THE CORE FOUR: AN EXAMINATION OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN’S WRITING IN *THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE*

by

JADE M. HARRISON

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at The University of Texas at Arlington August, 2019

Arlington, Texas

Supervising Committee:

Kenton Rambsy, Committee Chair
Penelope Ingram
Estee Beck
Copyright by
Jade M. Harrison
2019
ABSTRACT

THE CORE FOUR: AN EXAMINATION OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK WOMEN’S WRITING IN THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Jade M. Harrison, M.A.
The University of Texas at Arlington, 2019

Supervising Professors: Kenton Rambsy, Penelope Ingram, and Estee Beck

In recent years, only a select number of literary scholars have conducted studies on the contents of literary anthologies and the circulations of texts over various publications, especially African American collections. “The Core Four: An Examination of Contemporary Black Women’s Writing in The Norton Anthology of African American Literature” focuses on four women writers: Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Rita Dove, and Harryette Mullen. The critical recognition these four women garnered during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, including the critical durability of their literary works, induced Norton editors to frame them as anchoring figures of the contemporary era through frequent and consistent anthologization. “The Norton African American Anthology Dataset” offers an opportunity to utilize data analytic methods to uncover evolving trends in The Norton by quantifying the number of times contemporary Black women writers and their literary works have circulated across its three existing editions. This project combines
quantitative data findings with traditional, qualitative literary research to help understand how *Norton* anthology editors place Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen within an African American historical literary continuum.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Anthologized works by gender in <em>The Norton</em></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Anthologized works by gender across the contemporary sections</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Top 3 most frequently anthologized genres in <em>The Norton’s contemporary sections</em></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Top 3 most frequently anthologized genres in <em>The Norton’s contemporary sections</em> (cont.)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Anthologized novels by contemporary women writers</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Google citation rates of contemporary women novelists</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>Anthologized essays by contemporary women writers</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Anthologized poetry by contemporary women writers</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Institutional literary awards by contemporary women poets</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Google citation rates of contemporary women short fiction writers</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.......................................................................................................................... iii

LIST OF FIGURES............................................................................................................. v

INTRODUCTION.................................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER ONE: A DIGITAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE NORTON................................. 7

CHAPTER TWO: THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AND CONSTRUCTING THE NORTON.......................... 14

CHAPTER THREE: QUANTIFYING THE NORTON AND THE CONTEMPORARY ERA.............................. 27

CHAPTER FOUR: VISUALIZING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “THE CORE FOUR”.............................................. 35

CHAPTER FIVE: THE PROMINENCE OF FOUR WOMEN WRITERS IN THE NORTON.................................. 44

BIBLIOGRAPHY.................................................................................................................... 54
INTRODUCTION

This project, “The Core Four: An Examination of Contemporary Black Women’s Writing in The Norton Anthology of African American Literature,” will focus on four Black women writers: Toni Morrison, Rita Dove, Harryette Mullen, and Alice Walker—the most frequently included women writers in the anthology’s contemporary era. In this project, I argue the critical attention Morrison, Mullen, Dove, and Walker received during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, along with the critical durability of their works, contributed to their widespread appeal, subsequently leading Norton editors to include these women writers across various genres of the contemporary era. In acknowledging the artistic expression and merit of these four women, I also account for editors’ decision-making processes when selecting which literary works of Morrison, Dove, Walker, and Mullen to include across the three editions. The anthologized literary selections by these four women, regardless of genre, all correspond to The Norton’s unifying concept of signifyin(g), while exemplifying thematic traits associated with Black feminist ideologies.

The Norton remains as one of the most highly marketed Black anthologies to date, therefore, anthologists must follow prominent trends regarding the literary criticism produced about Black writers. Norton editors ultimately decide which writers are included and excluded in these various collections, thereby influencing what authors and select works become the most circulated. Therefore, my analysis takes into consideration how The Norton’s editors situated these four writers within a historical literary continuum of the anthology’s contemporary era, along with current critical trends and approaches concerning contemporary Black women’s writing. This information helps me to offer a
variety of reasons regarding the consistent inclusion of these four women. Without substantial information about the contents of a literary compilation, examining the editorial decisions is extremely difficult. Paying more attention to *The Norton*’s contents can offer insight into trends regarding the repeated circulation of select writers.

This project is situated at the intersection of African American literature and Digital Humanities. Therefore, my thesis underscores the need to use data analytic methods to analyze evolving trends in *The Norton* by quantifying the number of times contemporary Black women writers and their literary works have circulated across its three existing editions. Data mining, the primary data analytic method utilized for my project, involves discovering prominent trends and patterns in large collections of data. The goal is to extract certain information from a particular dataset in order to transform quantitative findings into comprehensible and intuitive visualizations. I created a quantitative dataset based on the tables of contents of three editions of *The Norton* published in 1996, 2003, and 2014. Contextualizing my quantitative findings related to the three editions of *The Norton* offers a new entry point for examining the multiple layers to literary history, or in this case, shifts in subsequent editions of a literary anthology. By identifying these shifts, we can uncover the frequencies at which writers and corresponding works have circulated in one of the most prominent Black literary anthologies. In doing so, we can gain a better perception of which Black literary texts have circulated the most amongst reading audiences.

---

1 I transcribed the tables of contents from all three editions of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* printed in 1996, 2003, and 2014. This digital record or “The Norton African American Anthology Dataset” catalogues literary-specific information about each entry including the story title, original publication of story, author birth year, author gender, and other information.

2 In her essay, “Cognitive and Education Implication of Visually Rich Media: Images and Imagination”,
“The Norton African American Anthology Dataset” contains 1,931 rows and 14 columns of metadata concerning the contents of The Norton’s three editions. At first glance, such a large collection of metadata is almost impalpable to any viewer due to its vastness. Cognitive psychologist, Jennifer Wiley, notes that people feel more capable of processing images instead of a large collection of texts because in general, it is more feasible for individuals to comprehend more information at once in graphic form, especially when shifting their attention across different components of an image than aspects of a text. In terms of interpreting large collections of data, Wiley suggests that, “in cases when the amount of information to be processed is overwhelmingly huge and from many possible dimensions, the simplification provided by converting the multi-dimensional data into a dynamic visual representation may be the only way to get a handle on the incoming stream of data” (Wiley 202-203). There are 337 anthologized literary works across The Norton’s contemporary sections, and if presented as a large collection of raw data, will prove too hard to interpret for most viewers. However, transforming the data into visually appealing graphs and charts helps the viewer better grasp and comprehend the circulation patterns of Black women’s writing anthologized in The Norton’s contemporary sections.²

My data analysis efforts throughout my study required consolidating the quantitative and qualitative findings from my data collection. In general, data analysis cannot exclusively be quantitative because we need qualitative investigation to substantiate numerical findings. Cultural studies and media communication scholars, Karen van Es, Nicolás L. Coombs, and Thomas Boeschoten, highlight a common

² In her essay, “Cognitive and Education Implication of Visually Rich Media: Images and Imagination”, Wiley notes that figures, graphs, or flowcharts that enable readers to think about abstract concepts through images may allow and foster improved comprehension of unfamiliar or difficult concepts.
misconception suggesting digital data analysis requires accumulating a large amount of
data and using calculations and algorithms to detect patterns and trends, which derives
from believing digital data analysis is purely quantitative. They note that while, “some
researchers aim simply to ascertain how often something has happened; others, however,
seek to discover why or how it has happened—requiring, in the latter case, a qualitative
approach” (Es, Coombs, Boeschoten 173). Utilizing visual aids to interpret my findings
have allowed me to identify Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen as the four most
frequently anthologized women writers in the contemporary sections. Moreover,
combining my quantitative and qualitative findings helped highlight prominent factors
such as critical acclaim, artistic merit, and institutional success over the last four decades,
which induced Norton editors to prioritize these four women across the three collections.

Chapter 1, “A Digital Approach to Understanding The Norton,” provides a
complete overview of my research project. I further explain my rationale in merging
traditional literary methods with digital tools as a means of performing a thorough
analysis of my data findings concerning Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen.
Additionally, I explore Norton editors’ roles in determining which writers and literary
texts to include and omit across each collection, and how critical trends alter editorial
decisions.

Chapter 2, ”The Politics of Representation and Constructing The Norton,”
describes Norton editors’ processes in collaboratively constructing a comprehensive
selection of Black writers across different literary time periods, or “section headers” in
The Norton. I provide insight as to how literary discourses inform editors’ decisions of
how to arrange literary texts that accentuate one another thematically through Gates’s
idea of “signifyin(g).” In presenting a comprehensive overview of *The Norton’s* contemporary eras, I demonstrate how the Core Four stands apart from other Black women writers of this historical time period.

Chapter 3, "Quantifying *The Norton* and the Contemporary Era," provides a step-by-step overview of the methods utilized for my thesis project. I explain how I organized the contents of my dataset, and describe how I catalogued literary-specific and biographical information in an Excel spreadsheet recording the tables of contents from all three editions of *The Norton*. I discuss my process in utilizing open-access sources such as Google Scholar, Wikipedia, and ProQuest as a means of tracing biographic information and identifying the number of times scholars have cited *The Norton’s* contemporary women writers. Finally, I reveal how I transform my findings regarding Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen into interactive and visually appealing Tableau Public visualizations.

Chapter 4, "Visualizing the Significance of ‘The Core Four’," reveals my findings from “*The Norton* African American Anthology Dataset.” My findings showcase how *Norton* editors represent Morrison, Dove, Walker, and Mullen as key literary figures in respective genres. These visualizations provide a comprehensive gender analysis of *The Norton*, and show which genres contemporary women writers are anthologized in most frequently. Additionally, I illustrate which writers have received the most Google Scholar citation rates and literary awards over the past few decades.

Chapter 5, “The Prominence of Four Women Writers in *The Norton,*” I contextualize my quantitative findings in Chapter 4, explaining why *Norton* editors frame Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen as key literary figures of the contemporary era. I
provide and in-depth explanation of how the critical attention and institutional recognition these four women gained throughout their careers increased the critical durability of their works, thereby revealing why Norton editors continuously anthologize them across the three collections. Furthermore, I discuss a few implications for future research regarding the circulation of Black women’s writing across multiple publications.
CHAPTER 1
A DIGITAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE NORTON

In 1991, Keneth Kinnamon conducted a study regarding American literary anthologies and the circulation of works written by three prominent male African American writers: Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson. In his essay, “Three Black Writers and the Anthologized Canon,” Kinnamon observed a pattern of exclusion and omission by the number of times editors of American literature anthologies excluded work by Black writers. He highlighted anthology editors’ tendency to tokenize select writers such as Chesnutt, Dunbar, and Johnson as representative of the entire African American literary tradition; Kinnamon objected to this practice. Because he felt editors included far too few Black writers in collections, Kinnamon described their practices as a, “virulent [and] explicit assertion of the racial and literary inferiority of black people” (Kinnamon 43). During the 1980s and 1990s, Kinnamon dedicated his research efforts to creating extensive bibliographies and tracking the circulation of Black writers in literary anthologies. His early work proved to be helpful when identifying landmark anthologies that have had a major impact on shaping impressions of the African American literary canon.

In recent years, rarely have literary scholars conducted studies on the contents of American anthologies and the circulations of texts over various editions, let alone African American collections. Aside from Kinnamon, not many literary scholars have committed their research to identifying circulation patterns of Black writers across American or

---

African American collections, particularly Black women writers. Since the 1970s, there has been an explosion of Black literary anthologies published including *Cavalcade: Negro American Writing from 1760 to the Present* (1971), *New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature* (1972), *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* (1980), *Call & Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1993), and *The Wiley-Blackwell Anthology of African American Literature* (2014). Over the last two decades, though, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (*The Norton*) has become one of the most widely circulated Black comprehensive anthologies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries circulating in “more than 1,275 colleges and universities worldwide” (Gates, Smith, xxiii 2014). This collection, in comparison with other various African American anthologies, has received a higher level of marketability through its publisher, W.W. Norton & Company. Theodore Mason, Jr., argues that, “[*The Norton*], having been published by W.W. Norton & Company signifies a certain ‘insideness’ hard to ignore… this is a volume whose very title signals an idea of mainstream acceptance and canonization” (Mason 186). Mason’s sentiment regarding the mainstream acceptance of *The Norton* suggests that a central reason the anthology has circulated so widely is due to its high marketability. This collection includes works by now canonical African American writers such as Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon, Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright, Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka, and many others. The repeated circulation of this anthology in classrooms over the last two decades has helped to solidify impressions of African American literature. If we are to better understand the
contexts in which Black texts circulate, we must devote more attention to the role of editors and the extent to which they historicize African American literature.

My research facilitates the integration of digital and traditional literary approaches in order to gain a better understanding of only a small facet of African American literary history. In his essay, “The Science of Culture? Social Computing, Digital Humanities and Cultural Analytics,” Lev Manovich describes the term “cultural analytics,” as “the analysis of massive cultural data sets and flows using computational and visualization techniques” (Manovich 1). Cultural analytics is the exploration and investigation of visual material including digitized visual artifacts, along with contemporary visual and interactive media. In my project, I employ cultural analytics methods to transform my data related to the three editions of The Norton into visual aids that focus on women writers in the contemporary era.

Digital studies scholar, Matthew Kirschenbaum, notes the widespread availability of large electronic text collections provides an opportunity to merge digital methods, such as data and text mining, with more traditional and qualitative literary methods. This collection of metadata or “The Norton African American Anthology Dataset” helps me engage in the digital humanities practice of “distant reading” in order to examine transitions in the Norton’s representation of contemporary women writers. Originally coined by literary scholar, Franco Moretti, distant reading involves the utilization of quantitative and statistical methods for interpreting large collections of text that allows the reader to study circulation trends of literary works over

---

4 Most recently, cultural analytics scholars have started developing new methods to transform large datasets into intriguing and occasionally interactive visual charts and graphs. A popular method frequently used by cultural analytics scholars includes the data mining of large sets of culturally relevant data such as social networking databases and library catalogues.
time. Moretti’s framework for examining multiple layers of literary history is quite useful when examining the subsequent editions of *The Norton*. Adopting distant reading as a theoretical framework for my study allows me to take a broad survey of the contents included in *The Norton’s* three editions. In acknowledging that my dataset only accounts for the three editions of *The Norton*, a relatively small portion of African American literary history, distant reading cannot reveal why anthology editors omit or continuously include particular literary texts across three subsequent publications. Therefore, performing a cursory literary analysis of the texts *Norton* editors include across the three collections can help substantiate my quantitative findings discovered through distant reading. Combining my distant reading efforts with traditional close reading practices offers an opportunity to contextualize my quantitative findings regarding *The Norton’s* shifting representations of contemporary Black women’s literary art.

Instead of using text-mining software to interpret thematic content of digitized texts, I surveyed how often texts by certain writers appeared across *The Norton’s* three editions. My distant read provides insight into how editors’ decision-making processes impact the overall presentation of Black women in the contemporary era. In addition to quantifying the rates at which particular writers circulate in *The Norton*, I also account for their prominence in literary discourses using Google Scholar to approximate the number of times their anthologized literary works have been cited across mediums such as scholarly articles, essays, blogs, literary magazines, and books. Ultimately, this project

---

5 In his essay, “Conjectures on World Literature,” (2000) Franco Moretti explores the limitations of “close reading.” Moretti explains how close reading necessarily depends on an extremely small literary canon. Distant reading, on the other hand, is a “condition of knowledge” that allows a reader to focus on units that are much smaller or larger than the text such as, devices, themes, tropes, genres, or systems (Moretti 57).
offers possible explanations as to what factors led editors to republish works in respective
genres by Morrison, Walker, Mullen, and Dove more than any other writers.

The editors of *The Norton* are responsible for determining which literary texts are
most representative of a specific literary canon, but also demonstrating which texts have
received the most critical attention and acclaim. While anthology editors do not create
literary canons, they are responsible for determining which literary texts are conserved
and retained within a particular literary tradition. General editor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,
believes, “A well-marked anthology functions in the academy to *create* a tradition, as
well as define and preserve it “(Gates 31). In order to create, define, and preserve the
African American literary tradition, Gates argues for a compilation of fundamental texts
written by Black writers whom are perceived as indispensible to a firm understanding of
the literary tradition. These editors, then, play a significant role in dictating which
writers and what selections seem more likely to be taught in survey and special topics
courses that have adopted this anthology.

Literary critics and scholars who have deemed certain writings as more vital to a
particular literary tradition popularize the texts that consequentially become more
frequently utilized in classrooms. My project hones in on the contemporary era to
interpret how literary criticism, critical trends, and popular culture influenced editors of
*The Norton*. In particular, I am concerned with what works they chose by Black women
writers as most representative of this historical period. *Norton* editors anthologize
contemporary women writers across multiple genres as a means of providing a

---

6 In his essay, “The Master’s Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African American Tradition,” Gates traces the development of Black literary anthologies dating back to the nineteenth century. Gates explores the canonization efforts of African American critics and writers across various literary time periods such as James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, V.F. Calverton, and Amiri Baraka, as a means of distinguishing how these efforts have transformed over the last several decades.
comprehensive view into contemporary Black women’s writing. Editors include selections in the novel, poetry, short fiction, essay, and drama genres to be as representative as possible when showcasing contemporary Black women’s literary art, but also to emphasize how influential these texts are within both the American and African American literary canons. African American literary scholar and Norton editor, Hortense J. Spillers, believes that, “the work of the black women’s writing community not only redefines [American] tradition, but also disarms it by suggesting that the term itself is a critical fable intended to encode and circumscribe an inner and licit circle of empowered texts” (Spillers 251). Moreover, Spillers believes that the proliferation of Black women’s writing in the contemporary era forces supporters and makers of the American literary canon to question the “structure” of values that ultimately decides whether a literary text is worthy of canonization. Norton anthology editors tend to include the works of contemporary Black women writers who have gained acclaim and critical attention across both African American and American literary discourses.

The type of criticism a literary work receives following its publication greatly influences reading audiences’ perception of the text. Literary critics decide which writers will eventually become canonized through critical evaluation of a writer’s literary oeuvre or specific works. In her essay, “The Race For Theory,” Barbara Christian argues that, “Critics are no longer concerned with literature but with other critics’ texts, for the critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer and has conceived on herself or himself as the center” (Christian 67). She continues explaining, “writing disappears unless there is a response to it” (Christian 78). Literary critics produce scholarship about literature, and in turn, anthology editors attempt to create literary collections that follow existing trends of
scholarship written about a particular writer or by a certain scholar. Due to the amount of critical recognition contemporary Black women’s writing garnered throughout the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary women writers became known for, “[articulating] the complexities of African American culture and history…[and] demonstrated how black communities had also deeply internalized racist stereotypes that radically affected their definitions for and expectations of women and men” (Christian 2016, 1996).

Furthermore, contemporary Black women writers were recognized by critics for introducing new themes such as motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, women’s friendships, and the connection between sexuality and spirituality, into the African American literary canon.

Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen all function as foundational literary figures within contemporary Black women’s writing. Despite writing across different genres, their writings converge through their emphasis on self-exploration, the celebration of one’s cultural heritage and traditions, and cultural identity from various perspectives and experiences within Black womanhood. Combined, their works serve as fundamental texts that best demonstrate the cultural renaissance of contemporary Black women’s writing that began in the early 1970s due to the propagation of Black feminist ideologies following the Black Arts Era. Their anthologized works offer varying modes and perspectives of Black women’s experiences’ in American society. The selections by these four women writers emphasize themes that are unique to contemporary Black women’s writing such as self-definition, cultural identity, sexuality, along with gendered and raced experiences in American society.
CHAPTER 2

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AND CONSTRUCTING *THE NORTON*

One of the main purposes behind the publication of *The Norton* was to compile a collection of African American writers whose literary works are most representative the African American literary tradition across multiple genres. While *Norton* editors demonstrate extreme selectivity when choosing which writers to anthologize, they still attempt to create a collection that encompasses a full scope of Black writing rather than one particular dimension of the tradition. In the first edition (1996), general editors, Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, describe the collection as, “a celebration of two centuries of imaginative writing in English by persons of African descent in the United States.” While this collection is not the first attempt to define the canon of Black writing, the editors take note that *The Norton* is “comprehensive as its sheer scope and inclusiveness enable readers to trace the repetitions, tropes, and signifying that define the tradition” (Gates, McKay xxxvi 1996). *Norton* editors attempt to excavate the underlying interconnectivity of Black writers across the tradition regardless of genre or literary time period.

Gates, McKay, and the other *Norton* editors collaboratively assemble an extremely comprehensive collection of African American literature. Editors take several factors into account when deciding which literary texts to include across the three collections; aside from critical recognition, some of these factors include artistic merit, critical durability, and overall popularity of the literary work. As stated in the second edition, all of the *Norton*’s anthology editors work together in selecting literary texts, “of such a quality that they merit preservation and sustain classroom interest…we have given

7 “The anthology, comprising the work of 120 writers, 52 of whom are women, richly represents African American vernacular literature, poetry, drama, short fiction, the novel, slave narratives, and autobiography” (Gates, McKay xxxix).
a prominent place to the black vernacular tradition…Oral expression—the dozens, signifying, rap poetry—surrounds the written tradition” (Gates, McKay xlvi, 1996).

_Norton_ editors seek to exhibit the foundation of the African American tradition by arranging texts in such a way that demonstrates the rhetorical usage of signifying within the African American literary tradition. Gates’s concept of “signifyin(g)” encompasses a variety of rhetorical strategies utilized in African American vernacular English that revise and critique Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralist use of the sign and signified. Additionally, Black writers participate in this rhetorical practice by reading and revising the literary works of other Black writers as a means of defining their own relation to them. As a result, many Black writers amend the tropes utilized by other writers in the tradition to further define themselves as literary artists. Gates argues that, “It is clear that black writers read and critique other black texts as an act of rhetorical self-definition. Our literary tradition exists because of these precisely chartable formal literary relationships, relationships of signifying” (Gates 693).  

_Norton_ editors utilize Gates’s concept of signifying to create a traceable connection between Black writers across various literary time periods and genres. While _The Norton_’s anthologized literary works do hold critical and institutional significance, in addition to pre-established artistic merit, this specific editorial decision suggests anthology editors include specific texts they feel best communicate the rhetorical usage of signifying.

_The Norton_’s editorial cohort consists of African American literary scholars and critics. Each edition of the anthology has a minimum of seven editors. In the first and

---

8 In his essay, “The ‘Blackness of Blackness’: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey” (1983), Gates explores how Black writers reuse themes and motifs from previous Black texts, but alter them through the rhetorical method of signifying to create their own meanings. _Norton_ editors include literary works they feel harken back to one another through signifying.
second editions, Gates, Jr. and McKay serve as the anthology’s general editors. In the third edition, Valerie Smith serves as one of the Norton’s general editors along with Gates. Each anthology editor is responsible for the selection processes of specific sections of the Norton. The Norton organizes its anthologized literary works into seven different literary time periods, otherwise known as “section headers.” Across the three editions, each collection is arranged as follows:

1. “The Vernacular Tradition”
2. “Literature of Slavery and Freedom 1746-1865”
3. “Literature of Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance 1865-1919,”
5. “Realism, Naturalism, Modernism 1940-1960,”

Although the dates of literary time periods are attached to each section header, authors are anthologized according to their birthdates (oldest to youngest) within each section, not according the publication dates of literary works. For example, June Jordan’s autobiography Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood (2000) is anthologized in the “Black Arts Era 1960-1975” sections in editions two and three, even though it was actually published almost 25 years after the Black Arts Movement. Langston Hughes, for instance, published works throughout the 1960s, but anthology editors only include him in “The

---

Harlem Renaissance 1919-1940” sections in all three editions. Similarly, Paule Marshall’s short story “Reena” (1962) and Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) were both published during the 1960s, but are both anthologized in the contemporary sections across the collections. Editors choose to place authors in literary time periods where they are most recognized within the African American literary canon, not according to the periods their literary works were actually published in. This editorial decision can likely be explained by how sensitive anthology editors are to critical trends within literary discourses; *Norton* editors want their collection to reflect the critical approaches associated with each literary time period across the *Norton* publications. Moreover, *Norton* anthology editors make sure to select literary texts that critics have written and continue to write extensively about. The literary works that lose attention from critics over time are either not anthologized in or omitted from *The Norton*. The works literary critics write most about become more publicized and famous within literary discourses, thereby serving as the most useful texts to teach in classrooms.

*The Norton’s* contemporary section stands out in particular because of the editors’ tendency to include more women writers instead of men across the collections. African American scholars, Barbara Christian and Cheryl A. Wall, work as joint editors of the anthology’s contemporary sections. The contemporary literature sections combined contain 337 literary works across the three editions of the *Norton*. The anthologized literary works written by women authors make up 230 of the contemporary era texts, while men only contribute 107 texts. Across the three editions, several women writers are omitted and added to the anthology’s contemporary sections while some women are
anthologized in every edition. The first edition anthologizes poetry by Colleen McElroy
and Wanda Coleman, also including short fiction by Terry McMillan, but after the first
edition these women are omitted from the Norton. In the second edition, Norton editors
add novelists Gayl Jones, and Edwidge Danticat as well as the poet Harryette Mullen to
the collection. Similarly, literary works by poets such as Natasha Tretheway, Tracy K.
Smith, and Elizabeth Alexander are not added to the Norton until the third edition.
Identifying the editions in which women writers are added and omitted from the
contemporary era of the Norton provides a better understanding of the shifting
representations of contemporary women writers across all three editions of The Norton.

Regardless of genre, the anthologized literary works written by contemporary
Black women authors all communicate with one another through their use of recurring
thematic elements and motifs related to the experiences of Black women in American
society. Some of these themes and motifs deal with the importance of self-reliance, self-
exploration, cultural identity, sexuality, as well as sociocultural issues related to race,
class, and gender inequality in regard to the lived experiences of Black women.
Additionally, some critics argue these texts relate to each other through the authors’
efforts to provide an undefined Black aesthetic.

The Norton’s contemporary era includes a larger amount of poetry written by
contemporary women writers in comparison to its other genres. Editors are more likely to
anthologize more contemporary women writers within the poetry genre due to poems
generally being much shorter in page length in comparison to novel excerpts, essays, and
short stories. Therefore, editors are able be more inclusive in terms of the variety of poets
presented. In the first edition, editors include poems such as Colleen McElroy’s
“Tapestries,” Lucille Clifton’s “homage to my hips,” and Michelle Cliff’s “Within the Veil.” The second edition includes works of poetry such as Ntozake Shange’s “Nappy Edges” and Sherley Anne Williams’s “Peacock Poems.” Poems such as Elizabeth Alexander’s “The Venus Hottentot” and Tracy K. Smith’s “Sci-Fi” are added to the third edition. The Norton editors tend to shift the representations of contemporary women poets more frequently in comparison to less inclusive genres like novels and short fiction.

Even still, both Dove and Mullen represent the most highly anthologized Black women poets in the contemporary sections across all three editions of The Norton. Dove and Mullen’s poetry remain relevant in literary discourses, and several critics often discuss the sense of an undefined Black aesthetic their works embody. In “African American Women Poets,” Emily Rutter explains how Black women poets, at the close of the Black Arts era, utilized the racial pride and consciousness popularized during the 1960s and 1970s in order to highlight the intricate intersections between race, gender, class, and sexuality. Rutter specifically cites Dove and Mullen as two poets who challenge and expand existing perspectives of political poetry produced during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Dove’s and Mullen’s poetry intersects various themes of womanhood, politics, and popular culture to combat the sexism prominent within Black liberation struggles and the second-wave feminist movement known for marginalizing African American women.

Numerically speaking, Mullen is the most frequently anthologized black woman poet across three editions of the Norton. Even though she does not appear in the first

---

10 Black women were predominantly marginalized during Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s as a result of male-centered ideologies flagrant within these liberation efforts. Black women were additionally marginalized in women’s liberation struggles during this period because equality efforts were primarily focused on the struggles of white women.
edition, in the second and third editions, editors select 16 poems by Mullen for inclusion. Interestingly, editors only include selections from Mullen’s *Muse and Drudge*. They opt not to include any of her works from early collections such as *Tree Tall Woman* (1981), *Trimmings* (1991), and *S*PeRM**K**T (1992). According to American literary scholar, Allison Cummings, *Muse and Drudge* has received a considerable amount of critical recognition in comparison to Mullen’s other poetical works because it has proven teachable in poetry classrooms. Through its highly original form, one long poem consisting of irregularly rhyming quatrains, its stylistic characteristics are a mix of black, regional and commercial expressions, urban slang, and Spanish phrases (Cummings 24). Despite the innovative stylistic characteristics Mullen utilizes throughout *Muse and Drudge*, certain themes recur throughout the work especially regarding ideas dealing with race, gender, class, and cultural identity. According to Elizabeth A. Frost, “*Muse & Drudge* explores the diverse influences and languages of a miscegenated culture. *Muse & Drudge* is in fact a poetic hybrid—a lyric long poem, a text that asserts hybridity both in its attention to overlapping identities and voices, and in its form” (Frost 466). Mullen’s emphasis on language in *Muse & Drudge* is what drives *Norton* editors to anthologize its poems so heavily across the contemporary sections. Her use of language, which is full of allusion and word play, harkens back to Gates’s idea of signifying.

primarily from *Thomas and Beulah*, a collection that focuses majorly on the importance of cultural heritage and history. In the second editions, editors again include 14 poems by Dove. This time, however, the selections such as “Demeter’s Prayer to Hades” and “History” as well as “The Event” and “Pastoral” come primarily from *Mother Love* and *Thomas and Beulah*. The poems included in *Mother Love* utilize Greek mythological themes, while focusing on themes dealing with mother-daughter relationships and myth making. The first two editions frame Dove as a versatile writer whose poetry covers a wide variety of topics that broaden and diversify the Black aesthetic.

The versatility of Dove’s writing stems from an authorial attempt to offer an unprecedented perception of Black artistic expression. Therese Steffen claims that Dove emits, “a double reaction” to the Black Arts Movement in that she, “picks up the political impetus, a sense of politics as the given starting point, but refuses and ironizes the clichéd political discourse and aesthetic dilettantism… She ties herself to a sense of urgency yet at the same time keeps a safe distance away from the limited and limiting essentialism of the black aesthetics” (Steffen 7). In her poetry, Dove utilizes the same type of political momentum that poets of the Black Arts Era incorporated into their poetry. However, Dove does not subscribe to the form of Black aesthetics prominent in Black Arts poetry, which she perceives as a conventional form of Blackness (M.W. Thomas). Mullen also utilizes a political momentum similar to Black Arts poetry in her work, but similar to Dove, avoids perpetuating this same conforming sense of Blackness. Instead, according to Elizabeth Frost, Mullen incorporates a “cultural hybridity” into her poetry, highlighting a myriad of cultural identities and voices through her lyricism (Frost 466). The variety of cultural identities Dove incorporates into her works can justify why her
poetry has generated a large amount of crossover appeal since the 1980s and 1990s. Dove’s poetry is palpable across varying literary discourses, which explains why her poems continuously coincide with critical trends.

_Norton_ editors anthologize several contemporary women writers in the short fiction genre. Short stories are typically shorter in length in comparison to novel excerpts; therefore editors anthologize a higher number of women short fiction writers in comparison to women novelists. Additionally, anthology editors are able to include entire short stories, unlike novels, which are almost always far too lengthy to anthologize in their entirety. The first edition includes short stories such as Toni Cade Bambara’s “Raymond’s Run,” Paule Marshall’s “Reena,” Sherley Anne Williams’s “Tell Martha Not to Moan.” The second edition omits short stories like Terry McMillian’s “Quilting on the Rebound” and Bambara’s “Raymond’s Run.” _Norton_ editors shift slightly in their representation of contemporary short fiction women writers through a process of inclusion and omission, but authors such as Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Sherley Anne Williams, and Octavia Butler remain anthologized across all three contemporary sections.

Alice Walker does not serve as the most frequently anthologized short fiction writer, but _Norton_ editors anthologize her holistically across the three contemporary sections. While literary critics have recognized Walker for her novels, poetry, and essays, her short fiction remains pertinent in scholarly conversations about contemporary Black women’s literature. Two of Walker’s most frequently discussed short stories, “Everyday Use” and “Advancing Luna—And Ida B. Wells,” are anthologized in each edition of the _Norton_. Literary scholar, Dianne F. Sadoff, claims that Walker’s literary works exhibit the importance of, “[discovering] an untroubled matrilineal heritage” (Sadoff 5).
Walker’s short fiction emphasizes the importance of the past and its influence on the present through a substantial focus on literary foremothers and maternal ancestors. *Norton* editors demonstrate extremely selectivity when anthologizing Black women novelists and their works of fiction because novel excerpts tend to be lengthier texts. Editors only anthologize a total of six women novelists across all three collections; therefore, the novel selections do not change frequently. In the first edition, editors anthologize works of fiction such as Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*, and the entirety of Morrison’s *Sula*. In the second edition, editors include selections from novels like Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, and the entire second half of Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. *Norton* editors seemingly include works of fiction by contemporary Black women writers that all connect thematically in some way; however, editors appear to utilize Morrison’s *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* as two fundamental texts of the contemporary era.

Morrison serves as an anchoring figure of the African American contemporary era. The widespread critical, institutional, and commercial recognition her works of fiction gained during the 1980s and 1990s, help frame her as a trailblazer for contemporary Black women’s fiction. Starting in the 1970s with the production of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1973), literary critics viewed Morrison’s oeuvre as unique in its attempt to reveal how social issues such as internalized racism, sexism, and class affected Black women and men in predominantly Black communities. Morrison scholar, Nellie Y. McKay, identifies Morrison as, “one of the vanguard whose work announced the new era in black women’s writings in American in the 1970s, [therefore] it is not unexpected that much of the attention on her centers on her place in the tradition of Afro-
American and American Letters” (McKay 7). McKay’s description of Morrison as a “vanguard” of contemporary Black women’s literature is useful when examining how Morrison is presented as an anchoring figure in the Norton’s contemporary era. Norton editors include larger selections of Morrison’s novels because literary critics view her as a pioneer in regards to contemporary Black women’s fiction.

In his article, “Shaping an African American Literary Canon,” Robert Elliot Fox notes some of the negative reception the Norton received upon the publication of its first edition. According to Fox, “a number of reviewers have judged The Norton to be conservative in its content and presentation” (Fox 13). Additionally, Fox reveals that a large number of the complaints about The Norton are based on the fact that reviewers believe the African American literary canon should be inherently and combatively “political” as a means of emphasizing thematic elements of suffering and resistance often prevalent in African American literary works

The editors of comprehensive literary anthologies are conservative when choosing how to present anthologized writers and their literary works by deciding on the “greatest hits” of a specific literary canon, which subsequently results in a variety of literary voices being excluded from the collection. Anthology editors are also frequently susceptible to dominant sociocultural climates during the time periods in which their collections are published.

11 Some reviewers believe that African American anthologies should be inherently political like anthologies published during the Black Arts Era (“Shaping an African American Literary Canon”).

12 In “Anthologies of African American Literature from 1845-1994” Kinnamon explains that anthology editors are often susceptible to current sociocultural climates. In his anthology study involving Chesutt, Dunbar, and Johnson, Kinnamon determined that white editors were influenced by racist ideologies of the early twentieth century when deciding which Black writers to anthologize.
approaches, but are actively helping to build these approaches within African American literary discourses. Therefore, writers that fall outside the purview of the literary discourses these editors are helping to establish are not included in major anthologies that circulate on a wide scale.

Despite these criticisms, literary anthologies serve as extremely useful resources for educators who cover multiple writers in a single course such as African American and American survey courses. Literary anthologies facilitate access to critically acclaimed works, thereby reinforcing which literary works are perceived to be representative of black writing and subsequently included in course syllabi at various institutions. According to African American literary scholar, Gene Andrew Jarrett, “The problem of preparing an anthology… is not whether anthologists should or should not agree on and deduce canonical selection from a set of ‘ideological or thematic principles.’ Rather, the problem is how to render that ideology visible, to explain how and why a ‘worldview’ responsible for these principles could become so readily found in the population’ in the first place” (Jarrett 162). Norton anthology editors prioritize the Black vernacular tradition when selecting literary texts for each section, a thematic element that harkens back to Gates’s idea of “the talking book.” Consequently, editors select texts that relate to this central theme.

The literary works of Morrison, Dove, Mullen, and Walker all disjoin from each other in regards to genre, but all converge through their rhetorical usage of signifying, or “talking back” to one another. Across the contemporary sections, Norton editors choose to frame these four women writers as key figures because of the way their literary works

13 A term coined by Gates, “the talking book” constitutes as a foundational trope for the African American literary tradition that is based on the autobiographical writings of 18th century Black writers who describe experiences of attempting to “talk” to a book and expecting it to talk back.
all communicate thematically. While working under the thematic umbrella of self-exploration, each writer offers a refreshing version of Blackness through their literary works; one that is non-prescriptive and tailored to express a gendered analysis of being Black and a woman in American society. Moreover, Morrison, Dove, Mullen, and Walker each provide social commentaries that focus on the shortcomings of Black American life, that undoubtedly exist because of American racism, sexism, and classism, as a means of encouraging African Americans to resist the structural and white supremacist foundation of American society. By prioritizing these four key woman writers, Norton editors are able to adequately demonstrate the repetitions and recurring tropes that create the tradition of contemporary Black women’s writing; more importantly, editors emphasize that regardless of genre, contemporary Black women writers are all in conversation with each other.
CHAPTER 3

QUANTIFYING THE NORTON AND THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

In this project, I created “The Norton African American Anthology Dataset,” by drawing primarily on the tables of contents of The Norton. I recorded all of my findings into a comprehensive Excel spreadsheet in order to easily trace trends across the three editions. I have condensed my creation process of my dataset into five main steps. First, I transcribed the tables of contents from all three editions of The Norton. I recorded the title of each anthologized literary work in order as they appear in each edition. I organized the contents according to edition number, anthology section header, and anthology publication date, The “anthology type” for each edition of The Norton is consistent; each edition can be considered as a “comprehensive” anthology, as opposed to anthologies that are organized alphabetically or are dedicated solely to one genre.

Certain section headers shift chronologically across the three editions. In the first edition, editors refer to the Black Arts and contemporary periods as “Black Arts Movement 1960-1970” and “Literature Since 1970.” In the second edition, editors name these sections “The Black Arts Era 1960-1975,” while the contemporary period section header is changed to “Literature Since 1975.” I color coordinated the contents according to anthology edition number 14 in order to increase feasibility in distinguishing between the contents in each edition.

Second, I catalogued literary-specific information and added it to the comprehensive spreadsheet. I created categories for each entry’s author, literary genre, and original publication date. After recording the author names for each entry, I reviewed

---

14 All of the contents in red are included in edition one; contents in yellow are included in edition 2; and the contents in aqua belong to edition 3.
the contents and classified all of the entries by literary genre. The process required a significant amount of time and deliberation, especially for literary works that possess literary hybridity. For example, Ntozake Shange’s, *For colored girls who have considered suicide/ When the rainbow is enuf*, is frequently called a “choreopoem,” but since it was performed on Broadway in 1974, it is categorized in my dataset as a play. Finding the original publication dates for each literary entry also proved to be very time consuming. While Norton editors do include original publication dates for many of the volumes’ anthologized literary works, they do not do so for several of its included poems. I utilized open-access resources such as Google Scholar, Wikipedia, JSTOR, and ProQuest, in order to find the original publication dates for several entries. At times, I could not find copies of the poems online due to copyright laws. Overall, compiling the literary-specific information required a larger amount of forethought than my transcription efforts.

Third, I combined my literary-specific data with biographical information about the authors of each entry such as author gender and birth dates. I added these categories to my excel spreadsheet. The author birth years are included in the tables of contents of each of The Norton’s editions. However, the entries included in “The Vernacular Tradition” section of each edition do not contain birth dates for the artists. While some of the entries included in “Spirituals,” “The Blues,” “Jazz,” and “Rap” do include author names; I performed a search inquiry using Google to find birth dates. Some entries did not include author names at all, so it was impossible to find the author birth dates or genders. The current average age for the men and women authors included in *The Norton’s* contemporary sections is 76. The average age for contemporary women writers
is 74, while the average age for contemporary men writers is 77. This suggests that collectively, the women writers anthologized across the contemporary sections are slightly younger than the men writers.

Fourth, I utilized Google Scholar to identify how often the fiction writers in the contemporary era were cited in scholarly sources. For each contemporary Black woman novelist, I performed a search inquiry including the author name and anthologized literary work. The search revealed thousands of results, so I had to narrow them all down to citations only. I tallied the number of times each novel had been cited in scholarly sources. Since novels have been reprinted by a variety of publishers; I added all of the citations together for some authors. The novels that have been converted to electronic form on Google Books, like Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, were much more frequently cited than those that only exist in print edition.

I performed a similar inquiry for contemporary women’s short fiction. I included the author name and title of short story, and was once again presented with thousands of results. It took a shorter amount of time to tally the number of times each short story had been cited on Google Scholar for two central reasons: First, the amount of scholarship done in regard to contemporary Black women’s short fiction does not compare to the amount of research scholars have done with novels. Second, works of short fiction do not tend to have as many publishers, or reprinted editions, as novels; therefore, I did not have to tally up as many citations for the anthologized short stories. Additionally, because most of the anthologized short stories do not exist in Google Book edition, the amount of citations for short fiction writers were drastically lower than those acquired by novelists.
For instance, according to Google Scholar, two of Morrison’s most critically acclaimed and well-known novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, combined have received 4,887 citation rates. Walker’s anthologized literary works, *The Color Purple*, “Everyday Use,” and “Advancing Luna,” combined have received 3,017 Google citation rates. This suggests that Walker and Morrison, overtime, have been the focus of several scholarly essays, books, and print magazines. However, it is important to reemphasize that these numerical figures be interpreted as only approximations; Google Scholar citation rates do contain algorithmic errors, meaning that all of the cited scholars may not specifically use Morrison and Walker’s works of fiction in their research. Despite this, Google Scholar does serve as an efficient digital tool to obtain a general idea of how often contemporary women fiction writers are written about and discussed in scholarly conversations about Black women’s writing.

It is also important to note, however, that Google Scholar citation rates are not an efficient tool for tracing the scholarly significance of contemporary Black women’s poetry. I believe this can be explained by the small amount of literary scholarship dedicated to African American poetry. In general, literary scholarship is seemingly more organized around novels, as opposed to poetry, short fiction, or drama. To better approximate the significance of contemporary women poets, I focused on the institutional awards to offer more insight as to how anthology editors might gauge the literary significance of poets and poetry. Dove earned numerous awards during the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, such as the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts (1983), Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1987), and the U.S. Poet Laureate (1992). Mullen, on the other hand, did not receive major institutional recognition until the early-2000s, when she was
nominated for the National Book Award (2002), awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts (2005), and presented with the Pen/Open Book Award (2007). Tracing the number and type of awards contemporary women poets is one way to approximate their literary significance, and substantiate *Norton* editors’ decision to include them across collections.

Fifth, I collected information related to how often poets received literary awards and to measure their growing significance across several years using Wikipedia and ProQuest. I performed general searches for each contemporary woman poet inquiring how many and what types of awards they have earned throughout their careers. Wikipedia proved to be extremely helpful with this endeavor, especially since multiple users are allowed to collaboratively contribute information on Wiki Pages. However, because many of *The Norton’s* anthologized poets have made several non-literary accomplishments, I had to narrow my scope to strictly literary awards. In order to measure the growing significance of poets, I utilized ProQuest’s “advanced search” tool to trace the number of times contemporary women poets have been cited in published theses and dissertations. I tallied the number of times the names of contemporary women poets occurred in the titles of theses and dissertations. I narrowed my scope to graduate thesis and dissertations to measure how relevant these authors are to graduate students currently in the academy.

I constructed two interactive displays to create a data story and present my findings. First, I created Excel charts that showcased several of my findings across the contemporary sections. I created (1) an Excel chart that shows a comparison of men to women authors across each edition of *The Norton*; (2) a chart that reveals the frequencies
at which each anthologized contemporary woman writer is anthologized in each genre; (3) one chart showing the number of times anthologized for each contemporary women poet; and (4) a final chart providing the number of times anthologized for contemporary women novelists.

I utilized Tableau Public to create two interactive data visualizations of my findings. Tableau allows users to import several Excel spreadsheets at one time in order to create a graph that is composed of several different parts. My first visualization only shows Excel chart numbers one, while my other visualization combines charts two, three, and four. I constructed these visualizations in two separate Tableau Public dashboards, and afterward I combined my dashboards into a Tableau story. Tableau’s story feature provides an opportunity for users to aggregate multiple Tableau dashboards into one central visualization. The dashboards are separated by tabs, allowing the viewer to click through various parts, or “story points,” of a particular visualization. These visualizations allow users to visualize specific components of a large amount of data at one time. Es, Coombs, Boeschoten explain that visualizations can be used as analytical and interpretive tools to reveal trends and anomalies through illustrating quantitative findings to substantiate arguments (177). Furthermore, they perceive visualization software like Tableau, which utilizes imported Excel spreadsheets, as an “easy-to-use tool” that will produce aesthetically appealing and simple visualizations for showcasing large amounts of data.

“The Norton African American Anthology Dataset,” offers an opportunity to further expand African American literary studies by tracing how contemporary Black literary art circulates across The Norton. While conventional analog approaches have and
remain important, we can further advance African American literary studies by taking fuller advantage of digital tools and datasets, which greatly assist in exploring and quantifying multifaceted publishing histories. Quantitative findings cannot speak for themselves. Therefore, contextualizing the quantitative information related to Black women writers helps to uncover deliberate framing practices of editors. This analysis will begin to explain how those shifts impact our perception of contemporary African American women’s literature.

I published “The Norton African American Anthology Dataset,” on the Mavs Dataverse as a means of making the information more accessible to other scholars. The dataset is available online for public consumption, allowing scholars to replicate or add on to my work. The Mavs Dataverse is a part of the Texas Data Repository, which serves as an open-source platform for publishing and storing datasets created by students and faculty members at Texas higher education institutions. This application allows scholars to add and work with any dataset, and also ensures they cite the original authors work accordingly.

This data collection represents one of the few attempts to catalogue and make data about Black literary art widely accessible online. Moreover, “The Norton African American Anthology Dataset” expands contemporary African American women’s literary studies, as well as the field of digital literary scholarship due to the overall scarcity of African-American digital humanities projects that actually focus solely on Black women writers. I only utilized a small portion of my collected data to focus on women writers from 1970-2014. I used these results to hone my focus on a core group of
black women writers. These four women writers informed the basis of my study and how I attempted to explain why *The Norton* focused on these four women.
CHAPTER 4

VISUALIZING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “THE CORE FOUR”

The following visual graphs provide an exploratory analysis of the Norton’s contemporary era sections by focusing on elements such as gender, literary genre, and Google citation rates for anthologized contemporary women writers. These visualizations showcase how Norton editors prioritize and represent Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen across the contemporary sections.

Figure 1.1

Figure 1.1 shows a disproportionately high number of men authors compared to women authors in most sections across the three editions. For example, the number of anthologized works by women writers steadily decreases during the “Harlem Renaissance” section over three editions. Grimke and Hurston are anthologized more frequently in the third edition in comparison to the other female authors (Hurston 7 works; Grimke 4 works), but even still, the number of anthologized works written by men in the “Harlem Renaissance” rises from the first to the second editions from 79 entries to 111 entries. In the third edition, the editors cut the number of entries in the Harlem
Renaissance section by 55; this edition contains 74 entries by men writers and only 14 by women writers.

![Anthologized Works by Gender Across the Contemporary Sections](image)

According to Figure 1.2, in each edition, anthologized works written by women significantly outweighs the amount of works written by men in the contemporary eras. Over a seventeen-year period, the number of works anthologized by women authors remains significantly higher than works anthologized by their male counterparts. The number of entries in the “Contemporary Period” by male writers decreases from 50 entries in the first edition, to 29 entries in the second edition, to 28 entries in the latest edition.
Figures 1.3 and 1.4 reveal that the majority of anthologized literary works by women authors in the contemporary section are found in the poetry genre. This trend is most likely explained by space constraints in *The Norton*; poems are typically shorter in length in comparison to novels or short fiction, therefore, editors are able to add more poetry selections across the three editions. With only 42 poems, the second edition contains the lowest amount of anthologized poetry, but it also contains the highest amount of anthologized novel selections (12 works) in comparison to the first and third editions. Anthology editors’ decision to include more novel selections over any other genre in the second edition (besides poetry) may be a result of wanting to promote certain women authors and genres over others.
Figure 1.4

Figure 1.4 provides a breakdown of the total number of anthologized literary works written by contemporary women authors across the three editions. This visualization relays the same quantitative findings indicated in figure 1.3, but is in the form of a heat chart instead of a bar graph.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Story</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.5

Figure 1.5 charts the number of times women novelists are included in the contemporary section. Generally, editors include only one excerpt by women writers across the three editions. In the second edition, however, editors include six chapter excerpts from Morrison’s 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*. Overall, editors routinely elect to present several chapters of Morrison’s novels in their collections in comparison to other women writers.
Figure 1.6 shows the number of times novels written by *The Norton’s* anthologized contemporary women novelists have been cited on Google Scholar. The novels accounted for were all published from the 1970s and throughout the 1990s; the broad period most associated with the development of contemporary Black women’s fiction. The graph identifies Morrison as the most highly cited contemporary Black woman novelist on Google Scholar through a summation of citations of six novels: *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved, Jazz,* and *Paradise.* It is worth noting that Morrison consistently published novels during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, while other fiction writers such as Alice Walker and Gayl Jones, directed a significant amount of their literary efforts to other genres like short fiction and poetry during these decades.
Morrison also appears to be a routinely anthologized essayist in *The Norton* among women writers in the contemporary era. Figure 1.7 reveals how editors anthologize more of Morrison’s critical essays in comparison to other women authors included in the second and third edition’s essay selections. Morrison has received a large amount of critical recognition for her critical essays, which is reflected in *The Norton*’s second and third editions. Editors include Morrison’s “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” “The Site of Memory,” and Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African Presence in American Literature” in each of the later editions. Although the second and third editions each only contain a total of 5 essays, Toni Morrison is allotted 3 essay selections, while Alice Walker and Paule Marshall are each only anthologized once.
Figure 1.8

Figure 1.8 visualizes women poets in *The Norton’s* contemporary era. In edition one, Rita Dove, with 14 works, is the most highly anthologized woman poet. However, the second edition adds 16 poems by Harryette Mullen to its contemporary section, while Dove remains with 14 anthologized poems. Rita Dove and Harryette Mullen still remain as the most heavily anthologized poets in the third edition, however, Dove is only anthologized 11 times and Mullen remains at 16. It seems anthology editors are more likely to anthologize more works by women poets born during the 1950s in each edition’s contemporary sections because of their significant contributions to Black women’s literature in the from the 1980s and into the early-2000s.
Figure 1.9 depicts the number of institutional literary awards earned by *The Norton*'s contemporary women poets. The graph reveals that Rita Dove has received the most literary awards over approximately the last thirty years. Dove has earned 15 institutional awards, her most prestigious awards including the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1987) and the U.S. Poet Laureate (1993-1995); she also served as the Poet Laureate of Virginia from 2004 to 2006. Although Tretheway outnumbers Mullen through her number of received literary awards, Mullen still outnumbers Tretheway through her number of anthologized poems in *The Norton*. Additionally, Mullen (like Dove) can be cited across graduate theses and dissertations about American contemporary women’s poetry, while Tretheway cannot. It is worth noting that while Dove and Mullen have each received a substantial amount of institutional recognition, *Norton* editors make them the leading poets of the contemporary era because their success as academic poets.
Figure 2 shows the number of times short fiction writers anthologized across *The Norton’s* contemporary sections have been cited on Google Scholar. The graph displays the story title of each writers anthologized short story in *The Norton’s* contemporary sections. Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” and “Advancing Luna—And Ida B. Wells” are the most frequently cited short stories on Google Scholar. “Everyday Use” has been cited 213 times, while “Advancing Luna” has received 52 citations. This suggests that Walker’s short fiction still remains very prevalent in scholarly discussions about contemporary Black women’s short fiction, as opposed to the Norton’s other anthologized short fiction writers, whose anthologize short fiction has received significantly less attention from literary scholars. After winning the Pulitzer, Walker’s novels, along with her short fiction, gained more critical recognition because of her rising institutional success.
CHAPTER 5

THE PROMINENCE OF FOUR WOMEN WRITERS IN THE NORTON

Morrison, Walker, Mullen, and Dove serve as four key figures amongst a relatively small collection of contemporary Black women’s writing. Norton editors anthologize Morrison, Dove, and Mullen more frequently in respected genres in comparison to other contemporary women writers, and anthologize Walker more holistically across genres included in the contemporary sections. Editors promote these four women across The Norton’s contemporary sections because their literary works have maintained a substantial amount of attention from literary critics and scholars over the last several decades. Additionally, the literary works written by Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen all relate back to The Norton’s overarching theme of signifying which serves as a demonstration of how Black writers, regardless of time period, refer to the works and beliefs of their literary predecessors or contemporaries in order to foster and produce new ideas.

The critical and institutional recognition Morrison’s novels garnered during the 1980s and 1990s, encouraged editors to include more of her works in comparison to her contemporaries. In the first and third editions, Norton editors include the entirety of Morrison’s novel, Sula (1973). In the second edition, “Part Two,” or chapters ten through fifteen of Song of Solomon (1977), are anthologized. Even though editors include works by other women writers such as Walker, Gayl Jones, and Jamaica Kincaid, they tend to only include one or two anthologized novel chapters. Editors in the Norton claim that Morrison is responsible for, “[transforming] our view of American history and literature,” the editors additionally note that, “[Morrison] was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature,
the first time that an African American writer has been honored, not only for the individual achievement also for her championing of the importance of the unique beauty of African American literature” (Christian, 2094, Edition 1). *Norton* editors praise Morrison for challenging preconceived notions of literary legitimacy within the American literary canon, but also for her assertive efforts in celebrating the African American literary tradition through her works of fiction and essays. Because of the vast amount of critical and institutional recognition she accumulated throughout the last three decades of the twentieth century, *The Norton* editors were inclined include her most famous novels in the anthology.

Morrison gained most of her major institutional and critical recognition throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a period when other contemporary Black women writers were beginning to be largely recognized for their literary achievements as well. According to online literary database, *Metacanon*, seven of Morrison’s novels rank within the top one hundred American fiction novels published from 1900 to 1999.\(^1\) The novels Morrison published from 1970-1999 all gained a substantial amount of crossover appeal and critical across American and African American literary discourses, which helps explain why most of her oeuvre remains embedded in both canons. Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise* all rank within the top one hundred American works of fiction most frequently cited in scholarly journals; *Tar Baby* is the only novel that does not rank within the top fifty. The data

\(^{15}\) *Metacanon* serves as a data-driven approach that offers a feasible and comprehensive entry point into the American literary canon by showing which American novels have been canonized over the last several decades. *Metacanon* builds digital book lists from existing data from thousands of literary scholarly texts. This digital tool is particularly useful to my study because it reveals which of Morrison’s novels have been canonized.
suggests that Morrison’s novels are still heavily discussed and researched by scholarly literary critics.

In his essay, “Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences,” American literary scholar, John K. Young, identifies a connection between Morrison’s canonical status and Oprah Winfrey’s commercial power. Oprah selected *Song of Solomon* for as the 1996 book of the month selection and *Sula* for the April 2002 selection. Young argues that Morrison’s canonical status in combination with Winfrey’s commercial power “superseded the publishing industry’s field of normative whiteness, enabling Morrison to reach a broad, popular audience while being marketed as artistically important. By embracing ‘Oprah’s Book Club,’ Morrison replaces separate white and black readerships with a single, popular audience” (Young 181). Morrison’s connection with Winfrey during the 1990s greatly increased her marketability; Morrison had already solidified her position as a institutionally and critically recognized American writer, but her increasing marketability transformed Morrison into an institutionally and critically acclaimed American woman writer whose novels were considered popular and trendy. The popularity of Oprah’s Book Club contributed to the growing readership of Morrison’s novels during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Editors essentially mirrored Oprah’s Book Club selections in order to offer more expansive views of Morrison’s body of work past *Beloved*.

Literary critics often focus solely on her novels, but despite this, *Norton* editors anthologize Walker holistically across the contemporary sections by including one novel excerpt, two short stories, and three poems. Walker serves as the only anthologized short fiction writer who is anthologized in every literary genre in the contemporary era, except
for drama. The accolades Walker gained throughout the 1980s greatly increased her visibility as a Black woman writer in the contemporary era. In 1983, Walker’s *The Color Purple* earned the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as the National Book Award for Fiction. The institutional recognition Walker received after publishing *The Color Purple* was even more heightened in 1985, when American director, Steven Speilberg, created a film adaptation of the novel. The film adaptation of *The Color Purple* attracted a large amount of commercial appraise for Walker; the film alone garnered $142 million across American box offices and was even nominated for a “Best Picture” Academy Award in 1986. Walker gained an extreme amount of institutional and commercial visibility amongst a variety of audiences in a short period of only three years. Walker was even awarded an O. Henry Award in 1985 for her short story “Kindred Spirits” during this period. In her essay, “Walker: The Achievement of the Short Fiction,” American literary scholar, Alice Hall Petry claims that a “reappraisal” of Walker’s short fiction took place after she garnered such a large amount of institutional recognition due to her earning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Color Purple*. Petry’s argument suggests that after Walker won the Pulitzer, literary critics began examining her short fiction even closer, which explains why her short fiction, particularly “Everyday Use,” has accumulated so much attention from literary critics over the last few decades.

Special attention should be directed to Walker’s anthologized short fiction. Walker’s anthologized short fiction aligns with *Norton* editors’ goal to demonstrate how Black women writers remain connected throughout the Black literary tradition, despite differing literary time periods. *Norton* editors consistently anthologize Walker’s “Everyday Use” and “Advancing Luna—And Ida B. Wells” because of their thematic
focus on maternal ancestors and literary foremothers. Through both of these short stories, Walker implements a rhetorical usage of signifying, by showcasing how Black women remain connected to their predecessors over several decades, and how this interconnectivity leads to a sense of self-definition and understanding. Walker’s thematic emphasis of self-definition and cultural heritage serve as two elements that connect her to Morrison. Walker’s short fiction demonstrates the significant impact of matrilineal heritage on the present experiences of Black women. More specifically, Walker highlights the importance of Black women artists acknowledging and celebrating the creative capabilities of their ancestors, as a means of moving closer toward self-creation.

Literary critics and scholars have popularized Walker’s anthologized short fiction within African American literary discourses over the past several decades. Google Scholar indicates Walker’s “Everyday Use” has been cited 216 times, while “Advancing Luna—And Ida B. Wells” has been cited by scholars 52 times. This suggests that while Walker’s “Everyday Use” exhibits aesthetic appeal, the story has also been more helpful to scholars in discussions regarding contemporary Black women’s short fiction because of its popularity. Barbara Christian notes that “Everyday Use” serves as Walker’s response to the concept of heritage often articulated by the black liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s. She explains how during this period, African Americans adopted a sense of cultural nationalism as a means of liberation. The ideologies emphasized during the Black Power movement emphasized an African cultural past, instead of an appreciation of African American heritage. Many African Americans changed their names to African names and even adopted Afro-centric hairstyles and African clothing. However, Christian further explains that although Black Power ideologues explored an
ancient and unknown history, they also depreciated the known and recent past (Christian 10). Many scholars focus their research efforts on the ways in which Walker’s “Everyday Use” emphasizes the major impact the unknown cultural histories of Black women can have on their lived experiences in the present.

Critics and scholars often devote their critical research efforts toward contemporary Black women’s fiction, and as a result, the work of contemporary poets does not receive as much attention. Wall notes that like contemporary Black women fiction writers, Black women poets, “have been insistent in their attempt to inscribe an Afro-American female self into literary discourse…Blackness must now be defined as a mediated, socially constructed, and gendered practice.” Additionally, “The necessity of recovering and inventing female traditions of blackness has led…to some of the more striking formal innovations in this poetry” (Wall 188). Black women poets of the contemporary era aimed to produce versions of Blackness through their poetry tailored to the experiences of Black women. The recognition Dove and Mullen earned during the early stages of their careers, subsequently led to editors identifying these two women as key poets when arranging black anthologies around the late 1990s and mid-2000s.

African American and American literary scholars alike favor fiction and produce a substantial amount of scholarship on novels and short fiction. For poetry, however, institutional awards tend to substantiate the scholarly relevance of contemporary poets.

Dove earned prestigious awards and honors such as the Pulitzer Prize and the U.S. Poet Laureate during the 1980s and 1990s, making her one of the most popular American poets of the time. Mullen, on the other hand, did not receive as much recognition until the 2000s decade, and as a result, was not included in the first edition of The Norton, which
was published in 1996. Eight years later, in 2004, editors included Mullen in the second edition of *The Norton*. Mullen’s achievements, such as being a finalist for both the National Book Award and National Book Circle Award in 2002 indicated her rising prominence in scholarly discourses. This perhaps explains why she is absent from the first edition of *The Norton* published in 1996.

Mullen’s poetry gained critical attention throughout the 1990s, but did not earn her any major institutional accolades until the 2000s. In 2002, her poetry collection, *Sleeping With the Dictionary*, became a finalist for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. *Norton* editors do not include Mullen in the first edition of the anthology, but make her one of the leading poets in the second and third editions. It is likely that Mullen earning institutional recognition in the early-2000s increased her visibility as a writer, thereby inducing editors to frame her as an anchoring poet in the second and third editions. However, Mullen’s increasing visibility in the early-2000s, does not diminish the scholarly attention her poetry collection, *Muse and Drudge*, gained upon its publication in 1995.

Dove and Mullen’s poetry has gained substantial crossover appeal over the past three decades because their work offers a more non-prescriptive notion of Blackness, thereby attracting the attention of scholars outside of African American literary studies. A wide proportion of the literary criticism produced about Dove focuses on her distinct shift away from the stylistic and thematic elements of Black Arts poetry. Helene Vendler states that, “blackness [is not] sole guarantor of identity; and in lyric poems, poems of self-definition, one risks serious self-curtailment by adopting only a single identity-marker” (Vendler 11). Dove’s prominent thematic and stylistic shift away from Black
Arts poetry, along with Mullen’s Black experimentalism and lyricism in her poetical works earned both writers significant institutional acclaim from the 1980s and into the early-2000s. Literary critics have recognized Mullen, though, for the Black experimentalist and lyrical style of her poetical works, which sets her apart from other contemporary Black women poets. Taken together, Dove and Mullen’s versatility encourages *Norton* editors to anthologize their work more frequently because their poems are more likely to align with current critical approaches across American and African American literary discourses, as well as circulate across classrooms.

*The Norton* prioritizes Black women writers over men writers across its three contemporary sections. The critical and institutional recognition Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen gained in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, encouraged *Norton* editors to frame them as key literary figures of the contemporary era. In general, critical and institutional acclaim influence *Norton* editors’ selection processes, which helps explain why some writers are added and omitted from editions over time; some writers continuously receive accolades and attention over the years, while others stop garnering such attention. For example, in recent years, Mullen’s poetry has not received as much attention in comparison to the works of her contemporaries, Morrison, Walker, and Dove; therefore, *Norton* editors may not place such a heavy emphasis on her works, and may introduce a new poet into the contemporary era if they are to publish another edition.

*The Norton* currently remains one of the most widely circulated and popular African-American collections in the academy. My study examines the contents of *The Norton* over a seventeen-year publication period (1996-2014); in each edition, *Norton* editors consistently frame the same four women writers as key literary figures of the
contemporary era. In examining such a small facet of African American literary history, we are able to better determine how anthology editors, critics, and scholars influence reading audiences’ perception of African American literature. Norton editors continuously include and omit writers across the three editions; despite this, they always anthologize writers whose literary works continue to garner critical and scholarly attention regardless of publication date. Editors anthologize literary works that will likely serve as useful tools for educators who aim to inform students about significant periods of Black artistic production throughout African American literary history.

“The Norton African American Dataset” serves as a sustainable, small compilation of African American literary history. This dataset is available for public use; therefore, people can replicate or add on to it. Additionally, this data collection allows scholars to think about how we can adequately integrate quantitative and qualitative information about African American literature, as a means of creating a story line telling how certain writers become prioritized within a literary canon, and why some writers become minimized. The information compiled in my dataset aids my qualitative findings about Morrison, Walker, Dove, and Mullen; we can see that Norton editors prioritize these four women by how each writer is presented, but we cannot pinpoint the reasons why they are presented as such without further qualitative analyses. My dataset is one of the few examples demonstrating how African American literature and the Digital Humanities can intersect and despite its relatively small scope, is capable of changing our perceptions about African American literary history. We can gain a better understanding of how factors such as critical trends, literary discourses, critical attention, and
institutional success influence anthologists’ editorial decisions when determining which
writers are most representative of a literary era.

Visual aids and visualizations offer a fresh perspective when analyzing the
circulation patterns and trends of literary works over time. My study focused exclusively
on the contemporary era, which is such a small chunk of The Norton; but even still,
visualizations offer an alternative method for comprehending one period in African
American literary history. My Tableau visualizations serve as an example of how
relatively feasible interpreting aspects of literary art can be for viewers. Moreover, my
visualizations provide a chance for audiences across different disciplines to easily
examine and analyze elements of Black literary art across subsequent collections.
I examined an extremely small portion of African American literary history and I hope to
expand this project throughout my graduate studies. “The Norton African American
Dataset” is capable of revealing a number of findings in regard to how Black writers and
their literary works are presented across subsequent editions of The Norton. In the future,
I would like to shift my focus to other literary time periods contained in The Norton.
Since one of the major elements linking The Norton’s anthologized literary works is
Gates’s, McKay’s, and Smith’s unifying theme of signifying, I could potentially extend
my study of the contemporary era by demonstrating how these writers reuse the tropes
and rhetorical strategies of Black literary artists from earlier time periods. Additionally, I
would like to incorporate more African American literary anthologies, as well as
American collections, to broaden my examination of how contemporary women writers
are presented across differing literary traditions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Introduction


**Chapter 1: “A Digital Approach to Understanding The Norton”**


**Chapter 2: ”The Politics of Representation and Constructing The Norton”**


**Chapter 3: Quantifying The Norton and the Contemporary Era**


**Chapter 4: Visualizing the Significance of “The Core Four”**


https://doi.org/10.18738/T8/0YCZZN.

**Chapter 5: “The Prominence of Four Women Writers in The Norton”**


