NOTED AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES SCHOLAR NAMED EDITOR OF AMERICAN LITERATURE, OLDEST JOURNAL IN FIELD

DURHAM, N.C. – Houston A. Baker Jr., noted African-American studies scholar and distinguished professor in Duke University’s English department, has been named editor of American Literature. The journal is the oldest and most prominent academic journal in the field.

Once a battleground in the so-called cultural wars, the journal today has evolved into a publication with a broad view of American literature, publishing scholarly articles on authors from Stephen Crane to Toni Morrison and accepting approaches to literature from close textual readings to broad cultural overviews.

Baker will serve a five-year term. He succeeds Cathy N. Davidson, vice provost for interdisciplinary studies at Duke and Ruth F. Devarney Professor of English.

American Literature is published quarterly by the Duke University Press, in association with the Modern Language Association (MLA), the country’s leading academic organization for the study and teaching of language and literature.

In being named editor, Baker said, “It’s challenging. It enables you to get a view of the kind of things that colleagues are doing all over the world.”

The African-American studies scholar is widely regarded among his peers as one of the most influential scholars of American literature in his generation. Baker has written or edited more than 20 books, including Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature (1984), Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (1987) and Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy (1993).

He also has been a recipient of Guggenheim, Rockefeller and Fulbright awards, and in 1992 served as president of the 100-year-old MLA, the first African-American to hold the post.

Baker said his motto for the journal will be general excellence and inclusiveness. He expects the publication to continue its move away from coverage of arbitrary separate spheres – such as North versus South, men versus women, black versus white. In addition, he said he
expects more articles on Transatlantic studies, examining the interactions between geographical areas of the world whose borders touch on the Atlantic Ocean.

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In the past year, Baker served as visiting co-editor of the journal, along with Dana D. Nelson from the University of Kentucky. Both were visiting professors in Duke’s English department. In March, Baker accepted a position as Susan Fox Beischer and George D. Beischer Arts and Sciences Professor of English at Duke. He has a secondary appointment in African and African-American Studies.

Said former editor Davidson of Baker’s appointment, “He has a finely honed literary sensibility. He’s also a true intellectual leader. He knows how to set an agenda and to create an audience. All of his own scholarship has been path breaking. It’s such a huge service for a scholar of his stature to take on the journal.”

Before coming to Duke, Baker was professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania since 1974. He was also director of Afro-American studies, and founded and served as head of the Center for the Study of Black Literature and Culture.

Baker currently is finishing a monograph on African-American modernism. Slated to be published by the University of Georgia Press, it will examine the effects of incarceration, from slave ship holds to maximum security prisons, on notions of black modernism.

He praised Davidson for her leadership in steering American Literature toward a more inclusive approach to scholarship in the field. She significantly broadened the range of contributing authors and published topics, he said, welcoming new people and new ideas. “The journal has just been transformed by her and her work in the whole field.”

When Davidson took over in 1989, the journal’s editorial policy was seen by many in the field as supporting the traditional Western literary canon. It tended to adhere to a more traditional, narrower view of literary studies. Yet, times change.

Back in 1989, the cultural wars raged in academia. The very definition of American literature was under attack.

Davidson became the first woman to be named the journal’s editor. She was a proponent of expanding the Western canon to include more women, minorities, gays and lesbians. In addition, she viewed scholarly work in the field not only as encompassing a close textual reading and criticism of specific literary works but also as covering the study of historical and biographical contexts in which literature is produced.

“It was a very heated discussion – and a hyperbolic time,” Davidson said of her early days as editor. In the first years on the job, she said, she received some hate mail and even threats of violence. “It was a trying moment in the profession.”
Yet, she said, “At the same time, I received the most wonderful fan mail. I tried very hard to answer every serious letter. I tried to explain what we were doing and what our principles were. I think people were pleased that I wasn’t dismissive. We pushed the boundaries of the journal, but we were not dogmatic.

“I think it was a generational issue. Scholars earning their degrees now almost have to be told what the cultural wars were.”

In the intervening years, she said, four things have changed: “Scholars in the field have expanded the Western literary canon now to include more women writers, writers of color, and writers speaking to popular audiences rather than just elite audiences.”

Moreover, she said, “Scholars now view authors less as saints and more as real human beings, and realize great literature can be produced by writers who are not perfect politically or morally.

“Scholars also tend to be more explicit now about their theoretical positions, assumptions and sources.”

In addition, she said, “Scholars have changed the very definition of American literature to include not only works produced in the United States but also those produced across the Americas.”

According to Davidson, reaction among American literature scholars to Baker’s appointment has been overwhelmingly positive. “I’ve not heard anything but ecstatic and grateful response to Houston Baker as editor.

“For the most part, the cultural wars have died down. In terms of the journal, I think a reasoned approach to dialogue worked. Explaining our vision allowed other scholars in the field to understand what we were doing.

“All of us in the field now are thinking in much more complex ways. We’ve taken a much broader view of American literature, and we’re asking: What happens next?”

For his part, Baker said he hopes the transition between editors will be seen by those in the field as “a pleasant segue.”

Despite his standing as a senior scholar, Baker said he feels some trepidation in taking over as editor. “Any time I do anything new at this point, I’m scared to death, but I think I will do all right.”

American Literature is read by academics and non-academics, with a circulation of more than 5,000, large by university standards. In 1998, The Council of Editors of Learned Journals named the journal’s special issue, “No More Separate Spheres” (arguing for a more fluid, sophisticated understanding of gender, race and other categories of identity politics) the “Best Special Issue of a Journal” for the year.
The journal was founded in 1929 at Duke University, and has remained there ever since. Annual cost for individuals is $39. For more information, call 1-888-387-5687.

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