

## *Recommended Books: African Americans Writing California*

An annotated bibliography compiled by Aparajita Nanda, Editor of *Black California: A Literary Anthology* (Berkeley: Heyday, Santa Clara University, 2011) – *A California Legacy Book*

### **1. Beckwourth, James. *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1931.**

James P. Beckwourth (1798-1866), a mountaineer, trader, chief of Indian nations, and early pioneer on the Pacific coast, was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, to a slave woman and a white plantation owner. His father emancipated him from slavery and he spent his early years in Missouri before he embarked on trapping expeditions with a fur trading company. Almost an iconic figure of the mountain men of the early West, Beckwourth was also a hunter, guide, horse thief. He took part in the Seminole and Mexican wars and the California gold rush before he dictated his memoirs to a newspaperman, Thomas D. Bonner in 1854. Beckwourth's autobiography recounts almost in mythical terms his life and adventures. Published in 1856 this book is a classic of its kind, the western adventure story. But in its mix of fact and fiction it stands out as a postmodern autobiography that questions the definition of truth in traditional autobiographies.

### **2. Gibbs, Mifflin Wistar. *Shadow and Light: An Autobiography*. U of Nebraska Press: Bison Books, 1995.**

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs (1823-1915) was born in Philadelphia. An abolitionist, he often shared the platform with Frederick Douglass and was an active agent in the Underground Railroad. Ushered by the Gold Rush, Gibbs migrated to California where he founded the first black newspaper, *Mirror of the Times*. His civil-rights agitation and protests against state legislature bills led to his exile in Canada. He returned to the United States in 1870 and was elected the first black municipal judge in the nation who went on to become the American Consul to Madagascar. *Shadow and Light* brings history alive in its portrayals of Gibbs first hand rendering of the Underground Railroad, the abolition movement, the Spanish-American War, and nineteenth-century race relations.

### **3. Thurman, Wallace. *The Blacker the Berry*. New York: Scribner, 1996.**

Wallace Thurman (1902-1934) was born in Salt Lake City. He moved to Los Angeles as a student, worked as a postal clerk, while he took courses in journalism at the University of Southern California. In Los Angeles he contributed to the black newspaper *The Public Defender* and established a magazine, *The Outlet*. In 1925 he was in Harlem

where he published another magazine, *Fire* that had the support of writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. Both his magazines, however, were short lived and later Thurman collaborated with white writers to write plays. 1934 found him in Hollywood where Thurman became the first African American to write screenplays.

His first novel *The Blacker the Berry* tells the story of Emma Lou Morgan, a dark-skinned black woman whose internalized intraracial color prejudice makes for a number of her personal calamities. She lives to see her dreams shattered till she makes the momentous decision to survive. A compelling read, Thurman takes the reader on a journey through the 1920s, the nightclubs and dance halls and house-rent parties, as he addresses the politics of skin color within the black community and ushers in a new meaning of beauty.

**4. Hughes, Langston. "Hollywood Mammy" in *Black California* ed. Aparajita Nanda Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2011.**

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was born in Joplin, Missouri. He enrolled in Columbia University in 1922 but left school to work odd jobs in New York and then embarked on his travels to Africa and Europe. Between 1926 and 1929 Hughes, then in New York City, became one of the primary figures of the Harlem Renaissance. At the age of twenty-four he published his first book of poems, *The Weary Blues*. His years in Harlem brought him into close contact with Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and Arna Bontemps. Among his notable works is his famous essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," his novel *Not Without Laughter*, and two autobiographies, *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*. One of the most notable writers of the twentieth century Hughes's role as promoter of black literature and culture includes his support of erstwhile young writers like James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Alice Walker, among others.

In 1939 Langston Hughes spent time in California, where he collaborated on different projects with the black Hollywood actor Clarence Muse. Racism and discrimination were rife in Hollywood. In 1940 Hattie McDaniel became the first black actor to win an Academy Award, for her portrayal of Mammy in the film *Gone with the Wind*. In his unpublished one-act play *Hollywood Mammy* (1940), Hughes responds to this event; although African Americans were pleased that a black actor had finally won an Academy Award, they were frustrated that it was for a stereotypical role.

**5. Major, Clarence. *Myself Painting: Poems*. Louisiana: Louisiana U Press, 2008.**

Clarence Major (b. 1936), a novelist, poet, critic, editor, and painter, was born in Atlanta and grew up in Chicago. Major, who has been writing poetry from the age of twelve, came into contact with William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg during his editorship of *Coercion Review*. His literary works have been the subject of scholarly articles and research, and they have been translated into a number of European languages. His book, *Configurations: New and Selected Poems, 1958-1998* was a finalist for the

National Book Award. Major moved to California in the 1980s and is currently a professor of English and creative writing at the University of California, Davis.

Clarence Major in *Myself Painting* recreates a magic for readers as he defines the aesthetic feeling that comes from creating art. He introduces one to the process of creating art with poetry, a process that draws on stylistic techniques of painting as it visualizes a world of moving, surreal images that in its dream visions captures the reader leaving him spellbound in a flow of meticulously structured free verse.

**6. Copeland, Brian. *Not a Genuine Black Man*. New York: Hyperion, 2006.**

Brian Copeland (b. 1964) is an African American comedian, television and radio host, columnist, playwright, and author. At the age of eight he moved from Birmingham, Alabama, to San Leandro, California. He began his career as a stand-up comedian before being recruited to appear as a morning-show personality on San Francisco's KTVU television, which led to a Sunday morning show on KGO radio. He has also published many opinion pieces on his website and in the *San Leandro Times*, his hometown newspaper. Copeland is best known for recounting his experience as a member of a racial minority in the very white suburbia of his youth. Even during and after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the Copelands found themselves ostracized from the larger community and the subject of abuse. Copeland turned his stories of this experience into a very popular one-man play, *Not a Genuine Black Man*, which ran for two years in San Francisco. In 2006 he turned the play into a book by the same name. *Not a Genuine Black Man* is a humorous response to “who could qualify to be a genuine black man”; the response camouflages the pain in the laughter.

**7. Bradley, David. “City of the Big Sleep” in *Black California* ed. Aparajita Nanda Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2011.**

David Bradley (b. 1950), fiction writer, essayist, and educator, was born and raised in Bedford, Pennsylvania. In 1972 he graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and was awarded a Thouron British-American Exchange Scholarship for the University of London. His lifelong interest in nineteenth-century American history is apparent in his second novel, *The Chaneyville Incident*, which was inspired by his mother's discovery of thirteen unmarked graves while she was researching the history of Pennsylvania's Bedford County. The novel won a 1982 PEN/ Faulkner Award and an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and Bradley was recognized as a major voice in American fiction. Besides his other novel, *South Street*, Bradley has co edited, with Shelley Fisher Fishkin, the three-volume *Encyclopedia of Civil Rights in America*.

Philip Marlowe is a detective—a fictional character in a number of novels written by Raymond Chandler, the first of which is *The Big Sleep*. The title of Chandler's novel

refers to a rumination about "sleeping the big sleep," a euphemism for death. A compelling read is Bradley's take on *The Big Sleep*.

**8. Sinclair, April. *Ain't Gonna Be the Same Fool Twice*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1997.**

April Sinclair (b. 1954) was born on the South Side of Chicago, where she spent most of her childhood. She has written poetry since the age of ten, but her creativity flourished after she relocated to California, where she did graduate work at San Francisco State University and continued to write for small, feminist publications. With her 1994 debut novel *Coffee Will Make You Black*, Sinclair burst onto the national literary scene. It was the American Library Association's 1994 young adult fiction book of the year and won the Chicago Public Library's Carl Sandburg Award in Literature, among others.

Her second novel, *Ain't Gonna Be the Same Fool Twice*, a sequel to *Coffee Will Make You Black* follows the central character, Stevie, through different stages of her life as she moves from Chicago to the San Francisco Bay Area. Stevie emerges as a liberated soul in San Francisco, freely exploring her lesbian desires. It is a joy to follow Stevie as she matures –her lovable character intensely alive.

**9. major, devorah. *Brown Glass Windows*. Connecticut: Curbstone Books. 2002.**

devorah major (b. 1952), a poet, essayist, novelist, arts educator, and activist, was born in Berkeley, California. Her name is spelled in lowercase letters because she wants the words she uses in her written works and her name to have equal weight. While she was a student at San Francisco State University, she helped create the Black Studies department in 1968-the first in the nation. From 2002 to 2006, major served as San Francisco's third poet laureate. She received the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles literary Award in 1996, and in 2005 the Oakland East Bay Symphony commissioned her to collaborate with composer Guillermo Galindo to create a symphony for orchestra, spoken word, and chorus, *Trade Routes*.

*Brown Glass Windows*, major's 2002 novel, is a haunting elegy to San Francisco's Fillmore district, where the old neighborhood has been lost to gentrification. It is the story of a black family, the Evermans, whose son, Ranger, a returnee from war torn Vietnam is ironically killed in a local shooting incident. Ranger's death devastates the family, releases grievances and recriminations, till they ultimately survive the loss. Gripping in its interplay of surreal spaces and gritty realism the novel is narrated by the ghost of a 200 year old slave woman who watches over her elderly friend, Victoria, as the latter strives to be invisible by painting herself white, in her effort to heal the Everman family.