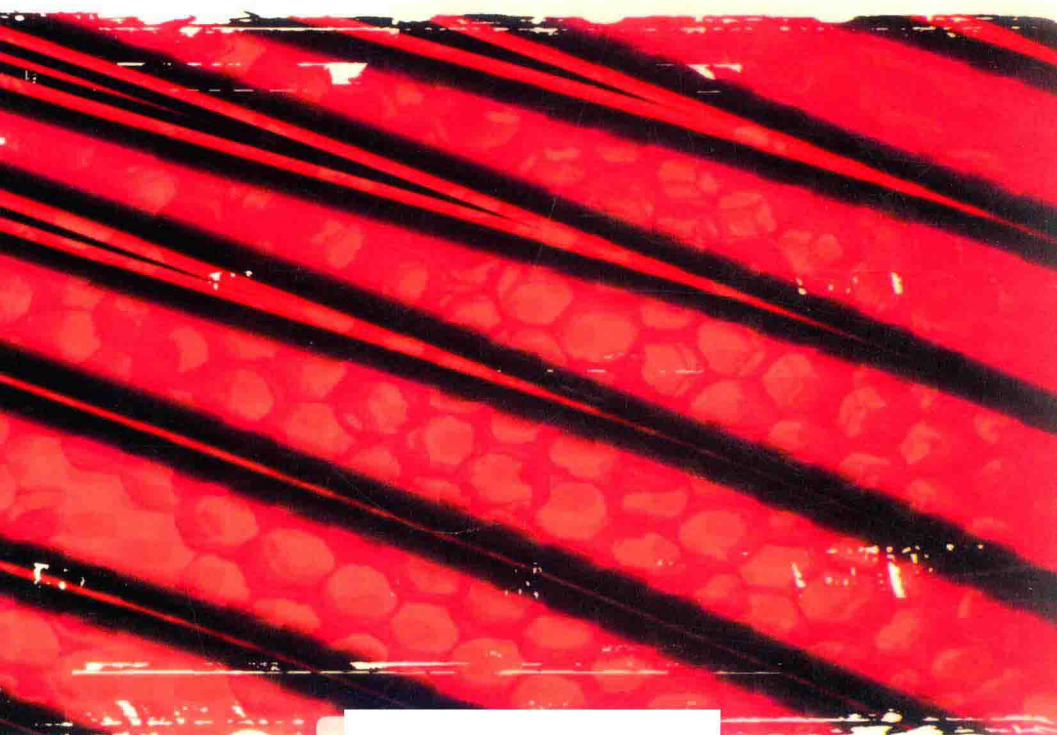


black feminist cultural criticism



edited by
Jacqueline Bobo



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Black Feminist Cultural Criticism



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Dedicated to the memory of Barbara Christian

Authors

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Ruby Dee is a noted actor and author. Her recent films are *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Jungle Fever* (1991), and the Academy Award-nominated short *Tuesday Morning Ride* (1995). Ruby Dee wrote and starred in the PBS drama *My Name Is Zora* (1989). She is the author of *My One Good Nerve* (1998) and co-author of *Of Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together* (1998).

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Preface: Bearing Witness

Jacqueline Bobo

A memorable series of images occur at the midpoint of Julie Dash's independently produced *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). The cinematic portraits depict the Peazant family gathering for a ceremonial feast commemorating their last day on the island Ibo Landing, located off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. Set during the turn of the twentieth century, the film portrays the lives of four generations of Black people who have lived through enslavement yet have retained memories, customs, and traditions of their African homelands.

The dinner sequence opens with a shot of a quilt spread out on the ground upon which the meal is placed. A diverse combination of traditional foods, invoking both Black people's African heritage and means of survival while enslaved, is shown in close-up: gumbo, greens, cornbread, shrimp, rice and corn. A hand-woven chair is carefully arranged as a place of honor to seat Nana Peazant, the oldest member of the family. The women appear wearing long flowing white dresses, artfully stitched, embroidered, and sewn by them. Their hairstyles, decorative, yet a regular part of the women's daily lives, form a significant aspect of the *mise-en-scène*. Layered with meaning and symbolism, the background environment becomes a canvas upon which the routine examples of Black women's creativity are displayed.

Black women's art evolved from the activities of women such as these; those who were restricted to using that which was functional and utilitarian, that which was left over to create beauty. These were women who had survived the harshness of life in bondage, yet emerged with principled dignity. Their strength, courage, and refusal to accept the dominant society's conception of them as chattel, property for which no human concerns need apply, form the essence of much of Black women's creative achievements. This perspective is fundamental to the articles selected for this volume. Writers and scholars in literature, film, television, theater, sculpture, painting,

music, material culture, and other forms of cultural analysis, explicate Black women's artistic activities within the context of an activist framework. The authors are concerned with the politics of cultural production and the ways in which Black women have confronted institutional and societal barriers in their daily lives and in their creative spaces.

Black Feminist Cultural Criticism charts new directions in considerations of Black women's artistic output by expanding the contours of how we conceive of and analyze creativity. It emanates from the notion of "dry-longso," that ordinary, everyday women are the unheralded bedrock of Black feminist social, political, and cultural activism. *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism* is a *hommage*, a tribute to those women who have contributed greatly to resistance efforts against racial, sexual, and other devastating oppressions while designing for themselves and their families a better world. Immanent within this universe are the diverse manifestations of the women's artistry. Their handicrafts, quilt designs, decorations, foods and recipes, rituals and sacraments, handed down through generations, are thus integral, essential components of Black women's cultural legacy.

Legions of Black women have, historically, been artists without acknowledged art forms. Prohibited by law and centuries-old custom from full participation in established creative endeavors, they persevered in crafting beauty in the midst of racial carnage, community in the face of legally mandated dispossession of both their families and property. Despite being treated as manual laborers without intelligence during the slavocracy and long after, sexual repositories of rapacious plantation owners, and, in general, ravaged in mainstream cultural representations, these Black women invented their own unique aesthetic expressions. Their lifestories are not just tales of stoic endurance or mute acceptance. Historical narratives that present them simply as survivors are incomplete. Imbricated crucially in Black women's past is the manner in which their imaginative lives are part and parcel of their ability to withstand and oppose repressive circumstances.

Recent research on quiltmaking and Black folk art offers valuable correctives to prior theories about the myriad ways in which Black women protested, fought back, and resisted over time. The passive, docile, obsequious mischaracterization, so beloved in Southern lore, does not appear in these studies. Researchers investigating material cultural artifacts have painstakingly recorded the presence of Black women actively involved in the struggles against enslavement using whatever mechanisms were at hand. For many women their skills as artisans were covert means of resistance. Quilt scholars Cuesta Benberry, Gladys-Marie Fry, Jacqueline Tobin, and Raymond Dobard present compelling verification that enslaved Black women used their expertise in quiltmaking, needlework, and textile production to assist

those who were escaping bondage by way of the Underground Railroad and other routes to freedom.

Although there has long been a tremendous silence surrounding the contributions of Black women to American quilting traditions, documentation exists proving that Africans who were taken to the USA utilized their prior knowledge of fabric construction in making quilts for plantation households and for their own families. Together with their experience in piecing, appliqué, and embroidery, the women used their proficiency in textile design and cloth-weaving to make the transition to quilting with relative ease.¹ Benberry asserts that specific pattern designs were invented by Black women. When quilts with these coded patterns were hung outside slave cabins they conveyed vital information: whether a home was a safe haven, routes with more hospitable access, directions about navigation of treacherous terrain, and various movements for safe passage.²

Gladys-Marie Fry, a respected scholar of quilts constructed by enslaved women, states that distinctive colors previously used in African textiles were used to encode symbolic messages for those who were fleeing.³ In the latest research on quilts serving as subterfuge, Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard conducted extensive inquiries to establish the legitimacy of an Underground Railroad Quilt Code. Transmitted orally throughout generations, these secret codes and communication devices employed quilting terminology as part of the clandestine processes used to help Black people escape to freedom.⁴

For many Black women during enslavement their labor on serviceable and practical objects, guaranteed through force, also served social and historic ends. Quilting was, according to Fry, a means for the women to gain emotional stability and spiritual sustenance.⁵ In addition, their work fortuitously recorded a history for later use that was revealed through the designs, stitching, colors, and fabrics. The women told of their state of mind during difficult periods, their family lineage, and the rigors of life in bondage, among other particulars. Fry declares: "slave women cast long shadows . . . they also remind us that the human mind, spirit, and talent can transcend the cruelest form of human degradation – slavery. Although slavery denied these women their physical freedom, it did not diminish their creative talent and artistic genius."⁶ Quilts are visible manifestations linking Black women's cultural past to the present. Throughout generations a sense of continuity is maintained as the insurgent spirit and creative traditions established during enslavement are passed on to other Black women.

In the current renaissance of quilt appreciation situating this expressive form as high art, the work of contemporary feminist painter and sculptor Faith Ringgold is part of the reconsideration of quilts as valued commodities.

Through a combination of text, images painted on fabric, and quilting, Ringgold originated what has been categorized as the story quilt medium. In the quilts, Black women's lives are depicted in symbolic historical contexts and settings. The women's narration is the text on the quilts. They are therefore the authoritative voices of their histories. Ringgold speaks (in an interview in chapter 11 in this volume) of the importance of Black women telling their own stories: others' fabrications distort the full range of their lives while perpetuating limiting translations. Females define themselves in Ringgold's story quilts.

The recovery of the merits inherent in quilt aesthetics has guided scholarly research into other forms of creativity and self-definition in women's domestic space and private worlds. The investigations into material cultural artifacts, such as gardening and food rituals, provide insight into ways women have shaped their environments and influenced their families and culture.⁷ Angela Davis writes (chapter 12 in this volume) that cultural practices have a primary role in the socialization process. She is referring here specifically to Black women and music. Extending this analysis to a range of cultural productions offers a broader understanding of art and activism, culture and agency. During periods of intense movements for social change, Davis notes, music "has helped to shape the necessary political consciousness." To understand the development of this awareness of ideological forces affecting their lives, it is imperative that scholars examine the cultural forms influencing Black women, especially those to which they have themselves contributed.⁸ Food is an ideal medium for examining the confluence of social relations, where the values, traditions, mores, and enduring historical linkages of Black life are cultivated and preserved.

Ceremonies around food have long been significant in Black people's lives. Even food choices have attained an historical and political dimension. During enslavement Black people survived on the scraps and discards of the plantation economic system. Heritage foods, such as pigs' feet, intestines, jowls, and ribs, evolved from enslaved people using skill and creativity to produce sufficient nourishment to endure physically damaging circumstances. Recent foodways studies probing the culture of food confirm that more than simply being peripheral to women's lives, it is a source of information about how they have contributed to cultural life. This is especially true for those with specific group affiliations, such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, and other relationships. Researcher Mary Douglas characterizes food practices not as static or innocuous, but "as a field of action."⁹ For Black women, particularly as it relates to culture and the development of political consciousness, a further contention by Douglas is relevant. "Food choices," she writes, "support political alignments and social opportunities." It is on the cultural terrain that social groups make sense of their

socioeconomic location and begin to understand their capacity to resist subordinate status.

The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook (1993), a testimonial to Black women and food memories, presents two critical sites where essential cultural meanings are perpetuated: quilts and food. In fact, the title of the cookbook memorializes these sentiments, pointing to the revered custom of using a quilt as a table covering for ceremonial occasions. In the article (chapter 19 in this volume), "Empathy, Energy, and Eating: Politics and Power in *The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook*," Sally Bishop Shigley notes that the connective tissue of quilts and food not only serves to hold the narrative together but also merges food rituals with history. Black women's public worlds and their domestic environments, through the communion of traditions of shared meal preparation, are united. As a consequence, what is perceived as ordinary and routine intersects with the symbolic in the realm of culture, underscoring its potency in community-building and group cohesion.

Agency, self-determination, recognition of systemic forces of oppression, and transformation of self and culture, are made real in Black women's cultural endeavors. These concepts are often referenced in theoretical tracts, but rendered tangible throughout the range of Black women's creative expressions, including material culture, popular representations, and other art forms. They are integral components of a cultural movement that has altered a people's awareness of their social circumstances and impelled collective actions for social change.

Black Feminist Cultural Criticism: Classic Readings

Two significant purposes are key in Black feminist criticism: to intervene strategically in privileged discourses that attempt to undervalue the merits of Black women's creative work; and to advance the causes of Black women and those of others at risk of oppression. Black feminist cultural criticism addresses concerns important to those who are usually never considered in any analysis of cultural works. Literary scholar Barbara Christian was one of the first to uncover and document a history of Black women writers that dated back to the nineteenth century. Christian categorized this body of work within the deserved stature of a tradition, thus emphasizing the expansive contours of a fertile lineage of creativity. Her initial efforts to construct a method of analyzing these writings led to a fruitful discovery about the responsibility of Black feminist critics. Christian asserts (chapter 3 in this volume) that the scholar must also be an activist seeking to substantively change Black women's lives for the better. For her the distanced stance

of an objective observer is a false one, because the analyst is also a participant "in an ongoing dialogue between the writer and those who [are] reading the writer, most of whom are not academics and for whom that writing was life-sustaining, life-saving."¹⁰

Black Feminist Cultural Criticism is divided into five parts: "Foundations," "The Moving Image," "Art," "Music and Spoken Word," and "Material Culture." Each section contains an explanatory overview, a listing of supplementary readings, and a compilation of media resources useful as visual and audio examples to amplify the contents of the volume's chapters. The supplementary material is part of an extensive body of work on Black women's cultural history that extends back several decades. Among those that expand an understanding of the articles and supplementary readings in this volume are several landmark pieces. The most comprehensive and ambitious is the Spring 1987 "Artists and Artisans" issue of *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, devoted entirely to the diverse and extensive range of Black female artists. Other works include the following: Darlene Clark Hine's "To Be Gifted, Female and Black" (1982) and "The Kitchen Crisis" (1970) by Verta Mae Smart-Grosvenor. Two introductions to larger volumes are also worthy of note. Margaret B. Wilkerson wrote the ground-breaking historical overview in her collection of original plays authored by Black women, in the volume *Nine Plays by Black Women* (1986). And Beverly Guy-Sheftall offers the germinal essay "Introduction: The Evolution of Feminist Consciousness among African-American Women," laying out the background to her edited book *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (1995).¹¹

The majority of the films and videos referred to in the media resources listing were created by Black female artists. These add to the display of Black women's cultural productions and bring the examples referred to in the book's chapters to life. More comprehensive information on the works can be found in my edited book, *Black Women Film and Video Artists* (1998).

The first part of *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, "Foundations," provides three chapters laying out the early contemporary explorations into the constitution of Black feminist criticism. Activist writer Barbara Smith begins the first articulations named as such in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." Deborah E. McDowell, a literary scholar, critiques Smith's assertions and refines the paradigms in "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." Barbara Christian, in "But What Do We Think We Are Doing Anyway," gives a history of the development of Black feminist thought and offers a comprehensive assessment of the primary goals of Black feminist undertakings.

Film, theater, and television criticism are taken up in the second part of *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*. Legendary actress Ruby Dee in "The

Tattered Queens” recalls the momentous contributions of early Black actresses who have since been forgotten. C.A. Griffith, an experienced cinematographer and director, writes of her experiences behind the camera in “Below the Line: (Re)Calibrating the Filmic Gaze.” In the chapter from my book *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995), on Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust*, I explicate the achievements of the film toward recasting Black women’s history and experiences. Drama scholar Sheri Parks, in “In My Mother’s House,” submits that a reconsideration of the feminist aspects of Lorraine Hansberry’s television adaptation of her stage play *A Raisin in the Sun* is overdue.

Four chapters focusing on art make up the third part of the book. In the first, “African-American Women Artists,” art historians Arna Alexander Bontemps and Jacqueline Fonvielle-Bontemps present a historical perspective on the earliest Black female sculptors and painters, starting with those in the first part of the nineteenth century. Freida High W. Tesfagiorgis, artist and scholar, decries the marginality of Black female painters, sculptors, photographers, and performance artists, in “In Search of a Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists.” Tesfagiorgis examines the spectrum of artists, including those in the United States, Britain, and other parts of the African diaspora, who have been overlooked in mainstream art history and criticism. Innovations in photography and text art are discussed by Kellie Jones in “In Their Own Image.” She looks at women who practice their craft in the United States and in Britain. Co-authors Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling selected feminist painter, sculptor, and author Faith Ringgold to interview, in part, because she consistently exercises, as the title of the chapter states, “The Freedom to Say what She Pleases.”

The pivotal role of different kinds of aural expression is analyzed in the fourth part, “Music and Spoken Word.” Activist scholar Angela Y. Davis formalizes music’s catalytic impact in chapter 12, “Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle.” Focusing particularly on the early blues singer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Davis examines how Black music has influenced other arts and shaped the development of Black people’s collective social consciousness. Music historian Tricia Rose offers a sustained critical exploration of rap music in chapter 13, “Never Trust a big Butt and a Smile,” asserting that Black female rappers have produced some of the most important contemporary feminist cultural criticism. Black women’s dominance in an art form identified as the spoken word, an aural expression evocative of both past and present political eras, is discussed by Evelyn McDonnell in chapter 14, “Divas Declare a Spoken-Word Revolution.” In the final chapter in Part IV, Carolyn Mitchell recalls the provocative effect of Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* on diverse art forms, including theater, music,