spectacle of [her] self" (*Gorilla* 5) by dancing with an elderly blind man. The thoughts of Miss Hazel at the end of the story reveal Bambara's own feelings about preserving the valuable voice of the elderly: "Cause you gots to take care of the older folks. And let them know they still needed to run the mimeo machine and keep the spark plugs clean and fix the mailboxes for folks who might help us get the breakfast program goin, and the school for the little kids and the campaign and all. Cause old folks is the nation" (*Gorilla* 9-10). "My Man Bovanne" is one of Bambara's most endearing stories and representative of her "straight up fiction" (*Gorilla* "Preface") that persists throughout her stories. *Gorilla, My Love* was accepted enthusiastically and received favorable reviews especially within the African-American community.

From the release of *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) to the publication of Bambara's second collection of short stories, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), the author traveled extensively. In particular, her visits to Cuba in 1973, a move to Atlanta with her daughter, Karma, in 1974, and a visit to Vietnam in 1975 had a powerful impact on many of the stories in the collection. In Cuba, she met women working in factories, on the land, and in the street who were able to resolve class and color conflicts. In Vietnam, she was "struck by the women's ability to break through traditional roles, traditional expectations" (Bell 238). In reflecting back on that period, Bambara refers to herself as "a nationalist; . . . a feminist" (Tate 14) and her political voice roars more loudly with themes of the injustices inflicted upon children and minority women's struggle against oppression. In particular, three of the protagonists in the stories in *Sea Birds* resonate with a strong feminist voice: Virginia in "The Organizers Wife," Lacy in "Broken Field Running" and the narrator in "The Apprentice."

"Broken Field Running" vociferates with the intersection of the oppressive forces weighing on the African-American community and the injustices leveled upon the children living there. Strong images throughout the story symbolizing the history of the European White race that continues to oppress them are prevalent; a "Gothic cathedral looms" and "gargoyles peer[ing]

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down on the children"(Sea Birds 52) as they walk through the streets. Lacy, who continually struggles with the predicament of the African-American children, realizes the system hinders them for a reason: "We blind our children . . . Blind them to their potential, the human potential. Cripple them, dispirit them. Cripples make good clients, wards, beggars, victims" (Sea Birds 52). Lacy, aware of how oppression is the juggernaut that prevents the children and her community from escaping the status quo, fights for their survival. Lacy is what Bambara would call a "warrior" because the women in her stories are fighters and survivors. Bambara understands and believes in surviving because she grew up listening to stories about "Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, and [Bambara's] grandmother, Annie" (Sternburg 163), and so the women in her stories not only survive, they inspire.

Although Bambara's preference for the short story was responsible for the publication of her first two books of fiction, the author began writing her first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, in 1978. Published in 1980, Bambara says the novel "came out of a problem-solving impulse." She was interested in bringing together the activists, warriors, and medicine people within her community to "fuse those camps" (Tate 16) into a venerable force. Set in Claybourne, Georgia, the novel is about a community of black people searching for the healing properties of salt. In a recorded interview with Kay Bonetti (1982), Bambara reflects on the symbolism of salt and the African flying myth—both critical metaphorical components in the novel. Her reflection in itself wonderfully representative of the eloquent oral tradition of the African-American community: "We got grounded because we ate too much salt, but some folks say it, we got grounded because we opened ourselves up to horror—invited it onto the continent—that created tears. And it was that salt that drowned our wings and made us earth-bound."

The novel centers on Velma Henry, a community organizer who experiences both a mental and emotional crises, and Minnie Ransom, a faith healer. However, according to Ruth Elizabeth Burks ("From Baptism to Resurrection") "the characters speak little, because they have lost the desire to communicate through words. Their thoughts, as conveyed by Bambara, are more real to them than that is real" (qtd. in Butler-Evans 173). For Bambara this is purposeful; she looked for "a new kind of narrator — narrator as medium . . . a kind of magnet through which other people tell their stories." *The Salt Eaters* was met with mixed reviews. Her experimental technique appealed to some but not to others.

After publishing *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara wanted "to explore more sense-ably" another kind of medium that would enable her to expand her repertoire of rhetorical skills. In "Salvation is the Issue" (*Black Women Writers*), Bambara states that she "wanted to experiment with new kinds of writing materials and writing forms and to pick up another kind of pencil—the camera" (44). Bambara went to Philadelphia and met Louis Massiah, founder-director of the Scribe Video Center. There, she not only learned about the art of editing, she also became involved in teaching other's about filmmaking. Three of Bambara's short stories, "Gorilla, My Love," "Medley," and "Witchbird" have been adapted to film. In *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, Bambara openly criticizes previous films made in Hollywood about Blacks. She says, "the tools of my trade are colonized . . . the global screen has been colonized. And the audience—readers and viewers—is in bondage to an industry" (139-140).

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Bambara's need to challenge the industry provoked her first film/documentary project *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* in 1986. She won the Best Documentary Academy Award for the film about the May 13th, 1985 bombing of the headquarters of an emerging Black organization, MOVE in Philadelphia. The mayor at that time, W. Wilson Goode ordered the attack. With more than 500 police officers surrounding 6221 Osage, a 90-minute gun battle ensued, and a bomb dropped from a state helicopter ignited not only the MOVE headquarters, but also another sixty-one houses in Cobb's Creek. Eyewitness accounts and interviews are the backbone of Bambara's *Bombing of Osage Avenue*. Falling back on Bambara's ideology "to tell the truth" in her writing, the author exposed the brutality and inhumanity of an event that left eleven—six adults and five children dead.

In 1993, at what seemed the height of her career, Bambara was diagnosed with colon cancer. Pulling herself up after diagnosis and treatment, she was determined to "kick cancer's ass" and get on with her work. During the process of recovery, Bambara began working with Louis Massiah on her next documentary, *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography in Four Voices* about the long and remarkable life of Dr. William Edward Burghardt DuBois (1868-1963). The film was released in early 1995. Bambara succumbed to colon cancer December 9, 1995 in Philadelphia. However, Toni Cade Bambara's work lived on—two posthumous publications are proof of her enduring spirit and legacy. In 1995, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations* was released. Within the collection, an important interview by Bambara's long-time friend, Louis Massiah entitled "How She Came by Her Name" offers an in-depth and valuable look into the author's personal history and the formation of the unique identity she came to claim as her own. She reflects on growing up in Harlem, the importance of her mother's influence in her life, her political insights, and her writing.

Bambara's second posthumous publication, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999) was the result of about twelve years of work and research. Bambara's close friend and editor, Toni Morrison, edited the book. *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, a novel about the Atlanta child murders that took place in the early eighties, centers around the Spencer family. Nathaniel (Spence) and Zala Spencer, the separated parents of three children, find themselves pulled into a living nightmare when their eldest son, Sonny is missing. The events in the story, based on the true accounting of the murders that claimed over forty children, was seen by many as "a class thing" (*Those Bones Are Not My Child* 103) and the main reason it took almost two years to solve. The novel uncovers the unbelievable corruption and cover-up that took place in Atlanta at that time amid political, racial, and class tension.

Toni Cade Bambara was a writer, activist, feminist, and filmmaker. In 1982, in a taped interview with Kay Bonetti, Bambara reflected on her work: "When I look back at my work with any little distance the two characteristics that jump out at me is one, the tremendous capacity for laughter, but also a tremendous capacity for rage." Bambara spent her entire life writing about both. Her ability to laugh and imbue laughter into her stories came from her strong conviction and belief in family and community. Her rage came from the injustices she saw in the treatment of children, elderly, and the oppressed Black community. As she wrote in "What It is I'm Doing Anyhow," writing was "one of the ways [she] participate[d] in struggle" (*The Writer on Her Work* 154). She

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witnessed that struggle between old and young, Blacks and Whites, and men and women. Bambara worked to change the oppressive existence for Blacks. She worked to destroy illusions, demolish myths, and celebrate struggle within an exploitive, strangling, capitalist society. But she never gave up; she knew there was "lotta work ahead of us" (Black Women Writers at Their Work 14).



Ntozake Shange

(pronounced en-to-zaki shong-gay)

1948-

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ntozake Shange was born Paulette Williams in Trenton, New Jersey on October 18, 1948. In 1971 she changed her name to Ntozake Shange which means "she who comes with her own things" and "she who walks like a lion" in Xhosa, the Zulu language. Her father was an Air Force surgeon and her mother was an educator and a psychiatric social worker. The Williams were upper middle class African Americans whose love of the arts contributed to an intellectually stimulating childhood for Shange and her three siblings. Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Chuck Berry, and W. E. B. Du Bois were among the frequent guests at her parents' house.

In 1966 Shange enrolled at Barnard College and separated from her husband, a law student. She attempted suicide several times. Nonetheless, she graduated cum laude in American Studies in 1970 and entered the University of Southern California at Los Angeles, where she earned a master's degree in American Studies in 1973.

While living in California and teaching humanities and women's studies courses at Mills College in Oakland, the University of California Extension, and Sonoma State College, Shange began to associate with poets, teachers, performers, and black and white feminist writers who nurtured her talents. Shange and her friends began to perform their poetry, music, and dance in and around the San Francisco Area. Shange also danced with Halifu Osumare's company. Upon leaving the company she began collaborating with Paula Moss on the poetry, music, and dance that would become *For Colored Girls*. Moss and Shange left California for New York and performed for

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colored girls in a Soho jazz loft and later in bars in the lower East Side. Producer Woodie King Jr. saw one of these shows and helped director Oz Scott stage the choreopoem Off-Broadway at the New Federal Theatre where it ran for eight months, after which it moved to the New York Shakespeare Company's Anspacher Public Theatre, and then to the Booth Theatre.

In addition to her plays, she has written poetry, novels, and essays. She has taught at California State College, the City College of New York, the University of Houston, Rice University, Yale, Howard, and New York University. Among her many awards are an Obie, a Los Angeles Time Book Prize for Poetry, and a Pushcart Prize.

PLAYS

"for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem"-1975

First produced in New York City at Studio Riobea in 1975; produced Off-Broadway at the Anspacher Public Theatre in 1976; produced on Broadway at the Booth Theatre that same year.

"A Photograph"-1977 First produced Off-Broadway at the Public Theatre.

"Boogie Woogie Landscapes"-1979 First produced in New York at Frank Silvera's Writers' Workshop; first produced on Broadway at the Symphony Space Theatre in 1978.

"Spell #7"-1979 First produced Off-Broadway at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre.

"Black and White Two Dimensional Planes"-1979 First produced in New York at Sounds in Motion Studio Works.

"Mother Courage and Her Children"-1980 An adaptation of Brecht's play; first produced Off-Broadway at the Public Theatre, directed by Shange.

"Three for a Full Moon" and "Bocas"-1982 First produced at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles.

"Educating Rita"-1982 Adapted from Willy Russell's script; first produced at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta.

"Three views of Mt. Fuji"-1987 First produced in San Francisco at the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre; first produced in New York at the New Dramatists.

AWARDS

"for colored girls...." Obie Award, Outer Circle Critics Award, Audelco Award; and Tony, Grammy, and Emmy Award nominations, 1977

"Mother Courage and Her Children" 1981 Obie Award