Afro-American literature in the wake of the Civil Rights movement
Antecedents

• Slave Narratives written in the 19th century

• The Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s: Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, Claude Mckay.
The Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement

- It was centered in Harlem, New York, but had far-reaching influence in art, music and literature.
- The interplay of race and culture and the developing of aesthetic appreciation in writing are some of the intellectual legacies of the Harlem Renaissance.
1950s and 60s: the social context

• The spirit of the Jim Crow laws that had been passed in the South between 1890 and 1910 was still prevalent in the 1950s
• The Civil Rights movement
• The Second Great Migration
• Urban realism – urban sensibility defines much of the African-American literature of this era.
• Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison as eminent writers in the 1940s and 1950s. Landmarks:
  • *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) by Richard Wright
  • *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953) by James Baldwin
  • *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison (National Book award)
James Baldwin (1924-1987)

- Lived in Harlem as a child, after his mother had divorced her husband and married a preacher
- Extremely difficult childhood (beaten up by a gang of police officers at ten, abusive adoptive father...)
- The quest to explain familiar and social repudiation became main motifs in his writing
James Baldwin

• Role of religion in his life
• Expatriation to Paris in 1948, where he became part of the Left Bank community
• Return to US in 1957. Social and political activism (met Malcolm X, Luther King and Senator Kennedy), “the latest slave rebellion”. Called for civil disobedience after a bomb exploded in a church ("the good white people on the hill")
• First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists held at la Sorbonne in 1956
• According to James Baldwin, black writers shared common features, such as a painful relation to the white world, a lack of self-confidence and the necessity to rename the world in his own image.
• The challenge that the black writer is facing today is "the creation of a language that is faithful to the experience of blacks in the New World, a language that expresses the adaptation of traditional African and European forms, and the dynamic transformations and reinventions of self that results" (Baldwin)
JAMES BALDWIN

• "It is astonishing that in a country so devoted to the individual, so many people should be afraid to speak."
Ralph Ellison (1914-1964)

• Early life: son of a construction foreman who encouraged his artistic aspirations
• Moved to New York and joined the communist party
• Became a teacher of Russian and American literature
• In 1957 he became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters
Invisible Man (1952)

- The novel confronts the social invisibility of black people in America

- Author refuses to sentimentalise black culture or present it in terms of an “authentic” ethnic heritage or descent
• Title coming from H.G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man*
• The overarching theme is the social invisibility of Black people
• The book begins and ends in a small underground room, a symbolic location
African American Literature
The 1970s to the Present

• African-American literature began to enter the mainstream of publishing.
• African American literature began to be defined and discussed by scholars
• Black women began to achieve success as novelists, poets, writers and artists.
Black women writers

• Women take central stage in the 1970s and 1980s
• Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison...
• Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 and Toni Morrison was the first black writer to be credited with the Nobel Prize in 1992
• They share with black writers a painful relation to the white world and the necessity to remake the world in their own image
• Use of a syncretistic language that blends different cultural traditions
• In their writing, gender is as relevant a factor as race and class
Here are some great web sites for further research:

- http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/slavenarratives/Slave_Narratives.htm
- http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/texts.html