READING BLACK, READING FEMINIST

A Critical Anthology

Edited by
Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

A MERIDIAN BOOK

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"Why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always represented as a black man? How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for survival?"

—Mary Helen Washington, from her essay in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*

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—Arnold Rampersad, Woodrow Wilson Professor of Literature, Princeton University

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READING BLACK,

江苏工业学院图书馆
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TOWARD A LITERARY HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN

"If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women—and this accounts for their lack of recognition—it is this: their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written."

—from Mary Helen Washington's essay
in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*

From the literary tradition of the slave narrative to the poetry of Maya Angelou and the prize-winning fiction of Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor, this unique collection offers a piercing look at an important group of writers, some of whom have been heretofore absent from official black histories and literary criticism. Here is a unique new perspective on women's writing that is both black and feminist, providing a running commentary on the collective experience of black women in the United States.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. is one of the most active and visible scholars in the field of African-American Studies. He has taught at Yale and Cornell and is currently the John Spencer Bassett Professor of English at Duke University. In 1981 Gates was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, and his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* won an American Book Award in 1989.

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

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For Ruth Simmons and Eleanor Traylor

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Introduction

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Obviously we will have to learn to read the Afro-American literary tradition in new ways, for continuing on in the old way is impossible . . . The making of a literary history in which black women are fully represented is a search for full vision to create a circle where now we have but a segment.

—Mary Helen Washington

I

Anna Julia Cooper, a prototypical black feminist whose 1892 book of essays, *A Voice from the South,* is considered to be one of the founding texts of the black feminist movement, argued eloquently for the recognition of the black woman's literary tradition:

> One muffled strain in the Silent South, a jarring chord and a vague and uncomprehended cadenza has been and still is the Negro. And of that muffled chord, the one mute and voiceless note has been the sadly expectant Black Woman . . . The "other side" has not been represented by one who "lives there." And not many can more sensibly realize and more accurately tell the weight and fret of the "long dull pain" than the open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America . . . [just] as our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot *quite* put themselves in the dark man's place, neither should the dark man be wholly expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman.

Cooper's claim of the especial authority of the black woman's voice, and her explicit challenge to black male authors who until quite recently felt no apparent ambivalence at all when claiming to speak for "the Negro" or representing "the Negro" as a man, has taken three quarters of a century to manifest itself in a literary tradition of its own. Since 1970, with the publication of those monuments of this tradition, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and of Toni Cade Bambara's anthology, *The Black Woman*, black women writers have come to the forefront of Afro-American literary creativity.

Much has been made—too much—of the supposed social animosities between black men and women and the relation between the commercial success of the black women's literary movement and the depiction of black male sexism. Perhaps some media commentators have been titillated by the notion of a primal black fratricide–sororicide. But the popularity of black women's literature has nothing to do with anti–black male conspiracies—as is occasionally charged. Rather, it stems from the compelling blend of realistic and lyrical narrative modes, as demonstrated, for example, in the so-called "magical realism" of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. It is as if the best of Richard Wright's prose and the best of Ralph Ellison's prose had fused into a new literary language. Added to this is the sheer energy that accompanies the utterance of a new subject matter, a formalized breaking of the silence of black women as authors. In doing so, they have generated a resoundingly new voice, one that is at once black *and* female, replete with its own shadings and timbres, topoi and tropes.

But no literary movement can be understood apart from the institutional and demographic facts of reading and writing that sustain—or fail to sustain—the author and her audience. This tradition within a tradition is often related to, yet stands independent of, the black male tradition and its triangle of influence, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. Yet contemporary black women writers have generated collectively a loyal and devoted readership more cosmopolitan and integrated (by race *and* by gender) than the customary market for black male writing has been. The phenomenal sales figures of works by Morrison and Walker, for instance, and the sheer level of production of novels and books of poems in less than two decades—works by Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, Jamaica Kincaid, Andrea Lee, Lucille Clifton, Sherley Anne Williams, Ann Shockley, Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy, Alexis Deveaux, Kristin Hunter, Gayl Jones, Octavia Butler, Terry Macmillan, Thulani Davis, Maya Angelou, Michele Cliff, Marita Golden, June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Rita Dove, Gwendolyn Brooks, and several others—attest to the vitality and consistency both of this new readership and of the movement itself. As feminist critic Hortense Spillers put it, "The community of black women writing in the United States now can be regarded as a vivid new fact of national life." Nor is this merely an American phenomenon: As critic Selwyn Cudjoe recently noted, black women writers in the Caribbean have published over thirty novels since 1970. Clearly, we are in the midst of a major international literary movement.

Octavia Butler has published nine novels, Toni Morrison has published five, and Walker has published four. Morrison was also a powerful and imaginative editor at Random House when the movement began, and her role in its generation was key. Publishing such formidable figures as Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and Angela Davis; inspiring by her own example a younger generation of writers, especially Gloria Naylor; and writing several best-selling novels herself, Morrison demonstrated to publishing houses that a new and identifiable readership eager for a "woman-oriented" content would handily sustain even more publications by black women. Her productivity, vision, and craft established the movement's pace; hers has been a role similar to that of Alain Locke in the Harlem Renaissance and Amiri Baraka in the Black Arts movement.

The black women's literary movement, it seems safe to say, already has taken its place as a distinct period in Afro-American literary history, and could very well prove to be one of the most productive and sustained. Certainly it has features that make it anomalous in black literary history. Despite the very public and bitter rows about the political implications of black women writing about black male sexism, this movement has not promoted itself as bombastically or as self-consciously as, say, did the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts movement. And whereas most older black male writers deny any black influence at all—or eagerly claim a white paternity—black female authors often claim descent from other black women literary ancestors, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Ann Petry. To an unparalleled extent, the writers in this movement have been intent upon bonding with other women. And the "patricide" which characterized Baldwin's and Ellison's declarations of independence from Wright has no matricidal counterpart. Indeed, Morrison's generous stewardship has served as a model for the creation of a literary sisterhood that seems to take it for granted that good writing will find a publisher. Black women writers are free of the anxiety that only one black writer can emerge from the group, in splendid commercial isolation, as "the" black writer of the decade.

In part, this movement is an extension of the Black Arts movement, as well as its repudiation. While several authors have bridged both movements (Brooks, Sanchez, Marshall, Morrison), black women's writings since 1970 represent worlds in which the Black Goddess/Black Queen stereotypes of the Black Arts movement—and the corresponding Black Warrior/Black Prince stereotypes for men—are rejected as cardboard stereotypes just as pernicious as the Sambo–Mammy types of the white racist plantation tradition. In this sense, the writing of black women is "political," indeed, but it takes its craft too seriously to be dismissed as merely propaganda.

What effect has the explosion of black women's writing had upon scholarship? The growing institutionalization of Afro-American literature in traditional English departments has been concomitant with the growth of black women's literature. Afro-American Studies and Women's Studies share a common terrain and a common discourse in the criticism of black women's writings: As Houston Baker put the matter recently, "The convergence of feminist and Afro-American theoretical formulations offers the most challenging nexus for scholarship in the coming years . . . One aspect of that development will be the continued reshaping of the literary canon as forgotten, neglected, or suppressed texts are rediscovered."

A split, or doubled readership, one both black and female, has created a market larger and more consistent than that enjoyed by black authors since perhaps the abolitionist movement. The production of works of criticism by and about black women's writing has kept pace with the production of texts by black women creative artists. Critical works by—among others—Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, Mari Evans, Valerie Smith, Gloria Hull, Trudier Harris, Thadious Davis, Mae Henderson, Hortense Spillers, Gloria Watkins, Barbara Johnson, Deborah McDowell, Frances Foster, Susan Willis, Barbara Smith, Houston Baker, Nellie McKay, Elizabeth Ammons, Michael Awkward, and even Harold Bloom, have either recently been published or are scheduled to appear soon. The launching of several reprint series, including the Beacon Black Women Writers Series, Rutgers's American Women Writers Series, and the Oxford-Schomburg forty-volume Library of 19th Century Black Women's Writings are signs of this movement's expanding and voracious readership.

Several important anthologies, such as Mary Helen Washington's *Invented Lives*, Mari Evans's *The Black Woman Writer* and *But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, have played a pivotal role in the institutionalization of black women in literature in the university curriculum. Every anthology defines a canon and thereby serves to preserve a tradition in what is designated as its most representative parts. In black letters, anthologies have *carried* a literary inheritance along from generation to generation, protecting an author's works from loss. Some black women writers' works, especially in the first half of this century, exist *only* in anthologies. Many, however, were not so fortunately preserved.

Above all, the writers collected here are concerned with tradition and its construction. "Tradition. Now there's a word that nags the feminist critic," Mary Helen Washington writes.

> A word that has so often been used to exclude or misrepresent women . . . Why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always represented as a black *man*? How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for its survival?

The clarity of Washington's answer disturbs:

> What we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and

> that that power has always been in the hands of men—mostly white but some black. Women are the disinherited. Our "ritual journeys," our "articulate voices," our "symbolic spaces" are rarely the same as men's . . . The appropriation by men of power to define tradition accounts for women's absence from our records.

By and large, black women have been absent from official black histories and literary criticism. We are only just recovering, piece by piece, the parts of black women's literary past. But Mary Helen Washington's reference to the "fiction of tradition" is a clue to the way in which this organizing concept has itself been criticized and reconstructed. Because "tradition" has served as a powerful heuristic term, we are always in danger of reifying it, treating it as literary structure that exists independently of the narratives we construct about it, independently of the social practices of reading. Nor can we conflate tradition as it conditions the contemporary act of reading and tradition as it conditions the historic act of writing; this is simply a failure to appreciate the distinct social and historical positioning of reader and writer. That an ideology of tradition *can* tend toward a naive organicism, however, need not vitiate its value for the self-conscious critic, as a generation of black feminist critics have demonstrated. If it is a fiction, it remains a necessary fiction.

The mixed blessing of the scholar of this body of texts is that we must resurrect it even before we can analyze it. As Spillers put it cogently, with the exception of a handful of autobiographical narratives from the nineteenth-century, the black woman's

> realities are virtually suppressed until the period of the Harlem Renaissance and later. Essentially the black woman as artist, as intellectual spokesperson for her own cultural apprenticeship, has not existed before, for anyone. At the source of her own symbol-making task, this community of writers confronts, therefore, a tradition of work that is quite recent, its continuities, broken and sporadic.

Reading Black, Reading Feminist is just one effort in the larger project to resurrect, explicate, and canonize the Afro-American

women's literary heritage. In reading these texts, we overhear a black woman *testifying* about what the twin scourges of sexism and racism, merged into one oppressive entity, actually *do* to a human being, how the combination confines the imagination, perplexes the will, and delimits free choice. What unites these texts, what makes them cohere into that imaginary metatext we call a tradition, is their shared structures and common themes. As Washington argues,

> Their literature is about black women; it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written. There are no women in this tradition hibernating in dark holes contemplating their invisibility; there are no women dismembering the bodies or crushing the skulls of either women or men; and few, if any, women in the literature of black women succeed in heroic quests without the support of other women or men in their communities. Women talk to other women in this tradition.

The essays in this collection seek to demonstrate explicitly how the texts of black women configure into a tradition, both thematically and structurally, in which black women's texts are set in conversation. Literary works are in dialogue not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race or gender, but because writers read other writers and *ground* their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin. It is through this mode of literary revision, amply evident in the *texts* themselves—in formal echoes, recast metaphors, even in parody—that a "tradition" emerges and is defined.

But such formal bonding is only one dimension of the larger project of literary history. And to appreciate this means not to ignore the claims of experience, of history itself: When sexuality, race, and gender are both the condition and the basis of personal identity, they must shape the very possibility of expressive culture.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that these critics have brought home the importance of attending to one's own

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positionality, a move that has often emerged in what Houston Baker calls the "black autobiographical moment." Few are inclined to stake out any Olympian perch; few profess a disinterested gaze. Criticism, for them, is as local, provisional, and context bound as the literature on which it comments. And as scholars, they retain the historical sense that the black woman subject—or, for that matter, the white male subject—does not arrive already constituted upon the historical stage. Studies of those formative eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses have acquainted us with the ways in which gender has become racialized, and race gendered. But to point out that such categories have always been fluid is only to say that they have, from the beginning, named sites for contestation and negotiation.

Perhaps they have learned from some of the early missteps of both the black nationalist and women's movements. In any event, having been excluded from representational authority for so long, black feminists have declined to respond with a counter-politics of exclusion. They have never been obsessed with arriving at any singular self-image; or legislating who may or may not speak on the subject; or policing boundaries between "us" and "them." And of course, it is just such an embracive politics of inclusion that has made this book possible.

Inspirited by the important work of such activist-intellectuals as Barbara Smith and Angela Davis, black feminist criticism has been empowering for a whole community of critics; almost all worthwhile criticism of black literature written in the past decade has been profoundly informed by its insights and perspectives. And for all its current diversity, it has taken Davis's warnings about the perils of narrowly interest-based politics to heart. Again, rather than attempt to construct a monolith of "the" black woman's experience, black feminists have sought to chart the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives. Perhaps, then, the contradictions that *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* contains (and is contained by) will themselves prove instructive. And it is very much my hope that the heteroglossia that Mae Henderson explores as characteristic of black women's literature may find a correlate in the polyphony of voices—female and male, black and white, gay and straight—that this collection seeks to present.

II

It is fitting that the collection begin with an unpublished essay by Zora Neale Hurston, whose work and career more than those of any other black woman writer, have become the symbols of a reclaimed literary tradition. Hurston wrote the essay, dated January 13, 1938, while working on a volume about "The Negro in Florida" for the Federal Writers Project, under the supervision of Stetson Kennedy, who is responsible for the essay's survival and its publication here. Kennedy's introduction provides the context for the essay's origins, and offers a unique interpretation of Hurston during this period in her career. It is not surprising that the essay was not published, for it serves as a bold critique of certain conventions of representation within the African-American literary tradition, conventions utilized in the main by black male authors, conventions under which Hurston obviously felt constrained. These conventions, Hurston argues, have "precluded originality and denied creation in the arts," producing a literature characterized by "the same old theme, the same old phrases." A thinly veiled critique of W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright, among others, the essay is also noteworthy for what it reveals about Hurston's understanding of the import of her own novels—especially *Jonah's Gourd Vine*—in relation to the black male conventions of "Race Champions," and her belief that she had, as she puts it, "for the first time" written "a Negro story . . . without special pleading. The characters [in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*] are seen in relation to themselves and not in relation to the whites as has been the rule. To watch these people one would conclude that there are no white people in the world." Hurston concludes her third-person account of her own significance by arguing that "the author is an artist that will go far." Hurston's brief for what she calls "a growing taste for literature," rather than propaganda or protest—stated here for the first time in such explicit terms— is of enormous significance to the contemporary black women's literary movement, especially because it is this aspect of Hurston's art that has proved to be compelling for writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker.

Mary Helen Washington occupies a unique place in the renascence of interest in black women's literature; these "Notes

Toward a Literary History of Black Women" come from one of the most distinguished practitioners of such literary history. To reject and transcend the male-centered literary history of the past, Washington points out, "is an act of enlightenment, not simply repudiation." She transumes an image from Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* to figure her own literary endeavor, "a search for full vision, to create a circle where now we have but a segment."

In "The High's and the Low's," Barbara Christian, the first scholar to write a book about the black women's literary tradition, offers a spirited critique of the uncritical reappropriation of the values and language of so-called "high" academic culture by black feminists, and urges them instead simultaneously to "retrieve the low ground," the very grounds of ritual and the vernacular upon which the Black Women's literary tradition is founded.

Michele Wallace, whose *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* proved to be a signal intervention in the generation of the contemporary black woman's literary movement, explores "the revolutionary challenge black feminist creativity could pose to white male cultural hegemony." Wallace critiques the binary oppositions of "the discourse of the dominant culture [which] tends to automatically erase black female subjectivity." Positing the black woman as "the 'other' of the 'other,' " Wallace argues persuasively that "radical negation, or doubling or tripling the difference," could very well offer a means by which "to reformulate the problem of black female subjectivity and black female participation in culture," in a critical discourse created by black women themselves.

Sherley Anne Williams, a distinguished novelist and critic, argues that a "womanist" perspective can help illuminate our understanding of the black man under patriarchy as well as the black woman, and briefly surveys the changing representation of the black man in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. Williams cites a conception of engaged (*bolekaja*) criticism from the Nigerian Leavisite, Chinweizu, as a possible model for a womanist theory of reading that will promote both community and dialogue.

Hazel Carby's essay explores the issue of representation in black writing, bringing in proximity its distinct political and discursive senses. Carby reads Nella Larsen's *Quicksands* as a representation of an alienated individual "embedded within capitalist social relations," and contrasts Larsen with Jessie Fauset. Fauset, Carby argues, "adapted but did not transcend the form of the romance," whereas Nella Larsen refused to provide a resolution on the level of a narrative of contradictions in the social real. Wary of the retreat from realism represented by the rural idyll, Carby also questions the tendency to fetishize the rural *Lebenswelt* over the proletarian urban life.

Deborah McDowell's contribution focuses on the shift from a public (exemplary) to a private (and self-expressive) narrative, and counterposes the didacticism of Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola LeRoy* (1892) to the overt psychologism of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple.* "Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story," Alice Walker insists. "And the whole story is what I'm after." Precisely what is or is not missing, and why, is McDowell's concern in this essay.

Mae Henderson brings to bear linguistic insights of Mikhail Bakhtin in tracing the interplay of glossolalia and heteroglossia from the Old and New Testaments to twentieth-century Afro-American women's literature. Henderson advances a truly critical stance that would resist monisms of all sorts, and that insists on plural subject-positions, and on a dialogic subjectivity that is radical to both race and gender, as she explores Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

III

Barbara Johnson's essay on Richard Wright's *Native Son* implicitly responds to Sherley Anne Williams's challenge to employ feminist insights to reread the representations of the black male in the Afro-American canon. The strategic importance of Johnson's intervention, indeed a feminist rereading of the archetypal black male author, poses the question, "Where, in Richard Wright, does the black woman stand with respect to the black man's *writing*?" Johnson cunningly elicits the story of the black female reader in the text, locating the reader—and the reading—Richard Wright must face.

Starting with a conception of picture making as a kind of world making, Timothy Murray centers on dramas by Ntozake

Shange and Adrienne Kennedy that are, in some sense, about visual representation. Given an ideology of the visible, Murray asks if we can move toward the specificity of "a *black* corporeal presence." As he explores the possibilities of a "technologically stressed aesthetic commitment," Murray shows how the works of Shange and Kennedy eschew the prospect of any transcendental point of view as they carry out a project of "redemption, retrieval, and reclamation of the literary page and visual space."

Examining the history of black women's self-representation, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese finds that the "identity of the self remains hostage to the history of the collectivity." Reading the autobiographical mode in Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent), Harriet Wilson, and Zora Neale Hurston, she shows how a distrust or ambivalence toward the reader cannot always be divorced from an author's struggle against those structures of oppression that help to confer on her a social and political identity.

Barbara Johnson returns with a very brief consideration of the first black American poet, a figure more often adulated, anathematized, or allegorized than *read*. She examines the strategy of "excessive compliance" by which Phillis Wheatley exposed the contradictions inherent in her own situation, and, Johnson suggests, in white liberalism more generally.

Valerie Smith's reading of Harriet Jacobs's classic *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* shows that its confinement to the idiom of the sentimental novel does not prevent it from developing that narrative space as a literary loophole of retreat—as a space of liberation. Straining the form's generic limits, she can speak of its inadequacies through her silences; even as she casts herself as a character in a sentimental romance, she can still make mayhem.

Nellie McKay, herself a distinguished practitioner of the biographer's art, proposes the idea of *feminist* autobiography that would not cover public, intellectual achievements at the expense of one's more inward, emotional life; that would, indeed, break down this opposition between public and private spheres. In a sympathetic reading of W.E.B. Du Bois, McKay suggests that his *Darkwater* carries a feminist critique, that its author hates the South for injuring black womanhood. Surveying the role of black women in his life, McKay further suggests that Du Bois understood the politics of gender far better than he is usually given credit for, and she argues that "it was in the souls of black women folk that he touched the chords in himself that brought him closest to an understanding of just what [feminist autobiography] might mean."

Hortense Spillers's discussion of Gwendolyn Brooks and the nature of the feminine raises broader questions of critical methodology. Maud Martha, Brooks wrote, "wanted to found—tradition. She had wanted to shape . . . a set of falterless customs. She had wanted stone." Yet this "shimmering form" is neither stone nor falterless; nor, as Spillers observes, is it "a dead letter, or a reliquary of ancestral ghosts." Combining theoretical inquiry with formal analysis, Spillers moves toward a provisional redefinition of the "feminine," arguing that "woman-freedom" in the novel is found in the fact that "the text itself that has no centrality, no force, no sticking-point other than the imaginative nuances of the subject's consciousness."

Selwyn Cudjoe surveys the autobiographical trajectory of Maya Angelou and offers individual assessments of its varied installments. For Angelou, Cudjoe argues, "the pain and suffering of black women flow like tributaries into the rivers of our general pain, with the poignant demand that the black male be cognizant of their special pains. Theirs is a pain that possesses its own particularities . . . It is well that we listen and learn."

The distinguished poet Jewelle Gomez offers a very personal tribute to Lorraine Hansberry as cultural worker and dramatist, commending her as an uncommon warrior against sexual and racial subjugation. In a day when the work of this playwright is often patronized as too mainstream and middlebrow, Gomez locates her subversive core with respect to the hegemonic sexual politics of her time, and ours as well.

Taking up the sounding kinesthetics of "renaissancism," Houston Baker establishes the importance of Sonia Sanchez through a critique of the black aesthetic movement and of the black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, which remained, he argues, entrapped within the structures and assumptions of repression. In the multiple modes of Sonia Sanchez, Baker finds a more promising prospect for a revolutionary art. At the same time, he shows how a revolutionary black feminist needs to be on guard against, for example, homophobia, as in the earlier specimens of Sanchez's "revolutionary didacticism" he examines and finds transcended in her later work. Surveying the poetry of her maturity, Baker argues that "[i]f the notion of a black renaissance may be assumed to imply communal leadership and a response among black people themselves—a self-direction, selection, and empowerment that do not recreate bourgeois forms for private gain and white acknowledgment—then Sonia Sanchez and her audience clearly mark a new, postmodern, and dynamically sounding renaissancism." In short, "Sonia Sanchez *sounds* a new day."

Barbara Christian examines Gloria Naylor's recent novels in the context of other black feminist works concerned with "a distinct Afro-American middle class," and finds that she has read deeply, and learned much, from Afro-American women's literature. Naylor's—and Christian's—concern is with the historical dimension, the ways in which communities are made, or fail to be made. As an instance of the failure of community, Christian finds that the character of Lorraine in *The Women of Brewster Place*—who, as a lesbian, is rejected by her Brewster Place neighbors—illustrates how "the effects of racism on this black community exacerbate the homophobia so rampant in the outer world." The more readily allegorical *Linden Hills* starkly shows that "the repression of women's herstory is necessary to the maintenance of patriarchy, and why it is that History is so exclusively male." But Christian finds the focus on community in black women's literature easily explained: "Because of their origins and history, Afro-American women could lay claim to a viable tradition in which they had been strong central persons in their families and communities, not solely because of their relationship to men, but because they themselves had bonded together to ensure survival of their children, their communities, the race."

In a close and insightful reading of Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*, one of the major achievements in contemporary poetry by black women, John Shoptaw reminds us that it is for its language that we read (and reread) poetry. He focuses on Dove's depiction of the ordinary, the quotidian, as she renders a quiet story of unrecovered loss and unfulfilled promise. "Strong poems omit their linkages," he notes, and these are indeed poems whose resonance depends upon omission, on what is not said.

Françoise Lionnet-McCumber squarely addresses a vexing aspect of Hurston's legacy: her resolute commitment to individualism over the communal or communitarian ideals of race solidarity (or, by the same token, feminism). She sees *Dust Tracks* as, quite precisely, "autoethnography"—"the process of defining one's subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history, and ethnographical analysis," a " 'figural anthropology' of the self." But if Hurston is the ultimate participant-observer, hers is an "orphan-text which attempts to create its own genealogy by simultaneously appealing to, and debunking, the cultural traditions it helps to define." And Lionnet-McCumber seeks to adopt such a Hurstonian approach to Hurston's text, exploring her resistance toward race as a basis for human solidarity; her aversion to ressentiment; her bold use of Greek and Egyptian mythology to figure her own liminality.

Marianne Hirsch discusses the way in which feminist readings have customarily treated the mother as object rather than subject of representation, so that feminism as a "daughterly" discourse occludes the uncomfortable possibilities of maternal agency. Her probing account of Toni Morrison's *Sula* shows it to thematize such ambivalences about maternal discourse, while *Beloved* can be seen as registering and representing the maternal voices usually muted.

From the perspective of radical critique, Bell Hooks assays the ideological contours of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. On the one hand, Hooks finds the novel's feminism curiously undercut by the normative "success story" paradigm that it seems to follow; on the other hand, she also finds a moment of liberation within Walker's "womanist" imagination, and within its powers of self-fashioning and reinvention. For Hooks, Walker's narrative inscribes the tensions that beset any project of emancipation, illustrating the difficulties of ever escaping entirely the confines of patriarchal discourse.

Dorothy Allison provides a detailed close reading of the nine novels of Octavia Butler, a central figure among contemporary science fiction novelists, exploring Butler's critiques of "human sexual relations and what it means to be other" through her themes of surrender and adjustment. From her first novel, *Patternmaster* (1976), through her most recent novel, *Imago* (1989), Allison traces Butler's depictions of women "not as dispassionate historical constructs, overlaid with political slogans and psychological reinterpretations, but as real women caught in impossible situations." Above all else, Allison concludes, Butler is concerned with exploring the intricacies and ironies of the family bond, and the forces that threaten to rend it asunder.

Molly Hite's essay returns us to the twin touchstones of Walker's *The Color Purple* and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hite views these narratives as examples of romance against the Shakespearian paradigms, and allows them to critique the centrality—and adequacy—of that paradigm in literary criticism. While conventional romance entertains hierarchic reversals so long as order is restored at closure, these narratives will destabilize relations of margin and center with no such commitment to oppressive norms, even to the extent of shifting and recirculating the role of motherhood itself. As Hite argues, "By treating the marginal as central and thereby unsettling the hierarchical relations that structure 'mainstream' genres, Walker and Hurston manage to handle very well the conventions that threaten to enslave them in a system of representation not of their own making."

In a way, that is a universal condition: The means of our representations are not of our own devising; they are, to be sure, of no one's devising. And in that respect at least, the self is always, as Fox-Genovese says, hostage to the collectivity. But black women today *are* making history, in every sense, even if not in circumstances of their own choosing. As never before, we are being asked as readers to reflect upon our own positionality, and to meld our formalisms to the discontinuous function that is history lived. As the essays in this collection suggest, part of what distinguishes black women's writing in the contemporary scene is a sense of historical community and its peculiarities—sometimes antic, sometimes grim, but never quite reducible to a master plot of victim and victimizer. At their best, these texts are porous to history and propose an articulation of power that is more decentered and nuanced than most of us are accustomed to. And if we as critics help in reading this literature, perhaps it is as repayment for a literature that has helped show us what it means to read.

The collection ends with two conversations, one between Rita Dove and Helen Vendler, the other between Jamaica Kincaid and Donna Perry. Both interviews provide fascinating glimpses into these two writers' ideas of influence and the complexity of their own multiple traditions or literary heritages, crucial biographical data, and careful and illuminating discussions of individual works of art, through carefully constructed encounters between two major critics and two major authors. Vendler, our most perceptive critic of poetry, and Perry, a champion of contemporary women writers outside the white, middle-class mainstream, have structured exchanges that illuminate the work of Dove and Kincaid in the most rewarding manner. Kincaid, a novelist and essayist, and Dove, whose *Thomas and Beulah* won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, represent two of the most compelling younger voices in the African-American women's tradition, and their works suggest something of the new directions that tradition is assuming in the 1990s.

CONSTRUCTING A TRADITION

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