What is the political value of African American literature? This question has united the intellectual interests of American authors as historically far apart as Thomas Jefferson at the end of the eighteenth century and Barack Obama at the start of the twenty-first. Over the past two centuries, it has united the social interests of literary works as different as pamphlets, autobiographies, cultural criticism, poems, short stories, and novels. And it has united the rhetorical interests of intellectual debate occurring in cultural forums as remarkable as the printing press, conventions, schools, parlors, railroad cars, and courtrooms. Certainly, the lists of authors, works, and venues can go on and on, almost in an unwieldy fashion. The challenges facing anyone interested in the opening question, then, are to think about it in systematic and sophisticated ways, to learn from its history, and to understand why it is still salient today.

Measuring the political value of African American literature begins with introducing what Jefferson and Obama have in common. As we all know, both men achieved the highest political office in the United States of America. One of the nation’s “Founding Fathers,” Jefferson was elected its third president in 1801, after having served, most notably, as secretary of state under George Washington and then as vice president under John Adams. Two centuries later, Obama was elected the forty-fourth president in 2008, after having served in the Illinois Senate for the state’s thirteenth district and then in the U.S. Senate for the state of Illinois. Prior to their careers as elected officials, both men wrote books that had been influential in shaping public opinion on the nation’s democratic potential as well as on their own personal, political, and presidential qualifications. In 1776, Jefferson coauthored the Declaration of Independence, and, in 1787, he published an authoritative ethnography of early America, Notes on the State of Virginia. Obama released
three bestselling books of autobiographical nonfiction and public policy: in 1995, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*; in 2006, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*; and in 2008, *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise*. Both Jefferson and Obama invested themselves in public service; both proved their commitment to “the life of the mind,” as Hannah Arendt, a political theorist, once put it.¹

Less obvious, Jefferson and Obama both entered office as “black” presidents—but not in the customary sense of who or what they are. Jefferson’s birth to a white mother from London and a white father from Virginia would suggest that he was white. Obama’s birth to a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya would likewise suggest that he is neither just white nor black yet both. In either case, the terms *white* and *black* connote genealogical meanings of “race” that, given our allegedly “postidentitarian” era today, threaten to oversimplify the American identities of these two storied men.² Nonetheless, I submit that they were “black” presidents insofar as whom they represented. As Jefferson was running for office, the “three-fifths compromise” or “federal ratio,” thanks to a provision in the U.S. Constitution, granted a man (but not a woman, who could not yet vote) an extra three votes in the House of Representatives and the presidential Electoral College for every five slaves that he owned. The large ownership of slaves in the South accorded this region—and, indirectly, its elected officers or office-seekers—leverage in securing more electoral votes and greater political representation. Jefferson’s election to the presidency benefited from the Southern advantage.³

Obama’s election likewise benefited from securing votes from a large swath of the African American electorate. Whereas Jefferson’s candidacy exploited a constitutional loophole that counted slaves while denying them the political entitlements enjoyed by white slaveholders, Obama’s presidential campaign attracted African Americans in unprecedented numbers. The electoral power of African Americans and the political power of his own Democratic Party grew. Drawing on his experience as a community organizer in Chicago, he led staffers, volunteers, and Internet bloggers as they worked to register for the first time many African Americans to vote and as they reminded others how to do so again. The more experienced African American voters were persuaded to cast their ballots early on Election Day and to galvanize others to vote as well. About seventy million Americans voted for Obama in the end, helping him defeat his Republican opponent, John McCain, a senior U.S. senator from Arizona, by about ten million votes. In the history of U.S. presidential elections, Obama earned the biggest per-
percentage and number of “black votes”—over 95 percent and sixteen million, respectively.4

Evidently, African Americans have been crucial to the legacies of both Jefferson and Obama. Yet an even less obvious, but equally important, story about African Americans binds them together: African American literature fueled their political imaginations. Notes on the State of Virginia has now become a canonical, or widely taught and analyzed, book of African American literary criticism in the academy. To be clear, “criticism” means both Jefferson’s art of interpretation and his art of ridicule, such as when he claimed that two of his era’s best writers of African descent, Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho, wrote literature that fell well below the stratum of reason and imagination that he had set for the political emancipation and national citizenship of slaves in the new republic. Substandard literature, in his view, disqualified Africans and their New World descendants from receiving the basic civil rights to which their fellow Anglo-American citizens were entitled.

Two centuries later, in contrast, literature supplied both the evidence and the medium by which Obama could prove not the civic worth of African Americans (for that goes without saying) but, rather, the nation’s democratic promise despite and because of race. Dreams from My Father inspired Nobel laureate Toni Morrison so much that she remarked in a 2008 interview, “I was amazed because he writes so well. Really well, with really nice big, strong, artful sentences. But equally important was his reflection.”5 Beyond the extraordinary style and storytelling, the substance or the “reflection” of this memoir and of Obama’s next book, The Audacity of Hope, includes explicit references to a tradition of African American writers, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Frank Marshall Davis, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Malcolm X. Pundits have, of late, ranked Abraham Lincoln and, his acquaintance, Douglass—the nation’s sixteenth president and that generation’s preeminent African American statesman—as Obama’s foremost political role models. Obama has done little to refute that perception (especially where Lincoln is concerned). Let the full record show that, in Dreams from My Father and The Audacity of Hope, Obama also embraces African Americans who wrote on the politics of race (or racial politics, in short) as crucial to his formative understanding of this subject matter, of his ironic identity as neither just black nor white yet both, and of his biracial descent from a Kansan mother and a Kenyan father.

Fittingly, Jefferson and Obama serve as presidential bookends to this book, which I propose as one step toward a new political history of African American literature. In a number of ways I connect racial politics to Afri-
can American literature. I look at African American literature’s role in the political imagination, political action’s role in the African American literary imagination, and, conversely, African American literature’s role in political action, to the extent that it can facilitate social change. But a deeper issue of methodology must be addressed. If we accept as true the idea that historical circumstances can determine merely whether African American literature has political value, then how do we read and write literary history to account for that value, to measure it, and to trace how it has varied across genres, authors, readers, marketplaces, societies, and eras? Developing a critical historiography attuned to the political contexts of literary texts is prerequisite to my argument that literature has helped African Americans secure or improve their representation in the “formal” realms of electoral voting, governmental intervention, public policy, and law, not just in the “informal” or cultural realms where special portrayals of the “black race” aim to affect social attitudes and attain racial justice. Another part of my study involves parsing out the myths of authenticity, popular culture, nationalism, and militancy that have come to define African American political activism since the contemporary birth of Black Studies around the 1970s. We must overcome these myths to show the diverse and complex ways that African American literature—and intellectual culture generally—has not only recounted the ills of race relations but also, in some historic cases, transcended its own medium and transformed society for the better.

More specifically, I describe the “politics” of African American literature in four ways: first, by arguing that, from the late eighteenth century to the present, African American literature has come to define, demonstrate, and even succeed in political action; second, by showing that political action’s informal context—its rarified production and consumption by intellectuals—does not necessarily depreciate the literature’s insight or connection to the formal kinds of political action; third, by documenting the actual and virtual challenges African American writers have faced in representing racially defined communities in person and in print; and, fourth, by demonstrating that racial representation is one paradigmatic step toward reconstructing the past while overcoming the blind spots of methodology and historiography that all of us, unwittingly or not, have inherited from Black Studies. In order to achieve these goals, the stories I tell range far and wide across American culture, politics, and history. They feature the debate over racial genius in early American history, the intellectual culture of racial politics after slavery, the rise of “New Negro” politics between Reconstruction and the Harlem Renaissance, the geopolitics of African American autobiography between
World Wars I and II, the tension between copyright law and free speech in contemporary African American culture, and the political audacity of Barack Obama’s creative writing. And yet one critique threads the stories together: the abilities of African American literature to transform society on multiple ideological, cultural, and political levels have not yet been treated carefully enough.

The Politics of Racial Representation

Let us now describe the problems of critical method and writing history posed by my topic of racial representation. In American history, the broadly aesthetic and political notions of representation date back to the late eighteenth century. Constitutional conventions were preoccupied with determining the degree to which elected assemblies should capture the “likeness” of their constituents while implementing their collective “will,” even as the fundamental differences between the elected and the electorate were striking. In letters of correspondence, delegates to the Continental Congress, such as John Adams, William Hooper, and John Penn, conferred with each other in 1776 on whether the “most natural Substitute for an Assembly of the whole, is a Delegation of Power, from the Many, to a few of the most wise and virtuous.” For literary scholar Eric Slauter, these words written by Adams in a letter to Penn reveal the historical tension between “actual” and “virtual” representation: between, on the one hand, “the desire of constituents for representatives who resembled themselves and articulated their local interests” and, on the other, “the charms of high republican theory in which the wills of the many (as well as the interests of all those persons said to lack wills of their own: children, slaves, women, white men without property, American Indians, free African Americans) were deputed to the wise and good.” The paradox of representation involved a contradiction in how assemblymen acquired their social power by being at once devoted to yet also detached from their constituents, at once identifiable with yet also an idealized image of them. From the early national period onward, cultural expressions ranging from miniature portraits to literature have consistently registered the aesthetic and intellectual factors of political representation.

African American literature, also from this period onward, is replete with various assumptions and anxieties about the aesthetic and political representation of not simply a social group but a “race.” The political process of representing a race—or hitherto called racial representation—has a double meaning. First, it signifies the aesthetic portrayal of African Americans, and
in some cases the African diaspora more broadly, in literature. Second, it signifies this group’s political delegation of its collective authority to an individual person or another group. By the end of this book, I aim to have made clear that racial representation in African American literary history has consistently endeavored to overthrow racial injustice. African American writers have long been committed to exposing the white-supremacist, discriminatory, prejudicial, and inequitable degradation of African Americans on the basis of race.7 Returning to the earlier distinctions, the “actual” representation of race means the way that representatives demonstrated an “authenticity,” which, in folklorist Regina Bendix’s words, alternately means “one who acts with authority,” a quality suggesting that something was “made by one’s hand,” and, in the case of art, “the clear identifiability of the maker or authorship and uniqueness of an artifact” based on some predetermined experience and imagination of racial unity.8 Virtual representation exposes the discrepancies between such representatives and their constituents, but, at the same time, it helps consecrate leadership by legitimizing the aesthetics and intellectualism of certain individuals, among other virtues. African American literature has been a tool of social change, addressing or redressing the attitudes of readers and stimulating social action, by balancing the actual and virtual modes of racial representation.

This claim does not sound groundbreaking; it sounds rather intuitive, as part of our common sense. It is as familiar as the ubiquitous term cultural politics, which E. Waldo Martin Jr. defines as “the inevitable politicization of culture and the culturalization of politics” or as “the intersection where culture and politics overlap and merge.”9 However, this definition’s tautological circle only exemplifies that neither cultural studies nor literary studies has been equipped to derive the terms, concepts, and paradigms needed to generate a political methodology of African American literature. More forcefully, I state here that the instinctive political definition of African American literature is an ideological inheritance of the “black nationalist” phase of the modern civil rights movement of the past half century and that it persists only because its status as common sense lulls our desire to qualify it. We need deeper understandings of literature and politics, not to mention the stakes of intersecting the methodologies of literary studies and political studies (the latter of which I take to be either political history or political science, fields that sometimes overlap but certainly are not the same). We also need an identification of the ideological patterns and conflicts of race and politics in order to outline the development of racial representation in the styles and themes of African American literature and in the taxonomic and legal forms of African Ameri-
can politics. From there, we can begin to show the political determinism of literary knowledge alongside the literary determinism of political action.

To this end, I empathize with the concerns of certain leading political and literary scholars about the methodological limitations of African American literary studies. Adolph L. Reed Jr., a political scientist, has suggested that scholars of African American literature have been consistently misapplying the category of politics, “unhelpfully blur[ring] the distinction between cultural history and the history of social and political thought, such that the former has tended to substitute for the latter.” More disciplined approaches, he implies, would separate culture from the issues of “legitimacy, justice, obligation, the meaning of equality, or the nature of the polity” or the issues of “demography, social psychology, political economy, or public opinion” or the issue of government.10 In a related analysis, Kenneth W. Warren, a literary scholar, provides a nuanced and tactful way of thinking about how and why historians should distinguish between “direct black political action” and “indirect cultural politics.” Direct African American political action acknowledges, in Warren’s words, that “race . . . is at bottom a problem of politics and economics—of constitution making and of wielding power legislatively and economically in order to mobilize broad constituencies to preserve an unequal social order.” In this context, African Americans have used activist, legislative, judicial, or public-policy means to access institutional resources and social power and to use them for their own best interests as racial subjects. Indirect cultural politics, by contrast, refers to the efforts of African American intellectuals and artists to operate “outside the political realm of direct representation—whether one did so literarily, sociologically, philosophically, administratively, or philanthropically.”11 Warren’s implicit and admirable call for more accurate historical contexts that account for the cultural turn of African American politics does not decry—as much as Reed does—contemporary academic interest in cultural politics. Nonetheless, both share the assumption that “direct black political action” is more transformative than “indirect cultural politics.”

Reed and Warren advance their argument in a 2010 book of scholarly essays they coedited, about “renewing black intellectual history” by revisiting “the ideological and material foundations of African American thought.”12 The academic-departmental affiliations of the editors and the volume’s contributors, who all range across the fields of literary studies, political science, public policy, history, and African American studies, attest both to the cross-disciplinary importance of their inquiry and to the timeliness of putting intellectual culture and politics in their proper contexts of African American
history. The book boldly questions the scholarly elitism of African American historiography, an elitism reified by its condescending appreciation of folk vernacular, authenticity, and political unity and by its neglect of historical instances in which these three racial protocols of African American community were being contested or compromised. No less elitist, such historiography has also interchanged intellectual identity and political identity. In such writings of history, the urgent social concerns articulated by African Americans in intellectual circles were, of necessity, the concerns affecting those “outside” these circles. The edited collection indicts what it calls the conceptual, institutional, and intellectual frames of reference existing today by which certain expressions of African American culture were given salience in political history:

To be clear, our objection is not that African American studies has sacrificed intellectual integrity in pursuit of a political agenda. No scholarly endeavor can be innocent of the ideological matrices and controversies of its historical moment, least of all scholarship on human affairs. The problems with the turn in African-Americanist discourse dating all the way back to the Reagan era stem from the way that it links political and intellectual concerns. The presumption that the goal of scholarly intervention is to speak for black collectivity in effect posits a primary audience that lies outside the universe of fellow practitioners.

The payoffs of this critique include exposing, first, the perennial scholarly overstatements of racism and the curse of slavery, as opposed to other kinds of historical circumstances, in the lives of African Americans; and, second, the redundant references to African American “agency,” such as “autonomy, community, and family,” in resisting the alleged ideological and material effects of racism. Not only are these “gross, clichéd abstractions” little more than “a conceptual shorthand that ventriloquizes them [African Americans] to make a reductivist political point,” they “impose[] a summary normative script onto behavior and aspirations that are certainly more complex and various.” One goal of renewing African American intellectual history in the new millennium, especially with the newfound ascendance of Obama to the presidency, is to revise the more problematic notions of cultural expression and political representation, among others, in African American history, so that we can sharpen our critical terms for explaining past and current political phenomena and for anticipating what may come next.
Some of the points raised by the project of Reed and Warren are well taken, but the others are as problematic as the above notions they seek to revise. Yes, I agree with the rationale behind their criticism of certain examples of African American literary studies. The recent scholarship that has perceptively assessed the political value of African American literature still may continue to understate the methodological rationales for how we theorize and historicize this literature in political terms. The problems of African American literary studies entrenched in the Reagan era, when the field consummated its academic presence, persist in both traditional and newer forms in the Obama era and remain fair game for critique. Reed and Warren have helpfully distinguished literary expression from political action, while pinpointing the way certain academics have overinvested intellectual or aesthetic culture with political capital. That said, Reed and Warren wrongly privilege direct over indirect political action and underappreciate the explanatory potential in uniting culture with politics. Russ Castronovo, a fellow literary scholar, gestures to this problem as he notes how Reed, in his writings elsewhere, has resorted to “a rigid disciplinarity that upholds politics as ‘an autonomous domain of social activity’ that [is] thankfully immune to literary hermeneutics” and “formalist aestheticism,” when “[n]either formalism nor aesthetics . . . is as formal or as historically empty as assumed.” Likewise, in this book, I resist such “rigid disciplinarity” and embrace, instead, an interdisciplinary mode of thinking that moves beyond the paradigms that have mischaracterized or understated the political potential of literature.

By no means is my coordination of literary studies with political studies a trivial exercise. The epistemologies and methodologies of each academic field diverge on the notion of power. Jodi Dean, a political scientist, suggests that the ideal coordination would work to “expand” and “reconstitute” “the domain of politics.” In this spirit, I distinguish formal from informal types of politics. Formal politics refers to the context of governmental activity, public policy, law, and social formations with which political experts, since Plato and Aristotle, have been preoccupied. Informal politics refers to the context of cultural media, representation, and subjectivity that has long intrigued literary experts. I seek an analytic balance that avoids the pitfall Dean points to: the risk of political studies “oversimplifying its accounts when it fails to acknowledge the multiplicity of political domains” and the risk of the “non-intervention” of literary studies “by presuming its political purchase in advance.” At the same time, I underscore a key point: whereas political representation involves actual and virtual kinds of relationships between leaders and
constituents, political action involves formal and informal strategies by which these relationships become manifest and productive in the public sphere.

Especially compelling is Dean’s allegation that studies of literature and culture usually presume their own political purchase. Perpetuating the critical “shorthand” that “everything is political,” these studies overstate that everything is, to borrow a well-worn phrase, “always already” a question of power. But the shorthand happens to elide the process by which culture becomes political. Again in Dean’s words, the shorthand neglects the “how of politics, the ways concepts and issues come to be political common sense and the processes through which locations and populations are rendered as in need of intervention, regulation, or quarantine.” I am concerned that certain African American intellectual contributions to political action have gone understated or misstated in the field of African American literary studies. The field has not always been as interdisciplinary in its discourse on African American political formations as its political purchase has suggested. The historical fact that African Americans have refused to take for granted the “how of politics” should encourage a referendum on this scholarly misstep. (This partially explains why, throughout the book, I spend much time on writers of essays or other kinds of literary nonfiction that, in effect, expound directly on this subject.) These writers have explored a number of ideological contexts, whereby literature could inform and transform society for the purpose of abolishing racial injustice.

By “ideology,” I mean Michael C. Dawson’s notion in political science. Ideology is “a world view readily found in the population, including sets of ideas and values that cohere, that are used publicly to justify political stances, and that shape and are shaped by society.” Dawson and Steven Hahn, a political historian, both suggest that we should distinguish the formal and informal modes of politics to describe how this social “shaping” works, and then we should regularly remind ourselves that the boundary between formal and informal African American political action is ideologically permeable. Likewise, Robin D. G. Kelley, a historian, has used the informal and formal typologies of politics and contrasted them in terms of “infrapolitics” and “organized resistance.” He has stated that we “need to recognize that infrapolitics and organized resistance are not two distinct realms of opposition to be studied separately and then compared; they are two sides of the same coin that make up the history of working-class resistance.”
Trying to describe formal and informal politics together, I aim to view literature—and, when applicable, broader intellectual culture—in a way sensitive to how African American writers over the past two centuries have viewed it: as an invaluable contributor to the ideology and practice of social change. I admit that my beneficial distinction of politics into formal and informal types, though now rendering explicit what has already been implicit in African American political science and history, risks at times becoming a deterministic and static taxonomy. Yet, by the end of this book, the informal and formal concepts of political action should come across as flexible and fluid. As much as political scholars have, perhaps unselfconsciously, assumed this typological dichotomy to add narrative coherence to the ideological conversations among political agents, I plan to render this dichotomy visible—and sometimes to cross-examine it—even as I deliberately use it to identify bridges between intellectual culture and political action across African American history.

Another caveat is worth mentioning here, with respect to the topic of elitism. As admirable as Dawson, Hahn, and Kelley have been for detailing the history of grassroots African American mobilization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they have only at best sketched how African American political identity has emerged through cultural and intellectual formations. Not yet have they corrected the historical and present-day view that such formations are merely the legendary bastions of elitism. In this book, I plan to flesh out and correct the record, showing that racial representation has long succeeded as an intellectual and cultural genre of political action in African American history. The success has been possible even when the writers were involved in the esoteric task of revising other literary works or even in the presumably elitist task of speaking to other literary elites. To argue, as I do, that even notoriously elite African American writers have long been formally and informally invested in political action—and have been successful at it—attempts not only to pry racial politics from the grip of popular culture but also to show cases in African American intellectual history where the line separating “state elites” (political leaders) from “nonstate elites” (cultural leaders) has been quite blurry. In recasting African American political history with examples of intellectual rather than popular culture, my goal is to show not that the latter is overrated but that the former is underrated. Recent history reveals that Obama’s ascent to the presidency demonstrates remarkable political achievement in both intellectual and popular realms of American culture.
Introduction

**Historiography after Black Studies**

Since the dawn of the American republic, a series of cultural, political, and legal texts by or about African Americans has realized the ideological osmosis of formal and informal types of politics, encouraging us to recast dominant histories of African American literature that have taken such permeability for granted. The following chapters of this book conduct such a revision. In brief, chapter 1 looks at the debate between Thomas Jefferson and David Walker, an African American author, over whether New World African intellectual culture, such as the literature of Phillis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho, should be, in essence, an entrance examination to the early American polity. Chapter 2 examines the way that, in the postbellum nineteenth century, Douglass translated political action into ideologies and practices of intellectual culture in order to grapple with the repercussions of slavery, even after the “peculiar institution” was officially abolished in 1865. Referring to but also extending the historical period of chapter 2 into the next century, chapter 3 considers politics in literature, interpreting what I call New Negro politics as a paradigm, lasting from the Reconstruction of the 1870s through the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, in which African American authors of criticism and fiction highlighted the theme of cultural politics—such as that endorsed by Douglass—in “uplifting the race.” Chapter 4 claims that the autobiographies of two African American writers, Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, written from World War I through the early part of the Cold War, document the transnational range of geopolitical activism, which used cultural expression to mobilize people for political causes and to engage political representatives at the highest levels of government and public policymaking. Chapter 5 reveals that the U.S. court of law was a recent venue in which the litigants, alongside the district and the appellate judges, of the 2001 case *SunTrust Bank v. Houghton Mifflin Company* debated and determined the transformative potential of African American literature in the realm of social change. (Here, “transformative” means both the political ability to change society for the sake of racial justice and the legal ability, under the auspices of parody, to incorporate and revise another literary work for the sake of political criticism.) In the concluding chapter, I argue that Obama, while now representing a so-called postracial phenomenon, has alternately turned in recent years away from the radical forms and toward the reconciliatory forms of African American literature written during the Black Arts, Black Power, and Black Studies Movements spanning the 1960s and the 1970s. Race was the specter of African American political history, of
elder activists and politicians who were not yet ready to yield their stature to him, but their struggle still inspired his intellectual thinking and his run-up to the presidency.

My elimination of a book chapter on the decades of the 1960s and 1970s captures my belief that this famous period has dictated too much of the recent political approaches to African American literary history and that its terms need an update. In 1991, in the visionary essay “The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics,” David Lionel Smith bemoaned the “paucity” of even “the most rudimentary work,” not to mention the “openly hostile” and “deeply partisan” nature of scholars, on the movement. Since then, what Smith called “careful and balanced scholarship” has finally emerged, becoming what the historian Peniel E. Joseph has succinctly termed “Black Power Studies.” This field, in Joseph’s words, “has begun to demystify, complicate, and intellectually engage demonized, dismissed, and overlooked actors and struggles by providing nuanced, well-researched, and weighty narratives that document the profound implications of black power politics for the study of African American history and U.S. history more broadly.”

The core meaning of the Black Power Movement, popularized by Stokely Carmichael of the Black Panther Party, mostly contradicts that of the historically overlapping Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s through early 1960s, led by the great Martin Luther King Jr. By the late 1960s, King was conceding the rising African American interest in the Black Power Movement, but he was still consistently contrasting the “peaceful sword” of “mass nonviolent direct action” of the “southern Negro” with the “angry mood” of “black nationalism” more endemic, in his view, among “northern Negroes.” Based on Christian principles, the nonviolent direction was, for King, “a more effective method and a more moral one” that he embraced for much of his political career. For this reason, he strove to correct the mainstream conception of Black Power as racial isolationism or separatism by tailoring it to suit the Civil Rights Movement’s focus on the social integration of the races and on the general assistance of the poor. Recently, Black Power Studies has worked to rethink the central issues of “black empowerment,” “political self-determination,” “racial solidarity,” and “a shared history of racial oppression” in Black Power.

Undoubtedly, my inspiration for writing this book arises from an unwavering appreciation of the historical salience of these central issues. At the same time, I attend to the challenge of deriving a political historiography of African American literature not beholden to the assumptions on which Black Power and its artistic and academic kin, the Black Arts and Black
Studies Movements, were understandably built. The assumptions include the definition of successful African American politics in terms of the racial authenticity of leadership; the utter ideological cohesion of racial constituencies; the primacy of popular over intellectual forms of expressive culture; and the nationalism, rather than the internationalism, of African American identity. I present an alternative historiography that looks beyond the critical methods anchored to these assumptions, held mostly in the 1960s and 1970s—assumptions that have encouraged subsequent scholars, teachers, and students to retrofit the political mantras of Black Power across African American literary history—while capturing the formal and informal nuances of political action.

To calibrate the tone of my critique, I turn to the work of Eddie S. Glaude Jr., a religion scholar who has urged the development of a “post-soul” paradigm of African American studies. In his 2007 book, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*, he states that we need “a form of political engagement that steps out of the shadows of the black freedom struggles” of the 1960s and 1970s, which “would recognize the diversity of African American political interests.”27 Extending Glaude’s periodization to as late as the 1980s in African American literary studies, I, too, welcome a plan to wrest the political historiography of African American literature from the clutches of the Black Studies era—to “step out of the shadows,” in other words, and retell dominant African American storylines in a way more open-minded to the complexities and contradictions occasioned by race, even when the politics of civil rights are at stake. One benefit is that the stories behind the political rise and endurance of African American literature would only further resonate as they are passed on.28

With this approach in mind, let us return to my earlier summaries of each chapter in this book, this time attending to the dominant assumptions of “the black freedom struggles” that each chapter unsettles. In chapter 1, I show that the “motive” of some African Americans in the new republic was to “demonstrate black equality” in their writing of literature, an idea that many of us have come to accept, but it turns out that they also argued for political emancipation and citizenship in American identity.29 In chapter 2, my turn to the cultural and political commentary of Douglass in the postbellum era recalls literary scholar Eric Sundquist’s broad look at Douglass beyond his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, whose allegedly authentic voice of black nationalism the Black Studies era has overstated.30 In chapter 3, the racial-uplift literature written by the African American elite contradicts the proletarianism and pragma-
tism demanded of the African American authors who were studied or who were writing during the 1960s and 1970s. In chapter 4, my focus on the transnational formations of African American geopolitical struggle between and during the world wars attempts to expand the political historiography of African American literature beyond the usual domesticity of African American cultural and political nationalism. In chapter 5, Randall’s novelistic critique of the racial and gender aspects of authenticity is an explicit attack on the historical confluences of sexism, patriarchy, and racial essentialism in definitions of political representation and action. Gender and sexuality cooperated in the cultural and political expressions of African American communities, in spite and because of the structures of discrimination and inequality oppressing women. From Phillis Wheatley to Alice Randall, by way of the post-Reconstruction “Woman’s Era,” which I discuss in chapter 3, “the gender identity of black women complicated their position as the racial subjects of black nationalist discourse”—and, I would add, of African American political discourse generally. Working against the caricatures of African American women from the era of slavery to the present, Randall represents African American women in ways that echo the feminist revisions of African American historiography appearing since the rise of Black Studies, while, with an eye toward the new millennium, critiquing the privilege of racial authenticity that both feminist and masculinist African American literatures have in common. Finally, chapter 6 examines how Obama overcame the myths of black nationalism to develop an appreciation of the later, racially open-minded Malcolm X. As in the previous five, this chapter balances its argument with an appreciation of agency—or what literary scholar William J. Maxwell calls a “historically consequential self-direction”—in both the formal and informal modes of Obama’s political action.

The Agency of African American Literature

So crucial to my study, agency requires further elaboration. Racial representation, as an intellectual and cultural genre of political action, implies a demonstration of agency. As mentioned earlier, in Renewing Black Intellectual History, Reed and Warren critique scholarly overstatements of the role agency plays in the vicissitudes of African American political history. The critique corresponds to a concurrent debate over agency among historians of African American slavery and political action. In 2003, Walter Johnson wrote a provocative essay on the topic in order to identify the methodological stakes of a new subfield emergent within the past decade or so, called the New Social
History (represented, say, by Steven Hahn, Michael C. Dawson, and Robin D. G. Kelley, mentioned earlier). Questioning the notion that “the task of the social historian is to ‘give the slaves back their agency,’” Johnson alludes to a moment from the 1960s through the 1980s when scholarship itself was politicized, when the “historical work” of determining how slaves actively resisted and overcame the system of slavery was linked to “the political project of redress” against the curse of slavery, and when such a linkage urged “white scholars to use a declaration of their alignment with Black slaves in order to signal their alignment with the ongoing struggle for Black Freedom.” Implicit in Johnson’s definition of the New Social History is a detection of the ideological remainder of a period when, in his view, white historians were trying to affiliate with African American historians who were trying to secure a greater foothold in the American academy during the founding of Black studies.

The language of agency, or the idea that one has independent will and volition and can also act on them, has come to underwrite recent scholarly historiographies of African American humanity and social action—historiographies, I might add, whose political rhetoric has less now than before to do with a scholar’s own racial identity. More important have been the stakes of narrating the history of slavery in terms of agency and what this emphasis says about the evolution of African American historiography into a crucial academic field of inquiry across the twentieth century. The New Social History has grown to complicate and advance the historiography of African American slavery developed from the 1960s through the 1980s by detailing further the cultural and political pramatics of human agency.

From a longer historical perspective, I agree with Johnson that we should concentrate, in his words, on the way “enslaved people theorized their own actions and the practical process through which those actions provided the predicate for new ways of thinking about slavery and resistance.” Texts of intellectual culture from the era of Jefferson to that of Obama supply the evidence of how African Americans came to understand and demonstrate their own agency for social change against racial injustice, or of how they and their critics came to articulate African American political subjectivity, action, and representation. Yet I account also for the historical paradoxes and ironies of African American culture and politics: for the way that intellectualism could form cultural wedges within African American communities, but also for the way it could support political bridges within these communities, too, such as by strengthening the ideological sensitivity of their de facto or elected leaders to the problems of racism and racial prejudice. In either case, by no means were such communities victims of the political history of race, defenseless
in the face of its vicissitudes. Rather, they were, and continue to be, almost always active despite and because of it.

Hopefully, my book signals a watershed moment in thinking about the political history of African American intellectual culture. I echo the reservations of Reed and Warren over the “well-embedded, commonsense form of narrative for making claims about black collective mentalité” afflicting political historiographies of African American intellectual culture. Yet I also remember the recent admonition of John Ernest, a literary historian, that “race” and all its ideological and material constellations remain a crucial paradigm of analysis. One reason Black Studies was so adamant about its intellectual policies includes its constant need to answer questions justifying its existence and its dual attention to race and politics. Ernest calls on scholars to continue to uphold the intervention of Black Studies into American literary studies by attending to the distinctive historical conditions of African Americans (such as slavery) that have framed their awareness of race and their approaches to political action and by drawing attention to those writers and critics of African American literature who have played crucial roles in the general development of American literature. My book heeds this call. The artistic or intellectual writings by African Americans, or such writings about them, can be a centerpiece of recovering their political history as agents of social change.

Let me stress here that this book is not a full political history of African American literature. It is not a comprehensive record of the ways that this tradition has evolved since slavery’s end at the hands of various actors or in response to various phenomena that many of us have assumed to be broadly political. Rather, this book is a basis for such a complete history: it looks at what literary scholar David Kazanjian has called “flashpoints.” A term borrowed from (the aufblitzen of) philosopher Walter Benjamin, a flashpoint signifies “the process by which someone or something emerges or bursts into action or being, not out of nothing but transformed from one form to another; and, it refers to the powerful effects of that emergence or transformation.” Analogous to Kazanjian’s study of early American literature, my study of certain literary processes and effects of African American political agency is selective and suggestive in referring to the past, if only because my argument involves less a full rewriting of history than a full critique of historiography and an exploration of why and how one should write a history both literary and political. I am proposing a paradigm of historiography in which the principles of researching and re-presenting the past account for the literary texts and ideologies of African American writers that have connected
informal to formal types of politics. Contrary to what certain critics have claimed, the “grounding of the political in the cultural” was by no means “ill-advised from start” in African American history and historiography, and a “post-identitarian conceptualization of race” is not necessarily required to realize the limitations of racial identity in political action or mobilization.40

In closing, I turn again to Glaude. In the preface to In a Shade of Blue, he talks about his participation in a summer 2006 town-hall meeting in Texas, alongside two celebrated experts on racial politics, media host Tavis Smiley and religion scholar Cornel West. One topic of discussion was the relationship between “knowledge” and “action.” In response to a person who asserted that “knowledge without action is useless” and that “we must do something with that knowledge,” Glaude responded with the questions “What if we understand knowledge not as separate from doing, but rather as a consequence of it? What if knowledge is simply the fruit of our undertakings?” Borrowing the language of philosopher John Dewey, these questions constitute the premise of In a Shade of Blue: the philosophical tradition of Anglo-American pragmatism, of which Dewey was a pioneer, may help us to explain and overcome some of the “conceptual problems that plague contemporary African American political life.”41 The interdisciplinary questions through which Glaude resolves the undertheorized relationship between knowledge and African American political action are useful in converse terms: What if we understand doing as a consequence of knowledge? What if our undertakings are simply the fruit of knowledge? What does it take for knowledge to motivate or work on behalf of political action?

The answers to these questions are far from straightforward, especially when the knowledge in question develops from the reading of literature. In their most precise and sophisticated forms, the answers require a reconsideration, as I have already suggested, of the definitions and assumptions in connecting cultural expression to political action and in arguing that the former may cause the latter while informing and transforming society. To begin this reassessment, we must deduce that talking about politics is tantamount to talking about power, especially in regard to African Americans, whose status as a “minority” group automatically implies a power relation to a “majority” group. The symbols in African American cultural expression that develop and shape knowledge and attitudes may likewise imply the power relation.42 As literary scholar Suzanne Gearhart suggests, “The question of minority cultures is inseparable from a question of power, or at least when we speak of a minority culture today it seems to me that what we have in mind are cultural groups whose members are not only fewer in number than those of
the cultural majority but who are also relatively disempowered with respect to members of a more powerful majority culture or group.” Two centuries ago, Jefferson’s Enlightenment generation reasoned that African Americans were inferior and should be circulated and exchanged as commodities in the global capitalist economy of slavery and the slave trade. According to Frederick Douglass, although American slavery formally ended in 1865, as an “old monster” it could persist in “new,” ideological “form” and become even more dangerous unless antislavery work continued—but also adjusted—to counteract it. Action against the racism that endorsed slavery, in other words, needed to assume multiple political forms to succeed. African American literature turned out to be one of those forms.