Honoring our Common Heritage and Promoting Solidarity

Black History Month
Special Edition of the Youthprise Newsflash

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In continuing their mission to champion learning beyond the classroom so that all Minnesota youth thrive, Youthprise is supporting a partnership with three Twin Cities–based organizations: The Givens Foundation for African American Literature, Juxtaposition Arts, and the Saint Paul Almanac. This partnership has founded a monumentally unique collaborative development model to evolve the world of development through our shared practices and values.

This publication is an example of our common values and intention to break down the silos that separate funding opportunities, organizations, and communities. The writers of the articles come from diverse African American communities and are affiliated with Juxtaposition Arts and the Saint Paul Almanac. To celebrate Youthprise’s Black History Month, the theme for this publication is “Honoring our Common Heritage and Promoting Solidarity.”

The articles included in this publication are intended to illustrate the common heritage but different histories of the various Minnesota African American communities and to promote the similarities among them and the solidarity that can arise.

The development profession, like many of the systems in place in our society today, can be very exclusionary, held within the confines of established practice. In our collaborative development project, we hope to put forth a tangible example of cooperation, inclusion, and reciprocity that can be replicated, not only within our own organizations, but also by other groups. We also hope that this project will be a successful example of working outside of the norms of established industries, institutions, and systems.

The partnership aims to reach out to and break the silos that separate organizations across the board. By paying special attention to the disenfranchised groups that we serve and partnering with established sources of power, we can disabuse ourselves of the social constructions (e.g., race, ethnicity, class) that divide us.

Initially, Youthprise served as a funder for our various programs individually. Impressed by the collaborative development project, Youthprise began to take a more involved supportive role in the collaboration. As a result, the project has grown even more innovative and hopes to increase its success.

Originally, to diversify and strengthen the fundraising strategies for our community-based arts programs, the three organizations planned to hire one development officer, who would work in concert with each organization. Upon further consideration, we changed the plan to hire a development manager and “development apprentices” to work as a team. This team’s work includes development tasks, such as grant writing and donor management, and now incorporates media communications and event planning.
We feel that hiring youth to be educated and paid as apprentices falls in line with our values to mentor youth and better maximizes our efforts. The three apprentices—Shaunté Douglas, Gozong Lor, and I—led by manager Lisa Steinmann, come from the Saint Paul Almanac, where we have worked or currently work as editors. The most important feature of the team is that our cohort not only receives education in development, but we also practice development and work in conjunction with the executive officers of each organization.

Youth+adult partnerships are central to Youthprise’s mission.

As an organization, they incorporate youth voices throughout their work; they employ young people, recruit youth board members, and seek partnerships with organizations that model youth-adult partnerships. This mentorship is a natural continuation of the work each organization is already doing with their youth affiliates.

The partners all have a commitment to working with youth and providing them with the opportunity to gain leadership experience and to secure employment.

In this new partnership, youth learn to work as grant writers and fundraisers and to serve on boards of organizations.

The idea for this venture stemmed from a shared need to increase our fund development. Kim Klein, publisher and editor of Grassroots Fundraising Journal and the author of Fundraising for Social Change, writes that the following are prerequisites for organizations to partake in successful fundraising collaborations: “The groups have similar values and they trust each other. Ideally, groups will have even worked together on other efforts. The division of money and labor is decided beforehand. Although the donations raised cannot be predicted, each group is getting donations from their own list. The reward must be greater than if each group had attempted the strategy on its own.” Klein’s comments are indicative of how our collaboration works.

Though the organizations differ widely in geographical areas, participants, audiences, size of staff and funding, and business models, we discovered common values that are foundational to our plan. They are both shared organizational values and personal values put forth by Paul Schmitz of Public Allies in his book, Everyone Leads. The values are recognizing and mobilizing community assets, connecting across cultures, facilitating collaborative action, continuously learning and improving, and being accountable.

As a group, we have agreed to investigate growing our development capacity. Over the course of two years, we plan to continually research collaborative development models, talk with industry professionals, and reconvene to hone our plan. We believe our organizations can use these shared values to increase our development capacity and knowledge, build trusting long-term relationships with each other, successfully raise new money for each of our institutions, measure our successes and failures, apply lessons learned, and share them with the broader community.

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Youthprise Newsflash: Black History Month Edition

For more than twenty-five years, The Givens Foundation for African American Literature has been the only organization in the Twin Cities exclusively dedicated to advancing and celebrating Black literature and writers for diverse audiences of all ages.

Juxtaposition Arts develops community by engaging and employing young urban artists in hands-on education. Students have opportunities to be employed while learning and teaching professional design, production, and marketing skills.

The Saint Paul Almanac is a literary organization that creates opportunities for understanding, learning, and building relationships through sharing people’s stories. This mission is primarily accomplished through collaborative decision making in publication activities, public readings, and mentorships.

For More Information:
Givens.org
JuxtapositionArts.org
SaintPaulALMANAC.org

Shaquan Foster is a University of Minnesota student and philanthropist dedicated to the universe of literature. He works predominantly with the Saint Paul Almanac, while also working in a local bookstore and attending university full time.

All Artwork used, Provided by JXTA
African immigrants know the stereotypes about themselves, and they know the stereotypes about African Americans—they notice a lot of overlap.

When I consider what we have in common with African peoples, a lot of things come to mind. We both place a high value on storytelling. We act, dance, draw, paint, and write in order to preserve a history of ideas and actions, which is why craftsmanship because it contributes to storytelling. In ancient Africa, all across the continent, Black people had perfected architecture, music, mathematics, stone carving, woodcarving, painting, and embroidery. And so African kids and brown kids struggle to succeed in a rigorous intellectual environment, which is how the Young Somali girl when we look, listen, or feel the expressions of our same language or jargon, we know what we mean. We know that African and the African American are sold a damaging narrative about each other, so I think to highlight these parallels and deconstruct them will lead to recognizing each other's humanity and building community.

The ability to create a sense of community starts with ownership of a physical space. JXTA has done a lot of work to expand their services and programs beyond Black people, which, I think, strengthens and expands creativity. But JXTA was founded by three highly motivated young Black creatives who understand it's necessary to still serve Black youth. In a state that has problems delivering an adequate education for Black students—both African Americans and African immigrants—a place like JXTA can help a lot of these kids find their voices. I think the ethos of JXTA is a self-hatred that extends beyond them. One young woman asked me plainly, "Who's most likely to benefit if us and Blacks have beef?" The question is, "What's most likely to benefit us and Blacks have beef?" The question is valid. When African Americans and African immigrants see each other as the problem, who benefits?

Despite the imposed idea that African Americans are the lowest American ethnic group that no one should aspire to join, these kids can't help but feel inspired by Black artists and Black pop culture. In some sense, this inspiration is on a surface level, but as I talk with these kids—about the stories they want to tell and their experiences as immigrants—I understand they see commonality with African American kids their age. They know that African Americans have used ethnic slurs when referring to them, but most of them seem to understand it as a self-hatred that extends beyond them. One young woman asked me plainly, "Who's most likely to benefit if us and Blacks have beef?" The question is valid. When African Americans and African immigrants see each other as the problem, who benefits?

A commonality existing between the African immigrant community and the African American community that can't be denied is tragedy. We tend to confuse struggle and tragedy, but the two, in my opinion, are distinct. Everyone struggles, but not everyone has experienced the trauma of racial oppression, including slavery and colonialism, and few that many African peoples have encountered historically.

Moreover, mainstream American culture often talks about these two communities as being violent, whether the reference is made to the stereotyped war-torn African country and its rebels, or to the negative representations of African culture in America. Here the African and the African American are sold a damaging narrative about each other, so I think to highlight these parallels and deconstruct them will lead to recognizing each other's humanity and building community.

The ability to create a sense of community starts with ownership of a physical space. JXTA is one of the only organizations run by people of color to address the need to create a viable community infrastructure in Minneapolis. While navigating the school-to-prison pipeline, JXTA has done a lot of work to expand their services and programs beyond Black people, which, I think, strengthens and expands creativity. But JXTA was founded by three highly motivated young Black creatives who understand it's necessary to still serve Black youth. In a state that has problems delivering an adequate education for Black students—both African Americans and African immigrants—a place like JXTA can help a lot of these kids find their voices.
A highly sought-after speaker who believes in the power of the truth, Nontombi Naomi Tutu refers to herself as a human rights advocate. “Truth and Reconciliation: Healing the Wounds of Racism” is one of the many topics she speaks about to inspire change. This topic urges individuals to simply communicate with one another to cure the ill that plague our societies. Ms. Tutu is from South Africa, a country where apartheid, systematic racial oppression, complicated and harmed the lives of millions of Black people through generations. Apartheid was much like the oppressive racial segregation that Black people experienced in the United States. According to Ms. Tutu, “For me coming to the U.S. from South Africa, I found the similarities between the struggles of African Americans and Black South Africans were very striking. Our [common] struggles were to be recognized as fully human and fully competent, to be a part of the suitable for someone who is beginning on a path toward stability and success, whether it’s a twenty-something-year-old Black woman like myself, or an immigrant from Somalia or Ethiopia.

There are various views on why this separation between us is considered normal. Perhaps we could come together and seek the truth about why we hold negative attitudes about each other. I asked Ms. Tutu the following question to gain her insight on how we can begin to build community, how we can begin to break down the walls between us: What creates the cultural divide between people of African descent and African peoples living in the Twin Cities or in the United States in general? Ms. Tutu responded, “We have a tendency to look at the problems and tensions that exist in our community in a very ahistorical way and without looking at context. These views of one another, that are not depictions produced by us, taint our views of one another before we even meet in communities in the U.S. …

We have a tendency to look at the problems and tensions that exist in our community in a very ahistorical way and without looking at context. These views of one another, that are not depictions produced by us, taint our views of one another before we even meet in communities in the U.S. We are already suspicious of one another because of the stories others have told each of us about the other, and if we are to bridge the divide seeded by these stories, we have to be intentional about talking to one another and sharing the real stories of our histories and our struggles.” As Ms. Tutu astutely points out, institutions and the media control, produce, and perpetuate negative messages about us to the other.

For instance, here in the Twin Cities there is a noticeable divide between us. I live on the edge of Saint Paul, on the end of West Seventh Street by the airport, an area some people choose to avoid. The government and design of our respective countries. For both of us, race was the defining issue that affected our human rights, dignity, freedom, and respect.” Racism in our country has spawned many problems in every aspect of our lives. Two problems are the misunderstanding that people of African descent and African peoples have about each other and the rejection that we perpetrate against each other. As a result, we segregate ourselves from one another.

We absorb these damaging representations, causing certain imagery to proliferate, like “dangerous” and criminal African Americans to avoid at all costs, and [Africans in] Tarzan movies, National Geographic spreads, and charity videos with starving children.” To resist these manufactured images, we must take the initiative to ensure our own stories are told and our cultures are respected.

In my interview with Ms. Tutu, I also wondered what similarities people of African descent and South Africans might have that could help close the gap between the groups. “I was struck by the cultural similarities that existed between the African American community and our back home,” she said. “The saying ‘It takes a village’ was a reality where I come from. Every adult in my community felt responsible for every child in that community, and that responsibility meant that they both loved on you and disciplined you as needed. When I came to school here, I would go home with a college friend from Virginia, and what I found in that community so reminded me of Soweto, Munsieville, Kagiso, Masere, Roma, and the other communities I had lived in in South Africa. There was the same responsibility on the part of the adults and the same level of respect from the young people. I believe part of what we all share now is the loss of that sense of community spirit and care for one another.” In these words, Ms. Tutu indicates that fundamental values, such as loving and supporting our children, respecting our elders, and uplifting our community, are lost and must be recovered. Perhaps these reclaimed values could build a bridge between our groups, if only we could talk about our commonalities.

In my last question, I asked her what advice she would give to young people to help them better understand their similarities and differences so they may strive to live in harmony. What resonates with me the most is this wisdom: “Don’t wait until Black History Month to study our history…”

Ms. Tutu also urged youth “to spend time with elders from both communities to learn the old ways, not necessarily to adopt them, but to have a clear sense of where their culture derives.” Her suggestion for the reading circle could easily include this aspect if some elders would assume leadership in this arena. The young need the mentoring of elders and their stories. When I was a little girl, my mom, while patiently braiding my hair, told me stories of our African past. Unfortunately, several of my peers and many younger children don’t become inspired as I did.

The art of storytelling lies dormant. It’s time we revive it by connecting to each other. African peoples and people of African descent must begin to listen to each other and to tell our own stories; divulging what we have had to deal with and what we’ve overcome.

Then we are bound to see our common struggles and triumphs. Then we can begin to make a change in how we relate. The effects of systemic oppression, however, often keep us from interacting respectfully. So, as Ms. Tutu admonishes, “We African immigrants must become aware of how we can be used as another way to oppress African Americans, and African Americans need to stop the perception of distance from the African immigrant community only increases the opportunities for oppressive systems to stay in place.” Consequently, it behooves us to disrupt the animosity that often surfaces between us.

As technology advances and information is available quickly and in abundance, there are opportunities to learn more about what we do not understand or know little about. Given such access to knowledge, ignorance is inexcusable. We must learn the truth about each other’s lives, cultures, and histories. Both communities’ leaders, elders, and youth can become involved in the Twin Cities by creating safe spaces to discuss our differences and similarities, and to share our stories. It’s time to talk.

Shaunté L. Douglas is a student attending Minneapolis Community and Technical College, an emerging poet, a writer, and a spoken word artist. She was born a California girl and got her flavor in the South, by way of Georgia and Kentucky. She found herself in this frigid inland called Minnesota and decided to stay.
When I was nineteen, during my sophomore year in college, I had an opportunity to travel abroad and I wanted to go to Africa. I didn't know why I felt compelled to go there. I didn't know anything about the continent; I probably thought it was a country. Yet, I yearned to be with Black people who had their own land—the Other Land as I called it. For I didn't feel at home in the U.S.—oddly enough, I wasn't conscious of this feeling then. But, now as I look back, I understand the discomfort I felt, steeped in a white dominant culture, having grown up in a white suburb, having gone to white public schools, and then attending a white liberal arts college, Carleton College. It was in the mid-seventies, soon after the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, the big Afros, and the beautiful dashikis. Since Carleton had no language studies exchange program in Africa, I traveled to France instead of going to an African country. Yet, I became a Black Studies major and vowed to go to the Mother Land someday.

Decades later, in July 2008, I traveled to Accra, Ghana, with other creative writing faculty and writers of the Pan African Literary Forum (PALF) to teach a creative writing seminar for two weeks. Then in 2011, I went to Dakar for two weeks to learn from Senegalese professors, writers, and artists about contemporary Senegalese literature, and art, and their relationship to my American life.

In his thought-provoking lecture about Senegalese literature, poet/scholar Dr. Hamidou Dia pointed out that slave traders took a certain young woman away from Goree Island; her American master named her Phillis Wheatley. I don't ever recall learning that Ms. Wheatley was Senegalese. He noted her poetry as the first Senegalese/African text published in English. Speaking about literature written in a colonized voice, particularly in the French language, Dr. Dia started me with the following assertion: "As long as the writing is cut from its indigenous language, it will lack authenticity and truth. African literature will be fully African when it is written in its indigenous languages."

I wondered what Senegalese writers would think and say about this complex notion. Would they readily agree that only their native tongue renders an authentic and truthful depiction of their experiences and colonial history of conquest? To my delight, the next day, in an uncanny fashion, writer/activist Ayi Kwei Armah picked up the thread of the colonized peoples’ "fragmented history" that Dr. Dia had mentioned in his lecture. Mr. Armah quipped that primitive African people had to ride inside the vehicle called Western civilization. He lamented that most African intellectuals had accepted the myth of the colonizer: African humanity didn't exist before the conquest. Armah stated that over the course of his life he discovered the European lie about the primitive African. He set out to study the history of the African continent to find the truth about African civilization.

Although Armah, a Ghanaian who emigrated from Accra to Dakar, doesn't speak directly about the insidious impact of the colonizer's language on the culture and identity of the Senegalese/African peoples, he does acknowledge the dire need to rebuild nation- and peoplehood through cultural production. In his lecture "Major Trends in Contemporary Senegalese Arts," artist/activist Kane-Si spoke about the detrimental consequences children suffer when they are required to learn the colonizer's language and values in school. As a six-year-old child, he lost his name upon entering French school, leading to the loss of his mother tongue. His autobiographical story had a chilling effect on me and reminded me of Dr. Dia's remark that African literature can't be fully African until it's written in its indigenous languages.

This brought to mind a similar process of dehumanization that occurred in the North American, South American, Central American, and Caribbean colonies, where African peoples became enslaved, losing their names and their mother tongues. Kane-Si astutely commented that losing one's mother tongue is the beginning of self-disintegration, as one becomes forced to assume the colonizer's worldview about the African. So, can the experiences and history of Senegalese people and people of African descent dispersed across the African Diaspora be authentically and truthfully rendered in the colonizer's language? Kane-Si says that every word he uses is problematic because Arabic, French, and Senegalese languages and cultures are now part of his identity. He first began to write the Wolof language in Latin characters! As a result, Kane-Si finds that no word neatly captures every nuance of meaning he would want to convey about his experience.

The threads between Kane-Si and Armah's lectures intertwined thematically regarding the disruption of the African identity and the need to reintegrate. After absorbing their information, I felt tormented by the harsh reality that European colonialism is but an extension of African enslavement that occurred in the Americas and in the Caribbean. I came away from Senegal contemplating the complex impact of language and history on cultural production, not only over there but over here, in the U.S. To overcome self-disintegration based on the imposition of the colonizer/oppressor's language and imagery and the resultant fragmented history, courageous change agents "use art to reintegrate [themselves]" and their society, according to artist/architect Gerard Chenet. And, as Kane-Si posits, artists "must conceptualize and visualize their own imagery in order to define themselves on their own terms."
When I was in high school, I enjoyed going to school because it was a warm and comfortable environment where a high percentage of us attended with our relatives. Looking back, I realize that, to some extent, Higher Ground Academy was a big family. I knew that schools usually have cliques that students tend to stick to. Although my school had cliques, they were not exclusive. One day a person would choose to sit with someone, and the next day she would sit with someone else. We didn’t see anything wrong with this, and no one questioned it. Like family, sometimes you just need a break from each other. We would have disagreements here and there, but they wouldn’t last long because, in the end, family is family.

The thing I remember most about going to school with other Somali students is everyone’s sense of humor. The hallways were full of laughter. Someone always told a story or a joke that would make people burst out laughing. The humor made going to school easier. At the start of the day, we went to school to get an education and then, hopefully, grow to become financially successful and give back to our community.

The late Hussein Samatar understood what it meant to give back to the community. In 2004, he founded the African Development Center, a nonprofit organization that helps African immigrants build wealth and start businesses. He knew the struggle African immigrants experienced when applying for loans: some could not qualify, and others, because of their Islamic faith, would not take loans with interest. Samatar found a way to help people realize their dreams: he offered loans without interest and helped open many small businesses. Making his mark, Samatar personified hard work and dedication, and he will always be remembered for the great things he did for the Minnesota Somali community.

A strong community builds a strong voice. The Minnesota Somali community is strong and outspoken. One notion that the Somali community promotes is “We are stronger together than we are apart.” We all have ideas that we want to see come to life, but in order for them to occur, we need the support of our community. If everyone sticks together, gets on the same page, and finds a happy medium, then we can see more positive changes happen. As the old saying goes, “Rome was not built in one day.” To make positive change, we must be patient. Being patient not only applies to the Somali community; it goes for all communities who want to see a difference.

The Power of a United Community, a United Voice

We are stronger together than we are apart.

To make positive change, we must be patient.

To honor our common African heritage and to promote solidarity between people of African descent (i.e., Black Americans) and Somali people, change is in order. Although we share an African heritage, we come from completely different cultural backgrounds and histories. We have dissimilar stories and, at times, we tend to clash with one another because of our different stories. Sometimes we clash because young people tend to be too stubborn, which interferes with our realizing there is a rational solution to solving disagreements. Sometimes we have conflict because both groups have negative impressions and misconceptions of each other’s culture and actions. As a result, we tend to make assumptions rather than think logically.

Nonetheless, I do believe that both communities have the potential to get along and work together. It is not a matter of taking the proper steps toward that goal. I’m not saying that Somali people and Black people have a big issue with one another. Yet, both groups tend to stay out of each other’s way. We could bridge the gap between us by having representatives from both communities sit down and have civil conversations about the things they want to change together. They could explore ways to make changes that would be mutually satisfying. At the end of the day, we are people with common goals and expectations. We both want opportunities to succeed, like getting a good education, obtaining good jobs, borrowing loans, and opening up businesses. Ultimately, we both want a society filled with love and peace. Together we can create a louder voice to make a difference in our communities.

I think that if Samatar, also a former Minneapolis School Board member, was still around, he wouldn’t like seeing the negative interaction between Black students and Somali students. I think he would have worked out a way for us to see the world around us through the similarities and common goals.

Farha Ibrahim
College Freshman

Farha Ibrahim is a freshman in college. She enjoys writing and reading stories. She usually prefers to be plain and down-to-earth, especially when it comes to how she dresses. She is not comfortable with anything that gets too fancy. She likes to have fun with her friends and enjoy socializing. She takes pride in being dependable, loyal, and trustworthy.

Together we can create a louder voice to make a difference in our communities.
I can taste the incense in the air, and I hear the faded sounds of a soccer game in the background and the booming voices yelling at the screen. None of speakers can pronounce the “th” sound, and when called to do so, it comes out as a simple “t.” I am at a gathering, a family gathering to be precise, commonplace in the hot Minnesota summers. This is an African get-together. You’ve got people coming and going and no more food because an hour after the party started, people started packing up plates and hiding them like squirrels hide nuts for winter.

Quick survey of the room: You got your middle-aged to elderly gentlemen with drinks in every hand, mostly Guinness; all speaking with their “tick” fresh-off-the-plane accents, even if they’ve been here for twenty-five years. You have your “aunties,” because anyone older than you who’s not a cousin, brother, sister, grandpa, or grandma is an “auntie” or “uncle.” Hiding somewhere, you have your cousins either too old or too young for you to hang with, and there you sit in the middle, observing everything that’s going on, eating your rice and stew from a paper plate.

Did I mention everybody is eating rice? Rice and stew, I’m convinced, will clog your arteries. Everything that’s going on, eating your rice and stew to hang with, and there you sit in the middle, observing everything that’s going on, eating your rice and stew from a paper plate.

All of the stories you hear are from the elders because the kids are too busy eating or trying to be cool. Everyone here is a story. Like almost every African American family, we claim ancestry from Sierra Leone. He came to Minnesota in the 1980s and Blackfoot on my mom’s mother’s side. My father is American, a native Minnesotan, born to an African American father and a Norwegian American mother. Like almost every African American family, we claim some native blood: Cherokee on my mom’s father’s side and Blackfoot on my mom’s mother’s side. My father is from Sierra Leone. He came to Minnesota in the 1980s on a scholarship to study at the University of Minnesota. That’s where he and my mom met.

My mom didn’t see her dad much while growing up, so she didn’t get to know her dad’s side of the family well. Her dad’s parents, Grandmamma and Granddaddy, lived in the ghetto in the sky, and all I have left of them are stories. Grandmamma was from Missouri and played a big part in the local church. She was part of the hip-bat lady club. My mom would love going to church and seeing the ladies with their extravagant hats. Granddaddy was from Tennessee. He used to hop trains, and rumor has it he had many wives before he married Grandmamma. He even got in trouble for being married to another woman while he was married to Grandmamma.

This is my family, spicy and sustaining, like rice and stew. America. Sierra Leone. From the very start, I grew up between two cultures, never far from the coasts and the immigrant African community and the African American community.

When I was playing soccer for my school, our rival was Higher Ground Academy, a primarily Somali school. It was one of the last games of the season, and we were losing. Because the opposing team was speaking in Somali, some of my players got agitated. Soon there were fous left and right, and yellow cards drawn. I knew Ade, one of the players of Higher Ground, and we agreed to talk to our players about being respectful athletes. After that day, when we played the last games against each other, we had more regard for one another.

The following year, I saw Ade again at a community editor’s meeting for the Saint Paul Almanac, where we were participating in an after-school program. We got a chance to talk about that conflict between our teams. As we spoke, we learned more about each other and how we are more alike than we first thought.

At the end of the day, there’s more that unites us than divides us, such as an indomitable spirit, endless creativity, and the perseverance that our ancestors passed on to us. No matter where we’re from, we’re all Africans in America.

This is my family, spicy and sustaining, like rice and stew. America. Sierra Leone.
Black History Month 2014 Celebration

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Saint Paul Almanac

African American Literature