

## Introductory Remarks

My purpose in compiling this book was to produce a “student-friendly” course book in African American Studies, the elective course I designed and introduced into the English Department curriculum at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš. The book is meant to provide a brief introduction into the history and culture of African Americans in the U.S., but could also be of interest to the general public, and, hopefully, may add to the practice of teaching African American literature and history already established at Serbian universities. The main purpose of the book is to get the readers/students acquainted with the key events in African American history, the most important political and cultural figures and the most prominent themes in African American culture. One of the goals would also be to spark further interest in this topic area and open possibilities for similar postgraduate academic courses. As most available books in African American studies deal either with history or literature, I have made an attempt to consider the subject from the perspective of cultural studies, integrating historical data with sociological, political and cultural commentary. I have deemed that such an integrative approach would provide the best insight into the study area and give the fullest picture of the African American contribution to the U.S. and world history and culture.

The book is divided into eight chapters covering the period from the origins of the Atlantic slave trade to the contemporary period. The concept of individual chapters is as follows: an outline of the most important events, developments and historical figures of a particular period is followed by two or three brief excerpts from some of the most important works by major African American writers which illustrate the most important theme(s) covered in the chapter, accompanied by a brief commentary with topics and questions for further study.

The first chapter deals with the African origins of both mankind and the future African American population in the U.S.: how once powerful African empires sometimes became accomplices in the slave-trading practice conducted by the Europeans. The Transatlantic slave trade and the Middle Passage as two key landmarks of African American history are explained and illustrated with excerpts from Langston Hughes’ poetry and William

DuBois' essays. Then, we move on to the history of slavery in North America, endeavoring to explain the economic, social, cultural and religious background of slavery. Special emphasis is placed on the history of rape and sexual abuse of female slaves, illustrated by excerpts from Jacobs' slave narrative and Morrison's contemporary novel. The third chapter is dedicated to the Civil War and its aftermath – one of the crucial chapters in African American history. The themes of slavery and, especially, the cultural representation of slavery are illustrated by two excerpts from Harriet Beecher Stowe's and Booker T. Washington's classics. The fourth chapter covers the historical period of segregation, its cultural, legal and economic foundation, as well as various attempts to oppose the dominant ideology of the South and a better part of the North of the country. The tradition of minstrelsy is explained and illustrated along with its far-reaching cultural consequences. The fifth chapter is dedicated to the most important African American leaders at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their works and their legacy, whereas the following chapter covers what is probably the most important period in African American history – the Civil Rights Era. The development, the importance and the success of the Civil Rights Movement is explained, particularly with regard to its most prominent leader Martin Luther King Jr. The two excerpts illustrate the cultural and political agenda of the Movement and the major influence it had on the future developments in African American history. The seventh chapter is about the more militant and radical political and cultural movements of the 1960s and the 1970s. The legacy of Malcolm X, still one of the most prominent African American cultural icons, and his political and cultural relevance for various African American cultural movements are highlighted. The final chapter is an attempt to consider the more recent cultural and political history of African Americans. Some of the events and persons mentioned in this chapter historically belong to the contemporary period and it may be too soon to give an objective assessment of their relevance. However, I felt it was necessary to at least get the readers/students acquainted with the most important events, figures and cultural and political processes of contemporary African American culture, literature and history.

I am aware that a book meant to represent a short introduction is certainly not enough to provide a comprehensive overview of all the relevant names, events and topic areas, and take full responsibility for any inadvertent omissions or mistakes.

I would like to offer my immense gratitude to the reviewers – Professor Aleksandra Izgarjan, Professor Danijela Petković and Professor Nataša Šofranac – for their valuable insights and their help, my dear friend and

colleague Professor Marta Veličković who did the proofreading and my (luckily) numerous friends, colleagues and family for their support and patience. Finally, when it comes to how successful I have been in my intentions, I leave the last word to my students.

In Niš, October 2020  
Ana Kocić Stanković