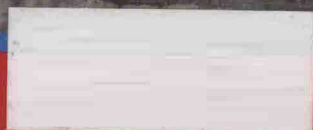
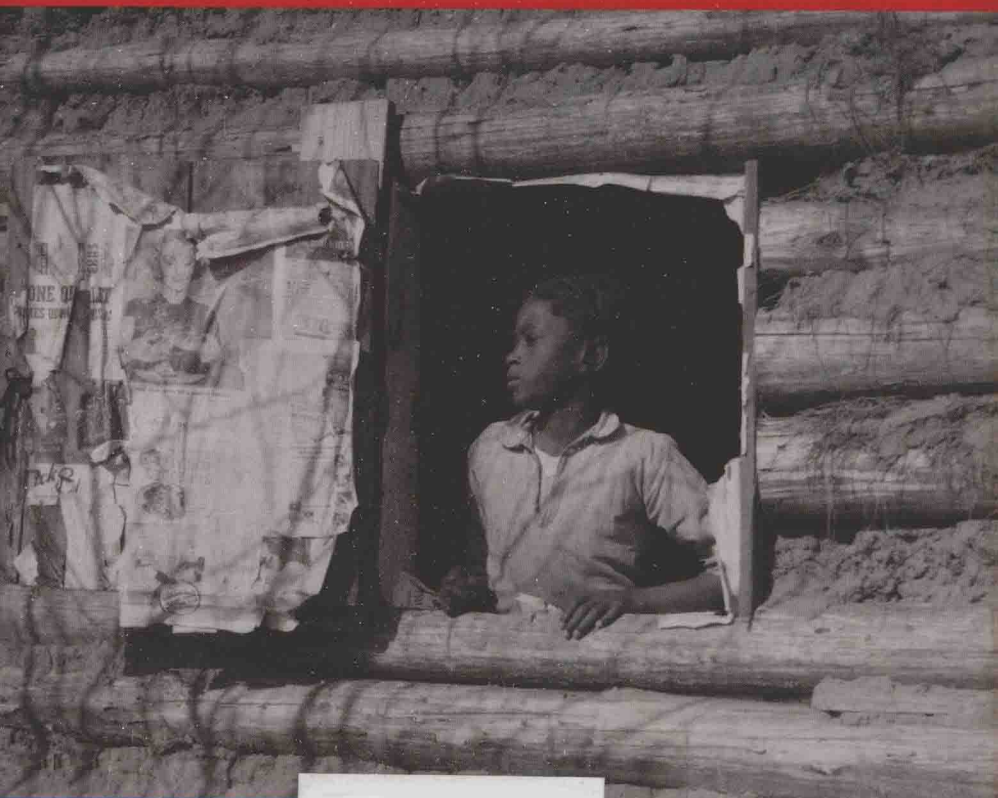


# AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS' HISTORICAL FICTION



ANA NUNES

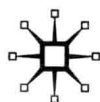


# **African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction**

Ana Nunes



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AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS' HISTORICAL FICTION  
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# **African American Women Writers' Historical Fiction**

With love and deep gratitude to Kieran Burns, who continues to amaze and inspire me. And to Alice Nunes Burns: artist, pirate, fairy, ardent lover of books, and my perfect love.

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# Introduction

In *African-American History*, Thomas C. Holt states that, although the study of black American history was initiated and developed by African American intellectuals and activists, it was Gunnar Myrdal's *American Dilemma* that "introduced black history to most white Americans."<sup>1</sup> Among the general acceptance with which Myrdal's sociological study of black America was received, there were, as Holt points out, some voices of dissent. Among Myrdal's critics was Ralph Ellison who reviewed *American Dilemma* in 1944, the year of its publication. Ellison's main objection to Myrdal's work was his assertion that "the Negro's entire life and, consequently, also his opinions on the Negro problem are, in the main, to be considered as secondary reactions to more primary pressures from the side of the white dominant majority."<sup>2</sup> Ellison rejects Myrdal's view of African American culture as simply reactive and points to a sense of African American culture with roots in the specific experience of people of African descent in the New World and exposes Myrdal's one-dimensional argument. For Ellison, this is a culture that evolved not merely because of but in spite of the racism that African Americans faced "embod[ing] a rejection" of the dominant culture and, thus, holding values and traditions distinct from the hegemonic other. Thus Ellison rebuffs the idea that white culture is a "higher culture," calling attention to the African American contribution to the United States: "In Negro culture there is much of value for America as a whole."<sup>3</sup> However, for Ellison, the "value" of black culture and contribution to American society had yet to be articulated from an African American perspective: "What is needed are Negroes to take it [the value of black culture] and create of it 'the uncreated consciousness of their race.' In doing so they will do far more, they'll help create a more human America."<sup>4</sup> What is implied in Ellison's paraphrase of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*<sup>5</sup> is a call for representations of African American people and experience beyond the prevailing depiction of "Negro culture and personality simply as a product of a 'social pathology.'"<sup>6</sup> What is important to consider here is not the merits or demerits of *American Dilemma*, but the emphasis Ellison puts on the need to challenge the image of the African American as a sociological product of the dynamics established by white hegemony.



His vision of the representation of African American experience and legacy meant that, as Holt puts it, "No longer would black history be simply the history of relations between the races or of black contributions to the nation's life and progress . . . In that history blacks would no longer be relegated to nonspeaking roles, the passive victims of white hostility or beneficiaries of white benevolence. They would be actors with top billing, creating institutions, sustaining communal values, and passing on a legacy of struggle and creativity to their posterity."<sup>7</sup> In 1944 this involved a radical review of the American historical record, one that is evident in Ellison's views. If African American history was to go beyond the analysis of race relations and the contribution of extraordinary people to the country's "progress," the objectification of black people had to be challenged, and they had to be recognized as authoritative narrators of their experience and their place in American society. The extraordinary experience of a minority had to be contextualized to include the "ordinary" lives of the majority of African Americans. This view of historical scholarship would allow African American history and culture to be depicted as valuable in their terms rather than those subservient to the dominant history and culture of whites.

In his review of *American Dilemma*, however, Ellison does not address the sources that document a history and a culture that evolved and developed primarily via word of mouth. This in itself required a fundamental revision of historical research and methodology. But Ellison does address this issue elsewhere, identifying how African American culture is "expressed in a body of folklore, in the musical forms of the spirituals, the blues and jazz; an idiomatic version of American speech (especially in the Southern United States); a cuisine; a body of dance forms and even a dramaturgy."<sup>8</sup> Thus, for Ellison, African American culture is distinctly marked by its orality more than its writing.

In *Living In, Living Out: African American Domesticity and the Great Migration*, published in 1994, Elizabeth Clark-Lewis strives to recover the history of African American women who migrated to the North from the rural South to work as domestic servants in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Clark-Lewis collected oral testimonies from her female relatives along with those from 97 other women,<sup>9</sup> all of them former domestics, in order to recreate the unwritten history of her female relatives.<sup>10</sup> Her work constitutes an example of the difficulties faced by historians of a predominantly oral culture. At the close of her book, she stresses the importance of storytelling as a fundamental source for the writing of African American history and appeals to other scholars to listen and record the testimonies that will constitute the cultural heritage of the coming generations: "This is the last time you may find 'the old women gathered.' This is the last song they

may ever sing. I challenge you, historians of tomorrow, to scoop up the baton of their rich heritage and carry it along with you as you run."<sup>11</sup> In this way, Clark-Lewis charts the difficulty in recording oral testimonies in a time when communities no longer gather around their elders—the storytellers who wove in their words the fabric of the cultural legacy.

Clark-Lewis had to overcome the lack of written sources from which to draw information about her foremothers' experience while striving to beat the passage of time to record their scattered stories. She makes use of sources often dismissed by traditional approaches to history. In her study she includes the usual references to other historians and political activists, but she also quotes W. E. Du Bois,<sup>12</sup> James Baldwin,<sup>13</sup> and Toni Morrison<sup>14</sup> in order to establish a context for the first-person narratives she collected. In doing so, she establishes a significant relationship between orality, history, and literature and how these sources are interwoven in order to represent African American experience.

Twentieth-century African American literature has been dominated by the notion that the writer should represent and celebrate the uniqueness of African American experience. In this way, contemporary African American writers deal with issues raised by Ellison, issues related to voice and authority over the African American historical record. The characters they create are "actors with top billing, creating institutions, sustaining communal values, and passing on a legacy of struggle and creativity to their posterity."<sup>15</sup> In doing so, they also establish a critical dialogue between orality and literacy and history and literature. This trend toward the definition of a culture that is distinct, though intrinsically related, to the hegemonic other has encouraged black writers, and black female writers in particular, to revise and redefine a history that they view as largely lost or misconstrued.

This study aims at exploring the ways in which African American women writers address the relationship between history and literature, reworking the historical record from the point of view of the silenced female and give origin to an unprecedented narrative of the American experience. For this purpose, I shall focus my analysis on Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* (1998). In selecting these novels, my primary objective is to consider fictional works that made a unique contribution to the African American historical novel. The main common dominator between these novels is the representation of slavery—the historical center of the African American experience. Writers from Walker to Perry seek different modes of exploring slavery, establish intertextual dialogues with previous works, and root their writing in a tradition that they address and reinvent in order to account for the African American past: "[A]mong the current generation of writers," as Deborah E. McDowell

observes, “women are at the forefront of reinventing slavery.”<sup>16</sup> This exploration does not, however, intend to be an exhaustive overview of African American historical novels published since 1966. The focus will be on the innovative narrative strategies advanced in selected novels, tracing the development of the representation of slavery from Walker’s *Jubilee*, published in 1966, to Perry’s *Stigmata*, published in 1998. My interest is thus twofold: to examine the narrative and thematic achievements of individual texts and to analyze the main trends and developments of the African American historical fiction written by women in the twentieth century.

These novels rework the nineteenth-century European tradition of the historical novel in order to challenge versions of history established by white hegemonies. Importantly, African American historical fiction combines historical research with imaginary elements in order to recreate the past. Therefore, this body of literature privileges the lives of the socially marginalized, those who remained outside the pages of history. In this context, literature becomes a means to recreate the “historical records” that were destroyed, or never existed; a way of including in the American experience the history of those “who do not speak, . . . who do not have a voice because they/we were so terrified” to make use of Audre Lorde’s words.<sup>17</sup>

In Chapter 1, I will focus on some of the texts that have significantly determined the development of twentieth-century African American women’s writing. Issues from the accuracy of portraits of black American experience to the establishment of an exceptional literary tradition are, I argue, expressed and defined particularly in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Critical to the establishment of this literary tradition are the works of Harriet Jacobs and Frances E. W. Harper. A central aspect of Harper’s work is her call for the establishment of a literary tradition that would assist the “uplifting” of the race, proving intellectual parity with whites, overturning the stereotypical images of blacks, and operating as a didactic medium for both. In this way, Harper prompts the creation of a literary body that would reflect the history of African Americans, one that they had reimagined and written. In this chapter I will also consider how the 1890s represented a seminal decade for the black women’s movement and literature. The contribution activists such as Fannie Barrier Williams and Anna Julia Cooper helped consolidate the African American literary tradition by setting the main themes and motifs of the works of contemporary female writers.

Nineteenth-century African American literature, however, presents limitations in its treatment of history. Writers such as Harper in *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869) and *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892) and Pauline Hopkins in *Contending Forces* (1900) approach the past from a didactic and moral point of view. Confined by the corset of the conventions of the

time and too preoccupied with the creation of a black middle-class role model for (and leader of) the masses, they write about exceptional characters, generally educated, and very often light enough to pass for white. In doing so they set aside a black protagonist who could be considered representative.

The silences and the gaps left both by the slave narratives and nineteenth-century historical fiction constitute the open spaces from which the stories of contemporary writers begin to take shape. As Houston A. Baker Jr. observes, only in the last four decades have African American writers traveled "as an extensive and articulate group . . . all the way back to the origins and recorded their insights in distinctive forms designed for a black audience."<sup>18</sup> In fact, Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder*, a fictional account of Gabriel Prosser's insurrection, published in 1936, is the only significant work to deal with slavery before the publication of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*.

In the field of black literary studies, *Jubilee* remains "the most famous [novel] nobody knows"<sup>19</sup> to paraphrase the title of an article by Maryemma Graham and Deborah Whaley about Walker. *Jubilee* has often been considered as a groundbreaking novel. For Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "*Jubilee* marks the transition between the modern and the contemporary history and neo-slave narrative, standing as the final of the modern neo-slave narrative and the harbinger of a new concentrated wave of contemporary neo-slave narratives."<sup>20</sup> For Joyce Pettis, "*Jubilee* is also a vital precursor to complex, nonchronological approaches to Afro-American history . . . *Jubilee* is precedent-setting black historical fiction."<sup>21</sup> However, besides being frequently noted as a benchmarking novel, *Jubilee*, and Walker's work in general, has received little critical attention.<sup>22</sup> Some critics such as Charlotte Goodman attribute this lack of critical attention to "Walker's [imitation of] the conventional linear structure of the traditional slave narrative."<sup>23</sup> Others, such as Barbara Christian, interpret Walker's characters as purely flat figures, "characters, Black and white, who are not subjects so much as they are the means by which we learn about the culture of slaves and slave holders and the historical period."<sup>24</sup>

Jacqueline Miller Carmichael's *Trumpeting a Fiery Sound: History and Folklore in Margaret Walker's Jubilee* is, to date, the only book-length study dedicated to the novel. The first section of this study relates the genesis of the book, adding very little to what can be read in Walker's essay "How I Wrote *Jubilee*." In addition, Carmichael's comparative study of the versions of *Jubilee*, Walker's doctoral thesis and the book format, tends to be quite descriptive. The second section of the book is a comprehensive summary of the criticism on *Jubilee*, but Carmichael does little to revise it. These readings do not seek to address the complexity of Walker's achievement. This is not to say that all criticism on *Jubilee* is flawed. For all its limitations,

Carmichael's study opens the way for more subtle readings of Walker's work. Minrose C. Gwin, for example, addresses Christian's criticism that Walker's characters lack individuality by reiterating that the novel "presents the slavery experience and cross-racial female relationships from the point of view of the black woman."<sup>25</sup> In her reading of *Jubilee*, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu questions Goodman's one-dimensional view of the text as simple linear narrative and identifies four key episodes, which "illustrate Margaret Walker's break with tradition, a break that is responsible in part for reinvigorating the slave narrative genre."<sup>26</sup> Significantly, Beaulieu also examines *Jubilee* in the context of the contemporary African American historical novel.

One of the primary objectives of this exploration is the contextualization of novels such as Walker's *Jubilee* and Morrison's *Beloved*, which on publication were considered to be benchmarks in African American literature, but tend to be read in isolation rather than as part of a significant trend in black American fiction. This study aims to extricate the selected novels from the literary vacuum in which they are traditionally read and place them within the literary production and ideology that played a central role in the consolidation of the African American literary tradition, which set the main motifs of the works of contemporary female writers. In pursuing this line of investigation, the reading of *Beloved* in the final chapter shall emphasize its innovative narrative strategies and devices in the context of the historical novels that preceded it, removing it from the isolation in which critical acclaim has placed it.

Second, I will examine the origins of African American historical fiction and how this genre has been reworked and reimagined by contemporary authors, tracing the development of the African American historical novel through the last four decades of the twentieth century. My analysis of these novels begins with Walker's *Jubilee*. My work aims to reflect on Walker's achievement in writing historical fiction when African American history remained practically unwritten. Considering the novelist's use of folklore as the framework of her novel, I emphasize the innovative aspects of a novel that have been undervalued on account of its chronological narrative and the common tendency to read its characters as stereotypes. Central to my project's analysis is that Walker's thorough research, concerned with historical accuracy and meticulous representation of the quotidian, free other writers from the constrictions of verisimilitude, creates the possibilities for complex psychological landscapes of the enslaved subject.

Jones's *Corregidora*, which I will examine in Chapter 3, reflects both an acknowledgment of the contribution of *Jubilee* to the African American historical novel and is a departure from Walker's model. In Jones's work, the chronological narrative is abandoned in favor of a mode of narration

that mirrors the mental processes by which one remembers, selects, and recreates different aspects of personal history. I emphasize the significance of Jones's first-person narrator and the writer's innovative approach to the use of folk speech. This novel is also influential in its use of the blues patterns of call and response to recreate a notion of history that is circular rather than linear.

In *Dessa Rose*, the focus of Chapter 4, Williams presents yet another way of representing slavery through a number of perspectives. These shifts in the narrative's point of view expose the distortion of African American history and the cultural constructs of race that define and condition the relationships between blacks and whites in the text. Williams exposes preconceived notions of blackness and whiteness, and racializes the latter, an aspect overlooked by the critical texts on *Dessa Rose*. In the final major section of the novel, Williams abandons the variable viewpoint in favor of a first-person narrative, reimagining the African American past by rooting it in the oral tradition that has kept it alive.

My reading of *Beloved* in Chapter 5 considers how Morrison uses magical realism as a means of translating the absences in African American history. I examine how magical realism provides the necessary narrative strategy through which a lost history can be recreated. I conclude the chapter with a reading of Phyllis Perry's first novel, *Stigmata*. I argue that Perry engages with the magical in order to rework the narrative model presented by Morrison. Perry's narrative explores the tension between the Tzvetan Todorov's notion of the fantastic and the supernatural accepted, or magical realism, and her development of a sense of community in the context of the fantastic and magic realism.



## Contexts

I would like to do something of lasting service for the race.

—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

My interest here is to consider a number of texts that significantly determined the development of twentieth-century African American women's writing. Issues from the accuracy of portraits of black American experience to the establishment of an exceptional literary tradition are evident in the work published particularly in the latter part of the nineteenth century. My focus is not simply on the themes addressed but also on the terms of narrative strategies and how literature and politics are closely linked.

The abolition of slavery in 1863 did not bring to an end African Americans' struggle for equal participation in American society. In the postbellum South, as John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss assert, "Depriving blacks of political equality became . . . a holy crusade in which a noble end justified any means. Blacks were run out of communities if they disobeyed orders to desist from voting, and the more resolute and therefore insubordinate blacks were whipped, maimed, and hanged."<sup>1</sup> At length, the compromise of 1877 between Northern and Southern states overthrew Reconstruction and despite the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Constitutional Amendments, as Franklin and Moss go on to say, "Before the dawn of a new century there was a complete recognition in law of what the South had itself accomplished in fact even before the election of 1876."<sup>2</sup> Between 1890 and 1900, the Southern states, led by Mississippi, gradually disfranchised African Americans. Poll taxes, literacy tests, and examinations on the ability to explain a section of the state constitution were some of the measures used to block black people from voting and maintain white rule. Once more, African Americans were silenced, and once more, they had to prove themselves fit for citizenship. The systematic enslavement might be abolished, but the relationships of blacks to whites, blacks to laws, and so on were defined in many cases in terms that reflected the values of slavery.



Social Darwinist ideas, which had a significant influence on American public opinion with the publication of *The Origins of Species* in 1859, were used to suggest that, considering the physiological differences between blacks and whites and the established leadership by the latter, color mattered and whites were the *fittest* to rule by nature. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African Americans used the written word to defy the logic of the Enlightenment proposed by such philosophers as Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others, which suggested that a society that did not organize itself around the written word was intellectually inferior. In these contexts, black writers wrote to claim their place in the human race. In the late nineteenth century, black intellectuals turned to the written text as a means of attaining social and political equality. In 1893, at the age of 25, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his diary, "These are my plans: to make a name in science, to make a name in literature and thus raise my race . . ."<sup>3</sup> Writing to *The Independent* newspaper in 1898, the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar states, "At this date the Negro has no need to prove his manual efficiency. That was settled fifty years ago, when he was the plantation blacksmith and carpenter and shoemaker. But his intellectual capacity is still in doubt . . . I would not counsel a return to the madness of that first enthusiasm for classical and professional learning; but I would urge that the Negro temper this newer one with a right idea of the just proportion in life of industry, commerce, art, science and letters, of materialism and idealism, of utilitarianism and beauty."<sup>4</sup> This passage implies Dunbar's refutation of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist policy and more specifically the primacy the latter gives to industrial education as the only way to social inclusion. Dunbar's call for and emphasis on the development of African American arts and letters cannot be divorced from the need that both he himself and the writers of his generation felt to deconstruct the representation of African Americans as minstrel figures, as inferior beings, and as ex-slaves.

Once white hegemony was reestablished and secured by law, some writers in the post-Reconstruction South set about trying to repair its image. Works such as Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1881) and Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* (1887) portray slavery as a benevolent institution and slaves as incapable of attaining self-sufficiency and reliance, living happily and being dependent on and loyal to their charitable masters. In her "Introduction" to *Iola Leroy, or, Shadows Uplifted*, Frances Smith Foster writes, "Afro-Americans and their friends had been urgently calling for novels that would refute these insidious stereotypes. Although autobiographies, biographies, and essays by Afro-Americans directly contradicted those ideas, they did not necessarily reach the same readers on the same level as the fiction of the Plantation School. To fight fire with fire, the