



READING CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

BLACK WOMEN'S POPULAR FICTION, POST-CIVIL RIGHTS
EXPERIENCE, AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CANON

BEAUTY BRAGG

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Reading Contemporary African American Literature

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Introduction

Locating an African American Literary Tradition

My interest in the work of popular African American women writers is rooted in my experience with students for whom the term “African American literature” largely means popular literature. Such students—English majors and non-majors with an interest in Black Studies—have not had much exposure to the “classics” of African American literature. Having come of age in a largely integrated (and structurally racist) environment, their exposure to “literature” has focused on a Eurocentric tradition with, perhaps, a tokenistic nod to Langston Hughes. Added to that, the fact that their informal encounters with African American literature (or fiction, if you must) were likely to be primarily shaped by a consumer market which, naturally, promotes a highly commercial form, means that their notions of African American literature and mine differ significantly.

After having the repeated experience of missed connections with students who couldn’t believe that I had not read Zane’s *Addicted* or Sapphire’s *Push*—which they were relating to texts like *Sula* or *The Bluest Eye*—I began to include such material in my own leisure reading. Finally, beginning with Sistah Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever*, I began to incorporate the occasional urban fiction title in my courses. As I attempted to incorporate a wider variety of titles—some of which were much less “polished” than others—I was forced to start to examine my own critical practice and skills. I was haunted by the question of what to do with texts that did not conform to the aesthetics that I had been taught to appreciate. Moreover, I continued to approach such texts as mere bridges to move students from one set of reading tastes to one that is considered to be more refined and therefore inherently more valuable. However, the more time I spent thinking critically about

popular fiction, the more I became convinced that such work has a value of its own, which exceeds its function to bring the lay readers tastes into harmony with academic tastes.

For example, in his work assessing the impact of canons on the study of American Literature, *Canons and Contexts*, Paul Lauter emphasizes the idea of student engagement as a standard of merit. Though Lauter is not concerned with popular literature in particular, his concern with the affective potential of noncanonical texts makes his observations quite relevant for thinking about popular fiction since the potential for identification or being “relatable” is such a definitive factor in successful popular fiction. One important suggestion he makes is that student audiences are less concerned with the kinds of formalist analysis that engages the professoriate. Rather, “the core for most of our students remains the experiences they encounter in the books and poems we bring them to.”¹ Moreover, Lauter reminds his readers that “our views of literary excellence derive largely from criticism of recent vintage” which developed, largely, to justify the expertise of the professional literary critic.²

The effect, of course, of the literary critics’ training in formal analysis is that she will most often choose texts that support such approaches. Like Lauter, though, I believe that engaging textual affect is as valuable as conducting formalist analysis. Thus, bringing into the classroom and our scholarship some texts, which may not seem to meet the “literary” aesthetic, but which are emotionally compelling and present unique opportunities to develop a richer understanding of a given period or theme in the literature. Although they are few, calls for an examination of popular African American fiction do tend to this perception by emphasizing how this literature can help us to more fully understand the complex and varied experiences of the post-civil rights era.³ In addition to providing a better understanding of significant social attitudes and experiences of the post-civil rights era, another possible result of bringing the formalistic and affective approaches together is the reinvigoration of African American literature as part of the public sphere.

Given my interest in explicating the political potential of popular African American literature, I decline to engage the question of aesthetic standards or merit to any significant degree. Instead, I assume that the merit of teaching and analyzing various forms of popular literature resides in its functional consistency with the African American literary tradition. My use of the term popular denotes concern with immediate socio-historical circumstance and thematic resonance over formal sophistication. These characteristics are, in my estimation, as important to the designation “popular” as sales or critical perception, which are more common ways of marking a distinction between the popular and the literary. Focusing on popular literature’s concern with lived reality and the affective potential of telling such stories, reveals that

African American popular literature constitutes an important aspect of the black public sphere by addressing questions that are of wide-ranging significance to majorities of black people in a given historical moment.

Black women's popular writing provides a particularly salient example of these historical and affective dynamics. Over and above the fact that women tend to be dominant in the production of African American literature, there are several distinctive ways that their work makes important contributions to black public discourse. First, they foreground gender in ways that are frequently missing from other modes of discourse on contemporary black experience. Second, they exhibit a responsiveness and timeliness to the shifting terrain which is reflected in the rapidly shifting styles and themes which characterize popular fiction. Finally, they continue the historical engagement of the black body as a symbol of political meaning in the social context of the United States.

Although other forms of African American narrative that can also be understood to engage dimensions of black publicity have emerged in the post-civil rights context, they have tended not to engage black female experience as a significant aspect of black identity. Here I am thinking specifically of the highly contrasting modes of narrative associated with post-soul literature and hip hop musical production. Indeed, each of these movements has registered and resisted important aspects of the exclusionary politics of the post-civil rights era. Hip hop musical culture has offered salient challenges to the ongoing practice of race-based economic exclusions, and the post-soul artist has exposed the exclusionary effects of media construction of black culture as homogenous other even as they have been primarily concerned with representations of black masculinity. In fact, they have produced such compelling representations of black male experience in the post-civil rights era that each has achieved a level of authority that has the effect of diminishing our perception of the multiplicity of black identity.⁴ Each of these aesthetic movements has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention (although discussion of the hip hop aesthetic tends to reflect cultural studies perspectives rather than literary methods), which has the effect of validating them as forms of cultural production and ensuring that there is a public engagement of those issues and experiences captured in these movements. By contrast, the relative lack of scholarly attention that has been paid to black women's popular writing, from any disciplinary perspective, perpetuates an unconscious high culture/low culture divide. The danger of perpetuating such a schism is that we miss opportunities for the kinds of dialogic interactions that animate the ideal public sphere in which people "gather and share information, debate opinions, and tease out their political interests and social needs with other participants."⁵

The post-soul aesthetic, for instance, has attempted to carve out new ways of engaging a black literary tradition by raising questions about the relevance

of civil rights ideology to contemporary experiences of blackness, by articulating the relation of African American culture and American culture broadly construed, and by utilizing alternative narrative forms. Ironically, the more institutionally acceptable post-soul literature operates along a similar trajectory as much popular fiction in its departure from canonical tradition. For instance, its heavy reliance on parody and pastiche of popular culture depictions are out of step with the themes and form that are considered to be the hallmark characteristics of African American literature. The notion of the individual as presented from a post-soul perspective challenges the traditional notion of the African American subject as a singular representative of an undifferentiated group experience. Additionally, post-soul narrative reliance on popular culture references complicates and sometimes subverts the primacy of a folk tradition based in African orality. Such shifts away from these approaches have led many to question how and if such literature can possibly accomplish what has been understood to be the ultimate purpose of African American literature—black political advocacy. The post-soul aesthetic does not give up on political advocacy as much as it reorients that advocacy toward a distinctive generational experience that is concerned with the positioning of black people as individuals in the here and now rather than the position of the collective historically. Many see this as a kind of cultural amnesia. Nonetheless, I see a benefit to the forced disaggregation of black communal concerns. It forces us to be critical about the bases of our collective identity. Consequently, the value of such literary heresy is its intervention in the public articulation of black identity.

However, the critical attention to difference that the post-soul aesthetic was supposed to enable was quickly undermined by its adoption within academe and public intellectualism. Such institutionalized positions, of necessity, reflect their positioning as sites of power. It comes as no surprise then, that what was, early on, imagined as a way of describing how African Americans spoke from multiple class, aesthetic, and ideological positions, soon lost track of varied class positions and was utilized in a way that focused on the black middle class in an oppositional relationship with working-class aesthetics.

As hip hop based representations of blackness became more commercially and critically prominent, applications of post-soul theorizing became more focused on those representations which challenged working-class representations of blackness and tried to clear space for middle-class black experience as an equally valid and “real” representation of black identity. Moreover, even when the post-soul perspective actively “instigated an aggressive, oppositional criticism that embodied the sonic kinetics of hip-hop” it did so in a way that was “primarily defined by black male sensibilities.”⁶ Thus, the very valuable potential of a critical and artistic perspective intended to examine

blackness from its own margins was crippled by its failure to recognize femininity as one of blackness's interstitial spaces.

In contrast, African American women writers across popular genres have demonstrated the affective potential of literature to articulate "shared experiences" that "can bond people together in ways that far exceed language."⁷ The opposition of language and feeling proposed is an interesting one that returns us to the troublesome question of aesthetics. Academic practice has tended to fetishize language and to approach literature in a way that, as Paul Lauter describes, dissociates "what a work is about and how it affects us from the ways in which it is put together."⁸ One result of this dissociation is the difficulty I describe above of knowing how to deal with a text that does not meet our expectations in terms of sophistication in language and structure.

Some critics have recently begun to address such issues in relation to contemporary urban fiction.⁹ Various they argue that we can approach such texts by reading them through theories of spectacle or by paying close attention to the act of writing as an assertion of agency. In both cases, the implication of their approaches is that we re-center the affective dimension of a text in our analyses. In turn, I am suggesting that popular literature's affective potential and the bonds it can create are of particular importance to the cultivation of a black public sphere in a time when, by many accounts, fragmentation among African Americans is one of the most crucial obstacles to a black counter-public.¹⁰ Thus, I forgo any extended discussion which would attempt to justify the inclusion of popular literature in critical practice on the basis of aesthetic merit. Instead I focus on the ways in which popular writing by African American women serves to create a dialogic account of female gender experiences as they intersect with class differentiation within the African American community, with shifts in generational experience, and with the public policy landscape. In focusing my attention on these popular forms, I am inspired by Mae Gwen Henderson's notion of dialogism.

The dialogic nature of black women's writing, as specified by Henderson in her 1989 essay, "Speaking in Tongues" is as much in evidence today as it was in the period in which she initially explicated it. Black women's writing, including the popular, speaks to and from the various social and aesthetic positions which have emerged in the post-civil rights era, enabling a critical project which makes legible the common goals and values of multiple discursive communities. It is my intention here to show how the "dialogic of difference and dialectic of identity" which Henderson finds at work in early twentieth-century African American women's texts can help to situate and advance critical engagement with the popular literature of the present era.¹¹ The dialogic of difference, which names the contestatory nature of black women's writing, is located in part in the popular writers' bold choice to speak from the literary margins. However, to speak from the margins does

not mean to wholly adopt the position of an outsider and in their extension of key aspects of the African American literary tradition, writers of popular fiction enact the dialectic of identity, which emphasizes aspects of shared experience and collective narrative enterprise. Thus, examining the multiple positions from which black women writers speak illuminates the diversity of experience which constitutes contemporary black life. The result of such “simultaneous discourse” is a resolution to the problem of competing aesthetic discourses described above and makes an important contribution to the larger public discourse on contemporary black identity.

The significance of speaking from the literary margins can be measured by the extent to which the recent crisis over the fate of African American literature has been motivated by the commercial dominance of popular fiction.¹² The ascendance of Buppie fiction in the 1980s and early 1990s first, and the subsequent rise of street lit/urban fiction and black erotica, has led to an animated discussion which sometimes posits the end of African American literature as we know it. These popular forms are seen to be out of line with the aesthetic and political standards established in the context of the academic institutionalization of African American literature in the latter part of the twentieth century. The substance of the critique regarding such literature has been two-fold, denigrating both the perceived lack of aesthetic quality and the failure to represent an activist politic.

In failing to centralize race in ways that are consistent with the Reconstructionist canon, popular literature has come to be associated with the potential death of African American literature rather than an indication of its evolution. A central question, posed repeatedly in interviews with authors, on discussion boards, and in professional editorials is what is the relationship between black popular fiction (genres such as romance, street lit, erotica, and Christian fiction, for example) and traditional, or “real” black literature. Implicit in this question is the assumption that the relationship is, in point of fact, a zero-sum relationship in which the vitality of one is figured as a death-knell for the other. However, I propose that in continuing to privilege those texts which are most obviously linked to the “traditional” canon, we miss important opportunities to widen the scope of our understanding beyond the dichotomies of post-black/old black, which force us into a fallacious debate over the viability of African American literature as a distinctive entity. In privileging narrative strategies that reinforce their relationship with a mass audience and its concerns, the voices of popular women writers challenge the marginalization of black women in the public discourse on black identity. Because the arena of popular literature is dominated by women as readers and writers, attending to this work would necessarily help us to recalibrate broadly defined racial concerns to account for the specific ways that gender informs those concerns.

Moreover, the emphasis on the question of what the rise of popular literature means for the fate of African American literature as we have defined it obscures the equally salient question of what constitutes *public* discourse. Even the latest model with which we have been working, which frames media as the most significant manifestation of black publicity, has not fully accounted for the degree to which even the discourses within it are shaped via the “blogosphere” and “twitterverse” by a professional intellectual class whose interpretations may or may not function to bind communities together. Turning to the relationship of black popular writers to their audiences, however, allows us to locate an aspect of black public discourse in which the values and concerns of multiple demographics carry significant weight in the expressions that, presumably, represent them. Thus, I centralize the affective dimension of the texts examined by focusing on these texts’ strategies for offering realistic depictions of familiar experiences which invite identification on the part of the audience.

Within this body of literature there is a characteristic of social reflexivity that opposes the trans-historical orientation of the novelistic tradition which emerged after the 1970s. The emergence of this trans-historical approach marked a consequential new development in the tradition of African American letters. It simultaneously contributed to more rigid distinctions of high and low forms and, to some extent, placed black literary production at a removal from the black public sphere. Popular culture material is necessarily concerned with the lived experience of contemporaneous audiences, who, of course are situated historically, but are unlikely to frame their daily experiences in historical terms. High cultural forms, on the other hand, tend to be conceived of as engaging more enduring and abstract components of human experience and to reify the separation of the everyday, mundane aspects of human experience from those which transcend the ordinary. Thus, the development of this thematic concern with history in African American literature contributes to a unique development in which African American writing is less likely to be simultaneously “literary” and “popular” at the same time.¹³

As a significant but critically neglected part of the new media ascendancy, the production of black women writers complicates extant analyses of racial representation by focusing attention on issues of class and gender in the academy, in the collective social lives of African Americans, and in the arena of national policy, making a crucial intervention in the black public sphere. Through my examination of black women’s popular literature in this book, I demonstrate how this literature can engender challenges to the ways that we consider the authority of the critic and critical reading practices as well as the ways in which popular writers are alternatively authorized through their relationships with audiences and their engagement of black identity politics through thematic rather than formal approaches.

Key among these themes is what the black woman's experience is in the here and now. We find in the contemporary literature black women speaking from highly specified social locales, which reveal the ways in which black female experience is nuanced by class positioning, the availability of new categories of identity, and the spatial politics of integration. Deeper critical engagement with such texts, then, is critical to understanding African American literature as it indexes African American experience, for as Herman Beavers proposes in his essay, "African American Women Writers and Popular Fiction," the response of audiences to this work has less to do with "their explication of African American female experience on a historical grid" than with "their depiction of African American women's experiences in the post-civil rights era."¹⁴

Even the forty or so years that we call the post-civil rights era reflects some distinctive social contexts that impact the nature of black women's social and political experiences. As a result, my analyses are similarly historicized, examining representative texts from three distinct social periods—the immediate post-civil rights era, the Affirmative Action period, and the Neo-liberal era. I settle on these periods because they help us to understand the ways in which black women's literature has been in dialogue with the black and American public culture.

From the 1970s to the present, we have witnessed a number of media innovations that have presented black women as symbols which were indicative of the social conception of black people as a whole. In the 1970s we witnessed the emergence of the "liberated" black woman in film and television media. From television's Christy Love, to Motown's biopic representation of the tragic life of Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, black women were entering into the panorama of American visual representation in a wider variety of roles than ever previously witnessed. Although such images did signify in ways that were specifically gendered, the choices that these female characters faced were also meta-commentaries on newly liberated black subjects. The choices that fictional black women characters made regarding their relationships to larger structures of power—like the law or corporate enterprise—paralleled the dilemma of the black community as a whole in its effort to assess the nature of its new relationship to a state which had presumably opened its arms to its black citizens. Moreover, there was a general consistency in the celebratory ways in which black femininity was framed, whether it came from mainstream or independent black media sources. By the 1990s media representations had shifted and there was less consonance between black produced images and those which dominated "mainstream" media outlets. In fact, black self-representation had departed significantly from the majority point of view. Black-generated imagery was focused on representing the unconflicted success of black professional women, while news media were largely focused on the black woman as social menace, through the

image of the welfare queen. By the beginning of the new millennium, the success of hip hop culture had once again shifted the image of the black woman in media representations. Through the rise of music video culture the black woman had become a symbol of wanton sexuality or merely a victim of black male misogyny.

In each of these periods, even as representations of black women have been central to the discursive construction of African American relations to the nation, at no point have actual black women been a significant presence in the institutions framing the discourses. We cannot identify any black women directors, producers, or script writers who could be seen to frame the image of the black woman in the 1970s. In the 1990s there were a number of black women holding political office by election or appointment but few who were positioned to shape the discourse on affirmative action or welfare reform from proactive position rather than a defensive one. Nor have African American women been especially well-positioned to shape the conversation on the nature of black culture to which critiques of hip hop culture are often linked. As a consequence, in the context of non-literary or non-fictional media forms, black women's voices have been relatively excluded from the public sphere.¹⁵

On the other hand, within the context of literary production, African American women have gained more authority than ever before. Their internalization of this authority can be illustrated through a consideration of one of the major archetypes of black women's fiction—the conjure woman. The conjure woman has been the subject of much scholarly attention as a figure that offered an image of empowerment along lines of race/culture and gender simultaneously. The title and introduction to Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers's 1985 collection, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*, gives some sense of the resonance of the conjure figure. The collection begins with a discussion of a closing note in Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple*, in which Walker thanks her characters for coming to her. Pryse's explication frames Walker as a kind of conjurer herself, to the extent that she becomes the medium through which the character Celie, "who lacks a formal education and who writes her letter (and the novel) in the colloquial English of southern, black, poor, and barely literate country people" is able to take form.¹⁶ The relationship between Walker and her character is a mutualistic relationship which echoes the ethos of Black Arts Movement communitarianism as well as the black feminist project of tradition building as Pryse characterizes it: "Walker seems to be saying that Celie's ability to write her story is a precondition for her own ability as a novelist."¹⁷ By contrast, the success of black women writers from Walker and Morrison to McMillan and Stringer, means that the twenty-first century offers few obstacles to a black woman imagining herself as a novelist. Thus the tropes which capture the imagination of contemporary writers tend to be oriented in other directions—

she is neither conjuring a new role for the black woman, nor breaking ground from which the dispossessed speak.

Instead, in contemporary African American popular literature, the black woman has been placed, unselfconsciously, at the center of black women's writing. The feeling of legitimacy that is engendered by the success of black literary and popular fiction becomes the basis for new approaches. What makes the work of popular women writers unique is the highly specific nature of their representations. The tendency within this genre of work is not to treat women as a generalized other. Instead, what I find is that each historical moment produces an engagement of black female experience in a relation to a specific set of discursive conditions. They represent experiences that respond to generalized media representations of black women, to black communal constructions of black femininity as well as to codes of behavior that emerge specifically from within black female culture. This is accomplished through challenges to existing black female archetypes and through the generation of new archetypes.

Those which I examine include the cultural mulatto, the Buppie, the Bitch, the Diva, and the Baby Mama. Each of these archetypal figures negotiates a particular set of socio-historical formations as well as particular iconic formulations of black femininity. The cultural mulatto is associated with the disruption of Black Nationalist ideology. In particular, I associate it with the disruption of the reactionary politics of gender that inhere in nationalist thought. The Buppie figure of Girlfriend fiction asserts the legitimacy of economic aspiration in the face of the assault on black progress that was the anti-affirmative action movement of the turn of the millennium. The Bitch, Diva, and Baby Mama are products of the deviant constructions of black femininity that converge in neoliberal political discourse and hip hop culture's hypersexual narrative content. Through such characters contemporary black women writers offer insights into the forms the black female quest for social power takes in the post-civil rights era. The sheer number and variety of black women writers and readers itself represents a change in black women's self-perception in both social and symbolic forms.

In the first chapter, I survey the politics of canon formation in the early post-civil rights era, linking it to the development of a set of critical reading practices which continue to inform how we as scholars approach a rapidly evolving body of literature. In it I describe how a particular notion of the vernacular comes to dominate the academic conception of African American literature to the exclusion of the real-life reading practices of black consumers and producers of literature. These developments are part and parcel of a shift in the institutional contexts for the production of scholarship on the subject of African American literature. Indeed, as literary authority moved from independent black institutions into the halls of the academy, even more factors arose to contribute to the separation of popular and literary forms.

The very nature of academic production is at odds with the dynamics of popular writing. This is the case not only in aesthetic terms but with regard to the temporal processes which govern each. Where popular cultural production is concerned with the lived experiences and cultural habits of subjects *in situ*, the processes of academic production are not always as explicitly concerned with the implications of scholarly insights for the day-to-day lives of its subjects. Moreover, the temporal cycles of the academy are so expansive that the scholarship is almost invariably referencing conditions that have already shifted by the time the ideas are in circulation, further distancing it from lived conditions.

In chapters two and three I focus on a set of texts which challenge the authority of professional critic. First, I offer a case study of critical practice around Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, demonstrating how the reading from a traditional historical perspective produced a fairly singular but incomplete reading of its textual dynamics. Foregrounding the novel's engagement of the complex intersection of race, gender, and social context, I read the protagonist from multiple angles. Situating her in the context of patriarchal gender ideologies, social and global changes of the 1970s, and in relation to twenty-first century aesthetics produces a composite of black female experience in the immediate post-civil rights era. As a further challenge to the hegemony of the critic, chapter three examines some of the narrative strategies popular black women writers have employed to acknowledge the authority of black readers in the validation of black literary enterprise. Through readings of Girlfriend fiction, I contrast the impact of audience-based black vernacular style with scholarly deployments of the vernacular. These novels express the socio-reality of black women interrogating the iconic representations of black women in the Affirmative Action era.

Finally, chapters four and five move even further toward the margins of black literary production to examine the fundamental challenges to academic and popular literary authority launched by women of the hip hop generation, who engage contemporary racial formations in economic rather than aesthetic or cultural terms. Focusing on the production of women writers in the "street lit" genre helps to fill a gap in the scholarship. This scholarship has been extremely valuable in suggesting how street lit authors of the 1960s and 1970s—such as Robert Beck (a.k.a. Iceberg Slim), Roland Jefferson, and Odie Hawkins—can be read in ways that complicate some of our current assumptions regarding distinctions between literary aesthetics and reading publics, but it necessarily focuses on the production of black male authors. Examining contemporary "street lit" or urban fiction provides an opportunity to examine how women use the genre. In chapter four, I demonstrate the ways in which black women writers of the hip hop era engage black feminism in a way that reflects their own unique positioning via the social and economic structures of the turn of the twenty-first century. The final chapter

positions tell-all memoirs by women of the hip hop generation as an extension of the urban fiction genre and explores how their self-narration encodes resistance to public neoliberal discourses of black femininity.

NOTES

1. Lauter, 102.
2. Ibid., 104.
3. See Herman Beavers's and Dana Williams's essays in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*.
4. In the essay "Postmodernism, Pop Music, and Blues Practice in Nelson George's Post-Soul Culture," David M. Jones offers a provocative discussion of hip hop culture in the post-soul era. He argues that scholarly attention to hip hop culture at the expense of other black musical forms echoes and reinforces popular media's presentation of hip hop culture as representative black culture.
5. Squires, 148.
6. Neal, *Soul Babies*, 110.
7. Joyce A. Joyce, "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism," *New Literary History*, 18, 2 (Winter 1987): 335–344.
8. Lauter. *Canons and Contexts*, 105.
9. I am thinking specifically of essays by Kristina Graaff and Eve Dunbar included in *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*.
10. For some examples see Eddie Glaude, Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*, Michael Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African American Political Ideologies*, and Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres."
11. Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues," 12.
12. Two separate moments of doomsday prophesying capture critical attention again and again: Thulani Davis, "Don't Worry Be Buppy," and Nick Chiles, "Their Eyes Were Watching Smut." Both are op-eds published in 1994 in the *Village Voice* and 2006 in *The New York Times*, respectively.
13. For a historical overview of this argument see Candice Love Jackson's essay 'From Writer to Reader: Black Popular Fiction' in *The Cambridge History of African American Literature*.
14. Beavers, 272.
15. For some discussion of the reception of black women's voices in political culture, see Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Outsider*.
16. Pryse, *Conjuring*, 1.
17. Pryse, 2.