Prometheus was irreverent: he took fire from the gods in the heavens and gave it to human beings. Historically, authors in the Black American literary tradition have exhibited irreverent Promethean qualities by 1) taking literacy from higher powers of White American literary cannon, thus breaking ideological rules of the literary gods and 2) empowering “lesser” beings – Black fictional and non-fictional characters – by giving them command of fiery prose. In this essay, I suggest ways in which authors of the Afro-American Major Works texts broke literary rules, created combustion within American society, and joked, practically, about complex meanings of the prose and poetry of African-American life.

From the beginning of the development of an Afro-American literary tradition, authors, themes, and characters in Black texts broke ideological rules of the White American literary canon. Authors that concerned themselves with scripting or narrating Black experiences shifted the Colonial focus of literature from White perspectives to Black perspectives and moved Black people from object status to subject. In the late 18th and early 19th century, authors such as Phillis Wheatley (Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, 1773), Olaudah Equiano (The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, 1789), and George Moses Horton (In Hope of Liberty, 1829) defied the deified standard of writing in the United States. Although the structure and language of the prose that these authors engaged clearly resembles the neo-classical style of the era in which they were writing, they bucked burgeoning American literary conventions in two ways. First, by mastering the English language despite legal, cultural, or social limitations, they disproved their contemporaries who asserted that Africans could not engage in refined language or high art. Secondly, by utilizing European language to articulate their own experience, they refuted those, like Thomas Jefferson, who insisted that Black writing was mere imitation of White writing. They not only mastered the language, but also usurped its importance by crafting their own meaning...
out of standard European forms of writing. This mastery has been continued through the creative language use and damn-near-arrogant manipulation of the English alphabet found in writings of authors such as Jean Toomer, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison.

A clear example of an author who understood the rules of writing enough to break them is George Moses Horton. When he wrote, “Is it because my skin is black/That thou should’st be so dull and slack/And scorn to set me free?/Then let me hasten to the grave/The only refuge of a slave/Who mourns for liberty...” it is clear that he engaged in more than simple mimicry of poetic style. His writing mocked those who dared to claim superiority of language based on white skin color, American nationality, or European heritage. Further, by clearly addressing a White audience, he indicted those who clung to the regime of slavery on grounds of African inferiority and offered himself as living proof to challenge those who asserted that the African was incapable of feeling pain, engaging in self-reflexivity, or executing critical social analysis.

The derisive dialogue about controversial issues in Afro-American literature reflects a breaking of the White American mores that would operate to silence Black voices. For example, the long-standing open debate about the shifting meaning of the color line is ever-present in the topic of “passing” in Black literature. When W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1903 “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line,” he was articulating an issue of race mixing and identity that had existed since Africans came to America. With the discussion of passing, those who fictionalized the Black American experience blurred the color-line and by doing so challenged those who imagined themselves racially superior. Frances E. W. Harper (Iola LeRoy or Shadows Uplifted, 1892), James Weldon Johnson (Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, 1912), and Nella Larson (Quicksand 1928 and Passing 1929) invoked the tragedy of Mulattos in a way that presented the “gods” (White American society) with the reality of their own mortality (Black miscegenation).

In *Passing*, when Irene Westover (Redfield) and Clare Kendry meet at the Drayton in Chicago – a segregated restaurant where both characters are passing for White, Irene thinks it impossible that anyone could possibly tell that she has Black roots. When she notices someone staring at her, she assures herself that White people, as Clare appeared to be, could not recognize all Black people by sight alone. She thinks, White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gypsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn’t possibly know.4

Larson, through her character, laughed at Whites who imagined they were gods (pure and racially superior) and, further, mocked those who imagined that they could recognize on sight, those who were not.

Further, when Mulatto characters rejected passing for White, as did Harper’s character Iola, the challenge to White superiority was even more apparent. When the White Dr. Gresham proposes to the light skinned, bi-racial Iola, he says that race doesn’t matter in their relationship because her complexion was a fair as his. Yet, she rejects his offer of marriage because race, as Cornell West wrote a century after Harper, does matter. Through Iola, Harper exposes racism, not only in the “Secesh” South, but also in the liberal North. She writes, “Dr. Gresham,” said Iola, sadly,

“should the story of my life be revealed to your family, would they be willing to ignore all the traditions of my blood, forget all the terrible humiliations through which I have passed? I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment. I have lived in New England. I love the sunshine of her homes and the freedom of her institutions. But New England is not free from racial prejudice, and I would never enter a family where I would be an unwelcome member.”5

Through engaging themes like passing, authors of Black literature have created a tradition of presenting topic that undermined White literary, and social, authority. In fiction, authors established themes that, presented through their characters, “signified” against White America.

The fact that there is still such debate about the meaning of Blackness, the characteristics of Black art, and the criteria by which Black art should be judged shows the virtual inconclusiveness of the debate about the role of social construction of race in American life and literature. However, although race is more

a social construction than a biological one, it is clear that there are identifiable literary traditions that come from Africa and in seeking to define what is Afro-American in this literary tradition, we can turn to Africa and the Diaspora for clues of what can be considered “Black” in literary form, technique, and content.

In The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates asserted that within Afro-American literature the trickster figure, illustrated by Esu-Elegbara (found in Yoruba cultures in Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti) and the Signifying Monkey (“distinctly Afro-American” according to Gates), represents a Black Diasporic literary practice that presents a challenge to elitists of American literature. Gates wrote, “To signify, in other words, is to engage in certain rhetorical games”. Uncle Julius McAdoo, created by Charles W. Chesnutt (The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales, 1899) represents the epitome of trickster characters prevalent in Afro-American literary history. The significance of the trickster figure in African-American culture can also be seen in Down By the Riverside by Charles Joyner. In this historical text, Joyner highlights the African oral tradition of trickster figures and documents the maintenance of this tradition in South Carolina history. In chapter six “All De’ Bes’ Story,” Joyner chronicles the educative, moral, cultural, social, psychological, and political aspects of African-American storytelling and the roles of human and animal trickster figures in those tales. Although this is an historical text, it demonstrates the centrality of an impious character within the Black America literary tradition.

In his introduction to The Conjure Woman, Richard H. Brodhead writes that there is much debate as to what degree Chesnutt actually challenged racial stereotypes and to what degree he perpetuated them; however, it is clear that “a simple reading of [racial self-caricaturing] is likely to be a wrong one” In the tales that Chesnutt tells, Uncle Julius seems to get the best of John and Annie, carpetbaggers who come to North Carolina, by telling old-timey folk tales. Chesnutt presents his main character in a way that requires a close reading in order to see beyond the Uncle Tom-type behavior that the use of affective language might imply. Though he seems to scrape and shuffle, Uncle Julius ultimately gets what he wants; Chesnutt, like Harper, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and Zora Neale Hurston, employs Black language and dialect which is

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7 Ibid., 48.
extremely controversial, especially in the era of the “new” Negro of the 1890s and later in the mid-1920s. Yet, a close reading of Chesnutt’s protagonist will reveal the clever use of wit and wiles that puts Uncle Julius ahead of the new White landowners, or at the very least, maintains his status as a semi-comfortable resident on the grounds: in “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” “A Deep Sleeper,” and “A Victim of Heredity,” he secures leniency for his nephew or a neighboring chicken thief; in “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” he makes a financial deal with the owner of a lame horse at John’s expense; in “Dave’s Neckliss,” he procures a ham from Miss Anne, John’s wife, after telling a story that sours her on the idea of eating ham; and in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt” he successfully protects his honey venture. Clearly, there is an attempt to steal fire, and literary subjectivity, away from White hands.

One final way that authors of Black novels construct characters to undermine the ideological authority of White penmanship is by claiming the power of self-definition. Many authors place common Black voices at the center of literature by reflecting characters who refuse to take on the names, titles, or language of White oppressors. In The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman (1971), Ernest Gaines creates a text in which the main character struggles to keep a name of her own liking. When Ticey is given the name Jane Brown by a passing Union officer, she refuses to relinquish the name – even when both her mistress and her master whips her for such a rebellious act.10 Although the character Jane does not actually choose her own name, Gaines represents the importance of self-naming in a scene where a group of freedmen and women who are resting in the woods begin to realize their freedom in a re-naming ritual. Jane narrates, “Then somebody said: ‘My new name is Abe Washington. Don’t call me Buck no more.’ We must have been two dozens of us there, and now everybody started changing names like you change hats. Nobody was keeping the same name Old Master had gived them.” Jane fights to keep her name and fights when one of the other characters chooses the name Brown; Much like Frederick Douglass in his 1845 autobiography, the right to articulate one’s own name – and resist White violence – is of the utmost importance in Black literature.

10New York: Bantam, 8-9.
11 Ibid., 17.
The second way that the Afro-American literary tradition resembles Promethean rebelliousness is by empowering “lesser” beings. The thrill of playing with fire that Johnson’s nameless protagonist speaks of is the thrill of making Afro-American literature powerful in the hands of writers familiar with African-inspired storytelling. By utilizing techniques such as call and response, musical allusion, and improvisation, literate Blacks, often in the name of all Black people, have released the “fire” of writing unto the Black masses and have conducted the written text like a firestorm to usurp the historically White supremacist American literary cannon.

An example of call and response can clearly be seen in the centrality of religion in Afro-American texts. Whether in structure (as in the religious cadence and polemical nature of The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965) and James Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time (1963) or subject (as in Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” in Poems or Du Bois’ “Of the Faith of the Fathers” in Souls) the blending of prayer, spiritual, and abolitionist fervor was apparent in the literary representation of antiphony or call and response. The discussion of religion was not blithely included in Black texts. The usage of religion, especially Christianity, was contested, claimed, and remade by African-American authors who, like Martin Delaney in Blake (1861-1862), rejected religion that was not emancipatory or that engaged biblical texts for anything other than African freedom.

There is much written about author Harriet Beecher Stowe and her historic invocation of the Biblical scriptures in order to shame the slaveholding apologists of her day. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) the Christ-like protagonist Uncle Tom and the saint-like sacrifice of Evangelista represent Stowe’s ability to write, although she is a White author, a text within the Afro-American literary tradition of protest. A further example of the intersection of religion with call and response can be seen in Richard Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children (1936/1940): by proclaiming “Uncle Tom is Dead” Wright responded to Stowe’s creation of a relatively passive protagonist and he created a character that showed the real complexity of religion in Black life. In “Fire and Cloud” he portrayed the radicalization of Reverend Taylor, an accommodationist preacher who if involved in a generational struggle between the old White mayor and that of his own son Jimmy.

Wright, by exposing the general complicity of Black leadership and the overwhelming hypocrisy of the flock, thus redefining the role of religion in Black life and the interpretation of religion in Black literature.

Musical allusion is a second technique used to popularize Afro-American literature. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Sonia Sanchez, and Amiri Baraka all represent examples of Black writers that, through form or function tie Black music to development of Black writing. As Eileen Southern presents in The Music of Black Americans, Negro spirituals, Ragtime, Jazz, and Be-bop are musical styles that originated in the Black community and these styles are mimicked and expanded upon in the Afro-American literary tradition.

A final example of linking Black literature to more common roots is the use of improvisation. Improvisation is a practice grounded “squarely in African music and poetic traditions.” In Call and Response, the authors assert that theme and variation are central to creation of Afro-American art:

Functioning much like the African griot, bard, or praise singer, the slave lead singer would extemporize the words of a spiritual or secular son as he or she sang. When the son was sung again, the leader might vary the words or another singer might lead it. This reflects the African musical idiom *theme and variation*, namely, that the songs become altered versions of other songs.

This technique can be seen in the articulation and re-interpretation of the use of literature to interpret Black experience. Black feminist criticism and the way that Black women have remade the meaning of Black texts is a fiery re-imagination of both the (White) American literary tradition and the Black (male) literary tradition. In Coming of Age in Mississippi (1968), Ann Moody records her experiences during the modern Civil Rights Movement in a way that adds new dimensions to the traditional bildungsroman: she not only gains an education, but she writes her story as a challenge to those would-be gods who reside in America. As the novel ends, she questions whether or not Black people can really overcome the horror of racism and even as she herself begins to feel old, she wonders if America will ever truly mature.

As further evidence of the improvisation of Black women’s literature, by introducing sexuality into their literary expressions, radical writers such as Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde continue to push the song of “Blackness” to be include a wider range of voices. In the prologue to Zami, a New Spelling of My Name:

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13 Call and Response., 51
14 Ibid.
A Biomythography. (1982), Lorde writes, “I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the ‘I’ at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing either or both directions as needed.” Lorde creates a new language as she writes her sexual self into being; by naming herself with words that before her time were rarely spoken and in a tone all her own, she riffs like Amiri Baraka’s description of John Coltrane Live at Birdland.

Another illustration of improvisation in Black literature is the constant theme of “newness.” Recreating and complicating Blackness by asserting a new positioning is a recurring – repetitious – remaking of Black writing. The Harlem “renaissance” that Alain Locke identified in his 1925 The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance is but one in a series of incarnations of the articulation of a “New Negro.” In the preface to Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow, Leon Litwack writes “by the 1890’s both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois expressed a strong preference for ‘Negro’ and the term ‘New Negro’ had come into frequent use…”. Later, in the 1940’s and 1960’s, the term Negro was then replaced with “Afro-American” and “Black” and, as exemplified by J. Saunders Redding and Stephen Henderson, the “New Black” poets also presented their own ideas and visions of self. Thus, the poets, artists, and social critics that appear in Locke’s New Negro are situated within a continuum of African Americans’ struggle for a fresh voice.

The academic implication for understanding the impious nature of Afro-American literary history is the necessary appreciation of irony. There are many complex types of literary irony. Three types that are salient in the Afro-American literary tradition are verbal irony (figure of speech and satire), situational irony (the difference between expectation and actual occurrence), and the irony of fate (the idea of providence). Those who would read and comprehend the many layers of Black literature would necessarily have to become familiar with the significance of these uses of irony. When in his poem “We Wear the Mask,” Dunbar writes of the mask Black people wear, he is alluding to the ironies present in Black life; this

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15 Freedom, California: Crossing Press, 7.
16 See “A Jazz Great: John Coltrane” and “Coltrane Live at Birdland” in Black Music.
17 New York: Touchstone.
metaphor can also represent the layers of complexity in the literary representations of Black life. Thus, if one is going to “get” the significance of the mask that Dunbar writes of, one must first know the mask exists and, second, be aware of the various ironies inherent in its existence. Examples of irony in Black literature abound.

In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Janie gives Phoeby permission to relay her story by saying “my tongue is in my friends mouth,” thus displaying verbal irony. When Du Bois writes “On the Coming of John,” he is demonstrating multifaceted situational irony: when John gets an education, like most Black people of his day – including Du Bois – instead of becoming more conciliatory as Whites would intend, Black students become more unruly. The irony of fate can be seen in Countee Cullen’s “Yet Do I Marvel.” He writes “I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind/…With petty cares to slightly understand/What awful brain compels His awful hand./ Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:/ To make a poet black, and bid him sing.”

**Conclusion**

In the end, though Prometheus initially defied the Gods, he ended up becoming one of them. Similarly, though the fundamentals of Black literature challenge the idea of an American literary canon, especially the “classical,” Euro-centric definition, over time, the Black literary tradition has developed a set of clear themes that have resulted in the development of a canon of Black literary gods. This is much like the paradox of working to earn a doctoral degree in Afro-American studies, for it is apparent that in this particular pursuit, there is a love/hate relationship that relies on the tension of creating a strong African-inspired voice, only to end up participating in the savagery of the American academy.

Further irony can be seen in the fact that Prometheus, a representation of Greek “classical” culture was the starting point for this question on Afro-American literature borders on the satirical for Prometheus,

“who was considered the epitome of Europe [,] not only was the son of Iapetos, plausibly identified as the biblical Japhet, third son of Noah and the ancestor of the Europeans; but his heroic, beneficial and self-sacrificing action – of stealing fire for mankind – soon came to be seen as typically Aryan. Gobineau saw him as the ancestor of the principal white family and

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by the 20th century the ultra-Romantic Robert Graves was even suggesting that the name Prometheus meant ‘swastika’. Now isn’t that ironic? In the end, the practical joke that Black writing plays on American society is that by its very existence, it both reflects and rejects the “diabolical” nature of the European social and literary construct of America.

The punch-line of Afro-American literature is that, because of its irreverence and irony, it defies simple definition. To those who would attempt to assign a term that pins down the essence of this vast literary tradition – be it “Black” or “revolutionary” - there are authors within the Black American literary tradition who would resist the given definition. Black American literature, which is a derivation of the African oral tradition of storytelling, is not meant simply to lie flat on a page. Rather, it is written to live in the telling and re-telling – naming and re-naming – of the nuances of Black life in America. The tension between improvisational flexibility and constant presence of African-inspired qualities is what makes Afro-American literature fascinating. The implication of the trickster nature of Black literature is in the necessity of close reading. The reader of Afro-American literary texts needs to be aware of the many layers of voice, audience, language, and structure that authors in the Black literary tradition place within the text. One needs to perceive the presence of the oft-times masked nature of Black literature in order to get the jokes told therein. The reader who does this, like human beings who have gained access to fire, can either generate light and heat or simply create a bunch of hot air and smoldering ruins.

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The question of themes in Afro-American history is different from the question of themes in Afro-American historiography. Though both questions are important, I am interpreting this exam query in such a way that requires a focus more on the historiography than on the history itself. Thus, for the purpose this essay, I explore the general schools of thought that Major Works historians have written within, how they have recorded and interpreted African-American life, and what evidence they utilized in order to draw conclusions about, decipher, or challenge the mosaic historical narrative of Blacks in America.

In Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick track trends in the historiography of Black Americans and present the complex context of the personalities that have worked on constructing the body of work in Black history. Meier and Rudwick identify and present a wide spectrum of answers to the questions that are inherent in the study of Black life. By way of outlining tensions in the field, they write,

Franklin had identified not only the dilemmas facing black historians, but also the range of dilemmas experienced by all students of the Afro-American past: the tension between studying Negro history as a distinct – and separate – field and incorporating it into the larger stream of American history; the tension between scholarship and advocacy – or more broadly stated, the tension between the canons of scholarship and the expression of one’s value judgments; the tension between calm and detached scholarship and the pragmatic, instrumental use of history to reform society; the tension arising over whether Afro-American history is a specialty best done by blacks, or whether it should be open to all with a serious interest and appropriate academic training.21

These questions of Afro-American historiography are paramount in the quest to appreciate the disciplinary context in which the Major Works authors are operating.

In order for me to proceed with answering this question, it was first necessary to grasp the concept of what exactly historiography is. I found that categorization of types of historiography can include topical history (i.e. Political history, Marxist history, Revolutionary history, Intellectual history, Economic history, Educational history, Scientific History, Social history, Labor history, Cultural history, Women's history, or Black history), epochal history (i.e. periods such as the American Colonial, Antebellum, Civil War,

21 P. 279.
Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Civil Rights, or Black Power eras), or a focus on broader themes (such as studies of American historiography or cultural fluidities in the African Diaspora).\textsuperscript{22} Within these schools there are also sub-topics such as regional or area studies (i.e. American Southern, New England, Maryland, or South Carolina histories) or ideological approaches to history (i.e. feminist historiography).

Of the numerous major themes that were apparent to me in the historiography of the Major Works seminar, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on social, legal, women’s, military, and revolutionary historiography. In the colonial, antebellum, and post-emancipation eras,\textsuperscript{23} authors presented fascinating, and oftentimes vastly different, perspectives of how Black people developed their social lives, navigated the politics of legal and military systems, revolted against individual, institutional, and social oppression, and how women were portrayed, or not portrayed throughout the course.

Social themes, specifically those of Black culture (African folk cultural transmission, music, and religion for example) were prevalent in the Major Works studies. It makes sense that those who are attempting to record a history of a marginalized population would present social rather than institutional approaches. This is a very different approach than the top down history of wars, presidents, and governments that has dominated the field of American history in the past. For example, in Charles Joyner’s Down by the Riverside, Eileen Southern’s The Music of Black Americans, Gary Nash’s Forging Freedom, and the Hortons’ In Hope of Liberty, the reader is introduced to folk tales, performance of the oral tradition, and other evidence of a continuum of cultural transition of African inspired religious practices, artistic creation, food, dress, and labor habits, and philosophy.

The theme of legal issues in the Black American experience, addressed by Tomas Morris’ Southern Slavery and the Law, and Richard Klugger’ Simple Justice also represent an important strand in the seminar studies. An important similarity that existed in these two otherwise different legal texts, was the focus on the active role of Black people in the legal system. Neither Morris nor Klugger ignored how African-Americans used the legal system to make gains in their own emancipation and social liberation. However, although the

\textsuperscript{23} I appreciate the necessary broadness of these exam questions, thus I am interpreting the “post-emancipation eras” rather liberally. I will include analysis of Major Works texts from Many Thousands Gone (1600s) to I’ve Got the Light of Freedom (1960s).
subject was the same, differences can be seen in how they went about studying the subject. While Morris spent considerable amount of time attempting to give an account of how shifting legal oppressions in different time periods and in different places impacted a vast number of people (both Black and White), Klugger’s investigation revealed the legal, political, and social antecedents to one set of court cases that deal with one aspect of the law (the desegregation of educational institutions). This is but one example of the possible range in approaches to one theme within Black history.

Women’s historiography is a school of study that shows the inherently political nature of all historiography. Not only has the recognition of the centrality of gender analysis to Black history been virtually ignored, representation of the topic in the seminar was also shamelessly thin. While Ira Berlin’s *Many Thousands Gone* did incorporate the treatment of women in slavery and the role of women in social development, a reading of Angela Davis’ “The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood” would have been useful to bring to light how sex and gender worked in Black culture and within the larger American society. This essay is especially appropriate because Davis draws on the scholarship of Aptheker (*American Negro Slave Revolts*) and Gutman (*The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*) and illuminates blind spots in both work that would have allowed students a more complex understanding of these texts.

In the broader field of history, Black women historians, and the focus on Black women as an area of study, is still a fairly recent phenomenon. In the mid-1980s, there was an explosion of texts about various aspects of Black women’s lives. Although not all of these works were historical monographs, in a short five years, many women developed a base for studying gender in Afro-American history that built on the few individual efforts of earlier scholars. Now the focus on various aspects of Black women’s experiences are

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25 I am aware that I did not respond to the call for suggestions when the department revamped the Major Works seminar. Please accept this reflection as a tardy submission. In addition, Deborah Gray White’s *Too Heavy a Load* would supplement texts like *Crusade for Justice* and *Trailblazers and Torchbearers* to ensure that history by and/or about Black women was integral to rather than in addition to the study of Black life.
26 Some of these texts were: *All the Women are White. All the Men are Black. But Some of Us Are Brave* (Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith 1982); “The Impact of Black Women in Education” (Bettye Collier-Thomas *Journal of Negro Education* special edition 1982); *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Barbara Smith 1983); *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (Paula Giddings 1984); *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* (Patricia Bell-Scott and Beverly Guy-Shiftall eds. 1984); *We Are Your Sisters* (Dorothy Sterling 1984); “Lifting the Veil, Shattering the Silence: Black Women’s History in Slavery and Freedom” (Darlene Clark Hine *The State of Afro-American History* 1988); *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (Jacqueline Jones 1986); “The Education of Black Women in the Nineteenth Century” and “The Higher Education of Black Women in the Twentieth Century” (Linda Perkins and Jeanne
becoming more of an accepted focus and Black women historians, whether they explicitly focus on gender issues or not, are gaining more recognition as “serious” scholars by those who deem themselves worthy to judge “quality” historiography. Further, although Black women, such as Gerda Lerner in the 1970s and Jacqueline Jones in the 1980s, have been involved in documenting the history of Black women, now Black men, most notably V. P. Franklin, are also beginning to publish monographs on Black women.

Two final themes that I found fascinating in the seminar were of the military participation and revolutionary action of Black people. The question of whether or not Black people should fight in America’s wars is a longstanding one. In Blacks in the American Revolution (the Kaplans) and Blacks in Civil War (Benjamin Quarles) authors investigated the presence of African-Americans in America’s struggle for independence from Britain and their active role in their own emancipation. The demand of an exchange of liberty for patriotism is a central question that extended through WWI, WWII, and continues to be relevant today. Further, in Herbert Aptheker’s Slave Revolts, C.L.R. James’ Black Jacobins, Peter Woods’ Black Majority, Crawford, Rouse, and Wood’s Trailblazers & Torchbearers, and Charles Payne’s I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, it is evident that Black people were not only willing to fight for emancipation and social justice, but it is also clear that Black people’s definitions of “resistance” encompassed a wide range of ideals, strategies, and actions. An interesting variation in the presentation of these resistance stories is the difference in voice of the authors. For example, although both C. L. R. James and Peter Woods deal with topics of revolt, (James in San Domingo and Woods in South Carolina), their approach and interpretation are extremely different. On the one hand, James’ work is clearly polemical. In his work, Toussaint L’Ouverture was the godfather of revolution whom Africans in general and West Indians in particular should follow in order to rise up and shake off European oppression for once and for all. On the other hand, while Woods does chronicle the climate of revolt in South Carolina and surrounding areas, he does not valorize Nat Turner, Gabriel Prossor, or the Charleston Blacks of the Stono Rebellion. This example is one that elicits major debates around racial influence and methodology – as explored in Meier and Rudwick’s “On the Dilemmas of Scholarship” – that looms large within the field of Black historiography.

In order to better understand the difference between historiography and methodology, it was important for me to note that one’s school of thought does not necessarily determine one’s methodological approach, methods, or evidence. For example, a “Marxist history” can be taken to mean either a study of Marxist influences on particular labor practices, as seen in Robin Kelly’s *Hammer and Hoe*, or it can mean that the historian has taken on the epistemological assumptions of Marxism, as exemplified by E. Franklin Frazier in his *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class*. It was an important step for me to be able to separate the historical structure of a text from the historical content.

There are many types of methodology that influence how a historian approaches a body of work. Whether one is seeking to draw conclusions (positivist), decipher complexities (interpretive), or challenge conventions (critical social science) will make a large impact on what type of history is produced. Is the author looking to delineate the cause and effect of a certain event? Is he seeking to investigate the fascinating complexities of a certain historical phenomenon? Is she seeking to dismantle a conventional, or “traditional” approach or interpretation? Does the author employ a mixture of these styles? The answer to these questions can give readers a clue as to what type of methodological approach a particular historian is taking.

In the Major Works seminar, there were clearly representative illustrations of how historians chose to approach their work. In *Simple Justice* and *Impending Crisis*, Klugger and Potter were attempting to make connecting statements about influences of the Brown case, and to delineate the role that the Civil War played in the advancement of U.S. nationalism. In contrast, Joyner and Berlin, wrote *Down By the Riverside, Many Thousands Gone*, in order to decipher complex aspects of Black experiences in antebellum South Carolina and the first two centuries of slavery within regional contexts, while Nash and Painter in *Forging Freedom* and *Exodusters* explored the social maneuverings of free Blacks in Philadelphia and the particulars of mass movement from the Mississippi Valley to Kansas after Reconstruction. Finally, there were authors who were not only writing to make a statement or explore characteristics of an event or a particular population. Many were clearly writing to challenge established narratives. For example, Du Bois wrote to refute Booker T. Washington’s assertion of the necessity of economic over political gain and to challenge apologists for

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American Governments failure to adequately provide for freedman after emancipation and Gutman wrote to refute the “deterioration of the Negro Family” that Daniel P. Moynihan asserted in his 1965 report “The Negro Family in America: A Case for National Action.”

While it is important to contemplate the various approaches that historians favor, it is also interesting to note the combination of methodologies that some employ. For example, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, Williams explored the ways in which slavery contributed to the development of British capitalism (interpretive history) but he was also clearly writing against the thesis that racism spawned capitalism, not the other way around (critical social history).

I have found that methodology should not be confused with methods. For example, one can employ statistics as method of data collection and analysis, but can choose to do either a quantitative or a qualitative methodological analysis. For example, statistical analysis is present in both *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Gutman) and *Time on the Cross* (Fogel and Engerman); however, *Black Family* is more of a sociological study (qualitative) while *Time* is much more concerned with using clinometrics to approach Black history (quantitative). A clear understanding of methodology and methods provides the necessary context for considering the varied use of evidence that the Major Works authors worked with.

In the introduction to *The African-American Mosaic: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture*, the authors state that the collection covers “the nearly 500 years of the black experience in the Western hemisphere, [and] the Mosaic surveys the full range size, and variety of the Library's collections, including books, periodicals, prints, photographs, music, film, and recorded sound.” These types of evidence have not always been considered to be credible evidence – in fact, some of these forms are still heavily refuted when included in historical studies. Benjamin Quarles, in *Black Mosaic: Essays in Afro-American History and Historiography*, wrote on the controversy surrounding what kind of evidence qualifies as “credible” or “valuable” in traditional American history and how historians in the field of Black Studies have challenged that criterion. In “The Problem of Materials” he writes on the scarcity of

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28 Oftentimes, challenges take place in historian’s notes; a model of this can be seen in Barbara Field’s discussion of the debate over “what constitutes capitalist socialist relations” in her notes in *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground* (page 248, note 7).
materials in Black families where illiteracy or record keeping were forbidden as well as the limitations of written materials as seen in the National Archives.

The issue of where to find records of Black American experiences despite limited materials is paramount in the historiography of the colonial and antebellum eras. In “Generating Change,” Meier and Rudwick present efforts to document the African-American oral tradition in order that it be introduced into the record. They write that although slave narratives and autobiographies have been challenged, historians have attempted use this type of evidence to broaden the knowledge base about these time periods. Interviews of ex-slaves were collected by Charles S Johnson, at the Fisk University Social Science Department (1929 – 1934) interviews in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Alabama), and John C. Cade (at Southern University), L. D. Reddick at Kentucky State College (Federal Emergency Relief Administration). The most extensive collection of oral history can be seen in the Federal Writers Project in the WPA (1936-1938). Oral histories, like autobiographies, are challenged because they are biased. However, the claimed objectivity of the written text requires scrutiny as well.

Some historians see written records as the only credible type of material. However records like government documents, census records, tax documents, estate inventories, voting records, and legislative roll calls, are inherently biased and incomplete because of the paramount role that racism has played in the institutional development of this country. Thus, it is my opinion that methods – whether qualitative or quantitative – which incorporate a range of materials and sources are more likely to offer a more complete picture. In this way, I am very much a synthesis historian. By using a combination of methods and a multitude of different classes of material evidence, it seems that historians are able to provide a more accurate telling of the story, but it also allows researchers to get at the complexities within the Black experience.

Many Major Works historians have seemed to use this technique. Throughout his career, Du Bois moved between a mixture of qualitative and quantitative history, fiction, poetry, autobiography, polemical

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29 Further some say that only work using primary documents is real history. It is interesting that I have heard some of my colleagues say that When and Where I Enter, like Howard Zinn’s People’s history of the United States is not real history because they do not use primary sources.
historiography and critical social science. As a master storyteller his flexibility shines as an example of true scholarship and his dedication to the field of history was enhanced by his willingness to engage many methods, methodologies, and means of evidence. The Souls of Black Folk is a key example of how this disciplinary fluidity can culminate in one vital text. Similarly, both in Been in the Storm so Long and Trouble in Mind, Leon Litwack combines work from Louisiana, Arkansas, and South Carolina WPA collections, newspapers, Senate and House proceedings, scholarly books and journals, discographies, church records, slave narratives, autobiographies, and fiction in order to create a rich picture of Reconstruction and Jim Crow history.

Conclusion

John Hope Franklin offers a hypothesis about thematic approaches to history and although it presents many problems and imposes limitations on how to understand African-American historiography, (like all organizational tools), it does offer a useful entry point into better understanding how historians have addressed the larger schools of thought. In “On the Evolution of Scholarship in Afro-American History”, Franklin asserted that there have been four stages of writing in Black history. The first stage in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a basic attempt to record and establish the presence of African Americans; The second stage involved recording Black “firsts” and asserting the contribution of African Americans to the development of the United States; The third stage, during the Jim Crow era and the onset of the Civil Rights Movement, historians began to record the long list of oppressions in the Black experience; Finally, during the development of Black Power consciousness in the late 1960s and early 1970s, historians began documenting the long tradition of revolt and resistance to American systems of oppression. Franklin does not assert that these stages were neat or static, rather he outlines the general tendency of historians to approach Black history from certain perspectives with specific assertions and assumptions based on the era they were writing in.

While it is clear that this paradigm is not entirely accurate (for example, American Negro Slave Revolts was written in the 1940s and Black women’s histories are still focusing on presence and

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contributions), it does present yet another type of methodology that can be considered when looking at Afro-American historiography. Initially, I adapted this outline as an approach to my work because with it I could work with a neat paradigm for categorization of messy events of Black woman’s educational history. Rather than simply record the presence, barriers, firsts, or triumphs of Black women’s American educational experience, I could use the three categories of “presence,” “oppression,” and “contribution and creative resistance” as guidelines by which to neatly record the broad history. However, after reflecting on the approaches that historians that we have been introduced to in this seminar have presented, I realize that Franklin’s theoretical assertion and my methodological approach will only be truly useful when used in tandem with a range of other methodologies, methods, and types of material evidence.

In Black Mosaic, Quarles discusses differences in approaches to history. He distinguishes between “‘the great man’ theory of history, presenting a gallery of heroic men and women pushing on to victory against greater odds” and the “revolutionary black nationalists.” I anticipate that in my work as a neophyte historian, I will attempt to tell the story of my predecessors, Black women educators, in a way that is neither wholly subjective or objective, nor simply qualitative or quantitative. I do not want to point only to the heroines nor do I want to engage in “writing against” everyone to prove how smart I am (as is the habit with many an overzealous graduate student). I imagine that as I proceed in the work of recording and interpreting the thoughts and actions of Black women educators that have come before me, I shall find a way to make some contribution that will add to the color and texture of the mosaic of human history. Studying how others have approached history will make my contribution richer. Thank you for teaching me; thank you for this experience.