

*Down
from the
Mountaintop*

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MELISSA WALKER
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BLACK WOMEN'S
NOVELS IN THE
WAKE OF THE
CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT,
1966-1989

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YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON
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CIP

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction 1

- 1 Slavery and Reconstruction 13
Jubilee (1966) by Margaret Walker
Dessa Rose (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams
Beloved (1987) by Toni Morrison
- 2 From the Great War to World War II 47
The Bluest Eye (1970) by Toni Morrison
The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker
- 3 Harbingers of Change: Harlem 74
Daddy Was a Number Runner (1970) by Louise Meriwether
A Short Walk (1979) by Alice Childress
A Measure of Time (1983) by Rosa Guy
- 4 Private Lives before the Movement 110
The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) by Alice Walker
Sula (1973) by Toni Morrison

5	From Desegregation to Voting Rights	129
	<i>Song of Solomon</i> (1977) by Toni Morrison	
	<i>The Lakestown Rebellion</i> (1978) by Kristin Hunter	
	<i>Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo</i> (1982) by Ntozake Shange	
	<i>Betsey Brown</i> (1985) by Ntozake Shange	
6	In the Wake of the Movement	167
	<i>Meridian</i> (1976) by Alice Walker	
	<i>The Salt Eaters</i> (1980) by Toni Cade Bambara	
	<i>Tar Baby</i> (1981) by Toni Morrison	
	Afterword	199
	<i>The Temple of My Familiar</i> (1989) by Alice Walker	
	Notes	209
	Bibliography of Primary Works	219
	Index	221

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INTRODUCTION

The civil rights movement is remembered by many as a series of supreme moments followed by chastening downfalls. The mountaintop experiences of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery bus boycott, the victories of the sit-ins and freedom rides, the 1963 March on Washington, and the final success of the Selma protests were regularly punctuated by bombings, lynchings, assassinations, and riots. The brief euphoria following the *Brown* decision, when many believed that integration and full equality would be achieved by 1963, soon gave way to the chilling apprehension that the road to the promised land would be strewn with the bodies of martyrs.

Today the names of only a few of the victims are remembered—Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and, of course, Martin Luther King, Jr. We will never know exactly how many others died as a consequence of the backlash that succeeded the first effective challenges to Jim Crow. Even more difficult to assess are the psychological wounds suffered by both activists and innocent victims of racist reprisals. What became apparent to the immediate survivors of the movement was that the view of the promised land would be increasingly obscured by the fallout from repeated acts of violence. In early 1990, as I write these words, the smoke has barely cleared from the latest explosions of letter bombs seemingly intended to terrorize those who fight for civil rights.

Since the early 1960s there have been growing antagonisms between

various factions of the activist community: discord among blacks over issues of militancy and nonviolence, the role of whites in the movement, and the relative merits of economic and political goals; conflicts between black women crying sexism and black men claiming slander; and the estrangement of African Americans from some of their strongest allies in the Jewish community. Since the mid-sixties, the concentrated vision of racial harmony has been diluted by the proliferation of other causes—including the movement to end the Vietnam War, and the women's, the antinuclear, and the environmental movements—as well as efforts to expand the call for civil rights to one for human rights for all groups and individuals who have been victims of discrimination or exploitation.

During the years between *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, many African Americans who favored integration and assimilation believed that their prolonged struggle for social justice would soon be won and that the “beloved community” envisioned by King and others would presently be a reality. During the last years of the sixties that belief was gradually eroded, and by the time King was assassinated in April 1968 most activists and many ordinary folk who had been inspired by the movement were floundering, wondering what had happened to the dream. Others who had staked their futures on the separatist movement and a commitment to black political power watched their ambitions go up in the flames of urban riots. Both groups were soon asking the question—Where Do We Go from Here?—that King had used as the title for his last book. That question and its corollaries—Where Are We? and Where Have We Been?—provided the impetus for a larger cultural inquiry.

A significant number of African-American women writers took part in that inquiry in the immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement. Producing a steady stream of notable fictional narratives ranging from Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* to Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, they have addressed these and other relevant questions about the past, present, and future of the African-American community. The way they have focused and composed their narratives relates directly to the civil rights movement—its issues, events, and consequences.

The subject of the eighteen novels that I consider in this book is “where we are”; the issue they explore is “where we are going”; and both are manifested in the authors' particular visions of “where we have been,” as revealed in the events they focus on in the journey upward from slavery: rebellions, flights to freedom, preparation for legal action, outbursts of cultural na-

tionalism, nonviolent protests, and development of a grass roots base for political power. Taken as a group, these novels contain details from many chapters of black history: they evoke for readers the holds of slave ships, the speaker's corner in Harlem, and sharecroppers' shacks, but also the polished tables in the carefully decorated homes of the black bourgeoisie.

From *Jubilee* to *The Temple of My Familiar*, events in the private lives of fictional characters are narratively linked to particular episodes in the struggle for racial justice. The long list of such historical allusions includes operations of the Underground Railway in the antebellum period; the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850; the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863; the constitutional and political achievements in the 1865–77 Reconstruction and the terrorist reprisals of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) during the same period; the withdrawal of federal troops and redemption of power by southern conservatives after the Hayes Compromise in 1877; the legalization of segregation with the separate-but-equal doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896; the development of factions within the black community roughly divided into followers of Booker T. Washington advocating accommodation to white supremacy and those influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois favoring legal action to achieve civil rights; Marcus Garvey's launching in 1916 of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (the first mass movement of African Americans); the public outcry following the arrest of nine young black men in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931; Roosevelt's executive order banning discrimination in defense industries and government employment in 1941 and Truman's desegregation of the armed forces in 1948; the founding of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942; the desegregation of public schools in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954; the public protest following the murder of Emmett Till in 1955; the Montgomery Boycott of 1955–56; the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., and of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960 under the auspices of Ella Baker; and finally the day-to-day activities of those engaged in the movement in its heyday. While these and other specific events of the more than a century of black protests and rebellions are an overt and integral part of the novels considered here, other elements of that long process are embedded in the narratives in ways that invite readers to seek out the connections between private lives and their public context.¹

Just as the civil rights movement facilitated the entrance of many African Americans into the middle class, a journey that a character in Toni

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* refers to as moving from the hem "into the major fold of the garment of life" (18), so has it accelerated the current outpouring of remarkable novels by African-American women. The degree to which a novelist's characters are comfortable with their place in the middle class says something about that novelist's own attitude toward the value of the journey that brought them there. From Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* to Jadine in *Tar Baby*, Morrison's middle-class black characters seem tortured by the price they have paid for their social status (or assimilation into mainstream integrated society). On the other hand, Ntozake Shange's Betsey Brown looks out at the suffering of others with the comfortable confidence of noblesse oblige, while Alice Walker's Shug Avery does not seem remotely aware of the considerable poverty that plagued the rural South during the years when she was making it as a famous blues singer.

All the novels treated here are rooted in history and in the culture and community of African-American life that can be traced to the experience of slavery. Each is set in a specific geographic and temporal—and, in that sense, historical—context. Not all of the novels written by black women since the mid-sixties seem relevant to such a study. Excluded are science fiction novels, those with major characters who have Caribbean rather than Southern roots, those with little or no reference to African-American culture and community, and narratives focusing primarily on personal and sexual themes divorced from larger social issues. Novels by Octavia Butler, Pauli Marshall, Gayle Jones, and Charlene Hatcher Polite are examples. Autobiographies such as those by Pauli Murray, Anne Moody, Maya Angelou, Mary E. Mebane, and Marita Golden are excluded on generic grounds. This book does not, however, treat all recent novels by black women that relate to the movement: Gloria Naylor's novels contain characters who were movement activists (Kiswana Browne in *Brewster Place*), admirers of Malcolm X (Lester Tilson in *Linden Hills*), or victims of racist employment practices (Ophelia in *Mama Day*), but their emphasis is elsewhere—on the internal conflicts of black communities. Very recent novels published since this study was completed are Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Echo of Lions*, Tina McElroy Ansa's *Baby in the Family*, and Marita Golden's *Long Distance Life*.

The eighteen novels considered here are grouped in chapters according to their historical setting—where we have been. Within the chapters they are arranged according to date of publication—where we are (or were at the time of publication), which is often as significant in terms of the movement and its aftermath as the historical setting itself.

Chapter 1 treats three novels set during the period of slavery and reconstruction. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), with its outright celebration of progress in the struggle for racial justice and harmony within the black community, set in the years immediately preceding, during, and following the Civil War, is clearly a product of the mountaintop visions of the mid-sixties; Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, published twenty years later in 1986, extols small private victories in the 1847 world that placed little value on relieving the suffering of slaves. Williams's novel is quite at home in the political climate of the 1980s, when victories for African Americans were private ones for those within or entering the middle class rather than public ones affecting the growing underclass. Published a year later in 1987, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* turns attention to former slaves and to the most devastating aspects of their lives in bondage, suggesting the process that would lead some up from slavery and eventually into the middle class and others to permanent social marginality and to early death. As in her previous work, Toni Morrison is inclusive, relevant—and ambivalent.

In chapter 2, I examine Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), both set chiefly in the period between the world wars. Written in the last years of the 1960s, as young activists advocating black power challenged the old guard still urging accommodation to the white establishment, *The Bluest Eye* explores the traumatic consequences of the cultural glorification of the middle-class white aesthetic on one child whose poverty and infatuation with whiteness lead to madness and on another who dismisses her less fortunate friend in her scramble to join the middle class. Published in 1970 at the height of the "black is beautiful" movement, Morrison's novel reinforces a major concern of the black community at that time and examines the dangers of the more subtle manifestations of white supremacy. *The Bluest Eye* is narratively linked to the civil rights period through the voice of Claudia MacTeer, one of its narrators, who looks back and regrets that she has achieved her own place in society by buying into the white value system and stepping over those who were destroyed by it, thus inviting readers to consider their role in the very recently altered world. *The Color Purple* was published twelve years later, when American culture was dominated by a complacent acceptance of free market rhetoric and a concern with feminist issues. Lacking a narrative link to the present, this novel allows readers to dwell in its once-upon-a-time world and to avoid considering the direction that racism and its consequences were taking in the early 1980s. While this best-seller in-

cludes scenes that dramatize the endemic racism of the first four decades of the century, Celie's success in business reinforces America's love affair with entrepreneurial capitalism. In the final scene of the novel, the once estranged or geographically separated characters are united in an all black community that would hardly threaten even middle-class readers comfortably settled in their segregated neighborhoods.

In chapter 3, I discuss three novels set in Harlem: Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970), Alice Childress's *A Short Walk* (1979), and Rosa Guy's *A Measure of Time* (1983). Composed in the last years of the sixties, published the same year as *The Bluest Eye*, and set in the mid-1930s, *Daddy* relates the private life of Francie Coffin to the economic realities of the Depression, as well as to the larger public arena. Meriwether connects her story to the time of its publication by including scenes in which characters imagine and prepare for the day when changes will come and by suggesting how the past is the precondition for the present. The action of Alice Childress's *A Short Walk*, spanning the first half of the twentieth century, also commemorates the lives of those who paved the way for the civil rights movement, concluding with the first significant victory for those seeking racial equality—the desegregation of the armed forces. Celebrating the same period is Rosa Guy's *A Measure of Time*, which follows the characters' struggles with Jim Crow all the way to the Montgomery bus boycott. By the end of the seventies, when Childress's novel was published, the failure of the civil rights movement to achieve its goals of educational, economic, and social equality was generally apparent. Four years later, when Guy's novel appeared, the dream of a fully integrated society seemed to belong to the realm of fiction rather than social reality. By going back to that earlier period when the foundations were being laid for the movement and its successes, these two novels celebrate the achievements of those preparatory years while inviting readers to consider what the future for African Americans might be in a society increasingly bent on pursuing private concerns.

Chapter 4 considers two novels that treat the private struggles of characters living in isolated, segregated communities from the end of World War I through the beginning of the civil rights movement. Alice Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, like *The Bluest Eye* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, was composed during the height of the movement and published in 1970. Toni Morrison's *Sula*, also an outgrowth of the final years of the movement, was published in 1973. Though *Grange* and *Sula* are set in the same years and are products of approximately the same

period, *Grange* looks forward to possibility and *Sula* looks backward to loss. Both, however, conclude with a character's private confrontation with the promises of the civil rights movement.

The four novels discussed in chapter 5 are set primarily in the peak years of the movement. Key scenes of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* converge with crucial episodes in the movement. Published in 1977, some fourteen years after the mountaintop high of the 1963 March on Washington, the climactic scenes of *Solomon* take place during the same weeks as the march and its immediate aftermath. Milkman's ambiguous perspective from the top of a precipice at the end of the novel invites consideration of the equally precarious postures of the black community and its visionaries, many of them either dead, retired, or living in exile by the end of 1977. Milkman's quest is less ambiguous than his fate, suggesting an alternative to a self-indulgent existence isolated from the life of the community. Kristin Hunter's *The Lakestown Rebellion* (1978) is set in the summer of 1965, following the Selma marches and during the final debates leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act early in August. A story of local activists who successfully use the methods of the nonviolent movement to defeat the forces threatening their community, *Lakestown* celebrates the movement during the last days when an unqualified spirit of jubilation could prevail. Soon the fragile unity of the black community, nurtured for so long by the spirit of nonviolence and apparent victories, would be fractured by the demands of militants like Stokely Carmichael advocating "black power." Soon the heady spirit of mass protests would be replaced for some by the tedious work of registering voters to build a political base for the black community. Others would abandon activism, purportedly seeking to break legal, economic, and social barriers through their own personal successes. Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982), set during the sixties, and *Betsey Brown* (1985), which takes place in St. Louis in 1959, both gloss over enduring conditions that have plagued the black community long after the praises of movement leaders had begun to ring hollow. And both affirm the quest for private fulfillment in ways consistent with the 1980s pursuit of personal satisfaction to the exclusion of public commitments.

Chapter 6 focuses on three novels set in the post-movement period following the brief Second Reconstruction, when all three branches of the government cooperated to assure full rights for African Americans. The primary action of Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) takes place in

the mid or late 1970s when the sweeping reforms of the 1960s reconstruction were being undermined by the "benign neglect" and the calculated retreat of the Nixon years, the ineffectiveness of Carter's civil rights policies, and the dilution of civil rights for blacks by his well-intentioned call for human rights for everyone, everywhere. The three main characters of *Meridian*, all activists during the movement's heyday, are plagued by the personal repercussions of their public commitments during the early sixties. Rather than a series of mountaintop visions leading to a clear mandate for the future, the movement toward freedom was chaotic, conflict ridden, and personally devastating. The characters in *The Salt Eaters* contend with the painful memories of their days in the movement and with the increasing demands of proliferating causes, which both expand and dilute the civil rights agenda—causes ranging from the fight for women's rights to the prevention of nuclear disaster. *Tar Baby* explores the unresolved tensions between assimilated blacks and separatists, as well the ongoing conflicts between blacks and whites.

The characters of Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), discussed in the Afterword, are still grappling in the late eighties with the question raised by Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. For activists like Fanny, answering "where do we go from here" requires confronting where she is and where she has been, questions that have informed the agenda of novels considered in this study.

While I will explore the ways a novel responds to and reflects prevailing values in the culture, I do not mean that at a particular time there is a monolithic zeitgeist determining the kinds of narratives writers produce and readers affirm. Rather, I suggest that novelists might write directly into the prevailing cultural values or into the counterforces challenging those values, but that in either case the spirits of the time are at work shaping their narratives. That significant elements of *The Color Purple* are compatible with the dominant ideology of the early eighties, for example, does not mean that all successful novels published at that time were necessarily speaking into or out of the identical cultural context. Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, discussed in chapter 6, calls into question the validity of the capitalist enterprises that *The Color Purple* seems implicitly to endorse. Walker's novel, on the other hand, reinforces the position of African Americans who maintain that economic independence is more liberating than privileges granted by a white power structure.

That both *Tar Baby* and *The Color Purple* were well-received and widely read novels at the beginning of the 1980s suggests that some readers may

have responded to both Morrison's consideration of the damage inflicted by an exploitive system and Walker's evocation of the allure of the personal benefits of free enterprise. The same readers who thrilled to Shug Avery's appeal to self-indulgence in *The Color Purple* might well have been moved to applaud its opposite by Morrison's tough-minded integrity. Indeed this ambivalence itself was virtually a characteristic of the eighties. Nevertheless, it was *The Color Purple* that became a runaway best-seller, won a Pulitzer Prize, and reached an even larger audience in a much discussed movie. Similarly, though most Americans express concern about the destruction of the rain forest, an overt concern in *Tar Baby*, a substantial majority of voters in the eighties seemed to endorse the extravagant, short-sighted, and self-indulgent policies that reinforce the continued exploitation of the natural world.

Though the dominant thinking of the times does not determine what a novel will say, it does condition content and form, as well as influence how popular a novel will be. Challenging novels like Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* and Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* seem in significant ways to run against the contemporary American grain. Both posit a complex interrelation between public and private life and invite readers to confront the dilemmas of living in the last quarter of the twentieth century without easy or programmatic solutions. Significantly, neither has received the endorsement of the popular culture that still seeks easy answers to evermore complicated questions about the future of race relations and human relations in the next century.

Clearly, Toni Morrison's rigorous adherence to the historical facts of the African-American experience is key to her portrayal of characters whose consciousnesses are largely informed by the ahistorical imaginative and poetic world of personal experience and inherited narratives. On the other hand, the power of Alice Walker's folk history is diminished somewhat by inaccurate historical detail, such as having Tubman president of Liberia years before he took power in 1944. Similarly, the historical and chronological component of Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* is weakened by her confusing the time of Nat Turner's rebellion and even by her placing William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* in the 1970s rather than in 1967.

Although this study focuses on the way these narratives relate to the larger historical context, I do not mean to suggest that a given novel's value as a work of art is necessarily determined by the degree to which it employs historical detail. I do insist, however, that its power is intensified

by historical accuracy. While I confess to a preference for fictional narratives that are circumstantially and chronologically correct, my focus on those elements is not intended as a dismissal of the power of the highly personal, subjective, poetic passages of *Dessa Rose* or of the impact of Celie's idiosyncratic voice in *The Color Purple*. My judgments about overall artistic value are largely implied, rather than discussed at length. There is no question in my mind that the novels of Toni Morrison belong in the category of major American fiction and that Shange's *Betsey Brown*, though set in a particular time and place—St. Louis in 1959—is a lesser novel, in part because it lacks the richness of texture created by the integration of substantive historical detail with in-depth development of character. Moreover, while I judge *A Measure of Time* and *A Short Walk* to be substantial literary accomplishments as well as important cultural documents, I suggest that they have not received the attention they deserve by readers or critics because they belong to a genre that is not especially prized by the culture at this time.

Barbara Christian has recently admonished critics "to let go of their distanced and false stance of objectivity and to expose their own point of view."² My predilections are for fictional narratives that are grounded in rigorous, historically accurate apprehension of time and place, narratives that consider private lives in the context of public history, which inevitably creates the contingencies shaping those lives.

To undertake a project that focuses on black women writers is to enter a many-voiced discourse in which issues of race, class, and gender are being explored in ever-new combinations. Central to the dialogue is black feminist criticism. Hazel Carby, in her introductory chapter to *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Writer* (1987), traces this discussion from Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) through the qualifications proposed by Deborah McDowell in her 1980 essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" to Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985).³ While presenting the major features of these critics' positions and pointing out what she considers fallacies in each, Carby warns against a transhistorical, essentialist epistemology that she finds in too much black feminist writing and urges a responsible, particularist, historical theory and methodology. Concerned with the historically verifiable conditions in which nineteenth-century black women writers constructed literary texts and in the process reconstructed their own futures by intervening in the "social formations" of their own time, Carby repudiates

those critical enterprises that presuppose an essentialist and reductive black female language and literary tradition.⁴

Responding to Carby, Barbara Christian indicates that Carby's view of history is different from her own, which she considers to be less rationalistic, more intuitive and creative, but history nonetheless: "One must ask whether the study of an intellectual tradition necessitates the denial of an imaginative, creative one? Who is to say that the European emphasis on rational intellectual discourse as the measure of a people's history is superior to those traditions that value creativity, expression, paradox in the constructing of their historical process?"⁵

Carby considers attempts to describe a black women's literary tradition to be reductive and usually neglectful of the social and historical contingencies at work in literary texts; others regard the effort to establish a black women's literary tradition a priority for critics. Contributing to the effort to discover how black women's texts relate to each other and to other African-American texts is Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In the last chapter of *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates applies his theory of signifying to the intertextual implications of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In the process of examining the connections between the two texts, Gates distinguishes Walker's method of paying homage to an antecedent text from that of Ishmael Reed and others who signify through parody, by implication criticizing other texts by black writers in order to expand their own narrative possibilities.⁶

Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition (1985), edited by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, contains essays by some fifteen critics concerned with placing individual novelists in a larger, largely literary—and often feminist—context or tradition. Referring to the volume as "a beginning in critical definition," Pryse insists that "there remains almost everything yet to be accomplished" in the effort to integrate the cultural enterprise of black women's studies into the academy. In her afterword to the volume, Spillers points to the common assumptions about the tradition in Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work*, Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976*, and Mary Helen Washington's first two anthologies, *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975) and *Midnight Birds* (1980). In suggesting directions for future studies, Spillers alludes to the complexities critics will encounter as they set black women's texts "against the general background of African-American life and thought." She endorses projects that undertake to place this literature in the context of other parallel writing communities as well as those

intended to discover "the elaborate and submerged particularities of the texts from writer to writer and within a writer's own career." As Spillers and Pryse saw it in the mid-1980s, the field was wide open.⁷

Indeed that there is a field for black women's literature was far from apparent less than two decades earlier. In 1970, Toni Cade [Bambara] could rightly claim that the publication of *The Black Woman*, an anthology of poems, stories, and essays by black women, was "a beginning";⁸ and Mary Helen Washington correctly predicted in 1975 in the first of her ground-breaking anthologies that there would be "quite a revelation in the country of the black woman writer, for the territory is still wilderness." That revelation came with the publication of *The Shomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* under the general editorship of Henry Louis Gates, the *Black Women Writers Series* published by Beacon Press under the general editorship of Deborah E. McDowell, and various texts emerging from the Feminist Press and some university presses. Hardly anyone could have predicted, however, the abundance of new books by black women that would come forth after Washington's statement—all but five of the novels considered here.¹⁰

Five years ago, when I began this book, I felt that I was venturing into virgin territory by even raising questions about how narratives reflect, grow out of, or examine the complex set of phenomena that make up the struggle for racial justice. Since then others, including Hazel Carby, have completed projects that confront in different and somewhat larger contexts some of the issues considered here.¹¹ While I acknowledge that issues of gender, class, feminism, canonization, and literary theory are all relevant to a global comprehension of a body of literature, my aim is limited, linear, and concentrated. The big picture, I believe, will not be a panoramic and synthetic view of carefully integrated parts, but a pastiche of bits and pieces periodically held together in the tension of a moment, only to be rearranged under the pressure of changing times. My intention is to provide one of those pieces by demonstrating how these eighteen novels published since the peak moments of the civil rights movement relate to the movement and to the historical contingencies that fostered it and led to its decline.

CHAPTER ONE

SLAVERY AND

RECONSTRUCTION

Three novels by black women published in the past quarter-century are set in the final years of slavery and its immediate aftermath. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), though it focuses on slaves and slavery, celebrates the century of progress made by the progeny of slaves—however gradual and however marred by losses and periods of reactionary backlash—extending from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the end of the movement as it was defined by the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) is a tribute to those who escaped from slavery and went west to settle in a region that, though it was still plagued by racism, was not haunted by the slave past. Although there are survivors in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) who will presumably become the forebears of the black middle class in the late twentieth century, the emotional power of the novel comes from its memorial for those who did not survive. In each of these novels, the focus of the historical perspective mandates the narrative structure and the treatment of character.

As a celebration of racial progress, Walker's sweeping overview of individuals caught up in widespread and revolutionary events requires the linear progressive narrative associated with much traditional historical fiction. Its characters are representative and typical of their time in history and place in society. Conceived in Walker's childhood when she promised her grandmother that she would someday write her great-grandmother's story, *Jubilee* was in progress for some thirty years. In "How I Wrote *Jubi-*

lee" (1972), Walker explains that she sees herself as "a novelist in the role of social historian," and confesses that, from the time she promised her grandmother she would tell the story, the commitment to write the book became "a consuming ambition, driving me relentlessly."¹ Ostensibly because she was determined that her story be historically accurate, Walker spent years, even decades, studying Civil War histories and primary documents "to authenticate the story" her grandmother told her.

It probably was not, however, Walker's confidence that she now had sufficient knowledge of the past but rather her sense that this was the appropriate moment for her story to be told which enabled her to complete her novel in 1965 in the midst of the culminating moments of the civil rights movement. Only when she and other African Americans were finally enjoying a kind of victory in the hundred-year-old struggle against racism that had been raging since the end of the Civil War was she able to bring her story to a conclusion that is both celebratory and, in terms of the mid-1960s, historically sound. By leaving her characters planning for the future in the days immediately preceding the widespread establishment of legal Jim Crow practices, Walker concludes with a time and with social conditions that were very similar to those of 1965, when she was writing the final words of this novel that had consumed so much of her life. That year it was possible to look back at slavery and then forward to see the promise of continuing progress, to imagine that the accomplishments of the modern civil rights movement began with the efforts of people like her characters—Vyry, Innis Brown, and Randall Ware—and to celebrate that long struggle with a fictional centennial, a jubilee.

By using a nonlinear narrative structure and shifting narrative voices, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* focuses on individual consciousness and personal experiences, as fugitive slaves repeatedly flee and finally, in 1847, escape their bondage during a particularly repressive period. Some twenty years after the publication of *Jubilee*, at a time when the gains of the civil rights movement were being threatened on all sides and there was less cause for celebration than in the mid-sixties, Williams chronicles the adventures of slaves whose rebellion ends in a kind of personal, though limited, freedom in the West, outside of mainstream society.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, on the other hand, remembers those who were totally destroyed or severely crippled by the experience of slavery. Rather than focusing on representative or typical slaves, as does *Jubilee*, or on the extraordinary individuals whose escape from the depths of slavery led almost miraculously to satisfactory private lives, as does *Dessa Rose*, *Be-*

loved examines the highly personal and historically determined lives of slavery's most afflicted victims before and immediately following emancipation. With a linear narrative firmly fixed in 1874–75 as a base, the characters' pasts are woven into the primary story so continually and subtly that the tyranny of that past impinges on the experience of the linear narrative just as the characters have felt it interfere with their lives. Much more than Williams, Morrison has grounded her story in history—the Fugitive Slave Act, the workings of the Underground Railway—and her narrative reveals how the characters' lives are conditioned by historical circumstances. Even though some of the characters are aware of the communal and public contingencies that shape their private lives, and even though in the pre-Civil War days some are active in the Underground Railway, by 1874 not one of the characters is playing a role in public life.

In the afterglow of the civil rights movement, Margaret Walker's text suggests progress and the possibility of effective social action. Williams's novel, appearing in the "Reagan retreat," glorifies those who act heroically regardless of history. Morrison's highly acclaimed work—a eulogy for those who were destroyed by slavery, as well as those who continued after freedom to suffer its consequences—calls attention in the late 1980s to the stories of history's casualties, suggesting that most slaves did not prevail in the aftermath of emancipation, any more than most ghetto dwellers will prevail in modern American society. Speaking of her dismay that there was no "piece of art that commemorates, remembers all . . . the innocent black dead," Morrison offers *Beloved* as such a monument.²

Jubilee

Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, in many ways a conventional historical romance, has an interesting history of its own. When Walker was a small child living in Birmingham, Alabama, her born-in-slavery maternal grandmother told endless stories about her own mother's life before, during, and after the Civil War. To fulfill her promise to tell the story of her own great-grandmother, Walker created three generations of women: Hetta, the black mistress of the plantation owner; their daughter Vyry, the protagonist, modeled after the great-grandmother; and her daughter, Minna, the fictional counterpart of Walker's grandmother, who first told the stories.

Walker first began to write down the stories in 1934, when she was still a college student. Years and then decades passed before she completed the

novel. While raising a family, attending graduate school, publishing poetry, and teaching English, Walker periodically immersed herself in the history of plantation life, slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. She read histories, slave narratives, diaries, letters, and other personal documents; studied Civil War newspapers, pamphlets, and songs; and traveled to the places her grandparents lived, delving into records of real estate transfers in the court house in Dawson, Georgia. In the early 1960s, as the "Civil War Centennial approached," she reported feeling "desperate to finish" the novel.³ She was more than fifty when she fulfilled her promise in 1966 and published *Jubilee*.

In the winter and spring of 1965, during the same months that civil rights activists were marching in the streets of Selma, Alabama, Walker wrote parts 2 and 3—approximately two-thirds of the novel—in a frenzy of creativity and concentration. The events of those climactic moments of the civil rights movement seem to have informed the novel as a whole and the final part in particular. The Voting Rights Act was passed in August 1965, as Walker was preparing *Jubilee* for the publishers. By ending *Jubilee* in 1870, a period of relative calm, she leaves her characters on the brink of events that would lead to decades, and even another century—two more jubilees—of betrayals and violence. She was close to producing a completed draft at the end of March, when Martin Luther King, Jr., stood on the steps of the Alabama state capitol warning that blacks "are still in for a season of suffering," and repeating the words of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," stressing the song's final lines: "Be jubilant, my feet, our God is marching on . . . His truth is marching on."⁴ Even though she worked at breakneck speed that winter and spring, writing from 7:00 A.M. to 11:00 P.M. and pushing herself "beyond all physical endurance," Walker surely noted the front-page news from Selma, Montgomery, and Washington, D.C.⁵

The almost fifty years from the time her grandmother first told those tales until the publication of *Jubilee* correspond to the period when the foundations of the modern civil rights movement were laid: by the National Urban League, formed in 1911 to find ways for blacks to have equal opportunity for housing and employment; by the NAACP, which was founded in 1910 and began organizing in the South in 1917; by the Garvey movement, 1916–23, which glorified racial pride and demonstrated that a mass movement was possible; by the Legal Defense and Education Fund, established in 1939 to finance the court battles that eventually led to *Brown v. Board of Education*; by the Congress of Racial Equality, which

staged a number of nonviolent, direct-action protests throughout the forties; by A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement of 1941 and his call in 1943 for mass protests modeled after Gandhi's passive resistance movement in India; and by the lifelong efforts of such individuals as Mary McLeod Bethune, W. E. B. Du Bois, Bayard Rustin, and Ella Baker. During the more than thirty years that Walker was struggling to tell the story of the men and women a century before who longed for freedom and fought to claim it, most of the battles in the war for civil rights were fought.

Jubilee is set in rural southwest Georgia and nearby Alabama communities, the same part of the South associated with the extreme racism that was the target of important campaigns of the civil rights movement. Vyry, the protagonist of the novel, is the child of a white plantation owner and a slave woman; the novel recounts her life from her birth around 1834 to a new beginning at the end of the summer of 1870. For some readers, as for some reviewers, *Jubilee* may seem to be little more than a conventional romance, complete with the clichés of the genre: the elaborate entertainments on the plantation, the patriotic lady who runs the plantation and bravely sends her son and her son-in-law off to die in the war she believes is fought to defend her way of life, emotional deathbed scenes, a love triangle in which a woman must choose between the man she loves and the one to whom she owes her life. Hazel Carby has observed that *Jubilee* was "a particular response to the dominant ideologies of the popular imagination embodied in Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*." But Walker has used the elements of popular romance to create a very different kind of novel, one that celebrates not the Old South, but the twentieth-century struggle for civil rights. Her history is not the story of a dead past, but of the past as the precondition of the present. As Carby has observed, "Walker's representation of slavery is her philosophy of history, which is to be understood as the necessary prehistory of contemporary society."⁶

Rather than being haunted by the past, Vyry lives in the present, only occasionally looking back from her bustling kitchens to all that she has lost. She moves from one tragedy—and even one beloved husband—to another with some sadness and difficulty, but she is rarely incapacitated by suffering. A celebration—a jubilee—of what Maya Angelou calls "the heroes and sheroes" of the past, this novel does not belabor the most devastating experiences of slavery. Even the horror of Dutton's sexual exploitation of Vyry's mother, Hetta, is mitigated by his visit to her deathbed to comfort her and by his grief when she dies. Only once, after suffering a miscarriage and losing her house in a fire, does Vyry experience despair.

Unlike even Scarlett O'Hara, she is never hungry. Though the overseer beats her when she runs away, Vvry is neither raped nor abused by the men in her life. She is more like Faulkner's Dilsey than the heroines of other black women novelists—Sophia in *The Color Purple* or Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, for example.

Concentrating on the conventional aspects of the novel, some critics have ignored its relevance to the mid-1960s. Although *Jubilee* does not highlight the ugliest conditions of slavery, it also does not celebrate the Old South but focuses on the slaves who live on or near the plantation owned by John Morris Dutton, a wealthy white planter who has two children by Salina, his socially prominent wife from Savannah, and some fifteen others by Hetta, the black woman his father gave him when she was still a young girl. Of Hetta's children, only Vvry, her mother's favorite, becomes a part of his life; the others he sells or apparently forgets. Events in this novel about slavery and its aftermath, and even the form of the novel, are directly related to the struggle for civil rights that peaked in the mid-1960s.

Each of the novel's three parts could stand alone as a novella. "Sis Hetta's Child: The Ante-Bellum Years" begins by exploring everyday events of slave life as Hetta is dying in childbirth and ends as Vvry recovers from the beating she endured after attempting to run away. "'Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory': The Civil War Years" focuses on life in "the big house" during the war, relates the destruction of the white family and degeneration of the slave society, and ends with the closing of the plantation and the departure of the slaves. "'Forty Years in the Wilderness': Reconstruction and Reaction" begins in 1866 as Vvry and her children leave the plantation with her new husband Innis Brown in search of land, work, and education for the children and ends in 1870 after they have finally found these and other benefits of freedom.

Even in part 1, "The Ante-Bellum Years," the narrative chronicles progress. Vvry, for example, fares better than her totally oppressed mother. As the mistress of John Dutton, who has used her sexually since she was fifteen years old, and the wife of a black man Dutton has forced her to marry, Vvry's mother, Hetta, does not even have the freedom to decide who uses her body. After some fifteen debilitating pregnancies, she dies in childbirth before her thirtieth birthday. Though Dutton exploits his daughter by bringing her to the big house where she serves first as playmate to her own half sister, then as a kitchen helper, and finally as the family's

cook, he does allow her to maintain a relationship with Randall Ware and to raise their children. And he promises to free her—but only after his death.

But progress within slavery is severely limited. To run away with the man she loves, Vvry would have to abandon her children. When Ware begs Vvry to leave with him, her maternal feelings override the desire for freedom. At the end of part 1, after she has made a half-hearted attempt to escape with a small child and a suckling baby, Vvry struggles to regain consciousness after being beaten. She recalls seeing John Dutton standing over her "cursing terrible oaths" (145). This image of a subdued black woman examining her almost mortal wounds and a white man cursing is emblematic of the condition of all subservient people whose freedom is enjoyed at the indulgence of their oppressors. At the end of part 1, Vvry has exhausted the limits of personal freedom within a slave society. Though it is not clear whether Dutton is cursing Vvry for trying to run away or his white workers for beating this woman who is, after all, his own child, the motives for his curse are irrelevant. Within the slave society, Dutton, like all oppressors, will inevitably curse those he oppresses.

Written before the civil rights movement's final push for federal legislation, part 2 belongs to that stage in the long struggle for liberation when white supremacy prevailed. When Ware writes to Vvry that there will be a war to free the slaves, she retorts: "A war to set us niggers free? What kind of crazy talk is that?" (166). At this point Vvry sees what Walker herself perhaps saw when she first conceived of the novel: a world in which white people make promises they never keep and black men join the struggle for freedom, leaving women behind with the children.

In part 2, "The Civil War Years," composed in early 1965, Vvry's desire for freedom is replaced by a struggle for survival, as she works to hold together the white family on which she and her children depend. In the course of the war the Dutton family slowly disintegrates: Marse John dies after an injury; his son and son-in-law receive fatal wounds in battle; with the sound of "big Yankee guns" firing in the distance, Miss Salina suffers a deadly stroke; and her daughter, Lillian, sustains a head injury and permanent brain damage when a Yankee soldier rapes her. As the world collapses around her, Vvry determines "to plant some kind of crop," since she has "the younguns to feed"—Miss Lillian's and her own (231).

Scenes in which characters fail to recognize the relationships between their own private experience and sweeping public events surface here and repeatedly in black women's fiction written since *Jubilee*. The limitation of

Vyry's exclusively private vision is most conspicuous when Union soldiers come to read the Emancipation Proclamation to the slaves. Preoccupied with feeding the crowd and caring for the children, Vyry does not understand the implications of this momentous public event. And at the end of the war, ignorance of the public arena leads Vyry to lose the man she loves: when Randall Ware does not return immediately, Vyry accepts the protection and eventually the love of Innis Brown, a kind but less compelling man.

In the final scene of part 2, on Christmas day of 1865, Vyry prepares two feasts. She serves "baked fresh ham and candied sweet potatoes and buttered whole okra and corn muffins and pecan pie and elderberry wine" to the white folks in the dining room, while she, Innis, and the children eat "possum with sweet potatoes and collard greens and okra and . . . sweet potato pone" in the kitchen (257). Like the tableau at the end of part 1—a white man standing over a subdued black woman—this scene is emblematic of the nature of race relations at a particular time: two families, each without a father, celebrating Christmas in separate rooms with different meals. Both the structure and the imagery of the fiction are determined by history. The dinner is in a sense both the last of an old way of life and the first of a new; from the perspective of the mid-1960s the alienation of the races began when masters and former slaves first chose to sit down at separate and not-so-equal tables.

In part 3, written during the climactic moments of the southern civil rights movement, public attitudes and events increasingly impinge on the lives of the characters as whites engage in violence to limit the freedom of blacks, who in turn struggle to claim the rights promised by freedom—housing, food, employment, education, and involvement in the political process. Having won the battle of "freedom from," they now must fight the battle of "freedom to." When Vyry and Innis set out with her two children, Jim and Minna, their plight is the same as that of "hundreds of thousands of emancipated Negroes" (263). Locating what seems like an ideal spot for farming, Vyry and Innis build a cabin, plant crops, and enjoy a plentiful harvest. But the following spring the river floods their house and fields, and they soon are on the road looking for a new place to settle. In the next three years, Vyry and Innis are cheated, exploited, and terrorized by poor whites who are determined to prevent blacks from owning farms and competing with them for jobs. Light enough to pass for white, Vyry contributes to the family income by selling eggs to white women who do not know she is a mulatto. After Vyry assists one of these women

in childbirth, her fortune changes. In need of a midwife, the white families urge Vyry to stay in their community, and the men volunteer to help Innis build a house.

The day of the house-raising is idyllic. The women bring quilts; the men work all day building the new house. Just as she had done that last Christmas on the plantation, Vyry prepares a feast: peaches, dew berries, sweet cream, ham, eggs, fried chicken, biscuits, buttered corn, greens, okra, blackberry pie, and coffee. In striking contrast to that earlier segregated meal, which served as a symbolic vignette at the end of 1865, blacks and whites now sit together and enjoy the food and fellowship. The first half of the summer of 1870 is "full of halcyon days one dreams and scarcely believes are real" (371). But before long the stresses of unrelenting economic pressures and unending labor begin to take their toll. Innis, frustrated by Jim's laziness, lashes out in anger and beats him brutally.

Randall Ware, meanwhile, very much alive, has delayed his return to private life to attend the First Convention of Colored People in Georgia. Putting his public responsibilities before his private ones, he joins the Georgia Equal Rights Association and determines to take "an active part in the political affairs of his county, town, and state" (270). It is during Ware's delay that Vyry despairs and leaves with Innis. Just as Vyry's exclusively private vision robs her of the power of public action, Ware's public commitments result in the loss of his private world. Had Vyry known about the scramble for political power that followed the war and had she understood Ware's commitment first to freedom and then to power, she might have concluded that he was involved in the struggle and would take care of his private life in due time. On the other hand, if Ware, out of consideration for Vyry's personal needs, had gotten word to her, she would surely have waited for him. But in fact neither finds a way to balance public and private responsibilities.

At first Randall Ware, like Vyry, underestimates the tenacity of racism. As a propertied free black, Ware is a ready target for racist terrorism. When he returns to claim his land and forge, the whites threaten him and demand that he sell them his land. When he refuses, "white-sheeted callers" arrive at his house, throw the bloody body of his journeyman at his feet, beat him, and leave him half-conscious in the woods (327). Defeated and frightened, Ware abandons his plans to play a part in the public arena, and he recognizes that a new war has only just begun: "This is a war of white against black and it's a night war with disguise and closed doors. The first white man you see in the morning could be the very man who beat

you within an inch of your life the night before. No, they have begun a reign of terror to put the Negro back in slavery. They will never accept the fact that the South rose up in rebellion against the Union North and the North won the war. They mean to take out all their grudges on us" (333). In certain communities—Selma, Alabama, for example—these words were as appropriate in the mid-1960s as they were a hundred years before. But unlike many of his counterparts in 1965, Ware sees no way for direct political action.

Toward the end of the novel, Ware, hoping that Vyry will come back to him and his son Jim will go away to school, searches out his family. Surprised and shaken by Ware's visit, Vyry soothes her uneasiness by preparing a welcoming feast. Once again, a dinner-table scene is emblematic of the condition of a community, this time the extended black community. At the end of the war Vyry prepared for her two families two meals served at separate, segregated tables; during that brief period after the war when some whites and blacks recognized their mutual dependency, she enjoyed one jointly prepared, integrated meal; now, members of her family, representative of the larger black community, sit down at the table together. Their differences are subsumed in a larger commitment to each other's welfare.

Randall explains that he had run for the state legislature and won but that "white folks couldn't and wouldn't stand for it" (400). Having abandoned his dream of playing a role in the public arena, Ware adopts a different plan for bringing about change. The first step, he argues, is education: "And so far as education is concerned, I tell you it may not be the only way for our people but it is the main way. We have got to be educated before we know our rights and how to fight for them" (404). By putting education—a top priority for many contingents of the modern civil rights movement—as the first item on Ware's agenda, and by not having him advocate retaliatory violence, Walker establishes him as a predecessor to some contemporary nonviolent movement leaders; much of his rhetoric, however, is consistent with that of black militants of the mid-1960s. Like many movement activists Ware is uncertain about the best means to achieve his goals.

The differing positions of the characters in this final part of the novel are almost parallel to those of contemporary reformers as Randall, Innis, and Vyry each voice one of three conflicting positions dividing the black community. Randall Ware's views, though sometimes moderate, are more consistent with those of the emerging separatists who by 1966 would take

over the leadership of SNCC. Ware argues that blacks will have "to fight and struggle" for "education, land, and the ballot" (396), that the "average white man hates a Negro, always did, and always will," and that "every white man" believes that every black is inferior and should be treated like "a brute animal" (397). Like Malcolm X, he never advocates specific acts of violence, but he does use militant language, equating the struggle to come with the "years of fighting and struggling" that were necessary to end slavery (396). Like SNCC leaders in 1965 who were arguing for the expulsion of whites from the organization, Ware opposes any cooperation with whites and urges a kind of 1870s black power.

Innis Brown, on the other hand, argues that blacks must accommodate to life in a racist society by relinquishing any hopes of equality: "They was a man not so long ago made a speech round here and he says the colored peoples got to forgit about the political vote and tend our farms and raise our families and show the white folks we ain't lazy and ain't stirring up no trouble for nobody, but we is for peace and we's good citizens. . . . I kinda believes like that man" (399).

As a mulatto, Vyry, on the other hand, represents that integrated society dreamed of by Martin Luther King, Jr.⁷ She insists that all people are capable of good and that being "apart and separated from each other" makes people hate (397). As she sees it, the solution to the racial problem lies in blacks and whites acknowledging their interdependency: "They ain't needing me no worser than I is needing them, that's what. We both needs each other. White folks needs what black folks got just as much as black folks needs what white folks is got, and we's all got to stay here mongst each other and git along, that's what" (402). Each position might be summed up in a single word: separatism, accommodation, and coalition. The novel itself, however, does not validate one view over the other but rather gives each a voice, suggesting that any solution to the problems of racism, if there is to be one, whether in 1870 or 1966, will inevitably evolve from the clash and resolution of such differences and the conflicting assumptions on which they are based. As the protagonist of the novel, however, Vyry stands between two extremes, and her advocacy of integration and interdependency, compatible with the position of Martin Luther King, Jr., seems to have the greatest weight.⁸

As Vyry, Innis, and Randall sit talking through the night, they all have their say, and the conflicts that divide them, though unresolved, are set aside for the sake of communal goodwill. Walker completed *Jubilee* before the Watts riots in 1965, but her first readers, still reeling from the violence