Opposition vs. Opportunity:  
The African American Literary Experience in America  
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From the moment Africans in America and their descendents acquired the technology of reading, writing, and printing in the script and language of the new republic which was to become America, the power relations that characterized the interaction between the two groups black and white took on new significance.

Despite all attempts on the part of the founders of the early republic to maintain the rapacious manipulation of resources at the expense of all 'others,' the tool of writing became an indispensable device marshaled in the service of liberation.

Once in the hands of the enslaved population, this newly acquired technology precipitated a process of transformation of the alien (European culture) into the intimate (the collective African experience in America). This advance by African Americans generated new strategies among the ruling elite, which enlisted the sciences and increased social and political constraints leveled against the enslaved African population. "We hold these truths to be self evident," had framed the rhetorical basis of colonial independence and was encoded in the written word. The unalienable rights endowed by the creator remained hidden and obscure by the select.

Decoding the language and characters of English revealed the inconsistencies of the African experience on the one hand and the national ideal exemplified in the Declaration of Independence.

The emergence of the new sciences of anthropology or ethnography as it was first called, craniometry and biology distilled in the European enlightenment served as the new rationale for continued restriction of rights, power and privilege within the republic.

Power and privilege was the exclusive domain of the ruling Anglo-Aristocracy or the Puritan select. ¹ Notwithstanding popular sentiment echoed in the literature of Anti-bellum America depicting Africans as docile, passive and non-demurring, the African in America has shown a persistent fervency toward securing liberation from oppression. Writing became the pre-eminent tool used to expose the feigned pretensions of 'justice and liberty for all.'

The historical context out of which African American literature emerges provides an appreciation of the importance and relevance of continued examination of the role, scope and difficulties African Americans faced in acquiring and making use of writing as a tool of liberation through literary expression.

It is perhaps no small wonder that the first African American known to have published a book, Phyllis Wheatley, was manumitted shortly after its appearance in 1767. Reading and writing have historically served to represent the arrogated machinations of the select that would promote their individual liberties at the expense of others.

African American letters must rightly take its place alongside and within the American literary tradition. It must further be acknowledged that the rich literary tradition of the African American had indeed developed apart of and apart from the larger canon of American letters. This bifurcation within African American letters reveals the genesis of divergent views expressed throughout the dialectic history of African American writings. From the publication of Freedom's Journal in 1827 to a period of literary and social protest during the decade of the 1920's African Americans have grappled with the question of 'to what end.' ² To what end should their writings be directed. This was the critical question measured by America's first successful Black writer, Charles Waddell Chesnutt. Chesnutt kept a journal from the age of 16 until his death in 1932. There he would expose his inner urges and pen observations of his experiences and musings. May 29, 1880 Chesnutt writes, "I think I must write a book ... I feel an influence that I cannot resist calling me to task. Besides, I do not know, but I am as well prepared as some successful writers. ... if I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high and holy purpose..."³ Here Chesnutt points to a dilemma of his time which was to foreshadow the voice of protest and cultural nationalism of the 1920's, namely who shall speak for the African Americans.

When one considers the obstacles facing writers of African descent from the mid 1800's to the early 1900's you find a unique point of focus in the person of Charles Waddell Chesnutt. Born 1858 in Cleveland, Ohio, Chesnutt spent his youth in Fayetteville, North Carolina. He was in a very special position to contem-
plate the direction and end of writing as a tool of liberation. Blonde haired and blue eyed, Chesnutt was a man of 'acknowledged Negro ancestry.' Like Walter White and Jean Toomer after him, Chesnutt was afforded a bird’s eye view of both Americas—one Black-one White. He chose to identify and proclaim the unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness through the use of the written and printed word on behalf of African Americans.

First published in 1899, Chesnutt’s works marks an important date in the annals of African American letters. The Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company was the leading publisher of the day, and upon the publication of Chesnutt’s Conjure Woman he arrives as the first African American to be published by the ‘legitimate’ publishing industry. This was a hallmark event at the end of the 1800’s as it relates to African American letters and represents an endorsement of value assigned to African American literary endeavors.

Chesnutt is a useful focal point for discussion of African American letters; he represents a coherent voice against the hypocrisy and convention of his day. He was one who saw in literature a useful tool of liberation, which could, when used effectively induce significant changes within the power relations of blacks and whites. He anticipated the ability of the written word to compel political and social adjustment within the black/white equation. For Chesnutt, the potential for social justice was the end all for writing and from this he never wavered.

Chesnutt’s daughter, Helen Chesnutt (Helen never married) provides this insight to the man “his philosophy for himself and his family was characteristic: we are normal human beings with all the natural desires of normal individuals. We acknowledge no inherent inferiority and resent any denial of rights and opportunity based on racial discrimination.”

Following Chesnutt’s death in 1932, an essay appeared in The Colophon (1937), the essay was one of several which addressed the topic of ‘breaking into print.’ Chesnutt’s essay was entitled “Post Bellum-Pre-Harlem.” In this essay, Chesnutt recounts his perception of his place in African American letters and the direction and intent of his. His daughter sums this up: “His conception of human rights was simple. Rights are fundamental. Man does not have to earn them, does not have to struggle to be worthy of gaining them at some far off future time. Rights are given by God and are unalienable, and any human being that does not demand his rights, is lacking in integrity and is something less than a man.”

Chesnutt reflecting on his literary contributions saw himself as closing a door (Post Bellum) and opening another (Pre-Harlem). In the case of Harlem, using the metaphor of the open door, it quite literally flew off the hinges. The failure of America’s legal and social system to extend liberty and justice to all gave rise to conditions that produced an outpouring of African American literature. What must be seen as social protest arrives during a period of intense social unrest brought about by America’s reneging on the promise of African Americans shared liberty. According to David Levering Lewis, by the close of World War I, the African American had indisputably moved to the center of mainstream imagination with the end of the Great War, a development nurtured in the chrysalis of the lost Generation – Greenwich Village Bohemia. The response of the African American leadership, the disenchantment of White Bohemians together found common cause to express a growing discontentment with the status quo. It is important to note that the former American Negro Academy having been founded in 1897, with its emphasis on men of letters, arts, and science contributed much of the intellectual capital and ideation to this period of cultural reclamation and redefinition. Men such as Alan Locke, Carter Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois and Kelly Miller to name a few had after all had to grapple with the question of the role of arts and letters in the context of race relations in America. The Academy was not disbanded until 1928, thus many of the individual members arrive as central players in the protest of the 1920’s.

In May, 1925, the New York Herald Tribune suggested that the country was ‘on the edge, if not already in the midst of, what might not improperly be called a Negro Renaissance.” Alan Locke was to declare Harlem as the “Mecca of the New Negro.”

While it is perhaps convenient to characterize accomplishments in the African American arena within that of Europeans, it is nevertheless misleading to see this period of social protest as a renaissance. It was more a period of cultural re-definition, self-examination and exuberance, of re-direction and refinement aligned with white intellectuals to bring about social change.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt had anticipated and participated in a period of literary expression unique to the 21 Century. We now know that Chesnutt’s literary career extended through the decade of the 20’s and
beyond ending only at his death in 1932. His life and work bore witness to the efficacy and power encoded within the written word – small wonder – ‘in the beginning was the word.’

Notes
3 Chesnutt, Helen; Charles Waddell Chesnutt- Pioneer of the Color Line, Chapel Hill, N. C., The University of Carolina Press, 1952
4 Keller, Frances Richardson, An American Crusade-The Life of Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Utah, Brigham Young University Press, 1978
7 Levering, David Lewis, Harlem Renaissance, Microsoft: Encarta Africana
8 McWilliams, Dean, Paul Marchand F.M.C., Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1999