

**Writing African American  
Women: An Encyclopedia  
of Literature by and about  
Women of Color, Volumes  
1 and 2**

*Edited by  
Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu*

**Greenwood Press**

# **WRITING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN**



# WRITING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN



*An Encyclopedia of Literature  
by and about Women of Color*

Volume 1: A–J

Edited by  
Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu



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*This work is for Lee Burdette Williams—friend of the second half, sister of my heart's heart, my poem.*



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## Preface

My introduction to African American literature came when, as a high school student, I was assigned Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Knowing little about slavery other than what conventional history texts presented, I looked forward to reading the firsthand account of a famous American, intuiting even then the importance of personal stories in supplementing the historical record. At the time, I did not know the word *patriarchy*, but I was astute enough to recognize the truth in the cliché that history has always been written by the winners, and the winners were almost always white, male, and educated.

What I remember most about reading Douglass's *Narrative* is being captivated not so much by his story as by the anecdote of Aunt Hester with which he concludes his first chapter. Douglass identifies the beating of his aunt as crucial in his awareness of his own position as a slave, calling the episode "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery" through which he is reluctantly and violently ushered.

Douglass never mentions Aunt Hester again, and I finished reading the text wondering about her fate and the fate of countless other enslaved black women like her. Who told their stories? How were their stories different? How incomplete would our understanding of American history remain if we were not afforded the opportunity to place their lives and their stories side by side with Douglass's *Narrative* and other tales of heroic American masculinity?

My questions remained unanswered until I read Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which was published in 1861 but not widely available to twentieth-century readers until the mid-1980s. Jacobs offered me the companion piece to Douglass's example of physical bravery, heroic struggle, and escape; her work (now routinely read alongside Douglass's *Narrative*) provides a woman's perspective on slavery, suffering, connectedness, and motherhood and is straightforward in outlining the multiple sites of oppression faced by black women. Her voice, long absent from the historical record, was finally available.

This encyclopedia, then, echoes and amplifies Jacobs's voice, attempting to provide, for the first time, a reference work that focuses specifically on feminist and womanist approaches to African American literature. Not all of the writers included can easily be labeled feminist; increasingly, that definition is difficult to pin down, especially when applied to women writers of color. The term *womanist*, introduced by Alice Walker in her 1984 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, is useful as an alternative to describe an emphasis on survival, wholeness, and inclusivity that conventionally held definitions of *feminist* sometimes preclude. What these writers of fiction, nonfiction, drama, and poetry have in common is their insistence that the lives of black women are worthy of examination.

From Lucy Terry, who wrote the first known work of literature by an African American (the poem "Bar's Flight," composed in 1746 but not published until 1855), to popular contemporary novelists Bebe Moore Campbell and Terry McMillan, black women have been telling their stories for centuries. Only recently, however, has African American literature become widely taught in American high schools, colleges, and universities. With the rise of black studies programs in the 1980s, African American literature finally entered the academy; around the same time, black women novelists began producing works that captured the attention of popular reading audiences as well.

Barbara Christian, in her seminal essay "But What Do We Think We're Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History" (1989), identifies Mary Helen Washington's 1974 *Black World* cover story "Black Women Image Makers" as a defining moment in the growing visibility of black women writers. In that essay, Washington issues a challenge to her readers, stating, "We should be about the business of reading, absorbing, and giving critical attention to those writers whose understanding of the black woman can take us further." For Washington, those writers were not only contemporary black women; she alludes as well to literary foremothers whose works could offer valuable insight into the image-making, life-transforming intersections of black women's lives and creativity. (It is interesting to note that the cover photograph that accompanied Washington's *Black World* story was of Zora Neale Hurston, who was still virtually unknown at that time.) Christian also points to Barbara Smith as initiating, through her 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," a conscious insistence that black women's writing be analyzed and interpreted through the lens of feminist theory, in order to explicate more forcefully the

triple oppression of race, class, and gender to which black women have always been subjected and about which they have always written.

Washington's and Smith's essays are only two examples from what has become a substantial body of feminist/womanist criticism; it is not my intention here to provide an overview of the scholarship, as there are several entries in this encyclopedia that do precisely that. However, it is important to note that at the same time women such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker were establishing their writing careers, paving the way for what some consider a new black renaissance in the 1980s, scholars had already begun the important project both of reclaiming the black woman's past through their literary production and heralding a new generation of writers and critics who would, it turns out, reshape the American literary canon. It is my intention that this reference work will recognize and contribute to that reshaping.

In nearly 400 alphabetically arranged entries that are appropriate for scholars as well as for advanced high school students, college-level students, and general readers, *Writing African American Women* profiles writers as diverse as the eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley, Harlem Renaissance folklorist-author Zora Neale Hurston, and contemporary playwright/novelist Suzan-Lori Parks. The encyclopedia features early slave narrators and spiritualists, numerous children's authors, political pamphleteers, and journalists, poets, and dramatists; the most well known contemporary black women novelists—Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor, among them—receive significant attention, as do their contemporaries, including Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Paule Marshall, and Rita Dove. Separate entries analyze their major works. Shorter entries present lesser-known writers such as Kate Drumgoold, Becky Birtha, Mae Cowdery, and Carolivia Herron. A number of black male writers who deal with themes from feminist or womanist perspectives are included as well.

In addition to biographical entries and feminist/womanist analyses of specific works of literature, the encyclopedia includes dozens of thematic entries with special relevance to African American literature. Lengthy pieces on topics such as race, stereotypes, motherhood, sexuality, memory, literacy, Christianity, slavery, violence, and the South provide context for the study of both African American literature and African American lives from a women's studies perspective. Movements and periods receive treatment as well, and a 6,000-word section titled "Literature" provides a chronological overview of major African American contributions to the broader field of American literature. Entries on black feminism, womanism, black feminist criticism, historical fiction, and masculinity offer a theoretical framework for understanding this subgenre of American literature that has rapidly established footing both in the academy and among lay readers worldwide.

Entries are arranged alphabetically, and cross-referencing of all the encyclopedia's entries is provided. A boldfaced name or term indicates that it is the subject of a separate entry in this reference work. Where possible, authors' birth and death dates are provided, although in the case of early African American writers this information often remains only speculative or

approximate. Entries on each author conclude with a selective list of his or her works, and most entries provide a short bibliography of books and/or articles that readers may wish to consult for further reference. In both cases, the lists are not exhaustive; individual contributors have selected which works by writers to highlight and which resources to include at the end of their entries. This supplementary material is meant to provide a starting point for readers who desire more information than a reference work such as this can offer. Additionally, most entries are followed by a “See also” list that points readers to other relevant entries in the encyclopedia.

*Writing African American Women* concludes with two important appurati: a timeline of women’s significant contributions to and achievements in the field of African American literature and a selected bibliography of book-length studies of African American literature from a women’s studies perspective. These are necessarily subjective and incomplete; I am limited in my own awareness of what is out there, and the field continues to grow as it gains status in the academy and amasses an increasingly loyal following of lay readers. Nevertheless, it is my hope that these features provide some measure of the powerful force black women writers represent in literary production.

A word about contributors: A work like this would not be possible without the combined talents and effort of many scholars. When I distributed the initial call for contributors, I received hundreds of inquiries and offers of assistance. While I had already devised a working table of contents, many contributors suggested additional authors, themes, and works to include. Several offered to write their entries right away so that their pieces could be edited and distributed as models. Others, after completing their own assignments, took on additional entries when contributors already under contract could not complete work to which they had committed. Several patiently revised, and all offered a steady stream of encouragement and support for the project; when I felt overwhelmed, there was always someone there to remind me of the value of a reference work like this one.

When Sojourner Truth cried out in 1851, “Ar’n’t I a woman?” she voiced a question that Douglass’s Aunt Hester surely must have asked; it is one that generations of African American women have sought to understand, and it has become a primary impetus in shaping black literature and literary criticism. The contributors to this encyclopedia have attempted to demonstrate that while responses to Truth’s question have many iterations, the resounding answer to her provocative cry is yes.

### Works Cited

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- Smith, Barbara. “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982. 157–175.
- Washington, Mary Helen. “Black Women Image Makers.” *Black World* 23.10 (August 1974): 10–18.

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The Cratis D. Williams Graduate School, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at Appalachian State University for research time and technical support to prepare this manuscript.

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And finally, James and Sebastian, who understood the importance of this project and were, as always, generous in their support and love.



## List of Entries

Ai  
Albert, Octavia V. Rogers  
Alexander, Elizabeth  
Allen, Clarissa Minnie Thompson  
Amini, Johari  
Ancestor, Use of  
Anderson, Mignon Holland  
Angelou, Maya  
*Annie Allen*  
*Annie John*  
Ansa, Tina McElroy  
Aunt Jemima  
Austin, Doris Jean  
Autobiography  
*Autobiography of My Mother, The*  
*Baby of the Family*  
*Bailey's Café*  
Baker, Josephine  
Baldwin, James  
Bambara, Toni Cade  
Baraka, Amiri  
Beauty  
*Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and  
Four Years in the White House*  
*Beloved*  
Bennett, Gwendolyn B.  
*Betsey Brown*  
Birtha, Becky  
Black Arts Movement  
Black Feminism  
Black Feminist Criticism  
Black Masculinity  
Black Nationalism  
*Blanche among the Talented Tenth*  
*Blanche Cleans Up*  
*Blanche on the Lam*  
*Blanche Passes Go*  
*Bloodchild and Other Stories*  
Blues  
*Bluest Eye, The*



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- Body  
*Bondwoman's Narrative, The*  
Bonner, Marita  
Boyd, Candy Dawson  
Boyd, Melba  
Bradley, David  
*Breath, Eyes, Memory*  
Brooks, Gwendolyn  
*Brothers and Sisters*  
Broughton, Virginia W.  
Brown, Hallie Q.  
Brown, Linda Beatrice  
Brown, William Wells  
*Brown Girl, Brownstones*  
Burroughs, Margaret Taylor Goss  
Burton, Annie Louise  
Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward  
Butler, Octavia  
*By the Light of My Father's Smile*  
Caines, Jeannette  
Campbell, Bebe Moore  
*Cancer Journals, The*  
Cartier, Xam Wilson  
*Caucasia*  
Chase-Riboud, Barbara  
Chesnutt, Charles Waddell  
Children's and Young Adult  
Literature  
Childress, Alice  
*Chinaberry Tree, The*  
*Chosen Place, the Timeless People, The*  
Christianity  
Civil Rights Movement  
Clair, Maxine  
Clarke, Cheryl  
Class  
Cleage, Pearl  
Cliff, Michelle  
Clifton, Lucille  
Coleman, Wanda  
Collins, Julia C.  
Collins, Kathleen  
*Color Purple, The*  
Combahee River Collective  
*Comedy: American Style*  
Community  
Conjuring  
*Contending Forces*  
Cooper, Anna Julia  
Cooper, J. California  
Coppin, Fanny Jackson  
*Corregidora*  
Cortez, Jayne  
Cowdery, Mae  
Craft, Ellen and William  
Crafts, Hannah  
*Crossing Over Jordan*  
Cullen, Countee  
Cuney-Hare, Maud  
Danner, Margaret Esse  
Danticat, Edwidge  
*Daughters*  
Davenport, Doris  
Davis, Angela  
*Day Late and a Dollar Short, A*  
Death  
Delaney, Lucy A.  
Delany Sisters  
Derricotte, Toi  
*Dessa Rose*  
Detective Fiction  
De Veaux, Alexis  
*Dew Breaker, The*  
Dickey, Eric Jerome  
*Disappearing Acts*  
Domestic  
Douglass, Frederick  
Dove, Rita  
Drama  
Drumgoold, Kate  
Dunbar, Paul Laurence  
Dunbar-Nelson, Alice Moore  
*Dust Tracks on a Road*

- Elaw, Zilpha  
 Ellison, Ralph  
 Epistolary Novel  
 Evans, Mari  
*Eva's Man*  
 Fabio, Sarah Webster  
 Family  
*Family*  
*Farming of Bones, The*  
 Fauset, Jessie Redmon  
 Ferrell, Carolyn  
 Fiction  
 Fields, Julia  
 Film  
 Finney, Nikky  
*Fisher King, The*  
 Folklore  
 Foote, Julia A. J.  
*for colored girls who have considered  
 suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*  
 Forman, Ruth  
 Franklin, J. E.  
 Freedom  
 Gaines, Ernest  
*Getting Mother's Body*  
 Gibson, Patricia Joann  
 Giovanni, Nikki  
 Golden, Marita  
 Gomez, Jewelle  
 Gossett, Hattie  
 Graham, Shirley  
 Greenfield, Eloise  
 Grimké, Angelina Weld  
 Grimké, Charlotte Forten  
 Guy, Rosa  
 Haley, Alex  
 Hamilton, Virginia  
*Hand I Fan With, The*  
 Hansberry, Lorraine  
 Hansen, Joyce  
 Harlem Renaissance  
 Harper, Frances E. W.  
 Harris, E. Lynn  
 Healing  
 Herron, Carolivia  
 Historical Fiction  
 History  
 Holiday, Billie  
 Home  
*Homemade Love*  
 Hopkins, Pauline  
*Hottentot Venus: A Novel*  
*How Stella Got Her Groove Back*  
 Hughes, Langston  
 Hurston, Zora Neale  
 Identity  
*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*  
*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*  
*In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*  
*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens:  
 Womanist Prose*  
*In Search of Satisfaction*  
*Interruption of Everything, The*  
*Iola Leroy*  
 Jackson, Angela  
 Jackson, Elaine  
 Jackson, Mae  
 Jackson, Mattie  
 Jackson, Rebecca Cox  
 Jacobs, Harriet  
 Jazz  
*Jazz*  
 Jezebel  
 Johnson, Amelia E.  
 Johnson, Angela  
 Johnson, Charles  
 Johnson, Georgia Douglas  
 Johnson, Helene  
 Johnson, James Weldon  
*Jonah's Gourd Vine*  
 Jones, Gayl  
 Jones-Meadows, Karen  
 Jordan, June  
*Jubilee*  
 Keckley, Elizabeth  
 Kelley-Hawkins, Emma Dunham

## xviii List of Entries

- Kenan, Randall  
Kennedy, Adrienne  
Kincaid, Jamaica  
*Kindred*  
Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press  
Kocher, Ruth Ellen  
Komunyakaa, Yusef  
*Krik? Krak!*  
Lane, Pinkie Gordon  
Larsen, Nella  
Lattany, Kristin Hunter  
Lee, Andrea  
Lee, Jarena  
Lesbianism  
*Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter*  
*Linden Hills*  
Literacy  
Literature  
*Living Is Easy, The*  
Lorde, Audre  
Love  
*Love*  
*Lucy: A Novel*  
Major, Clarence  
Malcolm X  
*Mama*  
*Mama Day*  
Mammy  
Marshall, Paule  
Matthews, Victoria Earle  
*Maud Martha*  
McElroy, Colleen  
McKay, Claude  
McKissack, Patricia  
McMillan, Terry  
Memory  
*Men of Brewster Place, The*  
*Meridian*  
Meriwether, Louise  
Middle Passage  
Miller, May  
Millican, Arthenia J. Bates  
Modernism  
Moody, Anne  
Moore, Opal  
Morrison, Toni  
*Moses, Man of the Mountain*  
Moss, Thylias  
Mossell, Gertrude  
Motherhood  
Mulatto/a  
*Mules and Men*  
Mullen, Harryette  
Murphy, Beatrice M.  
Murray, Pauli  
Myth, Use of  
*Narrows, The*  
Naylor, Gloria  
Neely, Barbara  
Nelson, Marilyn  
Neo-Slave Narrative  
Nunez, Elizabeth  
Oliver, Diane  
Osbey, Brenda Marie  
*Our Nig*  
Parable Series  
*Paradise*  
Parker, Pat  
Parks, Rosa  
Parks, Suzan-Lori  
Passing  
*Passing*  
Patternist Series  
Perry, Phyllis Alesia  
Petry, Ann  
Plantation Tradition  
Plato, Ann  
*Plum Bun*  
Poetry  
Polite, Carlene Hatcher  
*Possessing the Secret of Joy*  
Potter, Eliza  
*Praisesong for the Widow*  
Prince, Mary

- Protest Tradition  
*Quicksand*  
 Quilting  
 Race  
 Rahman, Aishah  
*Rainbow Roun Mah Shoulder*  
*Raisin in the Sun, A*  
 Rape  
 Reed, Ishmael  
 Religion  
 Rodgers, Carolyn  
*Sally Hemings*  
*Salt Eaters, The*  
 Sanchez, Sonia  
 Sanders, Dori  
 Sapphire (author)  
 Sapphire (stereotype)  
*Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*  
 Schomburg Library of  
     Nineteenth-Century Black Women  
     Writers  
 Senna, Danzy  
*Seraph on the Suwanee*  
 Sermon Tradition  
 Sexuality  
 Shange, Ntozake  
 Shockley, Ann Allen  
*Singing in the Comeback Choir*  
 Slave Narrative  
 Slavery  
 Smith, Anna Deavere  
*Song of Solomon*  
 South, Influence of the  
 Spencer, Anne  
 Spirituality  
 Spirituals  
 Stereotypes  
 Stewart, Maria  
*Stigmata*  
*Street, The*  
*Sula*  
*Symptomatic*
- Tar Baby*  
 Tate, Eleanora E.  
 Taylor, Mildred D.  
 Taylor, Susie King  
*Temple of My Familiar, The*  
 Terrell, Mary Church  
 Terry, Lucy  
*Their Eyes Were Watching God*  
*There Is Confusion*  
*Third Life of Grange Copeland, The*  
 Thomas, Joyce Carol  
*Thomas and Beulah*  
 Tillman, Katherine Davis Chapman  
 Toomer, Jean  
*Topdog/Underdog*  
 Truth, Sojourner  
*Ugly Ways*  
 Underground Railroad  
*Venus*  
 Violence  
*Voice from the South, A*  
 Vroman, Mary Elizabeth  
*Waiting to Exhale*  
 Walker, Alice  
 Walker, Margaret  
 Walter, Mildred Pitts  
*Wedding, The*  
 Wells-Barnett, Ida B.  
 West, Dorothy  
*What You Owe Me*  
 Wheatley, Phillis  
 White, Paulette Childress  
 Whiteness  
 Wideman, John Edgar  
 Wilkinson, Brenda  
 Williams, Sherley Anne  
 Wilson, August  
 Wilson, Harriet E.  
 Womanism  
 Womanist Conjure  
*Women of Brewster Place, The*  
 Woodson, Jacqueline

**xx List of Entries**

Work

Wright, Richard

Wright, Sarah Elizabeth

Xenogenesis Trilogy

Yarbrough, Camille

*You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*

*You Know Better*

*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

## **Thematic List of Entries**

### **Autobiography/Narrative Writers**

Angelou, Maya  
Baker, Josephine  
Burton, Annie Louise  
Craft, Ellen and William  
Delaney, Lucy A.  
Delany Sisters  
Drumgoold, Kate  
Elaw, Zilpha  
Holiday, Billie  
Jackson, Mattie  
Jackson, Rebecca Cox  
Jacobs, Harriet  
Keckley, Elizabeth  
Moody, Anne  
Potter, Eliza  
Prince, Mary  
Taylor, Susie King  
Truth, Sojourner

### **Children's/Young Adult Writers**

Boyd, Candy Dawson  
Caines, Jeannette  
Greenfield, Eloise  
Hamilton, Virginia  
Hansen, Joyce  
Herron, Carolivia  
Johnson, Angela  
Lattany, Kristin Hunter  
McKissack, Patricia  
Meriwether, Louise  
Nelson, Marilyn  
Sanders, Dori  
Tate, Eleanora E.  
Taylor, Mildred D.  
Thomas, Joyce Carol  
Walter, Mildred Pitts  
Wilkinson, Brenda  
Woodson, Jacqueline  
Yarbrough, Camille

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### **Dramatists**

Bonner, Marita  
Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward  
Childress, Alice  
Dunbar-Nelson, Alice Moore  
Franklin, J. E.  
Gibson, Patricia Joann  
Grimké, Angelina Weld  
Hansberry, Lorraine  
Jones-Meadows, Karen  
Kennedy, Adrienne  
Miller, May  
Parks, Suzan-Lori  
Rahman, Aishah  
Shange, Ntozake  
Smith, Anna Deavere

### **Genres**

Autobiography  
Black Feminist Criticism  
Children's and Young Adult  
Literature  
Detective Fiction  
Drama  
Epistolary Novel  
Fiction  
Film  
Historical Fiction  
Neo-Slave Narrative  
Poetry  
Slave Narrative

### **Male Writers**

Baldwin, James  
Baraka, Amiri  
Bradley, David  
Brown, William Wells  
Chesnutt, Charles Waddell  
Cullen, Countee  
Dickey, Eric Jerome  
Douglass, Frederick  
Dunbar, Paul Laurence

Ellison, Ralph  
Gaines, Ernest  
Haley, Alex  
Harris, E. Lynn  
Hughes, Langston  
Johnson, Charles  
Johnson, James Weldon  
Kenan, Randall  
Komunyakaa, Yusef  
Major, Clarence  
Malcolm X  
McKay, Claude  
Reed, Ishmael  
Toomer, Jean  
Wideman, John Edgar  
Wilson, August  
Wright, Richard

### **Novelists**

Allen, Clarissa Minnie  
Thompson  
Angelou, Maya  
Ansa, Tina McElroy  
Austin, Doris Jean  
Bambara, Toni Cade  
Brown, Linda Beatrice  
Butler, Octavia  
Campbell, Bebe Moore  
Cartier, Xam Wilson  
Chase-Riboud, Barbara  
Clair, Maxine  
Cleage, Pearl  
Cliff, Michelle  
Collins, Julia C.  
Cooper, J. California  
Crafts, Hannah  
Danticat, Edwidge  
Fauset, Jessie Redmon  
Golden, Marita  
Harper, Frances E. W.  
Herron, Carolivia  
Hopkins, Pauline  
Hurston, Zora Neale

Jones, Gayl  
 Kelley-Hawkins, Emma Dunham  
 Kincaid, Jamaica  
 Larsen, Nella  
 Lattany, Kristin Hunter  
 Lee, Andrea  
 Marshall, Paule  
 McMillan, Terry  
 Meriwether, Louise  
 Morrison, Toni  
 Naylor, Gloria  
 Neely, Barbara  
 Nunez, Elizabeth  
 Parks, Suzan-Lori  
 Perry, Phyllis Alesia  
 Petry, Ann  
 Polite, Carlene Hatcher  
 Sanders, Dori  
 Senna, Danzy  
 Shockley, Ann Allen  
 Thomas, Joyce Carol  
 Walker, Alice  
 Walker, Margaret  
 West, Dorothy  
 Williams, Shirley Anne  
 Wilson, Harriet E.  
 Wright, Sarah Elizabeth

**Poets**

Ai  
 Alexander, Elizabeth  
 Amini, Johari  
 Angelou, Maya  
 Bennett, Gwendolyn B.  
 Birtha, Becky  
 Boyd, Melba  
 Brooks, Gwendolyn  
 Burroughs, Margaret Taylor Goss  
 Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward  
 Clair, Maxine  
 Clarke, Cheryl  
 Cliff, Michelle  
 Clifton, Lucille

Coleman, Wanda  
 Cortez, Jayne  
 Cowdery, Mae  
 Danner, Margaret Esse  
 Davenport, Doris  
 Derricotte, Toi  
 Dove, Rita  
 Dunbar-Nelson, Alice  
 Moore  
 Evans, Mari  
 Fabio, Sarah Webster  
 Fields, Julia  
 Finney, Nikky  
 Forman, Ruth  
 Giovanni, Nikki  
 Gomez, Jewelle  
 Gossett, Hattie  
 Grimké, Angelina Weld  
 Grimké, Charlotte Forten  
 Harper, Frances E. W.  
 Jackson, Angela  
 Jackson, Mae  
 Johnson, Georgia  
 Douglas  
 Johnson, Helene  
 Jordan, June  
 Kocher, Ruth Ellen  
 Lane, Pinkie Gordon  
 Lorde, Audre  
 McElroy, Colleen  
 Miller, May  
 Moore, Opal  
 Moss, Thylia  
 Mullen, Harryette  
 Murphy, Beatrice M.  
 Murray, Pauli  
 Nelson, Marilyn  
 Osbey, Brenda Marie  
 Parker, Pat  
 Plato, Ann  
 Polite, Carlene Hatcher  
 Rodgers, Carolyn  
 Sanchez, Sonia



## xxiv Thematic List of Entries

Sapphire  
Spencer, Anne  
Terry, Lucy  
Tillman, Katherine Davis Chapman  
Walker, Margaret  
Wheatley, Phillis  
Wright, Sarah Elizabeth

### **Religious Writers**

Broughton, Virginia W.  
Foote, Julia A. J.  
Jackson, Rebecca Cox  
Johnson, Amelia E.  
Lee, Jarena  
Stewart, Maria

### **Short-story Writers**

Anderson, Mignon Holland  
Bambara, Toni Cade  
Birtha, Becky  
Bonner, Marita  
Danticat, Edwidge  
Ferrell, Carolyn  
Lee, Andrea  
Millican, Arthenia J. Bates  
Moore, Opal  
Oliver, Diane  
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### **Social Activists/Educators**

Albert, Octavia V. Rogers  
Boyd, Melba  
Brown, Hallie Q.  
Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward  
Cooper, Anna Julia  
Coppin, Fanny Jackson  
Davis, Angela  
Dunbar-Nelson, Alice Moore  
Golden, Marita  
Graham, Shirley  
Grimké, Charlotte Forten  
Guy, Rosa

Harper, Frances E. W.  
Matthews, Victoria Earle  
Mossell, Gertrude  
Stewart, Maria  
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### **Themes**

Ancestor, Use of  
Beauty  
Body  
Christianity  
Class  
Community  
Conjuring  
Death  
Family  
Freedom  
Healing  
History  
Home  
Identity  
Lesbianism  
Literacy  
Love  
Memory  
Motherhood  
Myth, Use of  
Passing  
Quilting  
Race  
Rape  
Religion  
Sexuality  
Slavery  
South, Influence of the  
Spirituality  
Stereotypes  
Violence  
Whiteness  
Womanism  
Womanist Conjure  
Work



**ADULTHOOD RITES.** See Xenogenesis Trilogy

**AI (1947– )**

The poet Ai was born Florence Anthony in Albany, Texas, in 1947. She spent the first seven years of her life in Tucson, Arizona, but it was when her **family** moved to Las Vegas and then to San Francisco that she was first introduced to the complexities of racial **identity**. While her family included Native American and African American ancestors, she realized that she looked like none of them. As a child, she experienced racism for looking “different,” and these experiences helped her uncover the reason when, at the age of twenty-six, she confirmed that her biological father was Japanese. She would eventually adopt the Japanese word for **love**, “Ai,” as her name. In a sense, the process of renaming herself was also a way of remaking herself. She could break free from the past and create a new palette on which to paint her word portraits, the first-person narrative poems that she would develop as her personal style.

The process of breaking free from the past began when she majored in oriental studies at the University of Arizona, graduating in 1969. And though she had started writing **poetry** in her teens, she formalized her training by earning an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of California, Irvine, in 1971. After sending her poems to poet Galway Kinnell, she published her first book of poetry, *Cruelty*, in 1973. *Cruelty* was highly successful, and soon after its publication, she was awarded a Bunting Fellowship (1975–1976) at

Radcliffe. The collection of poems that followed, *Killing Floor*, published in 1979, helped to secure Ai's critical reputation. It won the 1978 Lamont Poetry Award from the Academy of American Poets.

Her success has only grown from there. Published in 1986, her third book, titled *Sin*, won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. From there followed *Fate: New Poems* in 1991 and *Greed* in 1993. Ai was awarded the National Book Award for Poetry in 1999 with her collection *Vice*. Additionally she has received awards from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her latest book is *Dread*, published in 2003.

Ai's poems have found such success for a number of reasons; among them is how accessible the voices of her narratives are to readers. She updates Robert Browning's form, the dramatic monologue, by giving voice to the sinners and saints that populated twentieth-century American life. From the Atlanta mass murderer to J. Edgar Hoover to rioters in L.A., her personae reveal the beautiful ugliness that can exist in American culture. Shifting from one voice to another, Ai inhabits the voices of others, inhabiting their identity, allowing us to hear from them—though always through her. The overall effect of these collected voices creates an edgy, sometimes sensationalized panorama of American existence where **race**, gender, **violence**, and politics all roil together to create the very individuals for which she speaks.

### Works By

*Cruelty*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

*Dread*. New York: Norton, 2003.

*Fate: New Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

*Greed*. New York: Norton, 1993.

*Killing Floor*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

"On Being  $\frac{1}{2}$  Japanese,  $\frac{1}{8}$  Choctaw,  $\frac{1}{4}$  Black, and  $\frac{1}{16}$  Irish." *Ms.* 6.11 (May 1978): 58.

*Sin*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.

*Vice: New and Selected Poems*. New York: Norton, 1999.

### Works About

Becker, Robin. "The Personal Is Political Is Postmodern." *American Poetry Review* 23.6 (1994): 23–26.

Hueving, Jeanne. "Divesting Social Registers: Ai's Sensational Portraiture of the Renowned and the Infamous." *Critical Survey* 9.2 (1997): 108–120.

Ingram, Claudia. "Writing the Crises: The Deployment of Abjection in Ai's Dramatic Monologues." *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 8.2 (1997): 173–191.

Leavitt, Michele. "Ai's Go." *The Explicator* 54.2 (1996): 126–127.

Mintz, Susannah B. "A 'Descent toward the Unknown' in the Poetry of Ai." *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* 9.2 (1995): 36–46.

Moore, Lenard D. "Poetry Reviews." *Black Issues Book Review* (March/April 2000): 44–45.

Ostriker, Alicia. Review of *Sin. Poetry* (January 1987): 231–237.

Seaman, Donna. "Poetic Fire and Ice." *Booklist* 95 (1999): 1028.

Seshadri, Vijay. "When Bad Things Happen to Everyone." Review of *Dread*. *New York Times Book Review*, May 4, 2003, 7.

*Amy Sparks Kolker*

### ALBERT, OCTAVIA V. ROGERS (1853–1889)

Octavia Victoria Rogers was born a slave in Oglethorpe, Georgia, in 1853. Little is known about her childhood except that she remained in her hometown until after the Civil War when she attended Atlanta University and studied to become a schoolteacher. She was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and, in 1874, married a fellow teacher and a Methodist minister, A.E.P. Albert. The couple soon after moved to Louisiana, where Octavia Albert embarked on a thirteen-year project of interviewing many of the local formerly enslaved men and women in an effort to remember the **history** of American **slavery**. Her interviews were collected as *The House of Bondage; or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves*, a work first serialized between January and December 1890 in the *South-western Christian Advocate*, the paper for the New Orleans Methodist Episcopal Church. Octavia Albert died sometime around the time her work was first published, although the circumstances and exact date of her **death** are not known. After her death, Albert's husband and their only child, Laura T. F. Albert, published *The House of Bondage* in book form.

*The House of Bondage* relates the stories of seven different individuals interviewed by Octavia Albert, although the longest section deals with the life of the woman featured in the title, a slave named Charlotte Brooks, or "Aunt Charlotte." In keeping with Albert's goal of remembering the history of slavery, the stories emphasize the brutalities endured by a courageous people, the hard physical labor, the separation of families, and the various acts of resistance. Taken together, the stories display the importance of **community**, of a people with a shared history. In this sense, Albert's approach to combining multiple interviews into a collective narrative is different from the pre-Civil War **slave narratives** that focused on the experience of one individual. The theme of community, as well as the triumph over slavery, fits within Albert's post-Civil War purpose of recognizing the achievements of the **race** as a whole and the ability of a people, not just of individuals, to not only survive but succeed in a white supremacist **South** still intent on keeping them down.

Although she chose to write history rather than **fiction** or **poetry**, Octavia Albert's work is part of the same tradition of increased literary production by African American women during this period as part of the reform project of

#### 4 Alexander, Elizabeth

“racial uplift.” As a university-educated former slave, an author, and the wife of a minister, Octavia Albert herself was evidence of an alternative and positive ending to the story of slavery. Even as an educated member of the black middle class, Albert’s status and authority to produce this text were not assured, however. As a black woman and a married woman, Albert stepped out of the boundaries of proper womanhood in writing and publishing a historical text, especially one challenging white narratives about slavery and racism. Albert negotiated this situation and deflected attention away from her own role as author by presenting a collection of tales told by other people, her role being only that of interviewer and master storyteller. Albert’s primary work was, however, ultimately a political act of recovery and a challenge to the dominant white narratives of southern history.

#### Work By

*The House of Bondage; or, Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves.* New York: Hunt and Eaton; Cincinnati, OH: Cranston and Stowe, 1890.

#### Works About

Foster, Francis Smith. Introduction to *The House of Bondage*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

—. *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Tiffany K. Wayne

#### ALEXANDER, ELIZABETH (1962– )

One of the most accomplished African American women poets born after 1960, Elizabeth Alexander is the author of three **poetry** collections, a book of essays, and a play, *Diva Studies*, which premiered at the Yale School of Drama in 1996. Her debut poetry collection, *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), was favorably reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, and the title poem has been widely anthologized since. Her two subsequent collections of poetry, *The Body of Life* (1996) and *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001), explore **history** and African American culture through the intersection of interior consciousness and historical moment in both lyric poems and those written in the voices of historical personas. The lyric themes of her early work include **sexuality**, travel, **identity**, and self-discovery; the later work mines the physical and psychological realms of **motherhood** and the **body**, invoking such woman-mother-artist figures as Sylvia Plath, Betty Shabazz, and **Toni Morrison**. Alexander’s persona poems invent voices for characters ranging from the Hottentot Venus to Mohammed Ali. Her poems have appeared in over twenty anthologies to date. A reading of her poetry is available on the video recording *Furious Flower: Conversations with African American Poets* (1998).

Alexander's poetry and criticism are both informed by an intense appreciation for visual art. She pays homage to the masters of African American modernism—Romaire Bearden, **Gwendolyn Brooks**, and Robert Hayden—in *The Black Interior* (2004), her collection of essays, as well as present-day artists such as Denzel Washington. Alexander's approach to criticism is exemplified in the title essay, where she explores representations of the living room by both verbal and visual artists in order to examine the overlap between public and private selves in this "presentation space." Her essays, as well as a number of short stories, have appeared in numerous periodicals and journals ranging from the *Village Voice* to the *Kenyon Review*, from the *Women's Review of Books* to *Callaloo*.

Born in Harlem, New York, Alexander grew up in Washington, D.C., in a distinguished **family** where education and achievement were important values. Her father, Clifford Leopold Alexander, Jr., who served as secretary of the army under President Jimmy Carter, has had a distinguished career as a lawyer, business consultant, and diplomat. Her mother, Adele (Logan) Alexander, is a historian and writer whose work has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Alexander received a B.A. from Yale University, an M.A. from Boston University (where she studied poetry writing with Derek Walcott), and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. She has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, as well as two Pushcart Prizes. She has lectured abroad and taught at Haverford College, Smith College, and the University of Chicago, where she was awarded the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. She is currently on the faculty at Yale University. During the summers, she teaches at Cave Canem, a retreat for African American writers, of which she is a founding member. Recently she was elected to the board of the Poetry Society of America.

### Works By

*Antebellum Dream Book*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001.

*The Black Interior*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004.

*The Body of Life*. Chicago: Tia Chucha Press, 1996.

*The Venus Hottentot*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990. Reprint, Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004.

### Works About

"Elizabeth Alexander." The Academy of American Poets. March 30, 2004. [www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7-C000C046100](http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7-C000C046100).

*Furious Flower: Conversations with African American Poets*. San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1998. Video recording.

Phillip, Christine. "An Interview with Elizabeth Alexander." *Callaloo* 19.2 (Spring 1996): 493–507.

*Ann Hostetler*

**ALEXANDER, MARGARET ABIGAIL WALKER.** See Walker, Margaret

**ALLEN, CLARISSA MINNIE THOMPSON (?-?)**

If Clarissa Minnie Thompson Allen's *Treading the Winepress; or, A Mountain of Misfortune* had been published as a single volume, she would have been the second African American woman to publish a novel. Instead, *Treading the Winepress* was serialized in the *Boston Advocate*, on the front page of forty-one issues between 1885 and 1886. In *Treading the Winepress*, Allen offers a noteworthy critique of specific social concerns within the African American **community**, including African American elitism and racial loyalty. Though the plot of *Treading the Winepress* is frequently melodramatic, full of unrequited **love**, madness, and murder, Allen's tale advocates morality, the virtues of womanhood, and respect for all people regardless of color or gender. To date, Allen's *Treading the Winepress* has still not been published as a single volume.

Allen was born in Columbia, South Carolina, to a prosperous middle-class **family**. Her mother, Eliza Henrietta Montgomery, bore nine children, of which Clarissa was the oldest. Her father, Samuel Benjamin Thompson, was a justice of the peace and state legislator. Allen was educated at the Howard School, then attended the South Carolina State Normal School, part of South Carolina University. After she completed her education, she accepted a teaching position at the Howard School and later went on to serve as principal of the Poplar Grove School in Abbeville, South Carolina. She then took a position at Allen University, where she taught Latin, physical geography, algebra, and ancient and modern **history**. Allen left South Carolina in 1886 to teach at a public school in Jefferson, Texas. After three years, Allen took a position as the first assistant in the Fort Worth City School System.

Allen began writing at an early age and published essays in the *Christian Recorder*. The first three chapters of *Treading the Winepress* were also published in the *Christian Recorder*, but the paper felt the novel's plot unsuited for its ecclesiastic audience and withdrew further publication. She also published **poetry** and letters for a variety of black newspapers, sometimes under the name Minnie Myrtle. Allen was also an essayist, and her "Humane Education" was presented at a teachers' convention in Ft. Worth, Texas, in 1892. Parts of the essay also appeared in the *Afro-American Encyclopedia*. One notable poem, titled "A Glass of Wine," demonstrates her intolerance for alcohol and was printed in the *Texas Blade* in 1886. She also published a novella titled *Only a Flirtation* in the *Dallas Enterprise*.

Allen was first and foremost an educator. She placed particular importance on the education of the African American community, especially women, whom she felt were regularly deprived of the opportunities to raise themselves. Allen used her literary skill to celebrate her high ideal of womanhood, which is reflected in her **poetry** and the characters in her novel. Above all,

Allen advocated knowledge as paramount to the elevation of the African American community, and she dedicated her life to that end.

### Works By

“A Glass of Wine.” *Blade*, 1886.

“Humane Education.” *Afro-American Encyclopedia, or the Thoughts, Doings, and Sayings of the Race*. Comp. James T. Haley and Booker T. Washington. Nashville, TN: Haley and Florida, 1895. 267–270.

“In Memoriam—the Grand Old Man.” *Afro-American Encyclopedia, or the Thoughts, Doings, and Sayings of the Race*. Comp. James T. Haley and Booker T. Washington. Nashville, TN: Haley and Florida, 1895. 549.

*Only a Flirtation*. *Dallas Enterprise*, n.d.

“A Simple Tale of Simple Trust.” *Christian Review*, October 8, 1885.

*Treading the Winepress; or, A Mountain of Misfortune*. *Boston Advocate* 1–2 (1885–1886). Serialized.

### Works About

Monroe, Majors. *Noted Negro Women, Their Triumphs and Activities*. Chicago: Donahue and Hennberry, 1893.

Shockley, Ann Allen. *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746–1933*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988.

*Debbie Clare Olson*

### AMINI, JOHARI (1935– )

Johari Amini (Jewel C. Latimore) is a poet, writer, teacher, and chiropractor. As a poet, she seeks to celebrate her black heritage and to reject the racism that was so prevalent in American society during the 1960s. She and other poets protested the unequal treatment of blacks by turning away from traditional approaches in American **poetry**. They rejected formal English grammar, experimented with free verse that avoided the use of traditional metrical patterns, and implemented elements found in the everyday speech of many African Americans. Some features of the vernacular included shortened word endings, multiple negations, slang, the unvaried use of “be,” and a lack of possessives. In Amini’s poetry, one finds little punctuation, unconventional capitalization, the use of equal signs, the ampersand, ellipses, words separated with large spaces or no spaces, and abbreviated words. Although Amini’s poetry did not conform to traditional standards, as a teacher she encouraged her students to master orthodox English so they would have the proper background to excel in society.

Amini was born in 1935 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she was the oldest of six children. Her father was a clergyman and her mother, Alma



Bazel McLawler, was a songwriter who specialized in gospel music. As a young girl, Amini was considered by some to be a child prodigy and was encouraged to write by the adults in her life. She met Haki R. Madhubuti (born Don L. Lee) at Wilson Junior College, which marked the beginning of a significant literary and political alliance. Amini, Madhubuti, and **Carolyn Rodgers** cofounded the Third World Press in Madhubuti's apartment in Chicago with only \$400. The Third World Press has become one of the oldest and most prestigious publishers in the nation that has promoted progressive black thought, critique, and **literature**. After meeting Madhubuti, Amini changed her name from Jewel Christine McLawler to Johari Amini. In Swahili, *Johari* means "jewel," and *Amini* stands for "honesty and trustworthiness." This name was thoughtfully chosen because Amini believes that a name is connected to a person's character and personality, and it was her hope that this name would be a reflection of her personal behavior. Among her accomplishments, she holds an A.A. from Chicago City College (1968), a B.A. from Chicago State College (1970), and an M.A. from the University of Chicago (1972).

Amini used the name Jewel C. Latimore when she first started her writing career. Her poetry can be found in such works as *Images in Black* (1967), *A Folk Fable* (1969), *Let's Go Some Where* (1970), and *A Hip Tale in the Death Style* (1972). Her essays are in *An African Frame of Reference* (1972), and she also wrote *A Commonsense Approach to Eating* (1975). Her background in psychology and training as a chiropractor provide her with the knowledge to address the whole person in her writing. She is particularly concerned with the survival of African Americans and believes that survival is most likely when people understand their **identity**.

*See also* Black Arts Movement; Black Nationalism; Race

### **Works By**

*An African Frame of Reference*. Chicago: Institute of Positive Education, 1972.

*Black Essence*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1968.

*A Commonsense Approach to Eating*. Chicago: Institute of Positive Education, 1975.

*A Folk Fable (For My People)*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1969.

*A Hip Tale in the Death Style*. Detroit: Broadside, 1972.

*Images in Black*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1967.

*Let's Go Some Where*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1970.

### **Work About**

Reid, Margaret Ann. *Black Protest Poetry: Polemics from the Harlem Renaissance and the Sixties*. Studies in African and African-American Culture 8. New York: Lang, 2001.

*Deborah Weigel*

## ANCESTOR, USE OF

The concept of the ancestor is important in the study of African American literature. Explanations of the ancestor can be attributed to **Toni Morrison**. In her essay “City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction,” Morrison defines the ancestor and places the ancestor in relationship to the roles of the city and the country in African American literature. Morrison believes that because black men and women have not contributed to the growth of the American city, they are outsiders in that city. On the other hand, it is the village, the neighborhood within the city, that often empowers the African American, and this idea is illustrated by many African American writers. As well, Morrison points out that while the ancestor is often absent in literature that places itself within the city, the ancestor can often be found in the village within the city.

However, regardless of the setting of a work, the ancestor is frequently a key element. In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison explains that ancestors are not necessarily parents; they are grandmothers, grandfathers, and healers, among others. Morrison defines the ancestor as “benevolent, instructive, and protective.” She explains that when the ancestor figure is absent, the characters often fail to succeed; when the ancestor is present, however, the characters are more likely to survive, succeed, and find happiness.

There are a number of works in African American literature in which the existence, or absence, of an ancestor figure has significance. For example, Mama in **Lorraine Hansberry’s** *A Raisin in the Sun* is perhaps the best example of the ancestor figure. Many attribute the strength of the Younger family to Mama, and it is as a result of Mama’s wisdom that her son Walter acknowledges his black roots and experiences growth. Similarly, Janie in **Zora Neale Hurston’s** *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is another character who benefits from the wisdom of the ancestor in the form of her grandmother. As well, Mattie Michael in **Gloria Naylor’s** *The Women of Brewster Place* is the sustaining element for the community of oppressed women in this urban environment. On the other hand, Lutie in **Ann Petry’s** *The Street* is a character who fails to succeed because she has no ancestor figure to empower her; in fact, the solitary Lutie longs for the wisdom of her deceased grandmother as she tries to make the right choices. Without the ancestor, her life follows a tragic path. The use of the ancestor can also be seen in the work of **Toni Cade Bambara** and **Ralph Ellison**, among others.

### Works About

Morrison, Toni. “City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction.” *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*. Ed. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1981. 35–43.

## 10 Anderson, Mignon Holland

—. “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation.” *Black Women Writers (1950–1980)*. Ed. Mari Evans. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1984. 339–345.

Diane Todd Bucci

### ANDERSON, MIGNON HOLLAND (1945– )

Mignon Holland Anderson was born and raised in Northampton County, Cheriton, Virginia, to Frank and Ruby Holland, who owned and operated a successful funeral home in the area. Exposure to the intimacies of **death** heightened Anderson’s understanding and compassion for the debilitating affects of racism and economic poverty on African Americans. These experiences infused Anderson with a desire, exhibited in her writing, to represent the truth of African American heritage and experience and the strength developed and displayed in the struggle to withstand the onslaughts of segregation, which inevitably lead to feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, and vulnerability.

Anderson depicts the impact of potentially crushing outside forces upon the African American man and the significant role of the African American woman in that equation. She not only celebrates the power of African American womanhood but also what that strength brings to the African American male and **family**. In a 1968 short story, “In the Face of Fire, I Will Not Turn Back,” Anderson honors the strength of the African American woman through a depiction that chronicles her fortitude through captivity, **slavery**, her husband’s despair of his situation, and the need to hire herself out in order to support her family. Throughout Anderson’s writings, the African American woman serves as the foundation for the man as she gives support in his struggle against the world. She likewise acts as a freeing and **healing** force for the African American man and a mainstay for the children.

Anderson’s first book, a collection of short stories titled *Mostly Womenfolk and a Man or Two* (1976), contains stories that bring to life the intricate role of the female African American within the family. As the stories move from various accounts of birth, childhood, struggle, and death, Anderson weaves these representative roles of woman throughout the book, ultimately ending with a female child physically supporting an elderly man during a funeral. Anderson’s second book, a novel titled *The End of Dying* (2001), continues, in part, this exploration of the significance of the African American woman in her family as it follows the impact of overt racism leveled upon one child, Carrie Allen, and the people she loves.

Anderson continues to write and publish and has dedicated herself to enriching the learning experience of students, especially college freshmen at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES), a historically black land grant university, where she resides as the only instructor of freshman English honors courses. She earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Columbia University and has served as the associate editor and editor of the *Maryland*

*Review*, UMES' literary journal. Anderson has won several teaching awards, among them UMES President's Teacher of the Year and the President's Top Ten Teachers of the Year, and has appeared several times in *Who's Who Among America's Teachers*. Anderson is currently working on her third book, *The Summer Calling*.

## Works By

*The End of Dying*. Baltimore: AmErica House, 2001.

"Gone After Jake." *Carry Me Back: An Anthology of Virginia Fiction*. Ed. Mary MacArthur. Arlington, VA: Gallimaufry Press, 1978.

"In the Face of Fire, I Will Not Turn Back." *Negro Digest* 17 (1968): 20–23. *Mostly Womenfolk and a Man or Two: A Collection*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1976.

Wanda G. Addison

## ANGELOU, MAYA (1928– )

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, the multitalented and prolific Marguerite ("Maya") Johnson spent the majority of her childhood in Stamps, Arkansas. While living with her brother Bailey, her physically handicapped uncle, and her entrepreneur grandmother, Angelou was quickly immersed in the matrix of fear, surveillance, and racially centered **violence** that defined black life in the segregated **South**. The early divorce of her parents made for a rather unstable relationship with both, although her mother, Vivian Baxter, eventually emerged as the more influential parent. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), the author's first published work, was the recipient of widespread critical and public acclaim. It generated five subsequent volumes of the same genre: *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002). A consistent theme is the struggle to maintain a healthy sense of individuality amid the unrelenting social terrors faced by black Americans from within a national machinery of racial and sexual oppression. Angelou's victimization is held in equipoise with her heroic drive for self-actualization and her desire to succeed. Of key importance is the belief that through intelligence, perseverance, and acquired skills, the fulfillment of seemingly impossible goals is possible and, indeed, imperative for survival and ultimate growth.

As a public figure, Angelou has been extremely aware of her office as a positive and enduring role model for women, especially women of color. By participating in worldwide speaking tours, educational projects, corporate ventures for companies like Hallmark, and various artistic and social endeavors, Angelou has morphed into a kind of American institution. Like the Horatio Alger books she explored as a child, hers is a narrative of uplift and

## 12 Angelou, Maya

(feminist) transcendence beyond the poverty and circumscription of early life. Even when faced with indignities (racism, abusive relationships, job stress, depression, intense personal loss), her actions have exemplified how inner resources, no matter how atrophied or abused, can be revived through a mixture of initiative, creative thinking, and common sense. This mutable spirit suggests a very American kind of optimism. Angelou, in turn, is an emblematic figure, especially in what may be called the “self-made, self-help” tradition of American literary heroism. Her symbolic currency as a strong black woman has been duly suggested by her role in the **film** *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995). The **quilting** ritual serves as an occasion for her character, one voice emanating from a circle of female peers, to speak about ancestral wisdom, the dignity of folk tradition, and the nurturing, matrifocal bonds that can exist between women of different generations, backgrounds, and **races**. Art remains the nucleus of this creative and interpersonal exchange.

In an ongoing repudiation of the narrow roles that black women of her generation were expected to fulfill, Angelou’s career stands as a veritable patchwork of life encounters. They have been in artistic performance (singer, dancer, actor, composer, film director), creative and critical writing (essayist, poet, journalist, playwright, editor, screen and teleplay writer), social welfare advocacy (northern coordinator for Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference), education (endowed professor, university writer-in-residence, motivational speaker), transportation (streetcar conductress, chauffeur), food service (cook, waitress, **domestic**), and miscellaneous employment (unpaid laborer in the **family** store, whorehouse madam, prostitute). As *Gather Together in My Name* attests, **motherhood** has remained an undeniably central aspect of her life, although as an urban woman seeking the twin goals of self-sufficiency and financial stability, the management of her son’s life has been difficult. She dedicated *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to her son Guy, whose birth in San Francisco occurred shortly after her graduation from high school at sixteen.

Both movement and emotional flux characterize Angelou’s autobiographical journey. Especially during her teen years in California, she finds switching jobs and traveling routine occurrences. Her career would lead her to Canada, Europe, and Africa, among others, primarily by dint of the *Porgy and Bess* production (1954–1955) that she details in *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*. At times, she encounters resistance from others based on her refusal to muffle her assertive personality in conformity with her perceived station (that is, a young, black, unwed mother). Another reason for her early unsettledness lies in her failed romantic relationships. An intriguing section of *Gather Together in My Name* deals with the disparity between fantasy and reality in amatory relationships. Her human environment is littered with troubled males: drug users, pimps, pushers, gamblers, and the despondent, the latter category being one that includes her brother. While she acknowledges the dehumanizing pressures on many of these men, she finds her relative naiveté, loyalty, and straightforwardness abused by those who profess

to care for her. Her **body** becomes a tool for the furthering of their personal and professional goals, an often sexist breach of trust that requires **healing** and much positive support from her mother as well as a cluster of female friends.

Her marriage to a Greek American (that is, a white man) would substantially affect her perceptions, especially with regard to interracial relationships and the disparity between good intentions, bad outcomes, and what might aptly be called “the mourning after.” Whether it is the elaborately spun 1950s dream of a nuclear family that paired a working father and homemaker mother with a happy, well-adjusted child, or the more fundamental desire for respect and reciprocity in **love**, Angelou’s hopes for sustained and salutary interaction with men falter due to their inability to commit wholly, monogamously, and with a necessary level of compromise. In the case of her first husband, the point of contention is religious belief, something the staunch atheist Tosh forbids. For feminist readers, the semiotic field of religious devotion is most closely aligned with the sanctity and security of her grandmother, Momma Henderson. Tosh’s patriarchal intolerance for Angelou’s right to worship gestures to greater curtailments of her personal freedom over the rapidly dwindling course of their partnership.

Conversely, in the case of the two lesbians for whom she briefly serves as brothel madam, the relationship appears at least mutually satisfying. Between employer and employees, however, the rapport is less about sisterly cooperation and female empowerment than material gain, competitiveness, and eventually, shared disdain. The lesbian characters Johnnie Mae and Beatrice are eccentric and bawdy, and Angelou’s hardly tight-lipped ambivalence about their frank **sexuality** is reminiscent of **Ann Petry**’s portrayal of the queer landlady in *The Street* (1946). This episode, however, does provide a decidedly heterosexual (and arguably, heterosexist) coda to the agonizing qualms about **lesbianism** that the writer faces at the end of the first autobiographical installment. In *The Heart of a Woman*, lesbianism resurfaces briefly with reference to **Billie Holiday**, showing that homosexuality was a pervasive aspect of many prominent black artists’ lives. In the third text especially, a widening of Angelou’s social network makes more room for a spectrum of individuals; many are gay, and yet most of them are talented and memorable enough to be immortalized in her work. Such continuity functions in a more expansive, metacritical sense as well. At the end of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, the reader is taken to the point in Angelou’s life when she decides to begin writing her first **autobiography**. Coming full circle, the textual act mimics the recursive nature of the writer’s **memory** and the desire to reconstitute the past through a life-giving, life-affirming document of personal ascent.

From her early training in drama at the California Labor School, Angelou has danced, sung, and written herself into being as a consummate performer. During her artistic coming of age, she undergoes a name change (the adopted marital surname “Angelos” becomes “Angelou”), a profound metaphor for the refashioning of the female self. It is not through marriage but through the alembic of multiple formative experiences that this occurs. If the name stands

as a sign of assertive individuality, the newly formed “Angelou” consolidates the importance of the writer’s quest for an **identity** apart from the coercive influence of her husband or her prescribed role as wife. “Maya” also becomes her name proper, a tribute to the continuing love she has for her absent brother who originally used “maya” in lieu of “my” to signify an affectionate claim on her as sibling and charge. Her son also changed his name, an indirect testament to the influence of a strong female and mother on a growing son and a hearkening back to the importance of naming in African American **history** and **literature** as a means by which power relations have been imposed, subverted, or affirmed. The significance of naming initially emerges in the first volume when Maya refuses to accept a new, supposedly more convenient name from her employer as an adequate substitute for her own.

For readers, this textual resonance between mother and son reiterates the importance of Angelou’s commitment to her child and the possible unconscious effects that absences—temporary or prolonged—have on the psyche of loved ones. During her theatrical tour of Europe, the writer rarely fails to remind the audience of her devotion to her son and the attendant guilt of leaving him with her mother in California. This scenario proves to be a repetition of her own situation as a child, handed over to her grandmother while her parents pursued their own goals from a distant shore. While Angelou comes to a clearer understanding of her mother’s motivations and her probable emotional turmoil, she struggles with the double imperative of furthering her own inchoate career and attending to her only child. Privileging the latter need facilitates the recovery of Guy’s psychosomatic skin condition but prompts Maya’s descent into neurasthenic illness. In the end, however, she realizes with gratitude the extent of her life’s path thus far, her blessings by the grace of God, and the joy that awaits both in the continued pursuit of her ambitions. In some ways, her fight to guide her son as a single mother shares many qualities with Gloria Matthews’s struggle in **Terry McMillan’s** phenomenally popular novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992).

These volumes stand as vital historiographical documents for their ability to bring together in continuous narrative form some of the most pivotal incidents and figures in African American history. Much has been said about the assistance **Langston Hughes’s** chapters on Harlem life in *The Big Sea* (1940) provided for literary historians. Angelou’s contribution is hardly different, except that she strives to move beyond the scope of the merely literary, and her personal anecdotes tend to flesh out the characters and events more vividly because of the serial nature of her project. Her earlier texts contextualize, among others, the importance of Joe Louis, Charlie Parker, **James Weldon Johnson**, Paul Robeson, **Paul Laurence Dunbar**, and Jesse Owens in the readerly imagination. They also emphasize the influence of black music and social struggle on West Coast life, stressing how a culture beyond Harlem and other urban centers of the North did indeed exist. The later texts go on to mention southern lynch law, bus boycotts, Emmett Till, **Malcolm X**, Elijah Muhammad, the lure of the Pan-Africanist movement, the Du Bois in Ghana (where Angelou ventures in *All God’s Children Need*

*Traveling Shoes*), Kwame Nkrumah, and a host of other crucial avatars of revolutionary social change. What sets her rendition apart from those of her male precedents is the way in which her story showcases her own investment in, and involvement with, these movements, leaders, and ideas. In other words, she is not simply the passive female observer, the assistant, or the secretary. Her gendered presence is crucial. While the **Harlem Renaissance** poet **Countee Cullen** wrote wonderingly about his alienation from the African continent in a poem like “Heritage” (1925), Angelou goes to Africa and directly interrogates the lost centuries, doing so in the context of her *female*, as well as her male, ancestors. Like many autobiographers, her mode is certainly confessional, but her tone shuns sentimentalism, remaining shrewd, measured, and at times, tersely philosophical.

In the fourth volume, building on a theme of arrival and leave taking, Angelou relocates to New York with her son. She joins the Harlem Writers Guild, a stellar opportunity for her to renew her interest in literature and forge more profound ties with writers like **Paule Marshall** and **James Baldwin**. This would be a precursor to her move to Africa, appearances in Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* (1960), editorial work for the *Arab Observer* (1961–1962), print journalism for the *Times* of Ghana and the Ghanaian Broadcasting Corporation, and a climactic decision to return to America in order to continue her civil rights activism. *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* reveals how her work straddled two continents, interrogating the meaning of bicultural identification (African and American) at such an incendiary time as the 1960s. From a feminist vantage point, she takes up and reconfigures the work of similarly cosmopolitan individuals like Olaudah Equiano, one of the early writers of the transatlantic **slave narratives**. His travels during the European Enlightenment indexed what was to many the paradoxical status of being African and yet highly literate, intelligent, and indeed, a *human* citizen of the world.

Although the full impact of her **poetry** has been somewhat overshadowed by the popularity of her memoirs, this important aspect of Angelou’s repertoire was underscored by the honor of being the first female and first African American to read at a presidential inauguration. “On the Pulse of Morning” ushered in the Clinton era in January 1993. Her collections include the Pulitzer Prize–nominated *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ’fore I Diië* (1971), *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* (1975), *And Still I Rise* (1978), *Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?* (1983), *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987), *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990), and *Phenomenal Woman* (1994). The lyricism of her verse and the incisive commentary of her memoirs have been consolidated and transmitted into essay form, yielding *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993) and *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997). Many of her poems are succinct meditations on female strength, the refusal to submit gently to grief or failure, and the inimitable bonds that exist between family, friends, and lifelong acquaintances.

Angelou’s artistic territory has extended to plays (*And Still I Rise* [1978]), television acting (**Alex Haley**’s *Roots* [1977]), spoken-word recordings (*Been Found* [1996]), children’s books (*Kofi and His Magic* [1996]), a PBS series (*Black, Blues, Black* [1968]), screenplays (*Georgia, Georgia* [1971]), film direction (*Down*



*in the Delta* [1998]), and manifold other efforts on the national and international scenes. She has become a cultural icon, receiving a lifelong appointment as Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University. Apart from prizes and honorary degrees, she was awarded a lifetime membership to the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2002. Her career has exemplified a drive for honesty, self-validation, and visibility both as a female and as an African American artist and public intellectual.

*See also* Civil Rights Movement; Work

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*Nancy Kang*

**ANNIE ALLEN**

**Gwendolyn Brooks's** second collection of **poetry**, published in 1949, tells the story of the early life of the title character, a girl who comes of age during the 1940s. This focus on a single character represented a significant shift from the emphasis on setting in her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), which realistically portrayed a broad cross section of black people on Chicago's South Side through carefully selected details. By contrast, Brooks depicted Annie Allen's environment through symbols that suggest how Annie's perceptions are colored by romance and fairy tales. The second book also represented a stylistic departure for Brooks; her already careful language and attentiveness to form were dazzlingly heightened, earning both praise and criticism from the literary establishment. The collection won the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 1950, making Brooks the first African American—female or male—to be accorded this honor.

After opening with a poetic memorial for Brooks's friend who was killed serving in World War II, the collection is divided into three sections corresponding to the phases of Annie's maturation. The first, "Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood," includes ballads and other short poems describing her earliest years, in which she absorbs the romantic ideals that teach girls to aspire to **love** in lieu of active, self-determined lives. Annie clings to these illusions, despite the evidence her parents' marriage gives her about the realities of domesticity. The young Annie learns to suppress her feelings to gain her mother's approval and dreams passively of escape into a fairy-tale marriage.

The title of the second section, "The Anniad," purposefully recalls Greek epics like *The Iliad*. Written in exquisitely crafted variations of the rhyme royal stanza, the single long poem composing this section depicts Annie's troubled marriage, implicitly comparing her struggles to the heroics of great warriors. Annie's battlefield is the gloomy little apartment where she fights to save her marriage, challenged by poverty, the draft, infidelity, and finally, the illness that leads to her husband's **death**. Critics disagree about whether this poem is a mock-epic, suggesting that Annie's battle is trivial compared to traditional, masculine epic subjects, or a feminist revision of the genre, employing its conventions to recast her as heroic.

"The Womanhood," the third section, portrays Annie as a mature mother, devoted to providing for her children. Through her trials she has gained a sense of self, independent of illusions of rescue by a Prince Charming. Having learned that poor, dark-skinned black girls are not the intended heroines of fairy tales, she teaches her children, in a series of poignant sonnets, to approach life's pleasures and pains directly and pragmatically. The remaining poems illustrate scenes in which she and they face loss, racism, colorism, and economic oppression—and survive. Brooks revisits many of this book's themes in her novel *Maud Martha* (1953). Though she later dismissed her achievement as overly interested in technique at the expense of content, *Annie*

*Allen* remains an aesthetically and historically important representation of societal issues confronting African American women.

*See also* Beauty; Motherhood

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*Evie Shockley*

### ANNIE JOHN

"I always say it's completely autobiographical, including the punctuation," **Jamaica Kincaid** has remarked of her 1985 coming-of-age novel *Annie John* (Muirhead 45). "The point wasn't the truth and yet the point was the truth," she insists, describing *Annie John* as, at once, a fictional work and as autobiographical (Perry 494). First published as a series of stories in the *New Yorker*, *Annie John* is a fictionalized account of Kincaid's life as she grew up in Antigua in the 1950s through the mid-1960s. Haunted by memories of her mother-tormented past, Kincaid was moved to write because of the "immediate oppression" of the mother-daughter relation. "I wanted to free myself of that," she states (Bonetti 32). Writing gave Kincaid a way to talk back to her internalized mother and also a way to take control of her obsessive ruminations over the past.

Presented as a series of vignettes, *Annie John* chronicles the early life of Kincaid's daughter-character, Annie John, from ages ten to seventeen. Although *Annie John* may seem, at first glance, a simple narrative in its linear but episodic account of the childhood and coming of age of Annie John, many readers find an emotional puzzle at the heart of the work as Kincaid describes Annie's intense **love-hate** relationship with her all-powerful mother. If Annie as a girl feels physically and psychically close to her mother and secure in her mother's presence, she also is extremely sensitive to maternal rejection and slights. Just as Annie comes to divide her mother into the idealized good mother and the angry and rejecting bad mother, so she divides herself—and her

girlfriends—into good and bad identities, seeing Gwen as an embodiment of her idealized good self and the Red Girl as her unlovable and defiant bad self. While Annie excels in her studies in school, she also defies her teachers as she actively resists not only her English colonial education but also her mother's efforts to make her behave in a socially acceptable feminine way. But behind Annie's defiance lie deep-rooted feelings of shame and despair.

Living in the shadow of her contemptuous mother during her troubled adolescence, Annie comes to identify her bad and rejected self with Lucifer. Accused by her mother of behaving like a slut, Annie becomes not only angry but also depressed. Retreating into herself, she collapses into a prolonged depressive illness and is ultimately cured by her maternal grandmother, Ma Chess, a practitioner of obeah, who restores Annie to health by comforting and mothering her. In the novel's closing scenes as Annie prepares to leave Antigua to go to England, where she will train to become a nurse, she is almost overwhelmed by a flood of contradictory feelings as she recognizes the finality of her leave-taking from Antigua—and from her mother.

"Clearly, the way I became a writer was that my mother wrote my life for me and told it to me," Kincaid has remarked of her writing (O'Connor 6). A mother-obsessed and female-focused novel, *Annie John's* coming-of-age story sets the stage for Kincaid's continuing exploration of her mother-dominated Antiguan past in novels such as *Lucy* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, and it also marks the emergence of Kincaid's distinctive voice as she talks back to the contemptuous mother who wrote her life. If Kincaid was profoundly injured by her mother, she also traces the roots of her writing to her mother's storytelling, and Kincaid's characteristic angry and defiant voice also finds its roots in her mother's contemptuous voice. It is this voice that Kincaid uses to great effect in her next novel *Lucy* as she, in describing her experiences after leaving Antigua and coming to the United States to work as an au pair, continues to tell the story of her early life lived in the shadow of her powerful mother, Annie Drew.

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J. Brooks Bouson

### ANSA, TINA McELROY (1949– )

Tina McElroy Ansa has carved a niche for herself among the current generation of African American novelists. She has created the fictional **community** of Mulberry, Georgia, and populated it with an interesting array of strong African American women who struggle to come to terms with themselves and with their places in their community. Ansa's women work against common **stereotypes** of African American women, especially the stereotype of the downtrodden but morally superior superwoman, and the **myth** of the black matriarch as the head of the **family**. She also works to refute the image of loving, giving black **motherhood** with some of the mothers she creates who, far from being eternal nurturers, at midlife turn inward, seeking personal expression and connection with nature and with the nature gods that form their heritage. Ansa is also interested in material culture as an expression of personality and historical tradition and in folk traditions that reinforce connections between people, especially women, and nature.

Ansa was born in Macon, Georgia, and grew up in the predominantly black Pleasant Hill section of that city. The youngest of five children, her family's middle-class background is reflected by the fictional McPherson family that is prominent in her first and third novels, *Baby of the Family* (1989) and *The Hand I Fan With* (1996), as well as by the Lovejoy family of *Ugly Ways* (1993) and the Pines women in *You Know Better* (2002). Her parents were Walter J. McElroy, a businessman, and Nellie Lee McElroy, a teacher's assistant. Her grandfather ran a juke joint in which she heard many of the stories that find their way into her fictions, especially those featuring the fictional McPherson family's bar and grill called "The Place." Ansa always wanted to be a writer, and following her graduation from Atlanta's Spelman College in 1971, she began a career in journalism, first at the *Atlanta Constitution*, where she was the first black woman to work at a daily morning paper, then in North Carolina at the *Charlotte Observer*. In 1978 she married filmmaker Jonee Ansa, and in 1982 she retired from newspaper work to become a freelance writer, commentator, and promoter of literary and artistic

efforts by other young African Americans. Tina McElroy Ansa and her husband make their home on St. Simons Island, Georgia, where they are a vital part of the area's artistic community. Her novels are all dedicated to her husband, "whose love sustains me," and her acknowledgments, in addition to recognizing Ansa's debts to family, friends, and editors, always include thanks to St. Simons Island for its "beauty, peace, and acceptance of home."

Ansa's growing reputation rests on her four novels that offer vivid female characters struggling to come to terms with who they are as individuals and as parts of their families and communities. This struggle is personal and emotional for the most part, reflecting characters that have advanced up Abraham Maslow's widely known hierarchy of personal needs beyond physiological and safety levels to deal with their needs for **love**, esteem, and self-actualization. The needs for economic security and shelter are not central issues, even though they may form part of the background of her characters' lives. In *Baby of the Family*, young Lena McPherson is the central character whose life is traced from birth to adolescence. In this coming-of-age story, Lena struggles with the "gifts" that being born with a caul over her face have brought her while she also observes and hears much of the life of members of the African American community of Mulberry, thus telling us the stories of their lives. The other novels deal more with adult women in various stages of self-discovery; in addition, the connections among the stories are obliquely referenced from tale to tale. *Ugly Ways* focuses on the Lovejoy women, the recently deceased mother Esther and her daughters Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth, all seeking independence and struggling with the problems created by decisions the others make. References to the McPherson business, *The Place*, tie this novel to *Baby of the Family*. In *The Hand I Fan With* we revisit Lena McPherson as an adult facing her own midlife crises and coming to terms with her personal emotional needs. Lena, remembering her parents' funeral, offers the mortician, Mr. Parkinson, the opportunity to contrast the dignity of the McPherson funeral with his embarrassment about the debacle of Esther Lovejoy's funeral, tying this story to *Ugly Ways*. Finally, in *You Know Better* we meet three generations of Pines women, each of whom, in an oblique reference to Charles Dickens, requires guidance from the spirit world to see her life for what it is and to begin positive change. Nurse Bloom, important in *Baby of the Family* and mentioned in *The Hand I Fan With*, is one of the spirit guides in this story. The spirit world is an integral part of all four of these novels, with Lena haunted and helped by ghosts, with the deceased Esther having her own voice, and with the Pines women each being visited by a spirit who serves as guide and mentor. Ansa helps us to believe that this spirit world is a resource available to us if we open ourselves to its powers. She also celebrates the female connection to the natural world by the gardens and landscapes to which certain of her characters are intimately connected.

Ansa's style, in addition to celebrating black expression and black vernacular language, is characterized by her attention to the specific details that characterize her people. Food abounds in all of the stories, especially the soul food that sustains her characters when they need the comfort of particular

flavors and textures on the tongue or when they celebrate family occasions with traditional foods whose recipes have come down through generations. Clothes characterize her people from the fashionable designer clothes that Nellie and Lena McPherson wear to the gauzy pastels that Grandmama McPherson and Esther Lovejoy favor. The interior design of the homes in which the McPherson, the Lovejoy, and the Pines women live also tells us a lot about the women who surround themselves not only with specific pieces of furniture but also with particular rooms and color schemes that allow them to express their individuality.

Ansa's work has won many awards. *Baby of the Family* and *The Hand I Fan With* have both won the Georgia Authors Series Award; Ansa is the only author to have received this award twice. In addition, *Baby of the Family* was named a Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times* in 1989, and after its paperback publication, it made the African American Best Sellers List for Paperback Fiction as well as being named a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association. The African American Blackboard List named *Ugly Ways* Best Fiction in 1994. In addition, she is gradually becoming more well known as critics and scholars include her in bio-bibliographical sourcebooks and write scholarly articles that include her work, specifically those that compare her with writers such as **Zora Neale Hurston** and **Alice Walker**. Ansa herself has said that Hurston was a model for her. When she read Hurston as a student at Spelman, she realized that **literature** could be written in black vernacular, a language that Ansa explores and celebrates in her novels.

In addition to her four novels, Ansa has written various essays and short stories and has coauthored with her husband the screenplay for the **film** version of *Baby of the Family*. The film, directed by Jonee Ansa, came out in 2002. Ansa also conducts writing workshops and actively mentors other writers and artists. The cover art for Ansa's novels is by African American artist Varnette P. Honeywood, whose work is also admired by Lena in *The Hand I Fan With*, representing yet another way in which Ansa connects to the world of African American artists.

Influenced by models such as Zora Neale Hurston, **Toni Morrison**, and Alice Walker, Ansa writes stories about real women, who happen to be African American, struggling to make sense of their lives in a small city in southern Georgia. She paints vivid pictures of the settings and details that define the characters' lives and depicts their situations with humor and love. Over her four novels, Ansa has gone more and more deeply into the spiritual and emotional needs that women face and has especially tried to open herself to the issues that younger women face in the twenty-first century.

*See also* Sexuality; Spirituality

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*Harriette C. Buchanan*

## AUNT JEMIMA

The events that sparked the creation and rise of this icon, the twentieth century's most recognizable image of black womanhood, began in 1875 when an African American musician named Billy Kersand composed the song "Old Aunt Jemima." Its colorful portrayal of a stereotypical **Mammy** figure helped to make "Old Aunt Jemima" one of the most popular songs of its time, especially on the minstrel stage, where white male performers in blackface and drag brought the title figure to life. The image of the lively Aunt Jemima caught the attention of Chris Rutt, a former journalist. The year was 1889, and Rutt and his business partner, Charles Underwood, had recently



acquired a bankrupt flour mill that they intended to use for producing their latest creation, a self-rising pancake flour. Rutt, who first saw the Aunt Jemima performed at a minstrel show, realized that her lively wit and comforting image would make the perfect trademark for his new product.

Rutt and Underwood were unable to develop their flour business into a successful enterprise, and the company was eventually taken over by the R. T. Davis Milling Company. Davis's generous financing and marketing expertise breathed life into the Aunt Jemima product line. He hired Nancy Green, a former slave, to play the role of Aunt Jemima at public appearances. At trade shows and promotional events, Green served pancakes and told animated stories of life on the old plantation. Green's international debut was at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago where she performed in a barrel-shaped kiosk, serving pancakes and telling stories of the "good old days" in the antebellum South. Aunt Jemima was a hit. Her popularity spawned a spate of imitators who used only slightly modified images of the jolly and corpulent Mammy to sell everything from produce to cleaning products. Meanwhile, seizing on the obvious appeal of their living trademark, the Davis company created a family of spin-off characters—Uncle Mose, her husband, and her "pickanninies," Diana and Wade—to increase the marketing options for their most widely recognized icon.

In 1925 the Quaker Oats Company bought R. T. Davis Milling and expanded its promotion of the Aunt Jemima pancake line even further. After Nancy Green's tragic death in a car accident in 1923, six other women would play the role, interpreting the character Green made famous at trade shows and fairs and even at elite venues like the Waldorf Astoria. As popular as the real-life Aunt Jemimas were, though, the true heart and soul of Quaker Oats marketing strategy was the printed image of that figure, the smiling, middle-aged woman in her bright red kerchief, gazing out from the front of the package.

As awareness of stereotyping increased during the middle decades of the twentieth century, the dozens of corporations who used images of African Americans in the marketing of their products responded, most by removing images not only of Mammies but of black butlers, "pickanninies," and grizzled Uncle Toms from their packaging and advertising campaigns. By the end of the 1960s most such figures had disappeared, but Aunt Jemima remained. In response to decreasing tolerance for the Mammy, however, her appearance has gradually transformed. In 1968 Quaker Oats unveiled a thinner, younger-looking Mammy, with a few locks of straightened hairs poking out from beneath her trademark head wrap. The year 1989, however, marked the most dramatic transformation in the icon's physical appearance. Over the course of her century-long marketing presence, Aunt Jemima had largely remained static, but Americans' perceptions of **slavery** had changed. When she first emerged, the United States was experiencing a wave of nostalgia for the perceived innocence of the plantation era, but in the century between Aunt Jemima's inception and her 1989 makeover, the Jim Crow era exposed the notion of the benevolent South as an illusion; the **civil rights movement** called attention to black Americans' dissatisfaction with the very same

subordination that Aunt Jemima and other figures of plantation **myth** seemed to embrace; and the success of **Alex Haley's** *Roots*, first as a novel, then as a widely viewed television event, offered a vision both of slavery's cruelty and of black slaves' rage and dissatisfaction that contradicted the humble contentment that Aunt Jemima and other mammies symbolized.

The modifications that produced the current incarnation of Aunt Jemima were made in the 100th year of her existence. She retains none of the plantation iconography of the original figure. Her brightly colored scarf has disappeared to reveal a stylishly curled hairstyle. Her overall appearance has been feminized, her tasteful makeup and neatly trimmed eyebrows now accented with pearl earrings. Once a grinning Mammy with laughing eyes, today's Aunt Jemima would seem more comfortable in a boardroom than behind an ironing board. Even as her image transforms to reflect the beliefs and sensitivities of a new generation, however, nostalgia for the Aunt Jemima of the past has reached unprecedented levels. Original Aunt Jemima memorabilia and other reproductions of her image are increasing in popularity and value. Collectors of all ethnicities seek and find affirmation of either the racism of the past or the simplicity of times gone by in the comforting absolute and approval of her gaze, the suggestion in her smile and in the glint of her eye that between white people and black, between the enslaved and the free, between the servants and their masters, all is well, and if ever there were transgressions, ill will, or abuses of power, all is forgiven.

*See also* Plantation Tradition; Stereotypes

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*Ajuan Maria Mance*

### AUSTIN, DORIS JEAN (1949–1994)

Doris Jean Austin was an essayist, critic, and novelist. Central issues explored in her writing included the nature of kinship, relationships, recovery, **healing**, and wholeness. Austin published one novel, *After the Garden*, and short stories. She also wrote articles for *Essence* magazine, *Amsterdam News*, and the *New York Times Book Review*.

Austin was born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1949 and at the age of six moved to Jersey City, New Jersey. She grew up in a loving, supportive extended **family**.

Austin began writing in her teens and continued to write throughout her life. She was a member of Harlem Writers Guild, a MacDowell Colony fellow, and received the DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest Award for Literary Excellence for her novel. Women figure prominently in her writing whether her subject was fictional or she was writing about herself. Austin's writing frequently addressed the psychological states of women and how these states impacted their **identity** and sense of well-being.

*After the Garden* was Austin's first and only published novel. **Motherhood** and surrogacy are central themes in this novel as well as **class** and **religion**. *After the Garden* is a coming-of-age story set between the 1940s and 1960s in New Jersey. The text revolves around Elzina, who has been orphaned and was raised by a surrogate, her bourgeois, domineering, religious, strict grandmother Rosalie. Rosalie dreams of Elzina being able to attend Tuskegee Institute and is upset when Jesse, a popular classmate from a working-class background, impregnates Elzina. To Rosalie's dismay, Elzina and Jesse marry and move into her **home**. The marriage is troubled as Elzina and Jesse fail to reconcile their differences in expectation and worldview resulting from differences in class and religious orthodoxy. Rosalie's overt disapproval of Elzina's choice of a mate compounds the tension between Elzina and Jesse.

Jesse is convicted of armed robbery and goes to jail, Rosalie dies, and Elzina suffers from poor health. Elzina eventually goes to live with Jesse's mother, Truselle, who serves as a second surrogate mother to Elzina. Truselle's world is more socially liberal, open, and spontaneous than was Rosalie's. Elzina heals while living with Truselle and continues to develop her sense of self. The narrative comes full circle when Elzina becomes a surrogate mother for an orphaned girl whom Jesse had fathered with another woman.

Aside from the novel, Austin served as an editor and contributor to *Streetlights*, a collection of fifty short stories about the urban experience. Many of the magazine articles that she wrote were drawn from her own experiences and focused on recovery from traumas such as **rape**, divorce, and alcoholism. Austin died in 1994.

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Kimberly Black-Parker

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Autobiography as a genre has held a contentious space in literary theory almost since its inception and particularly since women have joined the fray of memoirists. The purpose of an autobiography used to conform to a fairly simple formula: White men would write the story of their own lives, showing their success stories and the “universality” of their human experience. These were public documents with little room for the ordinary or the daily, but they were full of the man’s interactions within the public sphere and his shaping of that sphere. Ever since voices other than that of the white male have turned to autobiography, a theoretical and critical battle over what constitutes a “true” or “good” autobiography has been fought. The critical establishment has long argued that autobiography, when it takes turns toward the private (as it does in many works by nonwhite men), is an inferior literary form.

It seems that no matter the criteria, women, and African American women in particular, are always writing just outside of the “appropriate” boundaries. Premodernist conceptions of “good” writing held that unity of plot, character, and theme were requirements. Later, the privileging of fragmentation and alienation during the modernist and postmodernist period has carried over into the assumption that abstract and depersonalized writing is the superior model. But it is Western, white men who claim the **death** of the author, not marginalized voices that have not yet been given authority (Fox-Genovese 162–163). Clearly, the same rules should not apply to women and minorities who have only relatively recently been given the space for their voices to be heard. Because social and historical conditions play a part in women’s and minorities’ lives, they must necessarily also play a part in autobiography. In other words, the context and voice change the type of autobiography, and the same criteria cannot apply to all forms.

African American women have had to struggle with dual models in the creation of their own literary selves through autobiography: the public male **slave narrative** that details an individual’s victory over struggle, and the private white female confessional of daily life. In the nineteenth century, in particular, women like **Harriet E. Wilson** and **Harriet Jacobs** had to find ways to discuss the double oppression of being black and a woman, and they did this through borrowing from both the male (slave narrative) and female (sentimental) traditions, creating interesting new generic hybrids that best fit their own voices and positions in society. Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for instance, has been called public confession, spiritual autobiography, seduction novel, narrative of captivity, and a text following the traditions of both abolitionist rhetoric and sentimental fiction.

In addition to the already hybrid form that is a product of following the male slave narrative and the female sentimental novel, there are two major strains in African American women’s autobiography: secular and spiritual (Andrews 34), though these strains are often combined as well. Whether slave narrative, travel writing, or cultural criticism, it is clear that the lines between secularism and **spirituality** often blend in these texts, particularly in

earlier works. Another duality found in this genre is the mediation between “I” and “we,” between the personal and the political. **Black feminism’s** basic tenets of survival through **community** networking and adaptation are regular features in African American women’s autobiography. The genre is adapted to fit the varying and various conditions of the woman’s life, and the woman is never a lone individual striking out on her own; she is a self only in relation to others (Soriso 6). In the most successful autobiographies, both the unique and collective selves are given voice (Goldman xxvii).

A few distinct time periods emerge in relation to African American women’s autobiography: the slave narrative period, the ex-slave narrative period, the **Harlem Renaissance**, **Black Arts Movement** revolutionaries, and the personal autobiographies of the late twentieth century (Andrews 36–37; Bassard 38–39). Each period can be defined in some ways by the historical and cultural context of its authors. In relation to today’s writing, many female slave narratives feel conservative due to their insistence on following the tenets of true womanhood: piety, purity, **domesticity**, and submission. Underlying the surface-level conservatism, however, lie some of the most radical authors, for their task was to convince a primarily white audience of their selfhood. In the slave narratives of Elizabeth, Harriet Jacobs, and **Sojourner Truth**, a strong commitment to religious faith and **freedom** for themselves and their families underscores their writings. This religious faith, though, is one that has remained strong through challenging the dictates of contemporary religious practice against their own beliefs about justice and God. In the same pre-Civil War time period, free (and thus more privileged) women like Mrs. Nancy Prince and **Charlotte Forten Grimké** write of their travels.

The ex-slave narrative was popular after the Civil War and into the 1930s. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) project of transcribing ex-slaves’ stories helped make this genre even more prolific and accessible. Women’s memoirs of slave life were often written through amanuenses, as in the cases of Bethany Veney and **Mattie Jackson**. But other women in this time period were writing autobiographical work that overlapped with cultural criticism and memoirs of personal scholarly activity (like **Anna Julia Cooper**) and activism (**Ida B. Wells-Barnett**). The Harlem Renaissance brought forth a new forum for and interest in African American writing, and gave birth to works like **Zora Neale Hurston’s** autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Coinciding with the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott and official beginning of the **civil rights movement**, **Pauli Murray**, a civil rights activist, wrote *Proud Shoes*, her family’s **history** and a personal memoir.

Still more innovations to African American women’s autobiography came about with the Black Arts Movement. Revolutionary work and cultural commentary rooted in personal experience by writers like **Angela Davis**, and statements on life and **poetry** from writers like **Nikki Giovanni**, led the genre into different and new hybrids. Always maintaining an interest in both the political and the personal, but becoming more intimate, are autobiographies from **Maya Angelou** and **Audre Lorde**. Also typical of later autobiography is the hybridization started by Lorde’s “biomythography.”

Women like Michele Wallace, a literary critic, today combine autobiography and cultural criticism in moves that are starting to be recognized as “autotheory.” Also prominent are **family** histories by writers like **Lucille Clifton**. Furthermore, the fictionalization of family and personal stories is quite common. **Jamaica Kincaid**, for instance, in the novels *Annie John* and *Lucy* writes of her own childhood but, with the freedom of **fiction** is able to move exactly where she wants to. In her later books, like *My Brother*, Kincaid deals directly with the family she indirectly struggled with in her earlier novels.

Despite the inherently personal connection between an author, her life, and her writing, there has never been an easy connection between reality and autobiography. All authors see their own life’s story through lenses of distance, self-**love**, and authorial purpose. Many have relied upon conventions of changing names, omissions, and creation in order to have textual unity and personal sanctity. Harriet E. Wilson’s pseudo-slave narrative *Our Nig* tells her own story, but through the character of Frado; the horrific Haywards become the Bellmonts, and she manipulates their story by omitting their abolitionist ties, by combining characters, and many think, by omitting her own sexual abuse. In the same way, Kincaid tells the story of Annie, a young girl forever distanced from her mother after the birth of a younger brother. Annie goes to England, while Kincaid goes to America. Later, Annie transforms into Lucy, an au pair like Kincaid, but Lucy is able to do and say things (regarding her **sexuality** and family relationships) that Kincaid might be uncomfortable making public. The novel packs a metaphorical punch that a “true” recollection would not be able to maintain.

Lorene Cary’s *Black Ice* (1991) is a straightforward autobiography, unlike **Marita Golden**’s work or Kincaid’s early novels. This text is an appropriate place to end this discussion, since it dramatizes, in a contemporary sense, the dualities and dichotomies of being a black woman writer struggling to write her self into American history. *Black Ice* exemplifies the struggle between the two traditions of women’s and African American’s autobiography. Cary is at once working within a tradition of women autobiographers, who write their painful and private experiences for the common good of women, and the African American autobiographer who writes out of a collective battle for racial equality, making politics of **race** more important than those of sex. The places where readers feel unsatisfied with Cary’s withdrawal, such as when she only goes so far in discussing her parents’ marriage, are precisely the places where the gaps in her two traditions show. *Black Ice* is critiqued for this split in purpose, but this same split demonstrates the tensions in her text based on her subject position as both woman and African American. The confusion in purpose between the two traditions, which can be felt as confusion or slippages in the text, are in the details she chooses to tell and withhold about her life. She is a complex person with a multiplicity of pressures and prejudices working against her, and because of this, she almost never fits neatly into other people’s categories describing her work. In the end, she is writing her own story, a story that will be added to the stories of her

people, her family, her community as an African American. Cary may not hit this balance consistently, and at times we as readers may be frustrated with the tensions in the text. But the tensions are her tensions, her struggles between the private and the public, between her fight against sexism and racism.

Multifaceted, hybridized, transforming, and personal, African American women's autobiography is a genre to be reckoned with; these personal voices form one of the bedrocks of the African American literary tradition, yesterday and today.

*See also* Religion

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Nicole Lynne Willey

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY MOTHER, THE**

An unremittingly bleak and bitter novel permeated with feelings of despair, contempt, and rage, **Jamaica Kincaid's** 1996 novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* is at once a continuation of and a departure from her autobiographical-fictional project, her attempt in *Annie John* and *Lucy* to use **fiction** to write herself a life and make sense of her troubled relationship with her mother. In part, Kincaid had a conscious political agenda in telling the story of her seventy-year-old narrator, Xuela Claudette Richardson, whose mother died

the moment she was born. Explaining that Xuela's life can be read as a metaphor for the African diaspora, Kincaid remarks, "At the moment African people came into this world, Africa died for them. . . . The birth of one is the death of the other" (Lee D3). But there is also something highly personal about this novel, which can be read at least in part as Kincaid's written vendetta against her "bad" mother, Annie Drew, and indeed Kincaid said that after writing the novel, she felt that she had made sense of her own childhood.

Continuing to investigate the formative influence of her childhood relationship with her powerful and destructive mother begun in *Annie John* and *Lucy* in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid incorporates **family** stories into her narrative. Like Kincaid's mother, Annie Richardson Drew, Kincaid's narrator, Xuela Claudette Richardson, is from Dominica and is part Carib Indian, African and Scots, and she bears Kincaid's mother's family name, Richardson. Kincaid also incorporates into the life of her character obeah stories told to her by her mother. If Kincaid is intent on examining her matrilineal roots as she includes family stories and looks back to her mother's Carib Indian roots in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, she also is driven by the daughterly imperative to assert herself and assume power by talking back—or, more accurately, writing back—to her powerful and powerfully destructive mother.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the loss of the idealized, good, and protective mother is experienced as a crippling, festering wound that never can be healed, and this loss puts the child at the mercy of a series of persecutory bad mother figures, who not only fail to nurture or confirm but also seek to dominate the child. Like *Annie John* and *Lucy*, *The Autobiography of My Mother* splits the mother into good/bad figures. Growing out of Kincaid's troubled relationship with her mother, *The Autobiography of My Mother* also deals, in a more self-conscious and extended way than her earlier novels, with the damaging impact of cultural forces and internalized colonialism on her character's developing personality. For as she describes Xuela's obsession with her idealized but dead mother and her abuse at the hands of a series of bad mother-substitute figures, Kincaid makes a conscious connection between her fierce hatred of maternal domination and her colonial upbringing, seeing the relationship between the powerful mother and powerless daughter as a prototype for the relationship between the colonizer and colonized.

Existing in a maternal—and colonial—world of dominator and dominated, Xuela determines to survive as best she can: by becoming one of the dominators, seeking empowerment through her **sexuality**, including her sexual power over the white English man whom she eventually marries and dominates as she plays out in her marriage, just as she does in all her significant relationships, a victor/vanquished power script. A motherless child and a woman who refuses to bear or mother any children of her own, Xuela remains self-possessed and defiant to the end, standing in the text as both an individual and also a representative voice as she breaks the long silence imposed on vanquished peoples.

*See also* Healing



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*J. Brooks Bouson*



### ***BABY OF THE FAMILY***

*Baby of the Family* is **Tina McElroy Ansa**'s first novel, published in 1989. The story of the McPherson **family**, the baby Lena especially, *Baby of the Family* deals with African American **community** life during the 1950s. The main settings are the McPherson family **home**, a middle-class two-story house on a large lot, the **beauty** parlor Lena visits on a weekly basis, the McPherson family business, "The Place," and the church school Lena attends. All of these settings play their parts as Lena struggles to overcome the curse of being born with a caul and to live a normal life.

The McPherson family is definitely part of the middle **class**. As part of this class awareness we see the conflict between a spiritualist tradition and middle-class education. Lena is born with a caul across her face. Although Nurse Bloom and her grandmother understand what this means and honor the rituals that must be followed to avoid having the spirit world affect the baby in a negative way, Lena's mother Nellie regards their precautions as superstition and, asserting that she is a modern woman, destroys the carefully preserved caul and the caul tea that Nurse Bloom has prepared for the baby to drink. Without the protection of the caul tea, Lena is subject to haunting by the ghosts of dead **ancestors** who frighten her.

Lena is indeed the baby of the family, being the youngest child and the only daughter. Her two older brothers are allowed adventure and **freedom** denied to Lena, who must be protected, both because she is a girl and because

her thick hair reacts badly when it gets wet outdoors. Wrapped in the cocoon of her family's **love**, Lena's main conflicts come from the loneliness she experiences outside of her family's domain.

Lena's best childhood memories beyond the family circle center on the beauty parlor, where she meets people who encourage her curiosity and where she hears about women in the community, and on the family business, The Place, where she overhears other stories about the life of Mulberry. On one trip to the beach, Lena wanders away from her family and meets Rachel, the ghost of a slave who had drowned herself rather than submit to enslavement. This ghost, Lena's first experience with a positive spirit, comforts her and becomes a permanent part of her life. Only after the **death** of her beloved grandmother does Lena begin to accept, as her grandmother's ghost promises, that the spirit world can be a positive force in her life.

Ansa's first novel introduces us to her fictional community, Mulberry, Georgia, and to the McPherson family, particularly its baby, Lena. The descriptions of people and place vividly connect us to the tangible reality of the characters' lives and make us believe not only in them but in the spiritual forces that are part of their lives. Ansa's love for these people infects us, and we feel a similar affection for her people and places.

*See also The Hand I Fan With; Spirituality*

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*Harriette C. Buchanan*

### **BAILEY'S CAFÉ**

In her fourth novel, *Bailey's Café* (1992), **Gloria Naylor** castigates the long-venerated Judeo-Christian tradition, boldly revising scripture that has historically pinioned women to the limited roles of their biblical cohorts. In this veritable Gospel According to Gloria Naylor, the author keeps a record quite different from the original Bible. Instead of the diametric and stringent gender positions depicted in scripture, gender roles in *Bailey's Café* form a symmetry even to the point of androgyny. As Naylor presents her tale, humanity is a balance of genders.

In this work are characters named for Old Testament women such as Eve, Esther, and **Jezebel**. The New Testament Madonna is even implicated in Mariam, and Mary reminds the reader of Mary Magdalene, also of New Testament **memory**. Naylor's *Bailey's Café* is laden with key names and allusions to the patriarchal system induced and/or supported by the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, in this novel Naylor also indicts a repressive matriarchy in which communities of women are complicit in other women's oppression.

As *Bailey's Café* unfolds, the narrative makes its way across a world of women's stories, stories surviving in a penumbral collective that includes Bailey's Café, Gabe's Pawn Shop, and Eve's bordello/boardinghouse. The plot of *Bailey's Café* is guided by the proprietor of Bailey's Café who buys the place after his return from World War II. The café serves as the axis of the novel's events where people facing the consequences of reaching life's nadir either step into the void in the back of the café, committing suicide, or become whole before daring to face the world again.

A cast of interesting characters streams through Bailey's Café. The first customer is Eve, who arrives at the café after being evicted from her **home** in Pilottown by her guardian, Godfather. Located down the block from Bailey's Café, Eve's brownstone is a refuge for single women with the exception of "Miss Maple," a man who loosens the boundaries of gender, for he is as comfortable in a dress as he is in his manhood. Entering Bailey's Café on her way to Eve's is Esther, who comes to Eve's after twelve years of sexual and emotional torture. Jesse Bell arrives at the brownstone with a heroin addiction and the embarrassment of a failed marriage and a much-publicized **lesbian** relationship. Mary is the ultimate conundrum in the novel. In protest to the name expectations that she is unable to meet, she chooses self-mutilation. Mary is expected to be the biblical virgin but is more akin to the assumed prostitute, Mary Magdalene. Although Eve's place is full of aberrant personalities, Mariam can be categorized as phenomenal; she is a fourteen-year-old mentally challenged Falasha Jew who arrives at Eve's a pregnant virgin.

The imperfection of both patriarchy and matriarchy accounts for Naylor's move toward androgyny especially in Miss Maple, who is the last major character to tell his story. Furthermore, the Christ child that is born at the end of the novel offers hope that the next millennium will embrace liberation through **sexuality** that does not insist upon confining gender roles. As the characters who frequent Bailey's Café realize their sexual selves, they are positioned in a strangely liberating limbo. Only in another world can a cross-gender arrangement be made that accepts the sexuality of everyone.

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Sharese Terrell Willis

### **BAKER, JOSEPHINE (1906–1975)**

Josephine Baker was born Josephine Freda MacDonald to Carrie MacDonald and Eddie Carson in Saint Louis, Missouri. They met at a theater performing as “natives” in a production called *A Trip to Africa*. But Carson did not stick around long, and Josephine, the oldest of four children, was at work earning money for the **family** by age thirteen; she would later recall herself as “the big man of the family.” The East Saint Louis **race** riot of 1917, the worst in American **history** at the time, deeply affected her. Her refusal to tolerate **violence** of any kind after that perhaps prompted her to end her first marriage to Willie Wells (whom she wedded in 1919), a man known for his violent outbursts. Once again set on establishing her independence, Baker began getting engagements with touring groups of black performers. In 1921, having traveled to Philadelphia with the Jones Family Band, she met Willie Baker, who at twenty-five was ten years her senior. They married in Camden, New Jersey, and from this point forward, she was known as Josephine Baker. She learned about a black musical called *Shuffle Along* playing in Philadelphia, and when the show moved to New York, Josephine left her second husband to follow it. By 1925, she was performing with the Broadway production *Chocolate Dandies*. As the end girl of the chorus line, Josephine clowned up the role so much that audience members could not help but notice her, and they liked what they saw. Prone to improvisation often to the distress of directors and producers, Baker was nevertheless wildly applauded by audiences.

“Discovered” in New York by Carolyn Dudley, Baker traveled to Paris in 1925 to join Dudley’s *La Revue Nègre*. To sweeten the deal, Dudley offered Baker a weekly salary of \$250, a huge sum at that time. But Dudley, a wealthy socialite and lover of French culture, felt secure in her investment, knowing that all things African were a big attraction in France and that Baker was sure to be a hit. For Baker, conversely, France’s “negromania” was not a reason to expatriate. Rather, the promise of a country that was supposedly blind to race attracted her, and she was often told that in France “people would think she was white.” Here begins what brings both criticism and praise to Josephine Baker for the rest of her life, and which continues today—her ambiguous position with regard to race. Did Baker’s expressed desire to transcend race, **class**, and for that matter, sex mean that she was a traitor to her race, her class, and her sex? Or was she, as others have opined, one of history’s greatest champions of human rights? On one hand, there are many examples of Baker’s apparent deference toward **whiteness**. Often considered too dark for success on stage, Baker took to covering her face with white powder to audition—a scene played out in Baker’s first

successful French **film**, *Zouzou* (1934). One of her famous songs is titled “I’d Like to Be White,” and she once expressed the wish to have a white baby. Conversely, she marketed a whole line of **beauty** products that capitalized on her blackness, including “Bakerskin,” a cosmetic replacement for silk stockings.

More important, Baker was a member of France’s League against Racism and Antisemitism; her husband at this time, Jean Lion, was Jewish, and Baker often compared the plight of blacks and Jews. She went on to become a Resistance fighter and was awarded the Legion of Honor for her work as an undercover agent in World War II. A tireless supporter of rights for blacks in the United States, she was named Most Outstanding Woman of the Year in 1951 by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), with 100,000 people showing up to honor her. Baker was an active participant in the **civil rights movement**, having marched with Dr. Martin Luther King in 1963, when he made his famous “I Have a Dream” speech (which Baker actually criticized for not *demanding* rights for blacks). Further, she absolutely refused to perform for segregated audiences.

In 1931, Baker authored a book titled *My Blood in Your Veins*, which told the story of Joan, a young, poor black woman who falls in **love** with a wealthy white man. Coincidentally, both are hospitalized at the same time, he for an almost fatal accident. Secretly, Joan offers her blood for a transfusion that saves his life. But when his white fiancée finds out, she calls him a “white negro” and leaves him; he then commits suicide. Baker had hoped not only to see the published work a success but also to play the role of Joan in a film version of the work. Neither happened, since, as Baker lamented, no one wanted to hear the story of mixed blood. Ultimately, however, this mixing of blood to the point of ending race difference was what Baker most desired. Moreover, she wished for the harmonious coexistence of all races, classes, sexes, and religions and undertook, near age forty, to create this world by adopting twelve children of various races and creeds; she called them her Rainbow Tribe and herself the Universal Mother. With her fourth husband, Jo Bouillon, Baker created Les Milandes, a complex including a fifty-room chateau, and the surrounding village and farms. Baker employed everyone in the vicinity and generated revenues by turning Les Milandes into a tourist attraction, including “Jorama,” a wax museum filled with scenes from Baker’s life. In fact, one might say that Baker’s life history is a history of performing her life, which she acted and reenacted in at least four memoirs and various stage and television productions. Sadly, Les Milandes literally broke her, the endeavor proving too onerous financially (her marriage also failed in the process). Determined to maintain her independence and to support her twelve children, Baker took to the stage to perform yet again the story of her life. She died in Paris, after playing herself in the very successful *Joséphine*, a revue feting her fifty years in the business.

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Michelle Chilcoat

**BALDWIN, JAMES (1924–1987)**

A feminist approach to the works of James Baldwin reveals female characters ranging from victims to self-assertive and confident achievers. Regarding the former, in *The Devil Finds Work* (1975), Baldwin objects to the portrayal of black women in **films** such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). In both these films, Baldwin argues, an African American maid is overly loyal to her white employers and objects to other African Americans

who are portrayed as uppity. Such characters as these maids, claims Baldwin, demonstrate their weakness, become “more white than black,” and serve to protect their white mistress from any possible harm that might be caused by dangerous African American men. Baldwin’s own works, though, contain their share of relatively weak women, regardless of their **race**. One such character is Mrs. Alice Hunt from *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), whose weakness stems from her concern of keeping up bourgeois appearances, so much so that she is shameful in her condemnation of Tish’s unplanned pregnancy. Mr. Hunt, recognizing his wife’s poor behavior, slugs her to the ground. (Due to Mr. Hunt’s being one of the “good” characters and his wife being one of the “bad,” the novel tempts the reader to regard Mr. Hunt’s violent act as appropriate behavior between a husband and wife.) Another example is Leona from *Another Country* (1962), who is so morally weak that she refuses to abandon her boyfriend, even after he begins raping her. She only leaves him after the intervention of one of his own friends, and even then, she claims to **love** and feel sorry for her boyfriend. Eventually she suffers a breakdown, is found wandering the street half-naked, and is taken back to Georgia. Another weak character, despite her career ambitions, is Ida from *Another Country*. She continually blames herself and berates others for her brother’s untimely **death**. Having depended on her brother to get her out of their unfulfilling environment, Ida feels cheated when he dies, and at the end of the novel, her state is ambiguous. Finally, one of the saddest characters is Amy in *Just Above My Head* (1979), who allows her daughter, a child minister, to manage the entire **family**. By bequeathing this power to her daughter (and thereby emerging as a weak mother), Amy’s physical problems go untreated, and she eventually dies in a hospital.

If not inherently weak, then some of Baldwin’s female characters make questionable choices. Usually these choices involve an unquestionable support for men, despite their foibles. Mrs. Proudhammer in *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) puts up with her husband, manages the family’s finances, and feeds her family. Her source of happiness, though, depends upon her husband’s mood: She is happy when her husband is happy. In the same novel, Barbara arranges her career as a successful actress so that Leo’s place in it will never be jeopardized. In *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Tish idealistically stands by her man Fonny, even though he is incarcerated and she is unmarried, pregnant with his child.

Just the same, within Baldwin’s output reside numerous female characters of considerable strength. For example, although the artist Jane in *Another Country* is self-absorbed, moody, and a heavy drinker, she is a woman of considerable force. Jane causes much harm, but her strength is such that for quite a while her boyfriend cannot find his own strength to leave her. Another character possessing much power is the actress Bunny from *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*. Professional and congenial, this white actress calls her fellow actor Leo, an African American, back onto stage to bow with her and to receive the accolades of the audience.

Some of Baldwin’s other characters convey their strength through their occupations. One example is Hilda from *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been*



*Gone*. Having saved money from working as a cook in private houses, Hilda invests it in her own restaurant. A hardworking African American woman, Hilda seems to have no business partners and sends almost all her earnings back to Trinidad. Another successful business owner is Madame Clothilde from *Giovanni's Room* (1956), a shrewd Frenchwoman who knows both how to manage her customers and also how to operate her place of business.

Baldwin's female characters often react when oppressed by male characters. For instance, in "The Man Child" (1965), Jamie's beautiful wife runs away from her unappreciative and ultimately murderous husband. In "The Rockpile" (1965), Elizabeth does not allow her husband to discipline one child for the wrongdoings of another. Usually the long-suffering wife, Deborah in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) finally confronts her husband about his illegitimate son, claiming that if he had owned up to his adultery, then she would have raised his son as her own. Cass from *Another Country* tells her husband about her affair (and physically suffers for doing so). Florence from *Just Above My Head* confronts Joel that he needs to regain control of his household (to be the man of the house) and therefore not to allow his young daughter to be the boss. *Giovanni's Room's* Hella claims to be traditional, wanting a husband and a family. Just the same, when she realizes the truth of her fiancé's **sexuality**, she leaves him and does not look (or wave) back at him as she departs.

Several characters reveal their strength by protecting men from the oppression represented by the police, especially when racism seems to motivate the policemen's actions. Three such characters appear in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. Early in the novel, Mildred attempts to hide Caleb from the police. Later, Madeleine is indignant and enraged when the police unfairly bring in Leo, Caleb's younger brother, for questioning. Finally, Lola berates the police officers for their actions. Another example of a protecting female character appears in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, where an anonymous Italian woman protects Fonnice from a racist police officer.

Within Baldwin's works, the most common method by far for female characters to obtain and to demonstrate power is to be active within a church environment. Some characters are themselves ministers or evangelists, such as Praying Mother Washington (*Go Tell It on the Mountain*), Sister Margaret Alexander (*The Amen Corner* [1968]), Julia (*Just Above My Head*), and Sister McCandless and Sister Daniels of "The Outing" (1951). When within the confines of the church, enjoying considerable power, female characters usually make much use of their chastity. For example, Sister McCandless testifies that even at her advanced age, she is still a virgin. A similar character is Sister Moore, from *The Amen Corner*. Both characters use their virginity to their benefits, cementing their respective positions within their respective churches.

On the other hand, some of Baldwin's strongest characters are not chaste at all and are instead sexually adventurous. In *Giovanni's Room*, Sue allows herself a brief sexual fling with David, although she is fully aware that he is not in love with her. She has no emotional expectations of him. When David

refuses her postcoital suggestion to have dinner together, she does not fall apart, sobbing; throughout the entire brief encounter, she maintains her composure. A more complex example of a sexually adventurous character is Cass from *Another Country*, who realizes that her marriage to Richard is not fulfilling and then commences an affair with Eric. When their affair comes to an end, she does not attempt to hang on to him; she lets him go. Probably the most complex example of such a character is Esther from *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; she asserts that life is for living. Esther is willing to pay after death for any sins that she might commit while on the earth. When she gets pregnant by Gabriel, who is married, she realizes that she does not want to be with him, considering him weak. She bravely refuses to marry anyone to cover up her pregnancy. Although Esther does die young, she resolutely never paints herself as a victim.

To be fully competent mothers is yet another way that Baldwin's female characters demonstrate strength. Such characters reinforce the importance of the family unit. In "Previous Condition" (1948), Peter's mother consoles her son when he is victim of racial slur, while in "This Morning, This Evening" (1960), Harriet seeks to learn how to protect her husband and her son as they prepare to immigrate to America. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Elizabeth refuses to bow to societal standards by regretting bearing her illegitimate son. In *Another Country*, Cass claims that her husband and children are her life and does much to promote their well-being. She fits her life around her husband's life and career and does not make her husband try to fit his life around hers. Sharon Rivers in *If Beale Street Could Talk* becomes a take-charge mother who will inform the rest of the family about her daughter's pregnancy. Sharon bravely (and as some critics have noted, unbelievably) leaves America for San Juan, successfully hunting Victoria Rodgers, the woman who has unfairly accused Sharon's future son-in-law of **rape**. Florence in *Just Above My Head* is the voice of reason, advocating that African Americans need to focus on living their lives and raising their families.

Perhaps only one of Baldwin's creations finds much strength from bitterness. Florence from *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is a character whose strength stems from her resentment of her hypocritical brother, Gabriel, who is awarded all the advantages that she feels would have been hers, had he never been born. When Florence's white master proposes that she become his concubine, she instead sets off alone for New York. She leaves for the railroad station, disregarding the attempts of her mother and brother to convince her to stay. In her older years, Florence confronts Gabriel with a thirty-year-old letter from his first wife that questions the parentage of a local illegitimate child. In addition, Florence defends Elizabeth, Gabriel's second wife, against Gabriel's unfounded accusations of her bad parenting. It is her aversion to her brother (as well as the need to protect Elizabeth) that motivates Florence.

A common theme in Baldwin's writings, both the essays and the fiction, are women who overcome adversity. Sometimes these women overcome the limitations of race and racial expectations. In *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin

praises actress Sylvia Sidney (1910–1999) because she was at the time the only American film actress who reminded him of an African American woman, by which Baldwin means that Sidney reminded him of reality. Sidney, a Polish New Yorker perhaps best known for her comic role in *Beetlejuice* (1988), is invoked several times in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. In the essay “Color” (1962), Baldwin notes the social difficulties of African American women who allow their hair to resume its natural texture. Rarely are such women admired. Such women, for daring to not mimic the hairstyles of white women, are looked upon with nervousness. The novels contain several examples of women who battle the breakdown of the family. In *Just Above My Head*, Julia asserts her desire to live her life—and not merely as a victim of incest. Martha from the same novel leaves her girlhood behind her, escaping a dead-end relationship for a much more promising one. In *Giovanni's Room*, David's landlady survives not only the death of two sons but also the loss of all of her and her husband's money. Yet she perseveres.

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*William S. Hampl*

### BAMBARA, TONI CADE (1939–1995)

Born in Harlem on March 25, 1939, and named for her father's employer Milton Mirkin, Miltona Mirkin Cade began, at around age six, to be called Toni and selected the surname Bambara in 1970 while pregnant with her daughter Karma Bene. One of two children born to Helen Brent Henderson Cade and Walter Cade II, Bambara was raised by her mother after her father left the **family** in her childhood. Early biographical details surrounding Bambara are often disputed, though some certainties exist. Among them is the importance of her mother's insistence that both Bambara and her brother Walter be self-reliant as well as the centrality of a female role model to her life.

The encouragement for self-discipline brought structure to her early life and led her to seek knowledge from family, friends, and neighbors. Her **fiction** evinces the stored folk knowledge she gained in her upbringing and a great sense of loyalty to her **community**. Educated in English and theater arts at Queens College and City College in New York, Bambara began her literary career during her senior year with the publication of the short story “Sweet Town” in the January 1959 issue of *Vendome*. During the 1960s, Bambara finished her master’s degree and began her university teaching career, focusing time on community education components, all the while remaining involved in activist groups and actively writing stories and essays.

Her most often overlooked work is the 1970 *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, to which she both contributed a preface and three essays and edited as well. The first of its kind, *The Black Woman* featured work from **Nikki Giovanni**, **Paule Marshall**, the near-unknown **Alice Walker**, **Sherley Anne Williams**, and **Audre Lorde**. In addition to being a showcase for emergent and established writers, *The Black Woman* contained essays discussing black women’s roles in society, the family, and the community. Like her preface, Bambara’s essay “On the Issue of Roles,” an excerpt from her larger, autobiographical work *The Scattered Sopranos*, forthrightly confronts the challenges before the black women at the commencement of a post-civil rights decade. Witnessing the burgeoning feminist enterprise, Bambara questions the validity of white women as experts for experiences particular to African American women. Her work on *The Black Woman* anticipates both Mary Helen Washington’s *Black-eyed Susans* (1990) and the essays of Barbara Christian.

Bambara followed *The Black Woman* with *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* (1971), an anthology aimed at middle and high school students to encourage reading and acquisition of personal stories. The anthology featured fiction from Bambara as well as **Langston Hughes**, Albert Murray, Alice Walker, **Ernest Gaines**, and others. Also included were classic fairy tales rewritten from an African American perspective, including “The Three Little Panthers,” which Bambara cowrote with Geneva Powell. In her introduction to the collection, Bambara anticipates the later critical focus on orality in African American writing, saying that “it is equally important for young folks to learn how to listen, to be proud of our oral tradition, our elders who tell their tales in the kitchen. For they are truth.” While her first two works filled a need for collections of African American writing, her own short stories published over the previous decade were not widely available. Aware that the then-editor at Random House **Toni Morrison** was looking for African American authors to publish, Bambara approached her with what would become Bambara’s first book of her own work.

In 1972, Bambara published the first collection of her own short fiction, *Gorilla, My Love*. In addition to previously published work, including “Sweet Town,” the book contained several new stories as well. Of that collection, “My Man Bovanne” became the most often anthologized. The story of Miss Hazel and the kindness she extends to the neighborhood blind man Bovanne encapsulates many of the themes Bambara would develop throughout her

career. Castigated by her children, Elo, Joe Lee, and Task, as inappropriately dressed and ill-behaved for the social function at which they gather, Miss Hazel responds with an independent and self-assured manner. While her ideas, like her speech patterns, do not match those of her more progressive children, Miss Hazel nonetheless sees a particular responsibility to Bovanne who, because of his age and handicap, is relegated to outside of the community. By juxtaposing the urban dialect of Miss Hazel with the proper English of her children, Bambara offers a meditation on the changing role of activism within a community and the marginalizing effects the younger generation has upon the elders. Aware that she will find nothing but criticism from her children and skewed glances from those in attendance, Miss Hazel leaves to take Bovanne home with her for an evening free of the confining nature of a new sense of activism.

With *Gorilla, My Love*, Bambara shows that she is unabashedly an African American writer who clings to a verbal, rhetorical tradition. There is no explanation in this, or any of her works, of the slang or colloquialisms used. Instead, one is thrust into fictional worlds where actions exist alongside signs of the richness of African American culture. Her writing style has matured; in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* in 1977, a gritty realism appears. For example, in “The Long Night” the single woman living alone in a dangerous area must hide in the bathtub she was bathing in when unknown men break into her apartment. By chance, her life is spared; Bambara confronts the changing reality of neighborhoods and the rise of urban crime and **violence**. Likewise, in “The Organizer’s Wife,” Virginia imbues the support and frustration involved in the sacrifice of **identity** for the sake of the cause. In the renaissance of African American women writing in the 1970s and 1980s, Bambara has remained in the foreground.

With the publication of her first novel, *The Salt Eaters*, in 1980, Bambara further extended her writings on the place of African American women. Centered on Velma Henry’s **healing**, *The Salt Eaters* celebrates the idea of wholeness within the female tradition by contrasting it with its opposite, fragmentation. Pulled away from her family by her many responsibilities to the community, Velma Henry must decide to embrace the idea of wellness in order to once again become whole and function within her community. She does so in full knowledge of the difficulties the future holds. With the appearance of *The Salt Eaters*, critical commentary on Bambara’s work began to flourish. Of note is Eleanor W. Traylor’s essay “Music as Theme: The Jazz Mode in the Works of Toni Cade Bambara” in Mari Evans’s anthology *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Traylor, a former colleague of Bambara’s, wrote what Bambara felt was the finest critical evaluation of her efforts as a writer.

Following publication of *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara turned her attention to **film**. In addition to several filmic adaptations, including a screenplay of Toni Morrison’s 1983 novel *Tar Baby*, Bambara’s most well known film work remains the documentary *The Bombing on Osage Avenue* (1986), which chronicled the deadly bombings by West Philadelphia police of the headquarters of

the African American activist group MOVE, and her work on *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography in Four Voices* (1995) with **Amiri Baraka**, Thulani Davis, and Wesley Brown. Her contributions to African American film remain on par with those of Marlon Riggs, while her critical insights on Spike Lee place him into a context noticeably absent from contemporary film theory.

In 1995 Bambara died from complications of colon cancer. She left several works unfinished, but thanks to the editorial direction of Toni Morrison, two additional works have been published. The 1996 collection *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* contains, in addition to Bambara's most candid and open interview ("How She Came by Her Name: An Interview with Louis Massiah"), essays on African American culture, film, and writing, as well as six previously unpublished short stories. The short fiction marks a subtle change in style for Bambara as she considers the widening consequence of multiculturalism upon African Americans. In "The War of the Wall," an African American neighborhood is perplexed and dismayed by a seemingly inhospitable artist who has been sent to their neighborhood to paint a mural. Over the course of the story, one realizes that the artist is a Jewish woman who, rather than being rude as originally thought, is instead following the customs of her faith. Regardless, the residents continue, to a lesser degree, their initial skepticism until the ending where the mural is revealed and no further details are offered. Read either as a boon to the locals or a disappointment, the mural's very ambiguity echoes the apparent growing uncertainty of where African Americans fit within a multiethnic America.

*Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), a novel of historical fiction, represents the mature work of Bambara. During the research for and writing of the novel, Bambara was threatened and heckled. Composed over a period of twelve years, Bambara's story explores the Spencer family's search for their missing son Sundiata (Sonny) and their attempt to reconstruct their lives when he was found injured and confused nearly one year later. Set against the backdrop of the Atlanta child abductions and murders of the early 1980s, the book powerfully confronts racially motivated crimes. Both far-reaching and myopic—the wide response of neighbors, authorities, and citizens contrasts the narrow focus of Sonny's mother Mazala Rawls Spencer in her experience of life following his disappearance—the novel blends public and private emotions in the wake of a missing child report. Difficult, discomfiting, at times diabolic, *Those Bones* polarizes the manner in which racial difference exists and illumines the government agencies' improper handling of a horrifying case. More linear in form than *The Salt Eaters*, *Those Bones* more profoundly explores the consequences of omission and marginality using children as a means to raise awareness.

An awareness of issues and culture informs all of Bambara's multimedia work. From her early lessons on the importance of individuality through her lifetime of work devoted to her African American community, Bambara created a fictional world to mirror her own indefatigable idealism. By surmounting the obstacles they encounter, Bambara's female characters teach a lesson in resiliency tinged with humor and compassion. In her documentary works, Bambara's sensitivity to the stories told reinforced her identity as a

writer and teller of tales. Finally, in her essays, Toni Cade Bambara showed that her major themes were more than literary preoccupations; they offered a systematic approach for invigoration of and loyalty to her community. Upon her untimely death in 1995, Bambara bequeathed a formidable legacy to contemporary African American women writers.

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F. Gregory Stewart

### BARAKA, AMIRI (1934– )

Everett LeRoi Jones was born in Newark, New Jersey, in October 1934, to working middle-class parents Coyette (known as Coyt) LeRoi and Anna Lois Jones, a postal service employee and a social worker. His only sibling, Kimako Baraka (born Sandra Elaine Jones), an actor and activist, was raped and murdered in 1983. Baraka's numerous children by several mothers include Kellie and Lisa Jones (with Hettie Cohen Jones), Dominique Cespedes (with Diane di Prima), and Obalaji, Ras, Amiri Jr., Ahi, and Shani Baraka (with Amina Baraka, formerly Sylvia Richardson), and possibly another two daughters, Maria and Sarah Jones, whose mother is not easily identified. Another child died unborn with its mother due to serious complications in late pregnancy. His youngest child, Shani Baraka, was murdered in August 2003.

Jones's early life was typically middle-class Newark, among what he later would call the black bourgeoisie, graduating with honors from high school and starting undergraduate study at Rutgers University. He transferred to

Howard University, a predominantly black school in Washington, D.C., where he soon changed the spelling and pronunciation of his name to LeRoi. This act of naming is perhaps the first explicit moment in his self-conscious construction of **identity**. After that, during a time when he began exploring Greenwich Village on visits back North, he also flunked out of his pre-med program at Howard. Jones realized he wanted an intellectual life but had yet to determine what form such a life would take. Somewhat surprisingly, he then enlisted in the air force, where his catholic and eclectic reading habits, such as *Partisan Review*, generated sufficient official concern that he was undesirably discharged in 1957. After he discarded life in the academy and the military, Jones decided to try living in bohemia and moved into the Village.

A long chapter (“The Village”) of his **autobiography** is devoted to the Beat years he spent there. For Jones and many others, it was a time and place of enormous ferment in a compressed population of artists of all kinds. He was influenced by the music of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Theophilus Monk, and Sun Ra, by the **poetry** and friendship of Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, and Charles Olson, the kind and gentle encouragement of **Langston Hughes**. Jones identifies **James Baldwin** as “the last great black arts figure who related to Europe as center” (*Autobiography* 129). In the dynamic and organic American literary scene, Jones learned from the major and minor Beat, New York School, and Black Mountain School writers, all of whom he knew—especially learning from Charles Olson, who “had the broader sword” (158) and whose seminal work *Projective Verse* Jones published.

Jones went to the Village to cultivate his intellectual life and to nurture his own literary ambitions. To that end, he worked as shipping manager at *Record Changer*, a **jazz** magazine, where he met his first wife, Hettie Cohen, with whom he established and edited the avant-garde magazine *Yugen* from 1958 to 1963; together, they established Totem Press in 1958. He also founded and ran another underground publication with Diane di Prima. The *Floating Bear* flourished from 1961 to 1969, with Jones involved only for the first two years. In these magazines, the work of emerging writers who are now considered major forces in twentieth-century American poetry first appeared. Di Prima and Jones also cofounded the New York Poets’ Theatre in 1961. He self-published his first book of poetry in 1961, and his important study *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* appeared in 1963 as part of his practice of jazz and **blues** cultural criticism.

Poetry, **drama**, and music were central creative and intellectual occupations for Jones during this period, and his years in Greenwich Village are considered by many his most important creatively. His theater work garnered the most attention initially. His play *Dutchman* opened off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre in 1964 and won an Obie Award. Collectively, his dramatic writing “scared, angered, and inspired both blacks and whites” (Watts 65). The overt anger politics of his provocative plays came at a time when growing impatience with the **civil rights movement** was on the verge of creating a rift between those who continued to believe in nonviolent means to effect change and those who began to espouse **violence** as a necessary



strategy. Subsequently, Jones took his radical voice, which became explicitly anti-Semitic, and began to advocate violence against whites, out of Greenwich Village—abandoning his white wife and mixed-race daughters—and into Harlem. He did not embrace **Black Nationalism** until after the assassination of **Malcolm X** in 1965, when he began to identify and align himself with the articulation and development of a black cultural **community**.

He established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre (BART) in Harlem in 1965, and later Spirit House in Newark in 1967, and became a leading proponent of the **Black Arts Movement**, also investigating Yoruba religious practice, philosophically attached to the idea of a self-consciously black art leading to the emergence of black nationhood. But as his writing became more propagandistic and polemical, critics have condemned it for a correlative weakening of its artfulness and for its varied racially based assertions that substituted for cultural analysis and argument. BART failed to flourish, and Jones stayed in Harlem less than a year, returning to his suburban origins in Newark, but as a changed man. He became ideologically enamored of Maulana Karenga's Kawaïda, an activist essentialist Pan-African philosophy. Jones once again used the strategy of self-naming in 1967 as an expression of identity and transformed himself into Imamu (Spiritual Leader) Amiri (Prince) Baraka (Blessed), later dropping the title Imamu. As his influence grew and his ideology narrowed, Baraka began more frequently to frame his racial commentary in terms of sex and **sexuality**.

For Baraka and black Nationalists, heterosexual **black masculinity** was a necessary part of the revolutionary persona (Watts 233) and included (as did Kawaïda) the subjugation of black women even though those women might be publicly extolled for their virtues. It was a period during which feminism was seen, by black men and even among women, as a potentially divisive racial topic. In other words, black women who expressed feminism could be perceived as traitors because in order to disrupt white power, black power needed to present a unified front and could not tolerate such an examination of gender issues. Ironically, this attitude, justified as important to the cause of black community, was of course harmful to black communities. Baraka's virulently sexist essay, "American Sexual Reference: Black Male," originally published in *Cavalier Magazine* (January 1966), advocated the black **rape** of white women as a politically legitimate act, stressing the objectification of white women as property held by white men.

Therefore, black-male-on-white-female rape was a politically motivated property crime, thus adding a racial element to a misogynistic attitude extant since the Middle Ages. In Baraka's thinking, the white woman served as a location for racial struggle rather than a person entitled to rights and respect. Further modifying the medieval foundation of the **myth** of woman's rape fantasy, Baraka suggests that the event would be a pleasurable sexual experience for a white woman whose previous encounters, confined to white men he portrayed in homophobic terms, would be weighed in the balance and found wanting. Hence the political prowess exhibited in the act could somehow be rationalized as furthering the cause of Black Nationalism. Baraka's uninhibited

racism and sexism plumbed the depths of misogyny before he experienced yet another political transformation. After almost twenty years of grappling with his identity in terms of intellectualism, racism, and the black bourgeoisie, Baraka's attention turned to capitalism as a root cause of black oppression and necessarily as an extension of that logically to its role in the oppression of women. Retreating from Kawaida and Black Nationalism in the mid-1970s, he turned his political attentions to Marxism.

This decision, to which he has remained attached for almost thirty years, is responsible for the rehabilitation of his antiwoman stance. His antiwhite and anti-Semitic attitudes remain and in fact are responsible for his dismissal from the post of New Jersey Poet Laureate in the aftermath of a poem he wrote questioning Jewish involvement in the terrorist events of September 11, 2001. Some of his children have followed their father's example in terms of being politically active and vocal through their artistic product. Baraka is the author and editor of over seventy-five publications, of poetry, drama, and social essays. During his Black Nationalist period, he was founder and chair of the Congress of African People, organizer of the National Black Political Convention, and chair of the Committee for a Unified Newark. He is professor emeritus of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, where he taught Africana studies until his retirement in 1996, and he also has taught at several other prestigious universities. He has held fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, won the PEN/Faulkner Award, and the Langston Hughes Award. Baraka was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2001. He is without doubt the primary force in the development of community-based arts projects and is the most influential figure of the Black Arts Movement.

*See also* Sanchez, Sonia

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A. Mary Murphy

### BEAUTY

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the *fairest* one of all?” As African American women and girls look into the mirror of American culture, what they see reflected back are Snow *White* images of beauty. Mass-produced images from Dick and Jane elementary school readers, classic fairy tales and **literature** to popular media have worked to reinforce Caucasian standards of beauty with faces that are fair, rosy cheeked, blue-eyed, delicate featured, bodies that are rail-thin and emaciated, and hair that is long, straight, wispy, and silky soft. While African American men do not have to fit into a socially accepted ideal of male aesthetics, African American women are presented with white standards of beauty on a daily basis and are taught from childhood that in order to be successful and loved, they should recreate themselves into the dominant white beauty aesthetic. In **J. California Cooper**’s “Vanity,” Vanity is lured into the white culture’s self-absorption with perfect beauty, which ultimately leads to ruin. Vanity combs her “luxuriant” hair so that it could be a “cape of beauty for others to enjoy.” But Vanity buys into the mythology of white beauty encapsulated in the vision of movie stars, and her obsession with that beauty frames her isolation and eventual demise. **Toni Morrison**’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, explores white beauty standards and their devastating effect on one small black child, Pecola, who learns that because she is black, she will never be beautiful, never be loved, never be worthy. Pecola dreams of having blue eyes because she believes that only people with blue eyes are beautiful, and only beautiful people are loved. Her belief is dangerously reinforced by her **family** and peers, most of whom are victims of the white beauty **myth** themselves. For Pecola, having blue eyes is the only thing that will validate her humanity.

One of the profound liberating effects of the rise in black feminist literature is the ability of African American women writers to reconstruct the beauty norm for black females outside the dominant controlling images of white beauty standards. African American feminist literature is richly textured with images of full black lips, beautiful dancing dark eyes, proud nose, lush mahogany-rich skin, soft, sexy, strong melodious voices, and a lively myriad of hairstyles that express the exquisite splendor of African American women. African American feminist literature presents positive images of the black female **body** that function to unite African American women in a discourse that neutralizes white standards of beauty. Black feminist writers dissipate and fracture the white gaze that looks upon the black female as *not* white, and therefore *not* beautiful, and instead present ideal images of beautiful, desirable black women.

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie's appreciation for and awakening of her own **sexuality** starts when she admires the captivating beauty of Shug Avery's body and her lovely "black plum nipples" and long graceful limbs. Shug introduces Celie to her sexuality and the magic button of Celie's femaleness. Harpo explains to Celie that he likes Sofia because of her "bright skin": It shines with life and vitality. Zora Neale Hurston describes the modern woman's connection to the pulsing beauty of Africa in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," when the **jazz** music she listens to transports her to the jungle, where, in her imagination, she dances; face painted red and yellow, body painted blue, graceful body moving rhythmically, wildly, freely celebrating her femininity and sexuality. In Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Jadine, who is a model and a product of white beauty standards, is awestruck by the "unphotographable" beauty of an African woman in a yellow dress, whose eyes are so darkly beautiful they have no lashes. In Imani Constance Johnson-Burnett's "The Dream and Lettie Byrd's Charm," when Yasmine sleeps, her mother, aunts, and grandmother visit her and remind her that she will grow and change, her womanhood a reaffirmation of and testament to the ideal beauty of her **ancestors**. As Yasmine studies her reflection in the mirror, she sees reflected back the softness and strength of her mother and father, delicately blended to create her feminine beauty—a beauty she believes is rooted in her hair.

African American women's hair has unfortunately been the most affected victim of white beauty standards. White biases about black women's hair reinforce Western perceptions that only straight silky hair is beautiful. Hair straightening products that are rigorously marketed to African American women strongly reinforce the belief that African American hair cannot be beautiful unless it looks white. Even white women who have naturally curly or kinky hair spend hundreds of dollars to straighten it in order to look less black. In Bridgitt M. Davis's "Bianca," the smell Bianca hates most in the world is burning hair: "cooked like catfish in melted grease" as her mother used hot curlers and combs to straighten her hair. Bianca finds out her daddy is not her real daddy as she sits in her mother's beauty parlor chair having her hair straightened. For Bianca, her artificially straightened hair symbolizes her

prepackaged American **identity**, and she heads for Paris, France, where she can experience the “blues and oranges and greens of the world” instead of being restricted to a black or white mold. **Carolivia Herron’s** *Nappy Hair* is a lively affirmation of black female beauty that is especially important for young black girls who are inundated with white culture’s consistent demonization of kinky or nappy hair. Brenda is taught to be proud of her nappy hair and all it represents. Herron’s tale counters the persistent white myth that nappy hair is bad hair and somehow ungodly. Instead, God tells Brenda that “one nap [from your] head is the only perfect circle in nature,” an affirmation of black female beauty that gives *Nappy Hair* a special power to endow young African American girls with pride in their own natural beauty.

No one captures the luminous beauty of the African American woman better than **Maya Angelou**. Her **poetry** and prose are filled with images of the lyrically radiant beauty of black men and women, though like a lot of young African American girls, Angelou also desired to “wake up out of [her] black ugly dream” and have “real hair” that was long, blonde, and silky soft as she describes in her **autobiography** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Much of Angelou’s poetry describes the compelling richness of African American female beauty in all its forms. In her “Mothering Blackness,” the images of blackness are uplifting and comforting, beautiful “mothering blackness” and “black arms waiting” for the child whose tears leave “icicle gold plains” on her “rich brown face.” Angelou’s “Black Ode” celebrates “beauty [as] a thunder” and laughter “black and streaming.” In “Sepia Fashion Show” Angelou comments on young black girls’ desire for high-society fashion and beauty: “Their hair, pomaded, faces jaded/bones protruding, hip-wise” then reminds them that they got their knees “at Miss Ann’s Scrubbing.” For Angelou, beauty is much more than outward appearance. It encompasses all the things that make up woman. In her “Phenomenal Woman” Angelou describes her own beauty in “The stride of my step / The curl of my lips,” and she is, as are all African American women, “Phenomenally / Phenomenal woman.”

African American feminist writers celebrate and reaffirm their beauty and strength for each other through what Zora Neale Hurston describes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as “words walking without masters”—words free of white standards and criticisms and, instead, words by black women writers who privilege the resplendent beauty and sexuality of African American women.

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*Debbie Clare Olson*

### **BEHIND THE SCENES, OR, THIRTY YEARS A SLAVE, AND FOUR YEARS IN THE WHITE HOUSE**

*Behind the Scenes*, the title of **Elizabeth Keckley's** postbellum **slave narrative** published in 1868, suggests the contrast between the public view and private reality of her experiences in **slavery** and in the political world of the nation's capital. On the title page, the author describes herself as "Formerly a slave, but more recently modiste, and friend to Mrs. Abraham Lincoln," emphasizing the Reconstruction narrative that follows as an American success story. The term *modiste* implies that she was more than a dressmaker; she was a fashion adviser and designer for the elite.

Keckley devotes the first part of the book to her experiences as slave to the Burwell family of Dinwiddie, Virginia, from her early years as nursery maid to her **work** as a dressmaker in St. Louis, supporting both her own **family** and her master's. After the author's successful effort to buy her own and her son's **freedom** for \$1,200 in 1855, the middle section shows Keckley establishing a growing business in Washington, D.C., as modiste to the upper echelon of political wives, notably the wife of Jefferson Davis and the wife of President Lincoln. Established in the inner circle of the White House family, Keckley concludes her book by recounting her experiences as confidante of Mary Lincoln, from the president's assassination to the "Old Clothes Scandal," defending her controversial role in helping the widow sell some of her wardrobe to pay off her enormous debt. Although questions have arisen over whether it was ghostwritten, abolitionist James Redpath most likely only edited the book, though he certainly was responsible, along with the publisher, for reprinting her letters from Mary Lincoln without permission. Those who knew Keckley testified to the long hours of hard work she put in on the book.

Like the antebellum slave narratives, *Behind the Scenes* underscores the wrongness of chattel slavery that deprived slaves of their human rights. Keckley depicts slavery as a crucible that tempered the soul and produced heroism in slaves through suffering. Keckley's postbellum slave narrative modifies the genre to accommodate female experience, just as **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which had appeared earlier, added a female perspective to the antebellum slave narrative. Told from childhood that she was worthless, the author wrote to show how she struggled to overcome her position as dehumanized slave, subject to the sexual harrasment of white men and the cruelty of white mistresses, to achieve her own dreams of economic independence and

social status as a dressmaker employing twenty women. Although *Behind the Scenes* ends with the author's earnest attempts to set the record straight about her friend and client Mrs. Lincoln, it does not record the conclusion to her story. Keckley died alone and destitute, limited in the end by **race** and gender, a black woman who proved she had value yet still could not triumph in a world of white male privilege.

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Beth L. Lueck

### BELOVED

**Toni Morrison's** fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987), based on the true story of Margaret Garner, is set in the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio, in the 1870s. Much that happens at 124 Bluestone, however, depends on events two decades earlier at Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation that was neither sweet nor **home** for Sethe, the novel's protagonist. Morrison's most acclaimed novel and winner of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for **Fiction**, *Beloved* explores the complexity of a too-deep mother-**love**, the psychological scars forged in a brutal slave system, the necessity of **community**, and the difficult path of self-forgiveness. On a larger level, the text is a discussion about individual, communal, and cultural humanity.

Sethe's murder of her crawling-already baby, not recounted until midway through the novel, highlights the psychological trauma of a mother who believes her primary duty is to protect her children from what she knows is evil: **slavery**. Having escaped from Sweet Home, giving birth to her fourth child in the process, Sethe enjoys twenty-eight days of **freedom** before Schoolteacher comes to reclaim her. As she gathers her four children in her arms and runs toward the shed, her only thought is to send them all, finally, outside the reach of slave owners. In an America ruled by the Fugitive Slave Act, the only refuge she can imagine is **death**. She succeeds in killing only one of her children—her

oldest girl—by running a saw across her neck. In the bloody aftermath, Schoolteacher writes them off as a loss. Although Sethe thus succeeds in ensuring freedom for herself and her remaining three children, their lives are all circumscribed by this act of **violence** as the baby's spirit returns to haunt 124 Bluestone.

Unable to live longer with the ghost of their sister, Sethe's sons Howard and Buglar run off in their early teens to join the war. In guilt over her failure to prevent her granddaughter's murder, and worn out finally from a life too filled with loss, Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law and once the strong, maternal spiritual center of the community, withdraws to her bed to contemplate something harmless: color. Denver, the girl born in a broken boat on the banks of the Ohio River, is left with a ghost for a sister and the fear that whatever made her mother once kill might make her do it again.

The awkward peace Sethe and Denver forge with the ghost is disrupted by Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men and the embodiment of a strong, sensitive **black masculinity**. After being sold as slave labor for the war and spending days sleeping in a box in a Georgia prison, subject to sexual abuse from the white prison guards, Paul D, his heart secure in a rusted tin, turns his feet finally toward Sethe. Paul D does two things upon his arrival: exorcise the ghost and have sex with Sethe. He, Sethe, and Denver form a tentative **family**, a union prefigured in their hand-holding shadows on the way home from the carnival. This newly (re)constructed family, however, is shattered by the ghost who returns, now physically embodied. When Sethe sees the young woman sitting against a tree stump in the front yard, she has the irrepressible urge to urinate in a scene suggestive of a woman's water breaking during labor. Sethe takes the girl in without question, unwilling to turn a young black woman into the street. The stranger, who can barely speak, walk, or stay awake, calls herself Beloved, the only word Sethe had inscribed on her daughter's pink tombstone. Documenting the rampant sexual abuse of black women by white men even in northern states, the stonecutter trades seven letters for ten minutes of Sethe's "time," allowing his son to watch as he has sex with her. Accepting the sexual exploitation as an unalterable fact of her world, Sethe primarily regrets not having asked for seven more: Dearly Beloved, the only words she heard the preacher say at her daughter's funeral.

Denver is the first to understand that Beloved is the ghost of her dead sister, whose blood she once drank along with her mother's milk. Beloved gains strength quickly and soon moves Paul D out of Sethe's bed and into the cold house. Against his will, he has sex with her, but her irresistible demand for intimacy is less about sex than it is about the raw exchange of some life force that she lacks. In an attempt to confess to Sethe, Paul D finds himself instead asking her to have his baby. Sethe rejects the idea, unwilling to accept once more the boundless loss of self she equates with **motherhood**.

When Stamp Paid shows Paul D a newspaper article describing Sethe's trial, Paul D's compassion temporarily fails him, and he reminds Sethe that she has two legs, not four. His distinction between animal and human



behavior echoes an earlier moment in the text when Sethe overhears Schoolteacher and his two nephews comparing her “human characteristics” with her “animal” ones. Sethe rejects Paul D’s oversimplification of her act, just as the text rejects his implicit assignation of blame to Sethe alone. If the infanticide is indeed the act of an animal rather than the ultimate sacrifice of a mother, the slave system is culpable: Sethe’s psychological response to Schoolteacher’s approach is specifically linked to her mistreatment at Sweet Home, an abuse Sethe understands as particularly threatening to motherhood.

The slaves of Sweet Home had planned an escape, but something went awry. After her husband Halle fails to meet them at the predetermined spot, the six-months-pregnant Sethe sends her three children on in care of a group bound North. When she returns to look for Halle, she is violated by Schoolteacher’s nephews in a way worse than sexual **rape**: Schoolteacher calmly takes notes as one nephew holds Sethe down and the other drinks her breast milk. What Sethe only learns much later, after Paul D comes to 124 Bluestone, is that Halle was above in the loft, watching. Halle’s inability to protect his wife—the effective erasure of his masculinity—drives him to madness. Paul D, himself caught, chained, and with a bit in his mouth, sees the mentally broken Halle at the butter churn, butter and clabber smeared across his face. A psychologically scarred Sethe tells the sympathetic but dying Mrs. Garner of her violation and is promptly and violently whipped by Schoolteacher, her round stomach placed in a hole to protect the fetus. Even more determined to get her milk to her baby girl, the beaten, bloody, pregnant Sethe runs on her own. For Paul D, however, neither her account of what happened nor the devotion that drove her forward to reach her children mediates Sethe’s act.

Shortly after Paul D leaves her, Sethe realizes Beloved’s **identity**. Overjoyed that she no longer has to remember all the things that haunt her, relieved that her baby girl was not even mad, Sethe puts down her sword, as Baby Suggs had instructed her, and picks up a pair of ice skates. Sethe loses her job as a restaurant cook and the threesome—beribboned, candy-fed, and dressed in carnival-colored cloth—speed through Sethe’s meager life savings. At first content in this isolated female space, Denver eventually recognizes that she is an interloper. The energy that sustains 124 Bluestone, the force that helps Beloved hold her flesh together, is a circuit between Sethe and the embodiment of her guilt. Unable to forgive herself, Sethe begins a futile attempt to explain. The more Sethe offers of herself, however, the more Beloved demands: Beloved’s life force expands as Sethe, consumed by her own psychological trauma, contracts. Denver sees the shift in the relationship and begins to fear for her mother’s life. Hunger and fear finally motivate Denver to step off the edge of her world in search of help.

Although the women of the community still cannot understand Sethe’s act, they understand their own complicity: a smoldering, unarticulated jealousy over Baby Suggs’s bounty spurred them to an apathy that failed to warn Sethe of Schoolteacher’s approach. After Sethe was released from prison, their

guilt turned to a self-righteousness answered by Sethe's scornful pride. But when Denver reaches out for help, the women of the community finally begin the **healing**. They leave food in the yard of 124 Bluestone. However, it is Ella, the woman who brought Sethe to Baby Suggs's door, who finally motivates the women to decisive action. Kept as a sex slave for father and son, Ella had given birth to a white-skinned baby whom she refused to nurse. It is in part the **memory** of this rejected child who died five days later that allows Ella to feel compassion for Sethe: Anything dead cannot be suffered to cross back into the land of the living. Metaphorically, Ella rejects the paralysis caused by allowing the past—which for the black community includes the dehumanizing system of slavery—to define the present.

At novel's end, thirty women converge on the house from one direction while Mr. Bodwin—a white man sympathetic to the plight of African Americans—approaches from the other. As the women begin to sing, making a sound from the beginning of time, Sethe and a naked, belly-swollen Beloved emerge from the house. In the women's song, Sethe is reminded of the Clearing, where Baby Suggs called her community to celebrate itself; in the white man approaching in the wagon, Sethe sees Schoolteacher. This psychological reenactment allows Sethe to redirect her rage upon the oppressor rather than to further victimize the oppressed. Thus, she turns the ice pick in her hand outward toward the white man, rather than inward toward the flesh and spirit of her daughters. As a consequence, Beloved disappears, explodes, or runs off, depending, that is, on whom you ask.

Beloved, as Denver tells Paul D, was more than just her sister's ghost. In the novel she comes to symbolize not only Sethe's guilt but also the misery of the 60 million or more the book is dedicated to, the people who made—or died during—the **Middle Passage**. She is the crime born of slavery, the pain born of loss, the trauma born of separation. She is the tragedy of the broken slave family, and the separation of mother from child, husband from wife, sister from sister. Born in hope and hatred, desire and despair, love and loss, she is an angry, jealous, sorrowful pain. But in the end, she gives way to hope, healing, and the possibility of promise. Denver exits the text a young, employed woman, no longer psychologically dependent upon her mother and a member of the black community. Paul D returns to Sethe, bathing her body and soothing her recovering spirit. He reminds Sethe that she, not her children, is her best thing, and the novel closes with Sethe, who had for two decades defined herself only as mother, beginning to understand what her "me" could be.

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

### **BENNETT, GWENDOLYN B. (1902–1981)**

Born in 1902 in Giddings, Texas, Gwendolyn Bennett was the daughter of teachers who eventually moved to Nevada to work on an Indian reservation. When Bennett was five years old, the **family** moved to Washington, D.C., so that her father could study law. It was here that life became less stable when her parents divorced and her mother was awarded custody. Her father, unhappy with the decision, kidnapped Bennett and lived a nomadic life with her until finally settling in Brooklyn, New York.

In Brooklyn, Bennett's creative life came alive as she joined her high school's literary and **drama** societies, won the school's art contest, and wrote her class's graduation speech and the lyrics to their graduation song. Her

talents and intellect earned her the opportunity to study fine arts at Columbia University and the Pratt Institute, from which she graduated in 1924. She received a scholarship from Delta Sigma Theta Sorority to study art in Paris for a year after graduation.

Upon returning to the United States, Bennett became actively involved in the **Harlem Renaissance**, which was then in full swing. Already working as an art teacher at Howard University, she also worked diligently on her **poetry** and short **fiction**, making the years between 1923 and 1928 her most productive, creatively. Bennett had at least twenty-two poems and several pieces of artwork published in journals such as *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Fire!!*, *Palms*, and *Gypsy*. Unfortunately, however, she never had her poetry published as a single collection.

In 1926, Bennett began working for *Opportunity* as the assistant editor and columnist of “The Ebony Flute,” a column that provided the social and literary happenings of prominent artists. She worked at the magazine for two years until her husband’s medical practice forced them to move to Florida. Bennett quickly became unhappy, longing for the stimulation of New York. Unfortunately, by the time they returned, the Great Depression had greatly depleted the movement.

After her husband’s death, she supported herself by working with **community**-based government art projects and at several schools. Suspicion of communist activities forced her out of these last positions, and she ended up collecting and selling antiques in Pennsylvania.

Bennett’s art is best known for the focus she places on the **beauty** of black people. Perhaps her most well known poem, “To Usward,” acknowledges the diversity in the black experience and celebrates the unity of the black **race**. Her poem “Heritage” (written prior to **Countee Cullen**’s poem of the same name) uses natural imagery to remind readers of the majesty of the African past. She is careful to emphasize the importance of black femininity to that past by drawing Negro girls against the backdrop of the scenery. She does this again in “To a Dark Girl,” which speaks specifically to black womanhood, calling for recognition of the beauty of black feminine grace and struggle.

While few scholars have chosen Bennett as a subject for thorough study, her focus on racial pride and gender consciousness proves her to be a woman who deserves such attention.

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*RaShell R. Smith-Spears*

**BETSEY BROWN**

*Betsey Brown* (1985), written by **Ntozake Shange**, is a story about the coming of age of a young girl in the midst of the racial turmoil in the 1950s. At a time when African Americans had difficulty defining a place in society and often felt like second-class citizens, the portrait of the Brown **family** is positive and reinforcing for the upkeep of ancient African traditions. The story confronts the confusion and understanding of a young girl growing up and attempting to create an **identity** of her own while still having an image that is family oriented. In the end, Betsey discovers a way to combine these two aspects of her life and define herself without having to abandon one or the other.

The family is not without problems. There is resistance between Jane and Greer, the mother and father of the family. Greer demands that his children have authority concerning their black heritage and demands they protest and take an active role in making their situation better. On the other hand, Jane wishes that her children could simply learn to blend in so as not to be recipients of racial hate or confrontation. This theme is revisited throughout the novel—the choice between blending in or being outspoken about personal social positions.

However, Betsey is still dealing with defining herself as a woman who is allowed to have **freedom** in her life. She does not seem to be overcome with defining herself according to her **race** in society. The Brown family creates a positive understanding of what it means to be African American, and therefore the children seem not to be plagued with doubt or fear about what they can or cannot do with their lives. They have confidence and understanding about who they are because of the methods Greer takes to educate them about their ancestry and break down the untrue **stereotypes** that appear in society. For example, Greer uses African drumbeats and call and response to wake the kids up in the morning. Not a day passes when he does not manage to teach the children something new about Africa and, essentially, about themselves.

The Brown family is under a new kind of stress in 1959 because of the forced integration of schools and the smoothing over of racism in society. Although the newly enforced laws claim that racism is over and that there is equality for all, regardless of color, racism was still prevalent and affected the lives of many African Americans. The novel follows the Brown family through this hard time and especially documents what it might have been like to be growing up a black woman during this period.

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*Fayme Perry*

**BIRTHA, BECKY (1948– )**

Few can rival the unique ambiance found in the richly textured simplicity of Becky Birtha's **poetry** and short stories. Birtha's writings reflect her unique insight into the reticular nuances of interracial relationships between women. Birtha was born in Hampton, Virginia, and spent her childhood in Philadelphia. Birtha is named after her great-grandmother, who was a slave, and Birtha's writings reflect her distinctive personal diversity: She is African American, Irish, Cherokee, and Choctaw, a lesbian, a feminist, and a Quaker.

Birtha attended the State University of New York at Buffalo, earning a B.S. degree in children's studies in 1973. In 1984 she received her M.F.A. in creative writing from Vermont College. In 1985 Birtha received an Individual Fellowship in Literature from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and in 1988 she received a Creative Writing Fellowship Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1989 Birtha's short story "The Saints and Sinners Run" was adapted for the stage and performed by the Rose and Swan Theatre Company, Media, Pennsylvania. In 1993 she was awarded a Pew Fellowship of the Arts. Birtha's poems and stories are widely anthologized.

Birtha's first published work was *For Nights Like This One: Stories of Loving Women* (1983), a charming collection of shorts stories that presents same-sex romance in a genuine way that is a testament to the infectiousness of the human spirit and the efficacy of believing in **love**. *For Nights Like This One* explores lesbian relationships in a remarkably unremarkable way that accentuates lesbian women's experiences in love as fully human—and not something socially deviant or mysterious. Birtha creates characters that are inhabited with vitality and joy, anger and pain, love and sacrifice. Their stories speak to the broader experience of being a woman and the search for love and acceptance that is common to all people. Birtha's second collection of short stories, *Lovers' Choice* (1987), continues the theme of celebration of the complexity and diversity of women's relationships with women. The compelling blend of grace and compassion in Birtha's characters cuts short the notion that same-sex love cannot be an adequate expression of *affaire d'amour*. Many of Birtha's stories in *Lovers' Choice* also offer a unique view of white women by black women through the struggles of lesbian interracial relationships. Birtha's first poetry collection, *The Forbidden Poems* (1991), offers a resplendent array of images that offer an affirmation of the forces of love and hope in the face of social intolerance and criticism. Birtha's poetry uses the soft and subtle power of metaphor to express her belief in a world of tolerance and acceptance as in "How It Happened." Most of all, Birtha's poetry and short stories are about women—women whose lyrical experiences of love function to foster hope within us all.

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*Debbie Clare Olson*

## BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement (BAM) was a collective attempt among African American writers, musicians, visual artists, activists, and cultural critics to articulate a specifically black art. This project entailed the definition of a black aesthetic as the underlying impetus of their work. Although such a definition could never be fully codified, most participants agreed that a work created in the spirit of a black aesthetic endeavored both to raise its audience's awareness of social inequalities and to valorize African and African American cultural practices. The BAM shared the idea of a black aesthetic with the Black Power movement, a concurrent drive to further the social rights of black people through black Nationalist organizations such as the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam; activists like Stokely Carmichael urged artists to advance Black Power principles in their work. As a creative movement, the BAM was seen by some commentators as the inheritor of **Harlem Renaissance** efforts to promote black art; others conceptualized its purpose more pointedly as the responsibility to succeed in cultivating a space for black creativity where Harlem Renaissance artists had failed. In any case, BAM supporters, unlike their 1920s predecessors, understood art and politics as inextricably linked. Many artists used black nationalist or separatist themes as a way of highlighting this relationship.

The BAM spanned roughly the years 1965 to 1976. Several critics cite LeRoi Jones/**Amiri Baraka**'s February 1965 decision to leave his Greenwich Village life for literary activist projects in Harlem as the movement's true beginning; some have labeled his 1969 **poetry** collection *Black Magic* as one of the BAM's first "official" publications. However, several black women writers made life-changing decisions during the same period that suggest other possible opening moments for the movement. **Gwendolyn Brooks** attended the Second Black Writers' Conference at Fisk University in 1967, a conference

that brought many BAM writers together for the first time; the ideas of the poets she met there radically altered the style and themes of her poetry. **Nikki Giovanni** graduated from Fisk University in the winter of 1967 and organized Cincinnati's first Black Arts Festival that summer. **Sonia Sanchez** published her first book of poetry, *Home Coming*, in 1969. BAM activities were also inspired by historical events and situations. The 1950s **civil rights movement** had gained ground for African Americans, but substantial social change was still needed. In 1961, several Mississippi "**freedom riders**" were pulled off the buses they were riding to protest segregation and severely beaten. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. **Malcolm X** was assassinated on February 21, 1965, at a rally. Writers like Brooks, Giovanni, and Sanchez were motivated by these events and others to argue for the worth of black achievement.

BAM creativity was grounded in a desire to define new approaches to African American expression. In **literature**, these new expressive strategies translated into innovative formal techniques, a use of African cultural references, and emphasis upon the term *black* as a replacement for *Negro*. Writers sometimes celebrated their heritage by choosing African names to replace their "slave names." The proliferation of literature that explored African American experience also prompted BAM teachers to reconfigure their notions of education. Psychologist Nathan Hare worked with Sonia Sanchez to establish the first Black Studies Department at San Francisco State University in 1969; poet **Sarah Webster Fabio** supported their efforts from her post at Oakland's Merritt College. Sanchez also taught the very first college seminar on literature by African American women writers that year, a course at the University of Pittsburgh titled "The Black Woman."

Prose writers formed a vanguard to BAM productions, but their longer pieces did not lend themselves as easily to political argument as did poetry and **drama**. The Harlem Writers Guild, established in 1950, counted among its 1960s members **Maya Angelou**, **Rosa Guy**, and **Sarah Elizabeth Wright**. Their work, primarily **fiction**, received acclaim without being considered revolutionary. **Toni Cade Bambara** is another fiction writer, not associated with the Harlem Writers Guild, whose work in the 1960s and 1970s grew out of contemporary social struggles. **Adrienne Kennedy**, the author of such plays as *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1969) and *An Evening with Dead Essex* (1973), explores in her work the violent racial tensions that have fractured the United States. Umbra, a Manhattan-based collective of black poets and fiction writers that included Calvin Hernton, Tom Dent, **Ishmael Reed**, and Brenda Walcott, paved the way for other BAM organizations through its focus on radical political statements, its innovative art, and the publication of *Umbra Magazine*. Both individual writers and groups like Umbra established structural experimentation and rhetorical boldness as central characteristics of BAM writing.

Poets comprised the largest group of BAM writers for several reasons. Poetry could be easily performed; its formal malleability encompassed both experimental writing and vernacular expressions; its metrical patterns were



aligned with the repeated rhythms of political exhortations; and its relatively short length meant that poets could self-publish. Many poets also wrote articles, plays, short stories, novels, and books for children, yet their investment in the movement's capacity for widespread public communication often encouraged them to publish poetry first. Sonia Sanchez produced seven poetry publications between 1969 and 1974, including *Ima Talken Bout the Nation of Islam* (1971), *Liberation Poem* (1970), and *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974), all of which consider the role that black women play in defining a black aesthetic. The linguistic abbreviations, erratic use of capitalization, and nonstandard spacing characteristic of Sanchez's work in the 1970s are common to many BAM writers. Nikki Giovanni published *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* and *Black Judgment* in the late 1960s; her poems in these two volumes lament the **death** of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., and demand retribution for crimes committed against African Americans. Giovanni is also known for her "Poem of Angela Yvonne Davis," a poem honoring activist and cultural critic **Angela Davis**.

The women poets of the BAM raised issues that were not always in the forefront of the movement's political concerns. **Audre Lorde**, a writer associated briefly with the Harlem Writers Guild, came into prominence on the BAM scene in 1968 when she published her first book of poetry, *The First Cities*, taught at Mississippi's historically black Tougaloo College for six weeks, and found her lifelong romantic partner. Lorde's personal life intersected with her professional activities in a way that some other BAM writers' did not: She was a lesbian who explored issues of **sexuality** in her work at a time when many of her contemporaries openly expressed homophobic sentiments. **June Jordan** began her teaching career in 1966 and published her first poetry collection, *Who Look at Me*, in 1969. Her work is notable for its investigation of **race** relations and the processes by which American society complicates black people's sense of **identity**. **Carolyn Rodgers** studied poetry in workshops with Gwendolyn Brooks and the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC). Her work reflects the militant themes and rhetoric of Black Power, but she tempers her promotion of Black Nationalism with a feminist politics that calls into question Black Power beliefs in female subservience. Rodgers uses the linguistic abbreviations common to BAM poetry in order to illustrate how language serves as a tool for political manipulation. The social themes that define the poetry of Lorde, Jordan, Rodgers, and their contemporaries also appear in the work of two poets from an earlier generation who were still active during the BAM, **Margaret Walker** and Gwendolyn Brooks. Brooks published *In the Mecca* (1968) and *Riot* (1969) a few years after her attendance at the Fisk Writers' Conference; these poems' interrogation of urban social conditions reflects the period's turbulence. Walker's *Prophets for a New Day* (1970), her third book of poetry, condemns specific instances of racial violence.

The efforts of independent publishers and editors who compiled anthologies of BAM work helped to sustain the movement's momentum. The *Journal of Black Poetry* and *Black Scholar* were both published out of San Francisco's Bay

Area; *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*), edited by Hoyt Fuller, came out of Chicago. Don L. Lee/Haki Madhubuti's Third World Press in Chicago and Dudley Randall's Broadside Press in Detroit also provided opportunities for African American writers to publicize their work and meet others with similar interests. Broadside Press in particular supplied invaluable support for the careers of Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez. Giovanni published three books, one tape featuring a reading of her poetry, one broadside, and twenty-four anthologized poems during her time with Broadside. Sanchez produced four books, three tapes, two broadsides, and fourteen anthologized poems during the same period. Both poets also participated in hundreds of readings, conferences, and other activities. Giovanni formed her own press, Nik-Tom, Ltd., in 1970; Sanchez established 5X Publishing Co. in 1971. Among the anthologies that featured work by BAM poets like Giovanni and Sanchez were Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal's *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968) and Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (1972). *Black Fire* also contained essays that attempted to quantify the emerging characteristics of the BAM, as did Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) and Floyd B. Barbour's *The Black Seventies* (1970). Most of the critics who contributed to these anthologies were men; however, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) compiled the work of several prominent black women writers who sought to define the place of **black feminist** thought in the wake of BAM ideas.

The BAM included writers who were noted as much for their political activities as for their publications. Public political expressions often carried serious consequences. Angela Davis, a well-known member of the Communist Party, lost her teaching appointment and was imprisoned in 1970 after her involvement with Black Panther Party members. She contributed to *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (1971) during her incarceration. Sonia Sanchez was investigated by federal agents in the mid-1960s after she was accused of teaching subversive materials; she and some of her fellow BAM poets were regularly put under surveillance by the FBI, local police, and Michigan state police because of their supposedly illicit activities. The gradual dissolution of the BAM can be attributed in part to Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), and FBI investigations, which undermined movement leadership and bred dissent among members. Some contemporary black feminists also felt that the BAM had long been marred by internal antagonisms. Michele Wallace, literary and cultural critic, wrote *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* in 1978 as a reflection on the gender politics of Black Power. She argued that black men's internalization of white American beliefs in their aggressive sexuality culminated in 1960s Black Power sentiments. Although her work garnered criticism from several quarters, she articulated the concern about male domination of the BAM that was shared by many women affiliated with its organizations.

The BAM resulted in positive gains overall for black women writers. The interest of writers like Sanchez, Giovanni, and **Jayne Cortez** in **blues** themes

as a source of feminist expression defied the belief some BAM activists held in blues' resonance with the oppressive social conditions of **slavery**. Writers sought out the work of lesser-known authors for republication; **Alice Walker** reintroduced the novels and short stories of **Zora Neale Hurston** to the reading public in the 1970s. Several books that assessed the end of the BAM also appeared. Walker's *Meridian* (1976) narrates the experiences of a young black woman whose physical illness mirrors the social unrest she works to combat. **Ntozake Shange's** choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976) comprises a series of monologues on black female experience narrated by seven anonymous women. When this work premiered on Broadway, its success was interpreted by many critics as a triumph for black women working in theater. Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) depicts a group of civil rights workers seeking a mythical source of **healing**. Such works both reflect on the social efforts of the preceding decades and pay tribute to the innovations of BAM participants.

*See also* Black Nationalism

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*Jennifer Denise Ryan*

## BLACK FEMINISM

The black feminist movement developed in response to the experience of black women in black liberation movements, which include the **civil rights movement**, the Black Nationalist Movement, the Black Panther movement, and others, and in the women's movement. Black women often found themselves facing sexual oppression within black liberation movements and racial oppression within the women's movement. White feminists often refused to see themselves as racist, projecting an antiracist attitude that was not reflected in either their ideology or practice. Although the black feminist movement was realized in the 1970s, the foundation had long since been developing.

As far back as the **slave narratives**, African American women have been asserting their desire for sexual as well as racial equality. This assertion was perhaps best exhibited by **Sojourner Truth** in her “Ar’n’t I a Woman” speech. Born in Ulster County, New York, and identified as “Isabella,” Truth experienced the hardships of **slavery** before gaining her **freedom** with the passing of the 1827 New York law. In 1843, Isabella assumed the name Sojourner Truth and worked with prominent figures like **Frederick Douglass** and William Lloyd Garrison in antislavery activities. In 1851 Truth attended the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, and both the reception she received there and the speech she ultimately gave reflect the multiple oppression that black women have had to cope with historically. Upon her arrival at the convention, Truth was met with antagonism from white participants who were against her participation in the convention. While some white males were opposed to Truth’s “gender,” some white female participants feared that Truth’s inclusion into the convention would minimize the focus on gender by bringing the **race** question forward. Many of these women were concerned that their supporters would turn from the women’s movement if they saw it as a support system for the antislavery movement. Truth was eventually able to give her speech, and in it she established not only her humanity but her desire to have both her race and her gender acknowledged. Truth’s positioning would be echoed later in the 1970s by black women who still felt that their gender and race ideals were being marginalized. Truth in effect set the foundation for the black feminism of the 1970s when black women were calling for the recognition of their multiple sites of oppression.

Sojourner Truth in many ways set the tone for black women’s writing that followed. **Harriet Jacobs’s** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* while following the genre of the slave narrative also emphasized the significance that gender played in the life of the enslaved. Jacobs acknowledged that slavery was hard for black men, but she went on to suggest that it was much harder for black women whose **sexuality** was often used against them. With this emphasis on sexual abuse, Jacobs highlighted an aspect of the slave experience that was often minimized in the male slave narrative. Thus the foundation of black feminism was being developed, and from the onset, the questioning of sexual oppression was paralleled by a questioning of racial oppression. In her 1892 piece “Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of Race,” **Anna Julia Cooper** clearly weaves together issues of race and sexuality. Cooper establishes to the leaders of her time the important roles that women can and should play in uplifting the race. “Womanhood a Vital Element” puts forth the idea that women can be leaders of the race both inside and outside of the church. The piece establishes the significance of a woman’s status within a culture or **community**. Cooper acknowledges that the sign of a civilized community was in the status of its women. If the black race wanted to be uplifted, women should and must play a vital role in the struggle.

What Cooper was struggling against, and what women of the 1970s would struggle against, was the emphasis placed on black manhood in black

liberation movements. Scholars have long suggested that the greatest travesty of American slavery was the systematic theft of African American manhood. Thus for many black leaders racial uplift was equated with recuperating black manhood. At the turn of the century, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois were central figures within the African American community. In the literary pieces written by both leaders, much emphasis is placed on retrieving, developing, and pushing forward African American manhood. This emphasis on uplifting the race through a reassertion of black manhood limited the roles that women could play in race uplift, literary movements, and day-to-day living. Part of the agenda of black feminism, which was established by Anna Julia Cooper, is to acknowledge the strength of black women and their ability to be leaders in the black community.

Prior to the 1970s, black women were central figures in the racial progress and development of the black community. Unfortunately, due to the emphasis on manhood, much of their work was left unacknowledged until recently. During the **Harlem Renaissance**, African American women were central to the literary movement. It was in their homes that writers gathered to share and develop their work. African American women at this time served as journal editors as well as writers. Women's writing during this time was provocative and progressive but unappreciated. The greatest strength of this work was its incorporation of both gender and race issues, and this is perhaps one reason why these women went unrecognized. From early on, women activists and writers such as Truth and Cooper insisted on including discussions about gender and sexuality into ongoing debate of the race question. During the Harlem Renaissance, **Jessie Redmon Fauset's** *Plum Bun* was critiqued by Du Bois and other scholars who took the subtitle of the novel, "A Novel without a Plot," literally. These scholars saw the novel as a text that did not contribute to the ever-present goal of race uplift. Ironically, Fauset, in *Plum Bun*, succeeds in not only addressing the race question; she links that discussion to a conversation about the Cult of True Womanhood. Fauset posits race and gender as interwoven characteristics that for the African American woman writer cannot be separated. The novel successfully highlights the problems that black women have faced and continue to face in the women's liberation movement. Many who were integral in the feminist movement were middle-class white women who were not overly concerned with issues of race and **class**. They were solely concerned with gaining sexual equality with men. Fauset's novel demonstrates that this narrow focus did not fully address the needs of black women, who also had issues pertaining to race and class that could not be ignored.

The black feminist movement recognizes that women of color are oppressed on multiple levels and that change cannot come by fighting singular forms of oppression; this movement focused on addressing all forms of oppression and developing political theory for advancing the status of women. The black feminist movement developed out of the concerns established by early writers like Truth, Jacobs, Cooper, and Fauset; the organization saw that it was essential to confront race, gender, and class issues at the same time. In 1973 the National Black Feminist Organization was developed. The group

acknowledges in their statement of purpose that as black women they want to define for themselves who they are; these women were in part concerned with the image or **stereotypes** of black womanhood that were being put forth by both the male-dominated black liberation movement and by the women's movement. The organization hoped to lend a strong political voice to the already established women's movement and to establish to the black liberation movement the need to acknowledge that only half the race could not be uplifted. The women who developed this organization also wanted to ascertain that as feminists they were not "selling out" or dividing the race. It was important that leaders in the black community understand that as a part of the race black women were impacted by racism, but even within their own community, issues of sexism pervaded.

In 1977 black feminist ideology was further advanced with a statement from the **Combahee River Collective**, a group of black feminists who had been meeting since 1974. Like the organizers of the National Black Feminist Organization, the collective acknowledged that all forms of oppression were linked, and they presented black feminism as the political movement to fight the many and simultaneous oppressions faced by women of color. The collective asserted the need for autonomy and established the importance of **identity** politics, confirming that their political voice must come from their own identity and experiences. They asserted that while it was impossible to separate race from class from sexual oppression, their experience as black people necessitated solidarity around their race. Black feminists recognized that their political and personal lives were interwoven and desired to develop theory that addressed this point of intersection.

What was perhaps most critical about the collective's statement was its discussion of the organizational problems that black feminists faced. The biggest problem that the collective highlighted was the lack of access to power and resources. The statement alludes to Michele Wallace's positing of black women as a group in a state of isolation. Fundamentally, these women acknowledge that freedom for black women would come when there was freedom for everyone, as black women's freedom called for the destruction of all systems of oppression.

The 1970s saw an increase in the number of black women writers whose works were being published. This was a significant step for the black feminist movement, as it provided a place for their concerns to be addressed. Black women used their **poetry**, stories, and novels to address the issues that had historically been impacting upon them. With the publication of her 1973 novel ***Sula***, **Toni Morrison** opened the door for black women to address the question of black female sexuality that had been left unanswered for years. Black female sexuality had been a taboo subject for so long, stemming back to the stereotypes that developed about black women during slavery. Black women were stereotyped as overly sexual beings, and often when a black woman was raped by a white master or plantation owner, the victim was blamed. Early American **literature** is full of accounts of white men being "overpowered" by the sexuality of African American women and who could

not help themselves but to rape them. This stereotype helped to establish some of the tension that existed between white women and their black counterparts. In writing their slave narratives, most women were seeking financial stability as well as hoping to cast attention on the system of slavery. And for the most part, the men and women who were part of the abolition movement and who lent their support to these early writers were also linked to religious organizations. In order to receive the support they needed, black women writers were often forced to downplay the instances of sexual abuse they were certain to have experienced during slavery. After the Civil War and with the turn of the century, the pressures of the Cult of True Womanhood also had an impact on the way that black women's sexuality was written about. In fact, literary black females became asexual. This writing of black female characters combated the images that came out of slavery of black women as **Jezebels**.

With her groundbreaking novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison allowed the black female character to be empowered by her sexuality. Sula is a character that is aware of the centrality of both her race and gender in defining her identity. She is not bound by the patriarchy of the American society in which she lives; she makes her own rules and defines her own space and place in American society. Most important, Sula helps to empower the community around her. Morrison demonstrates the effectiveness of the black female to uplift and transform her community.

**Alice Walker** has also played a critical role in the black feminist movement. It was Walker who coined the term **womanism** to place emphasis on the self-determination of black women, to show appreciation for all aspects of womanhood, and to advocate for the commitment to the survival of both men and women. Walker's literary works, including *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, highlight the struggles of women of color globally.

Black feminist theory has opened up a space for black women to address the personal within the political. **Maya Angelou's** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* established a new genre of expression as autobiographical fiction became a medium for women of color to bring attention to how their personal lives have been impacted by larger social and political systems. This form of writing can be linked to the newly coined term *faction* wherein writers take factual events and write about them in a fictional context. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is perhaps the best-known example of this writing form. *Beloved* highlights the way that the American system of slavery continues to impact American society, both black and white, and how the roles of African American women today are tied to the systematic abuses they received during slavery.

African American men, such as Michael Awkward, have also played a role in the black feminist movement. Awkward, in "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism," explores the role that black men play and have played in the subjugation of women.

*See also* Autobiography; Black Nationalism

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*Josie Brown-Rose*

### BLACK FEMINIST CRITICISM

Although its particular manifestations are quite diverse, black feminist criticism generally refers to politically informed analyses of literary and cultural representations produced by or about black women. Black feminist criticism became a recognizable intellectual approach during the 1970s when black women responded to their lack of representation in the male-dominated **civil rights movement** and the white-dominated women's movement. As greater numbers of black women began to write essays and form groups to raise consciousness and intervene in politics, those in academic circles attended to the way African American women have been represented (or misrepresented) in **literature** and worked to build a literary tradition of empowerment.

Black feminist criticism has been visible since at least the end of the nineteenth century, however. Even before the Civil War, some black women were involved in literary circles. The 1890s gave rise to a number of African American women's clubs and, in 1896, the National Association of Colored Women. Such organizations led to an African American women's newspaper called *Woman's Era*; to a number of conferences addressing the relationship between literature and racial politics, such as the 1895 National Conference of Colored Women featuring **Victoria Earle Matthews's** the "Value of Race Literature"; and to publications examining the possible roles of black literature. Among these were **Anna Julia Cooper's** *A Voice from the South* (1892) and **Gertrude Mossell's** *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894). Both texts argue for the inclusion of African American women in discussions of either an American or an African American heritage, and they also insist that artistic self-representation is a vital ingredient for the improvement of racial



conditions. Such work was continued in the early twentieth century when **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson** included the works of women activists in a volume she edited (*Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence: The Best Speeches Delivered by the Negro from the Days of Slavery to the Present Time*, 1914) and the monthly journal *Woman's Voice* began to be published (1919).

From the days of the **Harlem Renaissance** to the **Black Arts Movement**, most of the critical attention given to gendered aspects of literary representations came from writers who also produced creative works. Such authors as **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, and **Margaret Walker** considered African American expressive traditions in general terms as well as the particular concerns facing black women and the place of black women's literature. Hurston's anthropological recording of black **folklore** has been contextualized by scholars such as **Alice Walker** in terms of its womanist implications, and it is at times understood as a prefiguring of the cultural studies emphasis among contemporary black feminists such as bell hooks and Michele Wallace. Black feminist literary criticism was not widespread during the Harlem Renaissance or the eras following it, however, and it did not begin to gain momentum until the mid-1970s.

A number of publications signaled the beginning of black feminist criticism. In 1974, an issue of the popular black journal *Black World* included an article by Mary Helen Washington titled "Black Women Image Makers," an essay by **June Jordan** about Zora Neale Hurston and **Richard Wright**, a review of Zora Neale Hurston's work, and a review of a television version of an **Ernest Gaines** novel that focused on a woman. This amount of attention to black women was striking at the time. Then Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974) was published in the feminist magazine *Ms.* Here, Walker uses the term "**womanism**" rather than "**black feminism**" as a way of valuing black roots and an inclusive politics; that is, womanism is about improving conditions for women *and* men while addressing the concerns of women of color, lesbians, and others who are often excluded from feminism. Walker also champions the recovery of a black female creative heritage, suggesting that not only literature but also more everyday artistic expressions be included in such a tradition. The **poetry** of **Phillis Wheatley**, the **quilting** of countless anonymous black women, and the gardens of Walker's own mother are thus considered as valuable and inspirational manifestations of an indomitable creative spirit. Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) is also often heralded as the beginning of a new wave of black feminist writing. Smith's essay calls for analyses of the interlocking oppressions of gender, **race**, **class**, and sexual orientation, with attention to black lesbian writers and recognition of a distinct tradition of writing by black women. Smith's emphasis on the combined effects of various types of oppression has continued to be a premise in black feminist criticism, often termed "double jeopardy," "multiple jeopardy," or "simultaneity of oppressions." Much feminist work by scholars such as Hortense Spillers and Mae Henderson continues to analyze the way systems of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and heterosexism build upon one another. Early anthologies that explored issues of black

feminist criticism include *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, 1981), *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, 1982), and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (edited by Barbara Smith, 1983). The first of these brought issues of black feminism into conversation with the perspectives of Latinos and other women of color. All three anthologies attended to lesbian concerns and worked to address the racism in the women's movement.

Much early black feminist criticism worked both to disrupt **stereotypes** common in literary representations of black women and to restore African American women's writing that had all but disappeared. bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) notes the tendency of black women to remain invisible, even during times when white women and black men were fighting to express the concerns of "women" or "blacks." In English departments, this invisibility meant that attention was given to women writers such as Virginia Woolf or black protest writers such as Richard Wright and **Ralph Ellison**, but African American women's writing continued to be ignored. Deborah McDowell thus inaugurated the Black Women Writers series for Beacon Press that included new editions of such works as Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) and **Nella Larsen's** *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Henry Louis Gates acted as general editor for the **Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers** (1988), an important series that included volumes by thirty authors who had received little critical attention. Other scholars, including Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Claudia Tate, Mary Helen Washington, Valerie Smith, Hortense Spillers, and Mae Henderson, have continued to reprint writings by black women and/or encourage scholarship on black women writers, including **autobiographies**, **slave narratives**, and novels of the Harlem Renaissance. When drawing together themes and motifs among various generations of black women writers, critics have focused on such issues as silence and voice, **family** and **community**, and personal and social empowerment. Even as black feminist critics have worked to build a heritage of black women's writing, however, they have also participated in conversations problematizing notions of canon and tradition, both of which tend to rely on separations between "literary" and "popular" writing while privileging some texts and excluding others. Hazel Carby, for example, goes beyond ideas of a "tradition" in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987) by noting the many discontinuities in writings by black women and setting forth a black feminist criticism that is multiple and contextualized.

Black feminist criticism has also been important in responding to the rise of contemporary publications by black women, especially during the 1970s and following. Until this time, most feminist presses and journals focused exclusive attention on writing by white women, while publishing venues controlled by black or white men similarly avoided writing by black women. In 1979, however, an issue of the *Black Scholar* criticized **Ntozake Shange's** play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* and

Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. An ongoing controversy began as critics discussed the negative portrayal of black men in texts written by black women, including not only those by Shange and Wallace but also Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (both the novel and the film version) and some of the novels of **Toni Morrison** and **Gayl Jones**. Many black males believed that negative characterizations of African American men reinforced stereotypes associating black men with violent behavior and sexual aggression, turned attention to problems internal to the black community so that larger issues of racism became easier to ignore, and created a spectacle of black conflict for the enjoyment of white audiences. Many black feminist critics defended writing that portrayed abusive men by recentering the focus on women and women's experiences, refuting a standard for literature that included an idealized picture of the black family, and examining the fuller contexts of male portrayal, which often included change or redemption of some form.

Scholars have extended analyses of contemporary black women's creative writing to go beyond issues of black male portrayal. Some of the writers whose careers have been bolstered through critical attention include **Maya Angelou**, **Audre Lorde**, Toni Morrison, **Toni Cade Bambara**, **Gloria Naylor**, **Terry McMillan**, June Jordan, **Sherley Anne Williams**, **Lucille Clifton**, **Nikki Giovanni**, and **Sonia Sanchez**. Many of these creative writers also write critical commentary on the works of their peers, and they have published their reviews and analyses not only in literary academic journals but also in general interest magazines. The increased publications of contemporary black women has also increased attention to earlier black writers as feminist critics such as Deborah McDowell and Dianne Sadoff have connected contemporary writing with earlier black women's literature.

During the 1980s, as black feminist criticism gained momentum, a number of attempts were made to define the movement and articulate its relationship to poststructuralism, the predominant literary theory at the time. On the one hand, writers worked to refine the definition of black feminist criticism as presented in Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." Deborah McDowell's "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" (1980), for example, suggests that black feminist criticism attend to the context of textual production and reception rather than focus on common themes in black women's writing, while Hazel Carby's "'Woman's Era': Rethinking Black Feminist Theory" (1987) attempts to move beyond an assumption of an essential black female **identity** that would be expressed in African American women's literature. In the course of such writing, the question of who can actually be considered a black feminist critic regularly arises (Must it be a black person? Must it be a woman?), and the usual response is that black feminist criticism needs to be governed by the voices of African American women, but both women and men of other races and ethnicities may contribute scholarship that is mindful of the context and complexities involved in addressing black women's texts.

In the same time period, black feminist critics Barbara Christian and Joyce A. Joyce argued that poststructural theories were problematic for black

criticism in general as well as black feminist criticism in particular. Christian's "The Race for Theory" (1987) asserts the importance of specific literary analyses informed by attention to race, class, and gender, opposing such a practice to the jargon-filled language and abstract observations that she associates with poststructuralism. Joyce's "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism" (1987) was printed in *New Literary History* along with rebuttal essays by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker. Joyce argues that a commitment to poststructuralism compromises and depoliticizes African American criticism due to its inaccessibility and its use of theories from white men, but as Gates and Baker respond, the debate appears to be a divide between male theory and female practice. Although Christian's and Joyce's essays have garnered a great deal of attention, most black feminist critics have not been completely opposed to theory but instead call for a politically useful poststructuralism. While poststructuralism may be problematic in its questioning of stable identities and canons at a time when African American women were beginning to assert their identities and form a canon, many critics have used poststructural theories to question dominant assumptions, understand relationships between "center" and "margin," and attend to issues of difference and hybridity.

By the 1990s, black feminist criticism had made such a strong impact on English departments that most scholars considered, in varying degrees, issues of difference and became more likely to set their claims within specific historical contexts and showed self-conscious awareness of their own ideological positioning. The influence of black feminist criticism spread beyond literature departments as well, as scholars in disciplines such as sociology and **history** began to consider black women and other minorities more carefully. The growth of black feminist criticism also both enabled and was enabled by the critical concerns of other women of color, both within the United States and across the globe. Issues of postcolonial conditions and global economics began to have a bearing on black feminist criticism, and many cross-cultural studies placed black women's writing in relationship to lesbian writing, Chicana writing, and African writing. Black feminist criticism also contributed to an understanding of **whiteness** as a racially inflected rather than "neutral" position, as theorized, for example, in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). A number of books and anthologies appeared in the 1990s that marked the widespread significance of black feminist criticism and displayed the interest and involvement of black men, white women, and women of other ethnicities. These include Houston Baker's *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (1991), an anthology of black feminist criticism edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1990), and *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (edited by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, 1997). Many African American women scholars have also increasingly adopted critical approaches such as psychoanalysis, ecocriticism, New Historicism, cultural materialism, queer theory, and cultural studies when considering texts and power relations. The rise of cultural studies has been particularly fertile

ground for black feminist critics, for it focuses attention on popular, contemporary texts, including films and other nonliterary cultural expressions, in order to think about the political implications of various representational practices. In black feminist criticism, literary studies have often been combined with attention to music, painting, **spirituality**, or other black arts, particularly quilting, the **blues**, and **jazz**. Studies of **sexuality** and the black woman's **body** have also been central to the development of black feminist criticism, theorized by such scholars as Evelyn Hammonds. As the influence of black feminism has grown and contributed to the development of race and gender studies, however, many African American women scholars caution against a simplistic association of black women with the body, the material realm, and activism, while either white women or white or black men represent the intellectual and theoretical position. Such oppositions, even when appearing to be radical by including black women, tend to reinforce gendered and racialized hierarchies.

At this point, no single black feminist criticism exists. Instead, texts by and about African American women are analyzed in a number of ways, often attending to issues of not only race and gender but also economics and sexuality, two of the earliest concerns of black feminist critics. The roots of black feminist criticism are also continued in the ongoing attempts to link academic work with cultural practices outside the university setting. While black feminism has become firmly entrenched in English departments, its impact is generally less visible in other cultural realms, so many black feminist critics are working to solidify connections between their scholarship and political issues of import, often by maintaining ties to black communities. Throughout its history, black feminist criticism's strength has been not only its ability to challenge the invisibility of black women and build a heritage of black women's writing but also its encouragement of serious and self-reflexive discussion about how critics talk about literature and to what ends.

*See also* Black Masculinity; Combahee River Collective; Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press; Lesbianism

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*Laurie McMillan*

## BLACK MASCULINITY

It would be impossible to discuss contemporary black masculinity without first addressing the fact that African American men are considered by most to be in crisis. A recent study has shown that public schools actually track black boys as criminals, creating what they fear by keeping them alienated and in the margins (Ferguson 2). Another cause may be law enforcement agencies, which many hold responsible for criminalizing all black men through racial profiling, police brutality, and racist court procedures. These practices demoralize many, murder others, and create a national environment of fear (Neal 13). The young black man is the easiest scapegoat and primary target for multiple sins and the owner of the face seen drawn in shadowy figures on the evening news almost every night.

The dominant white culture of America has been taught to live in fear of black men. Black men are the Other; they are victims or thugs or simply made invisible. Robert Staples addresses the three main **stereotypes** that persist about black men: the “sexual superstud, the athlete, and the rapacious criminal” (1). And then there is the “bling bling” commodity culture promoted by many young black male artists today. The promise of the civil rights era has given way to economic relapses. Politicized artists from the Black Power movement have been overthrown by an easy materialism backed by “violence and aggression” (Boyd 133). However, black men themselves are the ones who have the most to fear. Their very survival is threatened by “higher rates of heart disease, hyper-tension, infant mortality, mental disorders, psychiatric hospitalization, homicide, unemployment, suspension from school, imprisonment, and morbidity and low life expectancy” than any other demographic in the United States (Majors 16). **John Edgar Wideman** calls the problems of black men a “*national shame affecting us all*” (27).

And yet this bleak portrait of crisis does not paint an accurate picture of black men in America. Stereotypes persist and obstacles are great, but there is no monolithic black man (Belton 4). The majority of black men are not the admired or condemned celebrity athletes whose faces appear regularly on commercials and in the news. Statistics about young black men in jail are staggering, but it is important to remember that 75 percent of black men never have anything to do with the criminal justice system (Ellis 11). And if the stereotype persists that black men are often emasculated by black women, the flip side, and more realistic version of this story, is that black men are “man enough” to have meaningful and functional relationships with powerful

women (Westwood 56). To understand the causes of the stereotypes, to redress the apparent contradictions, and to get a more realistic picture of black masculinity today, a historical perspective is necessary.

**Amiri Baraka** may homogenize African cultures somewhat when he discusses the genesis of the African **family**, but his claim that capitalism and **slavery** forever affected African relationships is a necessary addendum to the discussion of black masculinity (199). Most African cultures were not as intent on the complete subjugation of women as their Western counterparts (Staples 8). For instance, the Igbo culture (found in Nigeria), which practiced polygyny and all but demanded healthy sons from wives, also promised more autonomy and gender flexibility for women than Eurocentric cultures. Igbo wives demanded respect and proper treatment from husbands through striking with co-wives; women could end their sexual and **domestic** duties to their husband through becoming a “female husband” and supporting another woman who could be a wife in their place; and daughters could take on the role of first son when no male children were born. Older women served on their own political council that advised the chief, and women were often cunning businesswomen who ensured their children’s education through their sales at market. As Buchi Emecheta demonstrates in *The Joys of Motherhood*, (neo)colonial, and thus, capitalist, culture is what undermined the delicate balance between men and women in Igbo culture. The introduction of colonial powers in Africa undermined the communalism that had reigned previously, and of course, slavery and the slave trade further destroyed the black family and, necessarily, black masculinity.

In an American context, masculinity in general was (and is still) in flux, particularly during the nineteenth century. White men were struggling to define themselves in new contexts of urban life and industrialism. Many men, particularly upper- and middle-class men, sought to define their role through the strict definition of feminine roles. The “Cult of True Womanhood,” enforced by women as well as men, promoted the ideals of domesticity, piety, submissiveness, and purity. Keeping women in their place, the private sphere, allowed men access to their own normative masculine role—having a job in the public sphere that was meaningful and that provided for the needs and protection of his family. If masculinity in America means being able to **work** and provide for and protect your family, it is obvious that black men (and many working-class and other poor men) rarely had access to these normative definitions.

**Race** exacerbates the complications of gender roles in the United States. If white women are dependent on men for their livelihood and definition, then black men and women are also dependent on white masculinity to define them and circumscribe the possibilities of their existence (Young 271). This was particularly true in antebellum America, when black (especially slave) women were seen as the “colonial Other” whose definition had to be “sexually licentious” in order to justify their economic exploitation (Young 282). If slave women survived **rape** and pregnancy by their masters only to see their children sold away from them, then slave men were forced to stand by

as their wives, mothers, and daughters went through this dehumanizing process. Enslaved men, and to a lesser extent, free black men (even in the North) were dealt the “double blow” of watching African American women be used by white men, while being denied any contact with white women, commonplaces that symbolize black men’s secondary status in society based on race (Bell 201).

Relationships between black men and women were necessarily structured differently than white men’s relationships were with white women (or anyone else), and black men could not be dominant in the same way. Hazel Carby notes that black men have been systemically denied male privilege through the oppressions of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and violent aggression (391). Just as black women were denied access to “true womanhood’s” definition of women, black men were denied access to normative definitions of masculinity. While white women and men are both attempting to enforce an idea of femininity that adheres strictly to the ideals of “true womanhood,” masculinity was somewhat up for grabs. White middle-class men were dealing with increasing competition and industrialization, the demand for more time with their families, and a lack of access to physical definitions of manhood. Black men and working-class men were struggling with middle-class ideals of masculinity while not having access to the same institutional privileges as white middle-class men.

While the reasons for this denial are horrendous, the effects are not always negative. It becomes quite clear in **Harriet Jacobs’s** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that while black men are cut off from traditional white male definitions of “gentleman,” this has a positive effect, which allows them to be open to different and more flexible forms of masculinity. Further, Jacobs shows us that southern white “gentlemen” and their limitations are clearly undesirable for any woman or society. The black men characterized in *Incidents* are shining examples of embattled manhood. Jacobs admits that for the slave being a good man (being able to protect a wife or children) is almost impossible, but time and again we are shown men who, even as slaves, rise far above their masters in her estimation of true manhood. Slavery dehumanizes all involved with the system, and in particular, it constructs slave men who are degraded, unable to be all they can be for themselves or their families. Jacobs recognizes that many slaves would never dream of trying to escape because “[i]t is difficult to persuade such that freedom could make them useful men, and enable them to protect their wives and children” (375). In spite of this prognosis, Jacobs tells us of men who live up to their full potential. James, the slave killed in the cotton gin, was full of “manliness and intelligence,” and his crime was trying to escape (380). Young master Nicholas is deceitful and unfair to William, so William physically bests him and proves to be the better man (352–353). Characters like Jacobs’s father, her Uncles Phil and Benjamin, and her son, among others, dare to be men and, as such, demonstrate that appropriate manhood is a matter of integrity, pride, and strength. These characteristics are open to any man, black or white, slave or free, but those who have more uncontested power have less access to a positive masculinity.



The hazards to masculinity and the black family during slavery still affect black men. Until the legacies of slavery, institutionalized racism and systemic economic exploitation, are fully dealt with and amended, black manhood, at least for some, will be in turmoil. The literary legacy of African American women can attest to the turmoil this wreaks on women's lives. In **Harriet E. Wilson's** *Our Nig*, the one black man Frado meets marries her and abandons her. He is a fraudulent speaker, claiming to be an escaped slave speaking on the abolitionist circuit. His inability to find a decent job near their home leads him onto ships, long absences, and eventual **death**. Sadly, Harriet Jacobs's son is similarly forced onto a voyage to Australia, and she never hears from him again. More recently, **Ntozake Shange's** *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* depicts a father more intent on destroying the mother of his children in a jealous rage than protecting his own progeny. **Alice Walker** received criticism for her portrayal in *The Color Purple* of abusive husbands and fathers in the rural South of the early twentieth century. When female authors note the effects black masculinity has on women, they are often attacked.

Despite the climate of fear and prejudice about black men in America—think of Susan Smith's tragic drowning of her children and her alibi, the black male carjacker—there is reason for much optimism. The tradition given to white men allows for men to be the absolute rulers of their households; it also allows for aggression and **violence** when their masculinity is at stake. But just because this is the role white men have been given, not all have embraced it. For the many black men who have never had access to this story of patriarchal privilege, there is even more hope. As many note, the privilege of maleness is more than canceled out in most cases by the oppression of race in America. Therefore, room for transformation of normative masculine roles may be much more possible for black men. Jacobs showed America that the true gentlemen in the South were slaves. **Zora Neale Hurston** explores a companionate, loving, and joyous union between Janie and Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. And in **Toni Morrison's** most recent novel, *Love*, we get a glimpse of the complications, possibilities, and **beauty** of black masculinity. Even though Bill Cosey is a wealthy tyrant who all but destroys his family and workers, and the book is primarily about the after-effects of his legacy of hate on the women in his life, we are also introduced to Sandler, a strong, dependable, and, importantly, flexible husband and father. Romen, a young man searching for his path in life, leads to the most promising possibilities. While he does not always make the right choices immediately, in the end he can be counted on to do the right and loving thing. Mutual respect between men and women, between people, is the necessary ingredient for **love**, and he finds it. Through African American feminist authors, descriptions and prescriptions for black masculinity go a long way to counteract the destructive stereotypes that still seem to rule our everyday world.

*See also* Civil Rights Movement

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Nicole Lynne Willey

**BLACK NATIONALISM**

Black Nationalism refers to African American sociopolitical theories, organizations, and actions that responded collectively and interactively to deep-seated

institutional racism in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and into the twenty-first century. Black Nationalism evolved in response to the fact that, as individuals and as a group, African Americans have seen their social, political, economic, and educational endeavors hindered by institutional racism. Its rationale relies on the belief that blacks should—instead of focusing on civil rights that have yet to be enjoyed or that prove to be insufficient—create institutions independent of whites, either within the United States or outside the United States. Developed as a response to a dominant white culture, Black Nationalism’s organizational objectives, rhetoric, and activity depend on its proponents’ ability to identify social and political techniques of subjugation and separatism. By strategically adapting its literary and activist responses to these techniques, Black Nationalism endeavors to oppose white supremacy. Although the term did not appear in an American dictionary until 1963, specific characteristics of Black Nationalist principles are evident in African American **literature** as early as the eighteenth century. In a 1774 letter to Samson Occom, **Phillis Wheatley** both supports and nuances his argument for the immediate bequest of African Americans’ civil rights, which is the central issue encompassed in Black Nationalist thought.

Scholars disagree about how best to define Black Nationalism. Sometimes the term is defined as being rooted in the philosophies and mobilizing activities of the Black Power movement in the 1960s. African American studies discourse, however, tends to define Black Nationalism as a complex collection of theories responding in writing and action to racial oppression. In this definition, Black Nationalism is understood as responding to no single methodology for instituting racism; instead, it is a system of adjustments made as blacks’ response to immediate modes of apparent oppression practiced within American institutions. Viewed from this perspective, Black Nationalism, by design, revises its strategies and goals to accommodate immediate redress, yet retains the belief that blacks are globally connected and therefore constitute a black nation.

Although most black political movements have traditionally been dominated by men, this statistical fact is misleading for two reasons. First, efforts to protect black women within Black Nationalist thought is demonstrated by the promotion of women as valued matriarchs of a black nation dependent on their well-being as producers of new generations. Second, **black feminist criticism** has always engaged Black Nationalism in specific ways. However, in many cases, their contributions foreground disparities between gender roles in shaping Black Nationalism and the black nation. By reexamining key words and phrases associated with its Black Nationalist rhetoric and approaching the discourse from the position of black female experiences and knowledge, black women have contributed yet another level to Black Nationalist thought. What this suggests is not an indifference to Black Nationalism, nor a manipulation of its terms and meanings. Rather, black feminist texts represent the different relationship experienced by black women within and without Black Nationalist thought. Therefore, black feminist **poetry, autobiography, fiction,**

**historical fiction**, nonfiction prose, and academic scholarship offer new viewpoints of Black Nationalism, its organization, and activity.

Antebellum literature written by **Harriet E. Wilson**, **Harriet Jacobs**, and **Maria Stewart** are examples of early contributions to Black Nationalist discourse. Each woman raises well-defined issues concerning the precarious position of black women's chastity during **slavery**. Their observations of and arguments for the protection of slave women from physical and sexual **violence** at the hands of white men are not only implicitly and explicitly made, but each woman is also an independent proponent of the significance of black women as matriarchs and mothers.

Embedded with morality and **Christianity**, Maria Stewart's 1831 publication of *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build* adamantly contends that America's foundation, propagandized as a place for **freedom** and liberty, is yet to be realized, as America enslaves African Americans based on the erroneous idea that they are inferior to whites. Although Phillis Wheatley's eighteenth-century poetry and prose addresses the virtue of slave women accessing Christian argument, she likens Africans to heathens in need of saving by gracious and Christian whites. Therefore, Stewart's works are the first written by a black woman abolitionist who denotes African Americans as "daughters" and "sons" of Africa, maintaining that black women deserve equal respect for their virtue as that received by their European counterparts. Stewart poses questions concerning the sexual autonomy of slave women and the continuous jeopardy of that virtue by licentious white men, suggesting that slave women's piety and resistance to **rape** and sexual coercion will be rewarded with freedom and morality. Additionally, like the black Jeremiad David Walker (1785–1830), with whom she was a close friend, Stewart implies that if Americans refused to free Africans and grant them equal rights, the wrath of God would be rendered upon them.

Harriet Jacobs's **slave narrative** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is similar to Stewart's prose in that it presents an argument for black women's virtue by explicitly foregrounding the sexual and physical coercion and abuse routinely carried out against slave women on American plantations. Jacobs publicly scrutinizes such violations against slave women's sexual choices by offering her predominantly white readers a detailed account of her own. Her narrative is the first to specifically address the complexities of plackage, an intricate system of coercion in which slave women or octoroons (biracial women) were coerced into sexual liaisons with white men, who, in exchange for sex, offered them freedom, protection, property, and education for their children. Jacobs faced the choice of remaining enslaved by a master, James Norcum, who harassed and threatened her with rape, or plackage. She chose the latter and entered into a sexual liaison with the unmarried Tredwell Sawyer, who offered her protection. For Jacobs, choosing plackage provided freedom for her and her children. Telling her life story makes the case for two of the most important characteristics of Black Nationalism: freedom for blacks and the value of the black matriarch's sexual autonomy.

Harriet Wilson accesses yet another literary genre, historical fiction, in her book *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), which is the first novel published by an African American. In the text, Wilson presents the life story of the daughter of an unnamed black man and a white woman, Mag Smith. The child, Frado, is abandoned by her parents and left under the auspices of a white **family** determined to keep her in servitude, despite her free black status. *Our Nig* demonstrates specific principles of Black Nationalist thought in both its telling and title. First, it inscribes the Black Nationalist belief that although one may be biracial, if he or she descends from an African, it is that ethnic **identity** that supersedes all others; thus, *Our Nig* explores the antimiscegenation notions within Black Nationalist thought.

The Reconstruction era (1865–1910) was an extremely precarious time in the black experience, particularly for women. By 1870, Congress had enacted the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which, respectively, ended slavery, protected all citizens equally, regardless of **race** and gender, and granted voting rights to black men. However, the amendments did not address suffrage. More important, the amendments were selectively and inconsistently enforced. Consequently, Black Nationalism modified its objectives and strategies to confront racist institutions and practices that were, in theory, but not in reality, outlawed by the three new amendments. Despite the Fourteenth Amendment, black women continued to be victimized and were forced to protect themselves not only from abuse but from the new economic adversities. However, they boldly faced these challenges, and within African American literature, they were able not only to incorporate the technical skills found in early American literature but to become self-empowered by relating their experiences as women. **Anna Julia Cooper's** feminist text *A Voice from the South*, published in 1892, speaks to black life in the **South** as well as to living under white supremacy. Cooper accesses **history, religion,** and ethics to foreground the inhumanity of whites against blacks and emphasizes the need for a nonsexist black leadership unafraid to vocalize and act upon such violations. Similarly, **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**, one of the most outspoken women of her time, composed texts focusing on the rights espoused and guaranteed in the Fourteenth Amendment, dedicating her life to the antilynching campaign she established. Wells-Barnett's activism included the publication of *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases* (1892), which investigates specific cases of lynching and rape committed against blacks. Through their literary crusades, Wells-Barnett and Cooper served as proponents for one of the most significant principles of Black Nationalism: the right to protect oneself from the American pogrom, mob lynchings, and rapes.

By 1900, African American literature and journalism began to proliferate. However, the **Harlem Renaissance** marked the first period in American literary history in which blacks could openly debate questions of racial identity. Notions of the black aesthetic, central to Black Nationalist thought, emerged. Although prose by black men such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) and Alain Locke (1886–1954) expressed a Black Nationalist understanding of aesthetics and the rights of blacks, they were not acting or writing without the

input of black women. The early twentieth century presented myriad opportunities for black women also to make a case for equality. Their prose, fiction, and poetry consider Black Nationalist principles, including black identity, economic self-reliance, education, and the importance of recognizing and maintaining black aesthetics.

What may have been the result of two centuries of forced miscegenation, a popular literary theme during the Harlem Renaissance was black identity, how to define it, and in some cases, determining its value and existence. Some writers, such as **Nella Larsen**, author of *Passing*, **Jean Toomer**, author of *Cane* (1923), and **Charles Waddell Chesnutt**, author of *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), had a stake in identifying themselves as more than **mulatto**, while others writers rejected their identified blackness as a disadvantage. **Zora Neale Hurston**'s short essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1925) not only honors her racial identity but also makes it clear that being African American is not a tragedy; thus she celebrates her identity by accessing **folklore** and black vernacular. Although there were different ideological understandings among Harlem Renaissance writers regarding racial identity, their paradigmatic bantering is not the most important feature about this era in African American literary history but rather the fact that, for the first time, blacks debated subject matters that directly affected their lives among and for themselves without mainstream interference or subjugation, thus moving away from the sentimental apologetic literature of their nineteenth-century forebears.

However, race was only one focus of early-twentieth-century African American literature. In addition, black women wrote about their triple identity that threatened to jeopardize their lives: race, gender, and **sexuality**. In 1925, Elise Johnson McDougald (1885–1971) published her article "The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation" in Alain Locke's magazine *Survey Graphic*. Her article is the first prose to foreground the notion that as both African Americans and females black women are subjected to twice the amount of discrimination, not only from white America but also from men. However, this does not negate the impact of Frances Beale's 1970 publication "Double Jeopardy." **Angelina Weld Grimké** and **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson** took McDougald's observations one step further and, with skilled metaphorical poetics, added sexual preference to the list of discriminatory justifications to be contested. As lesbian women who were unable to openly admit their sexual choices, Grimké' and Dunbar-Nelson used poetry to express their feelings of isolation. Although homosexuality is not accepted within Black Nationalist doctrine, it is important to the principles of **black feminism** and is widely represented in prose and fiction by women such as **Audre Lorde**.

Notions of mass black emigration were popularized in the nineteenth century by David Walker, Martin Delaney (1812–1885), and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (1834–1915); during the Harlem Renaissance the torch of Black Nationalism was carried by Marcus Garvey (1887–1940) and his second wife, Amy Jacques-Garvey (1896–1973). From 1924 to 1927 she served as the associate editor of the column for women titled "On Women and What They Think" in *Negro World*, a newspaper published by the Universal

Negro Improvement Organization (UNIA). A few years after Garvey's death in 1940, she continued his Pan-Africanist/Black Nationalist campaign by establishing the Africa Circle of the World in Jamaica and working as a contributing editor for the *African*, which was published in Harlem, New York, during the 1940s. Later in life, Jacques-Garvey began writing and successfully published *Garvey and Garveyism* (1963), *Black Power in America*, and *The Impact of Garvey in Africa and Jamaica*.

During the protest movement (1940–1959), Black Nationalism's notion that poverty was a result of racism was challenged by a Marxist-influenced socialism. Perhaps partly influenced by ideas of socialism, literature during this period did not view emigration as a viable solution to racism but, rather, saw labor movements as a potential alternative. Socialist influence on African American literature is recognizable in feminist texts that articulate the deprivation within the black experience. **Ann Petry's** (1908–1997) *The Street* (1946) provides a fictional account of the social and political consequences for uneducated and poor African Americans, while Claudia Jones's (1915–1965) essay "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women," published in *Political Affairs* in 1949, speaks to the racism black women historically defy using a Marxist analysis.

The politically and racially charged 1960s brought about the rise of the Black Power movement (1955–1980), whose rhetoric heavily influenced African American literature. The **Black Arts Movement** produced **jazz** and rhythm and **blues** (R&B) music compositions, poetry and spoken word, critical essays, dramatic plays and **film**, and fiction embedded with black power, pride, and nationalism. **Lorraine Hansberry's** plays *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (published posthumously in 1969) encouraged blacks to face restrictive covenants head on and to be proud of their blackness. **Gwendolyn Brooks**, a writer and poet whose literary career spanned more than sixty years, used her personal life as a backdrop to the poetry, prose, and fiction she produced during her lifetime, including *A Street in Bronzeville*, her first book of poetry published in 1945.

Contemporary literature, including poetry, prose, drama, and fiction produced by women such as **Angela Davis**, **Octavia Butler**, **Gloria Naylor**, **Margaret Walker**, **Toni Morrison**, **Nikki Giovanni**, **Sonia Sanchez**, **Alice Walker**, and many others, not only foregrounds the discriminatory struggles that black women routinely face but also demonstrates the Black Nationalist principles begun with the simple eighteenth-century recognition that blackness is something beautiful, powerful, and worthy of protection and study.

*See also* Civil Rights Movement

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## **BLANCHE AMONG THE TALENTED TENTH**

Barbara Neely's first novel, *Blanche on the Lam*, focused on the racism and classism leveled against **domestic** workers, especially women of color. In *Blanche among the Talented Tenth* (1994), the second in her Blanche White mystery series, Neely makes clear that she plans to target more than the prejudices of whites toward blacks by turning her attention to the African American color hierarchy. The prejudice within some African American communities against those with darker skin tones is, she points out, an especially hurtful expression of the pervasive acceptance of a light/white standard of **beauty**.

The very dark Blanche has felt the weight of this prejudice all her life, but never so much as now, for the story opens with her on vacation at an exclusive seaside resort frequented by wealthy, light-skinned African Americans. The stares and ostracism of the upper-class clientele make Blanche acutely aware of how much her dark skin stands out in this crowd. Her occupation—she is a longtime domestic worker—would elicit even more prejudice if revealed. The novel's title plays on the phrase W.E.B. Du Bois used to describe the black elite in America, but here the elite are portrayed as anything but the force of racial uplift imagined by Du Bois.

Blanche resents and is hurt by the snobbery she encounters from African Americans; her primary concern, though, is that her children not buy into this color hierarchy, and she agonizes each time she sees the influence of a color-biased culture on them, especially on her image-conscious daughter. Blanche knows how much skin lighteners, hair straighteners, and fashion play in constructing the self-image of some African Americans, especially women. She hopes her own affirmations of the beauty of blackness will help her children resist cultural pressures to accept **whiteness** as their standard of beauty, just as she hopes her unapologetic career choice will help them to resist the classism behind so many social prejudices. She fears, though, that peer pressure will do more to shape their perceptions than her influence.

This novel also focuses on Blanche's **sexuality**, not what readers might expect of a novel about a nearing-fifty, heavyset African American domestic worker. There is a mystery to be solved in this book, and Blanche does plenty of sleuthing—or snooping—into a suspicious **death** being written off as accidental, but she is equally occupied with the attentions of a dashing handsome man.



A third focus of this book is Blanche's **spirituality**. Not a churchgoer, Blanche has done a lot of reading and thinking about the best way to express her spiritual self. Her religious practices and beliefs are uniquely her own, but they owe much to African influence; communion with the **ancestors** is at the heart of Blanche's spiritual life.

Predictably, Blanche solves the mystery, but as usual, it is the sleuth herself who is the draw. In a genre with few African American protagonists, especially women, a black female detective stands out. To encounter such a sassy, savvy, feminist black woman sleuth is a real treat.

*See also* *Blanche Cleans Up*; *Blanche Passes Go*; Detective Fiction

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Grace McEntee

### **BLANCHE CLEANS UP**

*Blanche Cleans Up* (1998) is the third book in the Blanche White mystery series by **Barbara Neely**. In this novel, as usual, Blanche's strong opinions on selected social issues are the heart of the story. There is a difference here, though; the issues in Neely's previous two mysteries were race centered, but here the author turns her attention to social problems that go well beyond racial concerns (while still making clear that each issue has its racial dimension). What remains a constant in each of her novels, though, is Neely's agenda to use mass-market fiction as a vehicle for social commentary.

The story line begins when Blanche, a housekeeper-cook, once more becomes embroiled in the doings of her white employers. A mysteriously incriminating videotape stolen from the politically ambitious husband and the murder of two persons likely to know something about the tape send Blanche into snoop mode. She quickly learns of his unhappy wife's extramarital affairs, but the **family's** darker secrets are harder to unearth. Homophobia, lead poisoning, and a complex of sexual issues (including masochism and pedophilia) weave through the story. Issues concerning **sexuality** are addressed not just in Blanche's white environment but also in her **home**, as the usually unflappable Blanche agonizes over how to handle her just-hit-puberty children and her just-got-pregnant teenage niece.

Set in Boston and its environs, the novel also looks at problems that plague largely black urban communities such as Roxbury, where Blanche and her family now live. Neely makes clear that homophobia, political corruption, teen pregnancy, and environmental hazards are problems that transcend racial concerns, but she also points out that each can have a racial dimension. For example, Blanche is quick to see connections between racism and homophobia,

and she is abashed to realize that even she is prone to stereotyping homosexuals. Meanwhile, she is keenly aware that politicians court and manipulate black constituents while ignoring social problems like lead poisoning that have a disproportionate impact on black communities (Blanche learns as the story progresses that lead-infused housing may be implicated in a child's turn toward violence). And she comes to see how the pregnancy of her smart, college-bound niece could have psychological roots in the girl's fear of failure in the white world outside the inner city.

*Blanche Cleans Up*, like its predecessors, offers a strong, feminist African American presence in a mass-market detective novel, filling a near-void in this genre. As is usual with Neely's mysteries, it is Blanche's personality, her astute reading of the social scene, and her in-your-face commentary that keep fans coming back for more.

See also *Blanche among the Talented Tenth*; *Blanche on the Lam*; *Blanche Passes Go*; Detective Fiction

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Grace McEntee

### BLANCHE ON THE LAM

*Blanche on the Lam* (1992) marked the debut of **Barbara Neely's** feisty protagonist Blanche White in a book that won multiple first-novel awards, including the Agatha, Macavity, and Anthony. Neely opens her story with a courtroom scene where Blanche, a heavyset dark-skinned **domestic** worker, is appearing (not for the first time) on charges of check bouncing. Neely uses this scene to immediately begin infusing her story with social commentary, as Blanche muses on the fact that her bounced checks have all resulted from white employers failing to pay her on time. Blanche's awareness of the law's lack of concern for her ill treatment at the hands of her employers sets the stage for the many pointed observations that follow about what it is like to be an African American in a racist society.

The novel's plot is set in motion when Blanche is handed down a prison sentence rather than the expected fine, which she was prepared to pay. Unable to face jail, Blanche bolts when she has a chance. Once on the lam, she drops out of sight by taking a job as a live-in maid/cook for a wealthy white

couple. As Blanche settles into the familiar routine of catering to the needs of an upper-class white **family**, she clues readers in on what it is like to be financially dependent on people who treat you as if you are not there or who relate to you only in patronizing or other demeaning ways. Blanche explains white employer/black “help” relationships in terms of **race** and **class** politics that go back to **slavery** times.

Blanche does not simply see herself as a victim, however, for she knows she is heir to another practice handed down from her slave **ancestors**—the ability to exploit what few sources of power her position of servitude offers her. Luckily, she is very good at manipulating circumstances for her own ends, because Blanche’s instincts tell her that she has taken refuge with a family hiding secrets—secrets that spell danger for her unless she gets to the bottom of them. Blanche relies on her employers’ belief in racial **stereotypes** to conceal her savvy understanding of the family dynamics she witnesses and to hide her snoopings into their affairs.

Because of her looks and her profession, the stereotype most easy for Blanche to assume is that of the **Mammy** or **Aunt Jemima**. Neely has daringly made Blanche outwardly conform to the Mammy stereotype as a way to deconstruct this icon of black womanhood. Blanche understands the popular conception of this stereotype and avoids arousing her employers’ suspicions about her investigation by allowing them to believe that she fits the image—that she is content in her life of servitude, as fond of her “white family” as of her own kin, genuinely respects her white employers, and is blissfully unaware of the disrespectful treatment she receives at their hands.

Blanche’s views about the racial origins of power and class relationships become complicated, however, once she meets Mumsfield, an adult nephew of her employers who lives with the family. Mumsfield’s mild form of Down’s syndrome has cast him in much the same position as Blanche in the power relationships of this family, Blanche realizes with a jolt. He, too, is treated condescendingly, and his capacity for understanding and wisdom go unnoticed by all but her.

Although Blanche occasionally resorts to acting the part of the Mammy before her employers, readers always recognize this as trickster behavior not at all at odds with her usual assertive, sassy, perceptive, self-confident, and humorous demeanor. And as in most **detective fiction**, all turns out well, thanks to Blanche’s intelligent deductions and courageous actions. The story ends, significantly, with Blanche rejecting a chance to earn a lot of money playing a Mammy role—and she is surprised that this rejection comes at some emotional cost. Asked to become Mumsfield’s caregiver, Blanche hesitates, for she genuinely likes the young man and the two of them are in instinctive accord with one another. But quickly Blanche puts aside the temptation, for to accept would be to put Mumsfield’s needs above those of her family. Her children’s needs will best be met if they move north—a move many of her ancestors have made before her.

Because Mumsfield is such a sympathetic character, and because he and Blanche seem to have a special relationship, readers might easily expect or

want Blanche to accept the offer to stay in his life. Blanche's dismissal of Mumsfield's needs helps such readers see how easy it is to unquestioningly accept assumptions about the service-oriented nature of blacks (and the self-sacrificial nature of women) at the heart of a powerful white construction of black womanhood. Here, and throughout the story, Neely also makes clear the emotional strength black women must call on daily to combat negative stereotypes that work to strip them of dignity, self-esteem, and confidence. Blanche's no-nonsense, in-your-face attitude, her sophisticated analyses of the world she lives in, and her habit of speaking her mind are humorous, but ultimately very serious, weapons in this struggle.

*See also Blanche among the Talented Tenth; Blanche Cleans Up; Blanche Passes Go*

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### BLANCHE PASSES GO

In this fourth Blanche White mystery novel, *Blanche Passes Go* (2000), author **Barbara Neely** takes her most feminist stance yet as she illustrates the impact of **domestic violence** and **rape** on the lives of women. Readers used to the feisty, in-your-face protagonist of the earlier novels see here a Blanche more vulnerable than they are used to. When Blanche moves back **home** to Farleigh, North Carolina, she is pulled back into **memories** she has tried hard to repress—memories of being raped by a white employer years earlier. Blanche's assertive demeanor usually hides the psychological damage of this assault, but she knows that true emotional healing has never been effected.

In Farleigh, Blanche's best friend Ardell has opened a catering business and wants Blanche to be her partner, a tempting offer she must balance against the independence the cleaning profession allows her. Blanche also notes with concern how being a boss has changed Ardell's personality and values; cost-effectiveness and profit have become her new lens for looking at the world.

Meanwhile, Blanche begins a romantic relationship. The strands of the story merge as Blanche realizes how much of her life is still being shaped by her rape. She wants to fall in **love** with Thelvin, but love and trust feel like dangerous vulnerabilities. And she finds herself making assumptions about Thelvin based on the fact that he is *a* man rather than on what she has seen of

him as a particular man, an unfair perspective she knows has roots in her assault years ago.

Then Blanche sees her rapist for the first time in years and realizes that as a caterer she might come in contact with him at any time. She comes undone. Seeing Blanche cringe, suffer physical sickness, emotional cowardice, and psychological distress is a potent reminder to readers of the effect rape can have on even strong, self-assured women. When Blanche becomes suspicious that the woman living across the street is abused, her emotional turmoil increases. She grapples with her moral responsibility in the face of this situation: Should she take some form of action? How can she respond and still stay safe?

Throughout the story Blanche agonizes over how to achieve psychological **healing**. She finally admits that she must quit merely reacting and start acting. When offered a job investigating the rapist's sister (is her upcoming marriage a gold-digging scam?), she becomes proactive at last, taking this as an opportunity to learn more about her assailant and to find a way to come to terms with her rape—perhaps even confront the rapist.

Along the way there is a murder to be solved—another crime against a woman—and Blanche's sleuthing uncovers the murderer. The book's end brings resolutions to the various strands of the story, but what readers are likely to remember longest is Blanche's personal struggle to reclaim her trust in men and her self-confidence in an environment that evokes her worst memories.

*See also Blanche among the Talented Tenth; Blanche Cleans Up; Blanche on the Lam*

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## **BLOODCHILD AND OTHER STORIES**

**Octavia Butler's** single book of short stories, *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995), is a slim volume consisting of five short stories and two essays. The essays are autobiographical; in the second Butler muses on the significance of writing and reading, especially science fiction, for an African American. Of the short stories, the two that have garnered the most attention are the title story "Bloodchild" and "Speech Sounds."

“Bloodchild” describes the complex relationship between Terrans (humans) and the insectlike Tilc, a relationship that has evolved over generations from the Tilc using Terrans as mere hosts for their eggs to a complicated familial social network. Since the Tilc need Terrans in order to survive as a species, the emotional ties between the two species are difficult to read: How much of their affection is real? How much a product of need? The story takes place on the day the Terran Gan will be implanted with eggs from T’Gatoi, a Tilc who has been his lifelong friend and second mother. Butler’s decision to make her prospective human host male instead of female gives new resonance to the social construction of defining women by their capacity to bear young.

Each story in this collection is accompanied by an afterword. Following “Bloodchild,” Butler comments that this story is meant to explore the complexities of choosing to become pregnant. Both **love** and a sense of obligation motivate Gan, but his maleness and his last-minute revulsion at the alien nature of being a host to insect eggs complicate readers’ responses to the decision he must make. As in her **Xenogenesis trilogy**, Butler suggests here that familiarity breeds not contempt but acceptance. “Bloodchild” received both Hugo and Nebula Awards.

In “Speech Sounds,” another Hugo Award winner, Butler creates a world where a strange pathology has damaged people’s ability to communicate. Some cannot speak, others can no longer make sense of verbal language they hear, others have forgotten how to read or write. Some cannot read even basic **body** language. **Memory** problems abound. Many people did not survive the plague; many others became so frustrated they committed suicide, so angered they turned to murder, or so dysfunctional they could not survive. Protagonist Valerie Rye sadly thinks of herself as now living in a world that seems populated with chimpanzees as she watches people grunting and gesturing, usually futilely, in attempts to make themselves understood. Like many of Butler’s works, this one depicts a bizarre world that nonetheless asks readers to contemplate what it means to be human.

The stories that round out this volume, “The Evening and the Morning and the Night,” “Near of Kin,” and “Crossover,” each depict psychically scarred women trying to come to terms with their **identities**. Like other stories in this volume and many of Butler’s novels, they show this author’s fascination with how disease can affect our sense of selfhood and how it can be used to examine the human condition. Likewise, these stories show Butler’s strategy of using unusual sexual arrangements in the interest of exploring the human capacity for love and tolerance. Like her longer fiction, Butler’s stories are original and provocative.

*See also Kindred; Parable Series; Patternist Series*

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Grace McEntee

## BLUES

Because of its persistent and variously influential role in African American life, the blues defies precise definition and categorization. Whether a musical form, broader aesthetic framework, stylistic element, or underlying mood that inspires them, the blues ranks as one of the most formative artistic forms in African American expressive culture. Though endlessly adapted, certain characteristics of blues music remain distinctive. A secular form of lyric verse steeped in southern black folk tradition, the blues is sung by a single performer who adopts a specific persona and witnesses to painful misfortune or personal loss, often caused or exacerbated by adverse economic, racial, or sexual conditions. Plaintive, sad, hopeful, tragicomic, witty, bawdy, condemnatory, triumphant, or a combination of these, the blues expresses the troubles or desires of either the blues performer or his/her sympathetic audience. Blues lyrics marshal culturally resonant allusions, emotionally evocative imagery, and playful double entendres. Its music employs raw vocal intonation, elastic phrasing, the distinctively mournful "blue note" (the flattened 3rd, 5th, or 7th note in standard scales), and a formal structure rooted in repetition, improvisation, and call and response patterns. Depending on how it is played and how one interprets it, the blues may fluctuate between solitary witnessing and communal expression, endless despondency and emergent hope, control of life and its impossibility, signs of weakness and strength.

The origins of the blues are at least as nebulous as its definition. Antecedents of the blues range from West African rhythmic texturing and complex syncopations, the **work** songs and **spirituals** forged under **slavery**, field hollers of the post-Emancipation period, and ragtime and vaudeville music. This amalgamation demonstrates the uniquely American character of the blues' emergence and to the devastating social conditions that inspired it. When and where these influences ultimately converged to form the blues is still unclear, although blues and **jazz** composer W. C. Handy, who heard blues songs as early as 1890 in Mississippi, composed the first written blues song, "Memphis Blues," in 1912 and standardized the traditional twelve-bar, three-line stanza with an AAB scheme. The blues developed in the rural **South** as talented workers and, later, musicians and traveling bands migrated across the region. Even the coarse, gritty texture of this early folk or country blues (with sparse instrumental accompaniment) had its geographical variants, namely, the popularly recognized Mississippi Delta (exemplified by Charley Patton and Robert

Johnson), East Texas (Leadbelly and Blind Lemon Jeffers), and Piedmont blues (Josh White).

As musicians and shows spread, so too did the influence and appeal of the blues. The Great Migration created a surge of southern musicians and audiences in the urban North, in conjunction with changes in the recording industry, that radically transformed the blues in the 1920s. The rise of the black-targeted “race record,” sparked by Mamie Smith’s acclaimed recording of “Crazy Blues” in 1920, laid the groundwork for the classic blues’ huge success. Greatly influenced by ragtime and tent-show performances, the classic (vaudeville) blues, unlike the male-dominated folk blues, almost exclusively featured female singers, including Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Ida Cox, and Alberta Hunter. These recordings in turn became blueprints for emerging musicians in both city and country, and the performers became the musical forbearers of singers like Etta James, **Billie Holiday**, and Nina Simone. This wave of popularity was followed by a move toward increased instrumentalization, electric amplification, and the discernable urban sophistication found in 1930s and 1940s Memphis, Chicago, and Detroit (Muddy Waters and B. B. King). Post-World War II urban blues were also increasingly influenced by jazz, whose roots were themselves shaped by early blues forms. The blues also inspired more “polished” popular offshoots like boogie woogie, swing, and rhythm and blues.

The blues song and its performance reflect a general ethos or worldview, captured in **Ralph Ellison**’s definition of the blues: “an impulse to keep the painful details . . . of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it . . . by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (5). For many, the blues represents a profound underlying resilience and triumphant life force. According to **Amiri Baraka**, the emergence of the blues marks the achievement of a fully black American **identity**. Houston A. Baker, Jr., presents the blues as the defining “phylogenetic recapitulation . . . of species experience” (5). Others resist using the blues paradigm to define African American culture, citing among other things opposition to the blues by members of the black church and middle **class**.

This blues ethos underwrites a broader blues aesthetic featured in African American visual art and **literature**. Modernist interests in folk culture led to formal experimentation with the blues structure and ethos evident in texts by Sterling Brown, **Langston Hughes**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, and **Richard Wright** and the artwork of Romare Bearden. More contemporary works by **James Baldwin**, Amiri Baraka, Robert Hayden, **Toni Cade Bambara**, **Gayl Jones**, **Sherley Anne Williams**, **Alice Walker**, and **Harryette Mullen** pay tribute to classic blues women and their songs. The presence of these figures in black women’s texts indicates their continued deep symbolic value. Female blues characters repeatedly facilitate explorations of defiant black female independence, **lesbianism** or bisexuality, and patriarchal constraints over women.

Black feminist critics have turned to the blues, and its frank sexual content, to help frame analyses of **sexuality**, gender relations, and black **domestic**



space. Hazel Carby argues that women's blues construct sensuous, sexually autonomous female subjects, in contrast to the desexed, middle-class self-representations of black women at the turn of the century. **Angela Davis** also regards the blues as a powerful, consciousness-raising cultural force that articulates a protofeminist, working-class political consciousness and exemplifies the politicization of the personal. But Ann duCille challenges the exclusionary politics of authenticity often marshaled by invoking the blues and questions the realism of the liberated blues-songstress archetype. Despite disagreements about the blues' meaning and function, most would agree with Lawrence Levine that the significance of the blues art form is its "insist[ence] upon the meaningfulness of black lives," which are "worth taking note of and sharing in song" (269–270).

*See also* Poetry

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*Stéphane Robolin*

**BLUEST EYE, THE**

**Toni Morrison's** first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is set in Lorain, Ohio, in 1941. Framed within the discourse of women's "secret" communal knowledge, the story relates the psychological damage of racism upon the most vulnerable member of U.S. culture, a young black girl. Eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove longs for the blue eyes of the little blonde girls hailed as icons of **beauty**. The image of Shirley Temple painted on a little girl's teacup or Mary Jane emblazoned on a candy wrapper makes Pecola see herself through the cultural lens that constructs her ugliness. If only she were pretty—an achievement reached through the blue eyes that mark **whiteness**—then, she believes, people would **love** her.

Another casualty of American racism, Pecola's mother Pauline is crippled not only by her slightly deformed foot but also by the ideals of physical beauty and romantic love that mature for her in the darkened space of the movie theater where she escapes from the loneliness of her small **domestic** sphere. As she watches the embraces of idealized white movie stars, her hair piled in imitation of Jean Harlow's, Pauline loses a front tooth, cementing the physical difference more broadly marked upon her black **body**. She ultimately finds an alternative escape in her domestic **work** for a white **family** that values her cleanliness and her relentless dedication, two characteristics she no longer shares with her own family that she sees as poor, ugly, and broken.

Pecola's father, Cholly, has his own psychological scars: Two white men discover him as a young teen having sex with a girl in a field. Instead of hating the white men, he despises the girl for witnessing his shame. This enduring shame, and the anger it engenders, is redirected toward his wife; the two regularly exchange physical and verbal abuse. Cholly's crisis comes when, frustrated and intoxicated, he sees his daughter reenact a physical movement that reminds him of a young Pauline. The tenderness that wells up inside him turns to an irrepressible sexual urge, and he violently rapes her. Thus, *The Bluest Eye*, like later Morrison novels, turns on an act of physical and/or psychological **violence** precipitated by self-doubt and a feeling of loss or emptiness created by a racist, sexist, and classist world. However, because these violent acts (including **rape**, murder, infanticide, and child abuse) often function as attempts to gain some lost thing, the victims embodying an unbearable absence, the perpetrators often conflate violence with love. Tenderness prompts Cholly to cover his violated daughter with a quilt; hatred of his shame—directed again toward the female body—prevents him from lifting her from the floor.

When Pauline finds Pecola on the kitchen floor, the traditional domestic space of the female, she beats her daughter rather than offering a sympathetic embrace. The pregnant Pecola also finds little compassion from the "respectable" neighborhood women. Indeed, the only kind adults in Pecola's life are three prostitutes who live in the apartment above her and hate with a proud authority (almost) all men. Marked as ruined by the **community**, Miss Marie, China, and Poland accept Pecola as she is, without judgment, just as

they accept each other. Their celebration of black female **sexuality** leads to a certain **freedom**, even if it does not protect from pain or suffering.

Claudia and Frieda, Pecola's girlfriends, are also sympathetic to her plight. The primary narrator of the novel, Claudia stands in distinct contrast to Pecola and Pauline. Rather than coveting the blue-eyed, blonde-haired white baby dolls that she receives every Christmas without asking or wanting, Claudia harbors a desire to dismember them, a scenario that gets played out in **Maya Angelou's** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970). Young enough to believe that real babies come from when a man loves you and to be slightly jealous when her sister Frieda is groped by the family's male lodger, Claudia is at least old enough to know that Pecola deserves compassion. The sisters plant marigold seeds, solemnized with prayer and magic words, in hope that Pecola's baby will survive. The marigolds, however, do not grow, and the premature baby dies, the embodiment of Pecola's sterile, loveless world.

But Pecola's wish for blue eyes comes true. At least Pecola believes so, after visiting the town's mystic Soaphead Church. The neighbors avoid Pecola because she is pregnant with her father's child, but she believes their aloofness stems from jealousy over her very blue eyes. By novel's end, Pecola has created a second personality, a friend who admires her new eyes. Claudia, whose voice closes the novel, cannot see Pecola's blue eyes but does finally understand that Pecola is "all the beauty of the world." Claudia thus rejects the white **stereotype** of beauty and celebrates her own embodied **identity** as a young black woman.

*See also* Black Masculinity

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

## BODY

The body is a site of intersections, a place where **violence**, **healing**, oppression, and empowerment are expressed. It is likewise a screen onto which cultural values are projected. Images and representations of the black body resonate throughout African American **literature** and signal, often simultaneously, ancient strength and authority, disempowerment, and the reclamation of power. According to Louis V. Zakbar’s collection *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae* (1988), Egyptians revered the goddess as all powerful; her body created, nourished, and destroyed. However, her very **identity**, as well as sites of worship devoted to her, transformed and almost disappeared during the emergence of monotheistic religions, Judaism and **Christianity**. Ancient attempts to annihilate the black goddess were portents of colonization and **slavery** forced upon Africans almost 1,500 years later. The horrific, systematic degrading of the African body into the mechanized, animalized slave body reverberates throughout Western culture and in popular depictions of black women as the embodiment of sexual promiscuity. This **stereotype** promoted early-nineteenth-century representations of South African Saartjie Baartman (Sarah Bartmann), the so-called Hottentot Venus, whose body was showcased for the pleasure and curiosity of European audiences and whose genitalia became a subject of intense scientific inquiry for those attempting to prove the superiority of the Caucasian race.

Many African American women in the 1920s, however, notably **Josephine Baker** and the female **blues** singers, including Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and **Billie Holiday**, reclaimed their bodies as conduits of self-expression and carved successful, powerful public roles for themselves. The complexity of the black female body’s evolution in **history** and culture is a poignant subject for many African American writers who illustrate that the black body serves, paradoxically, as a site of oppression and empowerment.

Violence against women is the most obvious form of oppression in African American literature. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston depicts a legacy of violence toward black women, first through Nanny's impregnation by her slave master and then in Leafy's **rape** by the local schoolteacher, an incident from which Leafy never recovers and of which Janie is the product. Janie's life, too, is haunted by looming violence—emotional and physical—and in her marriage with Tea Cake, domestic violence becomes an expression of his control, which Hurston represents troublingly as an act of **love** and devotion. However, in her short story "Sweat," Hurston presents intraracial domestic violence as utterly destructive and doubly dangerous because it prevents Delia, who is a washerwoman for whites, from addressing systems of racial inequality, thereby preventing her from improving her status.

This same theme appears in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, where intraracial violence constantly threatens to destroy Celie. Her rape and impregnation by her stepfather and the constant physical abuse by her husband are symbolic of the dangers of patriarchal society in which men "own" women. The rapes of Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Maya in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* also illustrate the young black woman's struggle within intersections of domination of which racism is one component along with gender, **class**, and **sexuality**.

Similarly, in his poem "Mulatto," Langston Hughes makes clear the double-edged oppression African American women face in interracial violence: first as a black woman in a white society that does not acknowledge her rights over her own body and second as a member of the female sex, thought to exist only to service and appease men. In this poem, a white man rapes the young **mulatto** boy's mother against a fence; she is literally trapped at the intersections of so many levels of violence and oppression that her fate seems inescapable. Like the narrator in Hughes's poem, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* heroine Ursa, a blues singer who weaves her **family's** painful history into song, is overwhelmed with loathing for the white slave master who fathered, raped, and dehumanized her grandmother and mother. Jones's novel traces Ursa's attempts to understand her family's story and to overcome the psychic damage caused by that past.

The continual oppression of blacks by white society becomes the impetus for violence against women in Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Bigger's fear and anxiety of the all-encompassing power of white society leads him to act out his own feelings of suffocation by smothering the white socialite Mary Dalton by accident, an event that causes more intense terror and leads him to burn her corpse in the furnace. When his plan of escape spirals out of control, Bigger attempts to reclaim his threatened autonomy by asserting sexual dominance over his black girlfriend Bessie. However, raping Bessie does not strip her of all power; Bigger fears she can still expose him. The only way Bigger can completely conquer Bessie is to kill her.

The depiction of murder as control is perhaps most disturbing in Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*, in which a childhood friend, Clare, becomes the adult object of Irene Redfield's hatred and jealousy. Irene's abhorrence and

fear of the beautiful Clare culminates in Clare's destruction when Clare falls out of a sixth-story window to her **death**. While Larsen does not directly reveal whether Irene pushed her or Clare committed suicide, Clare's death is indicative of racial or color-focused tensions within the black **community**. Clare's death is complicated by her status as a mulatta who has successfully passed in white society, and her story is similar to the **myth** of the tragic mulatto who is torn between black and white society and who is ultimately destroyed due to this seeming irreconcilable conflict.

The objectification of the black female body often leads to violence. Larsen's *Quicksand* features another mulatto character, Helga Crane, who, in an effort to obtain the lifestyle she desires, aligns herself with the Dahls, her extended white family in Copenhagen. The Dahls provide Helga with every lovely trinket she wishes, but it comes at a price: She must perform the role of the exotic savage for the Danish socialites, much like the "Hottentot Venus." The artist Axel Olsen also wants to capture Helga and further objectifies her by demanding that she sit for a portrait, a form of confinement. Larsen presents the lionlike Olsen's pursuit of a sexual relationship with Helga as a hunt, suggesting that if he succeeds, Helga will be consumed and therefore destroyed. When Helga refuses his advances, she is the victim of a searing verbal assault that leaves her reeling. Olsen's final punishment is the painting itself, which leaves all members of the household unsettled and makes Helga appear, in the words of the maid, "wicked."

In *The Street*, Ann Petry presents analogous intimidation via her protagonist Lutie Johnson, who, to her detriment, becomes the sexual object of many men. William Jones, the super of her building, has rape fantasies about Lutie, and even after discovering that she has been "marked" for someone else to own, he attempts to violate her. Failing in his attempt, he develops a plan to hurt her as deeply as possible by ruining her son, Bub. Junto, the powerful white owner of the local juke joint, also desires to possess Lutie. Like Jones, he acts as a voyeur, constantly watching and monitoring her. Junto simultaneously empowers and oppresses Lutie by allowing her to be the singer in his club. Lutie sees the spotlight as an opportunity to escape the street; however, she must serve as a sexual object and a source of entertainment to do so. Boots, who carries out Junto's dirty work, also sees Lutie as sexual prey and, at Junto's command, stalls and ruins Lutie's strategy for escape. When Boots attempts to rape Lutie, she recognizes him as all the forces that have prevented her success, and usurping phallic power via a candlestick, she murders him and leaves the city.

Petry's assertion of Lutie's power at the end of *The Street* is indicative of another trend in African American literature: using the black female body as a sign of empowerment. In the essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde also acknowledges women's internal creative energy and inspires women to reconnect with this force in order to empower themselves through self-expression and union with other women to facilitate activism and social change. bell hooks also calls black women to battle against negative and oppressive depictions of them. In "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black

Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” hooks reads **Nikki Giovanni’s** “Woman Poem” as a call to oppressors to acknowledge and rectify their actions but also indicates that empowerment must be accomplished by black women’s actively creating and recovering positive representations of their bodies and womanhood.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, African American women authors have successfully developed a stunning tradition of literature that portrays black women as highly capable of overcoming their oppressors. Hurston, Walker, and Angelou in the texts cited above enable their characters to overcome their situations and lead fulfilled and thriving lives. For Walker and Angelou, **motherhood** becomes the redemptive feature of Celie’s and Maya’s lives. Through their children, they are metaphorically reborn and revitalized. **Gwendolyn Brooks’s** *Maud Martha* also presents motherhood as an anodyne to the pain of living in a racist society, and in her poem “Sadie and Maud,” motherhood is crucial to a full and therefore hard and complicated life. For Petry’s Lutie Johnson, motherhood is the catalyst that sparks her desire to break away from the oppressive “street.” And to Lorde, being a mother entails pleasurable and infinite connection to her child, her creation, in “Now That I Am Forever with Child.”

Motherhood, however, is a contentious subject for many African American women. W.E.B. Du Bois, in “The Damnation of Women,” argues that society’s conventions restrict women’s ability to achieve their best because they are cemented into the role of mother. Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing* display intense anxiety about motherhood and depict it as entrapping and inhibiting. For Morrison’s Pecola, pregnancy ostracizes her from black society. Jones’s Ursa fears she cannot carry on her family’s story by “making generations” due to her infertility. **Rita Dove’s** poems “Mother Love,” “Daystar,” and “Motherhood” illustrate the complexity of the role of the black mother: the fear, limitations, and willing selflessness it inspires.

The most poignant imagery of the reclamation of power through the body is evident in the centrality of healing to African American women’s literary texts. In answer to the themes of violence explored above, many women writers use scar imagery to illustrate the inescapable presence of a wound as well as the body’s power to recover from and thrive despite it. The best example of this is the tree scar on Sethe’s back in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The scar results from a whipping Sethe endured as punishment for revealing to Mrs. Garner that the schoolteacher’s nephews had forcefully taken her breast milk. Whipping in this novel and countless **slave narratives** (or **freedom narratives**) represents one of the consequences a black woman faces if she challenges white male authority. However, the wound is healed, and the process of healing becomes a central theme in the novel, concluding with Sethe’s need to address her guilt and responsibility for the baby girl she murdered in an attempt to spare her the horrors of slavery. The women in **Edwidge Danticat’s** *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also have to confront a history of violence beginning with the rape of Martine—an act of violence that serves as an emblem of political violence in 1930s Haiti. Sophie Caco, the product of this rape, bears her mother’s burden both

psychologically and physically, as her face is repeatedly associated with the face of her mother's attacker. Her mother's insistent "testing" to learn whether Sophie's hymen is still intact causes intense sexual trauma that leads Sophie to inflict an extremely painful self-deflowering that mirrors her mother's rape. Both experiences prevent her from having a fulfilling love life and a positive body image. However, Sophie begins to heal herself by returning to her native village, where she revisits the site of her mother's trauma and beats back the sugar cane that symbolizes violent phallic power.

**Toni Cade Bambara** also explores the healing process in *The Salt Eaters*. Velma Henry, a feminist and civil rights activist who attempts suicide because she is exhausted and frustrated by the seemingly unwinnable and endless battle against oppression, develops a relationship with Minnie Ransom, the local healer, who facilitates Velma's psychological and bodily recovery. Bambara skillfully links Velma's recovery with the community, extending the need for healing beyond the personal to politics and the environment. Similar to Minnie, **Gloria Naylor's** healer Miranda in *Mama Day* channels supernatural forces through her body in order to help, heal, and punish people in the Willow Springs community. Women's power is at the heart of the community from the myth of the great conjure woman who aided and protected the island in its infancy to Sapphira Wade, the formidable, shrewd mother-of-all, whose sacrifices freed her children and their descendants. Miranda's healing ability is put to the test when her greatniece Cocoa is the target of a deadly curse. Miranda calls on her sister Abigail's prayer and Cocoa's husband's mortal sacrifice to revitalize Cocoa so that she can carry on her family's powerful female legacy.

While the healing process forces us to recognize the limits of the body, the celebration of the body's physical possibilities is also fundamental to recovering authority in African American women's writing. For example, **Lucille Clifton** acknowledges the strength and ability of her body in "homage to my hips" and links the potency and ferocity of the black Hindu goddess Kali to women's potential power in "Kali." Strength and, more specifically, the ability to overcome hardship are central to **Ntozake Shange's** choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. Shange's dramatic work is intensely connected with the body in dialogue, dance, and song, as seven female performers, each representative of a color of the rainbow, weave stories of the pain of initiation into womanhood with declarations of triumph and perseverance, ending with a communal song of internal empowerment about finding god in themselves and loving her fiercely. Similarly, Bambara's story "Raymond's Run" is a bildungsroman in which the brash preadolescent Hazel Parker's ability to be the fastest runner in her school is linked to achievement and self-esteem. Running also inspires friendship between Hazel and her competitor Gretchen, suggesting that friendly rivalry and genuine commitment to a shared interest facilitate unity among women. Unity is essential to self-realization in **Paule Marshall's** *Praisesong for the Widow* in which Avey (Avatara) Johnson's reunification with her heritage and the self that she has lost in her assimilation into mainstream white American culture can only be achieved through the cleansing and recognition of her body and



the performance of her natal nation's dance in the Beg Pardon ritual. Like Avey, the avatar of culture and ritual, African American literature contains the **beauty** and pain of the black experience and the importance of acknowledging and remembering our origins through the body.

*See also* Black Arts Movement; Conjuring; Folklore; *Hottentot Venus: A Novel*; Lesbianism; Middle Passage; Passing; Race; Work

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*Jessica Labbé*

### **BONDWOMAN'S NARRATIVE, THE**

*The Bondwoman's Narrative* (c. 1850s) is acknowledged as the first novel written by an African American woman. In the tradition of bildungsroman, popular in the nineteenth century, the book tells the story of a young woman who grows to maturity through America's institution of **slavery**. **Hannah Crafts**, the purported author, claims to be a **mulatta**, light enough to **pass** for white yet a person whose **identity** and sympathies are clearly with the enslaved.

Early on, the main character, who seems to also be the narrator, shows a resilience that establishes her strength. "The life of a slave is not a good one," she says, "but I had formed a resolution to look on the bright side of things, to be industrious, cheerful, and true-hearted, to do some good though in a humble way, and to win some love if I could." The statement locates her character as central, not only to her personal survival but to the preservation of the **race**. Crafts represents the continuation of the culture through spirit more than gender. Moreover, the qualities cited transcend the bounds of womanhood and color.

The protagonist escapes from masters in Virginia and North Carolina to eventually gain her **freedom**. At the same time, readers might be surprised to hear a voice that found ways to resist the oppressive influences around her from the beginning. The intensity of the prose is amplified by editor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s textual annotations and the appendixes that reveal the quest for the manuscript's authentication.

On the mend from a hip replacement operation near the start of 2001, Gates, W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Humanities and chair of Afro-American studies at Harvard University, thumbed through an auction catalog from New York's Swann Galleries. The upcoming sale of a handwritten manuscript caught his eye. Gates, who authenticated and edited a volume on **Harriett E. Wilson's** 1859 novel *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, was intrigued that Lot 30, the 301 pages bound in cloth, was said to be a "fictionalized biography" from the 1850s. The entry explained that the literary work was signed by the author, Hannah Crafts, an escaped slave. Gates was intrigued by the idea of such an early work written by a black person and was prodded to believe the claim because the advertisement said the book came from the collection of Dorothy Porter, a noted African American historian and librarian at Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

The Swann catalog offered almost 400 pieces—first editions, manuscripts, documents, posters, photographs, and memorabilia—in the annual Black History Month sale of African American collectibles. The author and scholar writes that his habit is to give the magazine a thorough read, even when he chooses not to buy something for his personal collection or the university. Gates, with the help of historian Richard Newman, who brokered the deal, purchased Lot 30 on the first bid for \$8,500 on February 15, 2001.

Gates concedes that he wondered about the investment. Many of the publishers he consulted would not commit money to produce an unauthenticated text. The assertions of Porter and others were no guarantee as to its unique nature. His past research taught him that writers in the mid-nineteenth century often published under pseudonyms or as poseurs. Women sometimes pretended to be men. Whites sometimes claimed to write as blacks.

Gates risked a lot on Porter's decision to buy the book for \$85 from Emily Driscoll, a New York City dealer, in 1948. He knew the woman was serious and meticulous in her work. He wrote as she did that the author would gain no benefit from the pretense of blackness.

Gates became even more convinced the book was a real find when he read the work. The professor writes that he was certain that no white author would write as a protagonist in a sentimental novel about slaves. He also said it is not likely a non-African American would develop a story that referred to so many black characters, nor describe them as people with so much depth. Also, he maintained that someone outside the slave experience was not likely to include "so very many counterintuitive observations" on slavery.

After he bought *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, Gates contacted Warner Books as the potential publisher. Then he had to prove that the text was real. Time Warner, the parent company, pushed him on the issue of authenticity. The corporation got burned in the past on fake diaries attributed to Adolf Hitler and Jack the Ripper.

He copied the bound pages onto microfilm and sought the advice of Harvard College Library's manuscript curator. He writes that she concluded that "in its physical form, the manuscript is typically mid-nineteenth century, perhaps dating from the 1850s or 1860s." At her suggestion, he checked the

quality of the paper with Craigen W. Bowen, the Philip and Lynn Strauss Conservator of Works of Art and Paper at Harvard's art museum. With his assurance, they conjectured that the novel was written between 1855 and 1860. Wyatt Houston Day, who appraised the document for the Swann Galleries, said he concurred. The paper, writing style, and ink all point to the 1850s.

Lawrence Kirshbaum, the Time Warner Books Group chairman, suggested Gates show the work to rare manuscript dealer Kenneth Rendell. He helped to expose the Hitler and Ripper diaries as frauds. Rendell looked into his microscope and identified the manuscript as a first draft, or "composing copy," etched with "iron-gall ink" widely used before 1860.

Joe Nickell, the author of more than a dozen works that include the 1996 *Detecting Forgeries: Forensic Investigation of Documents* and *Pen, Ink and Evidence: A Study of Writing and Materials for the Penman, Collector, and Document Detective* (1990), provided such a thorough, well-written breakdown on the manuscript that Gates decided to include the authentication report as part of the text.

With the aid of census records from the Library of Congress and the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah, background on Hannah Crafts and the manuscript emerged.

Nickell's report cites the novel's reference to "an equestrian statue of (Andrew) Jackson" in Washington, D.C., as evidence that the piece could not have been written before 1853. He also notes that the author's failure to mention the Civil War indicates the book must have been written before the attack on Fort Sumter in 1860. The report says Crafts was "a relatively young, African-American woman who was deeply religious and had obvious literary skills, although eccentric punctuation and occasional misspellings suggest someone who struggled to become educated."

Nickell pegged the handwriting as a style popular between 1840 and 1865 called "round hand." She wrote more for legibility than speed, the report says, and was right-handed. He also noted that the ink seemed to be iron-gall. He wrote that if she had been a middle-class white woman of the period, the writing likely would be more elegant and diminutive.

His report shows quite a bit of evidence that Crafts was a self-taught reader and writer. In specific, he remarks that the use of multisyllable words such as *magnanimity* and *vicissitudes* and frequent misspellings bear out the testimony of the novel's main character that she worked hard to make the transition from an illiterate slave girl to a schoolteacher.

Readers often hold a happy ending to be suspect these days. The author presents, as a matter of coincidence, that she gains freedom surrounded by her mother, husband, and friends. When the novel was written, a good end to such a story would have been a requisite. For one thing, the positive resolution fits the protagonist's expressed hopes and upbeat personality. Although unstated, it seems the narrative exists more to convey the message that a better life is possible than to document the pain and evil of slavery.

Also, nineteenth-century readers might not have accepted a future devoid of possibility.

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Vincent F. A. Golphin

### BONNER, MARITA (1899–1971)

Marita Odette Bonner is known today not only for her prolificacy as a short-story writer during the **Harlem Renaissance** but also for presaging the radicalism of the 1960s in her dramatic work and for addressing gender issues by depicting women's lives in her short fiction.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, the third of four children to Joseph and Mary Anne Bonner, Marita Bonner attended Brookline High School, where she excelled in music and German and wrote for the high school magazine. She enrolled at Radcliffe in 1918 as an English and comparative literature major. There she joined a number of musical clubs, twice winning the Radcliffe song competition, studied creative writing under Professor Charles Townsend Copeland, and founded the Radcliffe chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, an African American sorority. Graduating in 1920, Bonner taught at Bluefield Colored Institute in Virginia from 1922 to 1924 and at Armstrong High School in Washington, D.C., from 1924 to 1930.

In Washington, D.C., Bonner met and married William Ocomy, who held an M.B.A. from Boston University. They moved to Chicago, where they raised their three children. Although Bonner's writing career thrived for a time in the 1920s and 1930s with publication of her short stories, she eventually ceased literary activities. She began teaching again in the 1940s, retiring in 1963. She died in 1971 at the age of seventy-three from smoke inhalation complications after her apartment caught fire.

Among Bonner's earliest publications, three plays remain her most widely known dramatic works: *The Pot Maker: A Play to Be Read* (1927), *The Purple Flower* (1928), and *Exit, an Illusion: A One-Act Play* (1929). Singled out by critics as notable because of its experimental form, *The Purple Flower* allegorically portrays the treatment of oppressed African Americans and shows a futuristic vision of seeing the African American predicament as global and connected to other oppressed people throughout the world. Through a surrealist style, the play called for social and political revolution long before other writers dared to. Additionally, unlike the works of other African American women playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance, neither *The Purple Flower* nor Bonner's other plays deal with issues connected specifically with women's lives.

It was in her numerous short stories, however, where Bonner did focus on women's lives. Written primarily in the late 1920s and 1930s, Bonner's **fiction** often depicts lower-class female characters from southern towns or Chicago's working class, unlike her own middle-class upbringing. Cited by Judith Musser as a "proletariat writer," Bonner employs realism in her short stories by portraying living conditions of families and exposing problems faced by working-class African American women, particularly single mothers, either through divorce, desertion, or by never having married. As breadwinners, these women hold a variety of occupations. They vary from eighteen-year-olds to eighty-year-old grandmothers. Most of Bonner's short stories take place on her fictional Frye Street, which resembles a lower-class, ethnically mixed Chicago neighborhood.

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*Sherry Engle*

## **BOYD, CANDY DAWSON (1946- )**

A professor of education and author of **fiction** for middle-grade children, Candy Boyd was born and raised in an African American **community** in Chicago, part of a dynamic, loving **family**. She read avidly but never found the faces of her family or the stories of her **ancestors** in her library books. In high school, she became an activist, joining with others, black and white, to combat blockbusting practices by realtors in the area around the school. She continued her activism at Northeastern Illinois State University, focusing on the **civil rights movement** as she pursued the dream of an acting career. Finding racism an obstacle to that goal, she quit school and worked as a field organizer with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for one year. Returning to college, she earned a teaching degree and worked as an elementary school teacher in her old neighborhood and then in multicultural neighborhoods in Berkeley, California. She says she never saw her students' ethnicities reflected in realistic fiction about children whose culture was an inherent part of them, yet who underwent ordinary, sometimes life-changing experiences within their families, schools, and communities. She was also interested in writing about the way children cope with the decisions adults make. She completed her doctorate in education at St. Mary's College of California, eventually becoming its first tenured African American professor.

Her first published novel was *Circle of Gold* (1984), a Coretta Scott King Honor book in which a young girl tries to earn money to buy an expensive gift for her widowed mother, who works long and hard to support her two children. *Breadsticks and Blessing Places* (1985) drew on her experiences of surviving the **death** of a childhood friend, dealing honestly and perceptively with children's grief. *Charlie Pippin* (1987) is a bright, entrepreneurial eleven-year-old who is puzzled by her stern father's reluctance to discuss his participation in the Vietnam War, though she knows it shattered his dreams. An inadvertent rebel in school, she becomes deeply engaged in a social studies project on the war and discovers a clipping about her father's heroism and the death of his two close friends. During the project, she stands up to a male team member who expects her to take the notes because she is a girl and who is condescending though not well informed. Charlie's mother is always negotiating between her strong husband and equally strong daughter. Eventually, she and her father understand each other better, and she uses her business skills to help another school group organize a fund-raiser for a relief agency dealing with hunger in Africa. Though there are moments of great family tension, the family is a source of loving strength.

Two related novels, *Fall Secrets* (1994) and *A Different Beat* (1996), deal with the often-neglected subject of skin color prejudice within the African American community. Her picture book, *Daddy, Daddy, Be There* (1995) is an impassioned plea for fathers to be present for their children.

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Susan L. Golden

### BOYD, MELBA (1950– )

Melba Joyce Boyd was born in Detroit, Michigan, to John P. and Dorothy Boyd. She received her B.A. from Western Michigan University in 1971 and her M.A. in 1972. In 1979 she was awarded the D.Arts from the University of Michigan. Her professional career has been multifaceted; she is known as an educator, a filmmaker, a poet, an editor, and a writer.

Boyd's credentials as an educator are extensive. She has been a high school English teacher; at the university level, she has taught English, black studies, Africana studies, and women's studies. She has lectured at many colleges and universities in the United States and abroad, including Columbia University, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Houston, Mississippi State University, the University of Hanover, the University of Osnabruck, the University of Colorado, Sinte Gleska College, and Grinnell College. In 1983–1984, she was a senior Fulbright lecturer at the University of Bremen, Germany. At this time, she is professor of Africana studies at Wayne State University.

In 1995, Boyd produced and directed *The Black Unicorn: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press*, a documentary on the life of Randall and the impact the press had on American literature. The press was born when Randall published two of his poems, "Ballad of Birmingham" and "Dressed All in Pink," as broadsides.

Boyd explained to a reporter from the *Detroit Free Press* that the establishment of the Broadside Press “opened up the literary canon, and . . . mainstream publishers began publishing poetry and black writers and other minority writers.” As Randall’s friend and protégée, Boyd worked at the press as editor and was named Randall’s authorized biographer. In 2003, she published *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press*. In the book, Boyd credits Randall as a feminist and a literary visionary as well as a major inspiration in her own artistic development. The biography has received praise for its impressive scholarship and Boyd’s sophisticated and accessible writing style.

As a poet, Boyd is inspired by her interests in African American **history**, in human oppression, and in countering self-interest and materialism. Her poems create their own distinctive **beauty**, imposing dignity on often ugly and painful subject matter.

Boyd’s honors and awards include, among others, the Literature Award from the Michigan chapter of the National Conference of Artists in 1978; the Wayne State University President’s Affirmative Action Award in 1995; an award from the Ann Arbor chapter of Links, Inc. for literary contributions to African American Culture in 1995; and an award from the **Frances E. W. Harper** Literary Society for outstanding achievements in the literary arts in 1996.

*See also* Black Feminism

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*Anne Mangum*

### BRADLEY, DAVID (1950– )

An analysis of David Bradley’s two novels reveals strong female characters and an appreciation of the societal role women play. Interviews with Bradley



suggest, however, that it was his father's side of his **family**—his father, uncles, and male cousins—that influenced his art and gave rise to many of the stories and characters present in his novels. Bradley was born in 1950 in Bedford, Pennsylvania, to the Reverend David H. Bradley and Harriette M. Jackson Bradley. Although Bradley enjoyed hearing his father's sermons, and although he greatly enjoyed the trips he made with his father down **South** to revival meetings, he did not become a minister, the first time a male Bradley had declined to enter the profession since before the Civil War. Bradley's father, forty-five years old when his son was born, felt no calling to the ministry but entered it because there were so few professional options open to blacks of his generation. Bradley Sr. would rather have been a historian, much like John Washington, protagonist of his son's second novel *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981). That fact, coupled with a rural upbringing, led to the worldviews Bradley later put forth in his two novels.

After graduating from high school in Bedford in 1968, Bradley was named a Benjamin Franklin Scholar, a National Achievement Scholar, and a Presidential Scholar and attended the University of Pennsylvania. It was while he was a freshman that he heard the kernel of the story that would become *The Chaneyville Incident*. Knowing that David Bradley, Sr., was an amateur historian, Bedford officials approached him to write the **history** of African Americans in the county for its bicentennial celebration. Bradley Sr. wanted nothing to do with the project and recommended his son, who also refused to participate. Harriette Bradley eventually accepted the project. After visiting the county courthouses and many local cemeteries, she discovered an old gravesite on the property of a white man named Lester James. Her research determined that thirteen slaves attempting to flee north on the **Underground Railroad** were trapped at this location and chose to die rather than to be sent back down South. Soon after his mother's call, Bradley wrote a short story about the event. Years later, this story evolved into *The Chaneyville Incident*, a novel that won the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1982 and earned Bradley a position of prominence not only in African American literary studies but also in American letters.

Bradley felt excluded from student life at the University of Pennsylvania. The university had begun to accept and embrace its black students, but the majority of these students came from urban areas. As the son of a rural preacher, Bradley felt out of place. Rather than spend much time associating with his fellow students in their popular hangouts, Bradley began to frequent the bars of South Street. The people he met there became the basis for his first novel, *South Street* (1975), which he began in a writing workshop. Bradley graduated in 1972 summa cum laude and went to graduate school on a Thouron Scholarship to the University of London Institute of United States Studies. *South Street* was published after his return. Although Bradley has not published a novel since *The Chaneyville Incident*, he is purportedly at work on a nonfiction book about racism and its roots in America, which he claims can be traced back to the writings of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

In *South Street*, Bradley explores the concept of what it means to be a black male in Philadelphia in the 1970s. While his female characters are strong and

well defined, they ultimately serve as foils to the men in the novel. The sisters Leslie and Vanessa, for example, see their lives only in terms of the sexual pleasure they can give to men. Although Leslie seems to have a voracious sexual appetite that gives her power, in reality she feels so lost without a man that she willingly accepts Leroy Briggs's brutal treatment of her. Vanessa, an ex-prostitute whom Briggs pays not to **work**, seems independent and full of self-respect until she meets Adlai Stevenson Brown, a middle-class man who has come to live on South Street. When faced with someone she perceives to be smarter and stronger than herself, Vanessa becomes full of self-doubt. Big Betsy, an aging prostitute who unsuccessfully attempts to find customers on South Street, likewise views herself in terms of what men think of her. Her self-worth has been reduced to the possible in terms of men: As long as new men enter Lightnin' Ed's, the bar where she passes most of her evenings, Big Betsy clings to the hope that she may yet again regain her prowess as a woman.

The men of South Street similarly define themselves in relation to women, although at times this definition is fulfilled through the absence of women. Jake, the resident wino, claims that he gave women up years ago because they distracted him from his mission of staying steadily drunk. Leo, the proprietor of Lightnin' Ed's, eschews any mention of romantic entanglements with women and becomes highly embarrassed when Big Betsy hints at his own **sexuality** or lack thereof. Rayburn and Leroy Briggs, Leslie's husband and lover, both crave and fear Leslie's abundant desire. Rayburn mourns her desertion and attempts to redeem his self-worth by bedding a wealthy white woman. Leroy shamefacedly hides when Leslie's antics exhaust him and later threatens her life by forcing her to perform sex acts with what he considers to be the ultimate phallic symbol of his power: his fully loaded gun. The Reverend Peter Sloan, pastor of the Abundant Life Church, views bedding his female parishioners as a way to confirm his power. Not content to deliver sermons and count his riches, the Reverend feels that he will not be the perfect man unless he can prove his sexual worth to the women in his church.

It is Bradley's inclusion of Adlai Stevenson Brown, the novel's central character and catalyst for its action, that renegotiates the balance of sexual power on South Street. As feminist critic Cathy Brigham notes, much of the novel's action hinges on female pleasure and desire. It is not until Brown meets and befriends Vanessa that he understands what it means to be empathetic. Through their relationship, Vanessa learns that she is more than property to be bought and sold. Even Leroy Briggs, who still desires Vanessa despite the fact that he is bedding her sister, is changed by the relationship. Just as Vanessa and Brown consummate their relationship in a mutually satisfactory way, Briggs enters the apartment intending to kill his rival. When Briggs realizes that Brown has managed to satisfy Vanessa, something he was never able to accomplish, he slinks away in disgrace. He realizes that perhaps there is more to relationships than exchange and bargaining for power.

Similarly, John Washington's relationship with Judith in *The Chaneyville Incident* results in a growing understanding that maleness need not be defined by an exclusion of empathy and kindness. Washington is a history professor

who becomes obsessed with finding out why and how his father died. He firmly believes that only the facts about his father's life, and about any historical event, can lead to the truth. Empathy and imagination, he believes, lie in the domain of women and do not belong as a part of serious scholarship. What Washington comes to discover, however, is that these so-called women's weaknesses are essential to recapture the past and even to discover the truth.

When Moses Washington dies mysteriously in an accident, his best friend Jack Crawley becomes a father figure for young John. According to Old Jack, Moses claimed that John needed his tutelage in how to be a man because John had "a lot of woman" in him. Old Jack teaches John how to hunt, how to drink whiskey, and how to tell stories. He also discourages his young protégé from entering into romantic entanglements with women, whom he considers dangerous. As John matures and embarks on his quest to discover the meaning of his father's **death**, and therefore his life as well, he eschews anything he finds illogical or emotional, in other words, anything he defines as feminine.

This separation between male and female seems to parallel the separation between the races in the novel. When John receives the call that his brother Bill has been killed in Vietnam, he vents the rage he feels at the white establishment in town that he blames for Bill's death on the white girl he has been dating. He returns from the funeral, goes to see the girl, and rapes her. Although he claims to feel guilty for his actions, he later tells Judith that he still believes he did nothing wrong in blaming the girl for his anger simply because she was white.

Years after the novel's publication, in his interview with Kay Bonetti, Bradley professed shock that feminist critics neglected to mention the **rape** and John's casual reference of it to Judith. In his view, only a psychiatrist such as Judith could continue to **love** a man despite his cold treatment of her and his callous mention of such a heinous act. If the rape illustrates both John's chauvinism and his hatred of white people and Judith's desperate need to be loved, it also demonstrates how much John's worldview changes by the end of the novel. When Judith compels John to tell her the story of his father's life and death, she also forces him to fill in the historical gaps that his imagination has not been able to supply. This process of telling the story and recreating the past allows John to recognize and value the complexity of racial relations, sexual difference, and human nature. The hole that Moses Washington left in John's life has finally been filled.

Judith not only helps to heal John's emotional wounds and the intellectual inability to continue with his work, but she also helps to heal him physically. Throughout the novel, disturbing dreams that manifest themselves physically in the feeling of a penetrating coldness plague John. As a result of the icy feeling that grips him whenever he falls asleep, and which continues should he have one of his terrifying nightmares, John is unable to sleep. The only cure for this affliction, besides trying to stay awake at all costs, is whiskey. After Old Jack's funeral, which as critic Martin Gliserman notes occurs at the exact center of the novel, John is finally able to fall asleep with Judith.

The ice inside him begins to melt as Judith slowly draws the story of his family history out of him. By the end of the novel, when John finally reconstructs what happened to his great-grandfather and the other twelve slaves at Chaneyville, it is clear that the coldness is gone forever and that John is cured: the male and female, black and white, dichotomies that formally ruled his life have become both more complex and less threatening.

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*Elizabeth Ely Tolman*

### **BREATH, EYES, MEMORY**

Women populate **Edwidge Danticat's** works. Men tend to be peripheral: shadowy figures to avoid, emotionally remote, or distanced by authority. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), Sophie grows up in Haiti under the loving care of her Tante Atie and Grandmother Ifé. Though they are all "daughters of the land," they also live in a place where nightmares are passed on "like heirlooms." When Sophie was still small, her mother Martine escaped her Haitian nightmares, begun when she was raped in a cane field, but now supports her daughter's education and improved living conditions from New York.

Ifé's daughters Martine and Atie had been quite surprised to learn their limits as young Haitian women, yet Ifé emphasizes to Sophie the importance of female bonds, reminding her that her mother remains her best friend. But sent to New York herself at twelve years old, Sophie finds a woman who hardly looks as though she has left the cane fields and only reluctantly joins her mother's weary and troubled existence. (The **rape** still returns to Martine

in nightmares.) Over the next years, Sophie strives instinctively to connect with her mother, as well as her aunt and grandmother, but her desires are thwarted by Martine, who resists her daughter's own maturation and thereby her inclusion in the circle of Haitian women. Most difficult to the mother-daughter relationship, she forces a distance between herself and Sophie, as well as Sophie and other men, by physically testing for evidence of her daughter's virginity.

Very early in the novel, this circle of Haitian women of various generations appears to break apart. Not only have Sophie and Martine relocated to New York, but Martine later rejects her eighteen-year-old daughter, angrily relinquishing her to Joseph, Sophie's older boyfriend, after Sophie's purposeful act of violently breaking her own hymen with a pestle; but Sophie has finally rejected her mother's testing, deciding what will and will not enter her **body**. However, despite problematic relationships and the ocean's separation, the mothers and daughters of this **family** are bound to one another, a kinship emphasized structurally when Danticat sets the bulk of the novel in Haiti, where all the women reunite. Sophie, now married though scarred by the pain of sexual intercourse, returns with daughter Brigitte. Only in Haiti does Sophie learn through Atie that both her aunt and her mother were regularly tested as girls, as she was.

Martine and Sophie each come to realize that they are sexual beings, and upon their return to New York, they begin their mother-daughter relationship again through Martine's surprise pregnancy. But Martine has never had control over her body. Even more difficult, she is unable to connect with her violent past. Martine commits suicide, unable to bear a child whose face she sees as too reflective of the man who raped her more than twenty years ago.

After her mother's **death**, Sophie reempowers Martine through dressing her in a red funeral dress and then returning to Haiti to vent her rage at her mother's rape site. Sophie will also come to gain strength herself as a daughter of Haiti, by belonging to those who have been tested. But Sophie is not all knowing; she can only speak from the **violence**, not of the violence. Danticat demonstrates that in order to recapture the Haitian landscape and the body, each must be redefined. In the end, both homeland and the circle of womanhood complete the individual.

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Lisa Muir

### **BROOKS, GWENDOLYN (1917–2000)**

Born in 1917 at her maternal grandmother's house in Topeka, Kansas, Gwendolyn Brooks was raised in Chicago, Illinois, by her parents, David Brooks and Keziah Wims Brooks. She and her younger brother, Raymond, were sheltered by their mother, leading the already shy Gwendolyn to become increasingly reserved around her peers through childhood and adolescence. Brooks's mother espoused "middle-class" values; thus, despite the family's poverty, Brooks remembers being perceived as "stuck up." Such hurtful rejections were exacerbated by frequent reminders of the devaluation of her dark skin and untamable hair. With her parents' encouragement, she took refuge in books and in the poems she began writing at seven years old.

**Family** and **home** were always central for Brooks. Her deep enjoyment of the family's holiday rituals was offset by unhappiness caused by her parents' depression-era financial quarrels. Her mother's demanding standards motivated Brooks, however, who recalls her mother's conviction that Brooks would be "the lady **Paul Laurence Dunbar**" as an early source of her commitment to **poetry**. Her mother pushed the teenaged Brooks to share her work with writers **James Weldon Johnson** and **Langston Hughes**, both of whom offered significant advice and encouragement. Hughes, in particular, remained a generous mentor into Brooks's adulthood.

Brooks began to teach herself prosody by reading the Romantic poets assigned in classes, including Wordsworth, Keats, and Byron, and the modernist poets Johnson recommended, like Hughes and **Countee Cullen**, as well as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and e.e. cummings. Brooks concentrated on traditional forms like ballads, sonnets, and quatrains, while experimenting with enjambment and syntax. By the time of her graduation from Englewood High School, she was contributing **poetry** regularly to the *Chicago Defender*, the city's black newspaper.

Her next two years were spent at Wilson Junior College, from which she graduated in 1937. The racial and economic climate of that time compelled Brooks to accept employment as a **domestic** in the homes of wealthy whites and as assistant to the fraudulent "spiritual adviser" of the poor residents of the tenement called the Mecca Building—experiences she drew upon in later writing. Though Brooks found her employment conditions demeaning, she derived intellectual and social sustenance during this period from participation in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council, where she interacted with ambitious achievers like **Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs** and John H. Johnson, publisher of *Ebony* magazine. In Youth Council, Brooks also met Henry L. Blakely II, whom

she married in 1939. Their son, also named Henry, was born in the fall of 1940.

For years, the Blakelys moved from one cramped kitchenette apartment to another, unable to obtain the kind of single-family home in which Brooks had grown up, as the growing number of blacks in Chicago intensified problems of residential segregation and employment discrimination. Nonetheless, despite the disruptions and challenges of near-poverty, she continued to practice her craft, snatching time away from household chores and child care for writing. Significantly, in 1941 Inez Cunningham Stark began a poetry workshop for blacks on the South Side. Stark—a wealthy, white Chicagoan and member of the board of *Poetry* magazine—brought to the workshop a strictly modernist poetics and a ruthless, yet constructive critical sensibility. Other participants who remained important to Brooks included Blakely, Burroughs, Edward Bland, and **Margaret Esse Danner**. Langston Hughes, who visited the group, was quite impressed by the quality of their writing. Here Brooks embraced the aesthetics that have characterized her mature writing, especially an emphasis on linguistic compression.

Brooks began to win poetry awards, leading to the publication of her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), by Harper and Row, which published all her books through the mid-1960s. **Richard Wright**, who read the draft manuscript at Harper's request, commended Brooks's portrayal of African American life in Chicago. The collection's scope was subsequently broadened from neighborhood scenes to include a sequence of antiwar sonnets written primarily from the perspective of young soldiers. The book was acclaimed as an accomplished debut from a talented poet, though often in terms that suggested such merits were unexpected in a "Negro" woman. Reviewers stressed the poems' "universality," apparently to assure white readers—Brooks's primary audience—that their focus on blacks would not be alienating. These poems feature the alliteration, rhyme, tightly controlled lines, and intricate syntax that typify Brooks's poetics. They also establish themes to which Brooks returned throughout her literary career: the impact of white **beauty** standards on African Americans, especially dark-skinned black women; the challenge of creating a rewarding life in impoverished and racist conditions; and the importance of according everyone basic human dignity. Poems notable for their moving depiction of black women's concerns, in particular, include "the mother," which portrays the emotional aftermath of economically motivated abortions, and "The Ballad of Pearl Mae Lee," which explores the rage of a dark-skinned woman rejected in favor of a white woman.

The book's critical success did not change Brooks's material circumstances significantly. Tellingly, she often recounted that she was sitting in the dark when she received word in 1950 that she had become the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize; she and her husband had been unable to pay the electric bill. Notwithstanding its prize-winning status, *Annie Allen* (1949), her second poetry collection, received somewhat mixed reviews. Praise for its technical virtuosity and emotional intensity was matched by

criticism of its ornate diction and stylistic excess. The collection's eponymous heroine faces domestic challenges caused or complicated by her **identity** as a poor, dark-skinned African American woman. Annie hopes to model her life on fairy tales, which she learns are doubly out of reach for her. Especially in its long centerpiece poem, "The Anniad," *Annie Allen* turns a critical eye upon the limitations patriarchal gender norms and racist beauty standards impose upon black women.

Receiving the award opened opportunities for Brooks to review for local and national newspapers and journals, including Chicago's *Daily News* and *Sun-Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and *Negro Digest*. However, **race** and gender prejudices, combined with her possession of only a two-year degree, precluded her from obtaining other advantages that typically attended such distinction. More than a decade passed before Brooks was invited to teach a college-level poetry workshop; in 1963, she received and accepted Columbia College's invitation and later taught as well at Elmhurst College, Northeastern Illinois State College, University of Wisconsin at Madison, and City College of New York, before finally withdrawing from teaching in 1971.

Following the 1951 birth of her daughter Nora, Brooks began working on her only published novel: the heavily autobiographical *Maud Martha* (1953). Brooks turned to **fiction** in hopes of earning enough money finally to purchase a home—a goal that, with her parents' help, materialized in the small South Side house where she lived until her **death**. As with her previous works, Brooks carefully negotiated her editor's resistance to more direct critiques of white racism, arguing successfully to retain a chapter that emerged from her experiences as a domestic worker, despite her editor's concern that the white employer was portrayed two dimensionally. Brooks's story follows an ordinary black girl's maturation within the race, gender, and **class** confines of Chicago from 1917 through the conclusion of World War II. The critical reception was positive but highly gendered; *Maud Martha's* so-called delightfulness paled in comparison to the perceived powerfulness of the first novels released contemporaneously by **Ralph Ellison** and **James Baldwin**. Recently, feminist critics have demonstrated the novel's importance to the African American tradition, drawing attention to the nuanced analysis of the limitations upon Maud Martha's possibilities for growth lodged in Brooks's minimalist, impressionistic prose.

Soon thereafter, she produced a collection of children's poetry, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956), and then devoted herself simultaneously to a second novel and a new collection of poems. Though the would-be novel never saw print, its material—the lives of the residents of the Mecca Building—would find a compelling voice and publication later as the title poem of her book *In the Mecca* (1968). The collection of poems written during this period, *The Bean Eaters* (1960), was dedicated to Brooks's father, who died in 1959. It reflected Brooks's awareness of the changing racial climate in the United States, in poems responding to the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till and the 1957 desegregation of Little Rock, Arkansas, schools. Critics disapprovingly perceived of



the poems in this collection as more overtly politicized than Brooks's previous work. Brooks herself saw these poems, like the new work appearing in her 1963 *Selected Poems*, as evidence that the oft-discussed 1967 "turning point" in her poetics was not as dramatic a shift as critics have claimed.

In the spring of 1967, Brooks and her friend Danner participated in the Second Fisk University Writers' Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. Brooks enjoyed a warm reception but was amazed by the young black audience's energetic response to **Amiri Baraka's** work. From this point forward, Brooks began associating with young poets in the **Black Arts Movement**—particularly Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) and Walter Bradford, who became like sons to her—and absorbing tenets of the "black aesthetic" that would remain critical to her work, long after she had distanced herself from that label. She found personal and artistic affirmation in the movement's assertion that "black is beautiful" and embraced the challenge of writing poems as a black person, about blacks, and to a black audience. She published her work thereafter only with black presses, including Dudley Randall's Broadside Press, Madhubuti's Third World Press, and her own The David Company.

The difficulties of working with financially struggling presses were perhaps less disruptive than those of integrating her new priorities with her exacting poetics. Striving to produce poems that would be accessible and interesting to less-educated African Americans, without giving up her distinctive voice, Brooks did not create as prolifically or with as much satisfaction for many years thereafter. Her next collections—such as *Family Pictures* (1970), *Beckonings* (1975), and *Primer for Blacks* (1980)—were quite slim. Interviews during this period convey her frustration about her creative output; in them, she also appears disconcerted by the observation of feminist critics that her poems no longer featured women and women's concerns as prevalently. While Brooks privileged the fight for racial equality over black women's struggle for gender equity, the decline in focus on women in her poetry was arguably an unintended side effect of the black aesthetic's male-centered politics. Toward the end of her career, trips to Kenya, Russia, and Ghana, along with increased awareness of the South African antiapartheid struggle, promoted a more global focus on blacks in Brooks's poetry, as evident in *The Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems* (1986) and *Gottschalk and the Grande Tarantelle* (1988), with which she was particularly pleased.

Despite and because of the contradictory impulses informing Brooks's work, she and her writing have been widely influential for several generations of African American poets. She is admired and beloved for her generous investment of time and money into encouraging young urban poets. Brooks used her position as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1985 to 1986 and her life appointment as Poet Laureate of Illinois (beginning 1968) for this purpose, holding readings and sponsoring contests for personally funded prizes, among other activities. The state and the black poetic **community** have honored her contributions in a variety of ways, including renaming an Illinois junior high school for her and establishing the Gwendolyn Brooks Center at Chicago State University. Brooks's other awards

include two Guggenheims, the 1994 National Endowment for the Humanities Jefferson Lectureship, and numerous honorary degrees.

Brooks's idiosyncratic **autobiographies**, *Report from Part One* (1972) and *Report from Part Two* (1996), provide invaluable insight into the life and mind of a writer whose career was shaped by the interaction between an insistence on artistic excellence, on one hand, and a commitment to exposing and countering racial, gendered, and economic injustice through poetry, on the other. They stand with her brilliant oeuvre of poetry and fiction to establish her as one of the most significant African American women writers of the twentieth century.

*See also* Protest Tradition

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*Evie Shockley*

**BROTHERS AND SISTERS**

*Brothers and Sisters* (1994) by **Bebe Moore Campbell** is set against the backdrop of the 1991 Los Angeles riots that followed the brutal beating by white officers of an African American male, Rodney King. While the city burns and racial tensions smolder, Esther Jackson, an aspiring banker and operations manager in a branch of Angel City Bank, struggles to come to terms with the racial tensions played out in her own personal and corporate life. When Esther's coworker, a white woman named Mallory, accuses their African American supervisor, Humphrey Boone, of sexual harassment, Esther struggles with questions of loyalty and friendship. To unite with a white woman and believe, without substantial evidence, that Humphrey is a sexual predator is to substantiate the notion that all black men are lecherous and all white women are harmless victims. Esther knows that this is not true, and while she questions Mallory's accusations, she comes to realize how both African American and white women are pawns in a larger game, one that corporate America wages against aspiring women regardless of **race**. If Esther believes Mallory's allegation against Humphrey, then she feels she must betray her race. However, if she denies Mallory completely, she is betraying the bond that links women by virtue of gender. Such is Esther's bind, and, as Campbell suggests, the ties that link women to women and women to men calls into question what does make us "brothers and sisters."

Central to Campbell's second work of **fiction** is the quest to locate oneself in an ongoing narrative of survival and success. While the novel largely focuses around Esther, it also considers how black men are vulnerable to abuse. When money goes missing from certain bank accounts, charges are leveled against Humphrey, who is innocent of allegations of fraud, financial and otherwise, that are leveled against him. It is a white coworker, Kirk, initially held above suspicion because of his gender and race, who is the culprit in the mismanagement and theft of funds. After she is unceremoniously dismissed from the bank, as is Humphrey, Esther must risk future prospects and her career to see justice served and Kirk rightfully named as a white-collar thief. That she does so with the help of Mallory is a testimony to her strength and her integrity, as well as the bond between two women who know they must do what is right. By the novel's close, Esther realizes that it is not race and gender that separates or unites men and women but the belief that justice must be served and certain individuals held accountable for wrongdoing that links people together. If, as Campbell suggests, justice was not served in the case of Rodney King, then it can be met in the lives of individuals with the resolve to address trespass with dignity and fortitude. To see justice served, Esther, Mallory, and Humphrey must agree to cast aside their suspicions of one another, make amends with the fears, real and imagined, that they harbor against one another, and acknowledge the ways in which they have harmed one another and been harmed.

*Brothers and Sisters* is a novel that celebrates friendships, particularly those forged between women of different races who are initially suspect of one

another. Individually and collectively, Esther and Mallory must face issues such as sexual harassment, gender discrimination, glass ceilings in the corporate workforce, and questions of race and privilege. Their friendship and its evolution are set against the background of themes such as affirmative action, black-on-black racism, white-on-black racism, and greed and envy. Ultimately, the novel argues for the idea that to sustain friendship cultural and racial differences must be acknowledged; otherwise, misapprehension cannot be overridden.

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*Jennifer Driscoll*

### BROUGHTON, VIRGINIA W. (?–1934)

No one was more influential in uniting Tennessee women in Baptist missionary work than Virginia Broughton. Broughton was a driving force behind the success of Tennessee's Bible Band in the 1880s and 1890s, a powerful women's missionary movement that met staunch opposition from male members of the church who feared the rising power of these women's groups. Broughton's exceptional speaking skill and literary verve helped her achieve success in her quest to better educate and emancipate women from the patriarchal restrictions that hindered their desire to be equal partners in missionary endeavors. Broughton urged women to put God first and answer the call to do **His work**, which she describes in her first publication, *Women's Work, as Gleaned from the Women of the Bible, and Bible Women of Modern Times* (1904), a work that explores, and argues for, the validity of women's spiritual contribution to the **community** based on biblical passages. She also wrote for numerous periodicals associated with the black Baptist church.

Broughton was born to emancipated parents sometime before the Civil War and went to private school as a child. She attended Fisk University, the oldest university in Nashville, Tennessee, and one of the earliest African American colleges. Broughton was part of the first graduating class of 1875. After graduation, she took a teaching position in the Memphis public school system, where she taught successfully for twelve years. She married John Broughton, a Memphis lawyer active in Republican politics.

Broughton's missionary journey began when her friend Joanna Moore, a white missionary with the American Baptist Home Mission Society and

founder of the Fireside Schools, invited her to a women's only missionary meeting. Soon after, Broughton, along with Moore and other women, formed Bible Bands (black women's Bible study groups) that became very popular. In 1888, Broughton was asked to lead the Memphis station of Bible Bands to help raise funds for the Baptist Bible and Normal Institute, where Broughton taught for years. Broughton became a full-time missionary in 1892, as well as continuing to teach, and the Bible Bands enjoyed enormous success under her leadership. The Bible Bands grew throughout the **South** and developed into a powerful movement that helped to assert women's rights within the Baptist church and championed a female interpretation of scripture.

Broughton applied a unique feminist approach to her missionary work, which she outlines in her spiritual **autobiography** *Twenty Year's Experience of a Missionary* (1907). The work, written in the third person, is a significant addition to black women's spiritual narratives, particularly as Broughton examines the numerous places in the Bible that offer support for women's involvement in missionary work. She was skilled at the political maneuvering necessary when dealing with the all-male church councils and was well educated in the Bible, an education she used frequently when up against male resistance to the Bible Bands. She was firm in her resolve to advocate for more female involvement in missionary work and encouraged women, white and black, to answer God's call to service. Broughton's discursive command and her no-nonsense approach evinced the strength of women in the South and their quest for racial and gender equality.

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*Debbie Clare Olson*

### BROWN, HALLIE Q. (1850–1949)

The daughter of former slaves Thomas Arthur Brown and Frances Jane Scroggins, Hallie Quinn Brown grew up free in Pittsburgh. Her father, who had purchased his **freedom** in 1834, was a noted black businessman who had

ties to the **Underground Railroad**. Because of her mother's failing health, the family moved to Chatham, Ontario, in 1864, and there her elocutionary powers first attracted attention. The family moved again a few years later, this time to Wilberforce, Ohio, so that Brown and her youngest brother could attend Wilberforce College.

Brown took her bachelor's degree in 1873. Over the next decade, she taught in schools in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Ohio; she also lectured extensively and toured with the Wilberforce Concert Company, singing and raising money for her alma mater. Her first book, *Bits and Odds: A Choice Selection of Recitations for School, Lyceum, and Parlor Entertainments*, which grew directly out of her lecturing, was published in 1884. The following year, she was named dean of Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina (a university affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church). During her two years with Allen, she also attended the Chautauqua Lecture School. From 1888 until 1892, she taught in the Dayton, Ohio, public schools before accepting the position of Dean of Women at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, which she held until late 1893.

Wilberforce offered her a professorship in elocution, but she chose instead to travel to Europe. There, her lectures, which considered both American black life and temperance, were immensely popular—earning her membership in the Royal Geographical Society, roles at the 1895 Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the 1897 International Congress of Women, and presentations to Queen Victoria. On her return to the United States, she continued to lecture across the nation and became active in the “club movement” among African American women. Wilberforce renewed its offer in 1906, and she taught there intermittently for the rest of her life. Her teaching, though, was limited because the university recognized both her national fame and her fund-raising potential (the latter led to another trip to Europe, specifically for Wilberforce, in 1910).

In 1920, Brown won the presidency of the National Association of Colored Women, and during the next four years, she helped the organization initiate both a scholarship fund and efforts to preserve **Frederick Douglass's** Washington, D.C., **home**. She was also active in the Republican Party and addressed the Republican National Convention in 1924. While this period saw the publication of a selection of short works, Brown's key literary achievement was her *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* (1926). *Homespun Heroines*, a collection of biographies of sixty African American women edited by Brown (who also, notably, wrote twenty-one of the essays), is important for its emphasis on black women, who were often given limited (and sometimes no) coverage in other biographical collections on African Americans but also as a collaborative project *by* black women (over two dozen contributed essays). In later life, Brown continued teaching, lecturing, and writing.

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*Eric Gardner*

### BROWN, LINDA BEATRICE (1939– )

Although she was born in Ohio, Linda Beatrice Brown has become a southerner by choice, having lived in Greensboro, North Carolina, since 1970. Brown’s first publication was **poetry**, but since 1984 she has been writing and publishing **fiction** and nonfiction prose. Brown’s background in poetry, however, marks her prose, which relies on poetic language and metaphor for much of its power. Her themes focus on significant events in the lives of twentieth-century black women and on women’s struggles for **identity** and spiritual wholeness.

Born in 1939 to social worker Raymond R. Brown and artist Edith Player Brown, Linda Beatrice Brown was educated at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, where she received a B.A. degree. She earned her M.A. from Case Western Reserve University and a Ph.D. from Union Graduate School. Her first marriage to Harold E. Bragg ended in divorce in 1962, after they had two children, Willa B. Bragg and Christopher P. Bragg. Her career has combined college-level teaching with writing and lecturing. From 1970 to 1986, she was an instructor in English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; from 1986 to 1992, she was an assistant professor of English at Guilford College; and since 1992, she has held the Willa B. Player Chair in Humanities at Bennett College in Greensboro.

Brown’s first major publication was the book of poetry *A Love Song to Black Men*, published in 1974. All of the poems are short, but they convey volumes with the denseness of their images that sing of women as real people who bear heavy burdens, that sing of women and men who are trying to emerge from the shadows of racism into their full **beauty** and being, and that sing of the endurance of **family** relationships and of hope. Brown has said that poetry is the language of the young and that fiction requires more maturity for full expression. Her fiction emerges from her maturity but maintains the language and imagery of her poetry.

Brown’s first novel, *Rainbow Roun Mah Shoulder*, was published in 1984, after winning first prize from the North Carolina Coalition for the Arts in that

same year. Focusing on the life of Rebecca Florice Letenielle from 1915 to 1954, the novel's sweep casts light on the struggles of black women to find and keep jobs, on racist practices such as lynching and Jim Crow discrimination, and on the shelter and hope provided within the grounds of a historically black college. Against this background, Florice, as she becomes known, struggles against the gift of **healing** that her hands contain. Finally she comes to accept it and to reconcile it with traditional Christian values and is comfortable with the sense of light that seems to place the rainbow that she had heard about in an old song in New Orleans around her shoulders. The novel's overriding message is that **love** wins over fear and that acceptance of one's gifts is required for peace of mind and soul.

This same message eventually emerges from Brown's second novel, *Crossing Over Jordan*, published in 1995, but the scope is broader and the story more complex. *Crossing Over Jordan* traces the lives of four generations of women, focusing on the final two generations. The foremother is Georgia, born a slave who must bear her white master's children even after the end of the Civil War. One of these children is Sadie, the next woman we learn about. She marries Jacob Temple, a black minister, and bears four children. The two girls become main characters, Story and her sister Bertricia, known as Bertie or Baby Sister. Story Temple Greene emerges as the novel's main character, determined to be a credit to her family and to succeed in a hostile world. Story's daughter Hermine becomes the fourth generation. Through all four of these generations we see the struggles of women to deal first with their men, both their black husbands and the white men who take advantage of their powerless position, and then with a broader world that gives them only grudging credit. Set in a frame that takes place in a future 2012, the story slowly moves through the generations, focusing primarily on Story's life from the 1920s forward and on Hermine's life from the 1950s forward. The central metaphor of crossing over Jordan, drawn from the biblical story of Moses and from the **spiritual** Brown quotes as part of the novel's frontispiece, promises **home** and salvation, a destination Hermine eventually achieves through hard-won love and forgiveness.

Most recently, Brown has published *The Long Walk: The Story of the Presidency of Willa B. Player at Bennett College* (1998). Commissioned when Brown began her professorship at Bennett, this **history** serves as a commemoration of the work her maternal aunt, Willa B. Player, did to guide the historically black college through the turbulent period of the early 1960s when the **civil rights movement** was bringing integration to the **South**. Brown opens *The Long Walk* with a history of Bennett College as background to the achievements of Willa B. Player. The publication of *The Long Walk* in 1998 marked the 125th anniversary of Bennett College, founded under the auspices of the Methodist church. Originally coeducational, Bennett was reorganized as a women's college in 1926 and strove to provide a quality education to train young black women for positions of leadership in their communities and in the broader society. Brown wishes, in addition to writing the history of Player's presidency at Bennett, to present Player as a valuable role model for young black women.



Player's presidency was remarkable in that she was the first woman president of Bennett and the first African American woman president of a four-year liberal arts college. Brown defines Player's leadership as one of service and of principled vision. During Player's presidency, Bennett experienced positive growth and was admitted to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Brown based her research on a combination of oral history, gleaned from interviews with faculty, staff, students, and alumnae of Bennett as well as with Dr. Player herself, and of archival research. Brown's history is important as a personal testimony to Dr. Player and as a document of the struggle for survival of a historically black college. The title refers literally to the pathway from the president's home to the administration building at Bennett, a path that the president walked daily and that students and faculty walked at graduation and other ceremonial occasions. Figuratively, the long walk is from **slavery** to **freedom**, from ignorance to education, from shadows to achievement. *The Long Walk* is, therefore, a testimonial to the power of education, to the struggle for black freedom, and to the achievements of one person as a role model for others.

Brown's personal connection to Bennett College continues as a focal part of her life as she works in the classroom to encourage young women to follow in her aunt's steps to achieve for themselves. On February 23, 2003, Brown delivered the first of the Willa B. Player Faculty Lectures as part of Bennett President Johnetta Cole's efforts to follow in Player's footsteps and continue to enhance intellectual development opportunities for Bennett students. Like her aunt, Linda Beatrice Brown stands as an example for other women of intellectual and artistic achievement possible in the contemporary world if commitment and determination are part of the mix.

Brown's tribute to her aunt Willa B. Player can also stand as a statement of her own goals as an educator and author. Brown stresses Player's commitment to a vision of the possibilities generated by the empowerment of others. Personal empowerment is also a theme central to Brown's fiction as she portrays black women battling personal demons in an effort to find positive lives for themselves and for their descendants. Florice Letenielle battles against her gift of healing and against her own passions to come to an acceptance of her gifts and of her role as godmother to Ronnie Johnstone. Similarly, the women in the Temple family struggle to emerge from dependence to autonomy and personal freedom. Brown's message is that self-empowerment is not easy, but with spiritual commitment, determination, concern for future generations, and the willingness to accept help from others, it is possible.

*See also* Motherhood; Myth, Use of; Violence

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*Harriette C. Buchanan*

### BROWN, WILLIAM WELLS (c. 1814–1884)

William Wells Brown was one of seven children born to an enslaved woman, Elizabeth. They were owned by a Dr. John Young, a near relative of Brown's white father, George Higgins—hence Brown's original name, William Higgins. In 1816 the Youngs relocated from their farm near Lexington, Kentucky, to Saint Charles County, Missouri. As Brown grew, he labored primarily as a house servant or as a medical assistant to his master, although he also experienced fieldwork. However, his **family** connection did not excuse him from the **violence of slavery**. Indeed, it incited the wrath of Mrs. Young, who chafed at Brown's striking familial resemblance, and his occasionally being mistaken for a white family member. While Young had apparently made a promise to his relative, Brown's father, not to sell the boy, he did eventually find a way to remove him from the family, hiring him out to a succession of owners, including the editor of the *St. Louis Times*, Elijah P. Lovejoy, who would give Brown his first rudimentary education. To further distance him from the white family, William (a family name) was renamed Sanford, an unlikely first name for a white boy.

When, at around age fourteen, Brown was hired to a violent and drunken innkeeper in St. Louis, he made his first attempted escape. This unsuccessful attempt was followed by severe punishment, but a respite came when Brown was then hired as a servant on a steamer in 1830. There he first heard a Fourth of July oration and realized the mobility of his white countrymen. Others realized his intelligence and industry, and while Young refused to sell him, he did hire him out to a slave trader, Walker, who regularly traveled to the New Orleans slave market. This experience of the worst practices of the slave trade provided Brown with much material for his later abolitionist writings.

By 1832 Young was experiencing substantial financial difficulties and resolved to sell Brown. Brown and his mother tried to escape; after eleven days, they were recaptured, she to be sold to New Orleans and away from Brown forever, following the fate of the sister with whom he had been raised. He was

sold to a tailor, Samuel Willi, who again hired Brown out before selling him to Enoch Price, a steamboat owner. Brown used the opportunity his travel afforded him to finally escape on New Year's Day of 1834 in Cincinnati, Ohio. There he was assisted by the Quaker Wells Brown, whose name he took in gratitude. The year 1834 proved productive in other ways: Brown married Elizabeth Schooner, and while their first daughter died in 1835, their second, Clarissa, was born later that year. At the end of the summer of 1836, Brown moved his family to Buffalo, New York, in order to gain greater opportunities for employment and a closer connection to African American communities and organizations. There he formed a temperance society that at one point boasted the majority of the city's black population among its membership, participated in the **Underground Railroad**, and devoted himself to advancing his education.

In 1840 Brown toured Cuba and Haiti, gathering material for later work. Returning to the United States, he continued in his efforts to undermine slavery; in 1842 alone, Brown was credited with assisting over sixty slaves to freedom. By 1843 he was a popular lecturer with the New York Slavery Society, affiliated with the Garrisonian movement, and attending the National Convention of Colored Citizens with **Frederick Douglass**. In 1847 Brown moved to Boston to lecture for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. Separated from his wife (who would die in 1851), he lodged his daughters (Josephine was born in 1836) with the white abolitionist Johnson family of New Bedford, who had once sheltered Douglass and his wife. That same year Brown published his *Narrative of William W. Brown*, which proved enormously popular in the United States and Britain, going through multiple printings in a relatively short period of time. He followed this with *The Antislavery Harp* (1848), a collection of songs that included an account of Thomas Jefferson's rumored sale of his daughter. This account would become the basis of Brown's first novel, *Clotel* (1853), in which several generations of a near-white family of women would be repeatedly sold for the sexual pleasure of white men, echoing the likely fate of Brown's much-beloved sister.

In 1849 Brown was sufficiently respected to be elected a delegate of the American Peace Society to Paris's International Peace Conference. His popularity in Britain may have informed his move to London the same year, where he was employed as a journalist and lecturer. When the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 made his return dangerous, he sent for his daughters to join him. This decision afforded them their company but also protected them. As the children of a fugitive from slavery, they might legally be claimed as property by whoever held title to Brown, despite their mother's status as a free woman, as the chaotic enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law made it increasingly difficult to prove claims to northern freedom. Brown was more aware than most of their fate, should this happen. In her biography of her father, Josephine recounts they first attended a seminary in Calais, France, and then the Home and Colonial School in London, a teacher training institute, making them economically self-sufficient, should the need arise.

Brown used the opportunities Europe afforded him as a professional writer. His anti-slavery lectures and accounts of his travels were published as *Three Years in Europe* (1852) and *Clotel* in 1853, and in 1855, *The American Fugitive*, a revised version of *Three Years*, appeared. This flurry of publications made Brown the first African American author of a travel narrative, as well as the first to publish a novel. Both allowed him to mount critiques of the “peculiar institution,” his travel narratives by recounting his treatment in and experiences of different lands; his novel by appealing to the sympathetic hearts of his readers. While *Clotel* borrows from a short story by white abolitionist Lydia Maria Child for some of the action, it is nevertheless original for the way it weaves together various writing styles to mount a multileveled argument that slavery hurts families, particularly women, by allowing male power and greed to go unchecked.

His sojourn in England was more than just professionally productive; it was also personally liberating in more than one way: Brown’s British friends, as a tribute, negotiated his purchase and emancipation in 1854 for \$300, a token fee, and he returned home later that year. From 1856 to 1857 Brown toured the northeastern states, reading from his play *Experience, or How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone*. While no copies of this, the first play written by an African American, have survived, the second, Brown’s *The Escape, or A Leap for Freedom*, fared better, thanks to its publication in 1858.

In 1860 Brown again married, this time to Annie Elizabeth Gray (1838–1902), of Cambridgeport, Massachusetts. Of an age with his daughters, she was of a well-connected **mulatto** family and shared his interest in activism. Settling in Boston, Brown was a member of the city’s Colored Civic Committee. With the outbreak of the Civil War, Brown served as a recruiter for the famed all-black 54th Massachusetts Regiment, alongside Douglass. Not content with his fame as an author and success as an agitator, during the war Brown turned his attention to the medicine with which he had assisted Young and then, in England, studied with a well-known physician. By the end of the war, despite no formal medical education, Brown had added the appellation of M.D. to his name, a not uncommon practice of the time.

With slavery over, Brown was able to devote more time to his other political cause, namely, temperance. As a member of both the Order of the Sons of Temperance and the Independent Order of Good Templars, Brown promoted his belief that alcohol destroyed families and impeded the moral, intellectual, and social advancement of African Americans. When the primarily African American John Brown Division of the Sons of Temperance was formed in Boston, Brown was named its leader. Brown’s new wife shared his devotion to this cause and was herself elected as its leader in 1867. Throughout the 1860s and 1870s they remained the division’s most active members. Given Brown’s firm beliefs, it is no surprise that he ran as a temperance candidate in elections for alderman, governor, and senator, albeit without success.

For Brown, this cause and racial uplift were inseparable, as was evident in his leadership of the National Association for the Organization of Night

Schools and the Spread of Temperance Among the Freed People of the South. His work with this organization resulted in the distribution of over 9,000 educational texts; however, it also returned him to his birthplace of Kentucky, resulting in his being captured by members of the Ku Klux Klan. With characteristic ingenuity Brown escaped and continued his activism. Though ambivalent in his relation to the racial politics of the national temperance organizations, he remained committed to the cause more generally and his local **community** in particular. This included his sponsoring of a temperance essay competition for Boston's black youth that was won by a young **Pauline Hopkins**, apparently a crucial event in her decision to become an author.

Brown did not neglect his writing during the war and Reconstruction periods. In 1862 he published the groundbreaking historical work *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, in 1867, a second history, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, and in 1873, *The Rising Son*. The last included sketches of prominent African American men and women, including **Frances E. W. Harper**, Fanny M. Jackson, **Phillis Wheatley**, Harriet Tubman, and Edmonia Lewis. His final book, *My Southern Home*, both a memoir and a critique of the post-Reconstruction **South**, appeared in 1880. That same year the census reported that Brown, a physician, headed a Boston household that included his wife, her younger sister Henrietta, Henrietta's husband, Thomas S. Calvin, a tailor, and one servant. No record of his daughters has been found after 1856, though they may have remained abroad. Four years later, Brown died in his Chelsea **home**, in a suburb of Boston. He is buried in Cambridge Cemetery in an unmarked plot shared with his mother-in-law.

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Jennifer Harris

### BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES

In Paule Marshall's first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), the protagonist, American-born Selina Boyce, grows up in a Caribbean immigrant **community** in New York and struggles to integrate the heritage of her **family** with their new life in America. Many of the tensions Selina encounters, including family responsibilities, integration of the American dream of consumption, and racial and ethnic identification, begin in this text and develop throughout Marshall's other stories.

*Brown Girl, Brownstones* follows as Selina experiences childhood and young adulthood within her tight-knit and ethnically defined community. She constantly negotiates her relationship with her mother, Silla, and her father, Deighton, each of whom has different approaches to life in their new **home** of America. Silla incorporates the values of the larger Caribbean immigrant community, focusing on the material. Silla's main goal throughout the text is to place a downpayment on the brownstone in which they live. Deighton rejects this dream, instead focusing his attention on his past in Barbados, where he wishes to return. In a key scene, Silla threatens to sell Deighton's land in Barbados and use the money to buy the brownstone.

Selina travels between her parents' extreme perspectives, trying to find her own life in this new land. She rejects the conformity she sees her community experience as they delve into a world of materialism, but she also fails to fully embrace her Barbadian heritage, as she never lived there. In the

end, the daughter symbolically accepts and rejects her parents' viewpoints by tossing a silver bracelet into the air; by ridding herself of this Caribbean ornament while at the same time keeping another bangle in her possession, Selina opens a space to look both forward and backward to define herself in America.

Scholars understand this novel as one of balancing extremes. Silla represents American materialism in her quest for financial savings and property ownership. The close-knit Caribbean immigrant community teaches these values, especially through the influential Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen. Their unwavering concentration on material acquisition dictates the proper way for immigrants to integrate into American life; when Deighton fails to adopt values of property ownership, he is denigrated by the community. With Silla symbolically representing American individualism, and Deighton embodying heritage and community, Selina must balance the two in order to find wholeness for herself. Her journey illustrates the downfalls of both living in the past and conforming to expectations of materialism. Many critics praise Marshall's story for its unwillingness to side with either past or future, Caribbean or American, communalism or individualism, and its insistence that hope is located in the space of an immigrant daughter struggling to find a new, balanced way of life.

Marshall's life echoes many of the struggles in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. As portrayed in the novel with Silla and her female community, Marshall traces the influence of her mother's friends talking in the kitchen with her own growth as an artist. In both Selina's and Marshall's lives, we see that the integration of Caribbean heritage and American opportunity can produce artful and honest, and thus **healing**, expression.

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Laura Baker Shearer

## BURROUGHS, MARGARET TAYLOR GOSS (1917– )

Artist, activist, educator, museum curator, writer, and poet Margaret T. G. Burroughs was born on November 17, 1917, in the all-black town of St. Rose, Louisiana. She is the youngest of three daughters born to Christopher and Octavia Taylor. Her father was an agriculturalist, and her mother worked as a **domestic** in the homes of whites. Not only was her mother a maid to white families in the next county, but she was also teacher to the black children in St. Rose. Desiring a better life for their family and fearing the violently aggressive actions of the Ku Klux Klan, Christopher and Octavia moved their family to Chicago, Illinois.

From her experience as a child in the Chicago Public School System, Burroughs became acutely aware that the achievements of blacks were ignored in the classroom and erased in textbooks. In her 2003 **autobiography** *Life with Margaret*, Burroughs reasons that although she did moderately well academically, her grades and self-esteem suffered because nothing in the classroom or in books resembled “her people.” At Englewood High School, the interlocking issues of **race**, **class**, and especially gender complicated Margaret’s academic and personal journey. She dozed off in class until the teacher mentioned something specifically about black people and was only fully alert when the accomplishments or failures of black women were discussed. This attempt at black erasure fueled Burroughs’s artwork, and her **poetry** and paintings address social issues, particularly the concerns of black women.

Burroughs firmly believed that the arts were one way of educating and highlighting the achievements of black men and women. At seventeen, she began a long and enduring close friendship with famed actor/singer Paul Robeson, and it was through this friendship that Burroughs’s activism and resistance were further cultivated. She decided to work within the system and became a teacher after graduating from Chicago Teacher’s College. Later, she earned a B.A. in art education and an M.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago. As a teacher, Burroughs was often confronted and castigated by the administration and peers for her progressive ideas concerning education and her open defiance of rules she deemed unfair. Her refusal to be defined by societal constraints and expectations led to one of her most radical decisions—embracing her natural **beauty** as a black woman. Before the Black Power movement of the 1970s, she decided to throw away her straightening comb and curling irons. She wore her hair in its natural “kinky” state, much to the dismay of the school administration and her students.

In her personal life, Burroughs defied cultural convention and proposed to her first husband, Bernard Goss. The couple had one daughter, Gayle, and



divorced shortly after her birth. Years later she married “the love of her life,” Charles Gordon Burroughs. In 1961, the couple founded the Ebony Museum of Negro History—now known as the DuSable Museum. The DuSable Museum boasts an extensive collection of African and African American artifacts and is the first of its kind.

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*Karen Arnett Chachere*

## BURTON, ANNIE LOUISE (1858?–?)

Annie Louise Burton was born in Alabama in the 1850s; her mother was a household slave, and her father was the white owner of a nearby plantation. Her mother escaped **slavery** after being whipped by her owners, and she returned to retrieve her children only after the end of the Civil War. After her mother’s death, Burton cared for her youngest siblings while earning money in **domestic work**. She eventually made her way to New England, where she worked in a variety of jobs, but she returned to the **South** to take over care of her young nephew after the **death** of her sister. Working once again in New England in 1888, she met and married Samuel H. Burton.

The greatest resource regarding Burton’s life is her sole literary work, the **autobiography** *Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days*. Begun while Burton was enrolled in night school and published in 1909, the autobiography is structured unconventionally; it begins with Burton’s early **memories** of plantation life during the Civil War, chronicles her experiences as an adult in the years following the war, and then returns to her experiences as a child immediately following Emancipation. In addition to including personal reminiscences, the autobiography also contains an essay Burton wrote about Abraham Lincoln, another essay titled “The Race Question in America” by the progressive Christian minister P. Thomas Stanford, and sections containing Burton’s

favorite poems and hymns. This unusual, pieced-together structure of the narrative has the effect of a collage or a quilt, in contrast to the more common linear structure feminist critics have noted in autobiographies of American males.

*Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days* has been criticized for its idealization of slavery. While Burton does begin her autobiography by describing her youth as "happy" and "care-free," the work is not composed only of happy reminiscences of childhood; it also addresses the violent, exploitative, and individually damaging effects of slavery. Early in the narrative, for example, she notes the whipping of slaves, including herself, and she further emphasizes institutionalized **violence** against blacks when she explains how a slave from a nearby plantation was hanged for a murder he did not commit. Burton recognizes the destructive power of slavery on the slave **family**, acknowledging how regularly families are torn apart when slaves are sold. Furthermore, she obliquely addresses white male sexual exploitation of enslaved women and the consequences of that exploitation when she discusses her own father's refusal to acknowledge her.

Despite the antebellum focus of the autobiography's title, the narrative is largely concerned with the subject of work during and after Reconstruction, especially Burton's own succession of jobs as a domestic worker, a restaurateur, and a lodging-house keeper. Burton's writing is especially important for her detailed catalog of jobs available to black women in the late nineteenth century, her complex and highly personal evaluation of the institution of slavery, and her unconventional approach to autobiographical composition.

*See also* Slave Narrative

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*Linda Joyce Brown*

### BUSH-BANKS, OLIVIA WARD (1869–1944)

Olivia Ward Bush-Banks was a writer, teacher, proponent of the arts, and advocate for minority concerns. She was born in 1869 in Sag Harbor, New York, to parents of African American and Montauk Indian descent. Throughout her life, she remained an ardent supporter of her dual ethnic

heritage, championing causes that sought to further the artistic and cultural **identity** of both African Americans and Native Americans. For many years, Bush-Banks acted as Montauk tribal historian, zealously trying to preserve the tribe's Native Indian identity that was being threatened by a governmental legal decision that sought to declare the tribe extinct. And during the first half of the twentieth century, Bush-Banks stood as a vigorous proponent of the New Negro movement and the avant-garde in the arts.

Bush-Banks, one of three children born to Abraham and Elizabeth Ward, was raised by her aunt after her mother's death before Bush-Banks reached her first birthday. Bush-Banks's formal education ended in secondary school in Providence, Rhode Island; however, it was in high school that she first formed an interest in the arts, particularly in behavioral acting at the Dodge School of Dramatics. Bush-Banks later taught this **drama** technique in schools and studios in Chicago and New York.

Bush-Banks married twice, although neither marriage was long-lived. With her first husband, Frank Bush, came two children: Rosa Olivia and Marie. She later married Anthony Banks.

As a single parent with limited means, Bush-Banks traveled between Providence and Boston for work at a variety of endeavors. She contributed to the *Colored American Magazine* between 1900 and 1904. Later she acted as the literary editor of Boston's *Citizen* journal. In Boston in 1914 she became the assistant drama director for the Robert Gould Shaw Community House. She was also an activist in the Federation of Women's Club.

Between the late 1920s and the early 1940s, Bush-Banks lived in Chicago and in New York, where she was established the Bush-Banks School of Expression to teach drama and public speaking. In Chicago, she taught acting in the city's public school system and was also involved with Chicago's Lincoln Center. From 1936 to 1939 in New York she wrote an arts column for the *Westchester Record-Courier* and worked under the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Community Drama Unit, where she taught drama at the Abyssinia Community Center. She encouraged other artists like **Langston Hughes** and Richmond Barthé through her zeal for artistic excellence, organizing dramatic presentations, readings, and musical recitals.

Little of Bush-Banks's writing was published during her lifetime. Her first volume, *Original Poems* (1899), follows conventional literary styles of the turn of the century. *Driftwood* (1913), a more substantial and inventive work, includes twenty-five poems and two prose works. Her **poetry** received praise from **Paul Laurence Dunbar**, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and other artists. As a minor dramatist, Bush-Banks produced such ethnically conscious plays as *Indian Trails; or, Trail of the Montauk* (1920), performed at Booker T. Washington High School in Norfolk, Virginia. Other unpublished plays include several religious dramatic pieces performed at churches. Much of Bush-Banks's unpublished work has been assembled by Bernice F. Guillaume, the author's great-granddaughter, in *The Collected Works of Olivia Ward Bush-Banks* (1991).

Bush-Banks is recognized not only for her poetry, drama, and essays but also for her activist consciousness centered on her ethnic heritage and other

minority voices in the arts. Her writing, transformed in style and subject from the more polite neoclassicism to the rough edge of realism, represents the literary and cultural changes in the United States between the late nineteenth century and World War II. Along with Langston Hughes, **Claude McKay**, and other artists of the **Harlem Renaissance**, Bush-Banks is remembered as a protest poet who affirmed both the past and the future.

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*Michael D. Sollars*

## BUTLER, OCTAVIA (1947–2006)

Octavia Butler, America's only nationally recognized female African American science **fiction** novelist, was a self-proclaimed feminist who liked to cast strong black women as protagonists of her imaginative stories. She grew up in an era when science fiction seldom included African American characters and seldom cast women in lead roles. Butler has helped to correct both omissions.

Butler was born and raised in Pasadena, California. Her father died when she was quite young; she was reared by her mother (who instilled in her daughter a **love** of reading) in a strict Baptist environment. Shy, bookish, and self-conscious about her height, Butler felt like an outsider during her school years; one result is her special sympathy for characters who do not quite fit in—a type she often depicts in her fiction. By the time she was ten, Butler was writing stories, inspired, she liked to say, by *Devil Girl from Mars* (1954), a movie so bad she knew she could do better.

Butler attended Pasadena City College and California State University at Los Angeles and took writing classes at the University of California at Los Angeles at night. For several years, she worked a variety of temp jobs in order to have time to write fiction. (Her depiction in *Kindred* of Dana's struggles to make ends meet while she writes and sends off manuscripts draws on her

own experiences.) Eventually Butler began to meet supportive mentors, first at the Writers Guild of America and then at the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop, which she attended in 1970. She especially credited Sid Stebel, Harlan Ellison, and Theodore Sturgeon (she took classes from the latter two) with teaching her the nuts and bolts of preparing a manuscript for publication and for encouraging her to keep writing.

Butler's first manuscripts to sell were two short stories she worked on at the Clarion Workshop. It was not until 1976, however, that she sold her first novel, *Patternmaster*. Over the following years, she published the other volumes that, with *Patternmaster*, make up her **Patternist series**: *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978), *Wild Seed* (1980), and the more loosely related *Clay's Ark* (1984). These books describe the rise of a society of telepaths and explore the consequences of possessing extreme power. In the midst of writing this series, Butler published her sole stand-alone novel *Kindred* (1979), about a young African American woman from the 1970s who is pulled into the early 1800s, where she must learn to survive **slavery**. In this work Butler explores the psychology of slavery and what it takes to resist becoming mentally enslaved when your **body** belongs to another.

Critics by now recognized that Butler's work was adding a new dimension to the science fiction genre. Although many of her motifs are familiar—apocalyptic settings, time travel, first contacts—she gives original twists to her stories, often by casting a black woman as her protagonist. The need for ethnic tolerance is one of Butler's recurring themes, as is her warning against reliance on patriarchal social structures to solve problems. In the mid-1980s Butler's talent was recognized when she was awarded back-to-back Hugo Awards, in 1984 for her story "Speech Sounds" and in 1985 for her novella "Bloodchild," which also won Nebula and Locus Awards. Both of these works are included in her collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (1995).

In the late 1980s, Butler wrote her **Xenogenesis trilogy** (*Dawn*, 1987; *Adulthood Rites*, 1988; *Imago*, 1989), a postapocalyptic/alien encounter saga that examines resistance to adaptation and to cultural tolerance. In 1989 this trilogy came out under a single cover in a work titled *Lilith's Brood*.

In the mid-1990s Butler published the first novel of a new series, *Parable of the Sower* (1993), followed a few years later by *Parable of the Talents* (1998). These books are the story of Lauren Olamina's response to an apocalyptic United States. Lauren brings together an ethnically diverse group of victims; together they strive to build a social order that will ensure not just their personal survival but also the survival of the human race. Lauren also creates a new religion, Earthseed, to provide others with the vision needed to carry out her bold plan. More books in the **Parable series** are planned for future publication. *Parable of the Sower* was a Nebula Award finalist; *Parable of the Talents* was a Nebula winner.

In 1995, Butler won her most prestigious honor—a so-called genius grant of \$250,000 from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. These grants are awarded to creative thinkers who have broken new ground in their

fields, as a way to encourage their continued productivity. Butler's contributions to **literature** include her efforts to make science fiction a site that includes strong female protagonists and African American characters in lead roles, an important contribution to a genre that historically offered only token representation to blacks and women. Butler is credited with breaking through both color and gender barriers in this genre of popular fiction.

Butler's fiction is also significant for the themes she explores. Her novels often look at issues particularly relevant to African American social **history**, such as the consequences of prejudice or the effects of enslavement, but they rarely explicitly focus on the black experience. Rather, they show how **race** issues fit into a larger picture of species survival. Butler reminds readers that racial prejudice can have many guises, that extreme power tempts the empowered to enslave others, and that recent attempts to ensure racial equality are extremely vulnerable to reversal. Until we find better solutions to our social problems, her works suggest, the survival of our species is at risk.

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Grace McEntee

### **BY THE LIGHT OF MY FATHER'S SMILE**

*By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), Alice Walker's first novel after a six-year break, tells the story of two sisters, Susannah and Magdalena, who grew up in Mexico. Their parents go to Mexico to study a mixed African American and Indian tribe called the Mundo under the pretext of being missionaries spreading **Christianity**. They could not secure the funding as anthropologists. The father begins to absorb the Christian teachings and punishes Magdalena for her sexual relationship with a Mexican boy, Manuelito. Using the belt Manuelito gave Magdalena, the father beats Magdalena behind the locked bedroom door while Susannah watches through the keyhole. This action forces his daughters and wife to deny him the very affection he needs to sustain himself to study the Mundo. Though the wife eventually forgives him, the daughters, particularly Magdalena, cannot.

Like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *The Temple of My Familiar*, this novel covers many decades to fully develop and tell the story. Both Magdalena's adolescent lover Manuelito and her father die and must complete two tasks, according to the Mundo traditions, before they can rest: guide someone back to the path that is lost and host a ceremony to reconcile with eternity. The father must make peace with his daughters, as Manuelito must do with a Vietnamese woman. Susannah has become a novelist and freely explores her **sexuality** with a succession of lovers. Magdalena has become an academic who uses food to obese proportions as a balm for her pains. Magdalena and Manuelito briefly encounter to rekindle their desire; this is quickly followed with his **death** by bus and hers by food. The novel ends with the death of Susannah observed by the spirit herself and the spirit of Magdalena. They witness at the funeral the burning of Susannah's **body** and all her literary works.

Similar to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the novel allows the dead to speak and pay tribute to the living. In this novel, Walker playfully uses names of characters to symbolize their significance in the tale. Like Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the plot begins with a childhood trauma that connects and separates two sisters. Also, readers encounter missionaries or anthropologists who set out to study and convert another culture and fail. Most blatant is the same-sex relationship between Susannah and her lover, Pauline, which represents the closeness and distance between sisters or women that develops due to a negative patriarchal occurrence. Walker describes this novel as a celebration of sexuality.

See also Womanism

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*Laura Madeline Wiseman*







### CAINES, JEANNETTE (1938– )

Jeannette Franklin Caines was born and raised in Harlem, New York City. She checked out *Call Me Charley* (1945) by pioneer black children's author Jesse Jackson when she was in the fourth grade and became an avid reader. As an adult, she worked in the children's department of Harper and Row, publishers, for twenty-five years. During her life in New York City, she belonged to many professional organizations including the Council of 100 Black Women as well as the Council on Adoptable Children, and she served on the board of directors of the Salvation Army. She moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, in the late 1980s, where she opened a short-lived bookstore and where she still resides. In 2004, she was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Virginia Center for the Book. Caines wanted to write for children to portray black families with warm and loving interactions among the generations, as they both enjoy everyday life and sometimes face difficult situations.

Caines's picture book *Abby* (1973), illustrated by Steven Kellogg, was one of the first books to deal with adoption for young children. Kevin, older brother to Abby, who is adopted, initially feels too busy to read the baby book Abby requests about her arrival in the **family** but then realizes she needs reassurance to feel she has a permanent place in her loving family, and he even decides he wants to take her to school for show-and-tell. Kevin is a sympathetic male character, and this engaging book remains on many school and public library reading lists. Her next book, *Daddy* (1977), was an early picture book portraying the warm,

steady relationship a little girl has with her father, who is divorced from her mother. Daddy is shown to be reliable and fun, and although he has another woman in his life, the importance of his relationship with his daughter is clear.

*Just Us Women* (1982), illustrated by Pat Cummings, is a joyous paean to the fun and **freedom** of a road trip a little girl takes with her aunt. In this perennially popular story, they confidently plan their trip to North Carolina, a repeat of last year's visit, and tell about the fun they will have stopping wherever they please to shop at flea markets, walk in the rain, buy peaches from a roadside stand, or even have breakfast at night. Pictures show an envious man and boy watching their preparations, and a family group of a man and several women shaking their fingers and frowning while the caption says nobody will be there to admonish them about being in a hurry or not stopping another time. Their great affection for one another is clear from the ebullient pictures and short, rhythmic text. Another popular Caines book is *I Need a Lunch Box* (1988) in which a younger boy, whose sister is starting school, wants a lunchbox like hers. Told he does not need one yet, he is sad, but his insightful father understands his longing and gives him one.

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Susan L. Golden

### CAMPBELL, BEBE MOORE (1950– )

The majority of Bebe Moore Campbell's works focus on African American women who are struggling to reach self-fulfillment in their careers while wrestling with relationships with **family** and **community** members. These

women wage personal battles against racial injustices as well as certain atrocities that reside in our collective conscience: **slavery**, the Jim Crow laws, the senseless killing of Emmett Till, and the Los Angeles riots of the early 1990s that followed the **death** of Rodney King. Wounds of the past both near and far inform Campbell's subjects, and her female protagonists must encounter, on their own terms, hardship—historical, social, communal, and personal. With its attendant histories, the past has a way of creeping into Campbell's significant literary achievement; making sense of an archaic world is as much a part of Campbell's **fiction** as it is her life.

Born in 1950 in the racially segregated **South** of Pasquotank, North Carolina, Campbell is the only child of Doris and George Moore. Campbell's mother, a high achiever, earned two master's degrees (one in sociology and the other in social work), while her father, a hardworking man who labored as a county farm agent until he suffered a car accident that left him a paraplegic when Campbell was just ten months old, lacked his wife's educational achievements but never his daughter's adoration or respect. The two divorced early on, and their parting left Campbell spending the school year with her mother in Philadelphia and summers and vacations with her father. Summers and holidays found her witnessing the racial segregation of the South, and the fall and winter left her bearing testimony to the equally damaging but less overt racism of the North. A careful observer of human relationships, Campbell brings her assessments of racial tensions and the further injustice of bias based on gender and notions of masculinity and femininity to bear on her written works. Much like her mother, Campbell is a woman bent on turning these observations into an opportunity for intervention. Whereas her mother, a social worker in Philadelphia's Department of Welfare, intervened in the social infrastructure of her day, as a writer Campbell engages injustice, particularly the bind that strong, successful African American women experience in their inter- and intrapersonal relationships, in literary form.

Campbell's ambitions took root at an early age. While living with her mother in Philadelphia, in 1964 she enrolled in the Philadelphia High School for Girls, an academy for aspiring women. After graduation in 1968, Campbell attended the University of Pittsburgh and completed a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Her formal teaching career began in 1972 and lasted five years, ending when she enrolled in a writing class presided over by well-recognized African American writer **Toni Cade Bambara**. This tutorial altered Campbell dramatically and led to a writing career that began in 1976. Ten years after she began submitting and seeing her works to print in newspapers and magazines such as *Essence*, the *Washington Post*, and *Black Enterprise*, her first book, *Successful Women, Angry Men: Backlash in the Two-Career Marriage* (1986), was published. In this work of nonfiction, Campbell interviews 100 couples to explore the difficulties that men and women have establishing themselves in the workforce while seeking an egalitarian relationship within the **home**.

In 1977, when Campbell was living in Washington, D.C., and struggling to establish herself as a writer, her beloved father suffered another car accident,

this time fatal. The loss eventually led Campbell to write a memoir, *Sweet Summer: Growing Up with and without My Dad* (1990). Campbell's memoir is as much a heartfelt portrait to the father who had a pronounced influence on her life as a young child of divorce as it is a testimony to the importance of black men in the lives of their daughters. Within this text, as well as her first one and the subsequent fiction that followed, Campbell engages themes that characterize her as an important writer and chronicler not just of African American women's experiences but of women's collective experiences: the search for acceptance and **love** in an egalitarian relationship, the difficulty in defining oneself within a socioeconomic and geographic space that devalues certain female intellects while privileging others, the quest for voice, and the need to establish oneself in a historical and political climate that has been routinely unkind to women, particularly African American women.

Despite the loss of her father, in her own life Campbell has found much to celebrate. After an early marriage that resulted in divorce but whose union produced a daughter, Maia, she later married Ellis Gordon, Jr., a banker and father of a son, and moved to Los Angeles, where they currently reside. Since the early 1990s she has written four works of fiction and has been praised for her adept ability to create complicated female protagonists that must first heal themselves as members of a disenfranchised **class** before they can reach any resolution in their interpersonal, communal, and corporate lives.

While **history** plays a significant role in Campbell's fiction, she is not a historical writer; history is merely the backdrop. As a young observer, she knew the story of Emmett Till, a teenager murdered in 1955 by two whites for supposedly making a lewd remark to a white woman. (The two whites were later acquitted, despite the fact that one openly boasted about the slaying.) This murder informs her first work of fiction, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1992), which reached the *New York Times* bestseller list within two weeks. Similarly, the acquittal of two police officers after the brutal beating of Rodney King informs the work that follows, *Brothers and Sisters* (1994). In *Singing in the Comeback Choir* (1998) Campbell's focus again turns to racial tension and, now, urban gentrification. Personal accomplishment and achievement, as it is in all Campbell's fiction, is played against the fear that another's success, particularly an African American woman's success, will be met with fear and loathing, perhaps even **violence**. In her latest work, *What You Owe Me* (2001), this fear is located in the friendship between two women, one African American and the other a Jewish immigrant, who do not so much betray one another as they are betrayed by the racism and xenophobia that surround them in post-World War II California.

In tackling themes such as history's maltreatment of women, both as bodies and intellects, the inheritance of a racist past as it informs contemporary relationships, men's trespasses against women and their retaliation in kind, and the importance of community to the **healing** process, Campbell has received the following accolades: A National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Literature Award, the 1994 NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Image Award, a National

Endowment for the Arts Literature Grant, and the University of Pittsburgh's Distinguished Black Alumna Award. As of yet there are no full-length texts devoted to the life and literary accomplishments of Bebe Moore Campbell. Her work now awaits the scholarly inquiry that it deservedly merits.

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*Jennifer Driscoll*

### CANCER JOURNALS, THE

An account of the author's own battle with breast disease, *The Cancer Journals* (1980) by **Audre Lorde** was named Gay Book of the Year by the American Library Association. In 1997, a new edition appeared with a section of tributes by **Jewelle Gomez**, **Ann Allen Shockley**, and several other feminists. Lorde had presented the first chapter, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," as part of the Lesbian and Literature panel for the Modern Language Association's 1977 conference in Chicago, two months after her biopsy for a benign breast tumor. The speech subsequently appeared in the feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom*, along with a second chapter, "Breast Cancer: A Black Lesbian Feminist Experience." To form *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde added an introduction and a third chapter, "Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis," which opens with her discovery of a malignant lump in her right breast during a monthly self-examination on Labor Day of 1978. In a prefatory note, Lorde thanks "all the women who shared their strength" during the difficult period described in the slim volume. She cites several friends by

name, among them her partner Frances Clayton and the feminist writers **Michelle Cliff** and Adrienne Rich.

The 1980 Spinsters Ink edition of *The Cancer Journals* includes a book-cover tribute from **Alice Walker**, who says every woman should read Lorde's "words of **love** and wisdom and courage." Lorde herself emphasizes the power of the written word in effecting change. "As women we were raised to fear," she states; and she admits that the task of writing *The Cancer Journals* forced her to relive the terror surrounding her mastectomy. For months, she was unable to write **poetry**; diary entries about her two biopsies, her cancer operation, and her recovery formed a nucleus for *The Cancer Journals*. The book has become a familiar text in the field of disability studies, fulfilling Lorde's hope that her record of personal struggle would be useful to other women.

Lorde compares the "pain of separation" from her breast to the "pain of separating from my mother," but she also emphasizes the possibilities for "**self-healing**" in the aftermath of serious illness. Appropriately, *The Cancer Journals* evokes the image of the Amazon, a heroic female figure who appears throughout Lorde's works. Criticizing the social pressures that force many cancer patients to adopt the "mask of prosthesis" or to undergo reconstructive surgery, Lorde envisions a troop of single-breasted women storming Congress to protest carcinogenic cattle feed and other health threats. She similarly targets dangerous products of modern culture in "The American Cancer Society or There Is More Than One Way to Skin a Coon," a satiric poem from her 1974 book *New York Head Shop and Museum*.

The long title essay in Lorde's 1988 *Burst of Light* collection should be read in conjunction with *The Cancer Journals*. Weaving together diary entries from 1984 through 1987, "Burst of Light" describes the metastasis of her breast cancer into the liver cancer that eventually caused her **death** in 1992. Lorde wrote several of the diary segments in Europe, where she frequently taught, lectured, and underwent homeopathic therapy. Orlanda Women's Press in Berlin published a German translation of *The Cancer Journals*. Interviewed by Orlanda editor Dagmar Schultz, Lorde described breast cancer as a "feminist concern," even for the "twenty-one-year-old feminist who doesn't know it is."

*See also* Autobiography; Black Feminism; Body; Lesbianism; *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

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*Joan Wylie Hall*

### **CARTIER, XAM WILSON (1949– )**

Xam Cartier is an artist, dancer, and writer in whose work issues of **identity**, **family**, creativity, and the personal and social liberation of women are explored. Cartier's distinctive lyrical writing style is characterized by the use of a **jazz** music motif and elements of jazz performance style rendered in prose.

Cartier was born in 1949 in St. Louis, where she was raised as the only child of a postal worker and a guidance counselor. Cartier attended Catholic school and earned a B.A. in English from the University of Missouri at Columbia. She moved to San Francisco in the mid-1970s and worked with a local ABC radio affiliate. Later, she became a producer with an ABC television affiliate. Cartier worked as a legal secretary while writing her first novel, *Be-Bop, Re-Bop* (1987). Subsequently, Cartier became a writer-in-residence at Wayne State University and Oberlin College.

Cartier's two novels both have protagonists who are creative, intelligent, and highly individualistic African American women. Her work presents women who possess and express rich and creative inner worlds. Both narratives are nonlinear and exemplify a spirit of improvisation characteristic of modern jazz. This improvisational characteristic serves to liberate the texts from prescriptive narrative forms. This liberation from form also serves to highlight the personal liberation of Cartier's female characters through jazz.

Cartier's prose style makes use of vernacular speech and rhythmic patterns in language. Cartier employs word-play, sly wit, and puns in her creative use of language. The story lines of her texts are interwoven with interludes of fantasy that also invoke the melodic departures in improvisational jazz.

*Be-Bop, Re-Bop*, Cartier's first novel, has an unnamed woman as its protagonist who is searching for identity and self-fulfillment. The protagonist is alienated from her family of origin as she strives to become self-referencing and to begin to define "family" from within her own worldview. The character uses jazz music and family relationships shaped through the mutual experience of jazz to make sense of her life. *Be-Bop, Re-Bop* explores the social experience of **motherhood** and femaleness in an urban environment and the various difficulties, struggles, and indignities of material poverty that women suffer.



*Muse-Echo Blues* (1991), Cartier's second novel, has as its protagonist a composer/pianist named Kat and her historical, Jazz Age counterpart Kitty. Time and space are traversed throughout the narrative as Kat attempts to overcome composer's block by having consort with jazz musicians of the past such as **Billie Holiday**, Lester Young, and Sarah Vaughn, via her counterpart Kitty. Kitty attempts to resolve personal and relationship issues as both women simultaneously struggle to thrive in their respective environments with the powerful, mediating force of jazz.

Literary critics have compared Cartier's work to that of **Ishmael Reed** because of its postmodern sensibility that also invokes elements of the black aesthetic. Cartier herself has been influenced by **Amiri Baraka** and has noted his *Blues People* (1963) as especially significant. Cartier has also described the **literature** of **Richard Wright** and Chester Himes to have impacted her work.

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*Kimberly Black-Parker*

## CAUCASIA

**Danzy Senna's** debut novel *Caucasia* (1998) centers on Birdie and Cole, daughters of a black father and a white "blue-blooded" mother who are activists in the **civil rights movement** in Boston in the 1970s. The sisters share a bond that is highlighted by their creation of a private language, Elemenno. Elemenno speakers are described as chameleons; the girls' mixed **race** causes them to create fictional identities to more easily navigate their polarized environment. Despite their sisterly bond, however, their race complicates their relationship and ultimately leads to their separation. Birdie appears white like her mother, whereas Cole appears black like her father, and this is the basis for much internal and external conflict.

While the girls are originally home-schooled because of their mother's fear of racism, they are eventually placed in a Black Power school, Nkrumah,

where Cole fits in easily and Birdie encounters racism. Racial prejudices are embraced by the **family**: Birdie's father is distant from her and makes attempts at racial IQ testing on the girls; Cole's mother does not know how to do her hair; their maternal grandmother favors Birdie over Cole; and their father's black girlfriend favors Cole over Birdie. When the parents decide to separate, they split the children according to color: Cole moves to Brazil with her father and his girlfriend, where he hopes to find greater racial equality than in America, and Birdie is left behind with her mother. When Birdie's mother flees with Birdie, the two spend four years on the road, one of which is spent in a women's commune, where her mother has a lesbian affair. They eventually end up in New Hampshire, where Birdie's ambiguous coloring allows her to "pass" for Jewish as Jessie Goldman and where her mother returns to relationships with men.

The novel is narrated by Birdie, and it is her **identity** that propels the story. Birdie is not so much concerned with growing up female in a male-centered society but rather with growing up mixed in what seems to be a divided world of only white or black. When a young white girl is kidnapped, Birdie is made to feel at risk, because she is taught that only white girls are desired, and while she does not see herself as white, others do. Throughout, Birdie resolves that she will be reunited with her sister, and it is their bond that highlights the significance of their shared gender in the development of identity.

Birdie and Cole's names are symbolic. Their father theorizes that American **mulattos** are the canaries of coal mines, sent to gauge how poisonous the environment is. He believes his children are the first generation of canaries to survive. *Caucasia* may be read as Senna's canary, sent into the literary world to see if a book about young girls of mixed race can survive in a white male world. *Caucasia* not only has survived; it has received much critical acclaim.

*See also* Passing

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*Deirdre Fagan*

**CHASE-RIBOUD, BARBARA (1939– )**

In a review of a work on Barbara DeWayne Chase-Riboud's sculpture, Wayne Anderson writes that her artwork opens "eyes to see more in primitive art than its primitiveness—and more primitiveness in today's societies than one is wont to admit" (110). The observation also provides a good insight into her **poetry** and **fiction**.

The sixty-seven-year-old visual and literary award winner adapts the elements of her resume—woman, African American, artist, international traveler, and thinker—to probe the tender underside of contemporary consciousness. Her novels and poems force discussions about **race**, racism, gender, sexism, and other human boundaries. Her descriptive prose and insightful dialogue compel readers to move beyond traditional assumptions in **history** and human relations. Readers are in effect forced to think about the *holes* in what is often portrayed as knowledge or **beauty**.

Chase-Riboud seeks to create the kind of epiphany she experienced during her first visit to Egypt during the early 1970s. After artistic studies in the United States and Europe, she discovered a new aesthetic, that many of the notions about the universality of Western concepts of art and beauty excluded a grasp of African and other non-European cultures. The author's novels often juxtapose the ideas and actions of people of European ancestry with those of African, especially women. An average reader might wonder whose culture is more primitive.

Chase-Riboud was born to Charles Edward and Vivian May West in 1939 Philadelphia, when the United States and Europe were about to enter a war that changed the dynamics of political and economic power on the planet. Racial segregation was strong then, even in a major northern metropolis, but after the war in 1945, blacks gained small victories in civil rights. By the mid-1950s, the social climate in Philadelphia improved enough so that Chase-Riboud's early talent for visual art could be nurtured.

In her elementary school years, music, art, and **literature** were already a fascination. She played the piano, sculpted, and wrote poetry before and during high school. After graduation, Chase-Riboud went to Temple University. In 1957, she earned a fine arts degree (B.F.A.) from the university's Tyler Art School.

Her career path seemed set, and as many times since, awards opened Chase-Riboud's paths toward greater achievement and opportunities. She received a John Hay Whitney Fellowship that same year to study art in Rome.

The international exposure took her global. She showed work throughout Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the United States on a regular basis for the next twenty years. Rome also led her to expand her vision and grasp of sculpture. Upon her return to the United States, the experience pushed her toward graduate studies at Yale, where she earned a masters (M.F.A.) in 1960.

Chase-Riboud has said several times in interviews that she is not an expatriate, but after Yale, the sculptor decided to live in Paris. She continues to

live in the city of light and Rome, which reflects a trend found in her writing to blur the human-drawn lines between nations and cultures.

Another motivation for her settling in Paris was her 1960 marriage to Marc Edward Riboud, a photojournalist. The now-divorced couple has two children. In 1981, she married Sergio Tosi.

Chase-Riboud credits the end of her first marriage as the spur for her writing career. *From Memphis to Peking*, published in 1974, was her first book. The poetry collection muses on the author's real-life experiences in Egypt and Communist China. A second collection, *Portrait of a Nude Woman as Cleopatra* (1987), won the 1989 Carl Sandburg Prize for best American poet. The lengthy narrative poem imagines a dialogue between Marc Antony and Cleopatra about a Rembrandt portrait of a nude.

Chase-Riboud does not separate her visual art from the literary. Both are rooted in a passion to make the public rethink issues of race and gender. Her first novel, *Sally Hemings* (1979), is an account of a three-decade romantic relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings. The book drew controversy and praise enough to establish her credentials as a novelist and garnered the Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize for the best book by an American woman in 1979.

A second saga, *Valide: A Novel of the Harem* (1986), is about the 1741 kidnap of a Creole woman by Algerian pirates. They sell her as a slave to Sultan Abdulhamid I, which marks her entry into the harem world in Topkapi palace in Istanbul. The vivid glimpse into the self-indulgent and treacherous sexual and political peccadillos of the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire follows the woman through the harem ranks. When her son becomes sultan, she is made valide, the highest position for a woman in the kingdom.

*Echo of Lions*, a third novel, published in 1989, was inspired by the true nineteenth-century struggle of Joseph Cinque and the African slaves freed aboard the *Amistad*. Chase-Riboud later sued Steven Spielberg, whom she claimed used her book as the basis for his 1997 film. The suit over *Amistad*, as the movie was called, was settled for an undisclosed amount out of court.

A sequel to *Sally Hemings*, based on the real life of Harriet Hemings, one of the children Jefferson is thought to have fathered, was titled *The President's Daughter*. The 1995 novel tells how Harriet on her twenty-first birthday, in 1822, leaves Monticello for New York. Her light skin gives her the **freedom** to pass as white. The protagonist becomes an archetypal tragic **mulatta**. She is tortured by the fear her lie might be discovered. At the same time, her psyche is torn by the pain of living between two races. What seems an option for liberation soon becomes a noose that tightens as she journeys to London, Paris, and Florence.

Chase-Riboud's latest novel, *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003), reveals the bizarre tale of Sarah Baartman, a South African woman whom French scientists dissected and displayed as "proof" that Africans were the missing link in the Great Chain of Life. The narrative prods the reader to consider the depth of human cruelty and economic exploitation. In the end, as with most of her works, the reader might wonder where to find civilization.

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**CHESNUTT, CHARLES WADDELL (1858–1932)**

It is due to the determination of two free black women that we owe the existence of Charles Waddell Chesnutt and his writings. In 1856, Chloe Sampson and Ann Chesnutt joined an exodus from Fayetteville, North Carolina, to Cleveland, Ohio, fleeing the increasingly unstable slaveholding **South**. Sampson was attended by her daughter, Ann Maria (c. 1832–1871), whose father is believed to be white slaveholder Henry E. Sampson. In turn, Chesnutt was accompanied by her son, Andrew Jackson Chesnutt (1833–1920), one of seven children conceived with Waddell Cade, a prosperous white tobacco farmer who supported the **family**. The journey made a match, and Ann Maria and Andrew were married on July 27, 1857, in Cleveland.

Ann Maria exemplified the commitment to education and civil rights that would prevail in her family. In the South she had been whipped for violating laws that outlawed the educating of enslaved blacks. Andrew, in turn, exemplified the **work** ethic and ambition his famous son would inherit. Following the Civil War, in which Andrew served as a teamster, the family returned to Fayetteville, where he immediately opened up a grocery, assisted by his father, then becoming a county commissioner and justice of the peace. Not surprisingly, the family participated in the establishment of the Howard School, which Chesnutt would attend.

With the death of Ann Maria in 1871, it was necessary that Chesnutt begin teaching in order to continue his education and assist in supporting his five younger siblings. By 1872 he was teaching in various rural areas of North Carolina and had also seen his first short story in print in a Fayetteville paper. However, while this period marked the end of Chesnutt's formal education, he continued his studies of piano, organ, and foreign languages

independently. His experience and ambition no doubt facilitated his return to Fayetteville in 1877, first as an instructor, then as first assistant vice principal in the State Colored Normal School. The following year he married fellow teacher Susan Perry, daughter of prosperous barber Edward Perry.

By 1881 Chesnutt was the father of two daughters (Ethel, born 1879, and Helen, born 1881) and principal of the Normal school. Yet he remained ambitious, writing in his journal: "I want fame; I want money; I want to raise my children in a different rank of life from that which I spring from." Studying accounting on the side, in 1883 he resigned his position to become a financial columnist for the *New York Mail and Express* and employee of the famed Dow, Jones and Company. While his New York residence was short-lived, it facilitated his return to Cleveland as an employee of the Nickel Plate Railroad Company. In 1884 his family and new son, Edwin, born the year before, joined him there.

Interestingly Chesnutt's desire for financial security and advancement is matched in this era by his development and success as a writer. Simultaneously studying law and writing for *Family Fiction Magazine*, in 1887 Chesnutt passed the state bar exam, secured a job in the offices of Henderson, Kline, and Tolles, and saw his dialect short story, "The Goophered Grapevine," published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The following year, he opened his own legal practice and again graced the magazine's pages—the first African American to do so—with "Po' Sandy." For Chesnutt, literary success and financial success were not inseparable: Both were facilitated by his residence in the North, and both enabled him to challenge racism. However, in later years he would be critiqued by other authors for what they saw as his bourgeois lifestyle, ignoring the ways in which he had struggled to achieve such security for himself and his family.

As a writer of "local color realism" in dialect form, Chesnutt proved popular with editors and readers of the *Atlantic Monthly*, securing his literary reputation. However, editors remained unaware of Chesnutt's **race** until 1891, when he informed them, and then chose to keep the fact from their readers. By this time Houghton Mifflin had already approached Chesnutt about a short story collection, and many of his *Atlantic Monthly* publications of the 1890s, a period of significant literary productivity for Chesnutt, were published in 1899 as *The Conjure Woman*. This was followed the same year by *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* and, in 1900, by the novel *The House behind the Cedars*, enabling Chesnutt to become a full-time writer in time for the birth of his fourth child, Dorothy, in 1901.

*The House behind the Cedars* followed the lead of two earlier, unpublished Chesnutt manuscripts, *Mandy Oxendine* and *Rena Walden* (which Chesnutt revised into his first novel). As the titles suggest, at the center of these tales are strong female characters. Hindered by the racial designations that determine their economic and educational opportunities, heroines in both attempt to "pass" as white in order to advance themselves. While *Mandy Oxendine* is uneven in quality, it is notable for the ways in which it complicates the trope of the tragic **mulatta**, presenting a resilient and pragmatic heroine who defies sentimental **stereotypes**. This exploration of the nuanced negotiations of

color, caste, and racism, and the ways in which they determine character in conventionally unanticipated ways, is the most consistent of Chesnutt's thematic concerns.

Unfortunately, many readers did not respond as well to Chesnutt's writings on racial inequality as they had to his earlier dialect stories. When sales figures for *The Marrow of Tradition*, published in 1901 and concerning a North Carolina race riot, were less than Chesnutt expected, he returned to balancing his legal practice and his writing career. Likewise, the editorial revisions demanded to make the novel *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) less controversial were distasteful to Chesnutt. Nonetheless, the reviews of his novels, as well as his presence at Mark Twain's seventieth birthday party in 1905, suggest his acceptance as a talented writer by other American luminaries. No doubt Chesnutt's inability to secure production or publication of his play (*Mrs. Darcy's Children*) and publication of the novels *The Rainbow Chasers*, *Paul Marchand*, and *The Quarry* influenced his decision to concentrate on shorter works and political activism. Notably, Chesnutt led the protest that would result in the famously racist film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) being banned in Ohio.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Chesnutt could claim that he had achieved the desire he articulated in 1881 for fame, money, and success for his children. Chesnutt himself was president of the Cleveland Council of Sociology and a member of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce, the National Arts Club, and the Rowfant Club (a respected literary organization) and had received an honorary degree from Wilberforce University. All four of his children had graduated from university, Edwin from Harvard, and Helen and Ethel from Smith. All followed their father's lead as educators. Ethel and Edwin both taught at Tuskegee, Edwin then completing a degree in dentistry. Helen and Dorothy both taught in the Cleveland public school system. Helen, who would write a biography of her father, also taught at Western Reserve University, followed by a master's from Columbia, while Dorothy pursued graduate work at the University of Chicago. That all of his daughters had such opportunities speaks to the commitment to female education in Chesnutt's family, evident both in the naming of the Ann Chesnutt Middle School in Fayetteville after his sister, as well as the careers of numerous other female family members in the field.

While Chesnutt's publications were scant through the 1910s and 1920s, his reputation was on the rise. In 1924 famed African American **film** director Oscar Micheaux adapted *The House behind the Cedars*, while in 1927 *The Conjure Woman* was reissued. In 1928, the same year he testified before the U.S. Senate about matters of integration, he was recognized with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Spingarn Medal for his "pioneer work as a literary artist depicting the life and struggle of Americans of Negro descent, and for his long and useful career as scholar, worker, and freeman of one of America's greatest cities" (*Postscript* 176). This solidified Chesnutt's productive relationship with the organization and its magazine, the *Crisis*. In 1932, the same year Micheaux released a second

adaptation of Chesnutt's work, titled *Veiled Aristocrats*, the author died at his home in Cleveland. Despite the NAACP's assessment of his contributions, only in the late twentieth century have readers been finally able to appreciate the true scope of Chesnutt's oeuvre and complexity of his thinking. This is a result of the publication of his novels previously deemed unprintable, due to their political content, as well as his journals and letters. Other unpublished manuscripts deposited in the Chesnutt Collection, Fisk University Library Special Collections, await publication.

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*Jennifer Harris*



## CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Women authors and illustrators and representation of the lives and experiences of girls and women have always been a large and important, if not equal, part of African American **literature** for young people. Since the 1960s, children's literature has been studied and taught as two distinct but overlapping categories: children's literature as meant for pre- and elementary school children, and young adult literature designed for readers approximately ten through eighteen years of age. However, preadolescents often read young adult titles, and people of all ages enjoy illustrated texts and fairy or folk tales. Just as there are no fixed boundaries regarding the age of the audience, young readers are multiracial and multicultural. Critics and educators have come to define African American children's and young adult literature as a body of **work** produced by African American authors and illustrators that appeals to a wide variety of readers. A feminist overview of this body of work cannot make such clear-cut distinctions based on gender; African American men as well as women have offered accurate and empowering representations of girls and women in the books they write for children and young adults, in which females of all ages survive, even under the most oppressive and discriminatory conditions, and emerge as heroines who conquer conflicts and emerge triumphant. However, just as African Americans are still underrepresented in the wider field of children's literature, African American women are still a minority in children's publishing, and school curricula rarely include their work. This entry will therefore focus on women's contributions, even as it discusses how girls and women are represented in African American children's and young adult literature by women and men.

The genre of children's literature emerged as a distinct and independent form only in the late eighteenth century, although young people from all cultures have always appropriated oral and written narrative for their entertainment. Literature for young people grew as a broad generic category in England and the United States through the nineteenth century and encompasses a wide range of work, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories, **poetry**, novels and short **fiction**, and the lullabies, fairy tales, fables, folk songs, and folk narratives from oral tradition. African American children's and young adult literature began to be written in the late 1880s. Because literature for children and young adults has typically been seen as a "lesser" genre of literary or artistic endeavor, or simply as part of the **domestic** sphere, it has also been seen as an appropriate genre for women to write in. Many classic books for young people were written by women, such as Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and the first African American to contribute to the genre was a woman; **Amelia E. Johnson** printed a number of religious tracts for children through the 1880s, including an eight-page magazine, *The Joy*. She later published novels such as *Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way* (1890), which were overtly religious and didactic and featured male and female characters who did not transgress gender roles and restrictions and were often white. Also published in the early era of African American

children's literature, poet **Paul Laurence Dunbar's** *Little Brown Baby* (1895) is a germinal text in the genre. A collection of dialect poems that celebrate African American folk culture, *Little Brown Baby* was meant to delight girls and boys even as it shows African American people and culture in a positive light. Other early pieces have only recently been recovered, among them Leila A. Pendleton's *An Alphabet for Negro Children* (n.d.).

After the turn of the century the development of an educated African American middle **class** demanded and could support this growing body of literature for its youth. Recognizing the urgent need for characters black children could respect and emulate, W.E.B. Du Bois, the only black founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), experimented with "Children's Numbers," an annual issue of the NAACP's the *Crisis* (1919–1926), which he edited. These issues were so successful that, in 1920, Du Bois, along with business manager Augustus Granville Dill and literary editor **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, established the *Brownies' Book* (1920–1921). Aimed at children aged six to sixteen, the magazine incorporated a variety of popular forms, such as fiction, folk and fairy tales, poetry, **drama**, biography, and photography and illustrations by African American artists and offered nonreligious, nondidactic entertainment that infused black youth with a sense of self-worth and impressed upon them the importance of education.

Du Bois and Dill pioneered another important form of African American literature for young people, biographies of African Americans for children and young adults, and women were the more prominent writers of these works. Elizabeth Ross Haynes's *Unsung Heroes* (1921) and Julia Henderson's *A Child's Story of Dunbar* (1921) are important early works in this genre. Haynes published twenty-two biographies, and many of them introduced children to African Americans rarely depicted in their school texts, figures that are now well known, such as **Frederick Douglass** and Harriet Tubman. Ellen Tarry (1906– ) also published biographies, among them *Young Jim: The Early Years of James Weldon Johnson* (1967) and *Pierre Toussaint: Apostle of Old New York* (1981) as well as picture books and her **autobiography**, *The Third Door* (1955). Born in Alabama, Tarry moved to New York in 1929 and formed associations with many of the people who figured prominently in the **Harlem Renaissance**, most notably Johnson, **Claude McKay**, **Langston Hughes**, and **Countee Cullen**. These men made significant contributions to African American children's and young adult literature; for example, Hughes's *The Dream Keeper* (1932) is a classic collection of poetry for children, as is *Golden Slippers* (1941), an anthology of poetry by Dunbar, Cullen, Hughes, and Johnson edited by Arna Bontemps. However, their work overshadows that by their female contemporaries, critically and in the classroom, out of all proportion, and Tarry is rarely mentioned in comparison to her male counterparts. Bontemps created an extensive body of work, including biography, fiction, and poetry that helped African American children's literature gain widespread acceptance and offered children positive African American role models. Carter G. Woodson followed Bontemps in publishing biographies of

notable African Americans and later founded the Associated Press, which continues today. A contemporary of Woodson and Bontemps, playwright Shirley Lola Graham Du Bois (1896–1977) receives little critical attention, but her biographies of African Americans for young adults are important contributions to the field, including *There Once Was a Slave: The Heroic Story of Frederick Douglass* (1947), *Booker T. Washington, Educator of Hand, Head, and Heart* (1955), and *The Story of Phillis Wheatley: The Poetess of the American Revolution* (1949).

Through its development, librarians, classroom teachers, and postsecondary educators and administrators have worked to ensure that African American children's and young adult literature flourishes. During her thirty-seven-year career with the New York City Public Library as a children's/young adult librarian, storyteller, and administrator, Augusta Baker (1911–1998) added appropriate books to the Library's collections, encouraged authors and illustrators, and worked with publishers to get this literature produced and distributed. The first black librarian to hold an administrative position in the Library, by 1961 Baker was in charge of children's policies and programs in all eighty-two branches. Widely influential, she worked with schools and **community** groups, was a consultant for the television program *Sesame Street*, and taught courses on storytelling and children's literature. Following Baker, African Americans Glyndon Greer and Mabel McKissack, members of the American Library Association, established the Coretta Scott King Award for African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults in 1969. Also in the late 1960s, the Council on Interracial Books for Children began holding contests in order to identify and support promising young artists. These awards have garnered wide professional and public recognition for many of their winners; for example, the first winner of the Council Award, Kristin Hunter's (**Kristin Hunter Lattany**) *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1969), sold over a million copies.

As it became an established genre through the 1940s into the 1960s, African American children's and young adult literature reflected contemporary social and cultural consciousness. Early texts, such as Jesse Jackson's *Call Me Charley* (1945) and Lorenz Bell Graham's *South Town* (1958), offered an integrationist approach to racial difference and the problems of bigotry. These novels tried to instill in all children a social conscience that afforded awareness and tolerance of racial difference without taking into account social and cultural, and often gendered, difference. Since the late 1960s, African American children's literature is most often "culturally conscious," with its focus on African American perspective and setting. Over the last thirty years, dozens of African American writers have gained wide popularity through a variety of works that present the range of African American experiences. They entertain and educate even as they offer historically accurate portrayals of African American lives, female and male, and a tradition of resistance to racism and discrimination. Today, African American children's and young adult literature addresses the concerns of feminism, including perceptions of gender and **sexuality**, in illustrated texts for young children that offer a visual schemata that will inform **identity** formation and in texts for older readers that provide

rich literary material for exploring the issues and dilemmas of human experience.

Illustrated texts have the ability to offer visually positive gender and cultural role models, and African American children's literature is particularly reliant on the ability of illustrations to depict girls and women as individuals; many women authors and artists have gained prominence in the field. Writer **Eloise Greenfield** recognizes the importance of pictures by stipulating that her work be illustrated by African American artists. Some authors depict the African roots of African American culture and identity even as they show females as empowered individuals, such as Muriel Feelings with her Swahili abcediary and counting book *Jambo Means Hello* (1974) and *Moja Means One* (1971), illustrated by Tom Feelings; Verna Aardema's editions of African fables, such as *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* (1976), illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon; and John Steptoe's African Cinderella story, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (1988). African motifs empower African American girls and women and help tell their stories in Carole Byard's illustrations for **Camille Yarbrough's** *Cornrows* (1979), and Faith Ringgold's African-inspired quilts and tankas (fabric sculptures) are predominant in her *Tar Beach* (1991) and *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993). In this latter book, Ringgold relies on the African American **history** that informs many picture books, as her young protagonist imagines historical figures such as Harriet Tubman and Mary McLeod Bethune coming to dinner with her extended family. Illustrated children's books provide readers of all ages with positive images of African American females and the rich diversity of their history and culture and offer girls a literary experience that can aid in understanding and interpreting life experience.

Similarly, an awareness of literature by African American female authors and with African American girls and women in prominent and empowered roles is vital for both male and female young adults. The portrayal of female roles in adolescent fiction is important because it provides an environment for young adults to see the results of decisions made by characters and to evaluate their ideas and behaviors. How girls and women interact in those fictional situations can shape thinking by reinforcing **stereotypes** or by promoting alternative views. Key issues in young adult literature, issues that are often ignored in books that feature male protagonists, are girls' acceptance of their bodies' changes and growth patterns and themes of relationships with those of the same sex and of the opposite sex and with parents. Because ethnographic settings—religious, cultural, racial—affect the development of identity, the African American adolescent female must be able to find role models and affirmation in young adult literature, while others should be able to understand the uniqueness of her situation. African American young adult fiction has grown into a vast and widely popular body of work since the 1960s, and a good deal of that work offers positive and empowering role models for girls and young women. Two of the most popular and best known writers of young adult fiction are African American women. **Mildred D. Taylor** and **Virginia Hamilton** have written some of the most compelling female protagonists in the genre. Taylor's Logan family series follows the

growth and maturity of Cassie Logan in *Song of the Trees* (1975), *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981), and *The Road to Memphis* (1990). Set in segregated rural Mississippi, these historical novels tell the story of this brave and appealing character from a female and African American perspective. Hamilton offers several unique adolescent black heroines in the stories of Teresa in *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* (1982), Sheema in *A Little Love* (1984), Talley in *A White Romance* (1987), and the interracial Buhlaire Simms in *Plain City* (1993). Other writers deal with themes about and alongside race, such as **Rosa Guy**'s exploration of a lesbian relationship between two black teenagers in *Ruby* (1976), Sharon Bell Mathis's *Listen for the Fig Tree* (1973) about the experience of a blind girl, or **Joyce Carol Thomas**'s short stories representing the African American teenager in the midst of various ethnic groups in *A Gathering of Flowers* (1990). Thomas's earlier works *Marked by Fire* (1982) and *Water Girl* (1986) trace the stories of Abby and Amber, respectively, as they struggle to find themselves as young black women. Guy depicts a different black American tradition with her Caribbean young adult heroine in *My Love, My Love; or, The Peasant Girl* (1985). Others who have dealt with lives of African American females include **Alice Childress**'s *A Short Walk* (1981) and *Rainbow Jordan* (1982); Jacqueline Woodson's examination of interracial friendships and incest in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (1994); and Walter Dean Myers, who presents the story of Didi in *Motown and Didi: A Love Story* (1984), one of his many Harlem novels. African American children's and young adult literature performs essential functions in the growth and development of its female readers, and its benefits can go far past simply making visible the formerly absent African American girl or woman. It can enable them to define themselves as empowered females in terms of their cultural and their national heritage, and its importance to the wider projects of African American feminism cannot be overemphasized.

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Roxanne Harde

### CHILDRESS, ALICE (1916–1994)

Alice Childress was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on October 12, 1916. Her time in this city of such historical and cultural significance to African Americans was limited to less than a decade, however, as her parents' marriage dissolved in 1925. Childress moved at this time with her mother Florence to Harlem, yet another bastion of racial significance. Mother and daughter moved in with Childress's maternal grandmother, Eliza Campbell White. Living in a female-run household during her adolescent years surely helped to mold Childress into the confident playwright, actress, and novelist that she was to become. There was no doubt in Childress's mind, as she grew to adulthood, that a woman could take care of herself financially and emotionally and be successful in any endeavor into which she threw her passions. Indeed, such a way of life surely seemed natural to Childress as she matured.

Childress found not only the natural strength of women in her **home**; she also found a personalized education in the arts as her grandmother made specific efforts to expose the young woman to the cultural and artistic offerings of New York City. Childress's grandmother was also adamant about fostering the spiritual life of her granddaughter, taking her to church services regularly and exposing her to the trials that accompanied the lives of the poorest of the poor. In this way Eliza White weaved into Childress's consciousness the idea that human beings had certain duties to help one another, especially those less fortunate. Even though life was not luxurious at the home in which Childress was growing up, she was raised to realize that there is always someone in greater need than one's self and that that person must indeed be aided. Childress took these lessons of the poor with her and often used themes of the struggling poor in her written works.

Childress's mother and grandmother also encouraged the young woman's voracious appetite for books. Despite all of the intellectual stimulation she had received at home—or perhaps *because* of just that—Childress dropped out of high school before entering her senior year. It was also at this time that both

Childress's mother and grandmother died, leaving Childress to completely take over the orchestration of her own life much sooner than she had anticipated this would happen. Still, the two older women had prepared Alice Childress for independence and for continued intellectual growth. Surely, despite her grief, Childress must have been confident that she could proudly and without hesitation follow in the footsteps of these two important women. Sometime during this point in Childress's life, she married the actor Alvin Childress. It is known with certainty that Childress gave birth to her only child, a daughter named Jean, in 1935. Because of Childress's own efforts to keep such information secret, it is not known with certainty when Alice and Alvin Childress married and consequently divorced, although the divorce occurred fairly early in Jean's life. Childress remarried, to the musician Nathan Woodard, in 1957.

Childress began an acting and theater career before she began her writing career. In 1943 she began acting for the American Negro Theater in Harlem. It was also for this company that she wrote her first play, a one-act piece titled *Florence*, in 1949. Remarkably, this play was written overnight when Childress took up what she saw as a challenge presented by fellow actors—including Sydney Poitier—at the American Negro Theater. The actors had argued that it was impossible to write a good play in one night. What Childress presented to them the next morning was not only a good play but also a springboard to her writing career. *Florence's* central themes of racism, sexism, and economic disadvantage became critical themes to all of the work that was to follow from Childress's pen. In this first play Childress presents the reader/audience with the mother of Florence, an African American woman trying to make it in the acting world. In a conversation with the white Mrs. Carter, whom Florence's mother had perceived would be willing to help Florence's acting career, the mother is accosted with both racism and sexism, which leads her to an almost physically angry moment but also to the realization that she must urge on her daughter's dreams. It is surely no mistake that this first play of Childress's contains both autobiographical elements and feminist elements. Childress's life to this point had been a struggle, but it had also been incredibly buoyed by the unquenchably fiery spirits of her mother and grandmother.

Despite Childress's passion for her work and her moderate success, she still found herself in need of other jobs to assist in supporting both herself and her daughter. She toiled at a variety of menial jobs during this period of her life, including **domestic work**. Much of this work experience became of thematic importance to her future writing, including the 1956 work *Like One of the Family . . . Conversations from a Domestic's Life*, which Childress dedicated to her grandmother. This nondramatic work consists of a series of conversational vignettes told by Mildred, an African American domestic worker employed by a white **family**, to her friend Marge. Each vignette or conversation is light and rhythmic in tone but quite serious in the social themes revealed and dissected. Childress's Mildred is an independent woman, despite her economic station in life. She is a proud woman who insists on being treated as a human being and who insists on cherishing her own basic sense of self-worth.

Childress is careful to fashion Mildred as much of a feminist both philosophically and practically as were in actuality the women who raised Childress herself.

The year before *Like One of the Family* appeared, Childress's play *Trouble in Mind* was produced, although it did not find its way to publication until 1971. *Trouble in Mind* deals head on with racism in the theater. The premise of this play revolves around a white producer putting on a play about lynching that contains stereotypical depictions of its black characters. Although all of the black actors become increasingly incensed with the portrayals, it is the veteran actor Wiletta Mayer who eventually takes the lead in protesting the racist treatment by refusing to continue the farce. Wiletta begins by trying to placate the other actors, urging them to do what they must for the theater. Eventually she experiences a transformation and sees that she must be a leader in the movement against racism. Once again, Childress focuses on a woman character as the strong character and as the one willing to fight for what is just. It takes little imagination to hypothesize as to why it took so long to get the play published.

*Trouble in Mind* is certainly not the only controversial piece that Childress penned. The play *Wedding Band* was written in 1966 and first performed at the University of Michigan. This play did not have a major production, however, until 1972, when it was "introduced" at the New York Shakespeare Festival. The play was not published until 1973. *Wedding Band* delves into the world of interracial **love** and marriage, an issue that was absolutely controversial in the 1960s and continued to be a heated topic throughout much of the rest of the twentieth century. *Wedding Band* introduces the audience/reader to the white Herman and the black Julia, who live together as husband and wife even though they are forbidden to legally marry in their home state of South Carolina. It is Julia who rises up most against the racism tainting her and Herman's relationship, and it is Julia who urges Herman to be morally stronger. It is also Julia who tries to transcend the bonds of racism by caring for the extremely racist mother of Herman when she falls ill. Julia survives Herman, upon whose **death** the reader/audience becomes painfully aware of the legal ramifications for Julia, who is for all practical purposes a widow without any of the sustaining benefits. While the theme of interracial relationships is foremost in this play, Childress's signature feminism also surfaces here as the character Julia represents so many facets of the strong woman fighting against so many social odds.

Another controversial play of Childress's, *Wine in the Wilderness*, was produced in 1969. This play takes Childress's controversies to another level, in that she deals with socioeconomic prejudices among African Americans themselves. Again we have a strong woman character, only this time the strong woman is perhaps an unlikely version of strength. Tomorrow Marie Fields, nicknamed Tommy, is a down-to-earth African American woman of the 1960s who not only respects her roots and her elders but also delights in an almost childlike way in the comfort she feels in her own skin. Unlike the other characters in the play, who are much better educated and who fancy



themselves a better **class** than she, Tommy represents reality. While the other characters set about using Tommy as an actual model to help the artist Bill complete a work representative of the many faces of the **race**, Tommy is indeed the true face of the race, although the others are too caught up in their own importance and in their estimation of themselves as better human beings than is Tommy to notice what truths she represents. To her credit, Tommy, as undereducated as she is, is the only character to truly do credit to the race. While there are elements of sexism as well as classism evident in this play, Childress also cunningly brings out the problems that some women create for each other. The other woman in the play, Cynthia, is highly educated; in fact, she is a social worker, who should know better than to perpetuate social **stereotypes**. Cynthia does finally realize what she is doing by the end of the play, but it is the earth-mother-type Tommy who shows the most grace and strength in the play. One senses that Childress has a deep respect for the “common woman” and that she wishes to uplift that woman to her rightful place in the world.

Childress worked also in the genre of **fiction**, writing three novels for adolescents and one novel for adults. Her first two young adult novels, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1973) and *Rainbow Jordan* (1981), deal with African American teenage boys struggling with what life has dealt them; namely, both Benjie of *A Hero* and Rainbow of the second novel live in single-parent households, with their biological fathers missing. While Childress could have used these novels to further her use of strong women characters, she instead tends to make the mothers in these two novels ineffectual. Both mothers leave their sons turning to others for love, guidance, and support. To her credit, Childress does represent the character to whom Rainbow turns for such things as a foster mother, but it still remains interesting to note the change in feminist approach to her **literature** with these two novels.

Childress uses more ineffective parents in her third and final young adult novel, *Those Other People*, published in 1989. Here, however, the main character, Jonathon, finds difficulties with his parents because of his homosexuality. Clearly, Childress's focus in this novel is quite different from that in her other young adult novels. It may be that her intent in all three novels was to focus specifically on how adults in general fail children, perhaps in the hopes of awakening a sense of accountability in parents, especially in parents of at-risk children. If this was indeed the author's intention, then these novels also naturally have a place in the feminist themes of Childress's work overall.

Childress's only adult novel, published in 1979, is *A Short Walk*. Here the author's feminist themes definitely shine through. Racism and sexism become central struggles for the main character, Cora, who, in her abbreviated life through the first four decades of the twentieth century, lives with all of the racial and gender tensions that these decades so insistently dealt out. Cora is the quintessential twentieth-century black woman, struggling to be her own person and to embrace all that she feels is her due as a human being. Though her mother dies giving birth to Cora, Cora is blessed with a circle of women who help her form her own inner strength throughout her life.

Childress rounded out her adult canon with the 1987 play *Moms: A Praise Play for a Black Comedienne*. Childress wrote this musical in collaboration with her husband, Nathan Woodard, as a tribute to Jackie “Moms” Mabley. In the last years of her life, Childress worked on, but never published, the story of her maternal great-grandmother, Ani Campbell, who was abandoned as an infant and adopted and raised by a white woman. It seems fitting that Childress would have ended her work by drawing once again upon the facts of the lives of the women in her own family, the women who had taught her to be a strong and independent woman herself.

Both Childress’s personal and professional lives were richly satisfying. She traveled extensively, she won awards, she lectured on her craft and her ideals, she had the good fortune to enjoy her family, and she had the talent to leave behind a canon of work that will allow her to live on indefinitely. Childress was intent on illustrating the problems that black women particularly faced in contemporary life; she was equally intent on celebrating the strength of black women in most of her writings.

Childress died of cancer on August 14, 1994, in New York City, four years after her daughter also died of cancer.

*See also* Children’s and Young Adult Literature; Drama

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### CHINABERRY TREE, THE

Jessie Redmon Fauset's third novel, *The Chinaberry Tree: A Novel of American Life*, first published by Stokes in 1931, is set within the middle-class black **community** of Red Brook, a quintessential New Jersey "small town." One-third of the way into the novel, it becomes obvious that the main character, Melissa Paul, is embarking upon a doomed relationship with a local man, the politically and socially conservative Malory Forten. Wrongly, Melissa believes that her parents were married. Actually, she was fathered by Malory's father, who had an affair with Melissa's mother. If consummated, the relationship between Malory and his half sister would be incestuous.

The narrator manipulates the reader, heightening anxiety: Will the couple marry and perpetuate the ultimate sexual taboo? Or will they find out the painful truth beforehand? We wait until the day of their planned elopement to find out. Allusive of ancient Greek tragedy, the novel's tension rises; with self-conscious, theatrical language, the narrator asks: Will *The Chinaberry Tree* end in tragedy or in comedy? Men are held responsible for the cruelties that flourish in Red Brook. Melissa's mother was not an enthusiastic participant in the adulterous relationship with Sylvester Forten; the man simply "wouldn't leave Judy [Melissa's mother] alone." Men are possessive and greedy, keen for sexual "hunting" and for female deference. Melissa's cousin, Laurentine Strange, is shunned because she is illegitimate, the product of a relationship between a black woman and an irresponsible, married white man, Colonel Halloway. Men seek to transform women into commodities; one particularly aggressive youth, Harry Robbins, would "do anything to possess" Melissa. Even the novel's ultimate hero, Asshur Lane, has a hectoring propensity to patronize women, telling Melissa, endlessly, that "you must be good."

In addition to the problems caused by males with wandering eyes, Fauset's characters must also deal with "this nonsense about color." Although the novel conveys disgust at the second-class status of blacks—a system of oppression

symbolized by a bizarre restaurant incident, when Malory and Melissa are not allowed the full choice of desserts—the novel is more preoccupied with **class** differences between African Americans. Some blacks are left behind by those who progress to be doctors and successful dressmakers. One young black woman, Pelasgie Stede, profoundly resents having to serve better-off blacks; her only pleasure is to gossip about the misfortunes of the middle-class blacks, resenting them more than whites. One such misfortune is a public fight between Robbins and Lane over Melissa. A racist newspaper editor sees the fight and plans to report it, to cause embarrassment for the Strange **family**. Only a sort of bribe from a businessman who is courting Laurentine prevents him from running the story. But blacks can be bribed, too. The Stranges' old black gardener, Stede, always asserts, amusingly, that he never asks for food, but he hints that he wants food with evident imploring. Tipping Stede results in “ample and satisfactory rewards”—good service. Red Brook, then, is not a community but a gathering of self-interested individuals. When the network of mutual back scratching breaks down, or when male urges work to fracture marital unions, it is the female characters who suffer.

*See also Comedy: American Style; Plum Bun*

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### **CHOSEN PLACE, THE TIMELESS PEOPLE, THE**

**Paule Marshall**'s second novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), has been lauded as one of the most significant novels by a black women in the twentieth century. Critics such as Hortense Spillers and Barbara Christian find the novel's examination of oppressed peoples in Western culture to be both artful and culturally regenerative. Through the intersection of three main characters from three different ethnic backgrounds, Marshall reveals how facing and integrating an oppressive past into the present offers the only available hope for a restorative future.

Set in the fictional West Indian island of Bourne, *The Chosen Place* uses geography as a major actor on its characters. Bournehills, a district within Bourne, becomes the “chosen place,” and the **community** of Bournehills represents the “timeless people.” Marshall uses the tight-knit native community to represent cultural tradition and heritage lacking to her main characters Merle, Saul, and Harriet. Each character encounters the place and people with their own life struggles, and each meets a different end as a result of their experience.

Merle Kinbona symbolizes the most hopeful character in the story. Black, educated, and well traveled, Merle returns to Bourne facing a failed marriage to an African man and a troubled sense of herself. She meets white Jewish American anthropologist Saul Amron, who wants to help the Bournehills community. Harriet, Saul’s wife, represents the mainstream white culture and thus the larger oppressive society.

As each character interacts with the inhabitants of Bournehills, each is confronted with a living **memory** of **slavery** and oppression embodied in the people and the place itself. Merle ultimately learns the importance of confronting her heritage in order to both heal herself and help her people; the end sees her traveling to Africa to find and repair her fractured **family**. Saul also finds **healing** by facing the oppressive **history** of Jewish people but does not find as clear a resolve as Merle. Critics tie this inconclusiveness to his status as a white, although Jewish, man, thus linking him to the dominant and oppressive culture. Harriet’s status as a white woman without minority affiliation leads her to face her heritage of **violence** and domination. As a result, she finds little solace in the past and ultimately commits suicide.

*The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* is an expansive novel exploring the personal, social, cultural, and historical implications of slavery and domination. Unlike her other well-known novels, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall’s second novel extends beyond one protagonist to three main characters plus a larger island community. She locates regenerative hope in the integration of the past into the present and places female characters squarely in positions of power for healing. She links personal wholeness with social healing and continues to emphasize the role cultural memory plays in individual and social unity.

*See also* Ancestor, Use of

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## CHRISTIANITY

Feminist literary engagements with Christianity explore the vibrant belief systems of African American women and their communities of faith. While black Christian women are often associated with intense religious fervor and self-sacrifice in American popular culture, gynocentric representations seek to uncover the deeper complexities of "church mothers" and "preacher’s wives." An overwhelming number of texts in genres ranging from **spirituals** and **slave narratives** to **protest tradition literature** and speculative **fiction** further accentuate black women’s efforts to assert themselves within male-dominated ecclesiastic institutions and racially prejudiced scriptural interpretations. Indeed, the church functions not only as a transcendent source of hope and liberation but as a site of worldly contestation in literature. Central to African American feminist renderings of faith *and* doubt are the woman’s ability to claim her own religious **identity**, to associate freely with a fellowship of believers, and to testify in her own voice of her personal relationship with God.

Christian beliefs and practices are a vital component of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black women’s writing. **Phillis Wheatley**’s collection *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) reflects the strong influence of her Puritan upbringing as a slave in New England. Replete with Christian allusions and classical imagery, Wheatley’s odes and funeral elegies emphasize Calvinist doctrines of election and grace as preached by Rev. George Whitefield, the English Methodist evangelist of the First Great Awakening (1720–1750).

Several of Wheatley’s poems such as "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and "To the University of Cambridge, in New England" have

been criticized by African American literary scholars for suggesting that the conversion of Africans to Christianity was a beneficial consequence of **slavery**. Yet recent critics have highlighted the subversive nuances in Wheatley's brief writing career. The poet's reference to Exodus in her letter to Samson Occom, for instance, casts slave owners as Egyptians, while aligning African slaves with the chosen people of Israel. Such a framework provides readers with a new perspective on Wheatley's lyrical reflections on "Egyptian gloom" and the "sable race" awaiting earthly deliverance.

The ambiguities of Wheatley's verse call attention to the multifaceted role that Christianity has played in African American **history** and culture. Biblical concepts such as the "curse" of Ham in Genesis 9:25 and Paul's epistle to the Ephesians were narrowly interpreted by white clergy during the colonial and antebellum eras to indicate that people of African descent were intended by God to be enslaved and, therefore, should obey their "earthly masters" (Eph. 6:5). Yet the same Bible that was used by proslavery advocates as an instrument of racial oppression and patriarchal domination was also embraced by African American women as a source of hope. The Second Great Awakening (1800–1840), with its emphasis on the experiential elements of conversion and revivalism, saw an overwhelming number of African American slaves and free people convert to Christianity, particularly through Baptist and Methodist denominations that initially supported the antislavery cause.

It is the spirituals, or "Sorrow Songs," of these early black Christians that constitute one of the formative "texts" of African American religious expression. With the spirituals, slaves offered their own interpretations of biblical scripture through West African rhythms, harmonies, and antiphonal "call and response" patterns. The collective anonymity of these songs, with their improvised lyrics and revisions, further demonstrates the edifying creativity of slave **religion**. While no one can claim whether or not the voices that composed "Been in the Storm So Long" or "Run, Mary, Run" belonged to women, religious songs such as these initiated the pioneering strains of Christian sisterhood that would sustain black women in their struggle not only to survive slavery but, in some cases, to work actively for its abolition.

Likewise, the concept of Christian egalitarianism was a widespread theme in slave narratives and abolitionist pamphlets that condemned the hypocritical action (and inaction) of white Americans who supported the enslavement of human beings. While **Frederick Douglass**, Josiah Henson, David Walker, and others incorporate faith-based critiques in their narratives, **Harriet Jacobs's** *autobiography* *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) explores the nuances of a black female slave's efforts to uphold her own religious moral standards and protect her children from a life of servitude.

Jacobs, writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent, speaks forthrightly about her master's mental cruelty and his relentless attempts to sexually abuse her. The slaveholder's harassment intensifies, she notes, after he joins an Episcopal church. Jacobs rejects his proslavery religious ideology in her narrative, but she is also very careful to distinguish her beliefs from her beloved grandmother's rigid ideas about virtue. Where her grandmother regards her efforts to escape

as an abdication of her obligations as a good Christian mother, Jacobs boldly asserts that discontent with slavery is more in keeping with Jesus Christ's liberating ministry. Such a theology leads the author of *Incidents* to praise a number of women, black and white, from southern as well as northern states, whose activity on behalf of abolition reflects true Christian benevolence in Jacobs's view.

In the North, independent black churches began to develop as early as 1794 with the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Philadelphia. While the challenge for black men to become ordained ministers was difficult, it was nearly impossible for black women preachers to be recognized as such. The autobiographies and conversion narratives of feminist evangelists such as **Jarena Lee**, **Zilpha Elaw**, Amanda Berry Smith, **Rebecca Cox Jackson**, and **Julia A. J. Foote** offer critical glimpses into the increasingly codified hierarchies of power within black religious institutions.

*The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* (1836) vividly describes the free-born northern woman's personal struggle against sin and her conflicts with AME church leaders who prohibited her from preaching. After waiting eight years to be given permission to speak before her fellow congregants, Lee interrupted a visiting minister's sermon on Jonah with an exhortation in which she compared herself with the Old Testament prophet who ran away from his calling. Afterward, with the support of AME bishop Richard Allen, Lee began her work as an official—though not licensed—itinerant preacher.

Likewise, the words of evangelist **Sojourner Truth** underscore the social and political implications of male-centered readings of the gospel, particularly when such readings were used to deny women full citizenship rights. Truth put forth her own biblical exegesis in a speech to the Women's Rights Convention in 1851 when she pointed out that Christ was not born of man but of God and a woman. Convinced that their actions were sanctioned by God, Lee, Truth, and other black female exhorters put the authority of the scriptures before the laws of man.

**Frances E. W. Harper** combines women-centered religious beliefs with late-nineteenth-century racial uplift ideology in her essays, **poetry**, and novels. Grounded in Christian morality, her writing addresses issues such as suffrage, education, temperance, and the responsibility of the black middle **class** after Emancipation. One of her earlier poems, "Ethiopia" (1853), invokes the "Ethiopian Prophecy" of Psalm 68, a verse frequently interpreted by African Americans to signify the redemptive mission of the African race. Written after the Civil War, another poem, "Moses: A Story of the Nile" (1869), revisits the story of Exodus within the context of the abolition of slavery.

The same year that Harper published her well-known novel *Iola Leroy* (1892), fellow women's rights activist and educator **Anna Julia Cooper** published *A Voice from the South*. This compilation of political essays and speeches casts the collective potential of African Americans in the language of spiritual awakening. In the essay "Womanhood a Vital Element in Regeneration and Progress of a Race," Cooper emphasizes the importance of Christian



women as a civilizing force within society. Prefiguring twentieth-century literary works such as **Pauline Hopkins's** novel *Contending Forces* (1900) and **Jessie Redmon Fauset's** *There Is Confusion* (1924), Cooper's essays call upon black women, in particular, to take a more dynamic role in providing social, political, and religious guidance to their communities.

While the feminist religious discourse of racial uplift extends well into the twentieth century, Christianity acquires new dimension in the imaginative works of the **Harlem Renaissance**, the Great Migration, **Black Nationalism**, **womanism**, and contemporary fiction. In keeping with W.E.B. Du Bois's celebration of the preacher in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), literary renderings of the church after 1900 often focus on the **sermon tradition** and the leadership of black male clergy. Such is the case with texts such as **James Weldon Johnson's** *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), **Zora Neale Hurston's** novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), and **Richard Wright's** short story "Fire and Cloud" (1938). Just as common, however, are fictional works that explore the lives of churchwomen. The institutional silencing of mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters is countered in these texts by the overwhelming bodily presence of women in sacred spaces and by women-centered extra-ecclesial activities and auxiliary groups.

**Nella Larsen's** novel *Quicksand* (1928) offers a gendered perspective of Christianity from four different pews: a black southern college, an urban chapel, a storefront revival, and a rural southern church. The narrative's main focus is on the educated New Negro woman's quest for identity and sexual freedom in the 1920s. Yet Larsen often conceptualizes the social anxieties of protagonist Helga Crane through her inability to find a satisfying church "home." Issues of **race**, **class**, **sexuality**, and religion converge in the tragic ending of this Harlem Renaissance novel. An unsatisfying marriage to an Alabama preacher draws Helga into a domestic quagmire, and in her misery, she renounces God and the black church.

Zora Neale Hurston frequently incorporates religion into her representations of black folk life in the **South**. While most of her characters are avowed Christians, heroines like Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) nurture religious identities that subvert societal norms. In other instances, characters from Hattie Tyson in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* to Docia Boger's mother in the short story "Black Death" (1995) employ **conjuring**, "root work," and other non-Christian practices as alternative modes of empowerment within black communities. Hurston's literary works are supported by the research assembled in *Mules and Men* (1935) and *The Sanctified Church*—a collection of folktales, sermons, and spiritual autobiographies gathered by Hurston in the 1930s. *The Sanctified Church* anticipates stories such as **Gloria Naylor's** *Mama Day* (1989) and the character Baby Suggs in **Toni Morrison's** *Beloved* (1987) by depicting the formidable power of holy women like Mother Catherine, a preacher whose matrifocal religion combines Christianity with African-influenced beliefs.

African Americans who fled the South during the Great Migration of World War I and again in the 1940s and 1950s brought their distinctive forms of

worship to the urban North. The primary setting for **James Baldwin**'s semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) is a Pentecostal storefront church made up of southern migrants who have relocated to Harlem. While the spiritual conversion of adolescent protagonist John Grimes is central to the story, Baldwin demonstrates the complex ways in which John's identity as a black Christian male is explicitly and implicitly shaped by his spiritual elders. Indeed, the novel explores the turbulent religious heritage of John's mother and aunt in rich detail. Baldwin scrutinizes the faith that these women maintained in spite of the religious doctrines and social customs that sought to stifle their independent spirit.

After the publication of his first novel, Baldwin began writing *The Amen Corner*, a play first performed in 1955. The drama follows the life of storefront preacher Sister Margaret Alexander and her struggle to maintain her power as a religious leader in the face of domestic strife. The manner in which Sister Margaret wields Christian authority in her home has been described as tyrannical at times, much like Mama Lena Younger from **Lorraine Hansberry**'s drama *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Recent critics have taken a closer look at the ways in which the fiercely protective Christian **love** of these matriarchs can operate as a dangerous and debilitating force in black families, even as it claims to hold them together.

Criticisms of Christianity become more combative with the advent of the **Black Arts Movement** during the 1960s. As the faith-based activism of the **civil rights movement** transformed into the assertive nationalism of Black Power, poets like **June Jordan** and **Nikki Giovanni** condemned the oppressive image of God and other divine beings as white and male. Particularly fascinating in this regard is the poetry of Chicago-born **Carolyn Rodgers**. She began her career with an imaginative tirade against her mother's self-righteous morality in "Jesus Was Crucified, or It Must Be Deep" (1969) but offered contrition after her own religious conversion in later poems such as "and when the revolution came" and "how i got ovah II/It Is Deep II" (1975).

The work of **Alice Walker** highlights female characters whose forthright criticisms of the Christian church act as signposts of their own spiritual transformation. This is especially true in early works such as the short story "Roselily" (1973) and the novels *Meridian* (1976) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple* (1982). In *The Color Purple*, Celie expresses her feelings about the anxiety and shame of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse in diarylike "letters" to God. Although Celie is a devoted churchgoer, her intimate relationship with **blues** singer Shug Avery forces her to reconsider her beliefs about God and the patriarchal religious **community** that labels her race and gender as inferior.

Walker, along with Carolyn Rodgers, makes a distinction between her critique of oppressive Christian doctrine and her high esteem for the racial wisdom and strength of black churchwomen. Indeed, Walker describes her agenda in works like *The Color Purple* as womanist. As explained in her collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), the term characterizes feminists of color who cherish women's creativity, emotional

flexibility, and strength. Walker's understanding of womanism is not necessarily Christian, yet it is grounded in a sense of spiritual wholeness and connectivity with all of humanity. In the last two decades, black Christian womanist theologians have adopted Walker's gynocentric concept as a way to distinguish their interpretation of the Bible and their focus on black women's religious heritage.

Recent works of African American literature engage Christianity through experimental forms and genres. **Octavia Butler's** speculative novels *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), use Christian stories to frame a multicultural community's fight to survive in a dystopian future. Butler's black heroine in the **Parable series** is the daughter of a minister who creates "Earthseed"—a belief system that embraces the idea that God is manifested through change. Likewise, contemporary women's fiction places a strong emphasis on the distinctive religious culture of African Americans, particularly in stories such as *Baby of the Family* (1989) by **Tina McElroy Ansa** that concentrate on black **family** life in the South. The popularity of inspirational themes in current fiction is further indicated by developments such as BET Books' "New Spirit" black Christian fiction and romance imprint. The female protagonists in "New Spirit" novels, including Jacqueline Thomas's *The Prodigal Husband* (2002) and Angela Benson's *Awakening Mercy* (2002), emphasize the power of Christian faith, forgiveness, and reconciliation in overcoming personal struggle.

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Qiana J. Whitted

## CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

There is not a large body of imaginative **literature** that takes the civil rights movement as its subject. **Alice Walker's** *Meridian* (1973) and **Toni Cade Bambara's** *The Salt Eaters* (1980) center on women who were movement

workers. Walker and Bambara also wrote short stories with characters involved in or influenced by civil rights activism. Thulani Davis's *1959* (1992) explores a young girl's coming of age just as the movement arrives in her Virginia town. Some novels are inspired by or evoke specific events in the movement, such as **Bebe Moore Campbell's** *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1992) and **Toni Morrison's** *Song of Solomon* (1977). Anthony Grooms's recent and powerful novel *Bombingham* (2001), set in the summer and city of the Sixteenth Street Church bombing that killed four young girls, suggests that African American writers will continue to revisit the movement for their subject matter. In the meantime, however, the dominant genre of civil rights movement literature is the memoir or personal **autobiography**. Through autobiographical accounts (as well as oral narrative and biography), we learn of the women who organized boycotts, desegregated schools, participated in sit-ins, marched in demonstrations, taught in **freedom** schools, and assisted local residents in registering to vote. From the Montgomery bus boycott to the Black Power movement of the 1960s, women played important roles in the fight for civil rights, and in some of those roles, their participation surpassed that of African American men.

African American women have always been involved in the struggle for freedom, and the civil rights movement was no exception. The traditionally heralded "opening" to the movement was the Montgomery bus boycott. The two recognizable figures from that event are **Rosa Parks**, the woman who was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat, and the new young minister in town, Martin Luther King, Jr. Although King is generally seen as the architect of the boycott and the leader of the movement itself, it was actually women who organized, initiated, and carried out the boycott.

As an active member in and secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Parks was well aware of the ramifications involved in challenging segregation laws. The roots of Parks's act of civil disobedience also came from her training at the Highlander Folk School, a school for social activists that was founded in the depression. The Monteagle, Tennessee, school was a model of interracial and progressive activism. In the fall of 1955, Parks attended a workshop on leadership directed by Septima Clark, one of the "mothers" of the movement who was a lifelong activist and trained many civil rights workers. Clark had been born in 1878 in South Carolina and became active in the NAACP as a young woman. In Charleston, Clark was involved in a successful petition drive to allow black teachers to **work** in the public schools and then pressed further for equal pay. She had a career as a teacher herself until she was fired for her political activities. In the 1950s, Clark was introduced to the Highlander Folk School and began attending and teaching workshops, often bringing others with her. Three months after Rosa Parks attended Clark's leadership workshop, the Montgomery bus boycott began.

When Parks was arrested, E. D. Nixon, head of the NAACP, and local ministers met to discuss how they could use Parks's arrest to test segregation laws. In the meantime, the Women's Political Council, an organization of

professional black women, sprang into action, and its president, Jo Ann Robinson, spent all night at Alabama State College mimeographing 35,000 handbills urging African Americans to stay off the buses on the following Monday. The flyers were distributed through black neighborhoods and networks during the weekend, and on Monday morning—and for many mornings after—empty buses drove through the city. Women also played a central role in maintaining the boycott for thirteen months. **Domestic** workers were a large part of the bus-riding population, and their willingness to walk to work, organize and ride in carpools, make arrangements with their white female employers for transportation, and attend mass meetings after a long day of work contributed greatly to the success of the boycott.

In addition to initiating legal challenges to segregation in public transportation, NAACP activism concentrated on school desegregation cases as well. Another early confrontation in the civil rights movement took place in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 where nine black teenagers (six of whom were female) desegregated all-white Central High School. Daisy Bates, president of the Arkansas NAACP, was instrumental in leading the legal challenge to segregation and was adviser to the Little Rock Nine. Like Parks, Bates had long defied discrimination in both her personal and professional life. She and her husband owned the *Arkansas State Press*, which spoke out against police brutality, economic exploitation, and legal injustice.

While longtime activists and established organizations coordinated the battles fought at the dawn of the movement, the young people who were coming of age during those events stepped forward as college students. In the early months of 1960, student activism manifested itself in cities throughout the **South** in the form of sit-ins, boycotts, and demonstrations. **Anne Moody**, a student first at Natchez Junior College and later at Tougaloo College, worked with many civil rights organizations and participated in the sit-ins at Woolworth lunch counters. She tells of her civil rights activities in her powerful memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968). At Fisk University in Nashville, Diane Nash attended workshops conducted by nonviolent theorist and activist James Lawson. As part of the Nashville Student Movement, Nash organized and participated in sit-ins and other nonviolent direct action that protested segregation in Nashville. After three months of student activism, 2,500 students and **community** members marched on City Hall in April 1960. Nash took the opportunity to ask Mayor Ben West if he personally felt that discrimination was wrong. Forced to respond to a question of ethics, the mayor agreed that discrimination was morally wrong. The morning newspapers reported the mayor's reply as support of desegregation, and relieved business leaders saw the opportunity to end the boycotts and sit-ins. As a consequence of the students' actions and Nash's probing questions, the Nashville lunch counters were soon serving their black patrons.

When college students began organizing sit-ins, it was Ella Jo Baker of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) who recognized their potential and called for a conference to bring the young people together. In

April 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was born. Guided by Baker, the students created an organization that employed nonviolent direct action, grassroots organizing, and nonhierarchical leadership. Baker was a tremendous shaping influence on the student organization and was responsible for insisting that it remain independent of other civil rights organizations. Like Septima Clark, Baker had been involved in personal and collective resistance to oppression her entire life. She held numerous leadership roles in the NAACP throughout the 1930s and 1940s before resigning as its national director of branches in 1946. Baker criticized the organization's leadership for emphasizing membership numbers rather than participatory activities. A desire to see black people more directly involved in the fight for equality led to Baker's involvement in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the late 1950s. In 1957, Baker set up the SCLC's first office in Atlanta and traveled throughout the South during the group's first voter registration program. She repeatedly emphasized the need for group leadership and local organizing, putting her in conflict with those in the organization who upheld a hierarchical male ministerial leadership. It was Baker who advised SNCC to remain independent of other groups, who modeled egalitarian and group-based leadership, and who nurtured the students' empowerment through participatory democracy.

When SNCC arrived in Ruleville, Mississippi, in August 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer, a forty-four-year-old sharecropper, was among the first to attend meetings and attempt to register to vote. Although it was not Hamer's first act of resistance, it was the start of her political life. Hamer became a field secretary for SNCC, devoting her life to grassroots organizing and the fight for political and economic justice. She was cochair of the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party (MDFP), which was formed to give black residents a political voice and to challenge the legitimacy of the all-white Mississippi delegation. The MDFP traveled to the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, where Hamer rose to national prominence through her nationally televised, unforgettable testimony about the atrocities committed in Mississippi's attempts to keep black people disenfranchised.

The autobiographies and biographies that tell women's movement stories are among the most compelling, inspiring, and memorable texts in American literature. The leaders and activists mentioned here are only a few of the legion of women who fought for civil rights in large and small ways throughout the **history** of black people in America. While the conventional narrative of the civil rights movement represents it as a series of key events engendered by the charismatic and motivating male leaders, particularly ministers, a more accurate representation of the movement is emerging. Some of the most exciting research on the civil rights movement is directly focusing on the participation of women. Current scholarship suggests that the grassroots organizing tradition was the underlying foundation for the movement's successes; as the memoirs, oral narratives, and biographies confirm, at the heart of that organizing tradition were the movement's women.

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Janelle Collins

**CLAIR, MAXINE (1939– )**

For a woman who has spent most of her life *not* writing, Maxine Clair's literary achievements are remarkable. An award-winning poet, short-story writer, and novelist, she did not start writing until her forties, when she resigned her position as chief technologist at Children's Hospital National Medical Center in Washington, D.C. By this point, Clair, the mother of four, had divorced her husband. The pain of divorce inspired her to write. Seeking guidance, she mailed her poems to **Toni Morrison**, then an editor at Random House. Morrison advised that if she was serious about writing, Clair should read more **poetry**. Clair agreed and soon was publishing her work.

Clair's decision to write full-time came in 1980, during a long, soul-searching Caribbean vacation paid for by her IRS refund. Upon her return, she submitted all the poems she had ever written—six of them in total—to a

free workshop at George Washington University. Soon after, while working part-time as a medical technologist, she earned her Masters of Fine Arts from American University and began teaching courses there. In 1988 her poetry collection *Coping with Gravity* was published, followed in 1992 by her **fiction** chapbook *October Brown*, which won Baltimore's Artscape Prize for Maryland Writers. In 1994, the interrelated story collection *Rattlebone* was published to rave reviews and won numerous awards, including the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize for fiction and the American Library Association's Black Caucus Award. She wrote her most recent book, a 2001 finalist for the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award titled *October Suite*, on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Currently, Clair is a professor at George Washington University.

Both *Rattlebone* and *October Suite* are set mainly in Kansas during the 1950s, in a town like Clair's childhood **home**, where she grew up as one of nine children born to Lucy and Robert Smith. In this manner, she shares much with Irene, the young protagonist of *Rattlebone*, who, with her **family**, interacts in small, vivid, occasionally secret ways with the **community** at large. Like Irene, Clair formed close relationships with teachers—characters she revisits in her fiction. Intrigued by the fact that only single women were hired to teach in 1940s Kansas, she created the character of October Brown—an unmarried, much-gossiped-about schoolteacher who pursues an affair with Irene's father, James, in *Rattlebone*. The consequences of this affair are developed in *October Suite*, which chronicles October's choices to have James's baby and give it to her sister.

With an ear to the cadences of neighborhood life, Clair writes about choices that are sometimes discordant, sometimes harmonious to families, communities, perhaps even readers. Above all, Clair's characters, like the author herself, follow their own rhythms.

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*Rebecca Meacham*



**CLARKE, CHERYL (1947– )**

Born in Washington, D.C., Cheryl Lynn Clarke received a B.A. from Howard University and attended graduate school at Rutgers University (where she has worked since 1969), earning an M.A. (1974), an M.S.W. (1980) and a Ph.D. (2000). She has been Rutgers' director of Diverse Community Affairs and Lesbian-Gay Concerns since 1992. She lives in Jersey City.

Activist, poet, critic, and scholar, for the last thirty years Clarke has been weaving together a black lesbian feminist **identity**. Early exposure to the **civil rights movement** and the works of **James Baldwin** politicized her reading. In the 1970s Clarke participated in feminist collectives that enlightened her as to the importance of writing. Barbara Smith, **Pat Parker**, and **Audre Lorde** were mentors and comrades. She was active in the defense of Assata Shakur. Her early story, "Women of Summer" (1977), set in the grim days when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had infiltrated Black Power, describes the escape of lesbian outlaws to an older, rural tradition of sanctuary and self-defense. She has been a member of the *CONDITIONS* editorial collective (1981–1990) and of the Board of New York Women against Rape (1985–1988); a founding member of the New Jersey Women and AIDS Network (1987–1990); a board member of the City University of New York's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies; and chair of the Board of the Astraea National Lesbian Foundation (2000–2003).

Clarke's **poetry** supplies an integrative force in a life committed to complex values. Her four volumes of verse revolve around the lives of black women, lesbian desire, oppression, and communities of resistance. *Narratives* (1982) consists of poems in which individual black women speak about their lives in blunt words, reminiscent of **blues** lyrics. Clarke has given numerous readings. *Narratives*, in some ways similar to the monologues in **Ntozake Shange's** *for colored girls*, was also well received when performed on stage and on tour. *Living as a Lesbian* (1986) is far more insistently personal and sexual. Its explicit descriptions of lesbian desire made vague "poetic" erotica instantly obsolete, and gay and lesbian critics frequently cite this volume as a groundbreaking work. In "wearing my cap backwards," Clarke chants as a bad, butch witch but is also confident enough to include strict forms. Some poems address public figures, including, for instance, Indira Ghandi and Vanessa Williams. *Humid Pitch* (1989) continues Clarke's explorations of the lives of intersecting communities; notably, it contains a seventy-one-page poem "based loosely" on a relationship between Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Other poems present historical voices or deal with childhood memories, Catholic school, and uneasy alliances with gay men. Nominated for a Lambda Book Award, *Experimental Love* (1993) begins with the lush invocation of "A Great Angel" ("oh my soul,/ Oh my moon and coal black sea"), which highlights the sustained range of Clarke's poetic moods and ambitions. There are, again, witty dyke poems, erotic anthems, political prose/poem journals, and (increasingly personal) elegies, all written from a deep involvement in black **literature** and music. **Jewelle Gomez** writes that Clarke "is the progeny Walt

Whitman might have imagined,” a writer who “has painted a truly American landscape.” Clarke’s poems appear in many anthologies; her manuscript-in-progress is called *Corridors of Nostalgia*.

Clarke lists “being a poet” with her other “subversive identities,” and her influential activist essays balance her sometimes more vulnerable poetic voice. She has fearlessly criticized her own communities. “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance” (1981) presents a rejoinder to the sexism of the **Black Arts Movement**, in particular, aiming to “kill” “the homophobic father . . . Amiri Baraka,” and arguing for a politics based on choice rather than color. In “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community” (1983), Clarke acknowledges the homophobic national context, attacks the denigration and/or absence of lesbians and gay men in works by black intellectuals, and describes a black working-class tradition of tolerance. Her conference speeches, essays, and reviews have been published in a wide variety of black, gay, and feminist journals. Her review of **Sapphire’s** *Push*, essays in **memory** of Pat Parker and Audre Lorde, and her elegies for **Toni Cade Bambara** and Jewel Terri have a deep authenticity conferred only by shared experience over time. Clarke finished a dissertation analyzing the impact of poetry by black women on the black arts and feminist movements long after she was a well-known writer herself. (One scholarly essay published from that project considers “transferences and confluences,” another, the work of **Gwendolyn Brooks**.) Clarke’s dissertation ends with a chapter on the birth of black lesbian feminist poetry: the ground where her career began.

Clarke has often revisited but not greatly revised her early values. In 1995, she advised students not to settle for less than changing “the power dynamic of sexual politics in this culture” (“Being Pro-Gay” 99). Looking back in 2000, she wrote, “I don’t give up *Black* for ‘African-American,’ . . . *lesbian* for queer; . . . I don’t give up *feminist*, which is a doppelganger for lesbian and always gives me a way to move” (“Lesbianism, 2000” 233). Although photographs of Clarke document her progression from a frowning outsider to poised author, they continue to radiate intelligence and energy. She clearly enjoys her ironic cameo appearance in Cheryl Dunye’s **film** *The Watermelon Woman* (1997). Militant, but undogmatic, she has had the courage to inhabit publicly all of her identities and created literature that both defines and bridges difference(s).

*See also* Black Feminism; Black Feminist Criticism; Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press; Lesbianism; Protest Tradition; Sexuality

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*Susan Nash*

## CLASS

Until recently, there were few scholarly analyses of class relations within the black **community** and how the black class structure fit into American society as a whole, and consequently the clearest insight into African American class relations was to be discovered through literary representations. Authors such as **Charles Waddell Chesnut**, **James Weldon Johnson**, **Angelina Weld Grimké**, **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, **Nella Larsen**, **Dorothy West**, and **Lorraine Hansberry** chronicle in their works of **literature** the intricacies of African American class dynamics, including models of the black class structure and the characteristics defining class position and the relationship between the existence of the so-called aristocrats of color and the development of the upwardly mobile group of black people who gained access to a lifestyle commensurate with that of the white American middle class.

Some scholars take issue with the applicability of the term *class* to the system of stratified social relations in existence prior to the massive influx of southern black people into northern cities, commonly termed the Great Migration of 1915–1920. Using principles of categorization established by Marxist and Weberian economic theory, this position contends that the black aristocrats or elites who maintained social precedence in the black community prior to 1915 should be considered a status group rather than a legitimate class, if class is defined strictly as a function of how an individual is positioned with relation to the means of production of goods in a capitalistic society. Those who own the major manufacturing and financial enterprises and employ workers constitute the upper class, while those workers who depend on the members of the upper class for wages belong to the working class. The middle class, then, is itself composed of those educated professionals who operate outside of this wage labor system, such as doctors, lawyers, or teachers, as well as “white-collar” workers within the system—managers and officeworkers who are not themselves engaged in manual labor. The black elite group in existence from the antebellum period through Reconstruction up until the first decade or so of the twentieth century did not qualify as a middle or upper class in terms of this general structure. Instead, this elite set drew its members from an incongruous cross section of occupations and income levels, where standards for inclusion were based on traceable, distinguished ancestry, movement within exclusive social circles, taste, cultivation, and gentility. Charles Chesnut’s *Blue Vein*

Society, clearly delineated in his 1900 collection *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, is the best textual representation of this status elite and its foibles.

A changing of the guard, so to speak, occurred during the early decades of the twentieth century, at which point the aristocratic status group had been completely displaced from the pinnacle of black society throughout the nation by the rising black middle class. The coalescence of this upstart class, however, was in large part dependent on the resources of the status group that preceded it. Many entrants into the middle class were sons of the status elite educated into white-collar professions with money earned by fathers who were caterers, railroad porters, hostlers, barbers, or **domestic** servants for wealthy white families. Those who were not born into the elite group often married elite women in order to secure their own status within the upper echelon of black society. This class further distinguishes itself from its antecedent status group because unlike the black aristocrats who depended primarily on white patronage for the prosperity they enjoyed, the black middle class was able to establish itself mainly due to its ability to serve the black populace often neglected by white professionals.

The black doctors, dentists, teachers, real estate and insurance agents, ministers, undertakers, editor/journalists, and entrepreneurs who formed the burgeoning middle class are abundantly in evidence in the fictive urban settings of the novels penned by Fauset, Larsen, and West. Although many critics have registered discomfort with the so-called middle-class bias endemic in their novels, their depictions are among the few extant close descriptions of early black middle-class **home** life. The women proved to be remarkably astute cultural observers, encoding the transition in the black community from aristocratic status group to middle-class upward mobility in perfect accordance with retrospective analyses of the phenomenon.

The head of the Marshall **family** in Fauset's *There Is Confusion* (1924) is the former slave Joel Marshall, a successful New York caterer to wealthy white clients; he sends his sons to Harvard and persistently discourages their becoming involved in the service-oriented business that financed their expensive educations. Instead, his elder son becomes a Harlem real estate agent, and his younger son leads a racial uplift organization. Similarly, Larsen centers her 1929 novel *Passing* on Irene Westover Redfield, the college-bred wife of a doctor who returns to her college-bred father's home in Chicago for a visit and consequently reenters a whirlwind of upscale social activities, including teas, resort weekends, and card and dinner parties. Then, in *The Living Is Easy* (1948), Dorothy West focuses on Cleo Judson, a southern-born social climber who marries a produce wholesaler for his money but cultivates friendships among the impoverished, yet genteel, faded aristocracy in order to maneuver her way into upper-crust Boston black society.

By most standards, the characters enumerated above would assuredly have been counted within the upper class, with the possible exception of Cleo Judson, who because of her lack of cultural capital might be more appropriately classified as an upper-middle-class woman aspiring to secure a position in the

upper class. Relative status and public perception in the post–World War I era provide the basis for the division of the northern, urban black community into three basic classes: lower, middle, and upper. The lower class represents the largest, composed largely of recent migrants from the **South** with low incomes, low-status occupations, and “low” standards of living. The middle class differs from the lower class less in terms of economic well-being than in terms of values, goals, and manner of living. The middle class ranges from the lower middle, still struggling to effect a complete dissociation from the lower class, to the upper middle, perpetually attempting to elevate their status into the upper class. The upper class is then defined principally by way of a cultural barometer that rewards those who successfully accumulate the critical markers of achievement: college degrees, professional success, conspicuous consumption, and cultural refinement. As opposed to the “wealthy leisure class” characterization of upper-class white people, members of the black upper class were compelled to work in order to maintain their social position, essentially corresponding in lifestyle and level of prosperity to the white middle class and even sharing its fundamentally conservative values, family form, and social agenda.

Class advancement for African Americans typically elicited reactionary charges of assimilationism. While black novelists generally advocate racial consciousness in the sense of developing sincere pride in and commitment to advancing the collective interests of the **race**, passive resignation to a second-class social rank is universally excoriated. While individual writers explore various forms of resistance to racial hierarchy, all rely on the repudiation of “lower-class” behavioral models and servile demeanors. They avoid the semantic dissension inherent in using the “upper, middle, lower” classification system by employing alternative terms to describe the relative status of the characters in their novels. Fauset uses phrases like “the better class of colored people,” “colored society,” and “colored ladies,” while black characters of lesser station speak of “them real hinckty culled folks.” Larsen is more subtle, occasionally deploying such referents as “Negro society,” “Negro circles,” and “people of consequence,” but preferring to describe personal attributes, such as religious affiliation, education, taste, or habits, to signal social status. West refers to “the nicer colored people,” “these self-styled better Negroes,” “the genteel poor,” and the “Old Colored Families.”

Despite the critical resistance to representations of this early black elite class, its treatment in **fiction** is an indispensable contribution to African American social and cultural **history**, as well as the literary tradition. The invisibility of black intellectuals and professionals is a problematic misrepresentation in texts like the popular white writer Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1933), in which the central character Bea Pullman considers the entire black community of Atlantic City, New Jersey, nothing more than a pool of potential domestic laborers; she expresses frustration that despite a black population of 9,000, she still has difficulty finding good help. However, texts centered on the black upper class critique the pretension and elitism pervading it, and they seek to promote a black American aesthetic that unifies the cultural practices of the rural South with those of the urban North.

Black regional dissimilarity surfaces in different forms in the novels, though the South is universally represented as an environment in desperate need of reform and its black inhabitants as a population in desperate need of regeneration. In West's *The Living Is Easy*, fifteen-year-old Cleo Jericho is sent North with an elderly white lady who travels to the Jerichos' backwoods community seeking a more temperate climate to relieve a terminal ailment. The concerned dowager entreats Cleo's parents to deliver their beautiful young daughter out of the sultry, morally depraved South. Cleo eventually settles in Boston with another elderly lady who welcomes Cleo's arrival because she expects the absolute devotion of black servants to their white employers she has read about in accounts of southern race relations. This romanticized vision of black servility and fidelity is denounced through Cleo's contempt for black people who appear to reinforce the racist convictions. The stark distinction Cleo, who herself worked in service before her marriage, draws between herself and the domestic servants she encounters becomes clear through a platitude concerning the correlation of etiquette and class mobility she pretends to address to her daughter Judy but truly means for a maid who makes the mistake of presuming to be familiar with her.

During the early-twentieth-century time frame encompassed by such novels as *The Living Is Easy*, many married black women were compelled to find employment as domestics, abandoning their own homes to care for the households of wealthier people. The upscale characters Larsen depicts all have black female servants, though Larsen never delves into the personal lives of the hired help. Fauset's *There Is Confusion* briefly investigates the private concerns of Myrtle, the teenaged daughter of Essie, a domestic in the Marshall household. Myrtle resolves to finish high school despite the discouragement of her white classmates who assert the futility of her efforts since the diploma will afford her no advantage in finding **work**. Though the resolution of Myrtle's dilemma is immaterial to the predominant concerns of the novel, the attention to it demonstrates Fauset's consciousness of the difficulty involved in transcending class stratification. However, Joel Marshall's transmutation of his experience in domestic service into a lucrative catering enterprise does reinforce Fauset's conviction that it could indeed be accomplished. Rather, Essie's preoccupation with Myrtle's problems and Joanna's distracted, rather dismissive, response to the confidence illustrate the difficulty faced by female domestics whose lives are so fully consumed by the needs of their employers that they have little time to devote to the needs of their own families.

Historically, domestic work was forced on black women when their husbands did not earn enough to support their families alone, and there were few occupational alternatives open to the women, especially after World War I, when millions of discharged soldiers returned home to reclaim their abandoned positions in the American workforce. The resultant competition for a scarcity of employment opportunities, exacerbated by racial prejudice, pushed postwar black women out of the jobs they had finally acquired as a result of upwardly mobile white women securing better ones. Black women were barred from office, retail, and factory work; fictional characters able to obtain

such jobs are compelled to pass for white to do so. The dearth of opportunities available to black women to advance their own economic prospects made them largely dependent on marriage and **motherhood** to access a comfortable lifestyle and elevated class standing.

*See also* *Blanche among the Talented Tenth*; *Chinaberry Tree, The*; Kelley-Hawkins, Emma Dunham; *Passing*; *Plum Bun*; *Quicksand*; *Raisin in the Sun, A*; *Wedding, The*

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*Licia Morrow Calloway*

### CLEAGE, PEARL (1948– )

The blossoming consciousness of poet, essayist, novelist, and playwright Pearl Michelle Cleage began at an early age. Born on December 7, 1948, in Springfield, Massachusetts, to Rev. Albert B. and Doris Cleage, she grew up in Detroit, Michigan. Her father, a political activist, was the founder of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church and in 1962 ran for governor of Michigan on the Freedom Ticket. Later he embraced **Black Nationalism** and changed his name to Jaramoji Abebe Agyemen. Her more sedate mother was an elementary school teacher. Cleage's parents believed it was equally important to maintain an atmosphere that fostered an appreciation and knowledge of black culture and academics.

Pearl and her older sister were expected to excel academically and were introduced to controversial ideologies in an attempt to expand their intellectualism. According to Cleage, it was not unusual to find the works of **Langston Hughes**, Simone de Beauvoir, and **Richard Wright** strewn around the Cleage home. In addition, the Cleage parents cultivated an appreciation in their children for the performing arts. Some of Cleage's fondest memories include evenings spent at the theater, enjoying plays and dance ensembles.

After graduating from Northwestern High School in 1966, the academically gifted Cleage studied playwriting from 1966 to 1969 at Howard University in



Washington, D.C. She left Howard University to marry Atlanta politician Michael L. Lomax, with whom she has a daughter, Deignan Cleage Lomax. After leaving Howard University, her quest for knowledge led to further study at Yale University in 1969 and the University of the West Indies in 1971. After moving to Georgia in 1971, Cleage earned her B.A. from Spelman, a historically black female college. Years later she returned to Spelman as a professor and Distinguished Playwright in Residence. Cleage attended graduate school at Atlanta University. She currently resides with her second husband, writer Zaron W. Burnett, in Atlanta.

As a young wife and mother Cleage held a variety of jobs in Atlanta. At the Martin Luther King Memorial, she worked in the Archival Library. Next, Cleage became the on-air personality of *Black Viewpoints*, a local television show, and later hosted, produced, and wrote scripts for *Ebony Beat Journal*. While her career flourished, she continually questioned societal expectations concerning the role of women. Working as the director of communications for Atlanta's first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, Cleage began to feel that she was neglecting certain aspects of her personal life, for example, being a "good" wife and mother. At this time in her life, she admits to questioning whether she was performing as others expected, which eventually led to feelings of incompetence and eventually depression. In retrospect, Cleage concedes that at the time she was unable to recognize that the anxieties she experienced in her younger years concerning the **home** versus a career had little to do with her own defectiveness and more to do with a bigger problem—sexism.

This realization provided Cleage with many issues to write about in her large repertoire of works. A female associate of her husband's introduced Cleage to the feminist movement. The two women immersed themselves in feminist readings. The interlocking issues of **race** and gender always informed Cleage's feminist readings and writings. In a 1996 interview, Cleage recalls her introduction to the feminist movement as a pivotal moment in her life, because it explained so many feelings that she had as a woman. While she supports the feminist movement, Cleage believes that until it addresses the racism and classism that exist within, its gains will be marginal, and thus she aligns herself with the more encompassing womanist movement.

While she is extremely vocal about the racist division within feminism, her works seek to unify the fragmented sectors of the movement by speaking out against common issues that all women face, regardless of race or **class**. Although her essay collection *Mad at Miles: A Black Woman's Guide to Truth* (1990) focuses on **violence** committed against black women, there is a strong message for all women concerning **love** relationships that are sometimes violent. Cleage is unafraid to confront and express her disappointment with **jazz** icon Miles Davis for the physical assault on his wife at the time, actress Cicely Tyson. She urges readers to shun Davis because he publicly boasted about his abuse of Tyson.

Unabashed by criticism concerning her stance, Cleage later protested vehemently against basketball superstar Earvin "Magic" Johnson's use of the word *flooziess* to describe his female sexual conquests in her essay "Fatal

Floozies” (1993). *Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot* (1993) is a personal collection of essays directed at the black **community**. In *Deals*, Cleage gives the reader her stance on controversial issues such as Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*, the **film** *Driving Miss Daisy*, and the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings. Cleage is forthright in her criticism of both Hill and Thomas, whom she refers to as “Uncle Thomas.” Unwilling to allow her womanist views to cloud her opinion of Hill, Cleage is not convinced that Hill deserves the title “Shero” for bringing light to the issue of Thomas’s alleged sexual harassment. Instead, she argues that as an officer of the court Attorney Hill was morally and legally obliged to report his behavior a long time ago.

Even though the black community has touted the brilliance of Cleage for some time, recently she was exposed to a larger, more racially diverse audience. Her first book of **fiction**, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1998), became one of the reading selections of Oprah Winfrey’s book club. The book was so well received that Cleage published a sequel titled *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* (2001). Often called “a master storyteller” for her rich blend of truth and her stirring portrayal of black life and black womanhood in racist and sexist America, Cleage has recently published a third novel, *Some Things I Never Thought I’d Do* (2003).

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*Karen Arnett Chachere*

### CLIFF, MICHELLE (1946– )

**Toni Morrison** has described Michelle Cliff’s writing as “full of razors, blossoms and clarity.” The seeming contradiction inherent in this metaphor is one of the defining features of Cliff’s work. Drawing on paradoxical experiences of colonialism and diasporization, Cliff articulates a more complex

understanding of **identity**, one that emphasizes the syncretism that develops out of the interaction of **race**, **class**, gender, and **sexuality**.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1946, Cliff immigrated to the United States with her parents at the age of three. Although the **family** returned to Jamaica when she was ten, Cliff would eventually leave the island again, this time for London to attend Wagner College, from which she graduated in 1969. Over the next few years, Cliff would move frequently back and forth between Jamaica, the United States, and the United Kingdom. She received her M.Phil in Art History from the Warburg Institute at the University of London in 1974. Writing her thesis, a study of Italian Renaissance intellectualism, caused her to reconsider the benefits of her colonialist education. Inspired by the anticolonialist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the burgeoning women's movement, Cliff began to search for alternatives to post-Enlightenment knowledge, specifically the conceptions of identity that did not devalue its African and feminine aspects.

Because of her complex life **history** as a light-skinned black lesbian woman, Cliff came to realize that identity was incredibly complex. She began to search for ways to use writing to reflect and comment on that complexity. Her first piece of writing was *The Winner Names the Age, a Collection of Writing by Lillian Smith* (1978). An early feminist, Cliff would continue to explore the ramifications inherent in this more complex articulation of these radical ideas about identity and history in a collection of **poetry** and prose titled *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*. Published in 1980, the text mixes together poetry and prose in a fragmentary, yet lyrical, fashion. The essays and prose poems in this collection frequently engage notions of history and **memory**.

Cliff continued her experimentation with alternative generic forms in her first novel, *Abeng*, published in 1984. In this semiautobiographical novel, the protagonist Clare Savage, a light-skinned Jamaican girl, tries to come to self-knowledge in a world that denies and denigrates her existence as an African and a woman at every turn. The novel, like the earlier collection, engaged with many of the themes Cliff would go on to explore in further detail and from different perspectives in her future work in novels such as *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), a continuation of Clare's story begun in *Abeng*, this time highlighting the connections between self-identity and activism, and her next novel, *Free Enterprise* (1993), which begins with John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry and traces abolitionist Mary Anne Pleasant's relationship with a Jamaican woman named Annie and their efforts to resist **slavery** and sexism.

Recovering the unknown stories of those at society's margins, as well as claiming one's voice and identity and rewriting history, Cliff argues, is necessary for resistance, in particular resistance to colonialist and sexist thinking.

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*Nicole N. Aljoe*

### CLIFTON, LUCILLE (1936- )

Lucille Clifton was born in Depew, New York, on June 27, 1936, to Thelma Moore and Samuel Sayles, Sr. Clifton, like her mother and her first daughter, was born with six fingers on each hand. Clifton takes this trait, once thought to be the sign of witchery, and glorifies it in several of her later poems as a means of communicating what she sees as a potent and magical female power in her **family**. Her extra digits, as well as her daughter's, were removed at birth, and Clifton mourns their loss and the magical power she imagines them possessing. Even in their absence, however, this physical feature is just one of the many details of Clifton's life that imbues her work with a deep female sense of magic and power.

Both of Lucille Clifton's parents migrated from the rural **South** (her mother from Georgia, and her father from Virginia) to find **work** in the industrial North. Her father worked in steel mills, while her mother worked in a laundry. Although neither parent earned beyond an elementary school education, Clifton received many lessons from them that would later prove to be the fulcrum of her literary and artistic career. Clifton's mother was herself a poet. When Clifton was a little girl, she remembers watching her mother burn her poems because her father would not allow her to publish them. Her father's mercurial nature, however, is tempered in Clifton's **memory** and poetic rendering of him because of his ability to remember and retell stories of his great-grandmother Caroline.

As a child, Clifton recalls sitting at her kitchen table while her mother braided her hair, listening to her father tell stories of Caroline's capture by slave traders from Dahomey, West Africa, in 1830. When her great-great-grandmother arrived in New Orleans at the age of eight, she was forced on a journey to Virginia, entirely on foot. It was in Virginia that Clifton's roots in this country were established. Her father was born there and was raised by Caroline. Clifton returns to Virginia in her **poetry** as a space where she locates her own connection to her African past and this female **ancestor**. From this direct link to African roots, Clifton draws much inspiration for her poetry and **identity** as a black woman. Through Caroline, Clifton knows of the tradition of Dahomey women as strong, warrior leaders.

Clifton attended Howard University from 1953 to 1955 on a scholarship. She was the first in her family and in her church to attend college. In 1955, she left Howard to attend Fredonia State Teacher's College (now State University of New York at Fredonia), where she ultimately decided to leave the world of institutionalized education altogether to pursue her life as a poet. By 1958, Clifton met and married Fred Clifton; shortly thereafter, the couple moved from New York to Maryland, where they raised their six children.

While she was writing her first collection of poetry, the African American **community** was deeply involved in a struggle for equality that involved protests, riots, revolutionary movements, and some of the most inspirational and controversial art and **literature** that the country had ever seen. With regard to this era, known as the **Black Arts Movement**, Clifton says with a laugh that she was pregnant for most of it. While her physical absence from larger cities and elite college campuses left her outside of the major activity of these movements, Clifton's work clearly reflects the decade's focus on black pride and activism. Her work especially draws attention to the black feminist concerns of **freedom** for black women from both racism and sexism, family and community welfare, as well as the reversal of white patriarchy's influence on black men. Clifton has suggested in interviews that the vast majority of black people in American were not physically a part of the major **drama** of this movement but had been brought up in traditions, like hers, that took great pride in blackness, the power of community, the power of women-centered families. In other words, the message of the 1960s for Clifton was a message she had been hearing since she first heard about her great-great-grandmother Caroline.

In the body of Clifton's work, themes of feminism manifest not only in her discussion and celebration of strong women but in her inclusion of strong men as well. Her work is truly an example of womanist thought, as defined by **Alice Walker** in its ability to explain the power of women as the life force through which strong men, sons, husbands, daughters, and communities are made. In her children's books, Clifton communicates themes of cultural pride and dignity in rich African and African American histories and traditions. Other major themes that describe her work in general include the vital importance of storytelling and the duality and complexity of life experiences.

Clifton is the only poet ever to have two books chosen as finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in the same year. Other honors include an Emmy Award from the American Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Shelley Memorial Prize from the Poetry Society of America, the Charity Randall citation, and a Lannan Literary Award. She was also a National Book Award finalist in 1996 for *The Terrible Stories*. In 1999, she was appointed a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and elected a fellow in the Literature of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Clifton also served as the Poet Laureate of Maryland in 1979. In 1980, she received honorary doctorate degrees from Goucher College and the University of Maryland. Clifton continues to tirelessly give readings, work as an activist in education, and teach poetry. She is currently a Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary's College in Maryland.

In her first collection of poems, *Good Times* (1969), Clifton focuses on hope against losing cherished things like **love**, happiness, family, and memories. The poem "miss rosie" commemorates a homeless woman who wanders the streets. Clifton, however, makes her a heroic figure by seeing her as a person upon whose shoulders and suffering other black women's success was built. In this and other poems in the collection, Clifton reminds the reader of the strength and perseverance of black women (including her ancestors) and the importance of not forgetting the sacrifices of those who came before. The poem from which the collection's title was taken, "good times," points to the strength of men in the African American community, specifically her father's ability to support his family and let them know the joy and celebration of community.

Her next collection of poetry, *Good News about the Earth* (1972), focuses on nature and the female **body** and black pride in general. The poem "the way it was" describes Clifton's negotiation of herself as a black woman and her own attempts to contain her body and behave like a nice, quiet white girl when she was growing up. Clifton also situates herself as teller and bearer of stories in poems about African American leaders **Malcolm X**, Eldridge Cleaver, and **Angela Davis**. In the final section of the collection she retells stories of people in the Old Testament as something sensual, mortal, and woman centered.

Clifton's next collection of poems is titled *An Ordinary Woman* (1974). The first half of the collection, "sisters," begins with a poem about black witches and their defiance of ordinary, white existence. This sisterhood poem is followed by poems to and about specific women to whom she feels deep and meaningful female connections, including her sister, her girlfriends, Harriet Tubman, her grandmother, poet Adrienne Rich, Sally Hemings, as well as her sons and her daughters. In this section, Clifton also introduces "Kali," the black goddess. The collection's second half, "i agree with the leaves," returns to this goddess and Clifton's struggle to incorporate and calm the dark nature of Kali's force into her own identity as a woman.

In *Two-Headed Woman* (1980), Clifton continues to explore her strong sense of self as a woman. She celebrates her female ancestors and Dahomey strength in poems like “lucy and her girls,” which trace this lineage as some force of nature. Other poems honor the poet’s body and take pride in features that define her as a black woman, as in “homage to my hair” and “homage to my hips.” The final section, “the light that came to lucille clifton,” celebrates her identity as a poet and a woman and glorifies the sources of her inspiration.

Clifton followed this collection of poetry with a prose piece that continues to explore the lives of her ancestors. In *Generations: A Memoir* (1976), which was edited by **Toni Morrison**, Clifton begins with a dedication to her father Samuel Sayles. The narrative is divided into the genealogy of Clifton’s family: “caroline and son,” “lucy,” “gene,” “samuel,” and “thelma.” Each section is punctuated by a photograph of the family member and a line from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* (1855). Much of this narrative is written in Samuel’s voice, telling a young Lucille the stories Caroline told him. These memories are interrupted by Clifton’s telling of her father’s **death** and her family’s journey to New York for the funeral, which she parallels to Caroline’s journey from New Orleans to Virginia. As a whole, the stories communicate Clifton’s belief in unity and continuity of family, love, and hope; the photographs and words and the memories they trigger hold the lines of family together. The narrative begins and ends with stories of women, as if to punctuate and shore up the entire family’s identity with this female strength.

In *Next: New Poems* (1987), Clifton shifts from speaking to ancestors and people close to her to speaking from the voices of people after their death. She speaks for Crazy Horse, for Thelma Sayles, for her recently deceased husband Fred Clifton, and from her own near-death experience with leukemia. Clifton also presses beyond geographical, cultural, and chronological boundaries in her exploration of seemingly disparate notions of Asia, Native American cultures, Japanese internment camps, and karma. This collection takes on more global themes than her other collections and at the same time focuses on issues of American identity and memory. Although this text is broader in scope, Clifton is never far from her focus on feminine power; several poems in this collection revolve around the magical nature of young girls.

In *The Book of Light* (1993), Clifton’s poetry reflects her own hungry desire to keep climbing past her age of sixty. She again recalls and celebrates her family as a source of strength in poems about her daughters, her husband, her father, and her mother. In two poems about the 1985 bombing of the Afrocentric group MOVE in Philadelphia, Clifton pays homage to one of the group’s brave survivors, Ramona Africa. In the final section of the collection, Clifton explores biblical and mythological figures such as Sarah, Naomi, Ruth, and Leda to retell the stories through their own female voices.

In *The Terrible Stories* (1996), Clifton gives human female strength and qualities to a fox. The fox poems explore the animal’s ability to voice terrible,

previously untold stories. Some of the specific stories that Clifton focuses on are of her breast cancer diagnosis and lumpectomy; Clifton links her ability to survive this experience to her strength as a Dahomey woman. In one of her breast cancer poems, Clifton speaks directly to other black women who know this fear and the reality of breast cancer statistics within this community. Her mother's strength and wisdom is again emphasized in "what did she know when did she know it" as Clifton wonders how her mother's wisdom was acquired and from what strong and powerful source it grew.

In *Quilting: Poems, 1987–1990* (1991), Clifton draws on an artistic form (the quilt) that has historically been used in the African American community as a means to preserve histories and family legacies. Quilts have also been used to ensure physical survival by providing warmth, as well as signals and maps of the **Underground Railroad**. Sections of the text share names of various **quilting** patterns and work to mend together stories in the same way a quilt does. Also in this collection, poems about Adam and Eve retell the story of the first words spoken, giving more agency to Eve. Other poems compare menstruation and its force and magic to the world's rivers. Clifton continues to tap into feminine life forces in "poem to my uterus" and "to my last period."

*Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988–2000* (2000) contains excerpts from earlier collections, as well as a section of new poetry. These new poems focus partly on her own despair at the world and the people in it and her recent experiences with kidney failure and cancer. In an attempt to retell history from her own perspective, Clifton describes a lynching photograph and the roles of the women spectators, a recent lynching in Jasper, Texas, as well as her own Aunt Timmie's role in deconstructing the **myth** of America. In this, her most recent collection to date, Clifton ultimately returns to narratives of hope, rebirth, and waiting for an ultimately unknowable future.

The whole of her work explores how life can be both joyous and tragic, both blithe and burdensome, both mundane and extraordinary. This image of complete wholeness in her expression of universal and personal histories is created through an economy (but not simplicity) of language that says as much about the world through what she does not say as through what is explicitly stated. In her rendering of a more complete story and **history** of herself and her world, Clifton responds to a tenet of **black feminism** in her remark that she wants to write stories for academics, students, and literary critics as much as she wants to write them for folks like her Aunt Timmie.

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**COLEMAN, WANDA (1946– )**

A recipient of the Lenore Marshall Prize, Wanda Coleman is an acclaimed poet, novelist, and performance artist, deeply concerned with the issue of racism and the lives of inner-city Los Angeles. Coleman grew up in the Watts district of Los Angeles and was involved in a number of social organizations set up in 1965's post-Watts rebellion. She has also worked as a medical secretary, a magazine editor, a journalist, and a scriptwriter. She is the first African American to receive an Emmy for television writing. Her poems have been frequently anthologized, and she has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation for her **poetry**.

Coleman's persistent portrayal of urban, dispossessed African American women highlights the often marginalized struggles that they have against anonymity, poverty, racism, sexism, and **violence**. Characterized as demotic, idiosyncratic, at once celebratory and embittered, Coleman's poems are not always easy to read. Like many **blues** lyrics, her writing is consistently direct and stark, but she has also been noted for the wide range in tone. Invoking an unforgettably pungent lyricism, Coleman captures the striking iconography of urban southern California: Bondi Beach, the all-night diner and laundromat, Griffith Park, Hollywood, the "Chevy graveyard."

*Bathwater Wine* (1998), which won the Lenore Marshall Prize, is a collection of poems documenting a black woman's transformations through passion and rage. Evocative of themes of **Gwendolyn Brooks**, the collection begins in the working-class South Central of the poet's childhood. The poet's father is a ring-damaged former boxer working the numbers and other hustles by day and employed as a "maintenance engineer" in an office building by night. His overshadowing presence sets off the isolation of the girl's childhood in the intricate social systems of elementary and junior high school. Here her poems acutely render her overarching theme, the intimacies of everyday life, weaving traditional poetic tradition together with fragments of popular culture.

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*Rei Magosaki*

### COLLINS, JULIA C. (?–1865)

Julia C. Collins, a schoolteacher from Williamsport, Pennsylvania, authored *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride* (1865), the first serialized novel by an African American woman. *The Curse of Caste* appeared in the *Christian Recorder*, a weekly newspaper published in Philadelphia by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, from February 25 to September 23, 1865. On the verge of completion, the novel lapsed after publication of chapter 31. Collins's **death** from tuberculosis on November 25, 1865, left *The Curse of Caste* unfinished.

Little is known of Collins other than what she wrote and what a few others wrote about her in the *Christian Recorder*. For almost a year before the appearance of her novel, Collins contributed short essays to the *Recorder* that reveal her commitment to originality of thought and self-culture, while also offering practical advice on how to be an effective and nurturing teacher and how young women of color should prepare themselves for matrimony. Early in 1865, probably in response to the looming defeat of the Confederacy and **slavery**, Collins forecast "the seemingly invincible destiny of our people" to be "a nation that shall shine forth as a star on the breast of time, and be gathered into the brilliant galaxy of great nations!" (1). Her own brand of African American cultural nationalism soon found expression in the act of writing a novel.

Although the *Recorder* published two notices of her death, little information about Collins's life, other than that her husband was named Stephen C. Collins, was included in these testimonies to her character. What can be ascertained, however, is that Collins was a respected, articulate, and relatively well educated black woman who felt a strong sense of inner calling to become what she almost certainly felt she was—the first African American woman novelist. Although **Harriet E. Wilson's** novel *Our Nig* was published in

1859, making *The Curse of Caste* the second novel published by an African American woman in the United States, it is extremely unlikely that Collins knew of Wilson or read her self-published novel.

*The Curse of Caste* focuses on the lives of a beautiful mixed-race mother and daughter whose opportunities for fulfillment through **love** and marriage are threatened by slavery and caste. Since slavery had not yet been abolished in the United States when Collins launched *The Curse of Caste*, the author's decision to make her maternal heroine, Lina Tracy, a slave whose husband must purchase her in order to free and then marry her, was timely. Collins not only depicts this marriage but allows it to flourish in the United States instead of moving it abroad, as would become conventional in later "tragic **mulatta**" **fiction**. After Lina's death, her daughter Claire, ignorant of her mother and of her own racial heritage, must discover her **identity**, her **family**, and her future. Although slavery does not menace Claire in the latter chapters of Collins's novel, the "curse of caste" does, particularly with regard to the young heroine's marital prospects. What Collins held in suspense for the unwritten ending of *The Curse of Caste* was whether Claire's climactic moment of self-discovery as well as her own chance to become a bride would be overshadowed by "the curse of caste." Nevertheless, the thirty-one surviving chapters of *The Curse of Caste* show that its author was determined to imagine a fictional United States in which slavery and caste existed but could not totally deny to deserving African American women the **freedom** to marry and pursue a fulfilling **domestic** life, even if such choices challenged the color line.

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*William L. Andrews*

### **COLLINS, KATHLEEN (1942–1988)**

Kathleen Conway Collins Prettyman was born on March 18, 1942, in New Jersey. Collins graduated from Skidmore College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy and **religion**. She also studied French and cinema at the graduate level in France (Middlebury Graduate School of French). She enjoyed a range of professional experiences from editor, writer, filmmaker, and producer to educator and mother of two, Nina and Emilio. Collins spent the early part of her career working as a **film** editor. Later, she became a professor in the Theatre Arts Department at City College in New York, where she taught a number of courses until her **death**.

Arguably, her greatest contribution is her **work** in the film industry during a time when black women filmmakers were rare. Exercising authority over

her art, Collins chose not to create films in Hollywood. As an independent filmmaker and a black woman, Collins faced many obstacles. After writing a script titled *Women, Sisters, and Friends* in 1971, she found it impossible to secure funding for production. Unrelenting, she directed the film *The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy* (1980), an adaptation of one of Henry Roth's works, *The Cruz Brothers*, from *The Cruze Chronicle: A Novel of Adventure and Close Calls*, with very little money. The film earned Collins first prize at the Sinking Creek Film Festival. In 1982, she managed to collect enough money to produce *Losing Ground*, the first feature film written, directed, and produced by an African American woman. The film starred Kathleen's good friend, Seret Scott, who would go on to perform in several other films by Collins. In *Losing Ground*, a comedic **drama**, Scott plays the protagonist, Sara Rogers, a professor of philosophy, so immersed in research and scholarship, she finds it difficult to inhabit ecstasy. *Losing Ground* received the First Feature award at the Portuguese International Film Festival, while Collins's second play, *The Brothers* (1982), earned her a National Endowment of the Arts Playwriting grant. *The Brothers* also received recognition as one of the best plays of 1982, according to the Audelco Society. The same year the Theatre Communications Group chose it as one of the twelve outstanding plays. Other plays by Collins include *In the Midnight Hour* (1981), *Remembrance* (1985), and *Only the Sky is Free*, about Bessie Coleman, the first African American aviatrix.

Collins was a daring writer. Her texts are significant in that they provide images of people of color, particularly women, rarely seen in popular film (i.e., middle-class black women). Collins's films challenge **stereotypes** and explore the interlocking oppressions of **race**, **class**, and gender.

Collins died in 1988, several years after she was diagnosed with cancer. She left behind work in a number of genres: stage plays (i.e., *Waiting for Jane*), short stories, screenplays (i.e., *Conversations with Julie*, *Madame Flor and Love*, and *Summer Diary*), and a novel, *Black and White Imagery*. At the time of her death, Collins was working on the film, *Gouldtown: A Mulatto Settlement*, and a novel, *Lollie: A Suburban Tale*. Today, African American filmmakers (and writers in general) continue to marvel at and be influenced by Kathleen Collins's work.

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*KaaVonnia Hinton-Johnson*

**COLOR PURPLE, THE**

*The Color Purple*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by **Alice Walker** published in 1982, chronicles the life of an African American girl, Celie, growing up in the Deep **South**. As Celie's mother becomes sick after multiple childbirths and refuses sex with her husband, Celie's stepfather begins raping Celie, resulting in two pregnancies. He gives the children, Adam and Olivia, to a missionary couple who later go to Africa. Celie is then married off to physically abusive Mr. —, a man whose wife recently died, leaving him to raise their children. However, Mr. — is in **love** with the **blues** singer Shug Avery. Strong-willed Sofia marries Mr. —'s son, who attempts to break her as Mr. — has done to Celie. Consequently, Sofia leaves him and is eventually imprisoned for striking a white man. Celie meets and falls in love with Shug, who through intimacy shows her the love that gives her strength. Meanwhile, Celie's sister Nettie meets up with the missionaries who have adopted Celie's two children and joins them on their move to Africa. Throughout the years Nettie writes Celie at Christmas and Easter, despite Mr. —'s promise to keep them apart permanently. Eventually, with the help of Shug, Celie finds Nettie's letters that Mr. — had hidden, leaves Mr. —, starts her own pants business, and is reunited with her sister.

*The Color Purple* is described as a feminist novel about an abused and uneducated black woman's struggle for empowerment. The novel was praised for the depth of its female characters and for its eloquent use of black English vernacular. Though some critics attacked Walker's depiction of Mr. —, just as they did of Grange Copeland in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, these critics often overlooked the transformation male characters go through as they move from an abusive individual to one more certain of his connection to the world. Many themes are explored in critical inquiries of the text such as **religion**, **sexuality**, **slavery**, education, sisterhood, patriarchy, epistolary conventions, clothing, fairy tales, African American folk culture and tradition, gender, and **race**. Ultimately, this novel brought much-needed national recognition of the literary works of African American women. Walker develops some of the characters in this novel in her later books *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *The Temple of My Familiar*.

See also *By the Light of My Father's Smile; In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose; Womanism*

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*Laura Madeline Wiseman*

## COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE

One of the earliest and most vocal groups to express a vision of radical **black feminism** was the Combahee River Collective. This Boston-based organization rooted itself in an **identity** politics and worked to address the simultaneous and intertwined oppressions of sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism that affect black women and the communities to which they belong.

The Collective was an offshoot of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), which held its initial conference in New York in 1973. The Boston chapter called itself the Combahee River Collective, a name taken from the river where Harriet Tubman headed the only military action led by a black woman. The Collective first met in Roxbury, Massachusetts, in January 1974, and it broke from the national organization in 1975. Among its members were Beverly Smith, Barbara Smith, Gloria Hull, Margo Okizawa Rey, and **Cheryl Clarke**. Although the Collective was first formed because the needs of black women were not being addressed either in the white-dominated feminist movement or in the male-based **civil rights movement**, the Collective's mission soon came to be additionally characterized by a strong lesbian politics and socialist perspective.

The Collective was responsible for two important publications. "The Combahee River Collective Black Feminist Statement" was widely distributed in 1977 and has since been reprinted. It discusses the roots of black feminism, the basic assumptions on which the Collective based its politics, challenges and possibilities of a black feminist movement, and issues central to black feminism. A second pamphlet—"Twelve Black Women: Why Did They Die?"—was published in 1979 in response to a series of murders of black women in the Boston area.

Although the Combahee River Collective is most often cited today on the basis of its publications, it also took a politically active stance on a number of issues. Consciousness raising was its most important function, especially in the early years. It defined itself as a study group that would also publish and distribute black feminist writing. A number of retreats were held to bring black feminists together, beginning in 1977. At the same time, members of the Collective worked with other groups on a number of issues, including the opposition of sterilization abuse, **violence** against women, and racism in the women's movement, and the formation of coalitions to support reproductive **freedom**, black women's art, and women in

prison. The Collective is still recognized for its work and its revolutionary visions.

*See also* Black Feminist Criticism

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*Laurie McMillan*

## COMEDY: AMERICAN STYLE

The first novel by **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, *There Is Confusion*, told of the effects of racial and sexual discrimination on several generations of light-skinned, middle-class African Americans; Fauset’s other novels *Plum Bun* and *The Chinaberry Tree* focus on a smaller number of (mainly female) individuals. Fauset’s fourth and final novel, *Comedy: American Style*, first published in 1933, combines these techniques. *Comedy* describes a Philadelphia **family history** that crosses several generations, but separate sections are dedicated to portraits of individuals.

Fauset structures the novel in a quasi-theatrical manner. The first two sections are designated as “The Plot” and “The Characters”; the final section is called “Curtain.” The other three sections are “Acts” dedicated to one character’s story. “Teresa’s Act” narrates the coming of age of Teresa Cary, a **mulatta** who, from an early age, is told not to associate with dark-skinned friends. Her mother, the light-skinned Olivia Cary, has been scarred by racist incidents from childhood, incidents that have convinced her that her family’s black heritage must be hidden. Intelligent and insightful, Teresa resents the “sham” of “**passing**,” realizing that her neighbors see the Carys as “colored people trying to be white.” After a white youth molests her, Teresa falls in **love** with the black-skinned Henry Bates. The couple plans to elope, but her mother discovers the plot. Olivia’s bile horrifies Bates, but believing in racial integrity, he rejects Teresa when she suggests, in desperation, that he could



exploit his Spanish-speaking capacities to pass as Mexican. Teresa's thwarted romantic life is compounded when she visits Europe, marrying, hastily, a Frenchman who turns out to be stingy, too close to his mother, unambitious, and racist.

Teresa's life's tragedy is followed by that of her young brother, Oliver, who breaks Olivia's heart when he is born because he is dark. He grows up bereft of maternal affection. One grotesque episode summarizes the hideousness of Olivia's contempt for her wrong-colored son. When Olivia's friends visit, Oliver pretends to be the butler. Only when concealing his true **identity**, performing as the stock Negro servant, does Oliver gain approval from Olivia. Eventually, Oliver discovers the reason for his mother's coldness, and he kills himself.

Phebe Grant is a light-skinned friend of Teresa's. Olivia despises her because her mother is black and had not been married to Phebe's long-gone (white) father. Like Teresa, Phebe suffers romantically because of color-based prejudice. She falls for the dark-colored Nicholas, but he tells her that he fears for their safety; a black man partnered with a white girl is an easy target for white racists' **violence**. The most profound tragedy, however, belongs to the least sympathetic character: Olivia. Responsible for Oliver's suicide and for her other children's romantic miseries, she is ostracized by her husband, Dr. Christopher Cary. The novel concludes with a bleak description of Olivia's empty, lonely life. Quashing her African heritage has backfired. As with all of Fauset's characters who fail to repent for their wrong-headed passing, she suffers for not following the Shakespearean maxim "To thy own self be true."

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*Kevin De Ornellas*

### COMMUNITY

Like-minded and close-knit, the positive idea of community remains good; the pejorative connotations of community become restrictive and closed. Traditionally in the African American use of the word, *community* centers around the idea of the **ancestor** and finds its strength in **memory**. Likewise, a shared mythos often cements African American communities in a manner respective

of **history**; out of the collective memory of **slavery**, communities cohere. Nebulous and paradoxical as an idea, community in African American women's **literature** remains at once inclusive and exclusive, local and universal, peaceful and militant, simple and complex.

To speak of the African American community in a limited manner akin to the sociopolitical Moynihan Report of 1965, *The Negro Family and the Case for National Action*, results in **stereotypes** and cultural misrepresentations. The nuclear **family** so representative of the white middle **class** becomes grotesquely rendered in the broken homes of a popular, fragmented idea of African American community. Starting at the individual household, one discovers the means of assessing the interactions that define community in its strictest sense. Beyond that, through the values, mores, and customs operating in a given arena, an individual makes connections to a larger, more substantial group of like-minded people. The individuality that characterizes communities manifests the profound inspiration from which authors write their stories, poems, and novels. By reaching out to local communities, one strikes toward the universal and better understands the dynamics shaping community. In the same way the definition of African American feminism changes over time to include womanist and lesbian ideas, the idea of community necessarily shifts in order to respond to cultural change. Communities, by their nature, change in design and population; the inclusive becomes exclusive, while wholeness becomes fragmented.

One may argue that the peculiar institution of slavery began the fragmentation of community that African American writers have since attempted to reassemble. Slavery offered no cohesive community; families torn apart often found no reunion, while the reality of communal gatherings was more forced and expected than arrived at freely. In **Audre Lorde's** 1984 essay collection *Sister Outsider*, she enumerates further divisions continuing to split rather than bring together African Americans. Citing the black male's oppression of women, the misunderstanding of **lesbianism**, and the ongoing prejudices of whites, Lorde reaffirms the outsider as reality to community's ideal. Lorde and others show the often hierarchical side of community.

Neither does community necessarily remain cohesive when class lines are crossed. In *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*, Lawrence Otis Graham shows the restrictive bonds of the African American elite that pervade government and industry in America. Graham's work makes sharp distinctions between the lower and middle classes aside the upper class. **Jessie Redmon Fauset's** *There Is Confusion* reverses that by showing the hardships of the ambitious middle-class African Americans striving against discrimination to rise above the normal standards of the time. Similarly, **Ann Petry's** *The Street* offers Lutie Johnson's belief that money can be a panacea to all of her problems. She finds, of course, that money does not alleviate her problems, and rather than being included into her community, she becomes exiled.

Like class, color also proves divisive within the black community, a gradient of privilege by which lighter-skinned African Americans gain advances

denied to those with dark skin. Even before Madame C. J. Walker brought it to the forefront of African American culture, an obsession with light skin has pervaded the African American imagination; **Zora Neale Hurston** described one such character as “color struck.” Pecola Breedlove in **Toni Morrison’s** *The Bluest Eye* cannot compete against the “high-yellow” Maureen Peal. While Pecola identifies with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed white ideal of **beauty**, one sees discrimination from other African Americans at the darkness of her skin. Similarly, Clare Kendry’s decision to pass in **Nella Larsen’s** *Passing* shows the sacrifices to community one makes in such a decision. By willingly excising herself from the African American community she grew up in, Clare finds an insatiable longing to rejoin that community, one her husband, unaware of her racial background, despises.

On another level, in the absence of community one finds a better definition of it as an ideal. **Sherley Anne Williams’s** Dessa Rose strives to unite all of those she loves in **freedom**, while **Nikki Giovanni**, in “Adulthood,” offers a litany of all of the **violence** and triviality separating the speaker from a true sense of community. The need to belong thrusts Frado in **Harriet E. Wilson’s** *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* into a search for community that she never realizes. When Cleo in **Dorothy West’s** *The Living Is Easy* tries to arrange a permanent reunion with her sisters, she learns that community cannot be forced. The iron-fisted rule by the men of Ruby, Oklahoma, in Morrison’s *Paradise* also fails to result in true community due to their rejections of outsiders. In all of these examples, community is more of a goal than a reality. Though all find that community is something to aspire toward, the various paths taken offer little opportunity to create a true sense of belonging.

Often, the most striking examples of true community are found among the lower or more rural classes. **Paule Marshall’s** *Praisesong for the Widow* shows Avey Johnson’s introduction into community during the Carriacou Excursion in Grenada. There she must put aside her usual high-class notions of behavior and surrender to the experience. In so doing, she becomes aware of the presence of community that is genuine rather than forced. Like Indigo’s community of healers in **Ntozake Shange’s** *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo*, Avey witnesses and participates in a sense of *communitas* where judgment is suspended for the sake of a commonality and equality. In that state, Avey can see clearly the importance of her past and understand the deep wound her great aunt Cuney felt upon expulsion from the church for dancing.

In **Alice Childress’s** *Like One of the Family*, the distancing effect Mildred uses when she rejects being one of the family to those for whom she works clearly makes known that her community is outside of that family. Yet one sees that Mildred does have a community to call her own. Ultimately, with the influence of memory, one might see that true community is limited by time. As in **Gloria Naylor’s** *Bailey’s Café*, community is there when it is needed but grows into a genuine sense of something special through the aid of memory. The “good old days” that memory harkens toward, though finite and in the past, reveal a transitory sense of community not necessarily large but

satisfying, much like the scene on the porch where Pheoby listens to Janie's story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Community exists, but generalizations must be avoided in order to see the intricate forms it can take. At its best, community is the all-embracing, welcoming, and strong metaphor writers cling to; yet beyond a polished surface, community can be back-biting, judgmental, and wholly antithetical to its definition. Over the course of a century, African American women writers have worked to deconstruct its very nature in order to suggest, in their writing, a healthy and sound approach to community.

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*F. Gregory Stewart*

## CONJURING

Conjuring is a folk practice that stems from African religious beliefs. In many West African **religions**, spiritual forces are believed to participate in dynamic interactions with the human and material world, and certain humans, following particular ritualistic practices, are believed to be able to manipulate these spiritual forces and therefore to affect events in the natural world. West African conjurers, who serve the function of doctors, diviners, and intercessors with the dead, are central figures in African religions and have both sacred and secular manifestations. Enslaved Africans brought these religious beliefs to the Americas, where they became separated from their original religious cosmologies, syncretically merged with elements of European and Native American beliefs, and acquired new rituals and purposes. While in Africa most conjurers are trained and sanctioned by the religious **community**, in the Americas most conjurers have worked independently, apprenticing with a practitioner of conjure but receiving no communally recognized position. Nonetheless, they are important cultural figures who act as healers, mediate interpersonal conflicts, and provide African Americans with a folk source of social agency.

Conjuring goes by a variety of names, including juju, mojo, hoodoo, rootwork, goopher, and gris-gris. Conjurers might be called hoodoo doctors, two-heads, rootworkers, or simply conjure men or women. The ability to conjure is open to members of both sexes and has historically allowed African American women a culturally empowered position within the community. As

the name *two-head* suggests, conjurers are thought to have second sight, to be able to foretell the future, read the causes behind events, and commune with the dead. Conjurers are thought to act as intermediaries between the living and their **ancestors**. Some conjurers show these abilities from birth, and being born with a caul over one's head is considered a sign of conjuring potential. Most conjurers keep to themselves to heighten their status and allow few initiates to see how they perform their conjuring rituals. To study conjure as an anthropologist, **Zora Neale Hurston** apprenticed with a number of conjure men and women throughout the **South** and published a fascinating account of the rituals she learned in *Mules and Men*.

In addition to Hurston, other folklorists and anthropologists, including Alan Dundes, Harry Hyatt, and John Roberts, have collected and analyzed thousands of folktales concerning conjure within the African American community. These conjure tales tell of ghosts and haunts, of lovers seeking retribution when wronged, of people healed and others made ill through conjure potions, of people gaining luck through the use of "hands," of prophecies foretold and fulfilled. In these tales, the person who is ill or who has been wronged approaches the conjurer for help, and the first act of the conjurer is to validate the supplicant's perspective as valid. Conjure practice does not, in other words, include any sort of investigation into the objective state of events, though some acts of conjure may be performed to discover whether a lover is philandering, for instance, but only if that is what has been requested. Conjurers therefore perform an important function for the African American community; in a country where the legal system has often ignored or discredited complaints from African Americans, conjure practitioners regularly validate and **work** to remedy their experiences of being wronged. As John Roberts has suggested in *From Trickster to Badman*, this function of conjure practice served a particularly important role during **slavery**; by using conjure to deal with internal disputes in the slave community, enslaved African Americans retained control over their own affairs to a greater extent than more overt aggression would have allowed them, and they gained a means of exerting power and influence over their surroundings.

Many **slave narratives** depict conjure as a potential means of protection from the dangers of slave life, though most slave narrators struggle with whether to acknowledge their belief in it to their white abolitionist audiences. Notably, **Frederick Douglass** discusses the role of conjure in the turning point of his narrative—his fight with the slave master Covey. Just before this fight, a fellow slave, Sandy, has given him a root to keep in his pocket for protection. When at first Covey does not whip him, and later attempts to beat him but is unsuccessful, Douglass leaves the reader to decide the root's efficacy. **William Wells Brown** and **Harriet Jacobs** also discuss the use of conjure in their narratives and claim some belief in it. There is, importantly, a competing tradition of tales debunking conjure as mere tricks and hoaxes, and Henry Bibb's narrative offers a number of these instances. Two competing forces have traditionally been in conflict with widespread conjure belief: **Christianity**, which teaches that conjure is heresy, since it claims to offer

access to the supernatural outside of sanctioned religion, and science, which teaches that conjure is mere superstition.

Religious scholars, particularly Theophus Smith, have studied the ways in which African Americans have syncretically practiced Christianity itself as a form of conjure, using the Bible as a source of ritual incantation that offers material for performative enactment, for conjuring or calling forth a liberating God. In this light, many of the **spirituals**, the abolitionist orations of Henry Highland Garnet, David Walker, and **Sojourner Truth**, as well as the beliefs underpinning the revolts of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, for instance, can be understood as within the conjure tradition.

Since the slave narratives, African American writers have frequently depicted conjure in their novels, and conjure's emphasis on the performative power of words (in the act of conjuring, words are often repeated ritualistically or written a magic number of times and then buried) has particularly interested writers. **Charles Waddell Chesnutt's** conjure stories depict this power in a number of ways. In the tale "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," for instance, the master's use of language to change reality—to designate one as "slave," for instance—is countered by the conjure woman Aunt Peggy, who uses her own powerful words and rituals to transform the master into a slave. The narrator of this tale, Uncle Julius, tells it to his own employer, John, who has recently fired Julius's nephew, and the effect of Julius's words is that John rehires the nephew. Thus the words of the conjure story itself act as a kind of conjure, redressing a wrong and providing agency for the African American characters in the story.

Conjure is also often used as a motif to stand for African American "roots" more generally and therefore as a sign of authenticity or rejection of an assimilated perspective. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass enhances his description of Sandy, the rootworker, claiming that he spoke in an African language and specifically putting the root in opposition to the books in which Douglass has formerly placed his faith. Throughout this text, Douglass gives voice to the African Americans who influenced his life to a far greater extent than he does in the earlier *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In Arna Bontemps's historical novel *Black Thunder*, Gabriel's rebellion against slavery in 1800 fails partly because Gabriel does not place enough faith in conjure, so that he does not read the stars correctly or protect himself with a conjure hand. More recently, **Gloria Naylor**, in *Mama Day*, and **Toni Morrison**, in many of her novels, have depicted the ways in which younger African Americans have first rejected conjure as superstition, only to have to relearn it from an older mentor in order to develop a fulfilling life.

Since the 1980s, literary critics have been particularly interested in the literary uses of conjure by African American women. The 1985 publication of *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* opened the door for critics to consider a link between conjurers, as symbols of empowerment and active control over the environment, with narrative forms that broke from the realist and naturalist traditions. In the introduction to *Conjuring*, Marjorie Pryse traces depictions of conjure women in **literature** by Chesnutt, Hurston,

and **Alice Walker** and argues that each not only represents conjure characters but uses conjure symbolically to gain narrative authority. Literary conjure, particularly for African American women, Pryse argues, offers a powerful means of self-definition and a way of rejecting the narratives of environmental determinism that realism and naturalism produce. Conjure's emphasis on the unseen, on the possibility of sudden transformations or reversals, counters realism's emphasis on the visible, the common, and the likely, which tend to highlight and perhaps maintain the status quo.

*See also* Folklore; Healing; Myth, Use of; Womanist Conjure

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*Suzanne Lane*

## CONTENDING FORCES

**Pauline Hopkins's** first novel, *Contending Forces* (1900), illustrates the blurring of the color line at the beginning of the twentieth century and asserts that black women did not deserve the sexual stigmas that both white and black societies placed on them. Though a black press published *Contending Forces*, Hopkins nevertheless relied on a white audience—specifically white women—to ensure her work was a commercial success. The novel's sentimental form appealed to these readers, and she used this genre to draw them into the text's deeper levels of social commentary and protest.

The novel's plot is divided into an antebellum section and a postbellum section. The former, set in the 1780s, follows Charles Montfort and his

**family** after they relocate from Bermuda to America. When Grace, Montfort's wife, arrives in North Carolina with her family, the local people are taken with her looks and charms. However, the evil Anson Pollack and Hank Davis suspect her family lines may contain black blood. Armed with this rumor and fueled both by a fear that Charles will emancipate his slaves as well as a burning jealousy for the Montfort fortune, the two men and their "committee on public safety" steal the Montfort plantation, kill Charles, and place Grace and her two sons, Charles and Jesse, into **slavery**. Grace is thus transformed, in the eyes of society, into a black woman. Hopkins completes this transformation with Grace's brutal beating at the hands of Bill Sampson and Hank Davis. By putting Grace on the whipping post, Hopkins evokes white women's sympathies and attempts to make them question whether this ruthless white patriarchal power could be turned against them. Unwilling to submit to Pollack, Grace takes her own life, while Charles and Jesse later escape to England and New England, respectively.

Jesse's descendants then become the focus of the postbellum section of the novel. His grandchildren, Will and Dora, live with their mother, Ma Smith, who runs a Boston boarding house. Two of their boarders also become key characters: the beautiful, mysterious, and very light-skinned Sappho Clark and the unscrupulous John Langley, Dora's fiancé. Sappho disappears after John threatens to reveal her tragic past—as a girl, she was raped by her white uncle and bore a child as a result—and attempts to blackmail her in order to take her as his mistress. Langley seeks to win Sappho Clark just as his granduncle Pollack had sought to win Grace Montfort—by discrediting her rather than courting her honorably. Will, who is in **love** with Sappho, tries desperately to find her. He learns of John's plot through a letter Sappho leaves for him, and he then tells Dora, who casts off John and eventually marries a promising schoolmaster. A discouraged Will soon leaves the country.

Throughout the novel is Hopkins's biting, and often ironic, direct address to challenge sternly the equation of **race** and sexual purity. As part of this challenge, the text asserts not only that the color line remains ambiguous but also that pervasive white ideologies that question the purity of black women are neither fair nor truthful.

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*Jennifer Larson*

### **COOPER, ANNA JULIA (1858–1964)**

Owing to her vibrant social activism, prominent role within a budding black elite, and unwavering commitment to African American higher education, Anna Julia Cooper may be identified as one of the preeminent black female intellectuals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, in her most famous work *A Voice from the South* (1892), Cooper emerges as one of the first black feminists. A leading spokeswoman at the 1893 World's Congress of Representative Women and the 1900 Pan-African Congress, she also remained active within the black women's club movement.

Cooper was born on August 10, 1858, in Raleigh, North Carolina, to her slave mother, Hannah Stanley, and George Washington Haywood, her mother's white master. Awarded a scholarship to attend St. Augustine's Normal and Collegiate Institute in 1868, young Annie Haywood also worked as a student tutor. Shortly after graduation she married George A. C. Cooper on June 21, 1877. With her husband already employed as a Greek instructor at St. Augustine's, she took a position there as well. Widowed two years later at the age of twenty-one, Cooper never remarried, a decision that later exposed her to scandalous—albeit unfounded—charges of impropriety. Cooper did foster two orphaned children and in 1915 became the legal guardian of her brother's five grandchildren.

A lifelong educator dedicated to promoting equal educational opportunities for black men *and* women, Cooper taught at her Raleigh alma mater until 1881, when she enrolled at Oberlin College in Ohio. Receiving her A.B. in 1884, she planned to resume lecturing at St. Augustine's; however, a disagreement regarding her position delayed her return, and she instead taught at Wilberforce College. Accepting a faculty appointment at St. Augustine's the following year, Cooper taught Latin, Greek, and mathematics courses. In 1887, primarily due to the strength of her teaching, Oberlin awarded her a master's degree.

Moving that same year to Washington, D.C., Cooper took a position at the renowned M Street (later Dunbar High) School. During her tenure as principal (1902–1906), the school became the focus of an intense educational debate between proponents of Booker T. Washington's industrial training model and advocates of a college preparatory model. Despite pressure to implement an industrial program, Cooper continued promoting a classical curriculum that prepared students to enter well-known, esteemed universities.

Following this controversy her contract was not renewed, and she was forced to teach briefly at Lincoln Institute in Missouri before returning to the M Street School in 1910.

A rigorous academic throughout her life, Cooper pursued doctoral studies at Columbia University (1914–1917) and the University of Paris (Sorbonne), where she received her Ph.D. in 1925. Even after her ostensible retirement, she assumed the presidency of Frelinghuysen University in Washington, D.C., in 1930. Upon her death on February 27, 1964, she had—for the better part of a century—worked tirelessly not only to fashion and participate in a thriving African American intellectual **community** but also to demonstrate the crucial roles black women should play within such communities. Indeed, through her own extraordinary example Anna Julia Cooper enacted their heretofore-latent possibilities.

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Mary Alice Kirkpatrick

**COOPER, J. CALIFORNIA (?– )**

J(ean) California Cooper was born in Berkeley, California, to Joseph C. and Maxine Rosemary Cooper. She attended a technical high school and a number of colleges. She has one daughter, Paris A. Williams.

Cooper first garnered attention as a playwright. She has written seventeen plays and was named Black Playwright of the Year in 1978 for *Strangers*. Cooper has won a number of awards—Literary Lion Award and James Baldwin Award, both from the American Library Association, 1988, and the American Book Award, 1989, for *Homemade Love*. She also received the National Book Club Conference Author of Distinction Award in 2004.

It was as a result of her **work** in the theater that she attracted the attention of **Alice Walker**, who encouraged Cooper to write **fiction**. Because of Cooper's use of vernacular, her narrative style has been compared to **Zora Neale Hurston** and Walker. Like Janie in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Celie in Walker's *The Color Purple*, Cooper's characters speak in black dialect. At the same time, however, Cooper also emphasizes the need to learn standard English in order to become successful. This message is most evident in the novel *In Search of Satisfaction*, published in 1994, in which the character Hosanna is advised to learn to speak better because it can make a difference in life. Cooper's characters also value education and crave knowledge, and they recognize that both are necessary elements in order for them to succeed in the white man's world. While Hosanna sadly thinks about school and dreams of an education, poverty forces her to seek a job; however, her job becomes her education as she vows to learn as many skills as she can. Similarly, in Cooper's first novel, *Family*, published in 1991, Always recognizes that knowledge is power, and she learns anything that she can. Her master's land thrives as a result of her knowledge, but Always knows that she can use her skills to improve her life as well.

Cooper uses the first-person narrator, so the reader feels intimately involved with the characters. While Cooper's narrators are both male and female, there is a feminist pattern in the work: There is a strong emphasis on the ability of women to empower one another. Cooper's first collection of short stories is titled *A Piece of Mine* and was published in 1984. This collection of twelve stories is dedicated to Cooper's "female **ancestors**." She describes them as women who have "struggled to survive, which is the only reason I am here." Certainly, the theme of survival is a prevalent one in the collection, which is primarily told by older and wiser first-person narrators. The stories focus on women who become empowered and seek revenge upon the abusive men in their lives. In the collection of ten stories in *Some Love, Some Pain, Sometime*, published in 1995, Cooper, in a folksy, conversational style, again explores the lives of black women who are trying to improve their lives. Some of the characters are older women who finally find their dream, either in the form of a loving man or a house.

Much of her work is set in rural communities and focuses on the lives of poor to middle-class black people, generally women. Some of her characters

are drawn to city life, but they come to value the simplicity and authenticity of life in the country after they have experienced the corruption of the city. For example, in *Homemade Love*, published in 1986 and Cooper's second short-story collection, the man in "Living" leaves his wife and their country life, which he perceives as being old and worn, for the big city. He quickly learns that the city is not all that he imagined and returns **home** within three days with a greater appreciation for his life in the country.

Many of her characters are seeking modest versions of the American dream. In *In Search of Satisfaction*, the characters want to escape their impoverished lives after **slavery** has been abolished. For example, Joel and Ruth struggle to own their own home and dream of sending their son, Lincoln, to college. In *Homemade Love*, the characters in "Without Love" find that they can own a home that is full of the **love** of children and grandchildren, but Cooper's message is that work is necessary to achieve this success.

Some of her characters are admirable, but others are not. Some are simply nosy neighbors, such as "The Watcher," who is too concerned about her neighbors' lives to notice her own troubled **family**. Others are completely consumed by greed and material wealth, such as the wealthy, white, and powerful Befoes in *In Search of Satisfaction*; they are worth millions but take advantage of their town's poorest inhabitants. On the other hand, many more, such as Joel and Ruth, cannot escape poverty and meet with much disappointment in life. At the same time, however, it is often the impoverished characters that recognize the value of the family. Although Ruth and Joel's children are sad as individuals, they are happy being together as a family. It is through the help of friends and family that many of Cooper's characters learn important life lessons that lead them to happiness.

Cooper identifies herself as a student of the Bible, and **religion** is a significant element in her writing; in fact, much of her work can be considered morality tales that teach lessons with a strong moral message. This is most apparent in *In Search of Satisfaction* in which the roles of good and evil and God and Satan are examined. Cooper conveys the idea that life is difficult and there is much evil in the world, but we must do the right thing and follow the Ten Commandments.

Another theme in Cooper's work is the impact of slavery on the lives of blacks. *Family* consists of four tales that deal with the tragedy, hope, and survival of a black family as a result of slavery. The narrator, Clora, like her mother and her grandmother, kills herself to escape the horrors of slavery. She tries to poison her children as well, but they survive. Before her own **death**, Clora's mother warns her twelve-year-old daughter about what lies ahead for a slave girl on the verge of womanhood. Shortly after, Clora is raped by her master's son and gives birth to her first child at thirteen. Clora cries for the future of her newborn daughter whose life has been decided for her because she was born into slavery. Characters such as Yin in *In Search of Satisfaction* hope to give birth to boys because they know that life is too hard for a girl, especially a black girl in a white man's world. In much of her work, such as the collection *Homemade Love*, characters express their hatred for white people but

often come to recognize that not all whites are evil. For example, in “Happiness Does Not Come in Colors,” the narrator learns that love, like happiness, “does not come in colors.”

Cooper’s style is simple, but she has much to say, and she frequently uses humor to convey her messages about love, hate, family, and religion.

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*Diane Todd Bucci*

## COPPIN, FANNY JACKSON (1837–1913)

The first African American woman to serve as principal of an American educational institute, Fanny Jackson Coppin was a dedicated and influential educational reformer. Born a slave, Jackson’s **freedom** was bought by her aunt, Sarah Orr Clark, to whom she ultimately dedicated her **autobiography** *Reminiscences of School Life and Hints on Teaching*. *Reminiscences*, written near the end of her life, tells of her own life experiences as well as those of a number of teachers and students with whom she worked.

Soon after her aunt purchased her freedom, Jackson found work as a **domestic** servant in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and with the help of generous employers, she eventually received an education through private tutoring and formal schooling. After graduating from Rhode Island Normal School, Jackson entered Oberlin College in Ohio, the first college in the United States to admit women and among the first to admit blacks. At Oberlin she studied English, mathematics, and classics, and she began teaching in the

college's Preparatory Department. Her courses were popular among the students, despite the faculty's concern that some students might object to having an African American woman as a teacher.

While at Oberlin, Jackson was recruited by Philadelphia's Institute for Colored Youth, a high school and teacher training institute opened by the Society of Friends in 1837. She began **work** there as the principal of the Ladies Department after earning her baccalaureate degree in 1865, and she was promoted to principal of the entire Institute in 1869. The Institute offered a classical education for black youth—including courses in Greek, Latin, and mathematics—and under Jackson's directorship, the Institute also began to offer industrial training, predating the industrial programs offered by the Tuskegee Institute. Jackson, however, did not view industrial training as a substitute for classical higher education but as a supplement to it.

Jackson was especially concerned with the education and professional development of young women. While living in Philadelphia, she organized the Women's Exchange and Girls' Home, which provided both housing and instruction to working women and students. She also found ways to explicitly express her feminism by speaking publicly on black women's **history** and intellectual potential and by publishing a regular newspaper column in which she reported the professional and intellectual achievements of notable women and encouraged women to attend school, pursue careers, and open their own businesses.

In 1881, Fanny Jackson married Levi J. Coppin, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She continued to administer the Institute for Colored Youth until 1902, even when her husband was transferred to Baltimore. In 1902, she accompanied her husband on missionary **work** to South Africa, where she developed domestic training and temperance projects, working primarily with poor women.

Fanny Jackson Coppin died in 1913. Coppin State College in Baltimore, Maryland (originally called Fanny Jackson Coppin Normal School) is named for her.

*See also* Black Feminism; Slavery

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*Linda Joyce Brown*

## **CORREGIDORA**

Main character and **blues** singer Ursa Corregidora loses her womb in the opening pages of **Gayl Jones’s** brilliant and disturbing novel *Corregidora* (1976), after her husband accidentally pushes her down some stairs when he is drunk and jealous. Ursa’s husband, Mutt, wants her to stop singing so he can support her but also so that he can prevent other men from watching her; Ursa refuses because her singing is as much self-expression and art as it is a job. This loss is symbolic of what women can lose in the struggle with men for self-determination and ownership of their own bodies. The loss for Ursa, however, has greater significance as well, since she has been raised to “make generations”—to produce descendants that will exist as evidence of the brutal enslavement and **rape** of her maternal **ancestors** by the Portuguese planter Corregidora. Ursa’s childhood is filled with her grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s stories about the way Corregidora kept them as prostitutes and slept with both, fathering Ursa’s grandmother and mother, and these stories, too, threaten to deny Ursa her own **identity** as anything but the evidence of oppression. In this context, the loss of her womb can be understood as an ironic and painful emancipation from the mandate to reproduce that legacy.

In many other ways as well, the contexts of sexual, racial, and historical oppression overlap, entwine, and conflict. Before Mutt assaults Ursa, he has threatened to auction her off on stage to the highest bidder, as if she were both prostitute and slave. He speaks about her **body** as if he owns it, forcing her to say that her vagina is his, forcing her to have sex with him when she does not want to, and refusing to have sex with her when she does want to.

This intersection of racial and gender oppression is also highlighted through the subplot of Ursa's neighbor, Cat, who leaves her husband because she refuses to be cast in a lowly role as a **domestic** worker in a white woman's kitchen, only to come **home** to be a sexual object in her husband's bed.

Cat's rejection of subservience to both men and white employers (she becomes a self-employed hairdresser) offers one empowering response to this oppression, and another is offered through the story of a slave who cut off her master's penis when he tried to rape her. But despite these examples, Ursa is hampered by the one-sided nature of the stories she has been told since her childhood. She is oppressed both by the legacy of **slavery** that is passed on through her grandmothers' stories of *Corregidora* and by the silences. What is omitted from these stories are her mother's personal memories of her relationship with Ursa's father and the act of resistance her great-grandmother performed before escaping from slavery. Only when she recovers these can Ursa discover her own means of empowerment.

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*Suzanne Lane*

### CORTEZ, JAYNE (1936- )

Jayne Cortez is a noted and prolific poet, visual artist, performance artist, filmmaker, and teacher. She has often been called a "**jazz** poet" whose work commonly embraces themes of social justice and empowerment of people of color worldwide.

Cortez was born on May 10, 1936, in Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Her early life was spent as part of a military **family**; her father was in the army. The family moved briefly to San Diego, then to Los Angeles and Watts, where she grew up.

Cortez received sustained and extensive exposure to jazz music during her youth. She attended Manual Arts High School and later Compton Junior College, where she received training in the visual arts of painting and drawing.



She cofounded and served as director of the Watts Repertory Theater from 1964 to 1970. She has traveled extensively, particularly to African and Latin American countries, gaining experiences that often find expression in her work. Cortez has been self-published at times in her career and founded Bola Press in 1972. Along with Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo, Cortez helped to establish the Organization of Women Writers of Africa (OWWA).

Cortez has had many other successful personal collaborations. She married jazz legend Ornette Coleman in 1954 and then later divorced him in 1964; they have one son, Darnardo, who is an accomplished musician with whom Cortez has often performed. Cortez married sculptor Melvin Edwards in 1975; Edwards has created illustrations for some of her books.

Cortez has received many awards throughout her long, fruitful career. In 1979, she received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship; two New York Foundation for the Arts Awards in 1973 and 1981; an award from the Afrikan Poetry Theatre in 1994; and a Fannie Lou Hamer Award in 1994.

Cortez's work and personal expression merge art, music, **poetry**, orature, performance, and painting into a single form. Her work has been described as "fusion." Many critics have commented that her poetry skillfully incorporates jazz and **blues** structures. Cortez frequently performs her work; she has had her own jazz ensemble. Critics have also described her poetry as "surreal"—Cortez uses dreams and explorations of the subconscious in her work—and visceral in her word choice and use of language.

Thematically, Cortez's work explores the psychology of the African American experience and social justice. In her early works, such as *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares* (1969) and *Scarifications* (1973), Cortez explores issues of social protest and Pan-Africanism and expresses solidarity with the experiences of the urban poor. In her later works, such as *Coagulations* (1984), she embraces a human rights stance that actively confronts militarism, globalization, and environmental degradation. Cortez has also addressed **rape** and the abuse of women in her poetry as well as celebrated many women who have inspired her, such as Bessie Smith, Fannie Lou Hamer, and **Billie Holiday**.

Cortez has many inspirations for her work: Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Lena Horne. Cortez has noted the influence of many poets including **Amiri Baraka**, **Langston Hughes**, Aimé Césaire, **Gwendolyn Brooks**, **Margaret Walker**, and Pablo Neruda.

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*Kimberly Black-Parker*

### COWDERY, MAE (1909–1953)

Mae Virginia Cowdery, appelled by anthologist William Stanley Braithwaite as a "fugitive poet," had a brief but noteworthy literary career. An only child, she was born into the middle **class** in Philadelphia in 1909. She received her secondary education at the Philadelphia High School for Girls, a school that catered to scholastically talented students. During Cowdery's senior year, three of her poems were accepted for publication in the 1927 spring issue of *Black Opals*, a Philadelphia-based monthly publication that attempted to rival W.E.B. Du Bois's *Crisis* magazine. That same year, Cowdery received the Krigwa Poem Prize for "Longings," which was published in Harlem's most successful magazine, *Crisis*. After high school, Cowdery studied at Pratt Institute in New York to pursue fashion design but did not graduate. Beyond her sporadic trail of publications, little biographical information is available on Cowdery. Between 1927 and 1930, Cowdery's **poetry** appeared in *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *Unity*, and *Carolina* magazines as well as in three anthologies. In 1928 Cowdery also published the one-act play *Lai-Li* in *Black Opals*. Between 1931 and 1935, there is no record that Cowdery published, but in 1936, she completed *We Lift Our Voices*, a volume of poetry.

Fellow Philadelphian Alain Locke and poet **Langston Hughes** befriended Cowdery, but even with such well-respected allies, and even as one of the only **Harlem Renaissance** women poets to publish a full-length book of poetry, she remains on the margins of the Harlem Renaissance canon. The only available image of Cowdery is a photo that appeared in the magazine *Crisis* in 1927. Pushing the boundaries of 1920s gender expectations, the photograph shows her with short, cropped hair, wearing a suit and bowtie. Evoked in this snapshot and unambiguously projected is the butch lesbian persona. But the butch psyche is articulated not simply in the image of Cowdery but also in her poetry. (By *butch* I refer to the sexually masculine persona that has historically been a part of lesbian culture.)

“Longings” is a sensual poem full of feminine images with a subtext that hints at the strong **lesbianism** theme that will come to characterize her later work. In this poem, Cowdery approaches blackness, like lesbian **sexuality**, obliquely and through metaphor. Her narrator is dark skinned and achieves a metaphoric orgasm with the stanza that reads “To plunge— / My brown body.”

Cowdery’s poem “Dusk” was published in Charles Johnson’s collection *Ebony and Topaz* in 1927 and continues with a celebration of blackness, lesbian desire, and eroticism. It echoes a theme we find in many black writers of the time—that the true self can be embraced only in the shadows or at nighttime. Though Cowdery’s female images of sensuality and sexuality are cloaked and ambiguous in “Longings” and “Dusk,” she embraces them fully in her later work. In “Insatiate,” Cowdery’s most unapologetic and brazenly lesbian poem, she laughs at the foibles of jealousy and desire.

Cowdery took her own life at age forty-three, and much of her work still remains in critical obscurity. Yet through her embodied metaphors and disruptive choice of poetic personae, Cowdery allows the reader to hear the voice of the early-twentieth-century American butch lesbian.

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Lorna J. Raven Wheeler

## CRAFT, ELLEN (1826–1891) AND WILLIAM (1824–1900)

Unlike the majority of those born into American **slavery**, Ellen and William Craft documented their lives for posterity in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), a **slave narrative** that they published jointly in England. Ellen was born on a large plantation in the town of Clinton, Georgia, to a **mulatto** called Maria and her white owner, Colonel James P. Smith. When Smith’s

daughter Eliza married Robert Collins, a prosperous doctor and businessman, her father's wedding present was the eleven-year-old Ellen. She was forced to leave her mother and accompany the newlyweds to Macon, a growing cotton production and transportation center in the middle of the state.

By her early twenties, Ellen had met and fallen in **love** with William Craft, an enslaved carpenter and the "property" of a Macon banker. In December 1848, the couple initiated a bold escape to the North. Ellen, who could easily pass for white, boarded the first-class compartment of a train disguised as the sickly gentleman planter Mr. Johnson, whose black valet William escorted "him" to medical treatments in Philadelphia.

Although fugitives frequently fled bondage dressed as members of the opposite gender, Ellen's successful camouflage incited notoriety and controversy—extending to her staunchest white supporters—about whether African **identity** diminished or even negated an enslaved woman's femininity. Reports in the northern newspapers of Ellen's **domestic** life in Boston, the national base for antislavery reform where the Crafts settled, spoke back to such conceptions of **race** by proclaiming how she epitomized **whiteness** and **motherhood**. They described her as a reticent and retiring wife, an excellent and industrious seamstress, and a devout Christian mother whose desire to marry—and to bear children that no southern man or woman owned—superseded any scruples she might possess about unsexing herself in trousers.

Ellen herself actively reinforced such conventional gender roles when she participated in public abolitionist gatherings. Following the carefully choreographed lectures of his male contemporaries **Frederick Douglass** and **William Wells Brown**, William would present a stirring oral account of their escape. In contrast, Ellen waited and, on cue from William, acknowledged the applause by standing, speaking briefly, and then returning to her seat on the podium. She certainly would have been aware of social taboos that prohibited respectable women from speaking before mixed-gender or promiscuous audiences. Although she was never coy about expressing her opinions directly and firmly in society as well as private correspondence, this staging partnership distinguishes her from **Sojourner Truth**, **Maria Stewart**, and other African American women who stood alone behind podium and pulpit in the years before the Civil War.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave judicial support to slaveholders' efforts to return escaped blacks to bondage, forced the Crafts to seek safer, more hospitable domicile in England. When their owners commissioned agents to retrieve the now-famous pair, irate Bostonians rallied against them and, led by the biracial Vigilance Committee, chased away the bounty hunters. Sequestered in separate houses for their own security, the couple became virtual prisoners in the most free of the nominal Free States. Fleeing overland through Maine to Halifax, Nova Scotia, they boarded a Liverpool-bound ship and rang in the following year as British residents.

Ellen and William lived in Great Britain for nearly two decades, primarily in the London suburb of Hammersmith. Ellen refined her public persona as a

conventional woman who revolved around **home** and **family**, even though the challenging realities of a fugitive slave often contradicted this image. While William traveled to West Africa for long stints to educate and bring **Christianity** to the youth, and to cultivate cotton crops that would undermine the southern plantation economy, Ellen managed their household for extensive periods as a single parent. They bore five children: Charles, William, Brougham, Alfred, and Ellen. However, rumors circulated by the southern press that Ellen wanted to return to slavery impugned her character. In addition, two white Bostonians, Theodore Parker and James Freeman Clarke, would recall conversations where she reputedly confessed to having had a child before she met William. Even though she may have been a victim of **rape**, even though the child reputedly died because of a cruel mistress, Ellen most certainly would not have registered as virtuous by Victorian standards of morality. The prospect of such a shaming story fouling the ears of sympathizers and detractors alike must have magnified the pressures both Crafts faced to walk a straight-laced, pious path.

In 1870 they returned to Georgia. An initial attempt to open a school was foiled by night riders, who burned the building to cinders. On land purchased with funds raised by northern benefactors, they next instituted a cooperative farm and school for newly freed slaves in Ways Station, near Savannah, where decades before they had disembarked the Macon train and boarded a steamer toward **freedom**. The abolitionist Lydia Maria Child had published their story in a primer for the southern black **community** called *The Freedmen's Book* (1865, 1866), so it seemed only fitting that they actually launch their own educational institution. Ellen thus joined the ranks of African American women like **Charlotte Forten (Grimké)**, a minority among the masses of white schoolmarms educating the freedmen. Yet both she and William lacked the **class** privilege and freeborn status that even Forten claimed.

Unfortunately, this second project ended in financial ruin and scandal. In their final years, the Crafts joined their daughter in Charleston, South Carolina, a former port for the slave trade where, as "Mr. Johnson," Ellen had once rested as they escaped in the rooms of a posh hotel where human beings were sold at street level.

While the Crafts' written legacy is *Running a Thousand Miles*, William's first-person voice dominates. We can only speculate about portions Ellen may have contributed and the stylistic and editorial suggestions she may have made. Yet her courage in particular has inspired the work of many women writers, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), **Hannah Crafts's** *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (c. 1855), and Lydia Maria Child's *The Stars and Stripes* (1858), to **Georgia Douglas Johnson's** *William and Ellen Craft* (1926), to the performances of Marcia Estabrook's Character Educational Theatre and Gertrude Jeanette's Hadley Players of Harlem, New York. Both Ellen and William are remembered as heroes for all seasons.

*See also* Passing

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*Barbara McCaskill*

## CRAFTS, HANNAH (1830?–1880?)

Hannah Crafts is an enigma. The runaway slave who finally made a life in New Jersey is said to be the first black woman novelist. Yet, as the *American Heritage Dictionary* sums *enigma*, the woman is a puzzle, ambiguous, and inexplicable. Her true **identity** remains a boggle to literary researchers. Her authorship role in the novel *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is ambiguous. Lastly, how she garnered the skills to produce such a work remains largely inexplicable. What is left is speculation. Nonetheless, readers will experience the psychological development of a woman from a child who self-concedes her insignificance to a woman who shows her strength through accomplishment, compassion, and ingenuity.

Readers will not find a lot of information on the author in what is billed as an 1850s fictionalized **autobiography**. The manuscript, resurrected from the

shelves of New York's Swann Galleries auction house by Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is largely written in the first person, but there are times when the writer seems not to be the narrator. Those who have the tenacity to plow through the Warner Books-produced *New York Times* best-seller, edited by Gates, will find about all of the extant biographical information about Crafts.

She appears to be a self-taught writer who sampled liberally from classic novels such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Sir Walter Scott's *Rob Roy* (1817), and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–1853). Researchers say those books were included in the library of her third master, North Carolina politician, landowner, and author John Hill Wheeler. Scholars also cite as influences Shakespeare's tragedies, Byron, **Phillis Wheatley**, biographer Felicia Hemans, and the Bible.

Historical document expert Joe Nickell, one of the scholars who helped authenticate the manuscript, ties Wheeler to Crafts because the novel describes the mid-1850s U.S. minister to Nicaragua in a manner similar to the way he presents himself in his diaries. Crafts refers to the slaveholder as "Wh—r," early in the novel. Later, she uses the full name. Also, Wheeler was born and raised and owned land in Murfreesboro, in Lincoln County, North Carolina, which is mentioned in the narrative.

"I am neither clever, nor learned, nor talented," Crafts begins her self-description in the novel. "When a child they used to scold and find fault with me because they said I was dull and stupid." The narrator concludes that what she really had was a "silent unobtrusive way of observing things and events." Readers gain evidence of that perceptiveness as the manuscript continues.

Crafts says she was "not brought up by anybody in particular." The author emerges as a blank slate, which is typical in **slave narratives**. The problem is that the lack of information hides her time and place of birth. If, as some researchers suspect, the author was in her twenties during the 1850s, Hannah Crafts's birth can be fixed in the 1830s.

"The birds of the air, or the beasts of the field are not freer from moral culture than I was," she writes. From those vague images throughout the novel develops the tale of a woman who grows up on a Virginia plantation called Lindendale, owned by the Cosgroves, is sold to a **family** named Henry, who in turn sell her to the Wheelers of North Carolina, and from whom she escapes to New Jersey. In the end, as the narrative states and as experts believe, Crafts becomes the teacher in a black school and is the wife of a Methodist minister. In the end, the writer states that her husband sits nearby as she writes.

Crafts tends to speak about the places she works and her escape adventures through women. Readers will learn more about Mrs. Henry and Mrs. Wheeler than their husbands. Those who grew used to novels where male slaves take the lead in the control of plantation life or escapes will see those activities through women's eyes. Even when Crafts, during the successful escape attempt, disguises herself as a white man, she is urged by the black Aunt Hetty to move toward **freedom** within her own gender—as a white woman.

Gates notes that many of the names and places referenced in the book correspond to nineteenth-century places and people. Three Cosgroves are mentioned in the 1850 census. Henry was a Presbyterian minister in Stafford County, Virginia. Also, Milton, a small village mentioned during one of Hannah's attempts to escape, existed near Tyler's Mill in Charles City County, Virginia.

The novel frequently refers to Jane Johnson, who escaped John Wheeler's bondage in 1855. The case gained notoriety because William Passamore, one of the abolitionists who aided her, was sued. Researchers believe Crafts was bought to replace her. Gates and others estimate that she also escaped from Wheeler between late March and early May 1857. If so, it is supposed that the real Hannah Crafts might be Hannah Vincent, who appears in 1870 and 1880 New Jersey census records as the wife of Thomas Vincent.

Gates credits the late Howard University scholar Dorothy Porter with piquing his interest in the verification of the author's racial identity. She asserted that the author was a runaway slave because the narrator identifies herself as a black with "white" looks. According to Gates, Porter said there would be no reason for a white author to try to disguise herself as African American. Also, Porter backs the narrator's claim based on the sensitive way the work represents black characters.

In his hunt for the real Crafts, Gates began with federal census records. "No Hannah Crafts are listed in the entire U.S. Federal census between 1860 and 1880," he writes. The researcher found a Hannah *Craft*. Gates said the name was popular in the mid-nineteenth century, but all of the women were white.

He found a black Hannah *Kraft* who lived in Baltimore County, Maryland, in 1880. The woman was married to Wesley Kraft. The woman was born in Virginia, as was the story's narrator. Gates thought the protagonist's nuptial with a Methodist minister might have been a play on the real-life husband's name. The Rev. John Wesley was a Methodist founder. Gates was disappointed.

A copy of the census record from the Mormon Family History Library in Salt Lake City showed Hannah Kraft was thirty in 1880. That makes the person too young. They believed the book was written between 1855 and 1861. Also, Kraft could neither read nor write.

Gates turned to the 72,000 records of deposits into the Freedman's Bank, which are also available from the Mormon library. He found a Maria H. Crafts, who opened an account in 1874, whose complexion was listed as "white." Gates returned to census records and found twenty-three *Mary* H. Crafts in the 1880 list who were described as black. Six were described as **mulatto**. One was born in 1840s Virginia. She was a decade older than the researchers expected, but as a teacher, the woman could also be a writer. Gates's search continued.

The protagonist begins as the property of the De Vincent family. Gates checked whether she used that last name after the escape from **slavery**. He found a Hannah Ann Vincent in Burlington, New Jersey, in 1850. The twenty-two-year-old, mixed-blood woman, according to the census, lived with



a forty-seven-year-old black woman, Mary Roberts. Gates thought this was a dead-end lead but revived her as a possibility after a check of Joseph H. Morgan's 1887 *History of the New Jersey Conference of the A.M.E. Church*. A Hannah Vincent is listed as a stewardess, treasurer, and teacher at Burlington's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.

Despite all that remains unknown about the author, Hannah Crafts's novel provides chilling insight into the life of an antebellum slave. Experts say the book breaks many of the **stereotypes** present in other recollections of the time. Crafts's story does not present a system of exploitation that offered the enslaved a pleasant life. At the same time, there are some lighter moments. In the end, the author's life and work show that slaves' persistence and patience were key in their ability to maintain and fulfill their hopes.

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Vincent F. A. Golphin

## CROSSING OVER JORDAN

**Linda Beatrice Brown's** second novel, *Crossing Over Jordan* (1995), tells the story of four generations of African American women, focusing on the last two of those generations. The story is of the struggle from **slavery** to **freedom**, from oppression to independence.

The novel opens with a prologue that tells an African creation **myth** about the Longmother Spirit and her gifts of **memory** and words to generations of Africans and African Americans. The epilogue returns to the Longmother with images of undoing clothing and lives to take the fragments and reweave them into stories to pass to future generations. Within the frame formed by this mythic prologue and epilogue is another frame story set in a future 2012 that features two elderly women, Hermine Greene and her Aunt Story, who bicker and argue during their final days together. The narrative is divided into chapters, each beginning in the 2012 frame, then going back to pick up the thread that begins in 1873 with the story of Georgia McCloud, mother to Sadie and grandmother to Story, and continues across the chapters to 1974.

Sadie marries the abusive Reverend Jacob Temple. Story resents her mother's weakness and fears and loves her domineering father. Story's younger sister, Bertricia, also known as Bertie, or Baby Sister, is the spoiled baby of the **family** whom Story resents. Story hardens herself in her resolve to achieve education and a respected position in her **community**. She intervenes in Bertie's **love** life, stealing her boyfriend Herman Greene and indirectly causing Bertie's **death**. Story marries Herman and bears a daughter, Hermine. After Herman's death, Story returns to Hattenfield, North Carolina, where she grew up, establishing the **fiction** that Hermine is her orphaned niece. By sheer determination, Story gains a college education and becomes a respected teacher in her community but shuts Hermine out of her life for fear that she will lose herself in **motherhood**.

Hermine struggles with her educational goals, her sexual **identity**, and civil rights and student activism of the early 1960s. After spending much of her adult life in California, Hermine returns to North Carolina in 1987 to care for Story. Through the family photo album and inquiries from Herman's family, Hermine finally learns, in the last 2012 segment, that Story is her mother. She confronts Story, who grudgingly admits the truth. While Story never comes to terms with the lies she has lived to achieve her position, Hermine is able, finally, to reconcile herself to her **history** and to figuratively cross over Jordan to reach a kind of peace with her mother, her history, and herself.

*Crossing Over Jordan*, with its use of myth and its intense story of the struggles of several generations of women, showcases Brown's poetic skills and her commitment to the theme of the struggles of black women to liberate themselves from the oppression of history and society to become their own persons.

*See also* Civil Rights Movement; Sexuality

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*Harriette C. Buchanan*

### CULLEN, COUNTEE (1903–1946)

One of the most acclaimed poets of his time, Countee (pronounced count-tay) Cullen was born Countee LeRoy Porter in Louisville, Kentucky, though some sources claim it was New York, New York, or Baltimore, Maryland. His early life is unclear, but it is thought that he was raised by his paternal grandmother until her **death** when he was nine. In 1918, when he was fifteen, he was unofficially adopted by the Reverend and Mrs. Frederick A. Cullen. Frederick Cullen was the prominent pastor of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem and later became the president for the Harlem chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The Reverend Cullen's political activity and religious leadership in Harlem pulled Countee physically as well ideologically into the **Harlem Renaissance**, the flowering of black artistry in the twentieth century.

While Cullen was exposed to black leaders of his age, his formal education took place in predominantly white schools such as the De Witt Clinton High School in Manhattan, where his academic achievements led him to become vice president of his class and editor of the school newspaper as well as winning prizes for his speeches and **poetry**. While attending New York University (NYU), he won a number of poetry contests, in particular, winning the Witter Bynner Contest for undergraduate poetry sponsored by *Poetry* magazine. In 1925, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from NYU, and *Color*, his first book of poetry, was published. *Color* contains some of his best-known poems: "Heritage," "Incident," and "Yet Do I Marvel."

The third poem is perhaps his most widely referred to because in it Cullen marvels at God's creation of a poet who is black but whom God calls to art anyway. This poem has often been seen as a cry of despair from a poet struggling to be who he is in a time and place that often tried to prevent him from doing just that, but it can also be seen as a declaration, a loud affirmation, of the black poet's work. God calls the black writer to art just as white writers have been called. While the theme of the poem is clearly current with the political and artistic milieu of his day, the style of "Yet Do I Marvel" is a traditional sonnet. This suggests a central concern for the reading of Cullen's poetry. While many writers of the Harlem Renaissance were experimenting with new rhythms and forms, all of Cullen's poems show a clear influence of

the traditional white European style of poetry. Though he was a prominent writer during this time, his popularity was not universal. Some critics preferred a less rigid, less traditional style for the “new” poetry being written. Unlike **Langston Hughes** and others who were experimenting with poetic form and voice, Cullen’s major poetic influences were the English Romantics, particularly John Keats. Like Keats, Cullen seemed to believe that art should be transcendent; it should take us out of our time and place and be universal for all people. This ideal was clearly not shared by many other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, many of whom were more interested in creating an art that spoke about a people’s experience within the particular place of the United States.

Cullen has often been critiqued for not writing more about **race** or protest, and much has been made of his stated desire to write a race-neutral poetry. However, a close examination of his poetry reveals that he wrote many poems about what it meant to be black in the United States during the early part of the twentieth century, but he did so using traditional poetic forms and with Greek, Roman, and European allusions. Cullen did write poems about the racial injustices of the day, but he placed those thematic concerns within the confines of a white European poetic tradition embodied by Keats and the other Romantics.

In 1926, he earned a master’s degree from Harvard University and began working as an assistant editor for the magazine *Opportunity*. His column, called “The Dark Tower,” helped make him more prominent in literary circles by his criticism and promotion of other writers. He published three books over the next three years: *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1927), *Copper Sun* (1927), and *The Black Christ, and Other Poems* (1929). In the title poem of *The Black Christ*, Cullen uses the analogy of the lynching of a black man to Christ’s crucifixion, revealing that the poet was far from indifferent to the causes of his day and that he was moved to write his own particular kind of protest poetry.

The year 1929 was monumental in Cullen’s life. He published *The Black Christ, and Other Poems* and married the daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois in a lavish ceremony celebrated by what seemed to be all of Harlem, and he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to France. But his marriage ended in 1930, in part because of his close relationships with men, particularly his friend Harold Jackman. Though he married again in 1940, there are veiled references to homosexual desire in some of his poetry.

In the 1930s, his poetic flow slowed down, but he continued to write steadily for the rest of his life: writing children’s books, collaborating on several plays, and penning a somewhat unsuccessful satirical novel about life in Harlem. He began teaching in 1934 in New York City and died at the age of forty-three of uremic poisoning. Though he is not as well known now as other writers of the time who experimented with rhythmic forms, Cullen’s lyrical poems, though sometimes derivative of the tradition he emulated, express his desire to write the fullest expression of poetic beauty while grappling with the demands of being a poet and a black man in America.

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### CUNEY-HARE, MAUD (1874–1936)

Just two generations removed from **slavery** in Galveston, Texas, Maud Cuney-Hare rose to artistic distinction in an impressive variety of media and should be recognized as a pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology. She was an accomplished concert pianist who entered Boston's exclusive New England Conservatory of Music in 1890, despite the opposition of several of her classmates; Maud Cuney was one of just two students of African descent in the school. While in Boston she met and befriended the influential scholar and **race** leader W.E.B. Du Bois, then a student at Harvard University. Du Bois later proved instrumental in securing the publication of Cuney-Hare's first literary effort, a biography of her father, the prominent post-Reconstruction politician Norris Wright Cuney, in 1913. Cuney-Hare also compiled a volume of **poetry**; composed, collected, arranged, and delivered lecture recitals about black American music; wrote and produced an original play; and in 1927 founded and began the general directorship of Boston's Allied Arts Centre, an educational facility and performing arts venue showcasing visual art, music, and theater.

Cuney-Hare's paternal grandfather was Philip Cuney, a reasonably prosperous white planter who eventually manumitted his longtime slave housekeeper/mistress Adeline Stuart, along with their eight children, and also provided for the education of Maud's father, Norris Wright, and his seven siblings. Cuney-Hare's mother, Adelina Dowdie Cuney, was also the child of an interracial liaison between a slaveholder and his chattel property. A vocalist who periodically performed at public events, Adelina Cuney fostered her daughter's musical inclination. Following her study at the Conservatory, she returned to Texas, where she taught music successively at the Texas Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Institute for Colored Youths, at the settlement program of the Institutional Church of Chicago, and at Prairie View State College. A productive scholar, she contributed to periodicals such as the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Musical Quarterly*, *Musical America*, and *Musical Observer*. She also worked with Du Bois's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) journal *Crisis*, as the editor of a regular column on music and the arts.

Cuney-Hare's collection of poems *The Message of the Trees* appeared in 1918. She published a compilation of Creole songs in 1921 and staged her original play, *Antar of Araby*, with the Allied Arts Players in 1926. The work that has earned the greatest distinction for her, *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, was published just months after Cuney-Hare's **death** on February 13, 1936. The product of extensive travels throughout Mexico, the Caribbean, and the United States during which she collected songs and researched materials, the seminal text traces the roots of the black musical tradition from the continent of Africa and explores the common influences permeating the African diaspora. Containing biographical accounts of working artists as well as their illustrious precursors, the book is an invaluable resource in the study of the **history** of black music.

Though she married William Parker Hare and permanently relocated to Boston, where she became an active clubwoman and avid proponent of the arts, Maud Cunev-Hare is buried beside her parents in Galveston.

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*Licia Morrow Calloway*



### **DANNER, MARGARET ESSE (1915–1988)**

Margaret Esse Danner was a powerful force in the Chicago/Detroit literary movements of the 1960s, helping to foster the next generation of African American women writers through her work at various cultural centers and colleges. She should be situated as a key transitional figure in the African American poetic tradition between poets of the previous generation such as **Margaret Walker** or **Gwendolyn Brooks** and **Sonia Sanchez** or **Lucille Clifton** of the next wave. Today Danner is best known for achieving precise visual imagery and evoking African themes and **history** in her verse.

Danner's parents, Caleb and Naomi Esse, moved from Kentucky to Chicago, where Danner attended Englewood High School. Danner won a prize in eighth grade for her poem "The Violin." She attended Loyola and the Midwestern Writers Conference at Northwestern, where she received second place in their **poetry** workshop. She became an editorial assistant at the influential *Poetry* magazine in 1951, moving up to assistant editor in 1956. She was the first African American to hold this position at that national magazine. Danner was awarded a John Hay Whitney Fellowship in 1951 and used the award money to travel to Senegal in 1966. She held poet-in-residence positions at Wayne State University in Detroit (1961), Virginia Union University in Richmond (1968–1969), and LeMoyne Owens College in Memphis (1970–1975). The poet also helped found Detroit's Boone Cultural Arts Center in 1962.



Danner was married twice (Cornell Strickland and Otto Cunningham). With her first husband, Danner had a daughter, Naomi, named after the poet's mother. Her grandson Sterling Washington, Jr., is the source for her series of "Muffin" poems: "Muffin, His Baba and the Boneman" and "Inheritance for Muffin," among others. Danner published five collections of poetry from 1960 to 1976. The last one, *The Down of a Thistle*, is dedicated to Robert Hayden, another member of the Baha'i faith. Her use of Africa as an inspiration can be found in works such as "This Is an African Worm" and "Far from Africa: Four Poems." Danner's literary friendship with Dudley Randall produced the 1966 *Poem Counterpoem*, a work that includes ten poems by each poet engaged in a dialogue on facing pages. Her generous encouragement of young talent is evident in her two edited collections, *Brass Horse* (1968) and *Regroup* (1969). Danner was a model for poetic craftsmanship as well as a mentor for the next generation of poets.

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*Ann Beebe*

### DANTICAT, EDWIDGE (1969– )

Born in Port-au-Prince, Edwidge Danticat lived her first twelve years in Haiti. Unable to find **work** in his native country, her father André immigrated to the United States when his daughter was two years old. Once in New York he worked in a glass factory and for a car wash before becoming a taxi driver. Danticat's mother Rose immigrated when Edwidge was four and became a textile worker. Danticat remembers clinging to her mother, with others having to remove her physically, when she realized that her mother was to leave Haiti without her. Edwidge and her younger brother Eliab went to live with their father's brother and wife in Bel Air, a poor section of Port-au-Prince.

At twelve Danticat joined her parents in Brooklyn. By then she had two new brothers. Danticat's formal education had been in French, though the family spoke Haitian Creole at **home**. While she learned English quickly and remained proud of all three languages, once in the United States she withdrew as schoolmates taunted her as a boat person. Danticat felt a loss of **identity** in being between countries, simultaneously feeling a loss of her childhood in Haiti and like a young child in New York learning to function. Yet immigration and its changes would provide much material for the **fiction** she would write.

Danticat had kept journals in Haiti, sewing together pieces of paper to create a book. After receiving the Madeline books, she rewrote them, creating instead a Haitian heroine. In her very first short story she wrote about a girl who is visited by an assemblage of women each night. These visions would become part of the unstable Marie's experience in "Between the Pool and the Gardénias" in *Krik? Krak!* Once in the United States, Danticat continued to keep journals, written in fragmented Creole, French, and English. Mirroring Danticat's own uncomfortable entry into the English-speaking world, this fragmented presentation, representing those unused to, or uncomfortable with, speaking has become a powerful quality of Danticat's characters. That Danticat writes and publishes in English is something she attributes more to timing, the fact that she arrived in the United States as an adolescent, rather than to any conscious choice. At twelve she had still been learning French in school, not to the point of a literary facility with the language; and Creole, spoken at home but not taught in Haitian schools, was therefore not a written language for Danticat.

Proud of her origins, Danticat arrived in New York already possessing a love of storytelling, having heard folktales and family stories throughout her childhood in Haiti. She was used to the Haitian call-and-response technique of storytelling—the storyteller calling out "Krik?" and the listeners responding "Kra!"—having learned the power of storytelling through her aunt's grandmother. Children around her used to vie to comb the older woman's hair, into which she braided coins. Danticat later wove the importance of hair and heirs and women and wisdom together into the epilogue of *Krik? Krak!* where a young Haitian girl, very much like Danticat must have been, defends her desire to write in a country that devalues a woman's experience, especially in text, while simultaneously learning the importance of the myriad generations of women whose spirits run through her blood. In the United States, Danticat would find solace in books and was influenced by black writers such as **James Baldwin**, **Richard Wright**, **Alice Walker**, and **Paule Marshall**, feeling they wrote of her experience, too. Thus, for Danticat, reading and writing became a way to understand her new world once in Brooklyn.

Danticat was the first female Haitian American author to write in English and publish through a major publishing house. While the foreign nature of many ethnic female authors is promoted in the United States—as long as their works are without the more cumbersome aspect of translation—Danticat's works can be seen as forming a bridge between literatures. As though choosing from an archival largesse, she blurs the divide between American and so-called foreign literature with her presentation of engrossing, intimate

testimonials from a heretofore silenced **history**. Danticat's characters speak of suffering and even occasionally of prevailing. And to give voice to the lost, especially those female, is arguably Danticat's most crucial aim, an end she achieves expertly since the reader of her works can feel not only that her characters might have lived but that they must have lived.

Danticat graduated from Barnard College in 1990 and then earned a Master of Fine Arts from Brown University in 1993. She sold her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* to Soho Press while still a graduate student. The work had actually originated in high school as an article about leaving Haiti for a New York teen newspaper, yet she calls its emotions autobiographical rather than its plot. Expanded, the story would become her graduate thesis. Published in 1994, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells the story of a Haitian girl who at twelve joins her mother in New York, but Danticat also wanted to examine the lives and relationships of ordinary people as they cope with a dictatorship or with post-dictatorship. As a child, Danticat had formed strong bonds with her caretaker aunt and uncle in Haiti after her parents' emigration and at twelve felt torn when reunited with her **family** in New York. The novel explores the broken relationship between mother Martine and daughter Sophie, a relationship arrested because of the need to immigrate separately to the United States. However, Haiti later becomes as much a location of reunification for the women as it is a place of horror and anger. The testing for female virginity that Danticat writes about in the novel was seen by some Haitian Americans as an insulting outing of a cultural practice and garnered Danticat hate mail.

In the nine stories of *Krik? Krak!*, a short-story collection published in 1995 and a finalist for the National Book Award in the same year, Danticat allows women to speak of the emotional rather than political Haitian experience. Her female characters gain strength and identity through the persistent spirit of previous generations of women, the vast majority of whom they never met. The separate stories typify the fragmented nature of the Haitian experience, but the connections between the women are revealed in surprisingly profound ways. *The Farming of Bones* centers on Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molino's 1937 murder of 15,000 to 20,000 Haitians on Dominican soil at the border between the two countries. Here, as in all of Danticat's fiction, the bonds between women are more important than those between men, but in this novel, in which Amabelle searches for her lover Sebastien until coming to accept that he was slaughtered by Trujillo's forces, Danticat portrays real **love** between a man and a woman. Yet the critical relationship of the novel is again between two women, the Dominican-born and wealthy Valencia and the Haitian-born and poor Amabelle. While Amabelle and Sebastien never reunite, the women are able to meet decades after Trujillo's slaughter, but each comes to the cheerless realization that their political and emotional loyalties have long prevented any reconciliation. Amabelle instead regains her identity in the decades following the massacre through substitute mother-daughter relationships with the mothers of Sebastien and Yves, Sebastien's friend.

Public history has long displaced the personal narrative, yet those who live within a history have a great desire to fill in the gaps that traditional and

sanctioned history has left out. Only recently recognized as a reliable genre, **autobiography**, even autobiographical fiction, allows the nameless and forgotten of history to speak to those who never were there. All of Danticat's works, fiction and nonfiction (she has also edited, singly and with others, collections of Haitian voices), emphasize that **memory** is what has been forgotten in the public telling of history, for history never records the victim's horror. These memories of horror keep victims isolated, unable to speak of a lived experience in history's distinct separation between the personal and the sanctioned. However, Danticat does not present her works as any sort of truth of experience, for ironically victims may only keep a measure of sanity through explicit failures in memory, something almost all of Danticat's female characters exhibit on some level in order to survive and continue.

Danticat writes of one of the most underrepresented cultures in the world and yet emphasizes that she does not speak for all Haitians. Instead, her telling of the Haitian experience through separate stories allows a measure of acceptance by individual victims themselves. Danticat's stories underscore that no history can be fully understood until told, though details will come only in pieces. Her non-Western circular approach to storytelling allows characters to chronicle their stories, thereby destabilizing the traditional notions of the immigrant and highlighting their enduring strength instead. Danticat shows the female Haitian experience as incomplete without the recognition of Haiti's horrors. Despite the **violence** of the Haitian homeland, it is only through the acknowledgment of that violence that one is completed.

Danticat has won numerous awards, including a *Granta* Regional Award for the Best Young American Novelists and a Pushcart Prize, and has taught creative writing at New York University and the University of Miami. Most recently, she has worked for the National Coalition for Haitian Rights on a three-year grant from the Lila Acheson Wallace Foundation.

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*Lisa Muir*

## DAUGHTERS

In *Daughters* (1991), **Paule Marshall's** fourth novel, women are envisioned as not only the hope for a regenerative future but also as the source of political upheaval and power. Whereas much of Marshall's writing locates personal and cultural **healing** in the self-discovery of a female character, *Daughters* takes this idea one step further, into the decidedly political realm. The female characters in *Daughters* certainly experience enlightenment through their encounters with the past, but more important to this novel, their female **ancestors** inspire political activism. Through a small circle of interconnected women, political change occurs in both the United States and a Caribbean island.

Ursa McKensie is the novel's protagonist. She stands in a long line of political activists from the fictional island of Triunion, including her mother Estelle and island legend, **freedom** fighter Congo Jane. As the story begins, Ursa is an educated and successful woman working in the New York and New Jersey areas. She receives a message from her mother in Triunion, asking her to return to the island to aid in her father's election campaign. Ursa's father, Primus, began his political career with positive intentions, sincerely wanting to help the impoverished inhabitants of Triunion. More recently, however, he becomes manipulated by corporate interests; Estelle's concern for Primus's politics causes her to enlist her daughter's help. Once Ursa recognizes the decline of her father's good intentions toward the Triunion **community**, she schemes to affect his eventual defeat.

*Daughters* uses constellations and celestial imagery to connect present characters such as Ursa to her ancestral roots. Signifying one of the stars in the Little Dipper, Ursa defines herself in relation to her father and potentially her grandmother's status as "Ursa Major." The celestial references also tie the modern American woman Ursa has become to her past, both her childhood memories as well as her more distant cultural heritage.

*Daughters* presents an interplay of voices and generations as it interchanges temporal and geographical locations. Telling several stories at once, Marshall develops the many characters from Triunion's early **history**, including freedom-fighting Congo Jane, through Ursa's parents' meeting and marriage, into the present life of Ursa herself. The sections also vary physical settings

between Triunion and New York. Marshall's narrative technique further develops her larger literary themes of integrating the past and the present, the African and the American.

Significantly, the title refers to the potential for political change through the heirs of Congo Jane. Estelle and Ursa embody the daughters of political radicalism that is both effective in its ability to change the course of the Triunion election and striking in its feminine core. Unlike much African American literature, Marshall locates political upheaval rather than strictly personal or individual change in the figure of a woman. Through female connection across generations, Marshall gives black women power beyond themselves; in *Daughters*, women enact external, political, and national change for the betterment of black people.

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Laura Baker Shearer

### DAVENPORT, DORIS (1949– )

Through her **work** as a poet, doris davenport has made her mark on African American literature, but her essays and her work as a teacher, lesbian-feminist activist, and performance artist are significant as well. Informing almost all her work are davenport's feminist politics and her refusal to be pigeonholed by labels.

Davenport's first several collections of **poetry**, including *it's like this* (1980), *eat thunder & drink rain* (1982), and *VOODOO CHILE/slight return* (1991) were all self-published, partly because, as davenport herself has said, even small niche presses, including black and lesbian presses, did not see her work as being ideologically appropriate for them. Within all three books, davenport explores a range of topics from **love** poems and revenge poems for lovers and ex-lovers, to women's **spirituality**, to short imagistic poems capturing glimpses of nature, and especially, to forthright, defiant poems addressing the conflicts within feminist circles in the 1980s. For example, titles like "a statement in self-defense / regarding that shit about my negativity," "for sistuhs & others who object to my plain statements of fact, mixed metaphors, sick humor, and etc.—LISTEN," and "DOGMATIC DYKES" reflect davenport's refusal to accept a "party line" of any sort of politics. In "for sistuhs" she rejects straight women

who object to any critique of males that conflicts with their “adulation” of men; in “DOGMATIC DYKES” she equally rejects lesbians who insist on only one way of being lesbian. Such poems reveal davenport’s stature as a true individualist.

More recently, davenport has drawn on her northeast Georgia **home** for inspiration. Even the early volumes contain poems that pay homage to the place from which she comes, but her 1995 collection, *Soque Street Poems*, is focused completely on the small Georgia towns such as Gainesville, where she was born, and Cornelia, where she grew up. A recent essay, “All This, and Honeysuckles Too” (1998), shows davenport staking a claim to her “Af-frilachian” **identity** (Frank X Walker’s term for southern Appalachian African Americans). The essay is a lyrical celebration of her southern homeplace, one in which both **memory** and the present figure prominently.

Equally important is davenport’s work as a scholar. Her 1981 essay “The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin” unabashedly takes white women to task for their racism and calls for women of color to give up almost exclusively the desire for unity with white women and instead focus their attentions where they should be: on one another. “Black Lesbians in Academia: Visible Invisibility” (1982) was one of the first explorations of what it means to be an out black lesbian in an academic **community**.

Davenport earned her B.A. from Paine College in Augusta, Georgia, her M.A. in English from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and her Ph.D. in English from the University of Southern California. She has taught at a variety of schools; currently, she is an assistant professor of English at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She is also in demand as a performance artist and lecturer.

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Christina G. Bucher

### DAVIS, ANGELA (1944– )

Born to schoolteachers B. Frank and Sally E. Davis in Birmingham, Alabama, Angela Yvonne Davis grew up during the **civil rights movement** as witness to the injustice that she would spend her life fighting against. A writer, speaker, and political activist, Davis was introduced early to communism—her parents had friends who were Party members—and she has maintained close ties to this cause and its proponents ever since. She received a scholarship to Brandeis University and spent a year at the Sorbonne before graduating and traveling to Germany to study philosophy at Goethe University. In 1968, she earned her master’s degree from the University of California, San Diego, and she worked with her mentor, political philosopher Herbert Marcuse, for her doctoral studies.

Since her youth, Davis has been involved in political activism, joining several groups in California such as the Black Communists and the black liberation movement. She joined the Communist Party in 1968 and soon after the Black Panthers. A year later she began teaching philosophy at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) as an assistant professor, but her political activism was threatening to the establishment, and she was dismissed, though her reviews had all been positive ones. She was reinstated after a court order required it, but the university refused to renew her contract in 1970, and a further attempt by the Philosophy Department to reinstate her in 1972 failed. Undaunted, Davis continued to take an active role in demonstrations and protests against the repression of minorities by the American socioeconomic system, a system that seemed to encourage police **violence** against young black men in particular.

In fact, one of the main arguments used by UCLA’s Board of Regents in not rehiring Davis was her activism on behalf of the “Soledad Brothers,”



three black inmates accused of murdering a white guard at Soledad Prison. Davis, along with other political activists of the day, believed the three men had been falsely accused, and Davis began making speeches about the plight of the Soledad Brothers as well as about prison conditions for prisoners of color.

Davis struck up a mail correspondence with one of the Soledad Brothers, George Jackson. Soon after, Jonathon Jackson, George's biological brother, began to do security work for Davis, as she had begun receiving **death** threats. In August 1970, Jonathon Jackson took guns legally registered to Davis and used them while attempting to help a man on trial escape from the courthouse. When Jackson came into the courtroom, he gave weapons to three prisoners who were there as witnesses for the defense. Once Jackson and the three prisoners took their five hostages to a waiting van, the police opened fire, killing four people, including the judge in the case, two of the prisoners, and Jackson himself.

Because weapons registered in Davis's name were used during the crime, Davis was charged as an accomplice to murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. She went into hiding, evading police for up to two months and was one of only three women up to that time to have ever been named to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "Ten Most Wanted" list. Many people sympathized with Davis, and there were reports of people taping signs to windows claiming safe passage for their "sister" Angela in their homes. Davis was eventually caught and spent almost seventeen months in jail before her bail was paid by a sympathetic white farmer five days before her trial began. During those months, a massive campaign of both national and international support welled up among the black **community**, liberals, the Communist Party, and activists of all sorts. Her supporters created a defense fund that Davis insisted be called the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners. Even during this difficult time, Davis was able to see her experiences as part of a greater experience; she recognized not just how the justice system often failed people of color but how it often brutalized them.

After her acquittal on all charges, Davis continued her work on behalf of prisoners of color, whom she sees as being political prisoners caught up within the system because of their **race**. The book *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (1971) collects her early essays on the subjects of her belief in communist theory, her views on race and oppression in the United States, and her activism on behalf of those political prisoners who, she argues, are pioneering the fight against oppression. After her trial ended, Davis used the momentum to help create another organization, the National Alliance against Racist and Political Repression. She also published her **autobiography** in 1974. In it, she describes her life as a political one, describing the connection she sees between black liberation and the ideals of the Communist Party. Davis puts the fight for black liberation into the larger struggle of the proletariat against the oppression of the capitalistic system, which prevents the working class from rising up. Her autobiography is not just the story of a life but a story of the struggle to overcome oppression itself.

Davis's book *Women, Race, and Class* (1982) continues to examine the struggle to overcome, but this book explores the role of gender in historical terms by examining how the different paths taken by white and black women during the nineteenth century led to an estrangement between the races within the women's liberation movement during the 1970s and later. Davis continues the exploration of gender, race, and **class** in her book *Women, Culture, and Politics*, published in 1989, that collected the speeches she made during the middle years of the 1980s. Her later books analyze many facets of American culture as it concerns class and race. She has examined violence against women within the framework of racism in 1988's *Violence against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism*. She continues her activism on behalf of political prisoners such as Mumia Abu Jamal and Leonard Pelletier.

For many years, she taught at San Francisco State University and became a well-known public speaker both nationally and internationally. She has become a prominent member of the American Communist Party and ran as the vice presidential candidate on the Party's 1980 and 1984 tickets. In 1992 she began teaching at the University of California at Santa Cruz where she was appointed to the Presidential Chair in 1995. Today, she continues her **work** as a political activist, persistently raising her voice to be heard as she works for the liberation of those who remain oppressed.

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*Amy Sparks Kolker*

**DAWN.** See Xenogenesis Trilogy

### **DAY LATE AND A DOLLAR SHORT, A**

**Terry McMillan's** fifth novel, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001), opens with the novel's narrator, Viola Price, who is in the hospital after suffering a severe asthma attack. She is unable to speak because she is connected to a respirator, and readers are invited into her consciousness and are able to hear her thoughts. Through Viola, readers learn about the importance of self-empowerment and personal growth. A divorced mother with four children, Viola tells the story of the **family's** conflicts and their celebrations.

Paris, the eldest daughter, is a world-renowned chef and a single parent of a teenaged son. While her life appears easy, she suffers the pains of loneliness and the dangers that come with prescription drug addiction.

Charlotte, the second born, spends most of her relationship with Violet in conflict. Still living in Chicago, Charlotte sees herself as an island unto herself where she celebrates the fact that she is self-reliant. Unfortunately, her self-perceived independence is the very thing that threatens her relationship with her husband and child and also her relationship with her siblings.

Lewis, the third of the Price children, struggles with demons from his past. Once married to Donneta, Lewis cannot seem to move beyond the memories of his embattled marriage. He is unable to recognize that his trouble with relationships began early in his life when he was sexually abused by his older cousins. Without the insight into the connections between his early traumas and his present state, Lewis self-medicates with drugs, alcohol, and women. Moreover, not only is Lewis's life colored by his early abuse, but Lewis, described by his mother as a genius, is unable to complete anything, especially high school, in order to be a more productive citizen. Instead, Lewis's contribution to society is related to the criminal activities that continually land him in jail.

Janelle, the youngest of the Price children, struggles with naiveté and low self-esteem. After divorcing her daughter's father, Janelle has an affair with a much older married man named George. Eventually George leaves his wife and marries Janelle and becomes Shanice's stepfather. Unfortunately, however, it is soon discovered that George has been molesting Shanice, thus the reason for her strange behaviors such as pulling out her hair.

Cecil, Viola's ex-husband and the father of her children, plays a major role in the narrative as he struggles with Viola's resentment toward him for leaving their marriage and getting into a relationship with a much younger woman, Brenda. Although Brenda has three children from a previous relationship, she and Cecil have a child together.

McMillan's fifth novel brings readers back to the discussion of what it means to come of age as an African American. Through Viola, readers learn lessons about the importance of family connections, self-love, and self-empowerment. With Viola representing feminist viewpoints of survival and growth, readers watch as Viola teaches her family about **love**, hope, and forgiveness.

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Catherine Ross-Stroud

## DEATH

Death is a pervasive presence in black literature, partly as a result of inhuman sufferings during **slavery** and lynching laws in the post-Civil War eighteenth century. Among early African American writers, **Lucy Terry** (1724–1821) was the first black woman to write **poetry**. Her only surviving poem, "Bars Flight," is a vivid account of a gruesome fight and the death of several men in a bar fight. Two other writers from this period are **Phillis Wheatley** (1753–1784) and **Jarena Lee** (1783–?). Lee's only contribution to literary **history** is her spiritual **autobiography** published in 1836. Wheatley's poetry is primarily religious and spiritual.

Nineteenth-century writers dealt with the issues of slavery, abolitionism, and post-Civil War racial tensions. **Frederick Douglass** (1818–1895) was born into slavery and later won his **freedom**. He was a leader of the abolitionist movement in the years before the Civil War. His autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1884) deals briefly with the death of his mother. His description of the deathbed scene of the slave overseer in this autobiography is very poignant.

**Frances E. W. Harper** (1825–1911) was an important poet, **fiction** writer, abolitionist, and philosopher of the nineteenth century. In her writing, she seeks collective justice as opposed to individual justice. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) is a classic of nineteenth-century African American women's fiction. Death is featured prominently in her poetry. Examples of this are poems such as "A Little Child Shall Lead Them," "Death of the Old Sea King," "The Night of Death," and "Songs for the People."

**Charles Waddell Chesnutt's** (1858–1932) novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) is based on the Wilmington, North Carolina, **race** riot of 1898. It tells a complex tale of racial injustice, lynching, and social complications following the Civil War. Lynching, of course, is inevitably tied to the topic of death. His narrative is laced with metaphors of death.

The period from the end of World War I through the middle of the 1930s Great Depression is known as the **Harlem Renaissance**. During this period, a group of talented African American writers produced a great body of literature filled with racial consciousness and racial integration. Many writers exhibited an acute awareness of their dual **identity** as an American and a Negro. **Paul Laurence Dunbar** (1872–1906) is major poet of this era. His poem “When Dey, 'Listed Colored Soldiers” is about the loss of a loved one during war. It is about pride as well as sadness. Death appears in many of his poems mostly as a welcome, sometimes a reluctant visitor, for example, “Dead,” “A Death Song,” “The Right to Die,” and “Paradox.”

**Jessie Redmon Fauset** (1882–1961) explored the theme of personal and racial achievement in her works such as *There Is Confusion* (1924) and *Plum Bun* (1929). Her poems “Oblivion,” “Dead Fires,” and “La Vie C'est la Vie” touch upon the death theme in various forms.

Sterling Brown's (1901–1989) *Memphis Blues* (1932) displays an innocent indifference to death. Brown created a humorous character called Slim Greer and wrote a series of satiric poems about him. He is using this character to try and reclaim a sense of black humanity, as witnessed in “Slim Greer in Hell.” In another poem, “Sharecroppers,” the black hero pays the ultimate price for his loyalty to the union, a kind of interracial brotherhood. He is shot and killed by his boss.

Death in its most graphic and brutal form is depicted by **Langston Hughes** (1902–1967) in his *Three Songs about Lynching* (1936). His poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” has a quality of deathlessness about it. Another poem, “Night Funeral in Harlem,” describes the funeral of a young boy. In an essay titled “Bop,” Hughes traces the source of the soulful quality in **blues** music to the beatings that blacks had suffered.

**James Weldon Johnson** (1871–1938) is the creator of the black national anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” He describes death as a kindly creature who relieves a mother from her painful sickness and takes her to God's **home** in his poem “Go Down, Death.” He urges her **family** not to weep. Another well-known poem, “White Witch,” is a ballad to a witch who lures away young men and threatens to kill them. It is a metaphor for the black and white sexual relations of the time period when lynching was prevalent.

In his poem “If We Must Die,” **Claude McKay** (1890–1948) gives public voice to black men as a group. He builds a contrast between man and beast in this heroic sonnet to the black male, in an attempt to build a powerful racial identity. In another poem, “The Lynching,” McKay describes the lynching of a black man whose **body** is already burned to char. He juxtaposes the unnatural and the natural and death/night against life/day to create a powerful image of lynching. In another poem, “White City,” a deep hatred for the

city's callousness is what keeps the speaker alive. Other poems such as "Birds of Prey," "Futility," and "The Night-Fire" all have this element of darkness: "darkly death," as he calls it.

Contemporary black authors were born in a free world. They are one step removed from the dark history of slavery and lynching. Perhaps this fact accounts for the deeper and more spiritual treatment of death in modern black writing. The horror of the immediacy is gone, but a lingering fear and dissatisfaction with the injustices remain.

**Richard Wright's** (1908–1960) novel *Native Son* (1940) tells the story of a young black man whose life is turned upside down after he kills a young white woman in a moment of panic and confusion. It is a story of inner-city life. It explores what it means to be a black youth in contemporary America. Another one of his novels, *Black Boy* (1945), is an autobiographical account of growing up in the Jim Crow **South** during the early part of the twentieth century. In *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), Wright brings postslavery black characters to life.

Perhaps the most definitive poem about untimely deaths of young black men is **Gwendolyn Brooks's** (1917–2000) "We Real Cool."

**Rita Dove's** (1952– ) poem "Parsley" is a meditation on a death sentence. It is based on a historical event that took place in the Dominican Republic in 1937. Rafael Trujillo, the dictator at the time, executed 20,000 Haitian black workers who worked in the sugarcane fields. Trujillo ordered them to pronounce the word *perejil*, Spanish for parsley. The ones who could not roll the "r" correctly were executed. The first half of the poem is written from the point of view of the victims, but then Dove gets inside the head of the dictator in the second half and conjures up his rationale for the killings.

Many of **Toni Morrison's** (1931– ) novels deal with violent death including death by suicide. There is an abundance of self-destruction in her novels. In the opening scene of *Song of Solomon* (1977), Robert Smith leaps from the top of Mercy Hospital to his death. In *Jazz* (1992), Violet's mother drowns herself in the well. In Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), Sethe, an escaped slave, commits the most brutal and horrific act of killing her infant daughter. She does this in order to keep her daughter from being enslaved. In *Song of Solomon*, one of the main characters, Pilate, murders a man. Pilate in turn is accidentally killed during the attempted murder of her son. In *Jazz*, Joe kills his lover Dorcas. In *Sula* (1973), Eva Peace kills her son to spare him lifelong sorrow and suffering. In spite of all the beatings, **rapes**, murders, deaths, and suicides, Morrison's narratives always tell the story of an individual and not a **stereotype**. The stories are never clichéd or melodramatic. She also explores moral ambiguity in society through her characters' actions.

**Ernest Gaines** (1933– ) has skillfully engaged the theme of death in his novel *A Lesson before Dying* (1993). A young black man named Jefferson reluctantly gets involved in a shootout at a liquor store. The two other men involved are killed, along with the white storeowner. Jefferson, the only survivor, is accused of murder. He is condemned to death. His godmother persuades Grant, a young university-educated man, to teach Jefferson. She

wants Jefferson to die like a man, with pride in his heritage. Death is a constant presence in *A Lesson before Dying*. Another Gaines novel, *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), is set on a Louisiana sugarcane plantation in the 1970s. It depicts the racial tensions that arise over the death of a Cajun farmer at the hands of a black man.

**Sonia Sanchez's** (1934– ) *Does Your House Have Lions* (1997) is a rhyme novel chronicling her brother's death from AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). It deals with the family's estrangement and ultimate reconciliation. This is one of few African American novels dealing with slow and natural death as opposed to violent and sudden death.

**Toni Cade Bambara's** (1939–1995) novel *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (1999) deals with the topic of child murders at the hands of strangers. In the early 1980s more than forty black children were murdered in Atlanta, their bodies found strangled, beaten, and sexually assaulted. This novel is based on a true crime. It is a story of a struggling single mother whose twelve-year-old son is reported missing during that time period. The novel focuses on the search for the child without any support from the police or the politicians.

*The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) by **Gloria Naylor** (1950– ) chronicles the communal strength of seven black women occupants of ramshackle rented houses on a street that is walled off from the rest of the town. The novel is not so much about racism as it is about sexism. The tone of the novel is unmistakably feminist. Deaths occur frequently and are predictably violent. The most ambiguous and problematic is the death of Ben who is killed by his friend, Lorraine, in the chapter titled "The Two." Another character, Ciel, has to deal with the death of her daughter by electrocution and also an abortion, essentially signifying the death of her **motherhood**.

Death in African American literature is often violent and unjust. This fact is nowhere more poignantly stated than in the collection of short stories by black female writers titled *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds* (1990), edited by Mary Helen Washington. One short story from this collection, "Requiem for Willie Lee" by Frenchy Hodges (1940– ), portrays a young black boy in his early twenties. Willie Lee leads a life of **violence** and crime. His whole existence is based on physical and psychological violence. In the same collection, "Remember Him an Outlaw" by **Alexis De Veaux** appears. It is a story about a kind-hearted, alcoholic, innocent man who is wrongfully accused and killed. His nephew Richie uses Uncle Willie as a sacrificial lamb, as if Willie's life were dispensable. Death is, indeed, an enduring theme in African American literature.

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### **DELANEY, LUCY A. (c. 1830–c. 1890s)**

Author of an **autobiography**, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light; or, Struggles for Freedom* (c. 1891), Lucy Ann Berry Delaney was born into **slavery** in St. Louis, Missouri. Her mother, Polly Crocket Berry, had been born free, but while living with Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Posey in Illinois as a child, she was kidnapped and transported to St. Louis. She was sold in slavery to Thomas Botts and, a year later, to Major Taylor Berry. At the Berry home, Polly, who worked primarily as a seamstress, met another slave, and with the consent of Major Berry and his wife Fanny, the couple was married and had two daughters. When Berry was killed in a duel, Fanny remarried Robert Walsh, a lawyer and judge, who, upon her **death**, sold Delaney's father to a plantation near Vicksburg, Mississippi.

The sale of Delaney's father prompted his wife and daughters to vow to escape slavery by any means necessary. While accompanying Mary Berry Cox and her husband on their honeymoon trip, Delaney's sister, Nancy, acted on that pledge and fled to Toronto, where she resided for the remainder of her life. Three weeks after she was sold and separated from Delaney, Polly also attempted to escape but was soon arrested in Chicago and returned to St. Louis. After her return, she successfully sued for her **freedom** on the basis that she had been born free and, on September 8, 1842, petitioned the court for her daughter's liberation as well. Delaney spent seventeen months in jail until the case was resolved in court, which she recounts in specific detail in her autobiography, until, with the aid of Judge Edward Bates, she was awarded her freedom on February 8, 1844.

After her emancipation, Delaney married Frederick Turner in 1845 and moved to Quincy, Illinois. Turner was killed in a steamboat explosion shortly afterward, and Delaney returned to St. Louis and met and wed Zachariah Delaney. The couple was married for forty-two years and had four children, all of whom died early. After her mother's death, she began a "long and persistent search" for her father, and when she located him, both he and Nancy traveled to St. Louis for "a most joyful reunion."

Delaney remained active in the cause of racial uplift throughout her life. In addition to publishing her autobiography, which Deborah Garfield maintains focuses on "the liberating feats of slave-**motherhood**" and, thereby, situates Delaney within the context of other "celebrants of African American



maternalism,” including **Harriet Jacobs**, **Sojourner Truth**, and **Toni Morrison**, she was elected president of the Female Union, the first African American women’s society, and the Daughters of Zion. She also served as matron of Siloam Court and Grand Court of Missouri and as “Past Grand Chief Preceptress” of the Daughters of the Tabernacle and Knights of Tabor and was a member of Colonel Shaw Woman’s Relief Corps. Of her life, Delaney says, in *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, that “[c]onsidering the limited advantages offered [her], [she] made the best use of [her] time” and that her numerous hardships and successes should help “settl[e] the problem” in American’s minds of whether “the negro race [can] succeed, proportionately, as well as the whites, if given the same chance and an equal start.”

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*Kara L. Mollis*

## DELANY SISTERS

Sarah Louise “Sadie” Delany (1889–1999) and her sister Annie Elizabeth “Bessie” Delany (1891–1995) achieved fame in 1993, when they were 104 and 102, with the phenomenal success of their first book, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years*. Their say included commentary about the **history** of the twentieth century from the perspective of black women who had struggled to achieve professional status in a time when few blacks and fewer women were welcome in professional circles. First recognized for their remarkable age, the sisters gained popular acclaim for their positive attitudes, notable achievements as professional women, and enduring **love** for each other and their **family**.

Sadie and Bessie Delany grew up in Raleigh, North Carolina, the second and third of ten children born to Henry Beard Delany and Nannie James Logan Delany, the chief administrators of St. Augustine’s College. Born a slave, Henry Delany encouraged his children to pursue higher education with

the consequence that theirs became one of the most prominent families in Harlem and New York during the first third of the twentieth century. After early **work** teaching in black schools in the rural **South**, both Sadie and Bessie left North Carolina to attend Columbia University, where Sadie earned a master's degree in teaching and Bessie earned a doctor of dentistry degree. Sadie became the first African American woman to teach high school **home** economics in the New York Public School System, and Bessie became the second African American woman licensed to practice dentistry in New York.

Their autobiographical memoir *Having Our Say* records the struggles and successes of the family and of the two sisters. Sadie and Bessie tell of their dismay at the coming of Jim Crow laws during their childhood in Raleigh. They also tell of their determination to succeed in professions at a time when women had to decide between public work and having a family.

When Amy Hill Hearth interviewed them for a 1991 article in the *New York Times*, the Delany sisters' wit and charm captured the public imagination. A pattern, successfully repeated over three books, was established, with Hearth recording and arranging the sisters' stories and thus preserving a valuable oral history. Both Sadie and Bessie coauthored both the first and the second books, *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* (1994), and Sadie authored *On My Own at 107: Reflections on Life without Bessie* (1997). With both hardcover and paperback editions of *Having Our Say* reaching the bestseller list, a successful play based on the Delanys' story was first staged in 1995, with a **film** produced as a CBS movie in 1999. Hearth has also published a children's book based on their childhood, *The Delany Sisters Reach High* (2002).

Bessie died at 104 in 1995, followed in 1999 by Sadie at 109. The Delany sisters were remarkable women, choosing to be professionals when most women married and remaining optimistic during years of Jim Crow segregation and oppression.

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Harriette C. Buchanan

## DERRICOTTE, TOI (1941– )

Toi Derricotte was born Antoinette Webster in Michigan in 1941. She is the author of one memoir, titled *The Black Notebooks* (1997), and four books of **poetry**: *The Empress of the Death House* (1978), *Natural Birth* (1983), *Captivity* (1990), and *Tender* (1997). Derricotte's work has received recognition in the form of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts; the United Black Artists, USA, Inc. Distinguished Pioneering of the Arts Award; the Lucille Medwick Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America; a Pushcart Prize; the Folger Shakespeare Library Poetry Book Award; and most recently, the Guggenheim Fellowship. Derricotte is professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. With Cornelius Eady, she is the cofounder of Cave Canem, a workshop for black poets.

Derricotte's works reflect her commitment to exposing painful and often hidden stories about shame, sex, and anger within the context of **family**, **race**, and **class**. Each of her books confronts head-on a different subject that is considered taboo. The speaker in her poetry and prose leads readers through these stories in a voice that is often doubtful and self-critical but also courageous, empowered, and at times, joyful. In *The Empress of the Death House*, Derricotte portrays a complex world to which the speaker both belongs and feels distant. She says that with this book she desired to uncover silences around "anger and sex." *Natural Birth* tells her story of giving birth to her son in a "home for unwed mothers." In addition to chronicling the birth and the conversations among women in the **home**, this book also records the shame and fear surrounding that experience. In *Captivity*, Derricotte's pen turns to themes of servitude and confinement within the black middle class against the backdrop of a black working-class **community**. *Tender* continues to link personal struggles (such as abuse within the family) to historical struggles (such as the legacy of and responses to **slavery**). As the book's title poem implies, Derricotte's focus is on "the tenderest meat," which comes from "houses where you hear the least squealing."

In *The Black Notebooks*, Derricotte explores her experiences as a "white-appearing Black person" from childhood to adulthood. She writes about experiencing race from many complicated positions: that of desiring for communion with black people while desiring to escape the hatred often directed toward black people, that of being experienced as a threat to many communities and of experiencing oneself as an Other, and that of understanding the need to tell these stories while fearing that telling them will not make things better. In addition to writing these stories, she writes about what it means to write them.

Derricotte's critical engagement with questions of power and equality in intimate settings and her commitment to telling untold stories are present throughout her writings. One can read these feminist concerns through each of her books, as well as through her publications in feminist publications such as *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology* and the journal *Feminist Studies*. Of her own work, Derricotte writes: "Truth-telling in my art is a way to separate my 'self' from what I have been taught to believe about my 'self,' the degrading stereotypes about black females in our society" (Gabbin and Riha).

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Mendi Lewis Obadike

### DESSA ROSE

Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) is a historical novel that explores the **history** of African American resistance in the antebellum **South**. While other novels in the **neo-slave narrative** tradition document what Ashraf H. A. Rushdy calls the "dailiness" of **slavery**, such as **Margaret Walker's** *Jubilee* (1966), or the repercussions that a slave past has in the present, such as **Gayl Jones's** *Corregidora* (1975) and **Octavia Butler's** *Kindred* (1979), *Dessa Rose* considers resistance as an integral part of the African American experience.

Another innovative aspect of this novel is Williams's use of shifts in point of view. The world of the novel is represented by a number of perspectives. This approach exposes 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. In the first section of the narrative, point of view

shifts between Dessa, the condemned pregnant slave, and the white amanuensis who attempts to record the story of her insurgence on a slave coffle. The discrepancies between the black woman's oral history and its reconstruction in the white man's written record is thus emphasized. Williams dramatizes the misrepresentation of African American history by exposing the differences between the fragmented pieces of information Dessa chooses to relate to the white man and his journal entries. The loss of the black female's history is further highlighted by the white man's inability to understand both Dessa's experience and the language through which she expresses herself. However, if Nehemiah fills in the gaps with his own words, distorting Dessa's narrative, her vernacular functions as a site of resistance. The black vernacular, the humming, the vacant smiles, and the silences with which Dessa resists the white man's questioning illustrate that, for Williams, the act of resistance becomes synonymous not only with survival but also with keeping a part of oneself to which the hegemonic others do not have access. In this way the writer also pays a tribute to the **slave narrative** tradition, illustrating the willful silences left in the ex-slaves' texts.

The first part of the novel, significantly titled "The Darky," seems to be dominated by Nehemiah's views on Dessa. However, if the novel's prologue had signaled that this is Dessa's narrative, her dreams and recollections of her lover, **family**, and friends, which sometimes are italicized and extend to several pages, disrupt the white man's narrative and claim space in the text for the black woman's expression.

In the second section of the novel titled "The Wench," the narrative alternates between two points of view, Dessa's and that of the white woman whose farm becomes an accidental safe harbor for fugitive slaves. Williams uses this device effectively to explore preconceived notions of blackness and **whiteness** and furthermore to racialize the latter. Looking at the white woman through Dessa's eyes, the white **body** becomes the locus of strangeness and unattractiveness conventionally identified with the black skin and physiognomy, dislocating whiteness as an archetype for the familiar and appealing. Placing her characters in atypical circumstances, Williams creates for them an unfamiliar realm in which they are forced to look beyond skin color and socially assigned roles. In this section, **motherhood** is the critical issue through which boundaries between blacks and whites are redefined. Rufel nurses Dessa's baby, not only reversing the role of the black **Mammy** but also destabilizing the slave/mistress relationship by acknowledging the infant's humanity and refusing to see him as chattel. The child was hungry, and Rufel could and did feed him.

Nevertheless, the simplicity of this gesture, which defies all Dessa knew about white women, further exacerbates the contradictory nature of the black woman's feelings in relation to Rufel. Williams also explores the theme of motherhood and the figure of the black Mammy in order to unsettle the white female character's preconceived notions of African American **identity**. Through her brief but tempestuous exchanges with Dessa, Rufel is forced to acknowledge that she hardly knew the woman she called "Mammy" and in

whom she confided and implicitly trusted. Rufel has to come to terms with the fact that all she knew about Mammy was what both herself and her family imposed on their slave's identity—a fabricated name, date of birth, and history. Rufel's memories of Mammy and the contours of the familiar face become somewhat indistinct, compelling Rufel to inquire about the woman she became accustomed to thinking of as an extension of herself.

In the third and final major section of the novel, Williams abandons the variable viewpoint in favor of a first-person narrative. The title of this section, "The Negress," which, as Dessa's future lover explains to her, is French for "Black woman," announces both her rebirth and her newly found voice. In the first-person narrative, Dessa asserts control over her history and validates African American oral tradition by adopting storytelling as a legitimate means of revising and recording the past. The silenced attempts to insert African American history in the white record signaled by Dessa's italicized dreams and memories of the previous sections of the novel fade away. Dessa becomes the creator of her own text, ungirding the silenced black female—her second rebellious act.

Dessa's text is rooted in the **blues** tradition of call and response. The telling and retelling of her story to her son so that he can tell it as if her memories were his ensures not only that the familial history is passed on to the following generations but also that Dessa's individual experience finds meaning in the shared history of African Americans. In the tradition of call and response the past becomes a regenerative force by way of cultural practice. In this way, reimagining the African American past by rooting it in the oral tradition that has kept it alive, Williams uses the blues language to subvert the hegemonic discourses that attempted to silence the black woman's history.

*See also* Historical Fiction

### Works About

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Ana Nunes

## DETECTIVE FICTION

The archetypal detective is of white Anglo-Saxon ethnic origin and male. He is a man whose superior mental capabilities make him a paragon of intelligence and rationality. At the opposite end of the scale are nonwhites and females, who are often cast as incapacitated by their **race** and gender. In traditional detective fiction, they appear in secondary and/or stereotyped roles. Sally Munt observes, "Black man, because of his construction as non-thinking, non-rational, and non-literate, cannot deliver the denotation 'detective' easily" (85). The same holds true for members of other ethnic groups and for women.

However, black characters turned up early on in the genre. They were created by white and African American authors alike, and they fit popular **stereotypes**. Writers took advantage of racial clichés to meet readers' expectations. The depiction of blacks was shaped by Eurocentric images of "the Other" and—as Frankie Bailey notes—restricted to variations of the slave or the slum dweller. Woman's role was, on the whole, confined to that of victim or vamp. Creating a nonwhite and female detective—who is independent of male guidance and protection and who herself is successful in a male profession—seemed to be a double violation of the genre's conventions. But eventually black, female, and feminist detectives began to appear.

African Americans have been writing detective fiction almost from its beginnings in the nineteenth century. Their first experiments with the genre reach back to **Pauline Hopkins** (1856-1930). "Talma Gordon" (1900) deals with miscegenation and covers the theme of the "tragic **mulatto**" torn between cultures. Hopkins also makes use of the locked-room device, established by Edgar Allan Poe in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841). As Poe rose to fame as the "father" of the detective story, so Hopkins can be claimed as the "mother" of African American detective **fiction**. Among her heirs are Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934; author of *The Conjure-Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem*, 1932, the first detective novel by an African American, featuring black characters and set in the black **community**), George Schuyler (1895-1977; author of thrillers serialized in the 1930s), Chester Himes (1909-1984; famous for his "Harlem **domestic** novels" about black detectives Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson), Hugh Allison (1908-1974; his "Corollary," 1948, was the first short story by an African American published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*), Walter Mosley (1952- ; famous for his hard-boiled series about black private eye Easy

Rawlins, who first appeared in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1990), Gar Anthony Haywood (1954– ; author of three novels featuring L.A. private investigator Aaron Gunner, first investigating in *Fear of the Dark*, 1987), and more recently, many female African American writers.

Since the post–World War I “Golden Age” of the detective novel, women have been prolific in the genre. It was not until the 1970s, however, that feminist crime writing emerged. Much contemporary detective fiction by and about women—whether they regard themselves as feminists or not—challenges traditional role scripts and power conceptions. It undermines binary oppositions between male and female, white and nonwhite, good and evil. It gives visibility and voice to authors and protagonists who are not male and/or of Anglo-American descent. It reflects an appreciation of diversity, whether it is cultural, religious, political, or sexual. In 1977 Marcia Muller (1944– ) broke new ground with the introduction of Sharon McCone in *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*. Sharon is considered the first female hard-boiled private eye. With her toughness and independence, she served as a model for later female and ethnic sleuths. “Tough girls” like Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone and Paretzky’s V. I. Warshawski soon got distinguished African American colleagues, created by African American women. The first detective novel by and about an African American woman is Dolores Komo’s *Clio Browne, Private Investigator* (1988), featuring black private eye Clio Browne, the owner of a St. Louis detective agency. Komo tries to provide a believable picture of middle-class blacks, but her aspirations fall victim to the genre’s conventions. Other novels, however, stretch the genre’s boundaries and reveal a strong interest in the confluence of black **identity** with the detective genre. The simultaneous appearance and success of Nikki Baker’s *In the Game* (1991), Eleanor Taylor Bland’s *Dead Time* (1992), and **Barbara Neely’s** *Blanche on the Lam* (1992)—all introducing female African American serial sleuths—testify to an interest of authors and readers in the compatibility of race, **class**, and gender issues with detective fiction. These authors employ and modify the genre’s conventions to explore African American identity, color consciousness, racism, and **sexuality**. For them, the established form functions as a tool for expressing a social critique of mainstream attitudes toward race, class, and gender.

Eleanor Taylor Bland’s (1944– ) series depicts police officer Marti MacAlister, who had quit her job with the Chicago police to get away from her husband’s **death** and moved to cozy Lincoln Prairie, Illinois, where she encounters as much **violence** as in the city. Marti is teamed up with Vik Jessenovik, a white cop with outdated attitudes about women and racial minorities. Throughout the series, which starts with *Dead Time* (1992), Marti is confronted with social problems affecting women: domestic violence, abuse, abortion, poverty.

Barbara Neely (1941– ) subverts the genre’s formula in that she substitutes the classical detective with Blanche White, a strong and witty cleaning woman. Blanche is highly successful because she relies on her intuition and a tight-knit female network to solve murders at her employers’ homes. Nikki



Baker's (1962– ) series starts with *In the Game* (1991). It is set in Chicago and features black investment banker Virginia Kelly. Baker and others use the detective formula to highlight problems that homosexuals face in society. Penny Micklebury's series about lesbian cop Gianna Maglione and her lover Mimi Patterson, who make their debut in *Keeping Secrets* (1994), also explores issues of importance to racial and sexual minorities. Micklebury's second series starts with *One Must Wait* (1998) and introduces black criminal defense attorney Carole Ann Gibson.

The protagonist in Valerie Wilson Wesley's (1947– ) series is Tamara Hayle, who makes her living as a private investigator in Newark, New Jersey. Like many female authors, Wesley enriches the linear detective plot with nonlinear issues: **family** affairs, mother-child bonding, community ties, female networking, women's aspirations, and perceptions. Tamara is a divorced mother struggling to make ends meet for herself and her son. In *When Death Comes Stealing* (1994) she has already been five years in the business, and she is said to be able to handle anything from disappearances to homicide. According to the genre's conventions, the investigator has to be an uninvolved outsider. Wesley's series, however, implies that only someone whose sympathies lie with African Americans can be successful in the quest for truth. Tamara relies on her connections in the black community, and her being an African American woman becomes an essential factor for her investigations.

Feminist writer **Rosa Guy** (1925– ) introduces a black male investigator, Imamu Jones. *The Disappearance* (1979) and *New Guys around the Block* (1983) are infused with a critique of racism. Less-known African American writers of detective fiction are Nora DeLoach (*Mama Saves a Victim*, 1997), Grace Edwards (*If I Should Die*, 1997), Terris McMahan Grimes (*Somebody Else's Child*, 1996), and Chassie West (*Sunrise*, 1994). Aya de León (1967– ), an Afro-Latina, writes stories about Oakland, California, detective Madeline Moore ("Tell Me Moore," 1995).

African American writers have always used and subverted the traditional detective formula. The appearance of Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies* in 1932 already indicated an interest in the confluence of the genre with an exploration of matters of identity and of social and political issues. Contemporary black women writers have followed this lead. By simultaneously employing and subverting established detective formulas, they have demonstrated that the genre can be an effective device for discussing problems of race, class, and gender. They have shown that it is possible to establish a clearly defined female and African American point of view within the framework of the genre. And many of them have created a pointedly feminist perspective. In an attempt to do more than simply entertain, they have included substantial social, cultural, and political information in their plots. Thus, detective fiction—traditionally supposed to be male dominated, linear, straightforward, apolitical, and restricted to its basic formula—has assumed the function of a social document.

*See also* *Blanche among the Talented Tenth*; *Blanche Cleans Up*; *Blanche Passes Go*

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Katrín Fischer

### DE VEAUX, ALEXIS (1948– )

Alexis De Veaux is a poet, playwright, and novelist who teaches in the Department of Women's Studies at the University at Buffalo, where she received her M.A. and Ph.D. in American studies. She has also served as **poetry** editor for the popular magazine *Essence*. In addition to her work as a professor, De Veaux has also been involved in local **community** activism in Buffalo.

A prolific writer, De Veaux has published a novel, *Spirits in the Street* (1974), as well as two award-winning children's books, *Na-Ni* (1973) and *An Enchanted Hair Tale* (1987), in addition to numerous poems and short stories. A playwright of growing esteem, De Veaux's plays include *Circles* (1972), *Tapestry* (1986), *A Season to Unravel* (1979), and *Don't Explain: A Song of Billie Holiday* (1980).

De Veaux has also worked as a guest lecturer in Africa, Europe, Japan, and the Caribbean. In 1990, De Veaux was one of the first international journalists to interview Nelson Mandela upon his release from prison. On that occasion, she was granted an exclusive interview with both Nelson and Winnie Mandela.

De Veaux maintains that contemporary literatures are agents of social change that play a crucial part in diverse struggles for self-determination. Her work is particularly interested in the relationship between **literature** and **history**, especially the myriad ways in which women of color construct visions of history while engaging literary forms. As a writer immersed in this process herself, De Veaux openly seeks to challenge the dominant paradigms of the disciplines in which she teaches.

For De Veaux, writing occurs within particular social and political moments, so she approaches women's studies from the perspective of someone living a cultural life within those specific moments. She brings this experiential perspective to her scholarship and describes her work as empirical rather than primarily based on theory.

Among De Veaux's most significant work is the first biography of **Audre Lorde**: *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (2004). This monumental work, which took ten years to complete, draws out the complex intersections of those concerns shared by both De Veaux and Lorde, the development of a passionate and powerful artistic voice, and the ongoing struggle for social justice. Reflecting De Veaux's commitments, her biography of Lorde is not simply a literary biography but an expression of an artist's battles against multilayered oppressions.

Throughout her varied works, De Veaux, like other African American lesbian writers such as Lorde and **Pat Parker**, has contested hegemonic and essentialized notions of **race**, gender, and **sexuality**. For De Veaux, as for writers like Parker, black women both contest and construct **identity** as part of collective struggle and community building. Significantly, De Veaux asserts that contemporary black women in the United States are part of a conscious community of black women extending throughout U.S. history. De Veaux cites her mentors as the community of black women writers, both historical and contemporary, who have, in her view, allowed her to understand the great variety of voices in which she can speak as a black woman writer. In doing so, she not only draws attention to a literary community of black women who have taught and/or learned from each other over generations but also points to a largely neglected history that still has much to teach.

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*J. Shantz*

### DEW BREAKER, THE

As she does in *Krik? Krak!* (1995) **Edwidge Danticat** weds the genres of short story and novel in *The Dew Breaker* (2004), but in this work she gives voice to evil, to a *ton ton Macoute*, a henchman of the Duvalier regime. In "The Book of the Dead," the first of nine stories, daughter Ka, named for the good angel of ancient Egyptian mythology, is a sculptor who has carved her father,

a survivor of Haiti's prison system under the first Duvalier regime, naked and kneeling in his prison cell. Only when he destroys the sculpture does he reveal to Ka that he was a "hunter," not the "prey," and exposes his horrific personal **history** to his daughter. Ka learns that his scar, which he has hidden in photographs for thirty years, is not from a guard but a prisoner, a man he then shot and killed, "just like I killed many people." This dew breaker, a torturer named for going out before dawn to collect his victims, is never named. He is known only by roles: father to Ka, husband to Anne, barber to the public, landlord to a few, murderer of a harrowing number. While readers remain unsure of how much his wife must know, in possessing any knowledge of his past she and her daughter become *kas*, angels that mask this dew breaker's existence.

The following seven stories seem to break away from Ka and her father, the dew breaker, but they deal with Haiti's tortured and their connections, both direct and indirect, to him. Danticat questions why one man, any one man, could be given the power to destroy so many lives. Dany of "Night Talkers" believes his New York landlord, the barber, is the person who burned his **home**, blinded his aunt, and murdered his parents when he was a boy in Haiti. He searches for opportunities to murder him in retaliation, but he agonizes over the possibility of killing the wrong man, widowing the wrong woman, and making fatherless the wrong children, feelings he understands too well. On a visit to his now elderly aunt in Haiti, he meets Claude, who has lived both in Haiti and the United States as he has. Claude describes himself as a puzzle in need of assembly, but Claude, unlike many of the other emotionally tortured in Danticat's work, is a lucky palannit, one who can speak his nightmares out loud. Most cannot. Nadine, who has aborted a child because she cannot reconcile the life of her parents left in Haiti with her own in New York, stares at an "unrecognizable woman" in the mirror by the end of "Water Child." Even Ka, born in the United States, is affected by the puzzle of Haitian history. One Christmas Eve she believes she sees Emmanuel Constant, wanted for the murder of thousands of Haitians, sitting in a New York church pew. In "The Book of Miracles," Ka, here a younger version of herself than first met in "The Book of the Dead," has no idea survivors might too recognize her father, had he not lost eighty pounds and changed his name and place of origin. Perhaps most moving is "The Bridal Seamstress," the story of Aline, a naive journalist intern who comes to know Beatrice Saint Fort, a woman who sees the dew breaker on every New York street she has lived and continually moves in an attempt to escape him. Aline, finding the woman foolish at first, comes to realize that she will now write about people like Beatrice, those who are constantly "chasing fragments of themselves."

"The Dew Breaker," the ninth and final piece, returns to the main subject but also Anne, his wife. How could she have loved such a man? Connections only hinted at in previous stories are now unveiled, but without any sense of satisfying resolution. Instead, the origins of the nightmares are divulged, and readers are left to decide how much to forgive the dew breaker who has

poisoned so many lives. While the dew breaker has not caused all the anguish in the characters' lives, he is emblematic of all those who did. Anne realizes she cannot "escape this dread anymore." Her strength comes from revising herself, knowing that despite those close to her disappearing without a trace, and despite living already thirty years in New York, she is continually moving toward the woman she "wanted to become." And she credits her American daughter, not anything Ka has said or done, just Ka's presence, for making this perspective possible after her Haitian past.

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*Lisa Muir*

### DICKEY, ERIC JEROME (1961– )

Eric Jerome Dickey was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and attended the University of Memphis (formerly Memphis State). After graduating with a degree in computer system technology, Dickey moved in 1983 to Los Angeles, where he worked as a software developer in the aerospace industry. During his time in L.A., Dickey began to pursue alternative work as an actor and stand-up comedian, eventually becoming a regular on the local and national comedy circuits. When a downturn in the aerospace industry left him unemployed in the early 1990s, Dickey decided to develop the writing skills he had nurtured writing stand-up comedy scripts into a career as a writer.

Dickey began writing **poetry** and short stories, eventually joining the International Black Writers and Artists (IBWA), where his participation in development workshops led to a scholarship to attend Creative Writing classes at the University of California at Los Angeles. Dickey's first published work, the short story "Thirteen," appeared in the IBWA's 1994 anthology *River Crossing, Voices of the Diaspora*.

Since the release of *Sister, Sister* in 1996, Dickey has established himself as perhaps the foremost male author of popular African American **fiction** predominantly read by women. His books consistently reach number one on the

Blackboard bestseller list. Dickey is part of a small number of such writers, along with **E. Lynn Harris**, Omar Tyree, Colin Channer, and Michael Basdin. Among these writers Dickey is perhaps the most developed in terms of the attention he gives to women's feelings and desires within relationships. His works, despite the professional or middle-class context, are less focused on wealth and upward mobility than the works of his male colleagues.

His works pursue the intricacies of diverse relationships, and the pressures that influence those relationships, in big cities. Dickey emphasizes themes such as dishonesty, the lack of accountability, infidelity, and noncommunication that he sees as characterizing contemporary urban relationships. For Dickey, men and women play complex and nonstereotypical parts in these relationships. Dickey is not afraid to pursue the irresponsibility and selfishness of male characters, and he deals forthrightly and unflinchingly with issues such as infidelity, absentee fathers, and fathers' decisions to withhold child support in attempts to hurt mothers. *Cheaters* (1999) examines relationships among people seeking immediate gratification. Dickey portrays male characters exhibiting characteristics typically attributed to women, such as "codependence," in order to break down the gender specificity given to such behaviors.

Dickey has attempted, by creating different scenarios from book to book while still focusing on relationship themes, to challenge **stereotypes** about men and women or African Americans and white people. His work has ventured beyond the clichés and stereotypes of much romance writing to delve into complex characters with unexpected and atypical motivations. In addition, Dickey's works are perhaps unique among romance writings in the direct attention given to social and political issues.

In *Friends and Lovers* (1997), Dickey challenges the assumptions of readers and critics alike by basing the novel's central conflict around the decision by the heroine Shelby to have an abortion. In this work Dickey goes against the grain of much popular romance writing by refusing to portray Shelby as an immoral person or someone undeserving of the hero Tyrell's affections.

Dickey addresses other themes that remain controversial in American public discourse. In *Milk in My Coffee* (1998), Dickey explores the intricacies of multiracial relationships and the pressures these relationships experience, within both African American and white communities in the United States.

In *Liar's Game* (2000), Dickey addresses issues of prejudice within African American communities. In many of his other works he examines questions of solidarity and **community** conflict within African American communities and the socioeconomic pressures impacting communities and neighborhoods in an era of globalization. In many of his works, most notably *Thieves' Paradise* (2002), Dickey presents characters attempting to deal with the results of failing social systems in the United States in the contemporary context. Economic recession and layoffs, hunger, incarceration, and **domestic** abuse are addressed in Dickey's forthright style. Characters in recent works have reflected on changes in economics and politics in the post-9/11 world.

Unlike other popular romance writers, Dickey does not shy away from expressing these concerns in direct and even provocative language. In *Drive*

*Me Crazy* (2004), for example, Dickey accepts the assessment of many residents of Los Angeles in the wake of the Rodney King beating in referring to the Los Angeles Police Department as “Los Angeles’s most notorious gang.”

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*J. Shantz*

## **DISAPPEARING ACTS**

Following the critical acclaim of her first novel, *Mama* (1987), **Terry McMillan** introduces readers to Zora Banks and Franklin Swift. In *Disappearing Acts* (1989), McMillan continues her discussion of the effects of dominant ideologies as they relate to Eurocentric constructs of the **family**. A narrative about Zora and Franklin’s early romance and its tragic ending is the focal point of the novel. However, what readers are reminded of is a different perspective of racial and sexual oppression. While the novel takes place in Brooklyn, New York, the ideologies that follow gender and **race** are just as alive in urban Brooklyn as they are in *Mama*’s more rural Point Haven.

The connections between the rural and the urban are important in that these connections also link the discussion to both the past and the present. *Disappearing Acts* is an exploration of the legacy of **slavery** and how, if we ignore the historical importance of the past, we will be trapped in a destructive cycle of conflict and misfortune. In this novel, McMillan offers some strategies for countering race and gender oppression.

While Zora is a music teacher, a white-collar profession, and Franklin is a carpenter, a blue-color profession, their common bond is the struggle for the

ideal of the patriarchal construct of family. In this sense, while Franklin feels pressure to provide for his family within a Eurocentric model of the husband's role as provider, Zora struggles with the same ideological construct, but her struggle is twofold: She recognizes Franklin's inability to assume the role as provider, but as his wife, she feels the pressure to patiently support Franklin's quest to become the breadwinner of the family.

Because Zora recognizes Franklin's inability to fulfill the socially constructed definition of **black masculinity**, readers are introduced to some of the often-overlooked methods that black women use to be supportive of their mates while at the same time acting behind the scenes by doing what it takes to help the family to survive. In this sense, *Disappearing Acts* is a discussion of the ways in which the **myth** of the castrating black woman as the cause of the breakup of the black family are largely ill informed. At the same time, McMillan points out the strengths of black women that have held families together. Furthermore, McMillan puts forth the narrative of Zora and Franklin as a way to call attention to the politics that continue to disenfranchise blacks in America. With these ideas in mind, however, McMillan does not leave readers with a bleak picture of the negative effects of racism. Instead, readers are pointed toward Zora's singing and Franklin's woodworking as arts that remind readers to continue to be creative in solving life's troubles, no matter the odds.

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Catherine Ross-Stroud

### DOMESTIC

As perhaps the most notable type of **work** in which African American women have been employed throughout **history**, the position of the domestic has been both a complicated and intriguing role for black women workers. Throughout history, particularly before World War II, the domestic sphere was the primary space where black women could be employed. This position of the domestic is complex in that it signifies the often influential role these women played in their employers' and masters' families, serving as the **Mammy** or primary caregiver for the children. However, at the same time, while being a trusted member of the household and often gaining "insider" information in the way that these families functioned, domestics were still forced into long hours of labor, harsh working conditions, and limited



opportunities. While it is true that many of these domestic workers possessed positions better than those of their peers working in fields, mills, or factories, these household workers were still subjected to often severe discrimination and abuse.

From the time they were young girls, African American women were trained to do the work required of the domestic sphere. Great time and energy were put into ensuring that these women could care for and nurture children, keep up the **home**, and cook the **family's** meals, and often these young women were trained alongside their own mothers, which created a generational cycle of domestic workers. The role of the domestic was also difficult for African American women because, often, there was only one domestic worker per household. This meant that little sense of **community** or fellowship was present for these women because they were so frequently isolated from one another, with little contact with the outside world.

In the period before the Civil War, women slaves often worked as domestic workers within the homes of their owners, cooking meals, caring for children, and cleaning the house. In writings such as **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), one gains a sense of what the daily lives of these domestic workers were like. Jacobs's narrative tells of her years working in the home of Dr. James Norcom and the severe physical and sexual abuse she suffered at his hands.

The period after the Civil War represents a migration of domestic workers from the rural **South** to urban centers such as Washington, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, and New York. In this Great Migration, the stories of now "freed" women make clear the great gender, racial, and socioeconomic disparities that still existed in their positions within wealthy, white families. As early as the 1870s, African Americans moved north in search of better lives and escape from the rampant discrimination present in the agrarian South. And from 1910 to 1920, this migration increased dramatically, with between 300,000 and 1,000,000 blacks moving north, many of whom became domestic workers.

Literature that represents the position of the domestic was fairly sparse after the time of the Civil War. There is Fannie Cook's *Mrs. Palmer's Honey* (1946) that details the social and political struggles of Honey Hoop, a domestic worker and eventual activist. There is also **Alice Childress's** *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life* (1956), where the author provides stories of African American female domestic workers in a way that shows the importance and diversity of these women and their working lives. Interestingly, some texts, such as **Alice Walker's** *The Color Purple* (1982), demonstrate that domestics working in the homes of other African Americans were the victims of equally disturbing treatment. In this novel, for instance, Celie's position as Mr.'s wife is really more akin to that of a domestic worker than it is a partner in marriage. Additionally, even when working for middle- and upper-class black families who might not subject their domestics to such abuses, there were still significant socioeconomic and power disparities that proved complicated in their own ways.

In recent years, it seems there has been renewed interest in the role of the domestic. **Barbara Neely**, in her popular Blanche White mysteries, such as *Blanche on the Lam* (1993), *Blanche among the Talented Tenth* (1995), *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998), and *Blanche Passes Go* (2000), writes of an African American maid with a gift for solving mysteries. In Natasha Trethewey's collection of **poetry** *Domestic Work* (2000), the author uses photos of workers in the pre-civil rights era as inspiration for her poems, many of which focus on the domestic worker.

While black women working in domestic roles often had to contend with abuse, mistreatment, and other forms of discrimination, it is inaccurate to only view their domestic positions in these marginalized terms. As scholars such as Trudier Harris make clear, these women often possessed a great deal of unseen power and subversive influence. Inhabiting such important roles within wealthy, white families allowed these workers opportunities to influence their employers' families and societal views. This points to the complexity of the position of the domestic. While one can see the women in these roles suffered from many injustices due to their gender, **class**, and racial status, it is also clear that these women often held positions of power and influence within the homes in which they worked, even though this power was not always evident to their employers.

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*Lisa A. Kirby*

### DOUGLASS, FREDERICK (1818–1895)

Douglass is well known as an antislavery activist, journalist, diplomat, and autobiographer. What is less well known is the fact that Douglass was also a tireless crusader for equal rights for women. This should come as no surprise; after all, women played a significant role in Douglass's life.

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born on Holme Hill farm, near Tuckahoe Creek in Talbot County on Maryland's eastern shore. His mother was Harriet Bailey, and his father was an unknown white man. There are suggestions that his father might have been his master, Captain Aaron Anthony. He was raised by his grandmother, Betsey Bailey, and rarely saw his mother, who worked as a fieldhand. When he was about six years old, young

Frederick was taken to live on the Lloyd plantation near the Wye River. Although his grandmother had brought him to the plantation, she returned to the Holme farm, leaving Douglass in the care of “Aunt Katy,” a cousin of his mother. As he details in his first **autobiography**, as a child, Douglass’s **work** as a slave was relatively light. He writes that he was “introduced” to the **violence** and horror of **slavery** after witnessing his aunt receiving an extremely violent beating from her master. This vision not only initiated him into the horrors of slavery but also made clear the double victimization of slave women.

In 1827, Douglass was sent to Baltimore, Maryland, to live with Hugh and Sophia Auld. The Aulds were related to his master Aaron Anthony by marriage (Anthony’s daughter, Lucretia, was married to Thomas Auld, Hugh’s brother). While in Baltimore, Sophia Auld began to teach young Frederick to read. Her husband objected to her endeavors, explaining that teaching Douglass to read would spoil him for slavery. While in Baltimore, Douglass was a companion to the Aulds’ young son, Tommy, and he also worked as an errand boy and general assistant to Auld in his shipbuilding concern. Although Sophia Auld stopped teaching him, Frederick eventually taught himself how to read and write using Tommy’s old books. In 1833 after a disagreement between Hugh and Thomas Auld, Thomas demanded that Douglass be returned to Maryland. While back in Maryland, Douglass organized a Bible study group for the slaves on the Lloyd plantation and began to teach some slaves to read and write. After Thomas Auld discovered that Douglass had been teaching slaves to read, he decided to discipline him by renting him out for a year as a fieldhand to Edward Covey, a man known for his ability to “break” unruly slaves.

Covey proved to be a ruthless and sadistic master, subjecting Douglass to many beatings and abuse. One day after a particularly brutal beating, when he had collapsed from heat exhaustion, Douglass ran away from Covey and returned to Thomas Auld. Thomas Auld refused his requests to hire him out to anyone else and forced him to return to Covey. When Douglass returned, Covey was determined to beat him again, this time for running away and complaining to his master. Douglass refused to submit to Covey’s unfair punishment, and what had been a war of words between the two turned into a vicious physical confrontation. Covey was unable to gain the upper hand and after the fight never again whipped Douglass. In December 1834, Douglass left Covey’s farm for good and returned to the Lloyd plantation. While at the Lloyd plantation, he organized another Bible study group and also taught a small group of slaves to read and write.

In April 1836, Douglass and five other slaves planned to run away to **freedom**. Unfortunately, their escape plan was discovered. Although he and four other slaves were caught, they were not sold south but rather were jailed in Easton and released to their masters after a week. Douglass was sent back to Baltimore to live and work for Hugh Auld. Thomas Auld promised Frederick that he would manumit him at age twenty-five, but only if he behaved himself and learned a trade while in Baltimore. Frederick began to train as a

caulker and was hired out to work in several shipyards. Though forced to turn over the bulk of the money he earned to Hugh Auld, as an urban slave in Baltimore Douglass had considerably more freedom of movement than when he was on the Maryland plantation and came into contact with free blacks. He joined the "East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society," a discussion group whose members were free black men. Through this group he met Anna Murray, a free black woman who worked as a housekeeper in Baltimore.

The year 1838 proved to be a pivotal year for Douglass. He became engaged to Murray and moved out of the Auld household into his own lodgings. His taste of relative freedom of movement, however, came to a quick end after Hugh Auld found out that Douglass had attended a church meeting without first asking Auld's permission. Afraid that he would be sold, Douglass put his plan of escape into action. Murray sold one of her feather beds to help Douglass finance his escape, and he purchased free papers from a retired sailor. Then, masquerading as a free black, Douglass was able to escape to New York. Murray joined him in New York, and on September 15, the Reverend J. C. Pennington married the two.

They left New York for New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Douglass could find work in a shipyard. It was at this time that he decided to take the last name of Douglass, after the Scottish Lord named in the Sir Walter Scott poem *The Lady of the Lake*. Due to racism on the docks, he was forced to leave his work as a caulker and became a laborer. While in New Bedford, he came into contact with free blacks and whites involved in the abolitionist movement. He also began to subscribe to William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery newspaper, the *Liberator*. In 1841, Douglass attended a meeting of the Bristol County Anti-Slavery Society and spoke at the meeting, sharing his experiences as a former slave with the audience. His speech was so well received that he was invited to become a paid general agent or speaker for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. He traveled around New England and the Northeast, giving speeches describing his life as a slave, while withholding details that might positively identify him.

At Garrison's urging, he began to write his autobiography. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* was published in 1845 by the American Anti-Slavery Society. Worried that the narrative might have endangered his freedom, Douglass left for an extended speaking tour of the United Kingdom. Hugh Auld purchased Douglass from Thomas Auld for \$100 and vowed to capture Douglass as soon as he returned to the United States. In an endeavor to secure his freedom, two of Douglass's new British friends, the abolitionists Anna and Ellen Richardson, negotiated with Hugh Auld. Auld eventually agreed to free Douglass for approximately \$700. Some abolitionists criticized Douglass and the Richardsons for their course of action, arguing that the purchase acknowledged the right to buy and sell human beings. Douglass defended his decision in a letter to the *Liberator*.

Douglass finally returned to the United States in 1847. Using money he raised in England, he decided to publish a newspaper called *North Star*, in

Rochester, New York. The paper's manifesto was "Right is of no Sex—Truth is no Color—God is the father of us all, and we are all brethren." He eventually moved his **family** to Rochester and began to shelter slaves escaping to Canada on the **Underground Railroad**.

As editor of the *North Star*, Douglass wrote several editorials and articles supportive of women's rights. For Douglass, the rights of women and the rights of blacks were intertwined. He recognized that the plight of women was similar to that of African Americans. His support of women's rights might also have stemmed from friendships he cultivated as a speaker for the American Abolitionists Society, such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others. He saw that some of the strongest supporters of rights for African Americans were women. Indeed, Douglass was one of the few male nineteenth-century public figures to vociferously support women's rights. In 1848, Douglass was invited to attend and speak at the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. At the convention, he seconded the motion to support female suffrage, and his explicit support was instrumental in its passage. At the first national women's conference in 1850, Douglass signed the Declaration of Sentiments, which would become the movement's manifesto. Douglass would continue to support women's rights and to speak at most of the Women's Rights Conventions over the next twenty-one years.

In 1851, Douglass publicly disagreed with Garrison's interpretation of the Constitution as a document that supported slavery. Douglass felt the Constitution should be interpreted as an antislavery document because it enshrined and was founded on the notion of freedom. Garrison believed that the Constitution sanctioned slavery, and as a result, abolitionists should work toward exempting themselves from the Union. The estrangement with Garrison would continue and eventually cause Douglass to leave the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1854, when he then joined the Radical Abolitionist Party.

In 1855, Douglass published a second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In addition to detailing the horrors of slavery he had described in the 1845 narrative, Douglass also depicted the racism he encountered in the North and within the abolitionist movement. Douglass continued to lecture extensively. In 1856, John Brown visited Douglass in Rochester. When Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry failed and he was captured, a letter from Douglass was found among Brown's papers. An arrest warrant was issued for Douglass, and as a result, he had to flee from the United States. After a short sojourn in Canada, Douglass left for England, where he began another speaking tour, eventually returning to the United States months later in the spring of 1860.

When the Civil War erupted in 1861, Douglass continued to speak out and advocate rights for blacks. On January 1, 1863, he spoke in Boston at a celebration for passage of the final Emancipation Proclamation. He also became a recruiting agent for the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, the first all-black regiment.

Later that year, he attended the thirtieth anniversary meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society, where he argued that the work of abolitionism was not done and the society should not be disbanded, as Garrison had proposed.

At a meeting of the American Equal Rights Association in 1868, Douglass argued that it was more important for black men to receive the right to vote than white women. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton vehemently disagreed, insisting that women and blacks should receive the right to vote together.

Douglass moved with his family to Washington, D.C., after Ulysses S. Grant invited Douglass to become a member of his administration (assistant secretary to the commission investigating annexing Hispaniola). In 1874, he was named president of the Freedman's Bank and attempted to reorganize it. Unfortunately, the mismanagement of the bank prior to Douglass's tenure was so severe that the bank had to be closed. President Hayes eventually appointed Douglass U.S. marshal for the District of Columbia in 1877.

In 1882, Douglass published a new version of his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. It sold few copies. In this same year, his wife died. In 1884 Douglass married Helen Pitts, a women's rights activist who worked in the record office with Douglass when he was demoted to recorder of deeds. Douglass's marriage to this white woman was denounced in the press by friends and foes alike. In order to escape the firestorm, they left the United States for an extensive tour of Europe and Egypt in 1886–1887.

In 1889, Douglass was appointed consul general to Haiti. He would eventually resign in 1891 after being continually undermined by the U.S. government. On February 20, 1895, after addressing a meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C., Douglass collapsed from heart failure at home. At his funeral, Susan B. Anthony read a eulogy written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

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*Nicole N. Aljoe*

### **DOVE, RITA (1952– )**

When Rita Dove was a young girl, she never thought that she would become a writer. Though she loved to read and write as a child, the thought of making a living writing did not occur to her until she was a senior in high school. Her teacher invited her to attend John Ciardi's book signing of his translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and the experience made writers more real to her. Writers, Dove realized, could create in private and then share their creative inventions with the world. For the first time, she felt a connection between the author, the text, and herself, a feeling she lacked previously since many of the works she read as a child were authored by dead white men. Though as a child Dove did not see herself as a writer, she loved learning about language and would use her weekly assigned spelling words to create prose work she titled "Chaos." In fourth grade, Dove wrote the poem "The Rabbit with the Droopy Ear." She did not plan the solution to the rabbit's droopy ear or devise a plot for "Chaos." In both cases, Dove let the words shape the events of the work, a trait that she continues to use throughout her career.

Dove was born in Akron, Ohio, on August 28, 1952, to Elvira Hord Dove and Ray Dove. Ray Dove would become the first black research chemist in the rubber industry for Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company after attending the University of Akron. However, he did not obtain this post for many years and had to settle for being an elevator operator, where he was passed over by the very white students he tutored in chemistry. Eventually, management was changed, and he was hired as a chemist. Elvira Dove came from a well-educated **family**, and she received a full scholarship at Howard University. Her parents, though, decided that she was too young, at sixteen, to go away to college and sent her to secretarial school instead. Education became very important in the Dove household for Rita Dove and her two younger sisters and one older brother. For the young Rita Dove, each book became an exciting adventure, and learning brought good grades and praise from her family. By the time she was finishing high school in 1970, she was chosen as a presidential scholar, 1 of only 100 students in the United States, and was invited to the White House.

The emphasis on education put on Rita Dove by her parents not only earned her national recognition from the White House, but her academic success helped her fund college as well. She was named a National Achievement Scholar by Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in the fall of 1970. Surprisingly, Dove's major was prelaw. While growing up, Dove was influenced by the popular media and wished to be a lawyer's or doctor's wife.

Now, however, she felt that she could obtain such a profession. Many of the adults surrounding Dove expected as much. Dove changed her major four times as a freshman and started her sophomore year as an English major. While enrolled in an advanced English composition class, creative writing instructor Milton White replaced Dove's regular instructor. It was in this class that Dove became inspired to be a writer. By her junior year, Dove decided that she wanted to be a poet. Dove's parents supported her decision to become a poet, and in 1973, she graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and Phi Kappa Phi, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

Dove continued her education and began publishing her work in the mid-1970s. After graduation, Dove became a Fulbright scholar and attended the University of Tübingen in West Germany for two semesters. There she studied European literature, and her discussions with classmates would foster one of her major concerns throughout her writing. **History**, particularly American history, always left out the common and oppressed peoples' struggle and heroics. Dove's new view of history would be represented throughout her **poetry** and other writing. In 1975, she returned to the United States and enrolled in the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop program, where she was the only black woman among her peers. Though competition was vehement among the students, she felt that her **race** helped in this respect. As a black woman, she was an outsider; therefore, she was left out of what she calls the "pecking order." She was the only student who published a poem in *The American Poetry Anthology* that year, a precursor to her eventual fame as a poet.

In 1976, Dove met her future husband, German novelist Fred Viebahn, who was invited as a Fulbright fellow to Iowa for the International Writing Program. Through their support of each other, both were able to continue writing, and Dove began **work** on what would later become published collections of her work. When she first met her future husband, Dove agreed to translate any German texts into English that Viebahn may use. In 1977, Dove received her Master of Fine Arts degree. She soon decided that she wished to be a freelance writer and move to Berlin. However, her plans were delayed when Viebahn was offered a visiting professorship at Oberlin College, which was near Dove's childhood home in Akron. Though Dove undertook many activities during Viebahn's two years at Oberlin, she also completed most of the poems that were included in her first published book, *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980). She also worked on some prose writing that would later become part of a collection titled *Fifth Sunday* (1985).

After Dove married Viebahn in 1979, her husband was invited to Jerusalem for three months, and it was during this time that Dove sent out *The Yellow House on the Corner* to publishers. The manuscript was accepted in November of that year by Carnegie-Mellon University Press and published in 1980. What would become characteristic of Dove's writing first appears bluntly in the title of *The Yellow House on the Corner*, a concern with space and the impression space has on people's lives. For Dove, a poem can be a "house of sound" that impresses upon the reader, as well as Dove, the possibility of



building a **home** in a place where she or he is too frightened to go. Dove's own backyard and the back door figure prominently in much of her writing. In "Adolescence III," the backyard can be a frightening place of confrontation, where one is enclosed and exposed, a place of growth and stagnation, as well as a place of security and loss. In "Geometry," another poem included in her first collection, the back door becomes symbolic as "the door of childhood" for Dove. The back door also provides a place of growth for the child; it is protected and enclosed, but it offers a view of the larger world. This notion of space, in various examples, continues throughout Dove's work.

Shortly after Dove's first collection was accepted for publication, she and her husband moved to Germany, where they hoped to work as freelance writers. During the cold German winter, Dove would write a series of short stories in a friend's unheated apartment; however, she also created a series of poems in the apartment she shared with her husband that would eventually become her second collection of poetry, *Museum* (1983). Though she planned to stay in Germany much longer, Dove noticed that her ability to create poems in English was beginning to suffer. The more she spoke German, the harder it was for her to create English poems according to her standards. After one year, the couple decided to move back to America, and Dove accepted an offer from Arizona State University as a tenure-track assistant professor of creative writing in 1981.

Two major events occurred in 1983; Dove published her second collection of poetry, and her daughter was born. Dove's focus on the home space continues in *Museum*. Such an example is found in "A Father Out Walking on the Lawn," where the speaker of the poem is outside the house and yard, looking into the interior. For this collection, Dove focuses on the space in between exterior and interior. She believes that the movement between inside to outside, similar to opening a door, is effortless. It is this moment of suspension for the poet and the reader that signifies the essence of the poem, one that Dove claims is the moment of possibility or of irresponsibility for the reader. In other words, one must go out into the world, and such movement into the exterior space is fraught with danger, yet it has possibilities also.

When Dove's daughter, Aviva Chantal Tamu Dove-Viebahn, was born, Dove would find that despite the hardships and rewards of child rearing her desire to create was ever present. In 1985, Dove dedicated her collection of short stories, published by the Callaloo Fiction Series at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, titled *Fifth Sunday* to her daughter. The very title of this work suggests the significance of a "fifth Sunday," which seldom occurs, indicating that these stories have special significance.

When Dove was in Germany, she wrote about five or six poems about her grandfather's youth and thought that these would work well by themselves. While she was a writer-in-residence at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama for the summer of 1981, she wrote several more poems about her grandfather. She now revised these and sent them to the *Ohio Review*, where they were published as the chapbook "Mandolin." The poems about her grandfather expanded, especially after Dove was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for the

1983–1984 academic year, allowing her the **freedom** to focus on her writing. One night while Dove looked over a poem from *Museum* titled “Dusting,” Dove recognized that the solarium in the poem was her grandmother’s, and the woman who was trying to remember her lover’s name was, in fact, her grandmother. Dove felt that her grandmother, through the poem, spoke to her, asking to have her story told. At that moment, the poetry collection *Thomas and Beulah* was born.

*Thomas and Beulah*, published by Carnegie-Mellon in 1986, charts the lives of Dove’s grandparents in the context of larger history that entailed the migration of blacks from the **South** to the North, several wars, and the **civil rights movement**, among other social events that affected blacks. Though *Thomas and Beulah* is not about a place, Dove asserts that the grandmother and grandfather function as one unit that is “defined” and “confined” to a particular place, Akron, Ohio. For Dove, the poems took charge of themselves, and each fell into place within the collection. Dove won the Lavan Younger Poets Award and served as the president of the Associated Writing Programs. She also received the General Electric Foundation Award for Younger Writers. However, the most significant impact of Dove’s success with *Thomas and Beulah* was realized in April 1987, when she became the second African American poet besides **Gwendolyn Brooks** to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Dove soon found herself with celebrity status; the next year she had little time to write as she appeared throughout the country for interviews, presentations, and book signings. However, she was approved for a sabbatical for the 1987–1988 academic year, so she and her family left the country in June and spent time on the Yugoslavian islands, the German island Amrum, Mexico City, and then Berlin in August. While in Berlin, Dove managed to write prolifically for four weeks and then returned to the United States in September. Dove later returned to Europe in the summer of 1988 as a resident at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Study and Conference Center in Bellagio, Italy.

When returning to the United States, Dove moved first to Durham, North Carolina, where she was a Mellon fellow at the National Humanities Center for 1988–1989; she later joined the faculty at the University of Virginia. She also received several more awards, including the Ohio Governor’s Award. W. W. Norton published Dove’s next collection of poetry, *Grace Notes* (1989). These poems reflect the influence that music has in Dove’s life. While in fourth grade, Dove learned how to play the violoncello and took private lessons at the Akron Conservatory for Music. Shortly thereafter she joined the Akron Youth Symphony and was even part of a **jazz** quintet. She also played with the Miami University orchestra and continues to study music.

Later on, when her husband was at Oberlin College, Dove switched to the viola da gamba, an early cousin of the cello. For Dove’s fortieth birthday in 1992, Viebahn surprised her with a custom-made seventeenth-century replica of an English bass viol. The scrollpiece was carved by hand to resemble the head of a black woman from Albrecht Durer’s 1521 drawing *The Negress*

*Katharina*. Music played the role of discovery for Dove, and she claims that learning music provided her with her first sense of epiphany, of things fitting together that would no doubt be a feature in her literary creations. In 1991, Dove received the Ohioana Award for *Grace Notes*, the Charles Frankel/National Humanities Medal, the Harvard University Phi Beta Kappa poetry award, and the Literary Lion citation from the New York Public Libraries.

In 1992, Pantheon Books published Dove's first novel, *Through the Ivory Gate*. Dove spent many years working on the novel. In fact, the novel was born during a 1979 trip to Dublin, Ireland. The heroine of the novel, Virginia, shares things in common with Dove. She lives in Arizona and plays the cello. Virginia also has a revelation about the musical phrasing she notices in the Bach suites that was also Dove's. Though the novel is not biographical, the **love** of music and the elements found in Dove's poetry are consistent. Again, the very title of the work, *Through the Ivory Gate*, suggests that Virginia must move through her existing place. Her place serves as a passage, a "transient space."

More of Dove's poetry appeared in 1993 in a volume titled *Selected Poems*, published by Vintage Press. In this same year, Dove began serving as Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress. She was the youngest person and the first African American to receive such an honor. She served in this post for two years. Dove was also named a Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia and was given the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Great American Artist Award and received the Woman of the Year Award from *Glamour* magazine.

Dove's first play, *The Darker Face of the Earth*, was published by Story Line Press in 1994 and would eventually become more personal for Dove when she later revised the play for production in 1996. Dove began working on the play shortly after *The Yellow House on the Corner* was published. Like her first collection of poems, Dove had a concern for lost details of history, and she tries to fill in the past in order to humanize the experience and to learn more about personal **identity**. When revising the play, Dove had another "coming home" experience because she had to add emotions to each of her characters. Each character becomes part of her; they were no longer "mythic representations." Yet no character is simply bad or good in terms of the **slavery** system where each person is fighting for his or her own space.

The sense of history and the personal feelings and identities of the characters connect in the play. Dove felt W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness in her past when she realized that her dream as a young black girl and white mainstream society's dream differed. Her parents were very traditional, yet they told her that she could be whatever she wanted. There were, however, few professional women that Dove could use as role models; nonetheless, she grew up believing her dream was possible, though she recognized the obstacles she faced. This kind of realization, the understanding that what one is told may only be one version of the truth, would connect

Dove's personal and present life to the historical past and connect her own experience and identity to the play.

Dove also received many additional awards and honors that year, including the Distinguished Achievement medal from the Miami University Alumni Association, the Renaissance Forum Award for leadership in the literary arts from the Folger Library, and the Carl Sandburg Award from the International Platform Association.

Dove continued to be prolific in 1995, publishing a poetry collection, *Mother Love*, through W. W. Norton and a collection of essays, *The Poet's World*, published by the Library of Congress. The poems and essays move in a more personal direction and continue to universalize experiences often separated by race, gender, and **class**. Home and place are still important in these works. In 1996 she was honored with the Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities and the Charles Frankel Prize/National Metal in the Humanities.

After a two-year respite, Dove published a song cycle, *Seven for Luck* (1998), through the Hal Leonard Corporation with John Williams, which was used by the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood. The songs, which were originally from a group of poems called "Seven for Luck," engage the various stages of life that women go through and include adolescence, romance, love, pregnancy, disappointment, and renewal. This collection further connects Dove's musical interests with her poetic genius. Dove was also awarded the Levinson Prize from *Poetry* magazine at this time.

Dove published *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* in 1999. This collection of poems is largely about middle-age experience. Unlike many of her other collections, these poems were created over time and are less concentrated. Once again, the collection examines the personal, inner feelings of the self and connects those feelings to universal experience. Dove claims that the poems deal with the public and private parts of the self. This same year Dove was reappointed as special consultant in poetry for the Library of Congress and received the John Frederick Nims Translation Award from *Poetry* magazine. In 2001, Dove was honored with the Duke Ellington Lifetime Achievement Award. Over the span of her career, Dove has also been awarded numerous honorary doctorates. Her latest collection is the 2004 *American Smooth*.

One of Dove's most profound attributes is her willingness to get at history that is not told. In some respects, she is a controversial writer because she shows both the positive and negative characteristics of human nature, whether her characters are African American or white American. Dove's concept of how race shapes one's identity is, in some respects, in conflict with the **Black Arts Movement**. In her poetry, Dove seeks to uncover the limitations that any kind of movement can have on shaping one's identity, one's home, and one's personal/public life.

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*Earl F. Yarrington*

### DRAMA

Expanding the definition of drama beyond the play-text to consider oral traditions and ritual enactments as well as the theatrical activity in the culture at large, we can begin to widen the scope of what constitutes African American drama, particularly feminist drama. Performancelike drama involves the written and spoken word, gesture and image, text and **body**. It is a literary form and theatrical practice, an embodied way of knowing that employs “actors” and “audiences” ranging from the rhetorician and her listening audience to the performer and her theatergoing spectators. It includes oral literature and living art forms that bridge and merge disciplinary specific genres such as drama, dance, music, **folklore**, and the visual arts.

Why this emphasis on performance versus drama? The **history** of drama often relies on the circulation and survival of documented or printed plays. Moreover, ideas of what constitutes worthy drama rely on and reflect cultural ideologies, definitions of aesthetics, and hierarchies of art and representation. By turning our attention to performance as an object *and* lens of study, we begin to perceive the various continuities and connections between written and oral modes of expression—speeches and performance pieces, and rituals

and ceremonies—that inform and shape African American women’s performance creations.

Years before and after **William Wells Brown** wrote and performed *Escape, or a Leap to Freedom* (1858), the earliest documented play by an African American, the vernacular tradition functioned as the primary source of black expression that evoked theatrical and performative qualities. We might consider how **spirituals**, gospels, sermons, and folktales, to name a few genres within the vernacular tradition, employ voices, personae, and bodies to express and enact experience, messages, and lessons for specific audiences. As oral forms, these genres were invented for spoken performance in specific social and ritual contexts. As “actors,” the orators or tellers relied on theatrical techniques such as movement, gesture, actions, intonation, and silences as well as literary conventions such as metaphor, imagery, characterization, narrative, and allusion to draw in and persuade their “audiences” as they engaged the performed word. Of course, each genre of the vernacular tradition is different and has its own specific oratorical forms. But as a whole, the vernacular tradition offers one site of performance in which African American women were participants and producers.

Public speeches and the activities related to demonstrations, town meetings, and yearly conventions associated with the abolitionist and feminist campaigns (the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, the Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1837), the Women’s Rights and Suffrage campaigns in Seneca Falls (1848), and later the Woman’s (Temperance) Crusade (1873–1874) invoked spectacle, theatrics, and social dramas as central tactics of the gatherings. **Maria Stewart**, who gave speeches on the topics of **slavery** and women’s rights, is considered the first woman in U.S. history to speak publicly to an audience of men and women. On September 21, 1832, at the meeting of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, she called for an increase in the **work** toward educational and economic opportunity for young black women and men in Boston. Such lectures, including the more famous **Sojourner Truth**’s “Ar’n’t I a Woman,” delivered at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, took on the valence of political sermons and employed the rhetorical and theatrical structure of the vernacular tradition.

Rethinking performance to include these public events is important because it constitutes and contributes to an evolving tradition that is not mutually exclusive of its specific sociopolitical contexts. Writing drama requires having access to resources including publications and theaters as sites of distribution and legitimization, if not site of encouragement from which to develop their craft. Moreover, to write drama requires an audience that is receptive to the material and content of the literature. As a public art, drama often works with or against public and ideological representations. The history of the black theater is one that exploited and restricted African American actors and the representation of black life to the popular amusement stage and vaudeville environs, which severely limited the spaces and opportunities for African American women dramatists. In addition, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American dramatists had to work

against the predominant constructed images of minstrelsy, buffoonery, and low comedy; the white-produced minstrel shows employed **stereotypes** that posited African American women, for example, in the roles of “wench” or “**Mammy**.”

The history and development of African American drama is very much connected to the performance history of African Americans on the stage and their struggle against these representations. The first dramas about black life to receive national acclaim, however, were by white male playwrights such as Ridgely Torrence and Eugene O’Neill. Even though their plays still reflected explicitly or implicitly racist attitudes and stereotypes, they commanded serious attention of white critics and public and exploded the roles available for black actors. Musical theater became one early site in which black artists began to transform perceptions of black actors on stage, and Bob Cole’s *A Trip to Coontown* (1898) is considered the first show to be produced, directed, and managed by blacks. The first nonmusical play by a black playwright to reach Broadway, however, did not open until 1923: *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* by Willis Richardson.

Plays by African American women dramatists, if produced, were staged in church and school auditoriums. **Angelina Weld Grimké’s** *Rachel* (1916) is considered the first play by an African American woman produced publicly. The Drama Committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) produced this three-act **protest** drama in March 1916 in Washington, D.C., at the Myrtill Miner School. Subsequent performances occurred in New York at the Neighborhood Playhouse and in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The production of Grimké’s play reflected a developing concerted effort among African American organizations to increase the visibility of “**race**” plays. In the early twentieth century, black theater groups emerged around the country: the Howard University Players in Washington, D.C., the Ethiopian Art Theater in Chicago, and the Lafayette Theater in New York (a product of the Federal Theater Project). In 1926 W.E.B. Du Bois organized the Krigwa Player’s Little Negro Theatre in Harlem and published a manifesto that called for real black plays about, by, for, and near the African American **community** (a call that echoed the NAACP’s call only a decade prior). Yet African American women’s plays still appeared primarily in churches and schools.

African American women’s drama did appear, however, in print. In response to Du Bois’s call for an increase in “race drama,” various black journals sponsored and supported contests for one-act plays. The *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines, for example, offered prizes for the best short plays about the black experience. The majority of the contributors and prizewinners of these contests were women who were writing feminist plays. Among the winners were **Zora Neale Hurston** for *Color Struck* and *Spears* (1925), Ruth Ada Gines-Shelton for *The Church Fight* (1925), **Georgia Douglas Johnson** for *Plumes* (1927), and **Marita Bonner** for *The Purple Flower* (1928). Yet even earlier women were writing and publishing feminist plays. Mary Burrill’s *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919) was published in the *Birth Control*

*Review's* special issue (September 1919), "The Negro's Need for Birth Control as Seen by Themselves." Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919) appeared in the *Liberator*, a white, left-wing periodical.

The publication and circulation of these plays suggest that African American women's drama was alive and thriving even though it did not appear regularly on the stage. From protest plays to one-acts that address racial injustice, the rights of women to information about birth control, issues of miscegenation, church politics, and the achievements and contributions of African Americans to the community and nation, African American women emerged as an important force in the development of modern drama. These plays included a variety of dramatic genres that spanned the spectrum from tragedy, comedy, melodrama, drama of ideas, and moralities to surreal fantasies. While not all the stories or images are positive, most focus on the black woman's story and/or are told from her perspective. This treatment of black women characters distinguishes the work of African American women dramatists from that of their African American and white male counterparts.

Access, however, remained an issue that curtailed the exposure of this work in the literary and theatrical realms dominated by white authors and audiences. Between 1926 and 1959 only ten plays written by African American men were produced on Broadway. While the 1930s and 1940s saw an increase in venues for African American drama—the American Negro Theater was established in Harlem in 1940—it was not until mid-century that more and more black women dramatists received exposure on and off Broadway as legitimate and important contributors. One of the first black women to attract attention was **Alice Childress**, who, with her one-act play *Florence* (1950), cast the young black career woman in a hopeful light. Childress's *Trouble in Mind* (1955), a full-length play that focuses on a strong black female character, was produced off-Broadway and received an Obie Award. When **Lorraine Hansberry's** *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in 1959 and received numerous awards, suddenly black and white mainstream audiences began to give the long overdue attention to African American women characters and African American women dramatists.

The drama of the late 1950s to the 1970s grew out of the sociopolitical and cultural environments—the **civil rights movement**, the women's movement, the antiwar movement, and the **Black Nationalism** movement—that defined the period. Of course, not all black drama of this period aligned itself with these movements; however, the historical context is critical to understanding the artistic developments and the ways in which African American women playwrights negotiate the multiple intersections of gender, race, **class**, and **sexuality**. While much of the militant, masculine theater of **Amiri Baraka** (LeRoi Jones) and others of the **Black Arts Movement** were not feminist, women playwrights including Childress and Hansberry contributed to the black revolutionary theater by writing plays that foregrounded the idea of black mass liberation and strong female characters. Among the black revolutionary women playwrights, **Sonia Sanchez** and Martie Charles are most representative. Sanchez's one-act plays followed the method and form of



agit-prop, which employed short plays, simplistic action, and direct language to convey a message in the most effective manner possible. This didactic tone is evident in Sanchez's *The Bronx Is Next* (1968) and *Sister Soulja* (1969) as well as Charles's *Job Security* (1970), *Black Cycle* (1971), and *Jamimma* (1972).

Several playwrights broke with realism as a primary mode of representation. **Adrienne Kennedy's** *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962) and *The Owl Answers* (1963) employ **poetry**, imagery, and metaphor to create disjoined yet intersecting layers of time, place, and consciousness. Kennedy's dramatic oeuvre is very much about the failure to locate embodied **identity** as the source of authenticity of experience, and she remains one of the most innovative African American playwrights in the twentieth century. With *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), **Ntozake Shange** developed a new dramatic genre she named the choreopoem, which merged music, dance, and poetry throughout its series of dramatic monologues. Originating as a series of seven poems, *for colored girls* presents monologues of seven female characters who create an account of black women's interconnected experiences of racial, gender, and class oppression and celebrate being both black and a woman. Shange's *for colored girls* was produced first off-off-Broadway at the Henry Street Settlement and then off-Broadway by the New York Shakespeare Festival at the Public Theater. Four months later the play was transferred to Broadway and opened at the Booth Theater on September 15, 1976.

Feminist drama in the last quarter of the twentieth century continues to express the multiple and fluid identities that construct and represent black experience. The drama of this period puts in conversation personal identities and cultural histories. Moreover, it highlights performance as a site of representation that constitutes and deconstructs identity simultaneously. As such, the drama of this period engages a relationship between a performance present and its historical past. Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* (1990), Glenda Dickerson and Brena Clarke's *Re/Membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* (1991), **Anna Deavere Smith's** *Fires in the Mirror* (1991), and **Suzan-Lori Parks's** *In the Blood* (2000), to name a very select few, rely on and recall the rich history of African American drama and performance from the solo orator to mainstream theatrical production.

*See also* Franklin, J. E.; *Topdog/Underdog*; *Venus*

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Johanna Frank

### DRUMGOOLD, KATE (1858-?)

Kate Drumgoold is known for her **autobiography** *A Slave Girl's Story*, and all that is known about her life comes from this book. Drumgoold apparently self-published *A Slave Girl's Story* in 1898 in Brooklyn, New York. The autobiography recounts Drumgoold's experiences growing up as a slave, as a young girl during the Civil War and its aftermath, and as an educator at the turn of the century.

Born in 1858 in Virginia, Drumgoold recounts a pivotal experience in her early life, the burning of her mother's house, after which she lived with her white owner, Bettie House. Drumgoold formed a close relationship with Mrs. House, her "white mother," who treated Drumgoold as a daughter and who was significant in grounding her in the religious life that would be so important to her. After House's death, Drumgoold returned to live with her own mother briefly; early in the Civil War, her mother was sold to finance a war proxy for her owner, John House. About 1864 or 1865, Drumgoold's mother returned to Virginia and began gathering up her scattered children in preparation for the move to the North. In 1865, the **family** moved to Brooklyn, assisted by Major Bailey, a northerner sent to Virginia to ensure that newly emancipated African Americans received their rights, and Drumgoold was baptized into the Washington Avenue Baptist Church in 1866.

From 1865 to 1878, Drumgoold embarked on her "twelve or thirteen years of service," working in various Brooklyn households full-time until she began school, then working summers in Saratoga Springs to finance her education. During that time she became ill with smallpox and had to return for a while to her mother. Her illness and its financial consequences forced her to delay her entry into college by three or four years, but in 1875 Drumgoold began attending Wayland Seminary in Washington, D.C.; in 1878, she left Washington, which did not suit her fragile health, returning to **work** in Brooklyn so she might eventually return to school. From about 1881 to 1885, she attended school in the Blue Ridge, Alleghany Mountains at Harper's Ferry, and then in 1885 she began teaching in Woodstock, Shenandoah County. She moved briefly through two other schools before settling to teach for eleven years in Hinton, West Virginia.

In 1888 at a speech to a church in Talcott, Summers County, West Virginia, Drumgoold was asked to publish her narrative, but she refused, planning to publish the work from her home in Brooklyn; this episode suggests she had already done substantial work on the narrative at that time. In October 1895, after suffering continued ill health that eventually forced her to retire from teaching, Drumgoold returned home to Brooklyn, where she performed light household work for a number of families. The publication of *A Slave Girl's Story* in 1898 represents the last information available about her life, with the exception of one census document from June 1900, which reports a Kate C. Drumgold, a teacher, living in Brooklyn. A single black female aged forty-one, Drumgold was born in August 1858. Since several variations of her name exist in bibliographies citing her work (Drumgoold, Drumgold, Dormigold, and Dorrigold), it is difficult to assert with certainty that this record refers to her, but it seems probable.

Drumgoold's narrative highlights the contributions of women to her education and to her advancement as a teacher. She describes particularly the importance of her relationship with both her mother, a determined woman who restored her family after being sold away from them during the Civil War, and with her "white mother," a woman who treated Drumgoold kindly and tried to shield her from the experiences of **slavery**. A great deal of her autobiography recognizes the contributions of the many members of her **community** who supported her career; Drumgoold believed strongly that the advancement of the black **race** would take place with hard work, community support, education, and religious faith. In *A Slave Girl's Story*, Drumgoold resists racial prejudice and illness to present a portrait of a woman closely tied to her community and determined to contribute back to that community as an educator and a voice for social justice for African Americans.

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*Lisa Hammond Rashley*

## DUNBAR, PAUL LAURENCE (1872–1906)

Paul Laurence Dunbar's literary cache includes short stories, novels, essays, and plays; however, this early African American writer is most often recognized as a poet. In fact, Dunbar is considered the first free black American who made his living as a writer, although the field of published literature had been entered earlier by the popular African American woman **Phillis Wheatley**. He was even given the title Poet Laureate of the Negro Race. He was born in Dayton, Ohio, during Reconstruction to parents who were former slaves. Dunbar's father, who escaped **slavery** and later fought in the Civil War, shared with his son his deep resentment of slavery's effects. His mother often told him stories in a humorous fashion about the slave life she had lived. The embittered feeling about experiences expressed by his father and the tales of plantation life shared by his mother served as major influences on Dunbar in his development of a black voice in literature.

During the late 1880s, Dunbar, the only African American in his class at Central High School, served as the school's newspaper editor and class poet and even edited, during this period, the *Tattler*, a newspaper primarily directed at the African American **community** and published by a classmate, Orville Wright. Dunbar accomplished a major feat when several of his poems, including "Our Martyred Soldiers" and "On the River," were published in the city's newspaper, the *Dayton Herald*, in 1888.

Benjamin Brawley, a Dunbar scholar, refers to the period from 1891 to 1896 as a critical turning point in the artist's literary life. During this time, Dr. James Newton Mathews, a man he met through a former teacher, asked Dunbar to read his original poem "Welcome Address to the Western Association of Writers" at the association's meeting in Dayton in 1892. As a result of this presentation, he received some exposure and in 1893, with the help of the United Church of the Brethren, he published his first book of **poetry**, *Oak and Ivy*.

The following year Dunbar went to Chicago to seek **work** at the first World's Fair. An introduction to **Frederick Douglass** resulted in Dunbar serving as an assistant to the famous abolitionist. In this position, Dunbar gained exposure and experience. Another of his newfound friends, Dr. H. A. Tobey, helped him publish his second book of poetry, *Majors and Minors* (1896). The book drew interest from the noted literary critic William Dean Howells. His assessment of Dunbar set the standards by which Dunbar has been judged even today.

From the early stages of his writing career, Dunbar was influenced by the Romantics, especially Shelley. As a result of this affinity, Dunbar produced a substantial amount of standard English verse including "The Colored Soldiers" (1895), "Frederick Douglass" (1895), and especially "Ode to Ethiopia" (1893). While Howells determined that Dunbar's work could be divided into two categories, "literary" and "dialect," he overwhelmingly critiqued and declared Dunbar to be an authentic African American writer of dialect. This assessment indelibly marked Dunbar as a writer of dialect only. In his dialectical poetry, Dunbar described stereotypical black plantation characters.

Such descriptions alienated blacks who just wanted to forget the past, but these images enticed whites to read and be entertained by such stories. In December 1896, Dunbar published *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, considered by some critics to be his finest work. Its success afforded Dunbar an opportunity to tour the United States and Europe, where he did readings and even collaborated with Samuel Coleridge Taylor to produce an operetta, *Dream Lovers* (1898), which was performed in London.

Dunbar met schoolteacher and poet Alice Moore in 1896, after reading her poetry, seeing a picture of her in a literary magazine, and corresponding with her through letters. When he returned from his European tour and secured a job in Washington, D.C., they married in 1898. Now married, Dunbar continued to support his mother financially, whose sacrifices he felt were responsible for his success. He and Alice Moore later separated, but she continued to carry his name.

In 1898, Dunbar published *Folks from Dixie*, a collection of short stories, illustrating his ability to write **fiction**. These stories contain characters, not all of whom are black but who all have some connection to the **South**. During that same year, his first novel, *The Uncalled*, was published. Ironically, the book deals with a white youth's conflict of decision about a career choice of the ministry. It is believed that this work actually details the struggle Dunbar had with his own career choices. *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) was Dunbar's final novel and probably his best effort in this genre. The book showcases the writer's only black protagonist and paints a very dire picture of the future for African Americans. A very successful musical work, *Clorindy* or "*The Origin of the Cakewalk*," was also produced in 1898 in collaboration with Will Marion Cook. Although the work was very well received, the press painted a negative portrayal of Dunbar as a degrading minstrel showman.

Themes around which Dunbar wrote his work included racial oppression of African Americans in all aspects of their lives, pride shown toward the inner strength and accomplishments of the **race**, and revolution against the brutality and corruption toward African Americans. In *We Wear the Mask* (1896), the poet, reflectively and with a bit of displeasure, admits his awareness of the many roles that African Americans must play in order to survive. In *The Old Cabin* published in *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow* (1905), Dunbar demonstrates a skillful production of rhythmical appeal. Additionally, he uses the elderly speaker of the poem to proclaim the tragic nature of slavery and what it does to those who are subjected to it. Dunbar's views on the plight of blacks were often published in newspapers across the country. The articles contained expressions that were both dignified and intelligently composed. The author strongly attempted to address the indignities and injustices suffered by African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. However, this author is criticized, often by the African American community, because of the feeling that his literary work does not highlight issues of injustice substantially.

Several of Dunbar's poems continue to be favorites with readers. Among them are "When Malindy Sings" (1903)—a written recognition of his mother's **love** of singing; "Sympathy" (1899)—a metaphor for the pain of enslavement;

“The Corn’Stalk Fiddle” (1895)—a light, rhythmical rendition of party life under meager circumstances; “The Haunted Oak”(1903)—a denouncement of Ku Klux Klan activities and lynchings; “The Colored Soldiers”—a tribute to his father and black soldiers who died in the Civil War; “Frederick Douglass”—a memorial poem; and “Ode to Ethiopia”—recognition and praise of the black race and its expected productive destiny.

For a man whose literary life was severely handicapped generally by prejudice and specifically by illness, Dunbar produced a prolific amount of work across several genres. Dunbar died at his mother’s home on February 9, 1906. His death was the result of a long battle with tuberculosis and alcoholism. He was only thirty-three years of age.

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*Bettie Jackson Varner*

### DUNBAR-NELSON, ALICE MOORE (1875–1935)

A native of New Orleans, Louisiana, Alice Ruth Moore was born on July 19, 1875, to Joseph Moore, a Creole merchant marine, and Patricia Wright Moore, a seamstress of black and Native American blood. Fair enough to pass for white, Alice spent twenty-one years in the racially mixed Creole society of New Orleans. In 1896, she relocated to Medford, Massachusetts, with her sister, brother-in-law,

and mother, and a year later she ended up in Brooklyn, New York. After her marriage and literary collaboration with renowned black poet **Paul Laurence Dunbar** ended in 1902, she left New York for Wilmington, Delaware.

After a second marriage, and a third to journalist Robert J. Nelson in 1916, Dunbar-Nelson's social and political activism was kindled. She coedited the *Wilmington Advocate*, a civil rights newspaper, and for over two decades she addressed issues that confronted blacks and women of her time. She was a field organizer for the woman's suffrage movement for the Middle Atlantic states, and she was later field representative for the Woman's Committee of the United States Council of National Defense in 1918 to further war **work** among black women.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Dunbar-Nelson was even more active. She served on the Republican State Committee of Delaware in 1920, and that same year, with women from the State Federation of Colored Women, she helped to found the Industrial School for Colored Girls, a facility for delinquent and homeless juvenile girls, where she worked as a teacher and parole officer in Marshalltown, Delaware, from 1924 to 1928. In 1924, she spearheaded the Democratic political campaign among black women from the party's New York City headquarters and published in the *Messenger* a two-part article on Delaware in "These 'Colored' United States." Between 1928 and 1931 she spent much of her energy and time traveling and speaking as the executive secretary of the American Friends Inter-Racial Peace Committee.

While Dunbar-Nelson's political and social activism thrived, and despite the fact that many of her manuscripts and typescripts were rejected when she explored themes of racism, the color line, and oppression, her writing flourished between 1895 and 1920. She published *Violets and Other Tales* (1885), *The Goodness of St. Rocque, and Other Stories* (1899), a one-act satire, *The Smart Set* (1900), and her most popular play, *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918), published by *Crisis*. She also wrote newspaper columns for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Washington Eagle*. As an activist, short-fiction writer, journalist, poet, and dramatist, Dunbar-Nelson was genuinely dedicated to the cause of improving the conditions of blacks, and especially black women, whom she encouraged to become actively involved in politics and society.

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Loretta G. Woodard

## DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD

Zora Neale Hurston published her **autobiography**, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in 1942, and while it won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for its contribution to **race** relations, many felt that Hurston was less than candid about many of the facts of her life and were disappointed that she barely discussed her own **literature**. However, two points must be noted regarding this memoir: First, Hurston did not want to write an autobiography at this point in her life, stating that she still had much living to do; second, Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway suggests that her publishers indicated that this text would be the first of a series of autobiographical narratives, making it reasonable to assume, at least in Hurston’s eyes, that *Dust Tracks* was the first installment of her life story.

Regardless of the situation under which the memoir was published, *Dust Tracks* remains a powerful glimpse into Hurston’s life because in it she shares vivid accounts of her **memories** as an imaginative young black girl of the **South**, rich and detailed descriptions of her ethnographic fieldwork, and recollections of her friendships with two important women in her life, white novelist Fannie Hurst and black singer-actress Ethel Waters. While Hurston does offer guarded reflections on her romantic life as well, she makes it clear that she has chosen to keep private certain of her intimacies.

In establishing her parentage, Hurston indicates that her father, John Hurston, felt that God had played a dirty trick on him by giving him another



daughter. This observation gives the reader an early indication that Hurston recognized the devaluation of females in her society. At the same time, this recognition, along with her mother's advice to "jump at de sun," only served to make Hurston more determined to celebrate her black womanness. She was routinely accused of being "impudent" and of having a "sassy" tongue, labels that have been applied to black females since **slavery** to indicate the difficulty (impossibility) of silencing the black woman. Hurston's father, grandmother, stepmother, and teachers often warned her that her impudent ways and her sassy tongue would get her in trouble or possibly lynched. After all, her father cautioned her, she "wasn't white" (meaning that the double negative of being black and female gave her no voice). While Hurston's mother also acknowledged that Zora Neale was impudent, she did so with pride.

Hurston writes that she knew she was special even as a child, believing that the moon, the symbol of womanness, followed her. She often sat on the gatepost in front of her house in Eatonville, Florida, imagining the larger world that waited for her beyond the horizon and engaging, without fear or hesitation, the white folks that drove through town. She writes about a number of experiences in which she witnessed or suffered the attempts by others to silence the black woman's voice. The most poignant example occurs with the **death** of her mother, Lucy Ann Potts, when Hurston, as a young black girl, is pushed aside and silenced when she attempts to carry out her mother's last wishes.

Although Hurston notes in *Dust Tracks* a number of oppressive acts perpetrated against her because she is a black female—sexual harassment, accusations/expectations of wanton **sexuality**, attempts at silencing her—she remains strong in her determination to speak her mind and follow her convictions. In addressing the country's involvement in wartime activities, she finds an analogy and turns the focus on herself and on her own struggles when she states that she saw no need for "finger-nail warfare." In other words, when it came to battling for her place in the world, there would be no stereotypical "girly" fighting but out-and-out war. After all, the moon sat on her shoulder.

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*Johnnie M. Stover*





### **ELAW, ZILPHA (c. 1790–?)**

Born around 1790 of free parents near Philadelphia, Zilpha Elaw was one of the best-known black women preachers of the nineteenth century. Like her sisters in the ministry, Elaw found scriptural validation of authority to preach. For example, on the title page of her **autobiography** *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw* (1846), Elaw quotes from 2 Corinthians 3:5, which asserts that “our sufficiency is of God.” Elsewhere in her narrative she references Acts 5:29, which challenges Christians to obey God rather than man. These scriptures liberate women preachers from the limitations imposed on them by a male-dominated culture and religious tradition. Taking a clearly feminist stance on the role of women in the church, Elaw and other women preachers boldly affirmed their autonomy, insisting that their first duty was to God, not to men.

After her mother’s **death**, Zilpha worked for a Quaker family from age twelve to age eighteen. During these early years, she was associated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She married Joseph Elaw in 1810 and fulfilled the **domestic** duties of a wife and mother. Her religious awakening occurred when camp meetings and outdoor revivals were popular in nineteenth-century America. Elaw’s autobiography provides an extraordinarily vivid, detailed description of camp meetings. In one of those meetings in 1817, Elaw fell into a “trance of ecstasy” during which she became convinced that God had sanctified her soul. Emboldened by the sense of empowerment

that sanctification confers upon believers, Elaw moved into the public sphere, a space from which women had been largely prohibited. She began to speak in public and offer prayers for others. At a later camp meeting, Elaw received a call to preach, which she reluctantly accepted on the urging of a group of Christian women supporters.

Although a few ministers in the Methodist Society of Burlington, New Jersey, endorsed her preaching ministry, the powerful male church leaders denied her petition for a license to preach. Some church leaders, male and female, viewed Elaw's spiritual self-reliance as nothing more than female waywardness, an unnatural deviation from the prescribed roles for women in the church. Nevertheless, the denial of a formal denominational sanction did not dampen Elaw's zeal to preach. She embarked upon her ministry fully persuaded that God's command to preach superseded man's injunctions to the contrary. Like Eldress **Rebecca Cox Jackson**, the black Shaker, Elaw was obedient to her inner voice.

Leaving her daughter with trusted friends, Elaw became a traveling evangelist, undertaking missions into the slave states in 1828. As a free black woman, Elaw risked her own **freedom** by traveling and preaching in the **South**. In 1840, Elaw extended her evangelical reach by traveling to London, where she preached for five years, despite the vocal opposition to women preachers that permeated British society in the nineteenth century. Elaw's insistence upon the right to travel extensively challenges the dictates of the male-inspired Cult of True Womanhood that governed the lives of women.

Elaw was also a visionary like Rebecca Jackson (and **Julia A. J. Foote**). Elaw's autobiography records some of her dreams and visions. For example, she writes of the time when she was milking a cow and saw a Christ-like figure standing before her with outstretched, welcoming arms. The cow sees the Christ-like figure and falls to its knees in reverence. One of Elaw's dreams reveals the "terrors of the day of judgment." In another vision, she observes five angels praising God.

Unfortunately, nothing is known about Elaw's life after 1845. Nevertheless, the feminist impulse underlies Elaw's successful resistance against male dominance in the **home** and in the church. By her example, Elaw offers women courage to pursue alternative roles in communities of faith and to accept the new birth of sanctification that eliminates gender distinctions and fosters a sense of being in touch with the will of God.

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*Elvin Holt*

### ELLISON, RALPH (1914–1994)

One of the most influential yet controversial writers of the twentieth century, Ralph Ellison has made an inestimable contribution to African American literature. Known primarily for his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison continues to influence contemporary authors and critics. *Invisible Man* and his many essays, short stories, and second novel (*Juneteenth*) represent a small yet significant body of work by an author able to transcend the same color line that restricted his early life. His frequent interrogations of **race** in **literature** earned him advocate status for the African American **community** among whites, yet within his community many dissenting voices challenge the views and opinions advanced in his writing.

Born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Ralph Waldo Ellison had a literary inheritance thrust upon him by his father Lewis, an avid reader who believed that naming his son after the American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson would result in the promise of a literary career. Ellison's mother, however, would become the more influential parent following the accidental **death** of Lewis Ellison in 1917. Working as a maid for several families, Ida Milsap Ellison brought discarded record albums and books **home** to her son. Those albums and books created lifelong preoccupations of music and literature for Ellison, who learned early the importance of studying technique. Ellison played trumpet in high school under the tutelage of Zelia Breaux, who taught him musical theory, while at night Ellison would see **jazz** performances as various artists visited Oklahoma City.

Ellison's high school trumpeting won him a scholarship from the state of Oklahoma that he applied toward an education at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In 1933 Ellison entered Tuskegee to study music in their new program. While there, Ellison worked in the library where he fed his voracious appetite for reading begun in high school. In reading the works of Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, and Hemingway, Ellison found new worlds free from the confines of segregation he experienced in the **South**. Yet it would be to study art in New York City that sent Ellison North. Leaving behind Tuskegee in the summer following his junior year, Ellison's first sojourn to New York was interrupted in the winter of 1937 with news of an injury to his mother.

Ellison stayed in Dayton, Ohio, following his mother's funeral and worked with his brother Herbert to earn money for a return trip to New York. Using his nights for writing, Ellison produced his first published piece of writing for *New Challenge*. His review of Waters Edward Turpin's novel *These Low Grounds* (1937) thrust him into a critical arena he was never to leave. Returning to New York in 1938, Ellison made numerous influential contacts;

Duke Ellington, **Langston Hughes**, Alain Locke, and **Richard Wright** became acquaintances. Though the activities of the **Harlem Renaissance** were coming to a close, there remained a vibrant literary scene in New York, and Ellison found work at the Federal Writers Project recording oral histories while maintaining his own writing outside of **work**.

Today no complete edition of Ellison's short **fiction** exists, though one posthumous collection (*Flying Home and Other Stories* [1996]) includes the widest available selection. The 1939 publication of "Slick Gonna Learn" and the 1940 publication of "The Birthmark," Ellison's earliest published fiction, are segments of his first attempt at writing a novel. While the *Slick* novel, begun in Dayton, never came to fruition, Ellison's literary contributions clearly commenced in earnest with it. In 1944, Ellison published both "King of the Bingo Game" and "Flying Home"—his two most anthologized stories—and both anticipate the struggles of the protagonist in *Invisible Man*.

In "King of the Bingo Game," the unnamed protagonist goes to a local bingo hall in order to try his luck at winning a \$36 jackpot. Unable to secure work and financially bereft, his mind returns constantly to his wife Laura and her unmet needs. Obsessively preoccupied with the demands of life in the city, he unexpectedly realizes that he has the winning card. In order to claim the jackpot, he must stop the prize wheel on its winning spot. He takes too much time, though, considering all of the options and mechanisms behind the operation of the wheel, and police come to remove him from the stage. The story ends with him beaten and bleeding behind the stage curtain and no closer to solving his fiscal dilemma. "King of the Bingo Game" offers an interesting commentary on racial division within the city. While the African American protagonist is offered equal opportunity to win in the luck of gambling, his behavior causes alarm in the officials who do not know his dire position. Further accentuating his outsider status is his revelation to the audience that he is from the South. Ellison imbues the character with the two most indicting **stereotypes** of the day by making him both backward and black. While one can see that the character's actions do not merit the treatment he gets, the story chronicles the climactic moments of one man's experience of desegregation over his lifetime, all the time mistakenly believing himself able to rise above his circumstances and win.

"Flying Home" tells the story of Todd, an airman for the Tuskegee unit who, while on a training flight, hits a bird and has to crash land the airplane. Ellison's use of literary symbolism in the story is effortless and profound and also anticipates *Invisible Man*. Death is all around Todd ("death," in German, translates as *tod*); however, he repeatedly transcends it. As a result, he is frequently in opposition to the other people he encounters. For instance, the moment he regains consciousness in the presence of Jefferson and Teddy, two African American men who see the plane go down, Todd sees he is not like them. They are sentenced to a life of labor, while Todd has created a greater responsibility for himself. Todd's prejudice, then, seems to be directed toward the role a black man is assigned in the community. Todd's place in the world is

yet to be fully realized, though he senses its early manifestations in an episode from childhood where his mother admonishes him for wanting to fly planes.

By the time of the crash, the vehicle of his dream is the fuselage standing away from him in the field. Todd is so inextricably linked to the air in his own mind (and in the text) that he is not able to relate to the world around him, yet the tradition he finds himself a part of offers no future for him. When Todd is informed that the land his plane crashed on belongs to Dabney Graves, he again is confronted by images of death. In Graves's yard, Todd learns that he, like Jefferson and Teddy, is an outsider by virtue of the color of his skin. Blending the Western mythology of the Icarus story with the African American trickster tales told by Jefferson, Ellison incorporates the same focus he finds in music, for instance, that melds a classical tradition with the improvisation of jazz. Further, Todd, like the protagonist in "King of the Bingo Game," is assaulted by a white man (Graves), but his response is to laugh. Carried away by medics, Todd sees a crow transfigured in the sun into the form of a phoenix; the story offers a resilient ending to Ellison's homage to the Tuskegee airmen. Moving from a negative to a more positive ending, Ellison's two major short stories suggest an optimistic trajectory for African American fiction.

Noticeably absent from Ellison's stories are central female characters. The protagonist of "Bingo" remains concerned with the unseen Laura, while Todd recalls his mother's admonition to his childish dreams. Likewise, of principal objection by numerous critics is the stereotypical portrayal of women in 1952's *Invisible Man*. Claiming that women occupy no central roles whatsoever, contemporary critics fault Ellison for an omission that, when explored, does not hold; Ellison wrote from his experience as an African American male and focused on that role rather than one his own experience could not verify.

In 1946, one year after commencing work on his classic novel, he married Fanny McConnell fresh from a tour with the Merchant Marines. Ellison published *Invisible Man* and won the 1952 book award for his first novel. Told largely in retrospect by an unnamed protagonist, the story describes his life, from early childhood recollections of his grandfather, through his high school successes turned into exhibitions of racial division and **violence**, to his Tuskegee-like college experience, his affiliation with the communistlike Brotherhood, and his break from the group following the death of another of its members; it culminates in his confrontation of his own invisibility and lack of **identity**. The novel would become one of the most important works in the African American canon. Paradoxically enough, as a black bildungsroman, *Invisible Man* has an importance to African American women's literature that comes directly from its exalted place within the canon. While Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey*, contextualizes Ellison's conscious revision of Richard Wright's aesthetic, Michael Awkward, in *Inspiring Influence*, argues for **Toni Morrison's** revision of Ellison in *The Bluest Eye*. Indeed, as Ellison's novel showed the importance of considering the consequences of being



an African American male in the middle of twentieth-century civilization, African American women writing began to examine what roles black females occupied in America. Still, initial reception of *Invisible Man* and Ellison's subsequent 1964 essay collection *Shadow and Act* revealed a schism between those African Americans who praised Ellison for his contribution and those who faulted him for his lack of a racial militancy like Richard Wright's.

Ellison remained a staunch defender of the capacity for literature, ethnic or otherwise, to enlighten and inform readers. Meanwhile, he also saw the contributions of African Americans to American culture as vast and innumerable. This vision did not assuage those of Ellison's critics who continued to maintain that he was writing for white readership and consumption rather than for his own community—a charge that remains in the years following his death. Regardless, Ellison continued to write, and he began to accept academic appointments, the first in Rome at the American Academy in 1955. With the 1964 appearance of *Shadow and Act*, Ellison's various essays on music, literature, and American culture became widely available. His turn to collecting his essays indicated his growing frustration with his creative writing; and in an attempt to satisfy readers eager for his fiction, he published a collection of stories taken from his novel-in-progress *Juneteenth*. The Hickman stories, as they are collectively known today, remained the only glimpse of Ellison's second novel until its posthumous publication in 1999. Nearly 350 pages of that novel were lost in a house fire in November 1967. The extant novel, edited by Ellison's literary executor John F. Callahan, remains, like *Invisible Man*, concerned primarily with male protagonists (Senator Adam Sunraider and the Reverend Alonzo Hickman), though it offers an important furthering of Ellison's fictive vision.

Ellison also collected additional essays and in 1986 published *Going to the Territory*. Opening those essays, the reflective "The Little Man at Cheehaw Station" offers one of Ellison's finest considerations of critics and culture within America. In it, he recalls and elaborates on the capacity of words to create and disseminate information, but it is always left to the critic to test one's apprehension of that information. As a critic, Ellison worked tirelessly to show the incorporation and contribution of African Americans to literature, while as a writer, he focused on the need to explore the conditions of his present day in order to suggest the potential ways out of a prejudiced society. His mode was not the violence of Wright or the stridency of **James Baldwin** but of meditative contemplation toward possibility. Ellison died in 1994 at the age of eighty, leaving behind his wife of forty-eight years and a literary legacy unmatched by any African American male writer.

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F. Gregory Stewart

### EPISTOLARY NOVEL

The epistolary novel, a form that uses letters as the primary mode of narration, has become a powerful tool toward establishing female **identity** and self-empowerment in African American feminist **literature**. Although not common in African American literature, the epistolary form has been used to advantage in pivotal African American feminist novels such as **Alice Walker's** *The Color Purple* (1982) and **Sherley Anne Williams's** *Dessa Rose* (1986). Recording the experiences of women whose voices have been silenced by oppressive environments, the authors of both novels rely on the epistolary form to bring their stories to life.

A precursor of the modern novel, the epistolary novel first took shape within British and European American literature as a vehicle of sentimental and sensational **drama**. Reaching its zenith of popularity in the eighteenth century, the epistolary novel was viewed as a feminized genre, a natural conduit for women's literary voice. Women writers, often discouraged from entering public discourse, found the epistolary form appealing because it revealed the inner workings of the female mind, encouraged introspection, and allowed for a multiplicity of perspectives in the narrative.

Although few African American women writers in the nineteenth century turned to the epistolary form as an outlet for discourse, **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson**, in her novel *The Confessions of a Lazy Woman* (1899), employed a variation of the epistolary form. In this diarylike novel, accepted for publication but never making it to print, Dunbar-Nelson's female narrator records the foibles and eccentricities of her neighbors. It was not until the renaissance of African American female authors of the late twentieth century that a renewed interest in the epistolary form developed, as writers such as Alice Walker and Sherley Anne Williams used the epistolary form or variations of it as foundations for their groundbreaking novels.

Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple* (1982) is the first novel written by an African American woman to fit within the traditional definition of the epistolary novel. In ninety-four letters that cover the span of over thirty years between the two world wars, we hear and symbolically bear witness to the story of Celie, a young woman physically and psychologically battered in a series of abusive relationships with men. At the age of fourteen, Celie is raped and impregnated by a stepfather whom she believes is her father and later is bartered off in a loveless arranged marriage. Significantly, the first section of letters is addressed to God, whom she views as male, white, and conspicuously silent in her tribulations. The choice of God as the addressee of these letters signifies upon Celie's isolation from the human **community** surrounding her; it also speaks of the complicity of the male patriarchal system that stifles her voice and leaves no outlet for confession and introspection except a God graven in the image of her oppressors. It is only when Celie develops a support system of women around her, in particular through her relationship with the **blues** singer Shug Avery and her own sister Nettie, whom she had believed dead and whose letters had been withheld from Celie by her abusive husband, that Celie develops a positive self-image and is able to transition to addressing her letters to Nettie. The epistles that shape the novel thus become markers of Celie's psychological growth and development of a **womanist** or female-driven philosophy of life. In addition, through the letters Celie discovers a new system of gender equity and a burgeoning sexual identity that reflect her growing sense of independence and selfhood.

*Dessa Rose*, a novel written by Sherley Anne Williams, builds on the legacy of the epistolary form, signifying upon the authenticating documents written by whites often used to validate African Americans **slave narratives** and on William Styron's skewed account *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). In the novel Adam Nehemiah, a white schoolteacher turned writer of proslavery guides, attempts to chronicle the heroine Dessa Rose's involvement in an unsuccessful uprising in a slave coffle. Nehemiah's journal entries serve as significant symbols of racist and sexist objectification as he dehumanizes Dessa despite his efforts to understand and analyze her psychological motivations. Yet at the end of the novel when Nehemiah tries to send Dessa back into **slavery** by using her own story recorded in his journal to indict her, Nehemiah fails to silence or invalidate Dessa's voice. Only Dessa herself can

authenticate her story and her experience as an African American woman. Thus the fallen, invalidated pages of Nehemiah's journal serve as testimony of Dessa's triumph.

The impetus of a postmodern era has led to adaptations of the epistolary form to suit an increasingly heightened sense of political consciousness and the assertion of African American cultural identity. Trey Ellis's postmodernist novel *Platitudes* (1988) employs the epistolary form in an exchange of letters between Dewayne Wellington, a black male writer penning an experimental novel about a middle-class black youth; and Isshee Ayam, an African American feminist writer who critiques the work as lacking cultural authenticity and offers her own version. The letters between the two inextricably tie them together in a metafictional meditation of African American aesthetics and cultural authenticity. Significantly, Ellis, through the narratives of DeWayne and Isshee, parodies the overreliance of writers on the "platitudes" or the tropes and devices mastered by canonical black female writers such as Alice Walker and **Toni Morrison**. At question here is what defines authentic African American experience and whether we should rely on folk traditions and traditional tropes of African American literature or assert a new vision that privileges black middle-class values and cultural fluidity. As the two writers communicate through letters, they come to a middle ground that tempers artistic innovation with respect for cultural tradition and **history**. In the end, it is the epistolary novel that provides a gateway to new directions in African American literature and aesthetics.

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*Valerie Frazier*

### EVANS, MARI (1923– )

Mari Evans was born in Toledo, Ohio, on July 16, 1923. Evans attended public schools in Ohio and then studied fashion design at the University of Toledo. In her essay "My Father's Passage" Evans credits her father as the most important influence on her life. He saved her first fourth-grade story, which had been printed in the school newspaper, and added a comment to it indicating his pride in her. Evans claims that she embarked on writing **poetry** unintentionally, as indicated by her initial choice to pursue a major in fashion design.

Evans has had a varied academic career, starting in 1969 when she spent a year as an instructor and writer-in-residence at Indiana University/Purdue. She has continued to teach at various universities, including Indiana University/Bloomington, Washington University in St. Louis, Cornell University, University of New York, and Northwestern University. In addition to her academic career, Evans worked for five years as producer, director, and writer of the television program *The Black Experience*, which aired on WTTV, Channel 4, in Indianapolis from 1968 to 1973.

Evans has published collections of poetry, plays, essays, and short **fiction** but is known primarily for her poetry. While mainly focusing on issues of **race** and ethnicity, many of her works have a feminist undertone. Her greatest contribution in furthering the **work** of women may be the volume she edited on black female writers: *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation* (1984), a collection of writers and critics. The collection is an important addition to the scarce attention traditionally paid to black women writers; it challenged the literary canon's exclusion of black women authors.

Her first collection of poetry, *Where Is All the Music?* (1968), was not met with much critical acclaim. A major theme of the collection was the search of the individual, but it did set up Evans's focus on social issues, including feminism. Her next book, *I Am A Black Woman* (1970), was a collection of highly political poems that called for social change. The individual struggle of the individual black woman in *Where Is All the Music?* evolves into a collective struggle for all black women. The poems have often been referred to as **domestic** poems, and they are poems about the women of the black **community**, giving insight into the challenges of being black and of being a woman. *Nightstar: 1973–1978* (1981), Evans's third book of poetry, is considered one of her finest collections, showing a maturation of her themes and a marked improvement in her poetic technique. Her use of black idioms to communicate the authentic voice of the black community is a unique characteristic of her poetry.

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Kyla Hefflin

### EVA'S MAN

*Eva's Man* (1977), Gayl Jones's second novel, is a harsh but lyrical meditation on the possibilities of connection between men and women. The first-person narrator, Eva Medina Canada, is in jail after killing a man and biting off his penis, and her narration wanders through her **memories** of her relationships with men, including the neighbor boy who examined her with a Popsicle stick when she was five, her mother's lover who put her hand on his crotch when she was twelve, the man she stabbed when she was seventeen, her husband whom she abandoned, and the man she killed. Like **Toni Morrison's *Beloved***, *Eva's Man* is the backstory of a crime—the unreported, subjective perspective of a woman whom society has labeled "criminal" and "insane." Yet while we receive a first-person narration of these events, Eva is strangely silent during them, and after both the stabbing and the murder, she refuses to provide her own statements to the police or to respond fully to the psychiatrists' questions about her motives. The reader is therefore forced to piece together an interpretation from the interspersed memories.

What develops through the seemingly randomly interspersed memories is that, in Eva's mind, men do not see her as herself, differentiated, but instead fit her into preexisting categories, changing her name in the process from "Eva" to "Eve," which highlights their assumption that she was made for their pleasure, or from "Eva" to "evil," when she refuses to touch, rub, and please them. Societal pressures to conform to the Madonna/whore binary come in the form of both men's and women's explicit statements that women who do not want to be treated as whores ought to stay in the house, and indeed, in this novel, Eva's life is

circumscribed by the variety of sexually predatory men who lurk directly outside the small apartment, on every street corner, on the bus, and in the workplace.

Readers might be tempted to view Eva's act of murder and castration as an attempt to reverse the gender roles, to be the sexual predator rather than the prey. Eva does view herself in terms of a story she has heard about another woman whose lovers die and who gains the reputation of a "queen bee"; she also views herself after the murder as Medusa. These two images of females who kill males are potential sources of empowerment, and Eva's desire to fend off men, live alone, and protect herself are strong. But the narration does not reduce to a simple or formulaic inversion; detectives, psychologists, and Eva's cell mate all offer potential interpretations that Eva rejects and complicates. Her memories are also filled with desire, and in her memory, the murder is also an act of **love**, the castration perhaps her final attempt to please him, to try the unnamed act he has asked her to perform. More complication stems from her potentially unreliable narration; she claims that she has trouble keeping things straight and worries that her memories lie. There is even some question in the text as to whether she has, in fact, bitten off the penis—she remembers doing it, but the psychiatrist claims that the police report states otherwise. Taken as a whole, the novel offers a grim and tragic account of gender relations, yet one in which complexity, nuance, and possibility for connection remain strong.

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*Suzanne Lane*



### **FABIO, SARAH WEBSTER (1928–1979)**

With the exception of **Sonia Sanchez**, **Nikki Giovanni**, and **Mari Evans**, women have largely been underrepresented in the scholarship on the **Black Arts Movement**. One glaring omission to most studies is that of Sarah Webster Fabio, who was a poet, educator, literary critic, devoted mother, and integral contributor to the black arts and black studies movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Born on January 20, 1928, in Nashville, Tennessee, to Mayme Storey and Thomas Jefferson Webster, Fabio demonstrated a prodigious intellectual ability at an early age.

In 1943, at the age of fifteen, Sarah graduated from high school and enrolled at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. A year before completing her B.A. degree, however, she returned to Nashville to attend Fisk University, where she met Cyril Leslie Fabio, a dental student. After graduating in 1946, she married Fabio, who had enlisted in the military. Over the next seventeen years, she placed her career on hold in order to raise the couple's five children: Cyril Leslie III (1947), Thomas Albert (1948), Cheryl Elisa Louis (1949), Renee Angela (1955), and Ronald Eric (1956) as the **family** moved between Tennessee, Florida, Texas, Kansas, and Germany.

When the Fabios settled in California, where her husband established a dental practice, Sarah Fabio finally had an opportunity to complete graduate school. She attended San Francisco State College from 1963 to 1965, working on an M.A. in creative writing with a concentration in **poetry**. While a



graduate student, she joined a Bay Area black writers' workshop where she met playwright Ed Bullins and poet **Amiri Baraka**. Upon receiving her M.A., she began teaching at Merritt Junior College in Oakland, California. With the support of Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and other radical black students, Fabio organized a black studies program at Merritt, which she took to the University of California at Berkeley in 1968.

In addition to her progressive academic initiatives and continued care of her family, Sarah Fabio found time to become a prolific writer. Most definitely, Fabio's literary project was predicated on the desire to enlighten and elevate African Americans. Her first two collections of poetry were *Saga of the Black Man* (1968) and *A Mirror, a Soul: A Two-Part Volume of Poems* (1969). Fabio's **jazz**-inspired poems and academic articles were also published in journals such as *Negro Digest* and *Black World*, as well as the anthologies *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1970* (1970), *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), and *To Gwen with Love* (1971). By far, her most inspiring work is the seven-volume collection of poetry *The Rainbow Sign* (1973), published the year following her divorce from Cyril Fabio.

After teaching black literature at Oberlin College (1972–1974) and the University of Wisconsin, Madison (1974–1977), she was diagnosed with colon cancer. Despite her illness, Fabio continued to write, publishing her final collection of poems *Dark Symphony in Duet* shortly before her **death** in 1979. Although she has yet to receive the international recognition deserving of an artist-intellectual of her stature, Fabio's literary canon remains an example of the central role women played in the Black Arts Movement.

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*Anthony J. Ratcliff*

## **FAMILY**

“I am because we are.” This statement belies an ideology of the African **community** that speaks to their sense of connection and family. For Africans, family is not only significant; it is essential. This belief about the family is not restricted to the African nations alone but is germane to many around the world. Family is the cornerstone of society. It is the socializing unit that explains who we are and how we are to respond to our environments. For this reason, the family has been the subject of much study, much propaganda, and much manipulation. The black family, especially, has had to fight to maintain its stability in a society that is filled with racism, poverty, sexism, and fear.

**Slavery** has been especially harsh on the black family in America. It created an atmosphere in which individuals were not allowed to function in either a naturally or socially prescribed role. For instance, men and women were not given the legal right to marry. For slaveholders, this denial of rights was beneficial because they could validate their previous ideas of the immorality and inhumanity of black people and also mate slaves with whomever they wanted without disturbing their spiritual conscience. For the enslaved, this denial caused them to have to create different ways to solidify their marital bonds. One such way was to incorporate the African symbol of the broom as representative of the household into their ceremonies and “jump the broom.”

It was the peculiar institution’s way, also, to deny parental ties. The law stated that the children followed the status of the mother: If she were a slave, they were slaves. If she were free, they were free. Often, the mother was enslaved, forced to mate with someone who was not her husband, including the slave owners themselves. Not only did this law attempt to lower the morale of the black family, but it effectively excluded the black father from the destiny of his child.

It is commonly believed that the black family was destroyed on slavery’s auction block. In truth, the majority of families were split apart at the selling of an estate after a slaveholder died. At other times when families were broken apart, there was an effort to keep the husband and wife together, leaving the children to be sold. However, slaveholders found it more profitable to keep families together, recognizing a correlation between positive family ties and a reduction in escape attempts.

This reluctance to physically break up families did not signal a respect for the black family unit. Numerous **slave narratives**, such as those by **Harriet Jacobs** and **William Wells Brown**, detail the ways in which the emotional bond between siblings, husband and wife, even parent and child were either ignored or attacked. The emotional life of black families was often considered by slaveholders (and sometimes nonslaveholders) to be lacking in the substance that white families possessed. This belief allowed them to overlook the emotional connection between black family members and to treat them in ways that were beneficial to whites but detrimental to blacks.

The black family did not overlook these connections, however. In the same way that the enslaved had to adapt to a new **religion** and created voodoo, and in the same way that they had to adapt to a new language and created a dialect of their own—in each instance retaining aspects of their original African culture—they adapted to the attack on their families and created new bonds. In their native culture, the family unit was an extended one, raising children, making decisions, and sharing responsibilities as a community. This value for community, represented in the extended family, did not end in slavery; it, in fact, helped the individual to survive. When the family bond was attacked, physically or emotionally, the enslaved would resolidify their family and community by forming fictive kinship ties, making them stronger as individuals and stronger as a community.

In spite of the hardships the black family faced during and after slavery, they were still expected to behave according to the mainstream's standards. To some extent, they expected it of themselves. These standards included maintaining the structure (husband, wife, and children) and the function of the nuclear family.

For the black man, this meant that he was to be the main, if not sole, provider for the family. He was to be the head of the household, making the family's decisions and demanding submission from his wife and children. Finally, he was expected to protect his house and **home**. These standards were challenging for him because, unlike his white counterparts, the black man was not as economically fortunate. He often discovered the difficulty in finding employment that could provide for a family or finding employment at all. He was also forced to suffer indignities in the greater society, being subjected to name-calling and other humiliations. Finally, the practice of lynching, which plagued the country for many generations after slavery's end, ensured that the black man knew his place: He was not to achieve too much, and he was not to assume that he could confront white masculinity, no matter what white men did to his person or his home. While these expectations were hard on black men who often lacked the legal authority and financial means of white fathers, they were especially difficult on black women.

During the ante- and postbellum years, both white and black women were considered to be the single most important influence on their families. This created pressure on white mothers to be the moral light for their husbands and children, but for black women, this pressure was doubly hard because

while they were expected to be the moral light, they were often believed to be without morals. Black women were seen as the cause for the degradation of the black man and, ultimately, the black family. They were held to an impossible standard that called for them to be gentle and delicate, but the reality of their lives was that they had to **work** as much and as hard as their men. During slavery they were often required to meet the same quotas in the field as the men. After slavery, men were often denied jobs or had to leave home to seek them, and the women had to work as **domestics** to support the family. There was rarely the opportunity to develop the gentle sensibility that society said true women possessed.

Many writers, particularly female writers such as **Anna Julia Cooper** and **Pauline Hopkins**, criticized the image of black women and black **motherhood** that was accepted in the mainstream and even in the black community. In their works, they created truer pictures of the black woman, detailing the circumstances that she encountered in society that made her reality what it was. Even today, writers and scholars such as **Angela Davis**, Claudia Tate, and **Toni Morrison** are still battling the former image of the black woman as emasculating matriarch, as happy servant **Mammy**, and as loose Jezebel. There are also more recent images of the black woman as bitterly and overly independent and as welfare mothers, both reformulations of the same old images. Each character, however old or new, is still responsible for what the mainstream sees as the deficient black family.

In 1965, a great deal of controversy arose when white sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan published what is now known as the Moynihan Report. His research stated that there was a crisis in the black community that stemmed from the deterioration of the black family. He cited statistics and cases that demonstrated the rising level of illegitimate births in the black community and the increased level of dependence on governmental agencies for subsistence. A significant part of these problems was the growing number of female-headed households. This particular structure was problematic for Moynihan because it was incongruent with the structure of society at large, making it doubly difficult for the black family and its individual members to persevere.

Many were outraged by this report because they felt it blamed the victim and that Moynihan was not as concerned for the liberation of the black family as one needed to be when conducting research of this nature. Whether his critics' comments were valid or not, certainly he pointed to problems (which, incidentally, were discussed earlier in the 1930s by black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier) that continue to plague the black family.

The controversy surrounding Moynihan is not the only one to have affected the black family in the past forty years. Today there is a great deal of debate concerning single-parent, interracial, homosexual, and blended families. Perhaps as a result of the debate or as part of it, there is a push toward redefining the family. The idea of the nuclear family is no longer working for the larger society, and it has hardly ever worked for black people specifically. Now the focus is on the relationships between people, whether or not they are related. If

there is a substantial bond between them, they can be considered family. This definition becomes especially pertinent in light of changing social relations: the increasing number of unmarried women who are choosing to adopt; the number of women who are choosing to have babies and maintain relationships with the fathers outside of matrimony; and the acceptance of homosexual couples who want to adopt or have babies of their own—to name a few.

Although the black family is plagued with problems and crisis, there is still an element of strength that is exemplified by its very existence. It has been attacked as a whole and through its individual members, yet it continues to survive.

*See also* Black Masculinity; Stereotypes

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*RaShell R. Smith-Spears*

### **FAMILY**

*Family*, published in 1991 by **J. California Cooper**, is Cooper's first novel and is composed of four tales that deal with the tragedy, hope, and survival that a black **family** experiences as a result of **slavery**.

The narrator, Clora, is the child of a slave woman. Clora's grandmother and mother kill themselves to escape slavery. Just before her **death**, Clora's mother, well aware of the horrors of slavery, warns her twelve-year-old daughter of what lies ahead for a slave girl on the verge of womanhood. Indeed, Clora is raped by her master's son and gives birth to her first child at thirteen. Clora recognizes that she has become her mother, and she cries for the future of her newborn daughter whose life has been decided for her because she has been born into slavery. Ultimately, Clora gives birth to six children, but due to the hardships of slavery, only four survive. She also recognizes that death is the only means of escaping slavery and tries to poison herself and her children. Clora dies, but her children survive.

Clora's spirit, however, is able to follow the lives of her four remaining children: Always, Sun, Peach, and Plum. Sun, who is light-skinned, is taught

by his master's daughter to read. Knowing that the ability to read empowers the slave, Sun transfers his knowledge to his siblings. Eventually, Sun makes his way north. Through his honesty and hard **work**, as well as the fact that he lives as a white man, Sun lives a successful life. Peach is sold into slavery, marries her master, and moves to Scotland. There she lives as a white woman, and her children are able to attend college, have careers, and marry well. Plum, unfortunately, dies a tragic death.

Most of the novel focuses on Always, who is impregnated by her master and has many children who are sold into slavery. When Always gives birth to a blue-eyed baby at the same time that her mistress gives birth to a baby, she switches the infants to ensure that her own son will not be sold and, instead, will live a life of privilege. Always, recognizing that knowledge is power, learns anything that she can. Her master's land thrives as a result of her knowledge, but Always knows that she can use her skills to improve her life as well. After the end of the Civil War, Always finds **love**, purchases land and a **home** of her own, and is a financial success.

The siblings come together at the end of the novel. Even those who have been living as white people recognize the importance of their black ancestry and want to reunite with their black brothers and sisters. The strength of the individual in overcoming adversity and the importance of the love of one's family as a means of surviving even the worst of circumstances are important themes in *Family*. Cooper's final reminder is that our blood "is mixed up," and we cannot know for certain who we are; in fact, our varying degrees of color mean that we are all related—we are all family.

*See also* *Homemade Love*; *In Search of Satisfaction*

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*Diane Todd Bucci*

### FARMING OF BONES, THE

In Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998), Haitian-born Amabelle watches her parents drown in the Massacre River separating Haiti from the Dominican Republic. Amabelle grows up the companion of Valencia, a daughter of wealth and hence a young woman Amabelle refers to from the start as Senorita (and now Senora in the year since her marriage). However, Valencia's childhood friendship, begun in part since each was motherless, is

further solidified when Amabelle helps deliver Valencia's twins, a robust girl and a weaker boy, at the novel's opening. The women's relationship notwithstanding, Valencia still worries her darker daughter will be mistaken for a Haitian. Yet Amabelle's attachment to the **family** (she affectionately calls Valencia's father Papi) will become her biggest obstacle to fleeing when Dominican forces are ordered to murder Haitians in 1937.

Valencia loses one of her twins, Rafael, named for the Generalissimo, and laments that he never clearly saw her face; yet this poignant moment is countered by the fact that her husband has struck and killed a Haitian cane worker with his car and, in his haste to see his new son, does not bother to check the man's condition. The lack of value placed on Haitian life is unmistakable. Years ago when Valencia and her father had encountered Amabelle at the river, her parents' burial place, she had firmly indicated with a pointed finger that she belonged to herself, yet Haitians in a Dominican world are clearly without destinies in Danticat's work. Thus Amabelle lives in a world of shadows, those without names and faces who vanish: first her parents and later her lover Sebastien and his sister, as well as an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 more who would die in the days following Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molino's ordered mass murder of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic.

Once rumors of Trujillo's intentions become reality, the cane workers form a night-watchman brigade. Amabelle, her lover Sebastien, and his sister plan to meet at a church and escape together, but Sebastien and his sister are rounded up by Dominican forces before Amabelle can arrive. The bulk of the novel focuses on Amabelle's dangerous return to Haiti as well as her diminishing hope of finding Sebastien. Traveling with Yves, Sebastien's friend and fellow cane worker, the two join a small group traveling toward the river. Parsley (*parejil*), its importance having been emphasized in an early, moving passage, now becomes a weapon. Once in the river town, identified Haitians, including Amabelle and Yves, are beaten, their mouths stuffed with parsley by Dominican soldiers after failing to trill an *r* and precisely pronounce the *j*. Many will die. Part of Danticat's purpose is to give voice to nameless and faceless Haitians, which she does by allowing many in the ad hoc group of travelers Amabelle and Yves join, as well as patients in a makeshift hospital where a maimed Amabelle later recuperates, to offer testimonials of both their torture and their existence. More symbolically, Amabelle's **body** becomes a "marred testament."

Once in Haiti, Amabelle begins a kind of mother-daughter relationship with the mothers of Yves and Sebastien while living with Yves and his mother. Yves and Amabelle begin a strange new relationship, one that lasts at least twenty-four years; however, a sense of profound loss rather than **love** ties them together. Eventually finding mourning too hard, they use **work** as a consolation. Amabelle makes one trip back to her Dominican **home** years later, but the meeting with Valencia is a hollow one emotionally, despite Valencia's admission that she hid Haitians in 1937 in Amabelle's name. Amabelle instead receives her only real consolation from the river upon her return to Haiti. She realizes she is without **ancestors** and without heirs. All are ghosts.

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Lisa Muir

## FAUSET, JESSIE REDMON (1882–1961)

Jessie Redmon Fauset's work now receives considerable attention from scholars of black **literature** and of women's literature. Fauset, born in Camden County, New Jersey, was the youngest of the seven children of Redmon Fauset, an African Methodist Episcopal minister. When Jessie's mother, Annie Seamon Fauset, died, Fauset married again to a widow who already had three children. Fauset's new wife bore him three more children, giving him thirteen children to care for. Despite the grinding poverty of this very large **family**, Fauset raised two high-achieving individuals: anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset (1899–1983) and his half sister Jessie Redmon Fauset. Jessie excelled at the renowned Girls' High School in Philadelphia. Administrators prevented this gifted black girl from entering Bryn Mawr. Instead, Fauset became a pioneering black student at Cornell University, where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1905 after studying classical and modern languages. French was a forte for Fauset; she gained a master's in French from the University of Pennsylvania in 1919 and studied at the Sorbonne in Paris for six months in the mid-1920s.

After leaving Cornell, Fauset began teaching. She taught French and Latin at the all-black M Street High School in Washington, D.C. From 1912 onward, Fauset wrote **poetry** and fictional and nonfictional prose for publication. Most significantly, she submitted articles to *Crisis*, the National Association for the



Advancement of Colored People publication. Her work impressed the general editor of *Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois; he made her the journal's literary editor in 1919, which necessitated a move to New York. Fauset retained this editorship until resigning in 1926. Fauset also edited the *Brownie Book* during its two years of publication, 1920 and 1921. Her aim for that children's publication is typical: Fauset worked to encourage new African American writing, to celebrate the achievements of exemplary colored persons, and to raise the self-esteem and reputation of blacks. In a convincing polemic written for Allan Locke's 1925 *New Negro* collection, Fauset complained that in the theater black characters seemed always to be stereotyped as figures of trivial comedy. Such stereotyping was abhorrent because "no astute observer, looking at the Negro in modern American life, could find his condition even now a first aid to laughter." Fauset was preoccupied with the realities of life for black Americans, particularly black women. In her Harlem **home** of the 1920s, Fauset held literary meetings that developed fellow blacks' work; Fauset continually stressed that the black experience must be given a rounded portrayal, one determined by blacks themselves. Fauset's seriousness in fostering a black literary culture in Harlem goes some way to tempering clichés about noisy, "wild" Harlem. Fauset began teaching again in 1927. Staying in New York, she took a job at a junior school and then at de Witt Clinton High School, remaining until 1944. Fauset married Herbert Harris, an insurance broker, in 1929. Harris accepted the fact that his forty-seven-year-old wife would remain childless. After the 1933 publication of her fourth novel, Fauset's life got steadily quieter, although after 1944 she taught at Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes. An expected fifth novel never materialized. Harris died in 1958. The couple had lived in Montclair, New Jersey, for several years. Until her **death** from heart disease in 1961, Fauset lived with a stepbrother in Philadelphia, which, together with New York City, is one of the two main settings for her novels.

Fauset contributed to black culture through her **work** as an editor, poet, campaigner for black **history**, literary "midwife," teacher, and primarily, as a novelist. The novels—*There is Confusion*, *Plum Bun*, *The Chinaberry Tree*, and *Comedy: American Style*—were published between 1924 and 1933, receiving moderate critical acclaim and equally moderate sales. Fauset's readership has never been particularly large. Early white American reviewers sometimes took a patronizing tone, damning the novels with faint praise; a common comment was that the novels convey some curious information about the quirks of black folks' predicaments, but with an elaborate, over-ambitious literary pretension. The novels were published in England, too; the first three gained qualified appreciation in (albeit brief) reviews in the most significant British literary survey, the weekly *Times Literary Supplement*.

Interest in Fauset's work declined as interest in the **Harlem Renaissance** declined; her novels soon went out of print. There was a small revival of attention in the late 1960s, following the cultural impact of the **civil rights movement**. Her death merited a *New York Times* obituary (May 3, 1961), but it took a decade of campaigning for black cultural efficacy to alert white

America to the possibilities of “minor,” “marginal” writers such as Fauset. As if marking the nation’s vigor in reading black greats, reprints of Fauset’s novels emerged but soon went out of print again. A more lasting rediscovery of Fauset has flourished since the late 1970s when feminist scholars began reading ignored women writers. Similarly, from the mid-1980s onward, academics augmented the traditional white “canon” by also privileging non-white literature. Fauset’s legacy is ideal for scholars who critique the historical sidelining of a nonmale, nonwhite author of considerable talent. Scholarly articles on Fauset’s works began to appear in the mid-1970s; interest continues to grow exponentially. Carolyn Wedin Sylvander published an outstanding book-length study of Fauset’s work in 1981; a number of welcome monographs devoted wholly or partly to Fauset have appeared subsequently. Crucially, new editions of her novels were published—all are enhanced with affirming, vital introductions. The Marcy Jane Knopf-introduced *The Chinaberry Tree and Selected Writings* is particularly valuable for its inclusion of nonfictional pieces by Fauset, including the 1921 speech on black women’s development that she delivered to the Pan-African Congress.

Fauset was once dismissively referred to as a black Jane Austen—a writer of harmless middle-class romances. Critics of Austen now regard Austen as an astute observer and challenger of **class** and gender-based assumptions. Similarly, critics of Fauset’s novels now insist that Fauset did not write comfortable bourgeois **fiction**. There is too much **violence** in Fauset’s novels for any of them to be read comfortably, and the female characters especially have an obvious sexual longing that is gritty and realistic. Fauset’s black female characters suffer because of prejudices against them that are exercised in a personal, localized context and in the wider, legalized system of America’s suppression of blacks. Fauset does not completely vilify the young black women who “pass” for white in her novels. Although Fauset insisted that African Americans should proclaim their black culture and **identity** proudly, the status of impoverished blacks is so demeaning that we sympathize with rather than excoriate the vulnerable characters who pretend to be white. The four novels are sprawling, complex entities, full of anxious studies of female **sexuality**, class division, family conflicts, and crude and subtle racism, so it is unproductive to simplify Fauset’s message. However, one opinion of Fauset is clear: If people are suppressed, possibly talented people are left in enforced malaise, depriving society of their attributes. Racial and sexual demonization, then, is as practically wrong as it is morally wrong.

In his 1940 **autobiography** *The Big Sea*, **Langston Hughes** praised Fauset as one of the midwives of the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset assisted ably with the “birth” of much black culture of 1920s New York, but her own novels were passed over too swiftly by Hughes and others. Fauset’s four novels have a sustained clarity of vision that makes them seminal reading for any student of black literature and/or women’s literature and for any reader who enjoys articulate attacks on the manifestations of irrational prejudice. Above all, Fauset’s novels should be read by anyone who enjoys what Fauset herself called a “good story.”

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*Kevin De Ornellas*

**FERRELL, CAROLYN (1962– )**

Born in Brooklyn and raised on Long Island, Carolyn Ferrell received a B.A. from Sarah Lawrence in 1984. Afterward, she lived in Germany for four years, combining study with performance as a professional violinist. While working on an M.A. from the City College of New York, she joined the New Renaissance writers, led by **Doris Jean Austin**, whose sense "of the questions

writers must ask themselves” was crucial in Ferrell’s development. A long list of grants and honors have marked her career as a student and writer; her first book, a short-story collection titled *Don’t Erase Me* (1997), received the Zacharis Award and the *LA Times* Award for First Fiction. Married to Linwood Lewis, a psychologist, Ferrell currently teaches creative writing at Sarah Lawrence. She is a doctoral candidate at the City University of New York and is working on a novel about Long Island in the 1970s and 1980s.

Meri Nana-Ama Danquah describes her generation of black women writers, published since 1990: “We are biracial, bicultural, bisexual; . . . we are constantly insisting upon the recognition of our . . . complexity.” Ferrell, like **Danzy Senna** and **Edwidge Danticat**, supplements **race** and gender with other dangerous categories; like **Sapphire**, she has worked in inner-city literacy programs. Many of her characters have a heartbreaking need for a language commensurate to their unspeakable experience. The protagonists of the stories set in the South Bronx inhabit marginalized niches but reach for their goals against terrible odds. Ferrell brilliantly constructs children and young adults whose thoughts are simultaneously innocent and experienced; she shows them forming themselves in a street argot tinted (and tainted) by the pervasive bromides of American culture.

Ferrell’s protagonists touch many themes of contemporary **fiction**—hunger, imagination, the **family**, the **body**, ridicule, **sexuality**, **identity**, poverty, power—with fresh voices and sticky hands. In “Proper Library” (the most anthologized of her works, chosen for *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*), Lorrie cares for many children, suffers for being gay, and memorizes words, which weave a strange music through his short life. In “Don’t Erase Me,” Layla Jackson, knowing she has AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), reverses her story’s chronology as a remembrance for her children and a well of resistance for herself. The besieged heroine of “Tiger-Frame Spectacles” keeps a notebook celebrating “girl power” in the midst of a mean, misogynist culture. In “Can You Say My Name?” images from the **Middle Passage** weigh down Toya’s plan to be a mother in the ninth grade.

**James Baldwin**, **Audre Lorde**, and **Rita Dove** have written about being African American in German cultures; clearly, having a German mother and an African American father has stretched Ferrell’s own compass. Ferrell has called “Wonderful Teen” (a dystopic identity story in which a twelve-year-old, wanting to help her mother, realizes her irremediable difference) “my most autobiographical story.” “Inside, a Fountain” shows an African American teenager, surrounded by her hostile German family and **history**, holding her own ground.

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Susan Nash

## FICTION

Fiction is a form of storytelling written in prose or verse and created from an author’s imagination. The word *fiction* comes from the Latin word *factio*, which means “a fashioning or a making.” Storytelling is as old as humanity, and in order to examine fiction in an African American context, one must acknowledge the roots of the African American literary legacy in preslave trade epics of the African continent where oral storytelling served as entertainment and historical, sociocultural documentary of origins, **myths**, and beliefs. In this way, the purpose of fiction in an African American context has not only been to entertain but to celebrate, document, and critically assess a **history** specific to the experiences and ever-changing pathos of African American people.

Fiction has appeared in various forms since the development of writing thousands of years ago. Since the 1700s, the main forms of fiction have been the novel and short story. The 1800s were formative years in African American literary and cultural history. In pre-Civil War United States, the majority of African Americans living in the United States were in bondage, as slaves. The law made it illegal for African Americans to learn reading and

writing; however, a rich literary legacy was cultivated and maintained, even then. In 1988, the Schomburg Center, Henry Louis Gates, and Oxford University Press published the thirty-volume collection **Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers** and made available works by such literary artists as **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson** and **Harriet E. Wilson**.

While all fiction contains elements that are partly or entirely imaginary, fiction does not necessarily differ much from reality. Harriet Wilson's fictional **autobiography** *Our Nig* (1859) is based on experiences and events both real and imagined. While pre-Civil War United States served as the landscape of Wilson's work, factual elements in fiction are always combined with the imaginary to create a piece of fiction. In this way, fiction differs from histories, biographies, and nonfiction that are created entirely from facts.

By the early part of the twentieth century, the New Negro movement was producing black literary artists such as novelist **Dorothy West**, whose work explored social construct and racial segregation. The New Negro movement later contributed to the birth of the **Harlem Renaissance** of the 1920s, and women writers such as **Zora Neale Hurston** and West were producing **literature** that explored the diversity of the African American experience in relation to skin color, economic **class**, gender, region, belief, and history at the turn of the century. With Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), readers were introduced to literature of a female focus and mind. Her protagonist, Janie, tells the revolutionary story of a woman unbound by social expectation and predefined notions of womanhood. Hurston's work was also revolutionary in that she included the cadence of oral tradition, dialect, and the spoken word in her writings. This inclusion of speechlike literature and story in published work further carved the space for oral tradition in U.S. American literature. This foundation would later inform the literary tradition and works of such writers as **Toni Morrison** and **Alice Walker**.

With the **civil rights movement**, the political climate of the United States shifted. African American literature by women made history with the **Black Arts Movement** of 1965–1975/1976. Among one of the milestones of this movement is the 1970 anthology, edited and published by fiction writer **Toni Cade Bambara**, titled *The Black Woman*. This publication marked the first major feminist anthology and featured the work of such fiction writers as Alice Walker and **Paule Marshall**. Also in 1970 Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and cultivated mentor relationships with writers Toni Cade Bambara and **Gayl Jones**.

After the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the **community** of black women writers expanded and solidified in very tangible ways. Toni Morrison had begun a professional editorial relationship with Gayl Jones to produce Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976). **Ntozake Shange** published her novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* in 1982, and Caribbean-born **Jamaica Kincaid** published *Annie John* in 1983, contributing to a legacy of African American writings by women that broadened the scope of African American literature beyond the borders and territories of the

United States, to include the rest of the Americas. While Kincaid's works explore another experience of African immigration and migration, as well as colonialism, her works also explore themes common to the larger African American experience that frequently transcends nationality and birthplace. Her work explores **memory**, gender, power, oppression, language, **love**, **family**, and the history of **slavery** as it manifests itself in **body** and world. Haitian-born **Edwidge Danticat** continues in this same tradition with works such as *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and *The Farming of Bones* (1998).

By the late 1900s, many African American novelists produced literary works of myth and magical realism to reflect on the legacies of slavery, gender, racial prejudice, and the evolution of the nation. Novelist **Octavia Butler**, who was the first African American woman writer to gain acclaim as a major science fiction writer, had published her novel *Kindred*, and in 1995 she received a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" for her literary works.

In 1983 Walker received the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple*. In 1988 Morrison received the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved*. Both of these novels explored the pathos of black women in the context of slavery and oppression. Notably, Morrison's story is loosely based on the true story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave and mother who, rather than see her children returned to slavery, killed one of her children and attempted to kill the others. This is an example of the blending of fact and fiction to create the fabric of African American women's literary fiction. In 1993, Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, becoming the first African American to be awarded the prize.

An important phenomenon of African American women's fiction is its relationship with the cinematic world in the late 1900s. In the 1980s and 1990s, literary fiction by black women in the United States began to see a surge toward **film**, and both *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* were adapted to the big screen. Also included in this movement was the miniseries *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989), based on **Gloria Naylor's** 1982 novel of the same title. Popular fiction writer **Terry McMillan** was also part of this movement, and her works *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* were made into films in the 1990s.

Black women writers continue to write and forge new literary works well into the twenty-first century. Among new works created at the century's turn are Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright **Suzan-Lori Parks's** novel *Getting Mother's Body*, Gayl Jones's *Mosquito*, and collections by Mayra Santos-Febres and Shay Youngblood. Also noted for her contribution to African American letters is the Dominican-born writer Nelly Rosario, whose novel *Song of the Water Saints* won the 2002 Pen Open Book Award.

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*Aracelis Girmay*

## **FIELDS, JULIA (1938– )**

Julia Fields's promise as a poet remains unfulfilled. Born in 1938 in Alabama, Fields grew up on a farm as one of eight children. She received a B.S. from Knoxville College in Tennessee in 1961, spent two years studying abroad in Scotland, and received an M.A. in English from the Bread Loaf School at Middlebury College in Vermont in 1972. She has spent much of her professional career as an educator and counts poets **Georgia Douglas Johnson** and Robert Hayden among her greatest influences. **Langston Hughes** extolled Fields as one of the most promising writers emerging from the **South** during the height of the **Black Arts Movement**. However, since the 1970s her **poetry** and short **fiction** have received scant critical attention. Despite winning major library and literary magazine prizes and a National Council of the Arts Grant in 1968, her name is nearly absent from literary circles today except for a handful of obscure scholarly references to lost, southern black women writers.



Fields explores themes of social, political, and economic inequality between the sexes and races, but she departs markedly from her contemporaries. Rather than rely on overt, militant political expression in her work, Fields's poetic voice is fraught with subtlety. She relies on humor, nuance, and natural allegory to probe feminist and racial themes. Through references to the personal and reflective, Fields explores black people's **history**, **myth**, and legacy in light of the debilitating effects of racism, sexism, and poverty. The effects are most profoundly felt in their sense of loss and their search for a rightful place. These themes permeate Fields's work.

In a 1974 interview, Fields describes herself as working in isolation, and her poetry expresses separation from the perceived Eastern, aesthetic mainstream that dominated black cultural expression in the 1970s. Her themes are certainly not geographically limited to the South, but they resonate with southern sensibilities. She attacks the hypocrisy of northern integration and explores issues of racial and **class** ambiguity during a period of rapid social change. The influence of the South expresses itself most clearly in her deft exploration of the natural landscape and its connection to feminine creativity, **community**, and **spirituality**.

Through understatement, Fields articulates women's experiences to advocate women's strengths and to repudiate negative conceptions of black women. Dissatisfied with traditional negative assumptions, particularly of black women as sexually permissive and emasculating, Fields venerates black women's roles as mothers, teachers, and healers. For example, in her most critically acclaimed poem "High on the Hog," Fields demands recognition and reward for black women's abuse as slaves, sharecroppers, and menial laborers. She indicts male-centered **Black Nationalism** and rejects the pedestal existence offered as meager reward for the horrific struggles and ignored contributions of black women. Fields's poetry rejects the socially marginalized, morally denigrated, and politically limited spaces consigned to women in general and black women in particular. Her work allows women to gain a sense of themselves as creative, empowered, and spiritual beings.

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Shennette Garrett

## FILM

Only ten years after the inception of the Academy Awards, the motion picture industry's public measurement of itself, a black person not only was nominated for the first time but also won the award: Hattie McDaniel received the Best Supporting Actress prize for her performance as Mammie in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). However, any optimism that this specific victory might be a sign that African Americans were being welcomed into the industry elite as full and equal participants was a misplaced optimism. It was another decade before another performance was even nominated, and twenty-five years passed before another black actor received the award. Sidney Poitier won as Best Actor for *Lilies of the Field* (1963). More than fifty years passed before another black woman won the prize in McDaniel's category: Whoopi Goldberg for *Ghost* (1990). Only ten black women have been nominated as Best Supporting Actress, and only two have won.

Eleven black men have been nominated as Best Supporting Actor, and three of those have been given the prize: Louis Gossett, Jr., in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982); Denzel Washington in *Glory* (1989); and Cuba Gooding, Jr., in *Jerry Maguire* (1996). In the lead acting categories, seven women have been nominated, and one has been given the prize, Halle Berry for *Monster's Ball* (2001); men have been nominated a dozen times, winning twice: Poitier in 1963, and Denzel Washington for *Training Day* (2001). The acting awards, however, do not tell the full story. In the seventy-six-year **history** of the awards, African Americans have garnered only eighty-four nominations regardless of category and have won just seventeen times, winning in eight acting and nine nonacting categories. The chronology of both nominations and victories shows a story of systemic racism and agonizingly slow progress. The first three decades of the Academy's ritual saw only five nominations (and one win) for supporting performances by blacks.

Not until the 1960s did an African American receive a nomination in a nonacting category, and not surprisingly, that nomination was for music—Duke Ellington for *Paris Blues* (1961); not for yet another decade (over forty years after the beginnings of the awards) did a black person win a nonacting category. That distinction went to Isaac Hayes for his theme from *Shaft* (1971). The hierarchy of racist **stereotypes** placed entertainment right after servitude

as a major purpose and pleasure of the black person in mainstream cinema. Thus, it is almost logical that, within an illogical system, performance and music would be the first avenues of success for the black film artist. The less visible but equally telling technical categories were closed to African American nominees until 1969; the first nomination came in film editing. Although Quincy Jones is the most-nominated African American person, his nominations span three categories. Willie D. Burton has been nominated six times for Best Sound, winning for *Bird* (1988). The 1980s has been the most successful decade at the Oscars for African Americans so far: thirty-one nominations (twelve for acting) and nine wins (two in performance categories).

The larger story implied by the statistical analysis of nominations is a complicated one of sexism and racism. First, and clearest, an organization that has grown up within a racist culture and that is overwhelmingly dominated by nonblacks has found it difficult even to suggest excellence by nomination and nearly impossible to declare superiority through awarding a black person a designation as “Best” in any category. Only three black women and five black men have won the award for “Best” performances. When it comes to what might be considered the more intellectually demanding technical **work** in cinema, it is not surprising that such an organization might withhold both opportunity and applause on the combined basis of **race** and sex. Of the forty-four nonacting African American nominees since 1961, only six have been women. Overall, only four black women have won Academy Awards—three for acting and one for songwriting. Thus, Hattie McDaniel’s triumph in 1939 was a monumentally misleading omen.

While there are black women, such as Dorothy Dandridge, Ruby Dee, and Butterfly McQueen, whose names are part of film history in spite of the system within which they worked, many other talented African American women—Freda Washington, Nina Mae McKinney, and Diana Sands—also found themselves at the peak of their careers, far from the peak of their talents, with nowhere to go because there were no lead roles, either developed for them or offered to them, as complex, dynamic characters. As poorly as black women fared in front of the camera, the situation was predictably worse for women in film production. Nevertheless, African American women have been filmmakers for as long as African American men. **Zora Neale Hurston** both wrote and filmed ethnographies, and Eloyce Gist made and marketed her evangelical films, during the same period Oscar Micheaux worked, especially the 1920s to 1930s.

While the number of categories in which black people are nominated has indeed increased over the years, the very limited number of nominations and even more limited number of awards demonstrate an inherent inequality in the industry’s system of self-evaluation and self-reward. The crux of the problem is this: Membership in the Academy is a prerequisite for the privilege of nominating and voting, and membership is predicated on invitation by the Board of Governors, extended to those whose film work reflects the Academy’s standards, to those who themselves have been nominated for the award, or to those who have been deemed candidates for their significant

contributions to cinema. This set of subjective and restrictive criteria makes clear how it is that African Americans remain an Academy membership and ballot minority. It is the cumulative result of a century of racist conventions in film. Two of the most significant contributors have been race types and the industry code.

In the earliest of American films, black characters frequently were portrayed by nonblack actors in blackface and occasionally by absurdly made-up black actors in blackface. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, Donald Bogle traces the history of typed roles into which African American actors were cast, ironically forced into situations where their performances in mainstream media perpetuated those very stereotypes that marginalized them by race. Further, he describes the persistent existence of these basic types and their predictable qualities in contemporary black characters. With roles restricted to minor characters and those determined by stereotypes, opportunities in front of the camera for African Americans have been frustratingly limited. Part of the problem has been the fact that fundamentally racist attitudes were enshrined in the motion picture industry's self-censorship codes that were in place from 1920 until 1964.

Arising from the complex problems associated with censorship boards at the state level, some of which would allow a pregnant woman to appear on screen and some not, for example, and since producing multiple versions of every film in order to placate local quirks was logistically unfeasible, the movie studios collectively arrived at the more practical solution of a production code. The code was devised in order not to offend either overarching national attitudes or the local sensibilities of each state and thus to protect the studios' capital investment in the making of films and guarantee the widest possible audience pool with the result of the greatest possible profit. Among the many restrictions the industry imposed on itself, which touched on every aspect of society, two items are particularly noteworthy in a discussion of African Americans in film: white **slavery** and miscegenation. White slavery could not be depicted; black slavery was neither mentioned nor proscribed. Portrayals of miscegenation were "forbidden." This prescribed apartness and superiority, born of racist convictions, assured racial inequality on-screen and implicitly encouraged it off-screen by constructing a color bar on human interactions of all kinds, but particularly intimate relationships.

Independent black cinema, however, was not bound by the rules and practices of the Hollywood studios. Here, black actors played black lead characters, black secondary characters, black villains, and black heroes, living everyday life and engaging with black themes. Segregated theaters and screenings meant ready-made audiences for "race movies." Hundreds of screening spaces opened, and the independents thrived during the 1920s and 1930s. The advent of sound and its requisite expensive technologies disrupted an energetic underground cinema begun by people like William Foster, Noble Johnson, and Oscar Micheaux and which had produced hundreds of movies (many of them now lost) for black audiences. Another determining factor was that Hollywood began producing race movies of its own

to satisfy a clearly identified market and appetite for black images on the screen.

Following on the heels of an ideological shift from pursuing nonviolent means to social equality during the **civil rights movement** to the militancy of **Black Nationalism**, the blaxploitation films of the early 1970s energetically undermined as many of the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” of the obsolete Production Code as possible. These independent movies, starting with Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), portrayed urban corruption, their heroes often the very pimps and drug dealers the code had prohibited from positive portrayals, their villains often the very law enforcement groups the code had protected from negative portrayals. *Sweetback’s* protagonist is a porn star turned radical in the face of police corruption. The early race movies had focused primarily on the interests of the black bourgeoisie; the blaxploitation films that made Fred Williamson, Pam Grier, Tamara Dobson, and others into cult stars unabashedly flaunted black **sexuality** and realistically represented the speech and movement and concerns of less privileged black people.

The history of African Americans in film is a mixed history, and a discouraging one if only major studio productions are weighed, but it is a far deeper and varied tradition than those productions suggest. Black people have always found ways to tell black stories, and as documentarians such as Yvonne Welbon retrieve filmed documents and situate them and their makers in their legitimate place in the historical record, overall perception of the black contribution to cinema history is changing inevitably, both inside and outside African American communities. Contemporary filmmakers are adding to that continuum as black cinema and blacks in cinema expand exponentially.

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*A. Mary Murphy*

## **FINNEY, NIKKY (1957– )**

Nikky Finney was born Lynn Carol Finney in Conway, South Carolina, on August 26, 1957, to Ernest A. Finney, a civil rights attorney, and Frances Davenport Finney, an elementary school teacher. Although a poet rooted in the folk traditions of the African American **South**, Finney's work relies upon the spiritual and aesthetic influence of West African tradition, the **womanist** wisdom of her maternal grandmother, Beulah Lenorah Davenport, and her **family's** political commitment to equality and social justice.

After receiving her undergraduate degree from Talladega College, Finney began graduate work at Atlanta University and then worked as a writer/photographer for the Black Women's Health Project. During her time in Atlanta, she befriended **fiction** writer/cultural worker/activist, **Toni Cade Bambara**. Bambara's talent for appreciating the voices of black people, particularly black women, was more than literary device. Bambara welcomed black writers, one of whom was Finney, into her home for workshops, food, and nurturing. The group would be known formally as the Southern Collective of African American Writers, and Bambara would fulfill the role of mentor for Finney until Bambara's **death** in 1995 of cancer.

Finney's first collection of **poetry**, *On Wings Made of Gauze* (1985), mixes renderings of black family and issues of equality and social justice. In this early collection, Finney explores the themes she would develop fully in later works. After living in Atlanta, Finney moved to Oakland, California, before taking a teaching position at the University of Kentucky. Like her mentor Toni Cade Bambara, Finney worked with young writers. In Kentucky, Finney founded the Affrilachian Poets with then emerging writers Frank X. Walker, Crystal Wilkerson, Kelly Norman Ellis, and Ricardo Nazrio-Colon. Finney's **work** with the group emerged from the need to represent African Americans and other people of color in Appalachia. The group exemplifies her desire to reclaim the contributions of African peoples in the **history** of the American South. While in Kentucky, she completed her second collection of poetry, *Rice* (1995). Again, Finney was able to foster and preserve the legacy of black southern culture. *Rice*, she reaffirms in narrative, free verse, is the African heritage of South Carolina. The collection's title harkens to South Carolina's slave past and the cultivation of the state's cash crop by West Africans. Her collection includes personal poems that celebrate grandmother **love** in "The Vertigo" as well as persona poems like "Cotton Tea," which depict methods slave women used to induce abortion once impregnated by

the captors. Other poems examine **domestic violence**, the love of women (both sexual and nonsexual), and the universal oppression of women.

In 1999, she won the PEN American Open Book Award for *Rice* and completed a collection of short stories titled *Heartwood* (1997). In 2003 she published *The World Is Round*, a mixture of poetry and memoir. Much of Finney's aesthetic blends the feminist/womanist perspectives of **Alice Walker** and **Audre Lorde** with the fierce sense of self-determinism of **Black Arts Movement** poets **Nikki Giovanni**, **Sonia Sanchez**, Haki Madhubuti, and **Carolyn Rodgers**.

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*Kelly Norman Ellis*

### **FISHER KING, THE**

In **Paule Marshall's** most recent novel, *The Fisher King* (2000), Marshall investigates similar themes as in her other stories, especially those of integrating the past and the present into the lives of her characters. This story layers voices and generational tales like *Daughters*, but *The Fisher King* adds a different twist. Telling the story through an eight-year-old boy, Marshall weaves the narratives of several generations of the boy's **family** and the tragic decisions that led to their estrangement. These elements all hinge on the backdrop of the African American **jazz** movement.

*The Fisher King* is primarily the account of the young boy's grandfather, Sonny-Rett Payne. When Sonny-Rett determines to defy his West Indian

mother in both his choice of wife and career, he flees the country. His marriage to Cherisse McCullum angers both the bride's and groom's families, and Sonny-Rett's decision to become a jazz musician is even more unacceptable to them. As a result, the young couple joins the American expatriates in Paris, never to reconnect with their families in New York again. The novel begins with young Sonny, the jazz musician's grandson, confronting the extended families in America for the first time since Sonny-Rett's **death**.

In *The Fisher King*, Marshall again attacks the themes of integrating one's personal past with a larger cultural heritage in order to most fully discover oneself. The characters are of West Indian heritage, like those in many of Marshall's other stories, and they must not only face racism in America but also must integrate the pressures of a close-knit immigrant **community** with their own dreams and aspirations. This novel also incorporates the racism associated with jazz in America, often considered evil by mainstream American culture throughout the early twentieth century. Young Sonny listens to the story of how these many pressures cause Sonny-Rett's and Cherisse's exile from their families, and the grandson discovers with the readers how familial stubbornness can damage relationships forever. Despite Sonny-Rett's death in poverty and exile, Marshall opens a space for hope in the reconnection between young Sonny and his still-living American great-grandmothers. In *The Fisher King*, as in all of Marshall's writing, narrative offers an opportunity for remembering, retelling, and thus **healing** for many generations of family.

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*Laura Baker Shearer*

### FOLKLORE

One cannot assay the richness of African Americans' contributions to national folklore without acknowledging the diverse voices, expertise, and creative ingenuity of black women over the long trek from the horror of **slavery** to the political and social prominence enjoyed by many today. African American folklore as a field of knowledge production has often been overlooked by readers, educators, and cultural historians who disparage it as being facile, dated, derivative, quaintly impressionistic, or unworthy of serious scholarly regard. By the same token, folklore dealing with black women's experience has suffered further marginalization due to the combined hierarchies of **race**, **class**, and gender. This slight is ironic given the prominence of *Mules and Men* (1935), **Zora Neale Hurston's** seminal folklore collection.



This work combines **autobiography** and anthropological analysis to detail the folklore in her native state of Florida, as well as Louisiana, **home** of the legendary voodoo icon Marie Leveau.

As economic objects, most slave women were severely restricted to manual labor in either the fields or the plantation household. Because of this constraint, early women-centered folk knowledge had its source in the **domestic** arts (for instance, needlecraft, **quilting**, cooking, child care, textile and clothes production, and traditional **healing**). These tributaries of knowledge intermingled with less gender-specific expressions of black vernacular **identity**: songs and melodies, oral storytelling, games, jokes, religious rites, chants, sermons, traditional **community** customs (for example, jumping a broomstick to symbolize wedlock), superstition and the occult, and later, the visual arts and folk **literature**. The underlying difficulty in establishing a comprehensive vision of early (proto)feminist folklore exists in its dearth of public advocates, as well as a probable lack of artistic self-awareness. In other words, collectors were not actively archiving or publishing material during the time of slavery because of racist and sexist devaluation (that is, the impression that the inner workings of blacks' lives—especially black *women's* lives—were not worth cataloguing for posterity). The folk practitioners themselves were not consciously engaging in their art as such, primarily because of a scarcity of means (including education, **literacy**, and leisure time), and the oppressively unpredictable nature of life under the “peculiar institution.”

Social gatherings, including religious worship, **family** bonding, and occasional celebrations, would have been prime opportunities for the dissemination and reproduction of folk knowledge. However, as would be expected, these gatherings depended on the whims and demands of masters, mistresses, overseers, and the local night-riders (patrollers) who used terror tactics to prevent regular fraternizing among slaves. Fear of insurrection and a reversal of servitude back onto whites (the rhetoric of “Negro domination” that permeated the postbellum era), especially after Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion, were among the principal reasons for curtailing free exchange and slave recreation. Similarly, the intergenerational relay of folklore, especially the learning between mothers and daughters, was stymied by the specter of the auction block and the usually irreparable separations that ensued once children and other family members were sold away. A system of surrogacy and mentorship resulted in some households, with older or more experienced black women serving as teachers and mother figures to their younger peers. Sometimes, white children, or even the mistress herself, were recipients of the slave woman's care and expertise. Such emotional and practical generosity, likely a function of necessity as much as choice, contributed in part to the “**Mammy**” **stereotype** that indirectly praises black women for their domestic savvy but simultaneously divests them of the agency to adopt a host of other, more intellectually challenging social roles.

The thousands of autobiographical interviews compiled for the depression-era Federal Writers' Project (FWP) of the Works Progress Administration showcase the complexity and underlying volatility of many such relationships.

An avid concern for these intimate aspects of slave life helped form the standard oral questionnaire for the Slave Narrative Collection. The majority of the fieldworkers who conducted interviews were white, but black women like Ida Belle Hunter and Bertha P. Tipton were contributors to this legacy. Derived from the recollections of an aging black population, these accounts prove searing in their descriptive accuracy. As first-person testimonials, they offer a veritable goldmine of historical, anthropological, and sociological information that valorizes the resourcefulness and emotional resilience of the tellers. Female interviewees often describe such chores as cooking, carding, weaving, dye- and mattress-making, and the allocation of various household duties. They also recall local housing, types of furniture, agricultural methods, **conjuring** and superstitions, ghost stories, popular songs, and clandestine attempts to attain some form of religious or educational instruction despite the dangers of exposure and punishment. The salaried **work** provided by this important government initiative also contributed indirectly to the insertion of African American folklore into other genres of black literature. Such would-be novelists as **Ralph Ellison**, **Richard Wright**, and Hurston herself were among those writers on the FWP payroll who found themselves better equipped to pursue their creative interests at a time when opportunities and financial security were scarce. Elements of folklore—the Brer Rabbit allusion in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), the Badman stereotype reconfigured in Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), and the verbally dexterous Eatonville community portrayed in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) suggest how two very different imaginative helixes—one that can be traced back to ancestral West African, Euro-American, and Native American beginnings, another that has its roots in the gritty social realism of the years spanning mass migration, lynch law, Jim Crow segregation, pervasive social alienation, and political disenfranchisement—can intertwine to form the genetic material of mid-twentieth-century African American **fiction**.

Talking a step backward in literary **history**, folk practices in the formative genre of the **slave narrative** played a somewhat peripheral role to the overarching preoccupation with character, abolitionist moral suasion, carefully honed rhetorical effects, and political efficacy. Popular slave narratives like that of Henry Bibb (1849) describe the typical diversions of nonreligious slaves on Sabbath day: banjo-playing, gambling, singing, brawling, gaming, dancing, and drinking. A seminal passage in **Frederick Douglass’s** *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) contemplates the singing of slaves at the Great House Farm. These codified utterances reveal the paradoxical marriage of a joyous form with miserable but effectively veiled content. It is this nascent formula combining laughter and tears that would eventually find popular reiteration in African American musical forms like the **spirituals**, **blues**, and **jazz**. More sensitive to the female slave’s particular struggles, and ostensibly a “writing back” to Douglass’s robust masculine persona, **Harriet Jacobs’s** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) juxtaposes the brief but permissible merrymaking of Christmas with the tragic sale of slaves on New Year’s Day. Many of the most popular narratives tend to focus more on the

evolution of the male speaker's consciousness and his quest for intellectual and physical **freedom** than the plight of the female slave under similar, if not more abusive, circumstances. An appreciation of mutual hardship often exists, but a pervasive and unanimous sense of equality is difficult to discern in most of the texts and contexts presented by popular male narrators.

The slave narratives are a specialized genre, but they function symbolically as folk literature by imparting a representative voice for a larger community, one of the underlying objectives of folklore as a *communal* tool for cultural survival. Many of the recurrent motifs in the genre, including a victory for the underdog and the deception of the powerful, emerge in classic African American folktales, especially trickster tales (animal and human) and etiological fables (the "why" stories). Highly recognizable, the Brer Rabbit cycle offers a primarily male cast of characters: Brer Fox, Brer Deer, Brer 'Gator, Brer Dawg, and Brer Rabbit himself. Sis Cat is one of a few female characters who appears consistently (if at all), along with miscellaneous **love** interests who are often of indeterminate species. Brer Rabbit and the story of Tar Baby, originally brought to public prominence by Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus collection of 1881, was reapplied in **Toni Morrison's** 1981 novel *Tar Baby*. As a racist epithet, "tar baby" refers disparagingly to any African American, especially an individual of a darker complexion. As feminist symbol, it evokes a full range of significant connotations. On the negative side, the feminized tar baby suggests black women's voicelessness, emotional denigration by males, external constructions of black femininity, racist suggestions of pollution and contamination, and victimization through implied and actual physical **violence**. On the more positive side, the tar-covered figure comes across as a female refusing to acknowledge the dominating male presence, an embodiment of enigmatic or aggressive female power, and the attractive cohesiveness of black sisterhood (a society to which Brer Rabbit, playing the role of the representative male figure, is denied both easy entry and clean exit).

The abuse and denigration of black women is not a theme foreign to either early or more recent manifestations of African American folk culture. Such critics as Roger D. Abrahams, Lawrence W. Levine, and Geneva Smitherman have discussed the fascinating array of socially conscious, artistically innovative techniques used in verbal sparring (that is, signifying) between African Americans. Particular attention has been directed toward black males in historically rural but now largely urban locales. The assumption that females have little part in this discourse is a problematic one. For instance, in "the dozens" (the art of clever insult, whether categorized as "dirty" or "clean"), the role of the mother is a given. Although the subject of mockery and subsequent defense, her symbolic centrality as a life source, caregiver, sexual and social being, and powerful presence remains stark and irrefutable. At the same time, the verbal abuse of the mother also signals her contradictory position as the subject *and* the object of imaginative play. Such play can be constructive and critical, but it can also prove misogynistic and demeaning to black women and to women in general. Recent feminist theories have placed

the exploitation and exchange of women at the core of many masculinist cultural rituals. As a result, the verbal affirmation of male power in folk-based oral culture often occurs at the expense of grandmothers, mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, and other female kin. Women are increasingly asserting their own individualities through intervention into, and participation in, such contests and witty exchanges. Janie Crawford's ability to hold her own in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exemplifies the talent and verve that black women can offer, given the opportunity to participate fully on the discursive playing field.

Concerns about representations of black women also arise in early folk literature. The tale "Why the Sister in Black Works Hardest" details a chain of command originating with a white woman ("Ole Missus") who demands that her husband ("Ole Massa") retrieve a large, antiquated box from the middle of a road. The reversal of the standard patriarchal model (the white man at the top of the hierarchy of social power) is at best a reflection of the Reconstruction-era apotheosis of white womanhood, especially in the southern states, as a response to rampant fears about race purity, chastity, and caste disruption. Unwilling to follow through with his wife's demand that he retrieve the box, Ole Massa directs his black servant (typically a clever slave named John in other tales) to perform the assigned task. The black male, equally reluctant, commands his wife to do so, exploiting her—just as he was exploited—for her free labor, ignorance, and inability to refuse. Once open, the box presents the black woman with a large reserve of hard work, making her a modern-day Pandora and the center of much-needed political and social struggle.

A slight reversal of this abject status occurs in the folktale "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men," where the black female adopts the role of trickster and so-called badwoman, bargaining with God and the Devil (but particularly with the latter) to make her more powerful than her husband. While the home may appear to be a place of incarceration for some black women, especially those relegated to housework because of a lack of education and better employment opportunities, it is a site of ultimate female mastery in this instance. The wife wields power over the three domains that her husband frequents or values most: the kitchen, the bedroom, and the nursery. In this tale, the articulateness of the black characters emerges, as well as the humorous juxtaposition of God and the Devil, no longer untouchable or vastly antithetical entities. Such contentious topics as the idea of original sexual equality, man's justification of power through recourse to **religion**, and the shortsightedness of his domination based on physical superiority are all placed in stark yet humorous relief.

An area in which black women have wielded considerable, albeit largely unacknowledged, power is the field of folk medicine. Among other slave narrators, Bibb describes the practice of medicating sick slaves by means of an indigenous pharmacopoeia, the content of which ranged from pungent salts, castor oil, and red pepper tea to more creative and dubious concoctions like boiled chimney soot (which the master would compel the slave to drink). More

conventional ingredients with therapeutic properties included assorted leaves, camphor, oil of cloves, sulfur flowers, asafetida (often tied around the neck to ward off infection), various roots like High John the Conqueror, and an array of patented formulas that appeared well after the demise of slavery. To save the time and expense of calling a physician, rootworkers, “witch doctors,” and herbalists were often depended on by slave owners to administer to the sick among the black plantation communities. These healers tended to be mature and trustworthy females. Some were even free agents and businesswomen like Aun’ Peggy of **Charles Waddell Chesnutt’s** *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1899). Such females stood as redoubtable figures and early feminist role models. While they inspired fear in those who believed them to be witches, they earned the respect of others for their ability to offer tangible assistance when few such avenues were available—save recourse to prayer.

Douglass’s text includes an incident with a “magical” root given to him as protection by a fellow (male) slave, Sandy Jenkins. He adds that **deaths** were often ascribed to trickery, imbalance, or ill will rather than to natural causes. Such a belief finds a more contemporary echo in **Alice Walker’s** *The Color Purple* (1982) when Celie suffers insomnia after having wronged Sophia, a fellow black woman who hardly deserves to be beaten for the sake of her husband’s lack of self-esteem. As Chesnutt’s collection attests, male and female rootworkers, counselors, and conjurers (“two-headed doctors”) were not anomalies but acknowledged spirit-mediators and guides who could reassert the tenuous balance between the human and nonhuman world. Their ability to infuse the mundane with the magical, and distill faith and **myth** into the physiological process of healing, resonates with contemporary naturopathic and related alternative therapies.

As Hurston reflected in her treatise “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), black folklore is neither a dead language nor a finite and static collection of anecdotes, expressions, and behavioral orientations. Rather, in a constant state of flux, it offers a site for creative and cultural invigoration. Its diversity, adaptability, and capacity to reconfigure conventional power relations offer a metaphor for America’s continuing need to accommodate the voices of African Americans, especially those of black women.

*See also* Ancestor, Use of; Memory; South, Influence of the; Spirituality

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*Nancy Kang*

### **FOOTE, JULIA A. J. (1823–1900)**

Born in Schenectady, New York, in 1823, Julia A. J. Foote was one of the most notable women preachers of the nineteenth century. In her struggles against the limitations that the church imposed on women preachers, Foote developed a strong feminist perspective on her life as a wife and churchwoman. Like **Zilpha Elaw**, Foote was affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church from childhood. At age fifteen, Foote was converted and joined the AME Church. She studied the Bible diligently and attended church services faithfully. When she was eighteen years of age, she married George Foote, a sailor. She accompanied her husband to Boston shortly after their marriage and there joined the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, where she urged church members to seek sanctification, as Elaw had done. It was during this period that Foote felt her call to preach.

In her spiritual **autobiography** *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*, published in 1879, Foote describes the circumstances of her call to preach. For a few months prior to her call, she felt inspired to exhort and pray for people in a house-to-house ministry. Since spiritual exhortation was not classified as preaching, the male leadership of the AME Zion church voiced no objections to her ministry. Fully aware of the obstacles that women preachers faced from **family** and church leaders, Foote was reluctant to acknowledge or accept her call to preach. An angel appeared to her three times in a vision before she accepted the call. Each time the angel brought a message from God commanding her to preach. The final message assured her that her soul would be lost unless she obeyed "God's righteous commands." Ironically, Foote's call to preach was problematic because she had spoken out against women preachers. However, the angel's third message left her no choice; she must yield to God's authority.

Almost immediately, she encountered opposition. Her husband, embarrassed by her preaching, threatened to send her back to her parents or to the "crazy house" if she did not obey his command to stop preaching. Moreover, her pastor, Reverend Jehiel Beman, ordered her to stop preaching. When she refused to obey, he charged her with violating church discipline and

excommunicated her. Foote appealed her excommunication, but the male church leaders upheld Reverend Beman's decision. Reflecting on her pastor's attempts to silence her, Foote makes a bold feminist response in her autobiography: "There was no justice meted out to women in those days." Because her calling came from God, Foote would not allow her husband, her pastor, or any other man to override God's authority.

Consequently, Foote's autobiography is a feminist text that speaks specifically about the spiritual and cultural liberation of women. Her own life is an object lesson in independent thinking and resistance to male dominance. Indeed, Foote invites women to declare their independence from male authority when she writes: "You will not let what man may say or do, keep you from doing the will of the Lord or using the gifts you have for the good of others." Although "man" includes women, Foote's experience with dominant men suggests an emphasis on men who want to control women.

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*Elwin Holt*

### **FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE/ WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF**

This 1975 innovative, dramatic piece by **Ntozake Shange** (*en-toe-zah-kay-shang-ay*) marked the beginning of her career. An experimental blend of dance, **poetry**, music, and **drama**, *for colored girls* created a new space for women of color to declare themselves. Through the seven women's voices/dances that grace the various "choreopoems," as Shange defines them, the reader enters a network of **womanism** covering a wide range of political, sexual, and spiritual concerns of black people. Begun in San Francisco as improvisational poetry/dance/music pieces performed in various clubs in the early 1970s, *for colored girls* took shape in New York City in 1974 with the collaboration of Paula Moss (choreography) and Oz Scott (directing). It was staged under African American producer Woodie King, Jr., at the New Federal Theatre, having a successful run there from November 1975 until June 1976. Joseph Papp subsequently produced *for colored girls* at the New York Shakespeare Festival's Anspacher Theatre and later at the Booth. It was

published in 1976 and became one of the most famous works of the new African American womanist sensibility of the 1970s. Like no contemporary **literature** before her, Shange's *for colored girls* brings the life of the African American woman out in the open.

Shange's first work launched an important new era in black theater, for she redefined it to include the choreopoem as a legitimate dramatic form. It also draws on African dramatic/theatrical forms: a blending of chant, poetry, music, dance, and rituals. Many women identified with the black women in her pieces, which argue eloquently for females to **love** and believe in themselves enough to become visible, independent agents in creating, first and foremost, themselves. Shange's work gave not only shape but also color to later-twentieth-century feminism. Thematically, the twenty poems in the piece concern black women's abilities to overcome loneliness, abuse, self-effacement in relationships with men, **rape**, and invisibility. In the choreopoem "Sorry," women who have been mistreated through the patriarchal "I'm-sorry-I-cheated-on-you-baby" response are through with excuses. They simply will not absorb them anymore. A rainbow can be enough, Shange's work seems to suggest, because it offers new possibilities after the storm. And so her work marks a new beginning in the forms of African American art, for the choreopoem allows for several emotional tones to be struck at once.

There are seven black women whose names are lady in brown, yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, and green. Their voices intermingle within many of the poems, and together they attempt to rewrite language to allow for black women's reality. Using a complicated mixture of realism and magic, Shange creates a world where women are together, helping one another and acknowledging their place in the larger scheme of society. The introduction explains that such a language is necessary because, otherwise, the black girl is made invisible by English discourse conventions. This new choric form, furthermore, was necessary for the attempt to reintegrate the **body** with the mind. Literature and the arts had so long been dominated by individual rather than collective voices and shaped by museumlike decorums instead of by the raucous cultural expressions of the 1960s—youth culture, black influences in rock and **jazz** music, the **civil rights movement**, and the black liberation movement. With the appearance of *for colored girls*, there was now a new form of artistic expression that black women could identify as their own. Boldly, Shange's play made a definitive announcement: An African American woman will not identify with cultural forms that were developed primarily by whites. She will make her own new forms and create her own realities and through them break old silences and taboos.

Shange has stated that she writes for "colored girls" who need to read wonderful things about themselves in order to develop some self-esteem and a defense system against internalized racism and sexism. The women in her vignettes create that self-loving. The language manages movement, like dancing in the text, for the cadences and rhythms have a central significance in the sequence as a whole. As the lady in yellow explains, all she has going for her is the music and the dance. By exploring the expressive potential of



the body through dance, the seven women in the choreopoem search for, and find, various ways of making meaning of their experiences. Through them, Shange portrays black women fighting for their integrity and self-respect. Knowing how one's own body moves, and moving it, connects the mind and emotions to one's physical embodiment, thus **healing**, if only momentarily, the mind/body split. The women strengthen their newly created visibilities to one another by telling their many stories, sometimes painful, sometimes beautiful, but always real. They tell their stories to other struggling women and are bolstered by that. They sway with each other and themselves as the words move them to laughter and tears. But there is a language that they can understand and experiences that they can share that make the hurt and pain easier to endure. "Latent Rapist" is a good example of this, as the women echo the observation that a rapist is more likely to be a man whom you know than the "stranger" you/we/I usually assume a rapist to be. Dancing in this section is more like crouching in pain, but even so the dance movements of *for colored girls* are generally self-affirming, erotic, spiritual, communal, defiant, and playful.

Dance liberates bodily pleasure from **sexuality**. It conveys thinking through the body, and it plays a central role in *for colored girls*, where the exploration of being a black girl/woman can be undertaken without inhibition or fear. The women of the play possess creative energy based in the erotic, as **Audre Lorde** wrote about in her essay on the "Uses of the Erotic" in black women's lives, especially in artistic and political realms. Movement through dance also emphasizes a fluid temporality, and each choreopoem segues effortlessly into the next. The piece "one," performed by the lady in red, is about a woman who enhances her erotic power beyond sexuality, waking up the men after sex and making them leave her place so that she can write, which is her art. She claims the power that many women wish they had more of: power to attract and, then, to turn away men. The lady in red treats herself to body art—butterflies, sequins, and passion flowers—which she lets fall off of her later in the night as she bathes in scented oils. In "no more love poems #4," the lady in yellow says that being alive, a woman, and black is a "metaphysical dilemma": Staying alive emotionally is a challenge, and a chorus of dance movements and voices must enter into the moment in order to keep it from collapsing.

One of the most evocative and memorable metaphors to come out of *for colored girls* is the piece "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff," meaning somebody has taken all of my best parts, somebody has stolen my **identity** from me, somebody does not know me. Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* enacts the means whereby that "stuff" comes back; women of color speak, dance, and sing it back into their realities. In this work, Shange lays the foundation for what follows in her subsequent artistic efforts. She takes hold of the language that has hobbled African American women's subjective realities through the operations of **stereotypes** and categories, then she bends it. Shange creates written/oral/kinetic forms of resistance within English, accomplishing what Ezra Pound

wished the modernists would do: “make it new.” Shange’s influence on black theater in the late twentieth century is enormous. Through the inimitable argument of the choreopoem, she addresses the subjugation of black women, not to elicit pity or sorrow but to encourage, to bolster, the women who are “searching for the ends of their own rainbows.”

*See also* Beauty; *Betsey Brown*; Black Feminism; Community; Folklore; *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter*; *Sassafrass*, *Cypress & Indigo*

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*Sharon Jessee and Fayme Perry*

### FORMAN, RUTH (1968– )

Ruth Forman was born in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and grew up in Rochester, New York. She is a poet whose work celebrates woman, particularly African American womanhood. Reviews of Forman’s **poetry** frequently situate her within the tradition of female poets like **Sonia Sanchez**, **June Jordan**, **Nikki Giovanni**, **Audre Lorde**, and **Alice Walker**. These groundbreaking writers have enabled young female poets, like Forman, to spread their wings to the winds and speak the truth sitting before them. Forman’s work illustrates a talent that seizes the legacy and carries it forward for others to build upon as she celebrates female power, connection, and sensuality.

Forman’s poetry addresses the innumerable phases of womanhood and the roads traveled to obtain each plateau and speaks to the hope and potential that lives in the midst of near hopelessness. Her work conveys power, truth, and attitude, at times subdued but frequently in your face. Forman’s poetic strength finds voice in its presentation of the power attained by woman in the reality of her situation, be that circumstance joyous or painful. Forman writes, although not exclusively, in black urban vernacular, and her poetry often focuses on situations confronting African Americans, especially women.

The richness of Forman’s poems mirrors and captures the complexity and multifaceted nature of African American culture and experience as it streams through the voices of her poetic protagonists. In her verses are the unheard

voices of previous generations as her poetry celebrates what it is to be black and female, in all its expressions. While “You So Woman” and “Five” celebrate black female sensuality and influence, works such as “Young Cornrows Callin Out the Moon” and “If You Lose Your Pen” contain the **love**, joy, sadness, and hope found in African American experience.

Forman’s poems like “Up Sister” and “Spotlight Politics” evoke an inseparable connection found in female experiences regardless of the placement of woman along a socioeconomic or political spectrum and a shared consciousness that resists splintering. Poems such as “In the Mirror Too Long,” “In a Darkroom,” and “Today You Dial Me” address female ownership of self as woman and as African American, in the wake of past occurrences that threaten to alter its course.

Forman was the recipient of the Barnard New Women Poets award for her first book of poetry, *We Are the Young Magicians* (1993), and the 1999 Pen Oakland Josephine Miles Award for Poetry for her second book, *Renaissance* (1997). Forman has also performed her work at the United Nations, the National Black Arts Festival, the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center’s Black Roots Festival, the Poetry for the People Series, on National Public Radio, and PBS’s The United Nations of Poetry. In 2001 Forman received the Durfee Artist Fellowship to complete her first novel titled *Mama John*.

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Wanda G. Addison

### FRANKLIN, J. E. (1937– )

Jennie Elizabeth Franklin—playwright, short-story writer, educator, and theater director—was born in Houston, Texas, to Robert Franklin, a cook, and Mathie Randle Franklin, a maid. One of thirteen children living in tight quarters, Franklin was banned from making noise, a restriction that heightened her attentiveness to sound. After learning to write, Franklin hoarded found pens and paper to “re-play” these sounds, which still echo in the distinct voices of her characters.

Franklin graduated from the University of Texas in 1964 and continued her studies at Union Theological Seminary. In 1964 she married Lawrence Seigel (now deceased) with whom she had one daughter, Malike N'Zinga. After receiving her B.A., she taught with the Freedom School in Carthage, Mississippi, and with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee program to interest students in reading. Her **work** with CORE led to her first full-length play production, *A First Step to Freedom* (1964), performed at the Sharon Waite Community Center in Harmony, Mississippi. Her belief that theater should educate is currently reflected in her "Open Script" project that invites students to collaborate in writing texts that reflect their own lives and values. Franklin was also youth director of Neighborhood House in Buffalo, an analyst in the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity in New York City, lecturer in education at the City University of New York, visiting professor at the University of Iowa, resident director of Skidmore College, and playwright-in-residence at Brown University. In 1997 she was the Resident Scholar at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where she wrote *Grey Panthers*, a series of ten-minute plays on the lives of black elders. She is currently a faculty member of the Harlem School of the Arts and producing artistic director of Blackgirl Ensemble Theatre, which she founded.

In 1971 Franklin earned acclaim for her play *Black Girl*, which opened at the Theater de Lys in New York and was later released as a **film**, a process she recounts in her book *Black Girl: From Genesis to Revelations* (1977). *Black Girl* centers around the choices of Billie Jean, a seventeen-year-old high school dropout who struggles to escape her **family's** expectations of marriage and **motherhood** in order to go to college to pursue a career as a dancer. Similar themes of becoming and survival pervade Franklin's work, along with reflections on the **violence** that results when the black **community** internalizes oppressions imposed on them by white society. Franklin was also recognized for *Christchild* (1981)—the first in an octet of plays that charts the lives of four black children born to an intergenerational marriage—which explores the question of whether moral virtue can emerge from histories of suffering and sacrifice.

Her work has earned her numerous awards and grants, including a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, a Rockefeller Fellowship, and two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships. She was awarded the New York Drama Desk Award for Most Promising Playwright in 1972 for *Black Girl* and won the 1992–1993 John F. Kennedy Center New American Play Award for *Christchild*.

*See also* Drama

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Stacy Grooters

### FREEDOM

What is freedom? What does it mean to be free? In Western culture and **literature**, the ideal of freedom tends to turn upon certain ideological mainstays. Autonomy, independence, and, perhaps most important, individualism frame Western claims of freedom, certainly within an American context. Freedom is not simply an ideological concept, however; it is experiential. As experience, freedom is shaped by, indeed determined by, one’s **identity** and subjectivity. Freedom, then, turns on difference. The language of personal liberty, articulated in such critical texts as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, creates a rhetoric of freedom that in its claims of inclusivity and universality perhaps intends to transcend difference but tends simply to deny the realities of those experiences shaped and determined by difference, especially those of **race**.

African Americans have been critically engaged in the project of crafting a concept of freedom in terms relevant to their lived experience. For a people whose original experience in America was one of chattel **slavery**, African Americans have of necessity been fiercely invested in both the material reality and ideological rhetoric of freedom. Just as the **history** of African-descended people in America has been a complex one, so, too, have the definitions and parameters of the ideal of freedom been complicated and evolving. Understandably, African Americans, in life and literature, have frequently framed freedom as the absence of subjugation or oppression. But like the Western

rhetoric of liberty and individualism that neglects the experience of race, freedom as the simple absence of subjugation becomes an ahistorical frame that fails to take into account both critical historical shifts and experiences of difference within the African American experience, specifically those related to gender.

An inquiry into freedom within African American history, culture, and literature reveals a changing dynamic rather than a static ideal, discourse, or experience. At different points in history, African Americans have framed freedom in different ways, by turns as a material reality, a social experience, a psychic state, and a metaphysical condition. The particular vision of freedom in African American life, as reflected in African American literature, correlates with the particular manner in which freedom was threatened or denied. That is to say, within the bonds of chattel slavery freedom was envisioned as a physical reality; when one's physical self is considered the property of another, freedom would certainly be framed as the legal possession of one's **body**. Once emancipation occurred, physical bondage ended and the struggles for freedom moved from the material realm to the social; the challenge was to negotiate a place, both literally and figuratively, for these newly freed selves. Later, as civil rights battles were being fought on the social front, the quest for freedom turned inward: The psychic landscape became the site of the quest for a different kind of freedom, the liberation of consciousness.

Arguably, freedom, as rhetoric, discourse, and experience, serves as the critical point of departure in African American **literature**. The historical trajectory tracing freedom from material reality to metaphysical condition unfolds in the literature.

Nineteenth-century **slave narratives**, the autobiographical accounts of fugitive or former slaves, serve as testimonials to the brutal subjugation of an entire race and the indomitable will of an enslaved people to be free. These firsthand accounts of slavery and the quest for freedom reveal the extraordinary incongruities between the nation's rhetoric of freedom and the experience of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, close to 2 million human beings during the course of the Atlantic slave trade.

These narratives also reveal the gendered nature of slavery and, consequently, of freedom. To begin to understand the divergent lived and literary experiences of African American men and women with regard to freedom, it is crucial to consider the historical intersection of race and gender. For while men and women of African descent have a shared history based on their racial identity, their experiences have been fundamentally shaped, too, by their gender.

Any exploration of African Americans' struggles for freedom must begin with the experience of slavery. Slavery, while pernicious physically and psychologically for all enslaved people, was a gendered experience. Both enslaved men and women were subjected to the dehumanization and subjugation of being considered the physical property of white slaveholders, but black women's physical selves, their gendered bodies, created a dimension to their experience of slavery that would later influence their vision of freedom. For

the black female body itself has been the site of a singular kind of subjugation from the earliest presence of African-descended women on American shores. Enslaved women's gender, their female bodies, determined the contours of their captivity and their experience of enslavement. As the legal, physical property of their masters, black women's bodies were subjected not only to grueling labor but also to sexual exploitation at the hands of white slaveholders. Moreover, as children followed the condition of the mother, enslaved women gave birth to enslaved children; their bodies were used, then, to perpetuate the very system that enslaved them.

Just as it is critical to illuminate the particular and gendered experience of slavery endured by enslaved women, enslaved men's experiences within slavery must also be examined in order to fully understand the manner in which particular experiences of captivity determine specific, arguably gendered visions of freedom. No text speaks more directly to the gendered nature of captivity than the slave narrative. Studies of the literary depictions of African Americans' ideological and experiential engagement with the issue of freedom begin, expressly or implicitly, with these firsthand accounts of slavery and African Americans' original quests for freedom.

For years, **Frederick Douglass's** *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) was the most widely read and studied work in this genre. In his narrative, Douglass describes his life as a slave and his quest for **literacy** and liberty. The story of his physical and psychic journey was for years *the* slave narrative, the voice of the authentic slave experience. What Douglass actually offers, however, is a very specific account of one enslaved person's experience, one enslaved *man's* experience. For Douglass's gender defines the nature of his enslavement and determines the course of his quest for freedom.

The stories of enslaved women began to emerge as part of black feminist scholars' recovery project in the late 1960s and 1970s. Only in the decades since has the impact of gender on the experiences of slavery begun to unfold in earnest, with Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman* (1985) serving as one of the earliest scholarly explorations of the ways in which gender shaped the slave experience for black women. The 1980s also brought a newly recovered and authenticated black woman-centered and -authored slave narrative to light, giving life and voice to the enslaved black woman's experience. This narrative, now considered a crucial one in the genre, is **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Her text serves as a critically important companion work to Douglass's *Narrative*. Read together, these two works serve as the most compelling depictions of the gendered nature of slavery and, consequently, of freedom.

Douglass's account of slavery centers on his inability to be an autonomous, independent being with the right to reap the rewards of his labor and intellect. He writes to his sense of what slavery and freedom mean to him in the often-quoted line: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." Within this declaration, Douglass expresses a vision of freedom not only as the antithesis of slavery but as the realization of

manhood. Douglass's definition of freedom and manhood, crafted in relation to white constructions of manhood, a publicly recognized, agentic autonomy and individualism, would serve as points of departure for later black male writers. Arguably, then, African American male writers, from Douglass forward, have framed their literary visions of freedom within the Western cultural framework of individualism.

Jacobs's narrative is anchored in more corporeal and relational realities within the private sphere. Her narrative attests to the particularly gendered nature of slavery when she speaks to the particular experiences of women within the peculiar institution upon the birth of her second child, a girl. "When they told me my newborn babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."

For Jacobs, slavery meant the perpetual threat of sexual violation, the denial of her desire to be chaste and, later, to marry her choice of mate and to mother her children. It becomes clear at many points in the narrative that Jacobs's role as a mother, this primary relational role, defines Jacobs's sense of herself as a woman. It is her inability to fulfill that relational role that defines her experience of slavery and drives her quest for freedom.

Douglass gained literacy and the liberty to go out into the world to write and lecture about his experiences; he became a self-authoring, autonomous individual. In contrast, Jacobs's freedom was defined by the negation of the threat of **rape** and the opening up of a space for her to mother her children; hers was a relational freedom. In simple terms, Douglass establishes a trajectory for black male writers in which freedom is posited as the realization of individualism, while Jacobs's literary legacy to black women writers is a decidedly relational vision of freedom.

Writers along both trajectories are steeped in a cultural ethos that informs their visions of freedom, however, frequently requiring a negotiation with the very dynamics of individualism and the relational. It is an ethos that emerges from a commitment to **community**. For despite the social forces that impacted them from the outside, perhaps even because of them, the black community has served throughout African American history as the space within which to lay claim to their humanity, to be free. The African American emphasis on community gives rise, then, to a particular vision of freedom, centered not on the individual but on the communal.

It is little wonder that the communal is a touchstone in African American culture and ideals of freedom, given the historic denial of black people's connections, both through kinship and within community. During slavery, displacement and separation were natural consequences of a system that treated black people not as members of humanity but as commodities; market value preceded, indeed generally negated, familial or emotional bonds. Children could be sold away from parents, spouses could be sold away from one another; relational bonds could simply be dissolved at the discretion or whim of the slaveholder. After centuries of enslavement and impermanence, **family**, relationship, and community would become central not



only to African American culture and life but to African American identity itself.

By contrast, the self as individual is very much central to Western ideology and to a distinctly Western cultural ethos, the ethos of individualism. Not an ahistorical reality, radical individualism supplanted the classical understanding of human society in which the collective was the fundamental unit of human society. The modern concept of the self posits the individual as the critical unit of human society, preeminent to the collective, even engaged in a struggle to thwart the claims of the collective. Radical individualism, not simply a Western cultural ideal but a white, Western, patriarchal model of selfhood, serves as the wellsprings for the Western ideal of freedom.

By contrast, African American culture, defined by a particular and “peculiar” social experience, has historically centered on the communal as ethos and as the framework for identity. Arguably, African Americans, despite centuries of geographic and cultural separation, have drawn upon and retained African social and cultural patterns in which the self is a communal entity, a part of a larger, vitally important whole. Traditional African society organizes itself along kinship lines, and communal life is essentially the way of life. By virtue of the cultural retention of African models, the American slave experience that denied and dissolved kinship and relationship ties, and another century of collective struggle against the social, economic, and psychological forces of racism, African Americans have been deeply invested in the communal. The African American communal ethos serves, then, as a critical departure from the Western ethos of individualism and informs African Americans’ visions of freedom in life and literature.

African American literature from the early twentieth century reveals black writers engaged in the negotiation for social freedom, both for the individual and the collective. The turn of the century and the early decades of the century saw the erection, fortification, and entrenchment of rigid, legally and socially sanctioned segregation and disenfranchisement that served as America’s bulwark against the perceived threat of this newly freed caste to the white, patriarchal social order. African American writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois with his articulation of “double consciousness” gave voice to this experience of being “legally” free but still socially subjugated. Du Bois and Alain Locke became the leaders or deans of the New Negro movement, a movement of the black artists and intelligentsia that took as its charge to keep the renegotiation of African Americans’ place in the American consciousness and social order, to forge a space for African-descended people to be truly free.

This period served as the context for the burgeoning of arts and literature traditionally referred to as the **Harlem Renaissance**. The writers of this period were, too, given the charge of using their literary works to forward the cause of this political and social project, by addressing the ills of racism and/or creating in the realm of **fiction** depictions of a sector of African American society who, by virtue of their educational, cultural, and professional achievements and their economic status, bore a resemblance to a certain

segment of white America. By illuminating the harrowing effects of racism, while emphasizing the similarities across racial lines between these two classes, black writers' works might serve to make white Americans reenvision the African American race as a whole, and the sanctioned racism of social segregation and political and economic disenfranchisement might be mitigated. Works like **Nella Larsen's** *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) and **Jessie Redmon Fauset's** *There Is Confusion* (1924) contributed to this project by focusing on characters from the black upper classes often engaged in a struggle against the strictures of racial discrimination. In many ways, these works made explicit the need for an end of strife between the races and, implicitly, proffered a case for racial equality, the opening up of a greater social freedom for black people.

A second generation of Harlem Renaissance writers, however, had no qualms about focusing on the folk, both in the rural **South** and the urban North, while simultaneously laying claim to an equal share of the national ideal of freedom. Writers like **Zora Neale Hurston** and **Langston Hughes**, in their works *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), did not engage the issue of interracial strife by focusing on African American characters and life or offering critiques of European Americans. These writers focused on a cultural specificity without wavering from an implicit claim to racial equality and, with the attendant social, economic, and political enfranchisement, freedom.

Writers in the second half of the twentieth century, heirs to the legacies of the **civil rights movement**, moved the search for freedom onto psychic and metaphysical terrains. As legally sanctioned segregation and disenfranchisement gave way to a newly negotiated social space for African Americans, African American literature moved beyond the modernist focus on order and identity to a postmodern concern with dis-order and the expansive or liberatory possibilities of rewriting narratives of history and identity. For while African American writers were turning in the direction of the postmodern, a number of them also turned back to the past and the experience of slavery. **Neo-slave narratives** and other fictional works like **Octavia Butler's** *Kindred* (1979), **Charles Johnson's** *Oxherding Tale* (1982), **Sherley Anne Williams's** *Dessa Rose* (1986), and **Toni Morrison's** *Beloved* (1987) return to the past, illuminating within the narrative space the historical experience of African-descended people, retrieving them from historical narratives that had rendered them slaves to reveal them as enslaved people crafting lives out of the most life-denying of circumstances, physically, psychically, and spiritually resisting a would-be dehumanizing subjugation to engage in the quest for freedom.

The literary trajectory from nineteenth-century slave narratives to twentieth-century postmodern fictions of slavery traces the transformations in the historical discourses of freedom within African American history. Clearly, as African Americans moved through various phases of oppression and subjugation, physically, socially, psychically, and spiritually, they have also found ways in which to move beyond or rise above the forces that denied them claim to their own visions of freedom.

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*Yolanda M. Manora*



## **GAINES, ERNEST (1933– )**

Ernest J. Gaines was born on the River Lake plantation in Oscar, Louisiana. Although he moved to the San Francisco, California, area in his teens, his **plantation** youth shaped his novels and short stories. All of his works are set in fictional St. Raphael Parish, with its towns of Bayonne and Morgan, on the west side of the Mississippi River. The capital city of Louisiana, Baton Rouge, east of the Mississippi River, acts as a geographical marker. Gaines's works are set in the years from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s, an era that marked a transition in the **South** from the Jim Crow era to the **civil rights movement** era. All of Gaines's novels and short stories focus on African American characters but include the presence of whites, generally Cajuns and Creoles. He also focuses on the shift from black-centered plantation farming and ties to the land for the descendants of slaves to a land that is taken over by white farmers.

Gaines's first novel, *Catherine Carmier* (1964), centers on Jackson Bradley, a twenty-two-year-old young man who returns to his Aunt Charlotte's **home** on the plantation after completing college in California. Charlotte is convinced that Jackson has returned home to teach the children of the area, but he already knows he will not stay. When he returns, Jackson realizes his **love** for his childhood friend/sweetheart Catherine, who is devoted to her **family** and committed to staying on the plantation to care for her parents, especially her father, Raoul, as they age. Catherine is Creole, separated from Jackson

by skin color and by her father's vehement opposition to mixing with "common" black people. Even as children, Jackson and Catherine had to keep their friendship secret from her father. Raoul is the last remaining farmer who has not been run out by the whites who want to plow under the black quarters, graveyards, and churches for crops. He holds on to Catherine like he holds on to his land.

In the battle between Jackson and Raoul for Catherine we have the embodiment of common themes in Gaines's work: old versus new, young versus old, tradition versus change, city versus country. All of the young people have left the plantation for **work** in cities or to go to school, like Jackson. There is the common battle of fair economic access to resources and income. There is also the battle for justice under a legal system that does not recognize the black man as equal, deserving equal protection. In addition to these feminist themes that transcend gender boundaries—economics, justice, opportunity—we see a feminist battle uniquely Catherine's own in the novel. She is torn between two men who identify themselves through her. Unlike her sister Lillian, who leaves the area and feels no attachment to the people or the place, Catherine remains bound by what she sees as her duty to her father. She refuses to see that she deserves a life of her own, that they have had their youths and lives, that she is entitled to being with the man of her choice.

Even Jackson, however, defines Catherine through himself. That she deserves an education, a chance to see a bigger world than that of the plantation, that she is someone more than her daddy's precious girl or the lover/fiancée Jackson wants her to be, is never discussed. The culminating battle between Raoul and Jackson is discussed in terms of how it affects each of them, not what it means for Catherine. Only Lillian attempts to help Catherine realize that she is a woman of worth, a lesson Catherine rejects, for she ultimately chooses to remain on the plantation with Raoul. The novel ends abruptly at the end of the fight between the two men, with no last commentary on or from Catherine, who remains as voiceless as she has been throughout the novel.

Gaines's second novel, *Of Love and Dust* (1967), continues his exploration of the relationships between men and women, men and the land, black men against white law. In this novel Gaines includes more of the "aunt" characters who figure prominently in much of his work. Miss Julie Rand is the old woman who enlists the narrator, thirty-three-year-old Jim Kelly, a respected, steady plantation hand, to watch out for her godson, Marcus, who has stabbed a man but has been bailed out by the white owner of the plantation, Marshall Hebert. Marcus is young, arrogant, and determined not to serve time anywhere, either in jail or on the plantation. Miss Julie wants Jim to help Marcus learn to rein himself in, to learn to take responsibility for himself and his actions. While learning the backbreaking work of pulling corn, Marcus is driven by Jim, by other farmhands, and by the white overseer of the plantation, Sidney Bonbon.

Marcus is determined to take up with Bonbon's black mistress, Pauline, with whom he has two children. Bonbon is in love with Pauline, more than

with his white wife, Louise. The whole plantation is alarmed when Marcus makes known his interest in Pauline, and no one can stop him from making advances toward her. Pauline rejects Marcus, and for this he seeks revenge on Bonbon. Marcus then turns his attentions to Louise, thinking that cuckolding Bonbon is the solution to asserting his **freedom** and his manhood. The other black people on the plantation know that if Marcus and Louise are caught, Marcus will be killed. Aunt Margaret, Louise's housekeeper, is especially appalled because she is, in essence, a coconspirator with Marcus and Louise, since she did not tell Bonbon immediately when the couple first started their relationship. Marcus and Louise decide to leave together to go North, where interracial couples are more accepted. Their plans are discovered, and Bonbon kills Marcus at the time he and Louise have set to run away.

From a feminist perspective, this novel makes clear how women are pawns in men's games. At first, Pauline has no choice about Bonbon taking her for his mistress. While he loves her and she does grow to love him, both understand that they can never have an "open" relationship anywhere but on the plantation. Louise, too, has no say about her husband's infidelities. Nor does she have a say with other men in her life. Her father and brothers have thrown her to Bonbon, Bonbon throws her aside, and Marcus, at first, uses her to attack Bonbon, but then realizes he has feelings for her. However, she still is the excuse for him to run away, which he threatens to do throughout the novel, even before he is involved with her. She remains an appendage to his wants and desires. Other women are also bound by white men's, then black men's rules. Aunt Margaret must be quiet to protect herself; Miss Julie must enlist Jim's help, for she has no "pull" with Marcus; Marcus rejects his mother's influence as well.

*Bloodline and Other Stories* (1968) sees somewhat of a transition away from the rather single-dimensional female characters of the first two books. "A Long Day in November" tells the story of a couple's daylong separation through the eyes of six-year-old Sonny. His mother, Amy, is fed up with her husband's, Eddie's, reckless attention to his car. Eddie is gone too long too often, so she packs up and moves down the quarters to her mother's home. The separation affects Sonny in each part of his life. He has trouble with school, he is torn between the parents, he is bewildered by his grandmother's anger at his father, he must examine his allegiances.

The women in this story are more fully realized than female characters in the earlier works. Even though her move to her mother's finally acts to wake up Eddie and commands his attention, Amy is weak and vacillates in her feelings for Eddie. She even has him beat her (despite his opposition to it) at the end of the story to justify his manhood and solidify their separate roles. But her mother is the strong, no-nonsense woman of much of Gaines's work. She readily takes a shotgun to Eddie, twice. She is independent and wants that same strength for her daughter. Madame Toussaint, the fortuneteller and adviser, also acts as a strong presence, perhaps the female character who most reflects Eddie's weaknesses. Eddie whines to her, first about what she charges (thus his rejection of her need to make a living and her need to exact payment

for services rendered), then about the advice she gives (he does not want to burn his car; he wants to sell it). Madame Toussaint is adamant about burning the car, and eventually Eddie does it. Doing so is the show of good faith Amy needs to return to him.

Another story in *Bloodline*, “Just Like a Tree,” recognizes more women in the strong-aunt tradition Gaines develops so extensively in his work. Aunt Fe is the **community** mother who is to leave to go live with family in the city. The story is told through the eyes of those around her, with the common threads being her goodness, her generosity, her indomitable spirit.

“The Sky Is Gray” is the portrait of perhaps one of Gaines’s strongest women characters, Olivia. Her son, James, narrates. The story focuses on having to take a day away from the fields to have James’s tooth pulled. As they journey through town, we see Olivia in a number of ways. James tells us repeatedly about Olivia’s strength and how she does not like to show weakness or for anyone around her to do so, but in their travels it is clear that, despite her seeming hardness (Olivia makes eight-year-old James kill for food birds he wanted to play with), Olivia is altruistically maternal. She is silent during an argument about God in the dentist’s office; James is allowed to reach his own conclusions. She feigns buying an ax handle so James can get warm. She is aware of her own honor: She pulls a knife and threatens a man who comes on to her. She is independent: She rejects the charity of a white storekeeper. Throughout all of these events, she teaches James to be a man, exemplifying those traits she deems worthy—care, honor, dignity, self-reliance, self-respect, work—in her own carriage.

It is in Gaines’s earliest well-known book that we have his strongest woman: *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). The reader meets Jane when she is 110. She is a former slave who has lived to see the civil rights era. Jane is, from the beginning, well aware of herself and the need to speak up and act how she knows she needs to, no matter the consequences. As a freed child, Jane is determined to go north, to Ohio. But she is unaware of how far Ohio is from Louisiana, and thus we see her as she lives from day to day, in her quest to realize her freedom. In the first part of her journey, she cares for the orphaned Ned, a boy she takes as her own. She must work very hard for them to live, doing plantation work, cooking. As Ned grows up and away, she “marries” Joe Pittman, a man she loves and who, in turn, loves her. When he is killed after they have 10 years together, she must once again face the world around her through hard work and the boundaries white society puts on her. Jane must exist in what white people determine are her opportunities: fieldwork, housework, child care. Her interests outside of work are her own: boxing and baseball. Through all of her life, including Ned’s devastating **death** because of his civil rights work, Jane remains stable, strong, and dignified. Whether she fends off black and white oppressors in the Reconstruction era or seeks to end segregation, Jane is at the end of her life what she is when we first meet her: willing to take risks for what she believes in.

*In My Father's House* (1978) is a predominantly male-centered book. By the absence of women, however, the plight of females during the middle part of the twentieth century is made abundantly clear. The Reverend Phillip Martin sowed a wild youth before he found God. As a young man he had three children with a woman with whom he had a long relationship; she moved to California, and he did not see or hear of them for more than twenty years. The older son from that relationship returns when he is twenty-eight, but Phillip does not recognize him right away. The young man, Etienne, first calls himself "Robert X." He is jailed for vagrancy; he is dirty, mysterious, and cryptic to the community. When Phillip recognizes who Etienne is at a civil rights meeting, he collapses, explaining why to no one. Etienne is then arrested, and Phillip goes to bail him out. He is only allowed to do so by the white sheriff because he promises to stop his involvement in a picketing action against a white storekeeper. Phillip is seen as a traitor, and no one knows why.

As Phillip learns about Etienne's past, we see the condition of women. Etienne has come to kill Phillip because of the hardships he, his single mother, and his siblings faced without Phillip. Etienne's sister was raped, and the other brother killed the rapist. The mother, Johanna, wasted away, and Etienne blames Phillip. We also see Phillip's wife Alma pushed aside, alienated, and ignored by Phillip as he runs his church and civil rights activities, then also later as he seeks to discover what happened to Johanna and to deal with Etienne. Phillip is slow to learn about the effect he has on the women in his life.

*A Gathering of Old Men* (1983), like *In My Father's House*, is focused on men, with women, more specifically black women, generally background characters. Eighteen men gather to say each has killed the white bully Beau Boutan. They are determined to confound the sheriff's investigation, even though he is sure he knows which did it. Only one could have done it. Each man takes the killing as his opportunity to assert, finally, near the end of his life, the manhood that white plantation owners and law have stripped from him.

When it is discovered at the end that Beau was killed by Charley, a very large, very black man whom Beau has tormented, and who has run away, letting the other men stand for him, we see the men changed and with a bit more pride in their steps. Charley dies after killing a second white man in a gun battle, saying repeatedly that he finally is a man, no longer a "boy." So he is the one who most remains in the state of manhood he claims that day, even though the others stand in a way they did not figure they had left in themselves.

What remains a problem of feminist inquiry in this story is that each black man who asserts that he killed Beau is prompted to do so by a white woman, Candy, the heiress of the plantation upon which the killing takes place; this underscores the powerlessness of the men to do and act for themselves. With Candy orchestrating the stand against the sheriff, the question remains as to how independent each man truly is. Charley, however, does indeed declare his manhood without Candy at the helm of his actions and is proven to be the man he claims to be.



It is finally in *A Lesson before Dying* (1993) that we see much of the web of stories, themes, and characters come together in what is perhaps Gaines's finest work to date. When Jefferson, a young field hand, is convicted of a murder he did not commit, he is sentenced to death by electric chair. In the closing arguments of his trial, his own attorney refers to Jefferson as a hog. His godmother, Miss Emma, enlists the help of the schoolteacher, a man named Grant Wiggins, who is restless, angry at life in the quarters, and angry at the system that falsely convicted Jefferson, to help Jefferson learn to be a man before he is electrocuted. Grant's battles with himself, his Aunt Lou, Miss Emma, and his girlfriend and the plight of the children in the quarters all reveal the racism, segregation, and hopelessness that produced Jefferson. Grant feels his efforts are futile, that the damage done Jefferson reaches far beyond being called a hog.

Because the women of the novel—Miss Emma and Aunt Lou—are exemplary “strong-aunt” community women as Gaines has repeatedly appear in his works, they are the driving forces of the novel: They are, to borrow phrasing, irresistible forces and immovable objects. They will not be told “no,” neither about Jefferson's resistance to see himself as a man nor in Grant's reluctance to teach Jefferson. In the end, they get exactly what they want: Jefferson recognizes his manhood.

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## GETTING MOTHER'S BODY

Suzan-Lori Parks's 2003 debut novel is set in west Texas, where she herself spent time as a youth while her father was in Vietnam. The characters emerged from her fondness for and **memories** of the landscape, the big sky, and arid landscape. The novel resembles William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) in that both stories focus on the burials of dead women and are told by **family** members and the women themselves. Each story has a journey and a pregnant woman; however, where the Bundren family journeys to bury the mother the way she has instructed them, Billy Beede and her accomplices in *Getting Mother's Body* are sojourning to exhume the body of Willa Mae, her own mother.

It is 1963, and Billy Beede, a sixteen year-old black girl in rural Lincoln, Texas, finds herself pregnant and unmarried. After Billy travels to Texhoma to marry Snipes, the unborn child's father, and realizes that he is already married, she is determined to rid herself of everything that is associated with him. This includes the wedding dress, which she begins to burn but then opts not to because the return of it may help her to pay for a safe abortion. She is catapulted into a larger self-motivated quest once she sees that piecing together the little money she has will not be enough to pay for the abortion. In her desperation, she realizes she is very similar to her mother who surfaces in the novel as a **blues** singer performing songs about her ability to see a person's "hole," or weak spot, that helps her to get their money. Billy Beede, too, learns to see "holes" or make them in order to free herself from Snipes.

Parks tells the story of a young girl willing to take up the dead in order not to end up like her mother, who bled to death from a self-botched abortion. Billy Beede steals her mother's ex-lover's truck and travels to LaJunta, Arizona, to dig up her mother's **body** for the jewels that Dill said are buried with her. There is urgency for Billy; not only must she abort the baby before it is unsafe to do so, but she has to get to LaJunta before the new shopping center is built on the land where her mother has been buried. She is accompanied by her Aunt June and Uncle Teddy, who raised her and who also hope that they will be able to relish in Willa Mae's treasure. Aunt June, who has been one-legged since her childhood, wants to buy a new limb if there is one in her color for sale, and Uncle Teddy wants a new house and church for his family. And Dill Smiles, who was betrayed by Willa Mae when she exposed to the town that she was **passing** for a man, is in fast pursuit because she never buried the treasure. A scorned Dill Smiles used the money to finance her own pig farm that reaps her the rewards of financial independence, something few black Lincoln residents, let alone women, are able to attain.

Parks is successful at infusing comedy, desperation, and the meaning of family into the novel. In addition, *Getting Mother's Body* is also important as it creates a **community** of people who in the segregated **South** have not lost hope; many people in the novel join Billy in the journey to change their lives. Equally significant is Parks's creation of nontraditional female characters who win and lose on their journey to autonomy.

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*Brandon L. A. Hutchinson*

### GIBSON, PATRICIA JOANN (1951– )

Patricia Joann Gibson, also known as P. J. Gibson, was born in 1951 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She was raised by her grandparents until the age of five, when she moved to Trenton, New Jersey. After high school, Gibson went on to attend Keuka College, an all-women’s college in upstate New York, where in 1973 she received a B.A. in drama, religion, and English. After receiving a prestigious Schubert Fellowship to study at Brandeis University, Gibson pursued an M.F.A. in theater arts. Upon graduation, she taught creative writing at Boston College from 1975 to 1976 and then went on to teach at the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center, a nonprofit arts center in New York City.

Gibson is first and foremost a playwright, having written thirty-two plays to date, three of which have been published and seventeen of which have been produced for stage. Her work is noted for often including educated and professional African American characters in stark contrast to many depictions of African Americans in popular culture. She has also written **poetry** and short stories, including two short stories and a poem in the anthology *Erotique Noire/Black Erotica*. The source of her creative inspiration is black women, and she is often quoted as saying, “If I live to be 150, I still won’t have enough time to write about all the black women inside of me.”

Gibson’s plays have been performed throughout the world, including across the United States, Europe, and Africa. Over the years she has also accumulated numerous awards and honors including a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, two Audelco Awards, which are given to black theatrical artists and producers, as well as six playwrighting commissions. She has laid her hands on the Sidewalk of Fame of the Bushfire Theatre of Performing Arts in Philadelphia, served as artist-in-residence at the University of Michigan, guest lectured at Yale University, and holds a key to the city of Indianapolis.

Her most recognized work is the play *Long Time since Yesterday*, written in 1985 and published by Samuel French in 1986. The story focuses on five sorority sisters who reunite twenty years after college at the **home** of a classmate who has recently committed suicide. Alisa, Panzi, Thelma, Babbs, and Laveer have all reached individual levels of success when they reunite in

New Jersey to mourn the **death** of Janeen, their classmate who committed suicide at the age of thirty-eight. Through a series of flashbacks, the women examine both the past and the present. They come together to mourn, to understand, and to examine their own lives. *Long Time since Yesterday* is a story about women negotiating the complex web of relationships, secrets, **sexuality**, politics, gender, life, and death. Over the years, *Long Time since Yesterday* has been performed throughout the country, including at Johns Hopkins University and the New Horizon Theater. Gibson is currently an associate professor of English at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City.

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*Roxane Gay*

## GIOVANNI, NIKKI (1943– )

One of the most popular black American poets of the second half of the twentieth century, Nikki Giovanni was born Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr., in Knoxville, Tennessee. She was the second of two daughters born to Gus Jones and Yolande Cornelia Giovanni. Though born in Knoxville, Giovanni was raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, but she returned to the city of her birth to live with her maternal grandparents while she completed two years of high school there. Her grandmother, Louvenia Terrell Watson, had a profound influence on Giovanni's life, encouraging her to stand up for social justice and to always speak her mind. This outspokenness has become a lifelong trait and a hallmark of her **poetry**.

But as a young woman, this characteristic was often seen as threatening to others, and in 1961 she was expelled from Fisk University after her first semester for not following rules that seemed to her archaic and out of touch. Three years later, with a new dean in place, Giovanni was encouraged to reenter Fisk, which she did—with great success. While there, she reestablished the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee on campus, served as editor

of the campus literary magazine, and participated in the Fisk Writers Conference, which allowed her the opportunity to meet several prominent black writers such as Robert Hayden, **Margaret Walker**, and **Amiri Baraka** (then LeRoi Jones). In January 1967, she graduated with honors and a degree in **history**.

Just two months later, her beloved grandmother died. Working through the grief of such a loss, Giovanni focused her attention on her writing, creating the poems that would go into her first book of poetry, *Black Feeling Black Talk* (1968). Meanwhile she also organized the first Black Arts Festival in Cincinnati and attended the Detroit Conference of Unity and Art, meeting many protest leaders while there and becoming more and more involved in the fight against social injustice for black Americans. She received a grant from the Ford Foundation that allowed her to move to Wilmington, Delaware, and enroll in the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Work. With borrowed money, Giovanni published *Black Feeling Black Talk* herself. In its first year of publication, the book sold more than 10,000 copies, garnering Giovanni a lot of popular and critical attention. She dropped out of the School of Social Work, and in 1968, she received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. She moved to New York to begin taking classes in the M.F.A. program at Columbia University's School of Fine Arts.

At the end of 1968, Giovanni received a grant from the Harlem Arts Council and, along with the money made from sales of her first book, published her second book of poems titled *Black Judgment*. This volume also did extremely well, selling 6,000 copies within its first three months of publication. These first two books of poetry, which she later combined into one volume, offer many poems that protest the condition of black Americans within a racist white system. She, like many other writers of the **Black Arts Movement**, wrote in experimental forms using lowercase letters, fused words, and slang words, including epithets previously excluded from literary works. The experimental forms echoed the mood and themes of the poems themselves, poems that were fueled on rage and hope, poems that called for change now, and a change that was taken, not passively accepted.

Giovanni's poetry was widely popular but not always critically accepted, even by other writers within the Black Arts Movement. But she chose to forge her own path in life. For instance, in 1968 she gave birth to her only child, a son she named Thomas Watson, as a single woman, never revealing the father's name. At the time, this decision was as revolutionary as her poems. Her poetry was not all militant protest, though. Poems such as "The True Import of Present Dialog Black vs. Negro," which takes an urgent, militant tone, are also juxtaposed with poems such as "Nikki-Rosa," one of the most anthologized and beloved of all her work. The latter poem's title is taken from Giovanni's childhood nickname, and it examines the poet's childhood remembrances. But the poem explores what it means for a black poet to do the very act of remembering. She points out that too often the childhoods of black people are seen in negative ways; poverty and abuse are emphasized, especially by white biographers who, by their very nature, cannot comprehend

that there was far more in these childhoods that was positive. While the negative was there, Giovanni shows that the **love** and nurturing of black **families** overwhelm and overcome it to produce happy **memories** and healthy families.

While her poems were finding great success, Giovanni began teaching college classes. She edited and published a book of poems by black women; perhaps one of the first such anthologies ever, *Night Comes Softly* (1970) included poems by well-known poets as well as by the new and unknown. That same year, 1970, Giovanni also saw her first two volumes of poems published together as a single volume by William Morrow Publisher, and she published her third book *Re: Creation* through Broadside Press. By this time she had become so well known that she was named “Woman of the Year” by *Ebony* magazine.

A year later, Giovanni published *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-five Years of Being a Black Poet*, a piece that was part **autobiography**, part polemic, and part personal statement of belief. It reveals a poet struggling to make sense of her personal history within the larger story of black women and black history. *Gemini* was nominated for the National Book Award in 1973, and her successes continued to grow. Boston University offered to house her papers within its Mugar Memorial Library, an agreement that continues to this day. She also received a number of honors and awards, including being named “Best Poet” by *Contact* magazine in 1971 as well as being named “Woman of the Year” by *Mademoiselle* in 1971 and by *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1972.

Unafraid of change and a prolific writer, Giovanni began working in other genres, and through the 1970s her poetry continued to explore other thematic material. In particular, she began writing poems for children: *Spin a Soft Black Song* in 1971, *Ego-Tripping* in 1973, and *Vacation Time* in 1980. She also began appearing on the television show *Soul*, an entertainment and talk show produced by Ellis Haizlip, one of the first black producers at PBS. The show hosted a number of black luminaries, and Giovanni made several appearances. In 1971, she taped special segments of the show with **James Baldwin**, transcripts of which she would later edit to create the book *A Dialogue: James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni* (published in 1973). She would go on to establish another famous dialogue, this one with Margaret Walker. Giovanni published *A Poetic Equation: Conversations between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker* in 1974. These dialogues reveal a theme that can be found consistently through Giovanni’s work—how individuals come to their own **identity** via the larger backdrop of black history, especially through their experience within black families.

This theme can be found in her book of poems *My House*, which she published in 1972 and which was named one of the best books of the year by the American Library Association. That same year she joined the National Council of Negro Women and became the youngest person ever to receive an honorary doctorate from Wilberforce University, the nation’s oldest black college. She became the frequent subject in dozens of magazines and even made an appearance on *The Tonight Show*. Far from slowing her down,

Giovanni's success seemed to spur her onward. She began publishing in yet another format when she began releasing spoken-word albums, one of which, *Truth Is on Its Way*, won the National Association of Television and Radio Announcers award for Best Spoken Word Album in 1972. She published other spoken-word albums to great success: *Like a Ripple on a Pond* (1973), *The Way I Feel* (1975), *Legacies* (1976), and *The Reason I Like Chocolate* (1976).

In 1978, her father had a stroke and was subsequently diagnosed with cancer. Giovanni and her son moved back to Cincinnati to help out her family. Her father died that same year, one day after her thirty-ninth birthday. She remained in Cincinnati with her mother for several years. During the decade of the 1980s, Giovanni continued to adhere to an impressive **work** ethic. While she kept a busy schedule of speaking engagements and readings, she also held teaching posts: first, at Ohio State University as a visiting professor, and then at Mount Saint Joseph's College as a professor of creative writing. In 1983, the same year that she published *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*, she also was named Woman of the Year by the Cincinnati YMCA. In fact, the honors seemed to grow during this time period. In 1985, Giovanni was named to the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame as well as named an Outstanding Woman of Tennessee, and in 1986 she served as the Duncan Artist in Residence for the Taft Museum in Cincinnati. A year later, she was the subject of a PBS documentary, *Spirit to Spirit*.

All the while, she continued writing, producing a collection of essays called *Sacred Cows . . . and Other Edibles* in 1988. Her volume of children's poems, *Vacation Time* (1980), was awarded the Children's Reading Roundtable of Chicago Award. She moved to Blacksburg, Virginia, after accepting a permanent position as a full professor of English at Virginia Tech, but her teaching efforts went beyond the traditional classroom when she began a creative writing group at a retirement home. She later edited a collection of writings from this writing group. She published another collection of essays on surviving academic life in her book *Racism 101* (1994), as well as the twentieth-anniversary edition of her book *Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young Readers*.

While she continued to win numerous awards, honors, and even keys to cities, Giovanni also earned the title of cancer survivor after she was diagnosed with lung cancer in early 1995. Though she lost one of her lungs and three ribs to the cancer, she survived to continue writing and teaching. Though her recovery might have been expected to slow down her considerable schedule, her poetic output seemed to keep apace with the wide variety of awards and honors she continued to win. For instance, Giovanni was named the Gloria D. Smith Professor of Black Studies at Virginia Tech, and she published a number of books in the latter half of the 1990s. In 1996 alone, she published *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*, *The Genie in the Jar*, and *The Sun Is So Quiet* (the last two are children's books). And in 1997 she published another book of poems, this one called *Love Poems*.

While she has received numerous honorary doctorates from universities, Virginia Tech named Giovanni to its highest honor when it awarded her the

University Distinguished Professor in 1999. That same year she published another collection of poetry, *Blues: For All the Changes*, for which she received an NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Image Award. She won another Image Award for her 2002 book *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: Poems and Not Quite Poems*, and her spoken-word CD, *The Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection*, was a finalist for the 2003 Grammy Award in the spoken-word category. Finally, and most fittingly, Giovanni won the first Rosa Parks Woman of Courage Award, and it is an award well deserved for a writer who so warmly embraces change, who welcomes growth, and who writes fearlessly. Currently, Giovanni works at Virginia Tech, and she continues to inspire students, readers, and audiences everywhere.

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Amy Sparks Kolker

### GOLDEN, MARITA (1950– )

Literary activist, novelist, memoirist, and editor, Marita Golden is committed to producing and recognizing a broad range of writing. Born in Washington, D.C., in 1950, Golden was encouraged to pursue her **love** of writing by her parents, Sherman, a taxi driver, and Beatrice, a landlord. In her teens, she voraciously read novels by William Thackeray, Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, and Leo Tolstoy, whose writing, in her words, “spoke across the ages” to her own life. As a college student at American University in the 1960s—a time when **civil rights movement** leaders were reevaluating black **literature** and literary traditions—she was inspired by the scope and ambition she found in works by authors of African descent. According to Golden, writing for her Web site, “All the writers I love have taught me a lot about the role of courage in the writer’s life. The writer is supposed to be brave and daring and to ask the questions others fear asking.”

Golden’s desire to question led her to Columbia University, where she earned a master’s in journalism in 1973. It was there that she met Femi Kayode, an African man whom she followed to Nigeria and later married. However, as she describes in the autobiographical *Migrations of the Heart* (1983), her transition from a black activist and New York City television executive to a traditional African wife and mother was difficult and, ultimately, untenable. She returned to the United States with her son, Michael, in 1979 and assumed various professorships in the fields of English and journalism as her writing career developed.

Since **Alice Walker** praised Golden’s *Migrations of the Heart*, Golden has published four novels, three anthologies, and two nonfiction works inspired by her experiences as a single mother. Her novels center on the unique concerns of African American women ensconced in networks of **family**, **race**, politics, and **history**. Focusing on a range of characters—including students at

a New England university (*A Woman's Place*, 1986), a farmer's daughter in the streets of Washington, D.C. (*Long Distance Life*, 1989), female civil rights workers (*And Do Remember Me*, 1992), and a mother released from prison (*The Edge of Heaven*, 1997)—Golden's **fiction** refuses to furnish easy solutions to the complex problems of black women. Also notable is her anthology *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues* (1993), in which African American women writers offer frank reflections on love and sex. In her recent book *Don't Play in the Sun* (2004), Golden returns to **autobiography**, candidly revealing her struggles as a woman with dark skin.

Today, Golden encourages other writers to dare through her groundbreaking work with the **Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright** Foundation, which she founded in 1990. Established to recognize and foster **community** among writers of African descent, the foundation has distributed over \$100,000 in annual literary awards and scholarships to Hurston/Wright Writers' Week, a summer workshop. A self-described "literary cultural worker," Golden interweaves art, activism, courage, and candor, inviting both readers and writers to join her.

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Rebecca Meacham

### GOMEZ, JEWELLE (1948– )

Jewelle Gomez is a significant contemporary poet, novelist, journalist, essayist, activist, teacher, and public speaker who explores the multicultural, lesbian experience in her works. Gomez was born in Boston on September 11, 1948, and reared in Boston and Washington, D.C., by a supportive, extended **family** of African American and Native American ancestry. Despite experiencing material poverty in her childhood, Gomez earned a B.A. from Northeastern University in 1971 and an M.S. in 1973 from Columbia University's School of Journalism, where she was a Ford Foundation Fellow. Her early life was influenced by the major political movements of the 1960s and 1970s—the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the **Black Arts Movement**.

Gomez's early **work** was in journalism and television. She worked in television production for WGBH-TV's *Say Brother* in Boston and for WNET-TV's Children's Television Workshop in 1970s. She later worked in off-Broadway theater in New York. In the 1980s and the early 1990s, Gomez worked for the New York State Council on the Arts. She has also worked as a high school teacher and a professor of creative writing. Additionally, Gomez has devoted considerable energy to activist causes such as being a founding board member of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) and a member of the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT).

Gomez is a prolific writer and speaker. She has contributed essays to many feminist and lesbian publications and has written countless book and **film** reviews. Gomez is a vigorous proponent of feminism, **lesbianism**, and multiculturalism with a commitment to social justice. Much of her work has the critical engagement of aspects of her **identity** as its centerpiece. She writes from multiple, simultaneous perspectives in a way that preserves and celebrates the complexities of the human experience.

Gomez's work is influenced by literary writers such as **Ntozake Shange** and **Toni Morrison** and lesbian and feminist critics such as **Audre Lorde**, Barbara Smith, and **Cheryl Clarke**. Her earliest creative works are self-published **poetry** (*The Lipstick Papers* [1980] and *Flamingoes and Bears* [1986]). In her poetry, Gomez describes the lesbian experience in sensual and intimate terms.

Her first novel, *The Gilda Stories*, was published in 1991 and won Lambda literary awards for **fiction** and science fiction. *Gilda*, a fine example of speculative fiction, blends elements of the traditional, gothic vampire story with elements of the romantic novel, historical novel, and mystery novel, as well as elements of fantasy and science fiction genres. Gomez skillfully uses time

and geographic space to convey the personal experience of the self-titled protagonist who is an African American lesbian vampire. *Gilda* is written within the framework of shifting scales ranging from the lived experience of the individual to the larger dynamics of **community** and family. In the stories about Gilda, Gomez interrogates the links between the exercise of social power and social responsibility. In the late 1990s the Gilda stories were adapted to the stage as *Bones and Ash* by the Urban Bush Women; the script of this adaptation was subsequently published.

### Works By

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*Kimberly Black-Parker*

### GOSSETT, HATTIE (1942– )

Poet, writer, performance artist, and teacher, Hattie Gossett describes her early life in her introduction to *Presenting . . . Sister NoBlues* (1988). Her parents came north to New Jersey during World War II with an energetic belief that they could achieve the American dream but, disappointed, ended up focusing on their daughter's success. She reacted against their genteel expectations in a way reminiscent of **Lorraine Hansberry's** account of her own character formation. Despite pressure to be, in Gossett's words, "a lady and a good negro," like Hansberry she learned resistance from the ghetto/project kids who beat her up and, in the process, discovered a new intensity directing her unconventional life. When Gossett discovered the pleasures of reading and music, especially **jazz**, they gave her a sense of belonging to "a whole lineage of people . . . who aint gonna go along with the program."

Forced to be a debutante, in the early 1960s she dropped out of college, fled to the Lower East Side, got married and divorced twice in quick succession, wore Afros and dashikis, and took a militant stance. For a while she specialized in temporary jobs that allowed her to get by in order to create. She has been an editor at magazines as different as *True Story* and *Black Theater*. She has published in works of feminist criticism, like *Heresies*, and been part of black women's collectives like **Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press** but also written a sex column for *Essence*. *Presenting . . . Sister NoBlues*, however, is a landmark, combining the **Black Arts Movement's** commitment to orality and antielitism with a great sense of comic timing and feminist critique.

At the end of her introduction, she writes that she is beginning another book, but that work has not yet been published; instead, her writing has increasingly emerged as performance, especially in music and/or dance collaborations with other multiform artists, including Vinie Burrows, Jawole Willa Jo Zolar of Urban Bush Women, Casselberry-Dupree, Evelyn Blakey, Robbie Maccauley, Edwina Lee Tyler, Andrea E. Woods of SouloWorks, and composer Fred Carl. A series of recent high-profile awards, including the New School University David Randolph Distinguished Artist-in-Residence Award in 2002, may finally help Gossett realize her old dream of escaping the edges of necessity with enough drive left to keep producing a passionate art.

The theme of rebellion/anger that runs through Gossett's work can disconcert critics, but themes define her life more accurately than chronological lists of degrees and awards. She carefully totes up the costs of economic vulnerability and, in *Sister NoBlues*, transforms the nickel-and-dime encounters of working women into angry and hilarious letters from a tenant, a **domestic**, a cleaning woman, a woman trying to collect a debt. Another set of poems ("a night at the fantasy factory," "setting up," and the deft "butter" sequence) describes the humiliations of being a waitress. She intersperses them with monologues—variously irritating, grandiose, seductive, and pathetic—spoken by the waitress's black male customers.

In Gossett's work, poverty and rebellion do not preclude betrayal by one's comrades: the "progressive" clinic that cannot imagine the plight of its cleaner, the left-wing scholars whose self-righteous sexism she neatly refutes in "on the question of fans." She recognizes the limits and contradictions of various alliances, even those black women forge, excoriating "mammys" as "daddy's enforcer," but (usually) keeps her eyes on the prize. Her affinity for performance tends to blur her own life as a "diva" with that of "Sister NoBlues," a collective black woman whose formidable contributions to individuals, communities, and world culture have often been erased and/or exploited; however, many people recognize Sister's genius when she is "on"—an apt description of Gossett's own legendary performances.

Sections 3 and 4 of *Sister NoBlues*, in particular, are often reprinted because they speak to a global audience in the distinctive voice of a cosmopolitan black woman revolutionary, who—in Cuba, Dakar, Barbados, or New York—takes great pleasure in her alliances and victories and, from a distance, laughs

at her defeats. Many of these poem/performance pieces are chants and ceremonies of an alternative artistry determined to activate those working for change. “Is it true what they say about colored pussy?” improbably turns that query to uplift; “woman mansion” rewrites the heaven a churchwoman can expect; “21rst century black woman warrior wimmins chant” recognizes the vulnerabilities of tough, loving, “bad” women, even as it celebrates their courage.

Living in Harlem, “at the crossroads,” Gossett retains her trickster wit and sassy voice, reminding her aging generation that there is still a lot to do. She makes laughter, music, the inventive rhythms of speech, and pleasure serve the struggle for justice, but she turns a critical ear to American lies and individuals’ compromises and strategies inside and outside of movements. She belongs in books like this but resists the form.

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*Susan Nash*

### **GRAHAM, SHIRLEY (1896–1977)**

Gerald Horne's *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* says the Rev. David A. and Elizabeth Etta (Bell) Graham named a daughter born on November 11, 1896, Lola Shirley Graham. Papers archived at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University corroborate the details that began the future author and human rights advocate's uncommon quest.

From the time Graham was born, her father, an itinerant African Methodist Episcopal minister with a **love** for cultural politics, answered calls in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Colorado Springs, Spokane, and Seattle and churches throughout Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Louisiana. The nomadic life played havoc with Graham's education; nonetheless, she graduated in 1915 from Lewis and Clark High School in Spokane. She married Shadrach McCants three years later.

After they divorced in 1927 in Portland, Oregon, her mother largely raised their sons Robert, four, and David, two. Shirley McCants, as she was known, built a career. During the next three years Graham was a music librarian at Howard University and taught at Morgan College in Baltimore while she studied music at Howard, New York's Institute of Musical Arts, and in Paris at the Sorbonne. In 1931, Graham signed on at Oberlin College in Ohio. She earned a bachelor's degree in 1934 and a graduate music degree the following year. She spent the next year as a fine arts instructor at the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial Normal School for Negroes, now called Tennessee State University, in Nashville.

At the end of the 1936 school year, she became director of the Chicago Federal Theatre, an appointment that might have a connection to the good reviews her musical *Tom-Tom* received in 1932 at Cleveland's "Theatre of Nations" summer festival. Regardless of the reason, the job launched Graham on a three-decade journey as an international activist and writer.

During the 1940s she wrote biographies of famous blacks such as George Washington Carver, Paul Robeson, Jean Baptiste du Sable, and **Phillis Wheatley**. In 1961 she founded and edited *Freedomways* magazine. In the 1970s she wrote biographies and memoirs of her late, second husband William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and former presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Tanzania's Julius K. Nyerere. Graham founded the Graham Artists Bureau to broker talented performers. In 1941, she joined the United Service Organizations (USO) as entertainment director for black troops at Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

In 1943, spurred by a more than platonic involvement with still-married civil rights advocate W.E.B. Du Bois, Graham became a field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). After they married in 1951, the pair spent the rest of their lives as human rights advocates with associates that included communists. The House Un-American Activities Committee indicted her husband, but he was acquitted for lack of evidence. Still, federal authorities dogged them. The couple grew frustrated with the timid 1950s progress in civil rights. At the invitation of President Kwame Nkrumah, they moved to Ghana in 1961 and became citizens. The U.S. government never let her live in this country again. After her husband died in 1963, Graham remained to help build Ghana's national television and telecommunications network. When Nkrumah was unseated in the 1966 coup, she and son David moved to Cairo, Egypt. Her human rights work continued until she died of breast cancer on March 27, 1977, in Beijing, China, seeking treatment.

Graham's papers may be found as follows: The Shirley Graham Du Bois papers [MC 476], Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York; W.E.B. Du Bois Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; The Julius Rozenwald Archives, Fisk University, Nashville; The Black Oral History Collection, Fisk University.

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Vincent F. A. Golphin

### GREENFIELD, ELOISE (1929– )

Eloise Greenfield, a major and prolific author for children, was born in North Carolina but moved with her **family** to Washington, D.C., then a segregated city, when she was a baby. She grew up in a housing project in which the **community** cared about each other and together tried to face the problems caused by racism. She attended Miner Teacher's College (now University of the District of Columbia) but dropped out after two years. After a career as a federal employee, she started writing songs and short stories, none of which were published. Her first picture book, *Bubbles* (1972), is about a small boy who is excited about learning to read. After trying to share his joy with busy adults, he finds the perfect audience: his baby sister. Her next few books were among the first biographies of African Americans for young children: *Rosa Parks* (1973), *Paul Robeson* (1975), and *Mary McLeod Bethune* (1977). Many of her picture books sensitively portray strong multigenerational black families facing everyday and crisis situations, such as *William and the Good Old Days* (1993), in which a young boy remembers how vibrant his grandmother was and deals with her deteriorating health, and *Grandmama's Joy* (1980), in which the young heroine tries to comfort her grandmother when they are about to be evicted. Some of her major themes are developing a positive **identity**, a sense of African and African American **history**, and the courage and resilience to follow dreams, as in *Africa Dream* (1977), a Coretta Scott King Award book, in which a child's dreams are filled with African images.

Greenfield turned to **poetry** with *Honey, I Love* (1978), in which a young girl expresses her joy in everyday life. *Nathaniel Talking* (1988) is a series of poems told by nine-year-old Nathaniel B. Free, in which he talks about events and people important in his life, including the **death** of his mother and his father's strength. Each member of his family has a poem echoing the musical tradition of that generation, including a rap poem for Nathaniel. Three years later, *Night on Neighborhood Street* (1991), another collection celebrating an African American neighborhood, was published. Both were King Honor Award books. *For the Love of the Game: Michael Jordan and Me* (1997) examines the experiences of two children who find inspiration and purpose in the life of their hero. Her lyrical, rhythmical poetry, true to children's experiences, is perhaps her strongest literary contribution.

One of her major achievements is *Childtimes: A Three-Generation Memoir* (1979), written with her mother, Lessie Jones Little, with contributions by her grandmother. The three women recount the challenges they have faced as black women in this country and the ways in which family **love** can help overcome obstacles. These are the **memories** of a particular family, but the author believes they also represent the feelings and experiences of other black

families. She has written many other works, including board books for the youngest child and several novels for young readers.

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Susan L. Golden

### GRIMKÉ, ANGELINA WELD (1880–1958)

Born in Boston in 1880, Angelina Weld Grimké knew both the relative privilege and the attendant tensions of her mixed-race heritage, a dynamic that her writing reflects. Her father, a diplomat and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) officer, was the nephew of Sarah Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld, white abolitionists whose plantation-owning brother had fathered him and his brothers with Nancy Weston, a slave. The Grimké sisters offered their nephews the recognition that their brother did not, and in response, Angelina's parents, Archibald and Sarah Stanley Grimké, named her after the younger of the two women. Angelina's mother left Archibald Grimké in 1883,

taking the child with her, only to return the girl to her father after four years. Significantly, then, while Angelina Grimké's own writing confronts issues like racial **identity**, it also recounts personal loss.

Grimké attended schools in Massachusetts and Minnesota. Her earliest poem dates to around her eleventh birthday, and at thirteen she published a poem to her uncle Theodore Weld. Even her earliest literary efforts addressed social issues, including short stories that decried lynching, a subject that she later revisited. Through her uncle and aunt, Francis and **Charlotte Forten Grimké**, she became familiar with the African American social circles in Washington, D.C., when she lived with them while her father was U.S. consul to Santo Domingo. In a series of 1896 letters, Grimké and Mary "Mamie" Burrill recorded their erotic longing for one another, hinting at the personal motifs that would later inform Grimké's literary work.

By 1900, Grimké was publishing **poetry** in journals like the *Boston Transcript*. In 1902, she moved again to Washington and began teaching, eventually working at what would become Dunbar High School, where she knew **Anna Julia Cooper** and **Jessie Redmon Fauset**. Injured in a railway accident in 1911, she would not recover robust health. Nevertheless, Grimké imagined compiling a collection of poems called "Dusk Dreams," encompassing both private passions and public critiques. On one hand, Grimké's poetry commemorates historically significant figures, including **family** members and others. Yet her 1909 poem "El Beso," published in the *Transcript*, bespeaks the quiet personal intensity and vibrant imagery that would characterize many of her later lyrics.

In 1916, Grimké's antilynching play *Rachel* was performed in Washington and later in New York and Boston. Publishing the **drama** extended its influence, and by 1921 this work about prejudice against a black family was earning mostly supportive reviews. Grimké's next play, the incomplete *Mara*, in ways shared subject matter, as did many of the short stories that she wrote during this time. In the 1920s, her poems appeared widely in anthologies by **Harlem Renaissance** writers, and she contributed more poems than any other woman to **Countee Cullen's** *Caroling Dusk* (1927). Some critics see her father's 1930 **death** as a turning point for Grimké, and she produced no known poems after 1932, a fact that other critics attribute to the uncertain reception that Grimké's imagistic treatments of homoerotic desire would have faced during this era. After a long illness, she died in 1958.

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*Katharine Rodier*

### **GRIMKÉ, CHARLOTTE FORTEN (1837–1914)**

Charlotte Forten Grimké, poet, essayist, teacher, and civil rights advocate, is also now renowned for her personal writing. Her lifelong dedication to education and emancipation was in part a legacy from her **family**, especially her grandfather, James Forten: patriot, entrepreneur, and abolitionist. Although her mother died when she was only three years old, Forten was not without female exemplars as well as male during her youth in Philadelphia, as many members of the extended Forten family, including her aunts, publicly advanced reform causes and opportunity for their **race**.

In 1853, Forten went to study in Salem, Massachusetts, living there with the Remond family, themselves noted black abolitionists. In Salem, she joined the local Female Anti-Slavery Society and met many outspoken activists of her age, including William Lloyd Garrison. In 1856, she began teaching, a vocation to which she devoted much of her life, despite the illnesses that persistently afflicted her. An avid reader, she did not produce a volume of poems in her lifetime but despite her own professed reticence did publish close to a dozen individual poems, including several between 1858 and 1860.

Moving between teaching appointments despite periods of ill health between 1857 and 1862, Forten relocated frequently between Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. Then, inspired by an 1862 visit to John Greenleaf Whittier, she joined the Port Royal Experiment teaching former slaves in the Union-occupied islands off South Carolina. Forten's vivid journal entries at the time supplied the basis for letters in the *Liberator* and would again inform her publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "Life in the Sea Islands" (May/June 1864).

In May 1864, Charlotte Forten resigned her Port Royal commission and returned once again to Philadelphia, moving back to Boston in 1865 to work for the New England Branch of the Freedmen's Union Commission. In 1869, she translated *Madame Thérèse*, a novel about the French Revolution. Publishing personal sketches, short descriptions, and critiques of racism and segregation in the 1870s, Forten taught briefly in South Carolina and later in Washington, D.C. Employed subsequently at the U.S. Treasury, she met and married Francis J. Grimké, pastor of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church. Their daughter, Theodora Cornelia, born in 1880, lived only six months.

In 1885, the Grimkés moved to Florida, returning to Washington in 1889, whereupon they became central figures in the city's flourishing black cultural life. Forten published several more poems and some lighter **fiction** and also produced essays on the race issue, art criticism, and a vignette of **Frederick**

**Douglass.** Having helped found the National Association of Colored Women, she focused as well on **work** at church and **home**. From 1894 to 1898, the Grimké's were legal guardians to their niece, **Angelina Weld Grimké**, who with her father would again reside with the couple in 1905. Increasingly frail and eventually bedridden by 1913, Charlotte Forten Grimké died in 1914, having maintained a measured public voice through **poetry**, through editorial and descriptive prose, and in her public service as teacher and **community** leader.

*See also* Cooper, Anna Julia

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*Katharine Rodier*

### GUY, ROSA (1925– )

Born in Trinidad, Rosa Guy moved with parents Henry and Audrey Cuthbert and younger sister Ameze to Harlem, New York, in 1932 at the age of seven. Two years later, the girls' mother died, and their uninvolved father paid a neighbor to watch them. Later, the girls would live in a succession of institutions and foster homes. At the age of fourteen, she quit school and took a job in a factory to help support Ameze. Two years later, one week before World War II, she married Warner Guy. He served in the military, and she

gave birth to their son, Warner Guy, Jr. It was at this time that Rosa Guy first became involved with the American Negro Theatre.

At the end of the war, Guy worked in a clothes factory and attended night school. Because of the dearth of satisfying dramatic opportunities for a black woman at this time, she turned to writing. She enrolled in New York University, studying writing and theater. By the late 1940s, she was involved in the Committee for the Negro in the Arts. She also, with John Killens, formed the Harlem Writers Guild, a forum for her to air the plays and short stories she wrote.

Activism was also an important part of Guy's life. In 1961, after the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the independent Republic of Congo, Guy, **Maya Angelou**, and **Paule Marshall** held a sit-in at the chambers of the Security Council of the United Nations. It was in large measure due to this incident that the United Nations enacted stricter controls on access to the Security Council.

Five years later, Guy's first book was published. Set in black Harlem, *Bird at My Window* (1966) is the story of a **family** that fled the **South** after the father is accused of **rape** by a white woman whom he had rebuffed. The father is subsequently killed at a gambling table, and the family struggles to survive in spite of racism and burdensome responsibilities.

In the 1960s, Rosa turned her attention to youth. Curious about what they were feeling and thinking in response to the riots and assassinations of the **civil rights movement**, Guy took to the road. She traveled across the United States to talk to youth ages thirteen to twenty-three, rural and urban, high school and college, in a wide variety of settings. *Children of Longing* (1971), her second book, is an edited collection of their words. The universal themes the youth she talked to voiced—their hopes and fears, their difficulties dealing with parents and school—would appear in her later writing.

Rosa Guy's first book for youth, *The Friends*, was published two years later. The start of a trilogy about the Cathy and Jackson families, the book focuses on daughters Phylissia and Edith. The motherless girls are united by their longing for their mothers and their struggles with their families. The book also addresses the hostility and misunderstanding that can characterize relationships between black Americans and black West Indians. It was for this book that Rosa first received an American Library Association Notable Book Award.

Perhaps in part because of her own family experiences, responsibility is a theme that Guy visits often in her writing. Other common themes are the problems of discrimination and poverty faced by black youths in Harlem. Guy's writing is sometimes controversial. The second book in the Cathy-Jackson trilogy, *Ruby* (1976), involves a homosexual theme, and the third book, *Edith Jackson* (1978), involves abortion and police brutality. Her books for adolescents often seem to be a warning cry about a society that fails to meet the needs of youth.

Guy's work is often influenced by her international travel. Her first picture book, *My Love, My Love: or, the Peasant Girl* (1985) is a retelling of the beloved Hans Christian Andersen classic with Caribbean speech, rhythm, and flair. Her most recent novel, *The Sun, the Sea, a Touch of the Wind* (1995), involves Haitian characters and setting.

### Works By

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*Heidi Hauser Green*



### **HALEY, ALEX (1921–1992)**

Alex Haley was born in Ithaca, New York, on August 11, 1921. His father was a college professor, and his mother was a grade school teacher. He was the oldest of three sons. After graduating high school at the age of fifteen, he attended college for two years and then joined the U.S. Coast Guard in 1939.

While at sea, Haley started writing short stories. In 1952, he was designated as the chief journalist by the Coast Guard, and he handled public relations assignments. After retiring from the Coast Guard in 1959, he started his new career as a freelance writer. He became an assignment writer for *Reader's Digest* magazine. Later he worked for *Playboy* magazine. He started a new interview feature at *Playboy*. His interview with **Malcolm X** while at *Playboy* led to his first book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* (1965). This book was translated into eight languages and established him as a serious writer.

Next, he embarked upon the twelve long years of research into his maternal **family's history**, inspired by the family stories he heard from his maternal grandmother in his youth in the 1920s and 1930s. To find clues about the roots of his ancestry, he used “the pronunciations of the African words repeated . . . by family members” and help from the linguists at several universities. These linguistic specialists verified the language, as well as the village where the words originated. He conducted research in the Library of Congress and in Great Britain Maritime records to trace the history of slave ships. His search led him to



a sixteen-year-old boy named Kunta Kinte who was kidnapped and then sold into **slavery** from the small village of Juffure in Gambia, West Africa.

During this period, Haley wrote several magazine articles and was awarded honorary doctorates for his work. This work culminated in his most widely celebrated autobiographical work of **fiction**, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976). The book won the 1976 National Book Award and was translated into thirty-seven languages worldwide. The American Broadcasting Company/ABC-TV turned the book into a twelve-hour miniseries in 1977. That year Haley won the Pulitzer Prize and the Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1979, ABC-TV produced his next book, *Roots: The Next Generation*. In 1988, he published *A Different Kind of Christmas*, a story about slave escapes in the 1850s. The U.S. Coast Guard Academy awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1989.

Haley suffered a heart attack and died on February 10, 1992. Before his **death** he was researching his paternal grandmother Queen, who was born to a black slave mother and her white master. The book was later finished by David Stevens and published as *Queen: The Story of an American Family* (1993).

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*Pratibha Kelapure*

## HAMILTON, VIRGINIA (1936–2002)

Virginia Hamilton was born in the farming **community** of Yellow Springs, Ohio, a setting that is prominent in her **fiction**. Hamilton is the author of more than thirty books, including adolescent fiction, **folklore**, and critical studies. Her books have received numerous awards, including the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, the Coretta Scott King Award, the MacArthur Foundation prize, and the Hans Christian Andersen Medal.

Hamilton's fictional subjects and characters, both female and male adolescents, often face feminist challenges. They may feel at odds with their communities, families, bodies, and selves and see themselves as voiceless,

powerless, and misunderstood. They see themselves as different and apart from those around them. Often they retreat into their imaginations in order to reckon with the world around them.

In *Zeely* (1967), Elizabeth, a.k.a. Geeder, is imaginative and restless. She is enamored of tall, beautiful Zeely, whom Geeder imagines is a Watutsi queen. Geeder longs for the attention of Zeely, seeing her as an ideal woman.

*The Planet of Junior Brown* (1971), while centered on male characters, reflects the feminist concerns of isolation, **body** image, madness, and the need for a nurturing community. Junior's weakening grasp on reality helps reveal the strengthening humanity of Junior's friend Buddy, a janitor.

One of Hamilton's most celebrated novels, *M. C. Higgins, the Great* (1974), also focuses on a teenage boy, but he, too, must contend with adult concerns as his **family** fights for their land and the environment. Another character, the female outlaw Lurhetta, is alienated and a stranger, but she helps M. C. learn the value of the world around him and his family's ties to the land.

*Arilla Sun Down* (1976) continues many of the themes of the novels that came before it. Arilla Sun Down Adams is biracial (African American and Native American). She is overshadowed by her brother, Jack Sun Run Adams, who is preoccupied with his Native American heritage and is wildly charismatic. Arilla knows her friends hang out with her in order to be near her brother. Dreamy thoughts and memories of childhood reveal Arilla to us as she tries to reconcile her feelings of unworthiness as she compares herself with her brother, cope with school and friends, and express her **love** and admiration for her beautiful mother and somewhat capricious father. Arilla searches for self-awareness and eventually discovers her strong sense of endurance.

Several years after *Arilla*, the novel *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* (1982) continues the themes of coming of age in the character Tree. The novel also continues to explore the folk beliefs and elements of the supernatural that occur frequently in Hamilton's work. The ghost who appears to Tree, Brother Rush, helps her understand a family illness, her retarded older brother Dab, and her sometimes chaotic relationship with her mother and the mother's boyfriend.

In her folklore collections *The People Could Fly* (1985) and *Her Stories* (1995) Hamilton collects tales of characters who overcome oppression by ingenuity, strength, and perseverance. *Her Stories* focuses on varying tales of larger-than-life women who defy traditional female conventions. "Annie Christmas" tells of a woman keelboat captain on the Mississippi River in the Reconstruction **South**. While Hamilton notes in the collection that the tales come from sources that are fantastic or from sources about which to hypothesize, the collection ends with three stories of women who did exist. All of the stories reinforce the strengths of women in the most adverse conditions.

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Catherine E. Lewis

**HAND I FAN WITH, THE**

*The Hand I Fan With* (1996), Tina McElroy Ansa's third novel, brings us back to Lena McPherson from *Baby of the Family* (1996) and to Ansa's Mulberry, Georgia. By the time of this novel, all of Lena's **family** has died: her parents in an accident in their small airplane and her brothers in their own untimely **deaths**. Lena has become a very successful businesswoman and is intimately involved with the issues and crises of the lives of the people of Mulberry. She has become the hand that all of Mulberry fans with. Caught up in all of her business and good works, Lena is profoundly lonely, except for the friendship of Sister, her best friend since college. *The Hand I Fan With* is a novel about letting go of the world in order to tend to one's personal emotional and spiritual needs.

Before leaving for a year's sabbatical in Africa, Sister has performed a man-calling ceremony for Lena. The man, however, is a ghost, Herman, who has died 100 years earlier. Herman teaches Lena to take care of her own needs and to reconnect with nature. Together they work her garden and tend her horses. When Herman leaves, exactly one year after he has appeared, Lena is a different woman. She has turned her parents' former **home** into a shelter for homeless teens and has begun to have closer, more parental relationships with some of those teens.

*The Hand I Fan With* is frankly erotic and sensual. Ansa's usual descriptive skills reveal Lena's overtly sexual relationship with Herman and the joy both Herman and Lena take in food, in gardening, and in maintaining close contact with the landscape of Lena's hundred-acre estate, situated on a bend in the Ocawatchee River. Running through the novel and the river is "Clear Flo'," a phenomenon of the Ocawatchee River in which the river's normally muddy waters turn clear green. Herman explains that Lena has caused this natural phenomenon by cursing the river and spitting into it. After Herman returns to the spirit world, we see that Lena's anger and unhappiness cause a literal storm in her world, flooding the river and taking out the bridge from her property to the highway. This sets the scene for the novel's climax when Lena has to deliver a foal by herself. Herman's spirit returns to guide her, and she succeeds in delivering the baby colt and in accepting the loss of Herman's physical presence for the guidance of his spiritual reality.

*The Hand I Fan With* unites Ansa's themes of the reality of the spirit world and the value of familial relationships as an essential source of emotional satisfaction. For Lena, family comes from her friendship with Sister and her growing maternal relationships with the children at her shelter. Guidance from Herman, the ghosts of her family, and other female spirits, including Rachel from *Baby of the Family*, helps Lena find her way toward a fully satisfying life, both emotionally and spiritually.

*See also* Love; Sexuality; Spirituality

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*Harriette C. Buchanan*

**HANSBERRY, LORRAINE (1930–1965)**

Lorraine Hansberry was born and raised in Chicago in a **family** with social and intellectual advantages. Her mother, Nannie Perry Hansberry, a teacher and ward committeewoman, and her father, Carl A. Hansberry, a U.S. deputy marshall and successful realtor, had an active commitment to social justice. Through her uncle, William Leo Hansberry, a respected scholar and teacher of African **history** at Howard University, Hansberry first associated the efforts of Africa for independence with the struggle of black America for **freedom**, a connection that would later figure significantly in her creative work. During Hansberry’s childhood and youth, visitors to the Hansberry **home** included such major figures of black American culture and politics as W.E.B. Du Bois, Duke Ellington, **Langston Hughes**, and Paul Robeson.

Her family’s economic prosperity never blinded Hansberry to the social oppression under which most black Americans lived before the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Activism was a part of the Hansberry family life. When Hansberry was eight, her father, with the support of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, challenged Chicago’s discriminatory real estate covenants by moving his family to Hyde Park, an affluent, all-white Chicago neighborhood. Hansberry’s experience of racism in this privileged enclave was immediate, brutal, and violent. The white “howling mobs” hurled a brick into the Hansberry home that barely missed her head. While the Illinois courts evicted the family, the U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled residential restrictions unconstitutional, but Carl Hansberry’s victory was hollow, for the ruling had little effect in establishing precedent. His legal challenge exacted a personal toll in his disillusionment with America as a place of equality. He was planning to move his family permanently to Mexico when he died in 1966 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

The **death** of her father when she was only fifteen may have influenced Hansberry's **memories** of him as an exceptional presence always doing "something brilliant," and throughout her life, Hansberry had male mentors, but as *To Be Young, Gifted and Black (TBYGB)* (1969) suggests, the recollections of her mother and other maternal figures in her family provide her most vivid images. While Nannie Hansberry's indulgence in luxuries at times troubled her youngest daughter, Hansberry remembered a long car ride to Tennessee to visit her maternal grandmother, a former slave; her mother, pointing to the Kentucky hills, informed her children that her own father as a boy had hidden from his "master" there and had survived by his mother's secret midnight forays to bring him food. In a letter to the *New York Times* when she was twenty-four, Hansberry recalled the image of her mother during the Hyde Park siege "desperate and courageous . . . patrolling our house all night with a loaded German lugur doggedly guarding her four children, while my father fought the respectable part of the battle in the Washington court" (April 24, 1964). Hansberry dedicated her best-known play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), "to Mama: in gratitude for the dream." The heroic potential of **motherhood** finds its way into her plays through the strong presence of characters like Lena and Ruth Younger in *Raisin*, and the slave mother Rissa in the posthumously published *The Drinking Gourd* (commissioned by NBC but never produced). Hansberry's art shows a deep sensitivity to the intricacies of women's lives under challenging, possibly devastating, social conditions.

As the youngest of the Hansberry children by seven years, Lorraine's way for making her own decisions had been paved by three older siblings. Instead of attending a black college as her siblings had done, she spent two years at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, a large, mostly white institution where she became president of the Young Progressive Association, a national left-wing student organization. Without completing her degree, she moved to New York City in the fall of 1950, started attending classes at the New School for Social Research, and began a more active involvement with the protest movement.

Hansberry was supporting herself through freelance writing and odd jobs when the progressive magazine *Freedom*, published by Paul Robeson, and edited by Louis Burnham, hired her as full-time staff and quickly promoted her to associate editor. At the same time, her activism intensified. When Robeson's passport was revoked under suspicion of his communist activities, Hansberry delivered his speech at an international peace conference in Montevideo, Uruguay. She began speaking more frequently at public rallies and protests critical of American society. On a picket line at New York University protesting the exclusion of blacks from the basketball team, Hansberry met a graduate student of **literature** from a Russian-Jewish background who shared her interests in social causes and art. On June 20, 1953, she and Robert Nemiroff were married at the Hansberry home in Chicago. They spent June 19, the day before the wedding, marching in front of the Chicago Federal Building to protest the imminent execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. The day after the wedding, they returned to their Greenwich Village apartment.

Hansberry's increased activism in New York seems the natural outcome of her early Chicago years. She saw her **identity** as inextricably linked to place (Chicago's Southside) and to **race** and gender: "I was born black and a female." Living and attending public schools among Southside's working-class blacks, she witnessed the enduring determination to embrace life despite the hardships of relentless poverty and fatigue. "Each piece of our living," she wrote, "is a protest." From her position of economic privilege, she admired the working **class** and underprivileged black children for their readiness to fight—"the girls as well as the boys" (*TBYGB* 41, 45, 65). In her view, their fighting spirit helped to equalize the sexes. Her New York articles reflect and extend these central formulations of her early years. According to Anne Cheney, Hansberry wrote over twenty articles for *Freedom* during her five-year association with the magazine, addressing events in Africa, articulating social issues such as the educational problems faced by black ghetto children, and covering women's protests against discrimination and war. In letters and articles in other publications, she denounced the social expectations of womanhood that could result in the destructive life and senseless death of a Marilyn Monroe; in letters, albeit anonymous, to the lesbian journal *Ladder*, she connected homophobic, racist, and sexist attitudes, recognizing the dominant culture's routine denial of the rights of gays, people of color, and women; and in her *Ebony* article, "This Complex of Womanhood," she called on black women to resist notions of woman's proper place.

After her marriage, Hansberry quit her job at *Freedom* to devote more time to writing and thinking. She began studying African history with W.E.B. Du Bois at the Jefferson School of Social Science, where she taught black literature. For the next three years she and Nemiroff supported themselves through a variety of jobs. In 1956, a song, cowritten by Nemiroff, "Cindy, Oh, Cindy," became a financial success, providing Hansberry with the opportunity to write full-time.

Since seeing a production of Howard Richardson and William Berney's *Dark of the Moon* in high school, Hansberry had been enchanted by the theater. She was impressed by performances of Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Tempest* starring family friend Robeson. At Wisconsin, she became familiar with the social **drama** of playwrights like Ibsen, but it was a production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* that affected her most profoundly. His powerful drama lingered in her consciousness, affirming the power of theater to convey human experience more fully than any other kind of writing. Earlier in 1956, Hansberry had begun working on a play about a struggling black family in Chicago's Southside. When, on March 11, 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway, Hansberry's own Mama Lena Younger moved audiences as deeply as she had been moved by Juno Boyle. Hansberry was the first black female playwright to have her work produced on Broadway. At twenty-nine, she became the youngest and first black playwright to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play. Her competition in the 1959 season included plays by Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill.

*A Raisin in the Sun* tells the story of the five-member, three-generation Younger family, who live together in cramped quarters but have separate and large dreams. Their struggles in a social system that disadvantages blacks translate into familial tensions when Mama, the family matriarch, becomes the recipient of the \$10,000 life insurance policy on her deceased husband. Mainstream white critics and audiences embraced the play, ensuring its commercial success. Hansberry's more personal triumph was the confirmation that through drama she could effectively serve her commitment to social justice. Despite the criticism of more militant black playwrights, like Ed Bullins and **Amiri Baraka** (who later changed his mind), that the play was melodramatic, *A Raisin in the Sun* brought universal recognition to specifically black social problems and an enhanced understanding of the social oppression of black Americans.

The next few years did not diminish Hansberry's activism and artistic productivity. She was among the prominent group of black artists and intellectuals, which included **James Baldwin**, who met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy in May 1963 to discuss America's racial crisis; according to Baldwin, Hansberry assumed leadership, refusing to endorse Kennedy's assertion that America was a land of equal opportunity for all races. Hansberry continued to pursue several artistic projects, but her only other play to be produced during her lifetime was *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1965), whose protagonist, a white, Jewish, liberal intellectual living in New York's Greenwich Village, struggles with constant disillusionment in his commitment to moral action. Through the play's female characters, and Sidney's male homosexual neighbor, Hansberry questioned social attitudes toward women and homosexuals. An ambitious play in terms of both ideas and plotting, it lacked the dramatic clarity of *Raisin*, resulting in mixed reviews, but at the time of its opening in October 1964, Hansberry was already dying of pancreatic cancer. *Sidney* was not a commercial success, but the efforts of Nemiroff and their many friends financed its Broadway run until the day of her death.

In the spring of 1964, Hansberry and Nemiroff divorced, partly because of Hansberry's growing realization of her **lesbianism**, but they remained close friends and artistic collaborators. As her literary executor, Nemiroff published several finished and unfinished works posthumously, including her African play *Les Blancs* and *What Use Are Flowers?* which deals with nuclear holocaust. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, his compilation of Hansberry's writings into an **autobiography**, and a play, indicates the range of talents and interests that her early death left unfulfilled.

Hansberry's plans and unpublished manuscripts further suggest her engagement with feminist thinking. Her 1960 list of Projected Works (*TBYGB* 137) included a play about Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is a pioneer work of feminist analysis. In her unpublished essay on Simone de Beauvoir, she proposed *The Second Sex* (1949; English translation 1953) as one of the century's most significant books. Adrienne Rich has questioned a pattern in Hansberry's plays whereby characters,



originally conceived as female, emerge as male in the final version. Sidney Brustein, for instance, starts out as Jenny Reed. In *Les Blancs*, a daughter and dead mother turn into the male protagonist and his dead father. The changes, however, do not marginalize the female presence in these plays. Even in *Les Blancs* where the female warrior goddess remains silent, her movements exude power. In her feminism, as in so much else, Hansberry was ahead of her time. Margaret B. Wilkerson has called her “the complete feminist,” for she sought to address both race and gender within a social context. As black and female, Hansberry remained well aware that privileging gender over race offered no solutions. As Wilkerson also points out in her article “Lorraine Hansberry: The Complete Feminist,” Hansberry did not see her sympathy for the situation of black men as contradicting her advocacy for women’s rights. Both her commitment to human rights and her feminism remained inclusive.

*See also* Black Feminism; Civil Rights Movement

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Rita Bode

## HANSEN, JOYCE (1942– )

Joyce Viola Hansen grew up in the Bronx, New York City. From her parents she learned to appreciate books and the magic of storytelling. She received her B.A. in English from Pace University in 1972 and her M.A. in English education from New York University in 1978. Hansen began teaching English and reading in the New York City schools and, through her students, became aware of the need for books with settings, characters, and themes reflecting the lives of the black children in her classes.

Hansen began to write for these children, publishing her first novel, *The Gift-Giver*, in 1980. She quickly followed with her next novel, *Home Boy*, in 1982 and then *Yellow Bird and Me* in 1986. Hansen explores the problems young males experience within the inner city with sensitivity and understanding, yet she endows her female characters with strength to enable their own and the male characters' self-affirmation through dignity, **love**, and compassion.

After the success of her first three novels, Hansen branched into **historical fiction**. While all her narratives stem from the African American experience, Hansen chronicles that experience from varied perspectives. Both *Out from This Place* (1988) and *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl* (1997) feature young girls who find courage during the unstable times following Emancipation. *Which Way Freedom?* (1986) is about an escaped slave who joins a black Union regiment and fights heroically at Fort Pillow in Tennessee. *The Captive* (1994) details the journey of a young boy who is captured in Africa and sold as a slave but eventually finds hope and **freedom**.

Hansen relates that before embarking on historical fiction, she researched the time periods extensively, combing histories and interviews with former slaves to gain an understanding of the environments into which she places her characters. She reports that the experience has left her with a newfound appreciation for the complexity of historical interpretation.

Hansen made her mark in children's nonfiction with *Between Two Fires: Black Soldiers in the Civil War* in 1993. She retired from the school system in 1995 but continued to write. In 1997, she collaborated with Gary McGowan on *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground*, which was published in 1998. The subject is a once-forgotten African burial site discovered during a 1991 excavation for a new building in Manhattan. Her latest **history** is *Freedom Roads: Searching for the Underground Railroad* (2003). Again teaming with Gary McGowan, Hansen drew information from archaeological sites, Negro **spirituals**, **quilting** patterns, **slave narratives**, oral histories, diaries, letters, and church and government records. In concluding that the **Underground Railroad** constituted a network of routes and way stations, Hansen acknowledges the difficulties inherent in reaching a completely accurate impression of the past through historical interpretation.

Nevertheless, her well-researched books shed much-needed light on the beginnings of African American history for new generations of schoolchildren. Three of her books have received the prestigious Coretta Scott King Author Honors: *The Captive*, *Breaking New Ground*, and *I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly*.

*See also* Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Anne Mangum

## HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance is known as a period of unprecedented artistic production by African Americans. As the aesthetic counterpart to the social and political movement known as the Negro movement during the early twentieth century, the Harlem Renaissance represents a revolution in the ways African American artists would perceive themselves and their art and thus in the ways they would express themselves verbally, artistically, and musically.

Though both the geographical and historical boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance continue to be questioned, there is no doubt that Harlem had become the center of African American culture by the time of the Great Depression. Just as New York had become one of the cultural capitals of the United States by the

1920s, Harlem had become the geographical center for American blacks who had migrated North to seek better opportunities than those they encountered in the **South**. In Harlem, African Americans were able to live freely, **work** profitably, and attain an education in schools that were far superior to those in the South. As a sort of haven for African Americans to assert their African **identity** and heritage, Harlem was nicknamed “Black Manhattan” by **James Weldon Johnson** and the “Negro Metropolis” by **Claude McKay**.

Harlem’s proximity to the publishing metropolis that was New York in the 1920s helped black artists who migrated there as well. New organizations and publications were established to promote African American art. Harlem Renaissance artists were largely inspired and enabled by figures such as **Charles Johnson**, editor of *Opportunity*, Carl Van Vechten, and Alain Locke, who actively sought out black artists and rewarded them for their creativity. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) funded the magazine the *Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* and offered grants to black writers, artists, and performers. Two of the most influential political leaders during this time, civil rights advocate A. Philip Randolph, editor of the *Messenger*, and political activist Marcus Garvey, who encouraged African Americans to celebrate their heritage, would inspire a new generation of free black artists to take pride in their cultural identity, and their public visibility helped to legitimate the artistic achievements of black America.

Regarding the dates of the renaissance, some draw a narrow boundary between 1925, when the anthology of writings about African American culture and creativity *The New Negro* was published, to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Others contend that it began in 1910 during what is known as the Great Migration, when the population of black people in Harlem almost tripled, and ended around 1937 when **Zora Neale Hurston** published *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the last prominent novel to share characteristics with Harlem Renaissance **literature**. But still others note that the creative material produced during the Harlem Renaissance develops themes and reflects thoughts that were advanced much earlier, by notable figures such as **Frederick Douglass** and W.E.B. Du Bois, whose *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) inspired a number of Harlem Renaissance writers. In fact, some have argued that the opposite philosophies of Du Bois, who encouraged African Americans to develop a strong sense of their African cultural identity, and Booker T. Washington in *Up from Slavery* (1901), who encouraged them to blend into American culture by striving to achieve economic prosperity and assimilating, are reflected in the tension between economic success and exploitation of African culture for the artists of the Harlem Renaissance.

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance address the continued persecution of African Americans by complicating simplified **stereotypes** assigned to them by white culture in various ways. The poet **Countee Cullen**, whose work appeared in such mainstream publications as *Vanity Fair*, *Bookman*, and *Harper’s*, helped shape the aesthetic goals of the Harlem Renaissance by analyzing art in his regular column “The Dark Tower.” His **poetry** stylistically resembles that of British Romantics from Shelley to Keats, but its message

sharply critiques **race** and **class** prejudice. Quite unlike Cullen, **Langston Hughes** avoided traditional forms and brilliantly combined black dialect and musical rhythms to protest various forms of racial injustice. Hughes, who published several volumes of poetry and short stories, two novels, two autobiographies, and nine books for children, was a living example of the great potential African Americans possessed as writers. **Jean Toomer**, whose pastiche of poetry, prose, and **drama** titled *Cane* (1923) was recognized by some as a masterpiece hallmark of the Harlem Renaissance, recalled the music and content of Negro **spirituals** even as it reflected modernist principles of writing. Claude McKay, whose *Home to Harlem* (1928) celebrated the cabaret life of Harlem in the 1920s and aroused controversy for its uninhibited representation of male African American desire, overtly protested racial inequality and even at times generated criticism from the African American **community** for his views. Other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, from the novelist and short-story writer Rudolph Fisher, journalist and essayist Eric Walrond, playwright Willis Richardson to writer, editor, and librarian Arna Bontemps, are also seen as important in displacing, challenging, and rebuking assumptions about the inferiority of black writers.

The visual art of the Harlem Renaissance not only reflected the political, social, and cultural awakening of what came to be known as the New Negro but also introduced new images of African culture into American culture. Painter and muralist Aaron Douglas, who was called “the father of African American art,” created illustrations for what is recognized as one of the defining texts, the *New Negro* (1925), as well as for the writing of James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes. Painter Palmer Cole Hayden, who transformed his career from janitor to an internationally recognized award-winning painter, was known for his controversial caricatures of black subjects. Other painters such as William Henry Johnson, Jacob Armstead Lawrence, Romare Beardon, and Archibald John Motley, Jr., attempted to represent realistically the experience of African Americans during the early twentieth century. Sculptor Sargeant Claude Johnson brought together images from African and Mexican culture, while painter and sculptor Richmond Barthé brought life to African American historical figures through busts and bas-reliefs.

The Harlem Renaissance also encompasses the achievements and prominence of musicians and performing artists that generated what is known as the Jazz Age. The success of black musicals such as *Shuffle Along* (1921), the first Broadway production that was written, produced, and performed by African Americans, and *Runnin' Wild* (1923), which inspired the phenomenon of the dance known as the Charleston, announced a new era of American music. Along with Louis Armstrong, who is known as one of the founding fathers of **jazz**, musicians such as pianist and composer Duke Ellington, pianist and bandleader Count Basie, and singer and bandleader Cab Calloway showcased their talent in musical venues such as the Apollo Theatre, the Savoy Ballroom, the Plantation Club, the Ciro Club, Connie's Inn, Small's Paradise, Barron's Exclusive Club, and the Cotton Club, most of which denied access to African American patrons.

Though the male writers, artists, and performers of the Harlem Renaissance have dominated many studies of the period, feminists have recently generated great interest in the female artists who were often seen as marginally representative of the movement. Scholars such as Barbara Christian, Gloria Hull, Deborah McDowell, Nellie McKay, Hortense Spillers, Claudia Tate, Cheryl Wall, and Mary Helen Washington significantly revised old conceptions of the Harlem Renaissance by bringing out its misogyny and focusing on women's contributions. Gloria Hull writes in her landmark study *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) that one of the most influential figures in the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke, editor of the *New Negro*, aided novelist Zora Neale Hurston even as he perpetuated the misogyny that characterized the era by expressing dislike for women and promoting male authors. As Cheryl Wall pointed out recently in *Meridians*, organizers and speakers at the Civic Club dinner on March 21, 1924, known by some as a formal induction of the Harlem Renaissance, seriously marginalized the woman writer it was supposed to celebrate, **Jessie Redmon Fauset**.

As the literary editor of the *Crisis*, Fauset not only encouraged collaboration of ideas among African American writers and artists by hosting intellectual evenings that brought them together but also was a prolific writer herself and one of the major figures of the Renaissance. In addition to Fauset, many other women—both white and black—enabled black artists during the Renaissance, such as heiress A'Leila Walker, who opened the doors of her town house she named the “Dark Tower” to black artists and writers. Both Ethel Ray Nance, secretary to Charles Johnson at *Opportunity*, and Regina Andrews, librarian at Harlem public library, encouraged women's artistic production by hosting notable figures such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes in their shared apartment. **Georgia Douglas Johnson** not only entertained many of the famous figures of the Harlem Renaissance at her “S Street Salon” but also organized writing workshops where many of their ideas developed.

Writers such as Fauset and Johnson were part of a large group of women poets, novelists, and playwrights to explore the complicated experience of African American female identity during the Harlem Renaissance, a group that also included **Marita Bonner**, **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson**, **Angelina Weld Grimké**, **Nella Larsen**, **Pauline Hopkins**, Zora Neale Hurston, **Helene Johnson**, **Ann Petry**, and **Dorothy West**. Other less known women writers such as Anita Scott Coleman, who published several short stories and poems on women's issues in *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, Clarissa M. Scott Delaney, who was both a respected poet and a social worker, the African poet Gladys Mae Casely Hayford (Aquah Lalueh), who was an important figure in the Pan-African movement, poet and playwright **May Miller**, children's writer and poet Mary Effie Lee Newsome, the prolific poet Anne Bethel Bannister Spencer Scales, and others have been recovered impressively in *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (1990), though they have yet to be analyzed extensively.

Many African American women artists shared experiences of discrimination that reflected a complex mixture of racism and misogyny during the Harlem Renaissance and rebelled by establishing their own organizations or

by successfully expressing their sense of alienation creatively. Though sculptor Augusta Fells Savage was turned away from an art school because of her **race**, for example, she would eventually not only establish her own school, the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, but also begin the Harlem Community Art Center and aid in the organization of the Harlem Arts Guild. Also a sculptor, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller turned her experience of solitude as a black woman who experienced severe racial discrimination during her lifetime into widely celebrated art that brought together the images of African **folktales** and the painful experience of being an African American woman in the early twentieth century. Several other African American female sculptors flourished during this period, from Selma Burke, Elizabeth Alice Catlett, and May Howard Jackson, who produced busts of such notable figures as **Paul Lawrence Dunbar** and Du Bois, to Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, who earned international recognition as a sculptor. Painters Louis Mailou Jones, who brought the cultures of Haiti and Africa together in her impressionist paintings, and Laura Wheeler Waring, who not only illustrated for the *Crisis* but also composed portraits of many of the African American leaders of the period, also made important contributions to the world of African American art.

Some of the most notable musical and theatrical performers during the Harlem Renaissance were women as well. The most famous of these were **blues** singers such as Ma Rainey, commonly recognized as one of the earliest blues singers, and Bessie Smith, who called herself the “Empress of the Blues” and became a national phenomenon as one of the most successful singers of the early twentieth century. The unrelated Clara Smith was considered second only to Bessie. Jazz vocalist and songwriter **Billie Holiday** (Eleanora Fagan) continues to be celebrated as one of the most accomplished performers of jazz and blues and is also revered for her recording of “Strange Fruit” (1939), the first song by an African American that chastises the practice of lynching. Other singers such as Ida Cox, who successfully headlined her own shows, Marian Anderson, who was the first African American opera singer to perform at the Metropolitan Opera House, and Adelaide Hall, a singer whose impressive career had her performing from the time of the Renaissance until she was ninety years old, lived as examples that African American women could achieve great and lasting success as musicians. Performers such as Gladys Bentley (Bobbie Minton), an openly gay singer who cross-dressed, embraced and reflected the sexually liberal nature of the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age in general. Singer, dancer, and actor Florence Mills, whose career ended tragically early when she was only thirty-two, had become one of the most famous and popular black performers of her time in Europe and the United States. Singer and dancer **Josephine Baker** not only rose to international fame from complete poverty but also pushed the boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance world set by Du Bois and Locke in her risqué performance in *La Revue Nègre* (1925). Actors Rose McLendon, who starred in plays such as Langston Hughes’s *Mulatto*, which had become the longest-running play on Broadway at the time, and Ethel Waters, who lived through the horrific experiences of extreme poverty and child abuse to become one of the



most prominent singers and actresses of the Harlem Renaissance, also visibly contributed to the achievements of African American culture.

The creative art produced by both women and men of the Harlem Renaissance would inspire numerous African American artists, writers, and musicians of the future such as **Amiri Baraka** (LeRoi Jones), **Ishmael Reed**, **Audre Lorde**, **Paule Marshall**, **Toni Morrison**, and **Alice Walker**. But the legacy of women's contributions to the Harlem Renaissance is just beginning to be perceived as feminists work to uncover and explore the unique achievements of African American women artists.

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Kathleen M. Helal

### HARPER, FRANCES E. W. (1825–1911)

Born on September 24, 1825, in Baltimore, Maryland, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was a novelist, orator, essayist, poet, journalist, and activist. All of Harper's written and oratorical works were part of her efforts toward bringing about that "brighter coming day" she believed was on the horizon for women, African Americans, and indeed, all Americans.

Harper was born free in the slave state of Maryland and was orphaned at an early age. She was raised by her uncle William Watkins, who headed the William Watkins Academy for Negro Youth in Baltimore, a school recognized for its rigorous training in languages, biblical study, and elocution. As Frances Smith Foster notes, by age fourteen, Harper had acquired an education that was superior to most nineteenth-century Americans of any color or class at that time. Despite her education, it appears that Harper was only

able to find **work** as a seamstress, nurse, and housekeeper when she left the academy. Harper worked for the Armstrong **family** who owned a bookstore; they appear to have granted her access to their books in her spare time.

At age twenty, Harper published her first book, *Forest Leaves*, of which no extant copy appears to exist. In the early 1850s, Maryland laws prohibited free blacks from entering the state; if caught, they would be reenslaved. Baltimore was an increasingly dangerous place for free African Americans, and William Watkins closed his school and moved to Canada. For unknown reasons, Harper, aged twenty-five, did not travel with the family but moved to Columbus, Ohio, where she became the first woman professor at the newly formed Union Seminary (later Wilberforce University). Harper taught for a time at Little York, Pennsylvania, and eventually realized she was not well suited for teaching.

In response to an incident involving a free black man being sold back into **slavery**, Harper gave up teaching and devoted the rest of her life to abolition and other social reform agendas. In 1853, she moved to Philadelphia, where she published in abolitionist publications and lived with the family of noted abolitionist and **Underground Railroad** activist William Still, whose home was the main “depot” in Philadelphia. At this time, Harper contributed widely to numerous abolitionist publications, and in 1854 she combined her **poetry** and essays into *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*. As its title suggests, Harper addressed a wide range of topics including slavery, abolition, **religion**, women’s rights, temperance, and African American **history**. This volume sold 10,000 copies in its first three years and was enlarged and reissued in 1857. In 1871, it entered its twentieth edition. Harper is also listed as an editor and contributor to what is now considered to be the first African American literary journal, the *Anglo-African Magazine*. In 1859, she published what is generally considered to be the first short story by an African American woman, “The Two Offers.”

In 1854, after her first lecture in Boston, Harper accepted a position as a lecturer with the Maine Anti-Slavery Society and thus became one of the first professional orators in the United States. Harper was reported to be a highly articulate, persuasive, and fiery speaker who did not violate the rigid codes of female decorum. In 1866, Harper spoke at the Eleventh National Woman’s Rights Convention at which Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Frances D. Gage also spoke. Harper’s speech “We Are All Bound Up Together” established her presence with the national feminist organizations.

When she was thirty-six, she married Fenton Harper, a widower with four children. Together they had one child, Mary, who lived with Harper throughout her life. Little is known about Fenton or why Harper married at such a late age. When Fenton Harper died in 1864, everything that was jointly owned was taken from her to pay off debts she knew nothing about. This experience reinforced Harper’s understandings of the powerlessness of women and reinvigorated her commitment to equal rights for all. Within

months of his **death**, she and Mary moved to New England, and she returned to the lecture circuit.

Less is known about Harper's life after this point, and most of what is known about her comes from newspapers and other public documents. During the Civil War, she published writings and gave lectures. Between 1864 and 1870, she traveled to every southern state (except Texas and Arkansas), where she lectured to whites, blacks, and integrated audiences, teaching former slaves **literacy** and homemaking skills. She wrote letters to northern newspapers urging support for Reconstruction efforts. After the failure of Reconstruction, Harper argued for reformed voting rights and attempted to build strong African American communities from within.

In 1872, Harper published what is likely her most innovative work, *Sketches of Southern Life*. This work introduced the character of Aunt Chloe who, according to Frances Smith Foster, helped shape emerging interests in literary realism and local color through her use of dialect, folk characters, and culture. In 1892, Harper published her best-known novel, *Iola Leroy*, in response to the inaccurate and increasingly popular Plantation School novelists and in answer to the need for more books that would inspire and instruct African American readers.

Throughout her life, Harper was a committed social activist in printed word and deed for causes ranging from abolition to suffrage to temperance. She was one of the first African American women to hold office in the almost exclusively white Woman's Christian Temperance Union, was active in founding of the National Association of Colored Women, and from 1893 until her death, was involved in the Universal Peace Union. Harper's health began failing in 1901, and despite numerous offers of assistance, Harper declined them all, citing her desire for independence and liberty. Harper died on February 22, 1911, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Twentieth-century critics such as Barbara Christian, Frances Smith Foster, Mary Helen Washington, and many others have helped to recover and contextualize Harper's contribution to the American literary tradition and to show that Harper's belief in the "brighter coming day" remains as important today as it was in her own time.

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Heidi L. M. Jacobs

## HARRIS, E. LYNN (1955– )

E. Lynn Harris was born in Flint, Michigan, and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas. He attended the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, where he completed a B.A. in journalism. Following graduation, Harris enjoyed a successful thirteen-year career as computer salesperson before quitting that **work** to write his first novel, *Invisible Life*. Given the difficulties facing black gay authors in getting publishers to take on their work, Harris, notably, self-published *Invisible Life* in 1991 and sold it through black-owned bookstores, beauty salons, and even from the trunk of his car. When the first edition quickly sold out of its 10,000 copies, Harris won a reissue with Anchor Books, which simultaneously published his follow-up novel *Just as I Am* in 1994. This began a highly successful run of novels, stories, and a published memoir. Harris's works to date have all become bestsellers, while several have won a variety of awards, including the James Baldwin Award for Literary Excellence for *If This World Were Mine* (1997).

For literary critics and academic commentators, Harris's works, especially his breakthrough novel *Invisible Life*, are particularly significant in foregrounding bisexuality and exploring the complicated intersections of sexual **identity**, sexual behavior, and racial identity, particularly for black males. That these writings have gone on to achieve widespread mainstream popularity is significant in the **history** of publishing in the United States. The publication of Harris's *Invisible Life* in 1991 marked one of the first instances in which a U.S. novel addressed black male bisexuality as its central theme. While other black authors, including Wallace Thurman with *Infants of the Spring* (1932), **Claude McKay** with *Home to Harlem* (1928), and **James Baldwin** with *Another Country* (1962), had discussed black male bisexuality, it was

not presented as a primary theme. Although critics do not consider Harris's work to be among the same rank of **literature** as that of McKay or Baldwin, his work is important in bringing into the open a direct discussion of the experiences of bisexual black men.

In the United States, **race** and **class** converge to influence the development of discourses around sexual identities. Homophobia and racist **stereotypes** of black **sexuality** have contributed to a silencing of voices concerning black male bisexuality, forcing many black male bisexuals into positions of adopting invisible or dual lives. This invisibility sexuality has been matched by an invisibility in terms of political organizing and social movements. While bisexual political and social organizing in the United States is at a later and less developed stage than gay organizing, what organizations, publications, and networks do exist are predominantly white and middle class. This has created a certain disaffection and alienation among Black male bisexuals as their needs, interests, and experiences have been largely unarticulated, at least nationally.

This silencing has been reflected and reproduced in the publishing industry in the United States. Despite the emergence and proliferation of lesbian and gay presses as part of the growth of lesbian and gay movements, much of the work that is published is written by white men and women. The experiences of gay and bisexual black men have not found expression in much of the published work, certainly not in terms of **fiction**. Despite important breakthroughs for black women novelists, similar advances have not been made by black male novelists, especially among sexual minorities.

In light of these facts, the broad success of Harris's novels is particularly remarkable. Harris's popular writings have broken through the silence that has enveloped black male bisexuality.

In his treatments of black male sexuality, Harris's works suggest that supposedly stable or fixed identities such as gay or bisexual are inadequate for understanding black male sexuality or sexual practices. His works resist the essentializing, within dominant cultures and discourses, of black and gay identities. Instead, he offers glimpses into the often contradictory or conflictual experiences of black male sexuality. Harris's writings both problematize and reenvision conventional, racialized notions of **black masculinity** through the author's complex explorations of bisexuality. For Harris, bisexuality evades attempts to capture an inherent, essential sexual identity.

For Harris, repression relates as much or more to racialized experiences and the formation of racial identities as to sexual identities. Thus the processes of coming out and addressing one's emotional conflictuality are complexly bound up with the formation or reformation of racialized identities in his stories. In dealing with these contradictory experiences and understandings, Harris emphasizes his characters' attempts to forge some solidarity in the context of sexual diversity.

The extent to which Harris's discussions of bisexuality upset conventional approaches to sexual or identity politics have led some commentators to claim Harris as a postmodern writer. Still others have identified rather conventional

identity symbolism in Harris's works. Traci Carroll, for example, points to Harris's tendency to associate dark skin with traditional heterosexual masculinity and stable sexual identity. Other conventional aspects of Harris's works include his use of straightforward narrative structures focused on plot, the narrator's middle-class voice, and the privileging of personal upward mobility.

Elsewhere, Lisa Frieden criticizes the rather stereotypical portrayal of Basil, the sole character in Harris's work who maintains a bisexual identity throughout, as predatory and deceitful. While Harris's earlier works began a tentative process of dealing openly and thoughtfully with the complexities of bisexuality, his later works have settled into a more mainstream treatment that some critics suggest falls back on a discrediting of bisexuality as a transitional stage between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Even worse, Harris identifies bisexual men as deceivers primarily responsible for bringing HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) into the heterosexual **community**. This plays into conventional stereotypes that similarly attribute the spread of HIV into heterosexual and lesbian communities to the supposed promiscuity of bisexuals. These stereotypes, which downplay alternative explanations such as intravenous drug use or unsafe sex practices, reinforce notions that bisexuals are somehow more dishonest and irresponsible than monosexuals. While Harris does highlight social pressures, most notably homophobia, that force people to closet their sexuality, his failure to deconstruct these stereotypes, even as they contribute to the very processes Harris challenges, remains problematic.

Indeed, critics have also argued that Harris's works have retreated into a conservative defense of monogamy in which the bisexual character (Basil) poses the constant looming predatory threat to gay and straight couples alike. While Harris comes to pose bisexuality as a threat to heterosexual black women and African American families, he proposes a version of "**family values**" narratives as a means to repair divisions in African American communities in the context of more openly diverse sexual identities.

Part of this may be expressive of the tensions between Harris's understandings of his sexuality and his faith. In his second novel, *Just as I Am*, which takes its title from a **spiritual**, these tensions are expressed outwardly in the emphasis on **healing** and therapy, and confession within therapy, in that work. They are also reflected starkly in the decision by the series' protagonist Raymond to return to the **South**, where he moves back in with his parents and undertakes a period of chastity.

While Harris's discussion of homophobia, presentations of nonessentialist sexual and racial identities, and notions of healing and collective well-being touch upon values expressed in some **black feminist** theory, his work overall is conflicted and contradictory, torn between liberatory and conservative sentiments. In this regard, it may well be truly postmodern work.

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J. Shantz

### HEALING

African American feminist **literature** is richly textured with images of the healing of **body**, mind, and soul that echo the struggles of African American women to overcome white abstract beliefs about their femininity and humanity. Images of healing in the **poetry**, songs, and stories of African American women are a testament to their struggle for self-validation. The female healer character, often in the form of grandmother or spiritual **ancestor**, functions as part of a gynocentric discourse that strengthens the matriarchal bond through which **family history** and culture traditionally are passed down. For African American women writers, their literary images of healing are inextricably linked to a shared history of **slavery**, **motherhood**, and patriarchal domination that work to affirm the forces of **love** and hope.

Many images of healing in African American feminist literature concern dissipated and fractured motherhood through the loss of a child[ren]. One of the most horrific images in literature, and history, is the tearing away by slaveholders of a child from its mother. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), **Harriet Jacobs's** relationship with her grandmother demonstrates the bond between mothers, as both women lose children through slavery. The grandmother is a strong female character whose healing strength provides a solid foundation throughout *Incidents*. She affirms the bond of motherhood, as her healing love and wisdom are cornerstones of silent and subtle strength within the narrative. In **Toni Morrison's** *Beloved* (1987),

the women of the **community** gather around the house at 124 and loudly sing and pray for Sethe when the ghost of the murdered infant Beloved sucks the life from her. Sethe's crime went against the very notion of motherhood, yet she becomes the recipient of the healing love and strength of her sisters.

**Gloria Naylor's** works often utilize the natural and supernatural world, which then become the source of strength and healing. In *Linden Hills* (1985), Willa Nedeed is healed through the writings left by the previous Mrs. Nedeeds, creating a compelling bond between women that transcends time and gives Willa the strength to move past the loss of her infant and to embrace her own autonomy. In *Mama Day* (1988), it is the healing power of a family in crisis that becomes a testament to the infectiousness of human perseverance and the efficacy of believing. In **Toni Cade Bambara's** *The Salt Eaters* (1980), healing power is woven through a splendid array of characters ebbing in and around the life of Velma Henry. Minnie Ransom's bond to Old Wife is repeated in Ransom's bond to Velma as their unity demonstrates the radiant power of healing.

Framed around the desire to cure the soul from the repressiveness of slavery and the white belief in black inhumanity, frequent images of healing in African American literature unite physical **freedom** of the body with spiritual self-determination. For African American women the yearning for freedom of the body from patriarchal restraints becomes intertwined with the need for autonomy and selfhood. The spiritual narrative worked to validate African American women's humanity through the power of personal revelation, enabling the healing of both mind and soul. The act of owning one's story—of being free to *spea*k, to tell, to relive experiences—became both a liberating and healing power. Such examples include **Jarena Lee's** *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1836), in which Lee attempts suicide but is saved by a divine awakening from within and the discovery of Scripture. Her journey is one of self-discovery, and her narrative is a lyrical account of her determination to preach the Gospel despite the confines of patriarchal authority. Such spiritual healing and affirmation of female selfhood can also be found in the narrative of **Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart's** *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality* (1831), and **Harriet Wilson's** *Our Nig* (1859).

Voice is a source of empowerment in the act of healing and African American women's unabating will to speak without fear, to tell a story, and to relay experiences externalized an autonomy that challenged social attitudes toward African American women's intelligence and humanity. Healing images of freedom in song and verse are keenly captured in **Frances E. W. Harper's** "Eliza Harris" and "Songs for the People" where "music pure and strong" heals the heart and soul of all who hear. The lyrical grace and redemptive power of verse fosters a unique power to heal and celebrate womanhood. **Maya Angelou's** poetry presents deliciously positive visions of African American **beauty** and **sexuality**, contrary to restrictive white standards of beauty. Angelou's **autobiography** *I Know Why the Caged Bird*



*Sings* (1969) is a testament to her unflinching strength and resilience and exhibits a sense of the spiritual healing that comes from her ever-present awareness of the voice of her ancestors.

Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" expresses how it feels to be African American in a white community, how being colored should be but a small part of her wholeness. The act of *having* to explain her humanity outside of her color becomes a healing act of self-validation. The healing properties of self-revelation also run throughout Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as Janie sets herself in a comfortable position and proceeds to relate her story to Pheoby because "'tain't no use in me telling you somethin' unless Ah give you de understandin' to go 'long wid it." It is the act of sharing stories, of passing down wisdom between women, that creates a lush network of healing, of sisters whose resplendent array of experiences and knowledge heals each other, their families, and their community. The healing power within community is a theme in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), where Shug Avery's vivacious self-determination and captivating presence slowly heal the horrors of **rape** and **domestic** abuse Celie has suffered.

Images of healing in African American women's stories carry added significance as bearers of the black female experience both past and present. African American feminist writings reach beyond the color line and out to the whole community of women, sharing their healing power within the common bonds of motherhood, child rearing, and patriarchal bondage.

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Debbie Clare Olson

### HERRON, CAROLIVIA (1947– )

Although Carolivia Herron's first novel *Thereafter Johnnie* (1991) won wide critical acclaim, she is best known for her controversial children's book *Nappy Hair* (1997), an **identity**-affirming celebration of African American female **beauty**.

Herron's *Nappy Hair* is a delightful autobiographical sketch about Brenda and her unruly hair. Herron's story utilizes the African American call-and-response tradition that works rhythmically to incorporate much more than a commentary on Brenda's nappy hair. Herron's story is really an affirmation

of black beauty in the face of an increasingly narrow white standard of what constitutes attractiveness. Herron's tale celebrates Brenda's nappy hair by weaving a lyrical **history** around Brenda's hair and keenly connecting a sense of pride to the heritage her nappy hair represents. Herron's tale is an important contribution to black children's **literature** as it works to affirm black standards of beauty in a society that continuously bombards black children with a predominantly white paradigm.

Herron's first and only novel to date, *Thereafter Johnnie*, is a richly textured epic set in Washington, D.C., with numerous allusions to **myth** and biblical prophecies. Herron's novel discombobulates father-daughter incest, patriarchal **family** structure, and the intricacies of seduction. *Thereafter Johnnie* contains a complex structure that draws heavily on ancient Greek myths and African American folk legends. Herron's Johnnie, the child of Patricia and her father, John Christopher, is mute as a child but finds her voice at age fourteen. Johnnie's muteness parallels Herron's own childhood lack of awareness about sexual abuse she suffered. Herron's Johnnie does not slip into a melancholy victimhood but rather is a strong character who embarks on a search for her identity. The story is told from multiple female points of view, thereby negating the traditional patriarchal exclusivity of history and myth, as it explores the multifaceted history of modern racial conflict within the milieu of a global **race** war. The novel traces the destruction of the family and its ultimate **healing** through a second coming—Johnnie as messiah—that births a new society.

Herron was born on July 22, 1947, in Washington, D.C., to Oscar and Georgia Herron. In 1969 she earned her B.A. in English from Eastern Baptist College and, in 1973, an M.A. in English from Villanova University. She completed a second M.A. in comparative literature and creative writing and her Ph.D. in comparative literature and literary theory from the University of Pennsylvania in 1985. Herron taught at Harvard University as an assistant professor of Afro-American studies and comparative literature from 1986 to 1990. In 1985 Herron was awarded a Fulbright Research Scholarship and in 1989 was awarded the Folger Shakespeare Library Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship. Herron was a Bunting fellow at Radcliffe College from 1988 to 1989. She was a visiting professor at Carleton College in 1989, and from 1990 to 1992 Herron was the director of the Epicenter for the Study of Epic Literature and associate professor of English at Mount Holyoke College. Herron is a founding member of Jews of African Descent and continues her research in the interconnectedness of Judaic and African cultures.

*See also* Children's and Young Adult Literature

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## HISTORICAL FICTION

Historical fiction is a narrative form that combines research with imaginary elements in order to recreate a historical event, period, or figure. African American **literature** reworks the nineteenth-century European tradition of the historical novel in order to challenge versions of **history** established by white hegemonies. African American historical fiction, therefore, privileges the lives of the socially marginalized who remained outside the pages of history. **Slave narratives**, in their double role of contributing to the abolitionist cause and to the making of history, establish one of the most prevailing concerns of the black historical narrative—the production of the historical record.

**Frederick Douglass's** novella *The Heroic Slave* (1853) is one of the first texts to combine slave and fictional narratives in order to recover African American history. In this text there is a conscious effort to challenge the gaps and distortions of the American annals. In the recreation of the story of the slave rebel Madison Washington, Douglass established those unrecorded elements through **fiction**. The narrative is constructed around the oral exchanges between characters. From Madison's soliloquy to the final recounting of the mutiny on board the *Creole* by its surviving first mate, Douglass promotes the spoken word as a means of recovering history, thus establishing another significant paradigm in African American historical fiction. In this work, Douglass also illustrates that in the African American text history is simply not the story of the past but a means of explaining and understanding the present.

This dual process of entering into a dialogue with contemporary readers, calling their attention to the plight of a disenfranchised people while recording and reimagining history, also informs the fictional work of **Frances E. W. Harper**. As a women's rights activist, Harper is particularly keen to register the role of black women during **slavery**, the Civil War, and its aftermath. In *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1867–1868), slave women risk their lives to cross rebel lines in order to aid suffering soldiers. In *Iola Leroy* (1892), a female slave ingeniously spies for the Union army by hanging her sheets in different ways, which corresponded to different movements of the rebel forces, while Iola works as a nurse, relieving the suffering of the wounded. After the war the women continue to have an active role, working side by side with men in a continuous effort to reunite families and establish communities. The past, in Harper's

work, functions less as a nostalgic era of courageous endurance and deliverance and more as a period from which directions for the future can be drawn. An interesting 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 summons the creation of a literary body that would reflect the history of African Americans reimagined and written by themselves.

Nineteenth-century African American literature, however, presents limitations in its treatment of history. Writers such as Harper 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 by both 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 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" (53). 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** benchmark novel *Jubilee* (1966).

Led by the desire to record her great-grandmother's story, Walker extensively researched the historical texts available in the 1940s and 1950s, concluding that not only was African American history practically unwritten but that black women's history was still in a state of tabula rasa. Studying a myriad of documents, Walker created a historical context in which to give shape to her grandmother's oral narrative. The novelist creates a patchwork made up of fact and fiction in order to bring to life history and story. To validate the uniqueness of her grandmother's narrative and the distinctiveness of African American history and experience, Walker uses **folklore** as the framework of her novel. Music is an important element in this context. Walker shows her understanding of the central role that music occupies in black American culture by opening each chapter of her novel with a passage from a song. These passages function as epigraphs that establish the theme or set the tone of each chapter. In a European tradition, these excerpts are, generally speaking, taken from influential works, which inspired authors and helped to shape texts and traditions. Choosing oral texts as epigraphs, Walker clarifies the tradition within which her work is set. She also uses folk speech patterns, storytelling, and sayings; superstitions, beliefs, **religion**, and rituals; food, herbal medicine, and household customs; quilt making, clothing, and games in order to represent and express African American history in folk terms. In others words, Walker weaves her prose with those African

American traditions and skills that were communicated via word of mouth, revealing a rich and whole culture that survived and developed devoid of the printed word. Walker's thorough research, concern with historical accuracy, and meticulous representation of the quotidian freed other writers from the constrictions of verisimilitude, allowing them to enter the more complex psychological landscapes of the enslaved subject.

In the 1970s, with the emergence of black studies departments and the publication of studies on the history of slavery such as John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* and George Rawick's *From Sundown to Sunup*, both published in 1972, the novelist could be less preoccupied with her or his role as social historian. The historical fiction of this period is dominated by two main trends, representations of the early twentieth century and of the antebellum **South**. Novels such as **Louise Meriwether's** *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970), **Toni Morrison's** *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977) and **Alice Walker's** *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) explore the era of their parents' generation and their own childhood and early adulthood, portraying the endurance of both rural and urban communities in a segregated society from the 1920s to the 1960s. These novels reexamine and reinvent the African American experience as a part of a literary process that points toward a revision and redefinition of black **identity** from an imaginative perspective.

The exploration of slavery continues to dominate the historical novels of this decade such as **Ernest Gaines's** *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), **Gayl Jones's** *Corregidora* (1975), **Ishmael Reed's** *Flight to Canada* (1976), **Alex Haley's** *Roots* (1976), **Barbara Chase-Riboud's** *Sally Hemings* (1979), and **Octavia Butler's** *Kindred* (1979). With the exception of *Flight to Canada*, which tells the story of Raven Quickskill, an escaped bondman who returns to the plantation to free other slaves, and *Roots*, a genealogical narrative that traces the origins of a black American **family** to Africa, these novels privilege the female slave.

The most innovative works of this period are those that attempt to find different modes of exploring slavery, developing and reworking the African American historical novel. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines validates oral tradition by recreating the past through the voice of a storyteller, a representative figure whose chronicle is simultaneously the narrative of her personal story and the collective history of African Americans. *Flight to Canada* presents a parody of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) in a text that revises the conventions of the slave narrative. Reed's use of anachronistic elements such as a slave's escape by jumbo jet and the television broadcast of Lincoln's assassination blurs the boundaries and draws parallels between slavery and the Civil War and the present of the bicentennial anniversary of the country. In *Kindred*, Butler uses time travel to transport her protagonist from California in 1976 to an 1813 plantation, where her grandmother was born, testing her survival skills with the knowledge of the present. In Butler's novel, black history is marked by its discontinuity. On her last trip to the past, Dana, the main character, loses an arm—a metaphor for a history that cannot be retrieved.

In *Corregidora*, the chronological narrative is abandoned in favor of a narrating mode that is fragmented and at times seemingly disjointed in order to mirror the mental processes by which one remembers, selects, and recreates different aspects of personal history. Jones's first-person narrative constitutes an innovative approach to the use of folk speech. In order to solve the tension between the third-person narrator's standard English and the characters' dialogue or monologue in vernacular, Jones breaks out of this narrative frame. By doing so she not only removes the hierarchical relationship between standard English and black vernacular, but she also authenticates African American oral tradition by creating a narrator who is essentially a storyteller. Jones also initiates a new trend in the African American historical novel by exploring those events that, owing to their horrific nature, compromise the notion of historical continuity not because the past remains irremediably cut off from the present but because it remains a ghostly presence in the present day. This novel is also influential in its use of blues patterns of call and response to recreate a notion of history that is circular rather than linear. The blues function as a creative synthesis in which the tensions and contradictions of African American history can be contained.

In the 1980s and the subsequent decades, slavery remained a central theme in African American historical fiction. The emphasis of the works from this period is the representation of the heterogeneity of the experience of the enslaved self along with the exploration of facets of that experience that, in both slave narratives and nineteenth-century literature, remained in the realm of the unspeakable. In *Dessa Rose* (1986) and *Beloved* (1987), **Sherley Anne Williams** and **Toni Morrison**, respectively, also create fiction from fact in order to transform the fragmented past into what Margaret Walker calls the "muscle and flesh for the real and living bones of history" (*How I Wrote Jubilee* 58). In the "Author's Note" to *Dessa Rose*, Williams explains that her story is based on two unrelated historical episodes: a 1829 uprising on a coffer in Kentucky led by a pregnant slave and the story of a white woman who, living in a remote area of North Carolina in 1830, offers refuge to runaway slaves. Morrison bases her novel on the story of Margaret Garner, a slave who in Cincinnati in 1856 attempted to kill her four children, trying to save them from a life of bondage. Both these novels move away from linear modes of narration, reflecting blues patterns of repetition and variation. From the silences to the half-told tales, the fabric of the narrative leaves many loose threads to be picked up at a later stage. The act of reading becomes one of following the retelling of certain episodes until a more complete picture emerges. In these novels, **memory** is a critical issue not only because the way one remembers shapes the structure of the narrative but also because it is crucial to the reconstruction of an unwritten past. In *Dessa Rose*, historical continuity is assured by the ex-slave's passing on of her memories to next generation. In *Beloved*, Morrison reworks Jones's notion that a past of slavery can hold a grip on the present. However, Morrison's concept of "re-memory," a recollection that untold or unclaimed remains a ghostly presence in the present, is more ambiguous. Although the prefix "re" suggests repetition, the

never-ending resurfacing of the same memory, the final chapter of the novel reiterates that *Beloved's* story was not one to pass on. In this way, Morrison illustrates the paradox inherent in recreating the past, recalling and reimagining what the ancestors chose to forget.

In *Oxherding Tale* (1982), **Charles Johnson** dramatizes the sexual exploitation of enslaved men. Edward P. Jones explores the contradictory world of black slaveholders in *The Known World* (2003). In *Free* (1992), Marsha Hunt writes about the legacies of slavery in a small northern town in the early twentieth century, exploring the rigid divisions of **class**, race, and sex of the age in the context of a homosexual relationship and thus uncovering another silenced aspect of American history.

This period also witnessed the publication of critically acclaimed fictional biographies. **Virginia Hamilton's** *Anthony Burns* (1988) dramatizes the life of the eponymous runaway slave, his trial and return to slavery under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In *The President's Daughter* (1994), Barbara Chase-Riboud presents a sequel to *Sally Hemings*, which chronicles the life of Harriet, Sally's daughter with Thomas Jefferson. Louise Meriwether's *Fragments of the Ark* (1994) is based on the life of Robert Smalls and explores the African American participation in, and perspectives on, the Civil War. Jewell Parker Rhodes chronicles the intimate relationships of Frederick Douglass in *Douglass' Women: A Novel* (2003). Jacqueline Sheehan presents a fictional account of the life of **Sojourner Truth** in *Truth: A Novel* (2003).

Contemporary writers have experimented with ways of representing in their work the harrowing experience of the **Middle Passage**, the Atlantic crossing of kidnapped slaves from Africa to the New World. Examples of accounts of the Middle Passage occur in **Paule Marshall's** *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). The protagonist's symbolic experience of the ancestors' sea voyage, rather than signifying the moving away from homeland, family, language, and history, signals the character's redefinition of her racial identity by returning to the origins of the black people in the Americas. In *Beloved*, the spirit of the dead baby remembers the lives of several incarnations, recalling the memories of the slave ship in order to connect with the experience of the "Sixty Million and more" to whom the book is dedicated. However, it is not until the publication of Chase-Riboud's *Echo of Lions* (1989) and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) that the Atlantic crossing receives a full-scale treatment.

Chase-Riboud's novel recreates the story of Joseph Cinque, an African captive who led a mutiny on board the slaver *Amistad* in 1839. The mutineers attempt to find their way back to West Africa but are captured and imprisoned in New Haven. The novel dramatizes a trial case that finally ends in the Supreme Court, where the accused are defended by ex-president John Quincy Adams and, in a landmark decision, acquitted. Chase-Riboud explores the contradictions inherent to the American political and judicial system, while showing the impact of American slavery on the African continent. In the context of a land devastated by the illegal slave trade, Cinque's triumph is a partial one.

*Middle Passage* follows the adventures of a recently emancipated slave from Illinois, who ends up traveling first to New Orleans and then to Africa aboard

an illegal slave ship. In the characterization of his protagonist, Johnson reworks the type of the trickster, who is made to review his identity in his encounter with the Allmuseri tribe. The novel is clearly influenced by texts of the Western tradition such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and "Benito Cereno" (1856) and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), while rewriting the slave narrative by drawing on different genres, including **autobiography**, diary, logbook, and travel narrative.

In their short stories "Damballah" (1981) and "The Education of Mingo" (1977), **John Edgar Wideman** and Charles Johnson, respectively, represent the lives of the abducted Africans and their adjustment to the New World. Johnson's tale focuses on the slave/master relationship and how the dynamics of slavery affect both blacks and whites. In Wideman's text, the figure of the African functions as a more obvious link between America and Africa. The memory of Africa passed on to a younger slave reshapes both the young man's identity and the historical map of the Americas, partially recovering the cultural loss of the Middle Passage.

Other novels published in the last two decades have turned to exploring the quest for integration during the civil rights era in works that favor the child's perspective of the world. **Ntozake Shange's** *Betsey Brown* (1985) and **Maxine Clair's** *Rattle Bone* (1994) are two coming-of-age narratives set against the background of school desegregation. **Tina McElroy Ansa's** *Baby of the Family* (1989) follows the first years of Lena McPherson in an evocation of black middle-class life in 1950s Georgia. Set in the turbulent years of the early 1960s, A. J. Verdelle's *The Good Negress* (1995) describes a young girl's struggle to come to terms with her identity, divided between the rural world of her grandmother and the more sophisticated and somewhat unsettling realm of her mother's house in Detroit. In *Only Twice I've Wished for Heaven* (1997), Dawn Turner Trice explores the emergence of a black middle class in the 1970s that separated themselves from the rest of the **community** by living in different areas and attending distinct schools and churches. Narrated from the perspective of eleven-year-old Temmy, the novel examines the cultural losses intrinsic in the establishment of social boundaries, which contribute to a homogenization of the experience. In these narratives, the child's point of view allows the writers to register the disquietude and uncertainty of an evolving society.

Recent portrayals of the slavery era emphasize the genealogical narrative. **Linda Beatrice Brown's** *Crossing Over Jordan* (1995), Sandra Jackson-Opoku's *The River Where Blood Is Born* (1997), Connie Briscoe's *A Long Way from Home* (1999), and Lalita Tademy's *Cane River* (2001) explore the lives of several generations of African American women of the same family, dealing with issues of racism, sexual exploitation, miscegenation, and **passing**, which not only blur racial boundaries but also expose the complexities of African American history. **J. California Cooper's** *Family* (1991), *In Search of Satisfaction* (1994), and *The Wake of the Wind* (1998) are also tales told across generational lines in order to reconstruct African American history by drawing on family chronicles.

*See also* Neo-Slave Narrative



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Ana Nunes

### HISTORY

The exploration of history as narrative and the ways in which such narratives shape the understanding of **identity** and the world have been at the heart of African American **literature** from the earliest **slave narrative** through the modernist novels of **Ralph Ellison** and **Toni Morrison**. Feminist African American literature adds a new and important lens to the examination of historical narrative, not only to illuminate the construction of **race** and **class** but to reveal and interrogate the heteropatriarchal standards that inform judgments and values about gender and **sexuality**. Just as **Harriet Jacobs’s** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) exposed the particular effects of **slavery** on women and the rampant sexual abuse perpetrated against them, so feminist African American literature exposes sexist assumptions that inform works of art.

Thus the interests of African American women writers in the re-presentation of history is twofold: to uncover the racist and sexist assumptions that have shaped historical narratives and priorities, on the one hand, and to articulate a positive historical narrative of cultural complexity and survival in African American cultural history and, specifically, history as viewed through women’s experience, on the other. Even as black women artists were re-presenting history, they were making history of their own. As black women’s writing has flourished in America between 1970s and the present, it has done so in tandem with **black**

**feminist criticism**, which offers a hermeneutic for reading the writing of black women, and **black feminism**, which has created an activist agenda for change in the lives of black women and the systems that oppress them.

Because **fiction** relies on narrative, the African American novel has been a rich resource for alternative versions of history and challenges to official interpretations of the past. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), now considered one of the classic novels of the twentieth century, is an intricate narrative that explores the persistence of the past in the present through such double-edged legacies as African American music and American **stereotypes** of blackness. Ellison's exploration of history as internalized racism and the resulting double consciousness in his central male character is a landmark in African American fiction, but his treatment of female characters in this novel remains problematic because Ellison uses them in order to reflect the psychological dilemmas of his central male character, rather than as subjects in their own right. Thus he resorts to "types"—either the "forbidden fruit" of the erotically charged white, blond woman or the sturdy, reliable "**Mammy**" archetype, as in his landlady Mary Rambo. Such representations are answered by the work of the many fine African American women novelists writing today.

African American women novelists present women as subjects as they reveal internalized racism *and* sexism, often showing how internalized racism creates sexist hierarchies in black American culture. Before Ellison, **Nella Larsen**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, and **Ann Petry**, among others, sought to explore the consciousness and experience of women caught in sexist scenarios. Hurston, in particular, reveals the ways in which hierarchies are inscribed in history and serve to oppress both women and cultural minorities such as African Americans and Bahamians. Since the publication of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, such novelists as **Toni Cade Bambara**, **Barbara Chase-Riboud**, **Gayl Jones**, Toni Morrison, **Gloria Naylor**, **Alice Walker**, and **Sherley Anne Williams** have made women's lives, characters, and situations central to their historical novels.

Two African American women novelists in particular have contributed to African American women's history not only in their fiction but through their criticism. Alice Walker's articulation of a matrilineal history for black women artists in her groundbreaking essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1984) and a literary history for black women writers through her essays on Zora Neale Hurston have provided inspiration for many black artists and critics engaged in the acts of recovery and identity formation. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple* (1985) ignited a controversy in the black **community** among a number of male critics who felt that she was casting black men in a bad light by exposing **domestic** and sexual abuse within the black community. Their fury was, in retrospect, a measure of her success in challenging internalized sexism as well as racism. Toni Morrison, whose novels also expose sexism, writes fiction with textured details drawn from specific moments in American history—post-World War I Ohio in *Sula* (1974), reconstruction Ohio in *Beloved* (1987), westward migration in *Paradise* (1998), and the culture of African American seaside resorts in *Love*

(2003). Her influential essays on the reading of American literature, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), have profoundly affected the ways in which race is discussed and American literature, in particular, is interpreted.

Poets and dramatists have also contributed to the representation of history, especially as it concerns the lives of black women, in their work. In **poetry**, **Sonia Sanchez** and **Carolyn Rodgers** have articulated the perspectives of women so often missing from the **Black Arts Movement**. **Lucille Clifton** personifies history as female and gives voice to mythic female characters such as Eve. **Elizabeth Alexander** creates a voice for the Venus Hottentot in the title poem of her first collection, *The Venus Hottentot: Poems* (2004), and explores the personas of Betty Shabazz and Toni Morrison in her later work. **Anna Deveare Smith** creates a tableaux of living history in her docudramas based on live interviews such as *Fire in the Mirror* (1993).

While black women writers were exploring history in their work, they were also making history. Although the label “feminist” was not widely used to refer to black women until the 1970s, women’s strategies for survival during the preceding years have increasingly become the subject of black feminist art and scholarship. In 1970 Toni Cade Bambara edited a collection titled *The Black Woman*, celebrating the contributions of black women to history and culture. In the same year, Toni Morrison, then an editor at Random House, published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and also edited *The Black Book*, a collection of pictures, newspaper articles, advertisements, and other documents revealing an African American cultural legacy. Morrison continued to **work** to bring the writings of other black women writers into print, notably those of Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara, as she developed her own career as a novelist. In 1973 the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was formed at the offices of the National Organization for Women (NOW). This organization was formed partly in response to the continued media coverage of the feminist movement as white and middle class and sought to bring visibility to a black female leadership to address women’s issues in African American contexts. As black feminists sought to articulate an agenda, a number of prominent black women writers objected to the label “feminist,” including Toni Morrison, who argued in a *New York Times* interview that black women were the original working women and that their agenda differed significantly from that of white middle-class feminists. Alice Walker, in response to the controversy, coined the term “**womanist**” to refer to those who loved women and who collaborated with them in order to foster health and creativity. Patricia Hill Collins, a sociologist, has been one of the leading thinkers shaping theories of black feminist thought.

Writers such as **Audre Lorde**, Margaret Sloan, and Barbara Christian focused on black lesbian issues to address the interlocking oppressions of patriarchy and heterosexism in the lives of black women, owning black feminism and adding strength to its social analyses. Audre Lorde’s embrace of the label “black lesbian feminist,” and her argument that this term embraced all black women who supported each other through female community, redefined the

lesbian dimensions of black feminist criticism in ways that made it central to the movement. As these women artists and writers developed a feminist critique, they were also engaged both in the re-vision and in the making of history.

One of the first acts of black feminist criticism was that of historical recovery. Mari Evan's *Black Women Writers* (1984) and Mary Helen Washington's anthologies *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975) and *Invented Lives* (1987) made a chronological array of black women's writing available to a wide reading public. The rise of black feminist criticism was a response to the need for new historical paradigms that inform critical values and evaluation. In tandem with the development of this criticism, the recovery of black women's texts from obscurity began. Jean Fagin Yellin's scholarship on Harriet Jacobs has canonized that text as one of the most important slave narratives and the leading female slave narrative. Her analysis of Jacobs's narrative revealed the ways in which the paradigm of female writing differed, not only in terms of experience but structurally from male narratives such as the self-made-man pattern of **Frederick Douglass's** *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). In contrast to Douglass's narrative, Jacobs's reveals the networks of connection and interpersonal relationships that made her escape possible. Nonetheless, Douglass himself was a strong supporter of women's rights and was present at the first Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.

A number of male African American scholars have done work or collaborated to further the study of history in black feminist literature and criticism. Henry Louis Gates's work of anthologizing black feminist criticism and editing the **Schomburg** series, which reproduces nineteenth-century literature by black women, has contributed significantly to the prominence of both historical scholarship on black women writers and theory written by contemporary black women critics, as has his recent discovery and edition of **Hannah Crafts's** *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (2002). Michael Awkward's *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels* (1989) wove together historical analysis with contemporary theory as it provided a new standard of theoretical sophistication for the discipline.

Certain historical moments have become of particular interest to black feminist writers and critics. Among them are slavery and emancipation, migration, the **blues**, domestic work, the representation of the **body**. In addition to moments of physical struggle, such as escape from slavery and abusive situations, and moments of historical achievement, such as emancipation and the **civil rights movement**, women writers pay special attention to domestic life and female friendships. Both black male and female writers have explored in depth the legacy of the **South** and African American music. Black women writers in particular have paid attention to the ways in which migration and the blues have created mobility, space, and a variety of new roles for women to play in culture. They have explored the ways in which the "**beauty myth**" has distorted the self-images of black women. And they continue to explore the intersection of domestic spaces and technology, communication, and mass media. The most recent criticism coming from African American women writers invested in historical interpretation is influenced by cultural criticism,

as exemplified in the work of Jacqueline Bobo. Telling histories continues to be a vital part of African American women's writing and criticism, even as the theories and perspectives continually shift to find a more accurate lens through which to expose racism, sexism, and the brilliant survival strategies of black women, as well as their creative triumphs today.

*See also* Historical Fiction; Neo-Slave Narrative

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*Ann Hostetler*

### HOLIDAY, BILLIE (1915–1959)

The white gardenia in her hair was as much her trademark as the soulfulness of her voice. Billie Holiday, who has been described as kind, maternal, volatile, happy, sad, irresponsible, and gentle, is certainly one of the most well known **jazz** singers in America.

Born Eleanora Fagan in early-twentieth-century Baltimore, Holiday experienced the hardships of segregation and poverty. For the first ten years of her life she lived intermittently with her mother, her extended **family**, and a Catholic school for wayward black girls while her mother sought employment and relationships in New York and Philadelphia. Once finally reunited with her mother in New York, she contributed to the household by running errands, babysitting, and scrubbing house steps.

Holiday ran errands for one particular woman, the owner of a brothel, who allowed her to listen to the music of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith on the phonograph. That music changed her life.

Although women were not encouraged to sing or play jazz, Holiday began singing in Harlem night clubs. These performances led to her first recordings in 1933, "Your Mother's Son-in-Law" and "Riffin' the Scotch." Between the

years of 1935 and 1938, she recorded over eighty songs. While there were some who did not appreciate her style of singing or the music she sang, most who heard her were captivated by the soul in her voice and the artistry with which she used it.

Her subject matter is perhaps less desirable for many modern feminists. For instance, in “My Man,” the speaker is content to stay in a relationship with a man who is unfaithful and abusive. In “Billie’s Blues,” although the speaker seems to have a strong sense of self at times, she also remains in a relationship with a man whom she laments treats her as a slave. While there is no justification for such relationships, one must recognize the impact these songs had on Holiday’s audiences: Many women felt that she was singing their story. One should also consider that these songs of bad relationships and loss could quite possibly be drawn from her own life. Holiday suffered through many bad experiences with men, beginning with a distant relationship with her father and including her **rape** by a neighbor, unwanted sexual advances by a cousin, a brief stint as a prostitute, and involvement with abusive men.

Holiday’s experiences also led her to record “Strange Fruit” in 1939. This song about the surreal horror of southern lynching expressed the anger Holiday felt about the racism she and other blacks suffered. She was initially reluctant to record the song for fear that people would hate it, but the song was a turning point in her career and one of her most well known.

In her 1956 **autobiography** *Lady Sings the Blues* (written with William Duffy), Holiday recounts not only the triumphs of her life and music but the dark times as well. While many agree that this story is lyrical and captivating, there is some doubt as to the truth of many of the details. Finding it a story worth knowing, however, Paramount Studios released a **film** loosely based on the book in October 1972. Starring Diana Ross and Billy Dee Williams, the movie received favorable reviews and five Academy Award nominations, including Best Actress.

In 1959, Holiday succumbed to chronic alcohol and drug abuse. While such behavior is an unforgettable part of her life, Holiday is best remembered as a woman who sang the heartache and struggle of the black people but who also showed them the **beauty** that life can bring.

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*RaShell R. Smith-Spears*

## HOME

For the African American **community**, home has often been perceived as a site of conflict. Forcibly removed from Africa, African Americans lost physical contact with their indigenous home. The “slave culture debate,” which has gone on for decades, argues whether or not African Americans brought certain values, traditions, and customs with them when they were forced to migrate to the Americas. The evidence of the continued influence of African aesthetics on the African American culture is highly noticeable. Contemporary African American music owes its development to the slave songs and **work** songs that were created during **slavery**. In these work songs and in other aspects of communication, Africans in the Americas used the drum, a distinctly African music form, to express themselves. More important, Africans in the Americas carried with them the **memory** of Africa and an oral tradition that allowed them to pass on their personal and group **history**.

It is through the oral tradition that the most viable connection to Africa as the lost home has been maintained. In most slave communities, slaves who escaped from the plantations formed Maroon communities in the hills. These communities maintained a strong connection to Africa through the oral telling of stories. The oral tradition has been an instrumental part of the black experience in the Americas. It is often incorporated in African American **literature** as a means of culture communication and cultural transcendence. From the oral tradition, African Americans developed “call and response,” a form of communication that has been incorporated into African American culture. Perhaps the most noticeable use of call and response in African American literature comes in **Toni Morrison**’s novel *Beloved* (1987), which uses the tradition as an affirmation of the spirit of the African in the African American.

The idea of Africa as the “true” home of African Americans is not simply an impression that comes from the psychological maintenance of African values. Early African American writers were identified as *transatlantic writers*, a term that reflected their multiple local affiliations. Olaudah Equiano is perhaps the most well known of these writers. Equiano, unlike many slaves, carried with him a strong memory of his African home and the traditions by which he was raised. Although Equiano is forced to mask his relationship to his indigenous home behind a developed interest in **Christianity**, he continually lets his readers know that he has not forgotten his past. When Equiano is first introduced to the Christian **religion**, his acceptance comes

with an assertion that he can follow this religion because he identifies in these written words the customs and traditions of his African home. Equiano spends most of his life after capture sailing the Atlantic; his identification as a transatlantic writer captures the true nature of his physical alliances, as an individual tied not only to the Atlantic but also to the African, American, and European continent that borders it.

For slaves who, unlike Equiano, were not able to traverse the Atlantic, the connection to Africa as home is not as evident. Although many slaves acknowledge that their true home existed elsewhere, the desire for survival became a longing to find place where they could live as free men in the Americas. Thus, we find in the narrative of **Frederick Douglass** one of the first claims of America as home. Douglass can, in effect, be seen as the beginning of **Black Nationalism** in America. Douglass speaks not on behalf of himself as an individual but for the African American community as a whole when he calls for **freedom** and an acceptance of his humanity. With these words comes an acknowledgment that African Americans belonged here. Henry Garnett and David Walker further establish this idea by articulating in their writings that it is the labor of blacks in America that has made it what it is, establishing that African Americans belong here not simply because this is the space that they occupy but, most important, because this is the space that they have built with their sweat and labor. Ironically, despite his emphasis on seeing the black population as a community, Douglass deemphasizes the role that gender played in the slave system that developed in the United States.

With the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, life changed for African Americans. Some scholars have argued that with the abolishment of slavery and the onset of Jim Crow laws and lynching, life got much worse for the black population in America. Although African Americans gained their freedom, they did not gain access to the resources they would need to establish themselves as viable “citizens” in America. African Americans found themselves after the Civil War without “40 acres and a mule”—without property or work. A sharecropping system was established, but instead of providing African Americans with access to wealth, it was another system by which mainstream Americans used black labor without proper forms of compensation. Thus African Americans found it hard to identify America as home. It is within this environment that Booker T. Washington developed his “Atlanta Compromise.” Born a slave, Washington spent much of his life as a laborer. He saw the future of blacks in America as being tied to the question of economics. African Americans needed to prove themselves productive members of American society in order to gain access equality. With his “Cast Down Your Buckets” speech, given in Atlanta, Georgia, on September 18, 1895, Washington became one of the most controversial figures in African American history. Washington suggests that blacks needed to begin at the bottom of American society as laborers and work their way into the American economic system. He likewise calls to white Americans, who were at the time looking to recent immigrants



for labor, to rely on the population of newly freed slaves. Washington was highly critiqued by his contemporaries including W.E.B. Du Bois, who saw his uplift ideology as assimilationist. Du Bois critiqued Washington for asking African Americans to give up the basic rights that would allow them to legally and psychologically make a claim of America as home. Du Bois asserted that Washington's ideology asked blacks to give up the right to vote as well as their civil rights. Du Bois was very critical of having all African Americans establish themselves as laborers.

For Du Bois the question of racial uplift was a question of representation. His solution was to have the "Talented Tenth" of the black community gain economic and social stability and then be responsible for uplifting the rest of the **race**. He believed African Americans could gain access to mainstream America through its talented artists and scholars. Du Bois's ideology was not without its limitations; it is questionable whether or not Du Bois saw women as possible candidates for the Talented Tenth.

Du Bois's ideas about racial uplift and representation proved to be instrumental in the development of the **Harlem Renaissance** (a.k.a. the New Negro movement). His assertion that all art produced in the African American community be a form of propaganda helped to structure the movement. Du Bois was particularly interested in the ways that the white mainstream viewed African Americans; he was concerned with the image of the black community that was presented in literature and art. Du Bois therefore asked artists to produce positive images of African Americans in all forms of art, images of middle-class, upwardly mobile, educated African Americans. Du Bois can be seen as attempting to write the African American into American citizens, to create a sense of home, or nation, through literature. Du Bois's endeavor was not an impossible or a new one. Early settlers of America had in effect used literature as a means for creating the nation. Benjamin Franklin's notion of the self-made man became a template for American citizenship and American individualism.

Du Bois's call for art as a form of propaganda, however, created much controversy among artists during the Renaissance. Du Bois's notions centered on middle-class sensibilities, and younger artists, like **Claude McKay** and **Langston Hughes**, felt that they did not want to be restricted to presenting images that would appeal to white America. These Harlem School writers, as they became known, wrote literature that represented all aspects of life, particularly focusing on the working-class people of Harlem. By writing against Du Bois and Alain Locke's base for the Harlem Renaissance, the Harlem School writers opened themselves to criticism that frequently left them in the position of interloper. As harmful as Du Bois's ideas were for the Harlem School, they were perhaps even more complicated for the women writing during this time period.

Women played an important role in the Harlem Renaissance. It was in the home of women that artists met to share, develop, and discuss their work. Women were the foundation of the Renaissance, and they helped to establish many of the scholars who are associated with the Renaissance today. Despite

the instrumental role that women played, they were often unrecognized by their peers and by the publishing world. It is only recently that works by women during the Harlem Renaissance have been “recovered.” One such text, **Jessie Redmon Fauset’s** *Plum Bun* (1929), directly questions the Talented Tenth and the focus on middle-class ideals. Fauset uses her novel, ironically subtitled *A Novel without a Moral*, to demonstrate the limitations of the middle **class**, which she portrays as politically unaware and powerless to see the reality of life in America.

During the Harlem Renaissance, Du Bois’s belief in the ability of African Americans to function within the American mainstream is critical to his insistence that artists write themselves into American society. He founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in an attempt to actuate this belief. Du Bois’s greatest critic at this time was Marcus Garvey. Garvey, unlike Du Bois, did not see any potential for the African American in America. Garvey believed that America could never be a true home for African Americans. Garvey therefore developed the “Back to Africa” movement in order to facilitate the return of African Americans to their true home, Africa. Garvey felt that there was no possibility for equality or racial uplift for blacks in the Americas. Unfortunately, Garvey himself had never been to Africa, and he did not have a “real” image of what Africa was like. Garvey saw Africa as the “mother” country that needed her displaced citizens to return and free her from the continued impact of colonialism. It was Garvey’s hope that Africans in the Americas would return to Africa and develop her into a world power. Despite the divergence in their ideas, it is ironic that at the end of this life W.E.B. Du Bois would deny his American citizenship and return to Africa, making a clear and distinct statement about his determination of where his home truly was.

Garvey and Du Bois were not the only figures during this time who were attempting to define the relationship that African Americans had with America. George Schuyler, a contemporary of both scholars, saw African Americans solely as a product of American society. At a time when African American artists were attempting to distinguish their work as a by-product of the hybrid influence of African and American values and traditions, Schuyler suggested that there was no difference between African Americans and other cultural and ethnic groups that made up American society. In a roundabout way, Schuyler was in effect suggesting that African Americans were already Americans. He presented an image of African Americans that located them solely within the boundaries of the United States. Home was therefore not a site of conflict; the African American was just another product of American society. Schuyler’s definition of the African American dismissed the real and imagined connection to Africa that had thus far been critical to the survival of African Americans in the United States.

Defining and determining what home was during the 1900s was complicated by the experience that African Americans encountered in the United States at that time. During this period there were over 3,000 documented lynchings, a figure that does not take into account the undocumented

lynchings that occurred. For many African Americans this act, although not legalized, was a government-sanctioned policy of control that relegated African Americans to a position of noncitizen.

Du Bois's influence during this time was not limited to his desires for artists during the Renaissance. In his seminal text *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois suggests that to truly understand black culture, one must comprehend southern black culture. Du Bois presents the **South** as the site of authentic blackness; the home of "real" and "true" African American culture was the South. This notion would have great literary impact as it has been incorporated into much of the literary work that has been written during and since the Harlem Renaissance. Literary characters, on a search to define who they are, often make a physical or metaphoric journey to the South. Texts where we see a literal movement South include **James Weldon Johnson's** *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and **Jean Toomer's** *Cane* (1923). In **Ralph Ellison's** *Invisible Man* (1952) when the unnamed protagonist has lost control of his surroundings, he finds himself in the home of a southern woman who takes on a maternal, nurturing role, in effect facilitating a metaphoric return to the South. The South as the home of black culture is also presented in **Nella Larsen's** *Quicksand* (1928). However, for Larsen this idea is one that limits the agency of African American women. At the end of *Quicksand*, the main character, Helga Crane, who has spent most of the novel attempting to define who she is, returns to the South, where she marries a preacher. Helga's return to the South restricts her, rather than enhancing her as an individual. Returning to the South, Helga is trapped by her gender; as the novel ends, she is laboring in childbed, yet again, with no sense of place other than the maternal role she is limited to.

It is during the **Black Arts Movement**—with its "I'm Black and I'm Proud" motto—that we see a shift from the emphasis on the U.S. South back to Africa as home. The Black Arts Movement is the literary arm of the Black Power movement, and it is a moment in time when African Americans demonstrated pride in their "Africanness." It is a period celebrating all things black, and at the center of this celebration is an acknowledgment of, and a sense of pride in, Africa. This recognition of Africa as a central part of African American culture and tradition has continued to play a significant role in how contemporary African Americans see and define themselves. The African American community is itself a hybrid community that reflects the influence of both African and American value systems.

Since the 1970s, the number of Caribbean writers who have migrated to the United States has complicated the question of defining home within the African American community. For these writers, such as **Paule Marshall**, **Michelle Cliff**, and **Jamaica Kincaid**, defining home must incorporate a reevaluation of the colonial influence on the Caribbean. These writers have a triple alliance to negotiate—Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. Although many of these writers have been incorporated into the African American literary tradition, their literature primarily focuses on the Caribbean. Noticeable in the works of Jamaica Kincaid, the postcolonial question

takes a gender-specific approach. Kincaid's critique of home is centralized on a critique of her mother, whom she imagines as manifestation of the colonial presence in Antigua.

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*Josie Brown-Rose*

### HOMEMADE LOVE

*Homemade Love*, J. California Cooper's second short-story collection, was published in 1986 and received an American Book Award. The collection of contemporary **folktales** is composed of thirteen stories and focuses on the lives of everyday people and their ability to survive life's obstacles. All of the stories contain a life lesson.

Cooper's use of vernacular has caused her narrative style to be compared to **Zora Neale Hurston** and **Alice Walker**, and this is very apparent in this collection. Like Janie in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Celie in Walker's *The Color Purple* (1985), the characters in *Homemade Love* speak in black dialect. The narrators are both male and female, but there is a feminist pattern in the work: There is a strong emphasis on the ability of women to empower one another; as well, an important theme in many of the stories is that a woman must learn to be independent and, especially, that she can survive without the aid of a man.

The characters in this collection live basic country lives. A few, however, are drawn to city life and its perceived glamour. The man in "Living," for example, leaves his wife and their country life, where everything seems old and worn, for the big city, but he quickly learns that the city is not all that he imagines and returns **home** within three days with a greater appreciation for the simplicity of his country life. Similarly, the narrator in "Funny Valentines" recognizes the authenticity of life in the country as opposed to the superficial life that she observes in the city.

Most of the characters are seeking satisfaction, and often they find fulfillment late in life. Many have a deep-seated **love** for home and **family**. They also recognize that education and a strong **work** ethic are key elements to living a better life. Characters such as those in "Without Love" find that they can live the American dream of owning a home that is full of the love of children and grandchildren, but Cooper's message is that work is necessary to achieve this success.

Throughout the collection, Cooper's characters acknowledge their hatred for white exploiters who "runs this world," but many also realize that not all white people are bad. In "Happiness Does Not Come in Colors," the narrator learns that love, like happiness, "does not come in colors."

Not all of Cooper's narrators are admirable. Some are nosy neighbors such as "The Watcher," who is too concerned about her neighbors' lives to notice the decline within her own life. Others are outright sinners who easily justify their bad behavior. In "Swingers and Squares," for example, the narrator selfishly lives her life and disregards her responsibility to her children. The narrator's ironic comment that some people are fools and do not learn from their mistakes is Cooper's moral message in this tale.

*See also Family; In Search of Satisfaction*

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*Diane Todd Bucci*

### HOPKINS, PAULINE (1859–1930)

Through the pages of her prose, the columns of her journalistic essays, and the **drama** of her theater—written and performed—Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins showed herself to be a dynamic and subversive figure in the early African American literary tradition.

A descendant of a long line of impressive racial activists that includes James Whitfield and Nathaniel and Thomas Paul, Hopkins was born in 1859 in Portland, Maine, to Northrop Hopkins and Sara Hopkins (née Allen). Raised and educated in Boston, Hopkins demonstrated literary promise when she was merely fifteen, winning first place in an essay contest sponsored by **William Wells Brown**. Six years later, in 1880, Hopkins's first play *Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad* premiered at Boston's Oakland Garden. The cast was her own troupe, the Hopkins Colored Troubadors, and Hopkins herself sang the lead role. Until she eventually left the stage in the 1890s to pursue stenography training, Hopkins not only gave recitals and concerts throughout the Boston area but also lectured on black **history**.

Ever committed to creative endeavors, Hopkins temporarily abandoned stenography in 1900 to join the board of directors of *Colored American* magazine, the United States's first black journal. The journal's publisher, the Colored

Co-operative Publishing Company, also released Hopkins's first novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900), and she was named editor of the magazine's Women's Department from 1901 to 1903 as well as literary editor in 1903. Under both her own name and her mother's maiden name, the magazine published Hopkins's essays, short stories, and her novels *Hagar's Daughter: A Story of Southern Caste Prejudice* (1901–1902), *Winona: A Tale of Negro Life in the South and Southwest* (1902), and *Of One Blood; or the Hidden Self* (1902–1903). Hopkins also lectured nationwide to raise funds for publication.

Hopkins's tenure ended in 1904, however, when *Colored American* was purchased by Fred R. Moore, a man who was closely allied with Booker T. Washington and who did not approve of Hopkins's outspokenness on racial issues or her protest-oriented politics. Though Washington and his supporters denied ill will, citing failing health as motivation for her separation from the magazine, critics—including W.E.B. Du Bois—vehemently declared the move a coup. After this dismissal, Hopkins began publishing her work in *Voice of the Negro*, the first African American magazine in the **South**, and in 1916, she became the editor of *New Era Magazine*, which failed after only two issues.

In the wake of this disappointment, Hopkins left the public gaze. She never married, and little is known about her life until 1930 when, while employed as a stenographer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Hopkins was killed at **home** in an accidental fire.

Hopkins survived over half a century of critical obscurity to be rediscovered in the 1980s through both critical revival and the reprinting of *Contending Forces* and her magazine novels as part of Oxford University Press's **Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers** series. This revival reaffirms Hopkins's artistic versatility as well as her continuing relevance to African American literary and cultural study.

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*Jennifer Larson*

**HOTTENTOT VENUS: A NOVEL**

**Barbara Chase-Riboud's** works attract controversy because the author tends to take on stories about the oppression of African people in the Americas and abroad. Moreover, readers are forced to regard the incidents, but the main characters do not always think and act the way many might expect. She gives black women voices that grate against contemporary expectations. For example, in the early 1980s most Americans did not imagine a man like Thomas Jefferson involved in a romantic relationship with an African slave. Those familiar with the **history** of **slavery** in this country would harbor the **stereotype** of the black woman raped by the white master. In *Sally Hemings* (1979), Chase-Riboud portrays Hemings as an African slave who chooses to have children and an unrewarded lifelong affair with Jefferson. The story elevates their intimacies from sexual oppression and abuse to romance. *Hottentot Venus* (2003) is written in a similar spirit.

Sarah Baartman, protagonist of *Hottentot Venus*, shows a mind-set many contemporary readers will find difficult to understand. The 2003 novel's title character accepts debasement and captivity as a means to escape colonialism and genocide. Those imbued with today's empowerment notions will find that hard to understand.

In 1810, twenty-year-old Ssehura, an orphaned girl from the Khoikhoi tribe, in Britain's then-Cape Colony, near the tip of South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, abandoned her homeland for a shot at fame in England. Historians say William Dunlop, a ship's doctor, promised the former shepherdess money, marriage, and adulation if she went **home** with him. She was tricked and betrayed. The four-foot-seven-inch woman, whose Anglicized name, Sarah Baartman, comes from an Afrikaner translation of Ssehura, ended up in a sideshow for six years. After her **death** scientists turned her into a freak in a museum exhibition. Her **body** was dissected. The skeleton was encased in a plaster likeness that accented the drooping breasts and the legendary bulbous buttocks that once drew the curious crowds to see and scoff at the "Hottentot Venus." The brain and genitalia were put in glass jars,

along with a portrait and wax model that highlighted the labia. Those objects, displayed until 2002 in the Museum of Natural History in Paris, were preserved as “scientific proof” of blacks as subhuman.

Based loosely on the true story, Chase-Riboud’s Sarah refuses the aid of British abolitionists such as Robert Wedderburn, who sues to free her. The woman clearly understands her dire predicament yet accepts being poked, prodded, pawed, and paraded as an animal because she is paralyzed by personal demons and a great fear of returning to South Africa, where her tribe members face genocide.

Chase-Riboud’s description and dialogue make readers squirm but help unveil an oppressed mind and soul. French scientists created the Hottentot Venus as the antithesis of the Roman goddess of **beauty** and **love**. Baartman’s dark skin, large buttocks, and drooping genitals are used to establish a standard for ugliness and otherness. The novel leads the reader to wonder who is most primitive.

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Vincent F. A. Golphin

### **HOW STELLA GOT HER GROOVE BACK**

Written in less than a month, **Terry McMillan**’s 1996 novel *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* is described by the author as the closest to **autobiography** that she has written so far. Following the **death** of both her mother and her best friend, McMillan journeyed to Negril, Jamaica, for a much-needed respite. Enter Jonathan Plummer: a twenty-year-old hotel worker who stole McMillan’s heart.

Following her vacation to Jamaica, McMillan began **work** on this fourth novel that chronicles the romance between forty-something Stella Payne and twenty-something Winston Shakespeare. In this romantic tale, Stella Payne, a



successful securities analyst and a single mother of a preadolescent son, is in need of a spur-of-the-moment Jamaican vacation after assessing her life only to realize that she has lost her “groove.” In other words, Stella recognizes her need for romantic companionship. Although not traveling to Jamaica in order to find romance, by chance, Stella meets young Winston, and soon their friendship turns romantic.

Often criticized for its structure, *Stella* is written in stream-of-consciousness form; there are moments when the lack of punctuation reflects the characters' emotions. *Stella* can be described as an allegorical form of *Romeo and Juliet* where two star-crossed lovers must endure the difficulties that come with forbidden **love**. In the case of Stella and Winston, the forbidden elements of their relationship have much to do with their age difference. In *Stella*, McMillan departs from the typical pattern of the romance narrative in that both characters make slow and deliberate decisions regarding their future. Thus, McMillan helps readers to unravel the complexities of a love relationship where there are not only social taboos to worry about but also societal ills (racism and sexism) that will influence the outcome of the relationship. Although their romance is speckled with a mixture of objections and doubts, Stella and Winston decide to persevere in their relationship despite the age gap. Such a move challenges conventional notions of **sexuality** as they relate to gender and age. Both Winston and Stella are aware of the double standard that exists between men and women.

In *Stella*, McMillan reminds her readers that personal **freedom** happens when one looks inside oneself for affirmation rather than looking externally. Moreover, the novel challenges patriarchal notions of masculinity where the romantic tale ends with the female character having to give up erotic and spiritual parts of herself. And although the novel features a younger man with an older woman, McMillan does not create a **Mammy** figure out of Stella. Instead, readers witness a balanced relationship where Stella and Winston reawaken and discover their passions.

*How Stella Got Her Groove Back* was made into a film in 1998.

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Catherine Ross-Stroud

### HUGHES, LANGSTON (1902–1967)

Born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902 and raised by his maternal grandmother until the age of twelve, Hughes led a largely peripatetic lifestyle. This was partly due

to his mother's difficulty in securing menial employment. Included in his early travels were Kansas, Illinois, and perhaps most important for Hughes's later playwriting, Ohio. Under the direction of Russell and Rowena Jelliffe, the Gilpin Players of the Karamu House Theater in Cleveland would eventually stage some of his most important dramatic works (although *Mule Bone*, his aborted collaboration with **Zora Neale Hurston**, never made it past the planning stage). Marital instabilities and the eventual divorce of his parents led to a lifelong struggle to nurture what **love** and affection, had it been forthcoming from both parents, could have provided: emotional stability, a sense of belonging, and a respite from childhood loneliness.

Feminist readings of Hughes's early life may focus on the effects that Carrie Hughes's poverty had on her son's artistic development. *The Big Sea* (1940), Hughes's jovial but emotionally guarded **autobiography**, juxtaposes the harried life of his working mother to the authoritative and unabashedly capitalistic drives of his father, an expatriate American living in Mexico. This text would be followed by the more politically inflected *I Wonder as I Wander* in 1956. James Hughes's reasons for repudiating America (but not its ideals of self-sufficiency and personal gain) enact the utopian desire for a place where a black American could be enterprising and independent and thereby escape the soul-corroding harassment of the color line. His vision is reminiscent of Dr. Brian Redfield's in the novel *Passing* (1929) by **Nella Larsen**, which details the struggle of Irene Redfield to keep her **family** together despite her husband's obsession with emigration to Brazil.

Although Hughes credits his mother (herself a poet) for helping him to develop an appreciation for the arts through plays and books, their relationship appears marked by ambivalence. A typical example is the chapter in *The Big Sea* titled "Mother of the Gracchi," where Carrie Hughes attempts to present an oral recitation for the Inter-State Literary Society but is thwarted by her elder son's distracting onstage antics. A similar incident has Langston deliberately forget his **poetry** for a church presentation, an event to which his mother traveled just to hear him speak. While his behavior may be an expression of juvenile rebellion, it also communicates a deep longing for maternal attention and approbation. One brief source of such attention was Hughes's grandmother, a proud woman who used stories to instill in her grandson a sense of ancestral heroism. Honored as the last surviving widow of John Brown's raid (1859), Mary Langston carried a stalwart sense of her own genealogical investment in the abolitionist and revolutionary **history** of the area. Her obstinate thrift, while not as severe as that of **Richard Wright's** fundamentalist grandmother, still constrained her charge both physically and emotionally. This discipline did not rival that of his father, whom Hughes eventually declared he hated. While admirable for her commitment to her own economic and social welfare, she also remained distanced from Langston, her personality quite unlike the sympathetic, rustic grandmother Hager in *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Hughes's award-winning first novel. Upon her **death**, Hughes was transferred to the **home** of acquaintances, Auntie and Uncle Reed, whose relatively simple life offered the writer a measure of happiness

without the constant financial fretting of his mother or the harassment from his father about the young writer's inability to conform to his filial ideals.

Despite his mother's protests, Hughes spent some time teaching and living on his father's ranch in Mexico. In 1921, during the train ride to the border, he composed "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," a lyrical meditation on worldwide sites of black civilization. These were all connected by the powerful trope of flowing rivers that enacted the transit of blood in human veins. This piece would be published in the *Crisis*, the official journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and put him in contact with such emerging **Harlem Renaissance** luminaries as Alain Locke and the journal's immensely gifted editor, **Jessie Redmon Fauset**. During his time at Columbia University, Hughes's mother joined him in New York, and he felt bound to support her with the funds provided by his father. Only when she left for Cleveland did he find the burden lifted somewhat, although he continued to live in poverty.

Unmoored by the lackluster experience of college, and driven by the eventual withdrawal of his father's already conditional financial aid, Hughes failed to earn a degree and spent his adolescence in poorly paid manual labor jobs, made more difficult by pervasive color prejudice. Many of the jobs he acquired put him in only occasional contact with women. During the formative experience of working on a freighter (the SS *Malone*) bound for the African coast, Hughes's main encounter with women involved witnessing two young African girls prostituting themselves to the foreign sailors. The writer's description in *The Big Sea* errs on the side of objective reportage rather than involved commentary, revealing his passive position as an observer, not participant. Such is again the case in a scene involving a bar brawl in Paris over the ethics of male violence against women. The author had taken up a kitchen job in Le Grand Duc, a nightclub that featured Florence Embry, a black performer from Harlem, as the star attraction. Little would Hughes know, this glittering atmosphere, a momentary reprieve from the constant threat of financial destitution, would serve as a modest precursor to the many social functions that awaited him when he returned to America. Hughes also details the experience of rooming with a poverty-stricken white dancer, as well as a short-lived romance with an Anglo-African girl. Both of these are passing portraits, although the latter incident has interpretive potential for critics who seek to explore (or posit) the dimensions of Hughes's submerged homosexuality.

The most prominent female influence in Hughes's artistic life would prove to be Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy white patron who began to support the writer while he was attending Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. A year earlier, in 1926, Hughes published his first poetry collection *The Weary Blues*, an innovative fusion of **blues** and **jazz** rhythms into richly stylized portraits of lower-class black life. Another poetry collection, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) would follow, although its critical reception and sales were less than stellar in comparison. Many of the poems from these and subsequent efforts meditated upon the **beauty** of black women ("When Sue Wears Red," "Red Silk Stockings," "Juke Box Love Song"), their social and

economic struggles (“Mother to Son”), and the psychological toll of racism and unfulfilling relationships (“Song for a Dark Girl,” “Gal’s Cry for a Dying Lover”). Hughes does not shy away from adopting the persona of a black woman (“Lament over Love,” “Hard Daddy”), or the lover that alternatively exalts or abuses her (“Bad Man”) in order to depict the complexity of black women’s experience in Harlem.

Hughes’s “Godmother” provided generously for her charge and was highly devoted to nurturing black artists (including Hurston and Locke) during the period of literary efflorescence known as the Harlem, or “New Negro,” Renaissance. “The Blues I’m Playing,” a short story included in *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), may be construed as a veiled commentary on the exigencies of Mrs. Mason’s artistic direction. With its prose treatment of lynching, **passing**, ingrained racism, and the aftershocks of **slavery** and miscegenation, the text presents a more pessimistic reflection of black/white relations in America than the soulful *mélange* of laughter and tears that characterized Hughes’s blues poetry. It was published after the patron and artist had a bitter falling out, an incident that could be described as a slow and lethal buildup of tension between contrasting artistic visions. Mrs. Mason’s increasingly specific and resolute demands pressured Hughes, who was unwilling to conform to her ideals of black “primitivism.” The situation was exacerbated to a large extent by his quarrel with Hurston over *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life* (1930; not published in full until 1991). Intent on creating an authentic **drama** based on black vernacular forms, the pair collaborated on a humorous reinvention of a (hetero)normative romantic cliché: two men’s attempts to win the hand of a desirable, sexually available female. The folkloric flair, rollicking but nuanced humor, and romantic tension inherent in this love triangle belie the gravity of the dispute. Although speaking with relative restraint in his autobiography, Hughes characterizes Hurston as erratic and emotionally unstable, throwing tantrums in front of their friend Carl Van Vechten, accusing the typist Louise Thompson of interference and undue personal investment, and plotting with Locke and Mason to discredit him, her sometime friend and collaborator.

After this personal nadir, Hughes pursued leftist politics through his writing, choosing to publish in a communist-run journal, *New Masses*. He became more vocal about inequalities endemic to American society, traveling extensively in the **South** and later the Soviet Union both to disseminate his work and hone his ideological orientation. Politics and critical awareness of black life never strayed far from Hughes’s artistic aims. Despite later attempts during the McCarthy era to discredit him for socialist sympathies, the integrity of Hughes’s choices remained more or less intact. Even noted black educator Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955) encouraged his efforts to bring poetry to a greater cross section of the African American populace. It was this kind of accessibility and willingness to immerse himself in the concerns of his black brothers and sisters that eventually made Hughes the male “Poet Laureate of the Negro Race,” if not officially, at least in the minds of those who enjoyed his work.

In the twilight of Harlem's high days, Hughes's attention turned to drama and a vast spectrum of literary forms: librettos, children's writing, edited collections, histories, and even spoken-word poetry. He would eventually found his own company, the Harlem Suitcase Theater. Many of his plays were staged at the Karamu House, although often to mixed reviews. Among others, *Mulatto* (1935) paved the way for *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), **Lorraine Hansberry's** bittersweet drama of the Younger family in Chicago and their attempts to recuperate their deferred dreams of self-respect and financial stability. Not only does the play's title allude to a line from one of Hughes's signature poems, "Harlem," it also replaced his drama of miscegenation and longing as the most popular black production on Broadway.

During the war years, the antics of Hughes's phenomenally popular character Jesse B. Semple ("Simple") appeared in the black-owned *Chicago Defender*, starting in 1943. Over two decades, the newspaper column yielded five volumes of Simple stories. Central to Simple's life was the juggling of his relationships with women: his would-be (and later) wife Joyce, his girlfriend Zarita, his ex-wife Isabel, and his landlady. Two cousins, Minnie and Lynn Clarisse, map the intellectual complexity of black urban women, although not all characters appear in each collection. Simple is noted for his verbal jousting, his lack of pretension, and his searing inferences about the city, the nation, and the state of **race** relations. These stories pivot upon the colloquial repartee between Simple and the unnamed narrator, later identified as a Mr. Boyd, over an evening beer. Although women's voices do appear in context, they are usually filtered through the masculine narrative perspective. Insofar as Simple was conceived as a composite of numerous male Harlemites, the women in his life also showcase a blend of hardworking, high-living, and assertively self-aware individuals. This obtains despite their being largely distanced from the site of actual narrative exchange. Misogynistic commentary exists but is mitigated by Simple's obvious dependence on his female companions for health, happiness, and basic self-understanding.

Toward the end of his career, Hughes remained active. The scope of his interests included emerging black writers, one of whom was **Alice Walker**. Although the Civil Rights struggle and the **Black Arts Movement** demanded more radical shifts toward Afrocentric and avant-garde art forms, Hughes's lifelong contributions to African American **literature** have remained indelible.

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*Nancy Kang*

**HUGHES, VIRGINIA.** See Rahman, Aishah

**HUNTER, KRISTIN.** See Lattany, Kristin Hunter

### HURSTON, ZORA NEALE (1891–1960)

Zora Neale Hurston was an African American female novelist, ethnographer, and essayist who is known for her celebration of the richness of language and culture that emerged from a unique, expressive black **community**. Most of her works are situated in the **South**, specifically in Florida, and capture the black southern vernacular and traditions of that region.

Although Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, on January 15, 1891, she always claimed to have been born in Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated all-black city in the United States. She also routinely shaved ten or more years from her actual birthdate, usually asserting that she was born in 1901. It appears that the Hurston **family** moved to Eatonville when Zora Neale was just a toddler, and it was that location that shaped her and her **literature**. During these early years, until she was anywhere from eleven to fourteen years old, Hurston states that she never experienced racism in Eatonville, her only

experience with white people being her observation of them as they passed through the town on their way to somewhere else. All of that changed with the **death** of her mother; she was sent to school in Jacksonville, Florida, and became just another “little colored girl” in this large urban center.

Hurston did not complete her education at that time; instead, she was bounced around from relative to relative, eventually taking on a number of odd jobs and living a life of independence, separate from her brothers and sisters most of the time. After several years, the desire for an education took hold of her and would not let go. She completed high school in Washington, D.C., and immediately entered Howard University, still doing odd jobs to support herself. Upon graduation from Howard, Hurston, like so many other black artists, headed for Harlem and the phenomenon known as the **Harlem Renaissance**. By this time she had already published her first short story, “John Redding Goes to Sea” (*Stylus*, May 1921), and her first nationally published story, “Drenched in Light” (*Opportunity*, June 1925). “Drenched in Light” is particularly telling because of its portrayal of Watts, a poor black girl so full of light she does not feel the weight of oppression. Obviously patterned after Hurston herself, “Drenched in Light” serves as the model around which Hurston chose to live her life. She was so confident in herself as a person that, as she writes in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” she cannot imagine anyone depriving themselves of the pleasure of her company.

Hurston took Harlem by storm. Also, with the sponsorship of Annie Nathan Meyer, she received a scholarship to Barnard College and became its only black student. There, her study of anthropology under the tutelage of Franz Boas opened her eyes not only to the power of ethnography but, more important, to the culturally rich resources of her own little section of the country, Eatonville, Florida. This discovery offered an outlet for the release of her literary genius. So much material had been right under her feet, but it took the distance between Florida and New York to make her realize it. Once these floodgates opened, however, there was no turning back. Her career moved in two directions simultaneously; as a writer, she developed a passion for recording and reproducing black folkloric traditions; as a performer, she became the toast of Harlem parties as a storyteller and performing artist. She was thus doubly committed to the African American oral tradition. Like many other black artists during this time, Hurston had a wealthy white patron who was fascinated by and invested in what was called the “primitive” black arts. For Hurston, this patron was Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason. Also like other black artists learned, one of the negative results of this type of financial relationship was that the patrons exerted a certain amount of control, and often approval or censorship, over what and in what form the artists could publish. While other artists severed their relationships with their patrons, Hurston, being resourceful, found ways to mask the chastising messages within her literature while retaining the financial support of Mrs. Osgood Mason.

Hurston, fiercely independent when it came to her subject matter and its presentation, was not particularly popular with the black male intellectual

and literary leaders of the Harlem community because she refused to align her work with anybody's political ideologies. Rather than using her art as a weapon to overtly challenge the oppressive conditions under which blacks in America lived, she chose to present a folkloric picture celebrating the rich traditions of the African American community. Her challenges to racism, sexism, and classism were, for the most part, more covert, blended into her beautiful lyrical narratives. One of her main critics, **Richard Wright**, was particularly outspoken regarding Hurston's most celebrated novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), asserting that it brought to the black community no theme, no thought, and no message but instead exploited the "quaint" aspects of Negro life to satisfy the tastes of a white audience. Such criticism demonstrates that the story of a black woman searching for her voice had no place in the male-dominated Negro literature of that time. In addition to the dozens of short stories, essays, plays, musicals, and newspaper articles that Hurston produced, she also published an **autobiography** and a total of six novels and ethnographies during her lifetime: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Mules and Men* (1935), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Tell My Horse* (1938), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948).

The last few years of Hurston's life were marked by poverty. This black female writer who defied the models laid out by patrons and the black male "literati," who was the winner of a number of awards including the Guggenheim, who published more books than any other black woman during her time (and more than many afterward), was discovered working as a maid in Miami in 1950 in order to support herself. Deteriorating health eventually led her to a position working as a columnist for a weekly black newspaper, the *Chronicle*, in Fort Pierce, Florida, in 1957 and as a substitute teacher with Fort Pierce's black high school, Lincoln Park Academy. When she could no longer **work**, she lived on county assistance and with the help of friends until she died in relative obscurity on January 28, 1960. Black feminist scholar **Alice Walker** is credited for her diligence in finally locating Hurston's unmarked grave site in the 1970s and lifting her out of obscurity, coordinating a proper tribute to the woman now regarded by many to be Florida's first daughter of literature; the inscription on her gravestone reads "A Genius of the South." Since then, documents that she left behind have been preserved in a special collections section of the University of Florida library, an official Zora Neale Hurston postage stamp has been released, the house in which she lived in Fort Pierce has been made a historic landmark, and the city of Fort Pierce has established a Zora Neale Hurston Dust Tracks Heritage Trail patterned after a similar trail established several years ago in the city that Hurston claimed as her home—Eatonville, Florida.

Hurston was a woman who spoke her mind—about American democracy, black literature, integration, and a score of other topics—without seeking anyone's approval or affirmation. Some critics called her arrogant; however, she was a black woman who was very comfortable with herself, someone who did not write to "uplift her race" because, in her opinion, it was already uplifted.



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Johnnie M. Stover



## IDENTITY

*Negro, colored, black, Afro-American, African American.* This partial list of names for racial identity suggests the rapid mobility of thought about racial identity in African American culture and in American culture generally. One of the major themes of African American **literature**, therefore, has been the question of identity. African American literature and literary studies have, consequently, greatly contributed to the critical theorization of identity, a major critical concern of the late twentieth century.

Racial identity was originally imposed on “Negroes” from without—that is, not as an internally developed identification but as a classification system developed by Europeans. The concept of “**race**” is understood by contemporary critical theory to have developed in conjunction with practices of colonization and **slavery**. In the era of imperialism and empiricism (beginning in the European Renaissance and expanding into the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment and on), the concept of race displaced region and **religion** as the primary marker of human “types.” “Race” (a nonnatural, man-made concept and system of classification) came to be posited and even lived, by colonizers and colonized, as a natural, biological, and scientific fact. In the Americas, this system of racial classification both enabled and abetted slavery by demarcating a fundamental distinction between “Caucasians” and “Negroes.”

However, in the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, a high incidence of miscegenation between “whites” and “Negro” slaves challenged

the system of racial classifications. An elaborate terminology for fractionalized racial identity—for example, “**mulatto/a**” (half black, half white), “quadroon” (one-fourth black), “octoroon” (one-eighth black)—came into play. Legally, though, the “one-drop rule” became institutionalized in the United States. This “one-drop rule” stated that anyone with any black African ancestry at all (even “one drop of black blood”) is “Negro.” This “one-drop rule,” which served to increase the slave pool, was, over the years, accepted by both whites and blacks as a natural and true determinant of racial identity.

But the one-drop rule meant that a person could look white but “really” be black. Such a possibility created—and reflected—instabilities in the concept of racial identity. These instabilities are dealt with almost obsessively through two major motifs of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American literature: “**passing**” and the figure of the “tragic mulatta.” (*Mulatta* came to mean any woman of mixed race, whatever the fraction of mixing.) Novels by both whites and blacks, from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) to **Nella Larsen’s** *Passing* (1929), and popular plays and **films** from the musical *Show Boat* (1951) to **Adrienne Kennedy’s** *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), display an American cultural fascination with these motifs. Most typically, these motifs appear in the form of a light-skinned woman who tries to live in the white world but fails and comes to a tragic (usually fatal) end. While this typical narrative can be read as ultimately punishing the mulatta for crossing racial barriers, she is also generally treated with great sympathy by the narrative. Hence the ambiguities and ambivalences of American racial identities were both revealed and contained in the figure of the passing mulatta, who embodies anxieties not only about (literal and figurative) miscegenation but also about the inherent impurities of racial identity classifications.

With the **civil rights movement**, a more humanist approach to racial identity gained political prominence. In Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, famous “I Have a Dream” speech (1963), individuals, ideally, “will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” In this formulation, the content of an individual’s character is separable from (if not irrelevant to) the color of that individual’s skin. Individual identity is distinct from, and more important than, racial or cultural identity. While the civil rights movement was very conscious of racial inequities in American culture, its goal was for American culture to achieve “color blindness,” as opposed to color consciousness, at least in hiring and funding practices and ultimately in economic distribution and political representation. Racial identity was seen as a *product* of racial inequality, which was to be overcome. While the civil rights movement did not necessarily promote assimilation, it saw racial identity as less important than cross-racial cooperation and racial equality. A work such as **Lorraine Hansberry’s** play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) exhibits this humanist, equality-oriented approach to racial identity.

Concomitant with the civil rights movement was the emergence of a more separatist movement (or set of interrelated submovements). Loosely associated with terms and phrases like “Black Power,” “Black Pride,” “Black Is

Beautiful,” and “Afrocentrism,” and with groups like the Black Panthers and Nation of Islam (among many others), this mode displaced terms like *colored* and *Negro* with *black*. This movement tended to pose racial identity as fundamental, not incidental, and to see black identity as preexisting and transcending socioeconomic racial inequality. Indeed, it built its politics upon the foundation of racial identity; in some circles, its politics consequently came to be referred to as “identity politics.” This approach saw racial identity not, finally, as man-made but as essential. Indeed the metaphor of “blackness,” reflected in the terminological shift from “Negro” or “colored” to “black,” emphasizes the physicality of this identity and its stark difference from (if not polar opposition to) **whiteness**. Ironically, this mode accepted and affirmed the “one-drop rule” of racial identity, but this time it revalued blackness over whiteness.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as poststructuralism took hold in academia, “identity politics” was criticized for its essentialism. **Body**-based identities were conceived of not as biological facts but as constituted through “performative acts.” A performative model of identity (developed by Judith Butler first in regard to gender identity) suggests that identity is not something we *have*; it is something we *do*. The illusion of an essence underlying identity categories is a product, not a precursor, of our endlessly reiterated performances of those identity categories.

In the case of racial identity, the sense of an “authentic black identity” is, in the poststructuralist model, performatively produced. Like other concepts constructed within and reified through language, “blackness” (or racial identity, generally) is more a discursive entity than a prediscursive fact. Hence a terminological and conceptual shift from “black” (connoting a seemingly factual, biologically and body-based racial identity) to “African American” (connoting a more culturally produced identity, one based not in biological fact but in the occupying of national and ethnic positions and self-identifications). In this model of identity, it is not just the terminology of racial identity that is culturally constructed and historically specific but the very identity category divisions themselves and even the very concept of racial identity. To say that racial identity is a construct, though, is not to say that it is not real but to say that its reality is produced within its sociocultural moment—and hence not inevitable. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., put it in *The Signifying Monkey*, his groundbreaking book on African American literary identity, “Blackness exists, but ‘only’ as a function of its signifiers” (151). Or as Frantz Fanon put it earlier in his prescient *Black Skin, White Masks*, “The Negro is not. Any more than is the white man” (151). In other words, neither racial identity category (“Negro” or “white”) has any absolute, extradiscursive or extracultural grounding.

The language of “man” in the above Fanon quotation embodies the implicitly male-gendered nature of much of the discussion of racial identity. But racial identity is gender inflected, just as gender identity is racially inflected. Many African American women and other women of color were finding a white bias in the feminist movement even as they were finding a male bias in African American, Native American, Latino, and other racial identity-based

movements. This frustration is encapsulated in the title of the 1982 book *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Another important anthology of critical writings in this mode is the 1981 book *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (and the more recent update *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*). A feminist approach to identity that refuses to single out any one coordinate—race, gender, sexual orientation, **class**, even health and disability status—as primary is sometimes referred to as a “womanist” approach and is associated with writers such as **Alice Walker**, **Audre Lorde**, and **Ntozake Shange**. **Womanism** observes how a culture of white privilege (if not white supremacy) such as the United States tends to reinforce the power of the dominant group by marginalizing and dividing subordinate groups. Womanist politics seeks to overcome such divisions and hence offers the terminological category “people of color” to emphasize political unity among racial subdivisions. This shift in terminology reflects yet another shift in the conceptual experience of racial identity, now as a political construction that can temporarily unite nonidentical groups. Such an approach sees identity as always already multiple, intersected fundamentally with other primary coordinates, and inherently political.

Some critics have noticed a decline in focus on identity in contemporary literary theory and even an emerging critique of the need to identify. The ability to move beyond or refuse racial identification, though, lies in the domain of the privileged race. For African Americans, the question of identity remains crucial to representation, both in the body politic and in the arts. Identity questions are certainly not disappearing from contemporary African American literature.

Representing, both politically and aesthetically, is bound up with identifying practices. Much critical work remains to be done in respectfully re-evaluating the personal, political, and aesthetic functions of identity and of identification in African American literature.

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*Deborah Thompson*

## **I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS**

A lyrical blend of realism, emotional gravity, and candid reflections on segregation-era America, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) is **Maya Angelou's** feminist intervention into the primarily male tradition of African American **autobiography**. The first installment in Angelou's serial autobiography, it conveys the vicissitudes of growing up black and female in an atmosphere of pervasive uncertainty, racist and sexist devaluation, and precarious self-fashioning. The stability and nurturing provided by human relationships, especially those within the **family**, are forces that counteract the constant threat of dissolution, despair, and **death**. Its title derived from poet **Paul Laurence Dunbar's** "Sympathy" (1899), the text combines the themes of knowledge (and the imperative for *self-knowledge*) with the artist's desire for voice amid the pervasive silencing of a hostile but not irredeemably corrupt society.

The work begins with the two Johnson children, Maya (a shortened form of Marguerite) and her brother Bailey, riding on a train to Stamps, Arkansas, from California. Moving from the West Coast to the **South**, through to the Midwest briefly, and ultimately back to the West again, the textual and geographic itinerary of the novel forms a symbolic circle, tacitly enunciating a yearning for wholeness as well as respectful and open-minded reciprocity between writer, reader, and the whole chiaroscuro of individuals making up the American republic. For these passed-around children, the **home** provided by the strong female presence of their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson, offers a catalyst for their educational and emotional development. Rural Stamps provides the earliest scenes of instruction both in and outside of the home, and San Francisco emerges as the site where the older Maya explores a more diverse spectrum of opportunities from which to forge a life path. Her accomplishments include becoming the city's first black streetcar conductor and, at the conclusion of the text, courageously accepting the responsibility of teenage **motherhood**.

Buoyed by lucid, unsentimental prose, an awareness of racialized corporeality—the black female **body**—figures prominently in the text. Maya often feels self-conscious about her appearance (her height, angularity, and perceived ugliness), but these pale in juxtaposition with her intellectual curiosity, her refreshing sensitivity, and her finely wrought, imaginative "I." The repudiation of white American standards of **beauty** (the "Black Is Beautiful" credo) is prefigured in Maya's dismemberment of a blonde, blue-eyed baby doll, a Christmas gift from her absent parents. This episode resonates with similar acts of **violence** in **Toni Morrison's** *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In Angelou's text, the simultaneous vulnerability and resoluteness of the female body and mind are prefigured in the first chapter's image of a razor threatening a young girl's throat. Childhood **rape**, which the speaker experiences at the hands of her mother's boyfriend, is the materialization of this threat. Posttrauma, Maya slips into a state of aphasic shock, unable to speak in a combination of fear, guilt, and powerlessness. Her rebirth from paralyzing introversion is catalyzed by a **love** for **literature**, language, and the nonjudgmental guidance of Bertha

Flowers, a schoolteacher who emphasizes the importance and intrinsic beauty of the human voice. Later, after an awkward and worry-plagued journey to sexual awareness, Maya finds joy in dance, **drama**, and motherhood, occasions that celebrate the dexterity, communicative power, and creative potential of the female body.

In Stamps, the narrator expresses her frustration with the treatment of the blacks in the rural **community**: the drudgery and alienation resulting from toil in the cotton fields, the victimization by local racists, and the small but searing indignities faced by her loved ones, a daily reminder of color prejudice. One memorable episode bears witness to the indignities endured by Maya's grandmother at the hands of some neighborhood poor whites. A robust widow, "Momma" Henderson exudes respectability and feminine agency. Her personal qualities are a stalwart **work** ethic, religious devotion, and dutiful generosity. Her power echoes that of **Harriet Jacobs's** grandmother in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Like the latter, Momma is particularly admirable for her business acumen. The store she runs with her disabled bachelor son (Uncle Willie) is a concentrated site of community power. Provisions for the body *and* the mind (in the form of chatting, gossip, and opportunities for public assembly) are exchanged and explored with equal vigor.

Distanced from this rural scene is Vivian Baxter, Maya's mother, a woman whose aura of fun flirtatiousness almost diametrically opposes Momma's organic simplicity. Whether portrayed as a latter-day goddess, a black version of a Hollywood starlet, an earthy Madonna, or a kite borne aloft above the heads of her children, this performer and ego ideal diversify our often narrow image of what a mother is or should be: desirable, imaginative, and heavily invested in the pursuit of her own goals. She bears no trace of the pancake-flipping **Jemima** or baby-minding **Mammy**. Grandmother Baxter, Vivian's mother, is also striking, primarily for her ability to function within an almost amoral zone of civic influence. Almost white in skin color, she serves as a precinct police captain, holding political and legal sway over gamblers and other shady personalities. This station is rather atypical of a black woman in depression-era St. Louis. Between Momma, Vivian, Grandmother Baxter, and Maya herself, the text clearly reveals the diversity and vividness possible in the maternal narrative genre.

Apart from underscoring female friendship and kinship bonds, *I Know* suggests that the best platform for the negotiation of a confident self is lived experience. After a skirmish with her father's girlfriend, Maya find solace with a community of indigent youths inhabiting a southern California junkyard. The ultimate vision is not gender exclusive but rather collaborative, highlighting for today's readers **Alice Walker's** theory of **womanist** empowerment. Maya's enduring love for Bailey, his rapid initiation into a racist society, and even his inadvertent complicity in black women's oppression complement his sister's understanding of personal tragedy and its racial and sexual implications. Beyond these, issues as diverse as **lesbianism**, the collective wisdom of "mother-wit," and the integrity of naming converge and merge in the engaging eloquence of Angelou's earliest recollections.

See also Black Feminist Criticism; Healing; Identity; Memory; Religion; Sexuality

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Nancy Kang

**IMAGO.** See Xenogenesis Trilogy

### INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL

In 1861 when **Harriet Jacobs** first published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, it was promoted as a tool with the power to end the vicious enslavement of blacks. In a voice shocking for its strength and vehemence, Jacobs chronicles her plight as a young woman caught in the bonds of **slavery** in Edenton, North Carolina. Throughout her narrative she explicitly appeals to northern white women, hoping to elicit their sympathy and rouse them to action in support of the abolitionist cause. In her narrative, Jacobs takes on the arguments of proslavery factions, as she categorically disproves the **myth** of the "happy slave." She tells stories of those around her that exhibit the brutality and inhumanity of slavery, and she uses her own life as an example of its degrading effects upon even the most virtuous of young women. Finally, she examines the conditions of her enslavement that forced her to hide for seven years in a crawl space in her grandmother's **home**. Throughout her story, Jacobs uses the pseudonym "Linda Brent," and she loosely masks the **identity** of her cast of characters, while, at the same time, claiming the veracity of her account. Perhaps her greatest accomplishment in her narrative is that she forces her readers to see her or "Linda" as someone not all that different from themselves.

Jacobs's narrative begins with her awakening to her condition as a slave. Upon her mother's **death** when she was six years old, Jacobs, or "Linda,"



learns that she is the property of her mother's mistress and that she will now take her mother's place at this mistress's side. She notes that her mother had been a slave in name only, and she finds her treatment in this new home to be pleasant and her life to be as carefree as that of a white child. When this kind mistress dies, however, Jacobs learns that she has been willed to the woman's five-year-old niece. This incident is the first in a series of moments in the text where Jacobs learns to distrust the intentions and actions of white people.

Jacobs goes to live in the home of Dr. and Mrs. Flint—her new mistress's parents—and it is here that Jacobs spends the bulk of her enslavement. In *Incidents*, Jacobs tells of growing up in the Flint household and of Dr. Flint's attempts to manipulate her into a sexual relationship. Judging a consensual relationship with a man that she did not loathe to be better than a forced encounter with one she did, Jacobs enters into a liaison with a prominent white citizen, referred to in the narrative as "Mr. Sands." She bears two children—a son and a daughter—by this man, which serves to infuriate the "jilted" Flint—so much so that he vows he will never sell her or her children. She also has to contend with Mrs. Flint's jealousy at her husband's perceived infidelity. Jacobs describes how, in a near pathological fit of distrust and resentment, Mrs. Flint would haunt her bedside at night. Mrs. Flint ultimately succeeds in having Jacobs expelled from the house, and after living with her grandmother for a time, she is sent to the plantation to serve the Flints' son and his new wife.

In her narrative, Jacobs describes awakening to the fact that, despite the best interests of Mr. Sands and his intentions to buy her and her children, neither she nor her children will ever see **freedom** unless she takes matters into her own hands. Prompted by the information that her children will be brought to the plantation to **work**, Jacobs devises a plan for escape. She flees the household one night, to be taken in by a sympathetic white woman, who is also, ironically, a slaveholder. When this arrangement proves too dangerous, Jacobs's uncle constructs a garret above her grandmother's storage shed where Jacobs will spend the next six years and eleven months confined to a space so small that she cannot stand upright within it. Although her narrow space is cramped and subject to the elements—cold in the winter, hot in the summer, wet and unhealthful during the rainy season—Jacobs is close to her children and at least marginally safe from her pursuers.

Despite Jacobs's long absence from Dr. Flint's household, he does not give up his obsessive search for her. Over time, Jacobs realizes the threat she poses to her grandmother's own safety (and peace of mind), and she emerges from her garret to make her final bid for freedom aboard a ship bound for the North. Her daughter, Louisa Matilda (Ellen in the book), had preceded her when Mr. Sands had, in fact, purchased his daughter (but not freed her!) and taken her north to live with (and serve) his new wife and child. When Jacobs reaches New York, she is reunited with her daughter and befriended by Nathaniel Parker Willis and his first wife, Mary Stace Willis (Mr. and Mrs. Bruce in the book), who become her employers and protectors.

Ever fearful of being caught and returned to enslavement in Edenton and even more so after the passage of the "Fugitive Slave Act," Jacobs flees the

city on several occasions when she learns of the arrival in town of people from her hometown who could identify and possibly arrest her. Jacobs is finally liberated when Mr. Bruce's second wife is successful in purchasing her from her mistress—now married and in dire financial straits. Although Jacobs is bitter that her freedom must be purchased and is not considered a natural right, at the conclusion of her narrative she is grateful to be rid once and for all of the yoke of slavery.

Jacobs was encouraged by her friend Amy Post to write her story in order to help the cause of abolition, but the publication of her story was not without trial itself. Fearful of taking on the task herself, Jacobs initially desired to pass along her story for another writer to tell. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a natural choice, and, when Jacobs learned that Stowe would be touring England, she proposed to send her daughter, Louisa, to join the company with the hopes of persuading Stowe to write her mother's story. Stowe responded to this proposal by claiming that Louisa, as a young black woman, would be spoiled by the attention she would receive there and that the plan was not logistically feasible despite the fact that Jacobs was prepared to pay Louisa's way. Jacobs responded to this slight with predictable anger but also with renewed vigor for her project. She knew that if her story were to be told, she herself must tell it. Although Jacobs initially considered a British publisher, her biographer Jean Fagan Yellin notes that it is unclear why that plan fell apart. Two of the American publishers Jacobs contacted about publishing her narrative failed before the book reached print, but Thayer and Eldredge was instrumental in encouraging Jacobs to work with Lydia Maria Child, who would eventually become the book's editor and write a preface for the text. After Thayer and Eldredge went bankrupt, Jacobs, tired of waiting, bought the plates and had the book printed herself.

Although it was initially well received and even published in London as *The Deeper Wrong; or, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*, over the years, Jacobs's story passed into obscurity. When it was read, it was assumed to be the work of abolitionist Lydia Maria Child and not the factual account its author claimed it to be. In her preface to her critical edition of *Incidents*, Yellin describes her own initial doubts about the text and her gradual awareness of its accuracy over the course of her research into women abolitionists. Yellin identified the characters in the story long thought to be types rather than actual people, and she successfully connected places and events to Jacobs's recollections in order to reveal the veracity of Jacobs's claim to truth and to reconnect the text with its original author.

*See also* Slave Narrative

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*Jennifer Dawes Adkison*

### **IN LOVE & TROUBLE: STORIES OF BLACK WOMEN**

*In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women* is the first published collection of short stories by **Alice Walker**. Some stories were previously published, but the collection as a whole appeared in 1973. It was preceded by four other works by Walker, including her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970).

Walker, who grew up in Georgia, wrote the stories between 1967 and 1973 on the heels of the **civil rights movement** and during the **Black Arts Movement**. Consisting of thirteen stories, *In Love & Trouble* addresses many concerns that recur in Walker's work. She takes a critical look at the oppression that black women face. Important to Walker's view is not only how black women are affected but also how oppressive forces such as racism and sexism pollute the black **community**.

Most of the stories take place in the **South**. Each one involves a black woman and her experience with **love**. As the title suggests, however, their experience is not always positive. For Walker's women, love can include misplaced loyalty to black men who are often characterized as abusive and dismissive (as in "Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?" and "Her Sweet Jerome"). Walker explores these women's lives and surroundings with an eye toward revealing how oppression affects their physical and mental states of being, namely, in trying to fulfill definitions of self and resisting conventional definitions imposed on them. Individual relationships and social institutions, such as marriage and **religion**, are both scrutinized.

The collection begins with "Roselily," setting the example for Walker's critical and insightful stories. The story takes place during the title character's wedding ceremony. Roselily is a southerner with three children and no husband. She hopes that marriage to a black Muslim from Chicago will bring her and her children some respectability and security. Knowing little about her future husband's religion, she expects her role as a wife will be subservient and confining. Her love for him exists only as the recognition of his ability to improve her condition as a single, working mother. Roselily acknowledges feeling trapped and unfulfilled, yet marriage and life in a northern city seem better than her current situation.

Throughout the collection, women often act against their notions of **freedom** and fulfillment because societal conventions limit what they can do. Yet these women are not simply victims. At the least, they define fulfillment for themselves even if they cannot act in support of that fulfillment. The

development of a definition of self-fulfillment in the face of racism and sexism is itself a valuable process for Walker's women. It is a necessary struggle without which change would be impossible.

*In Love & Trouble* was met with mixed critical reception. Critics charged that the depiction of black men was stereotypical and that the women came across as damaged victims. Supporters contend that Walker's women are not victims but women with hope who are capable of growth in spite of the difficulties they may face. Some have described the stories as examples of **womanist** prose, a term Walker popularized that refers to black feminists or feminists of color.

*See also In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose; Womanism; You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*

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*Raquel Rodriguez*

### **IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS: WOMANIST PROSE**

Written between 1966 and 1982, this 1984 text is a collection of essays, articles, reviews, and speeches by **Alice Walker** divided into four sections. In part one, Walker describes in "Saving a Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life" the frustration she felt for the lack of black women writers as models. However, in her pursuits of a factual account of voodoo, she stumbles across the footnoted name **Zora Neale Hurston**, which leads her to Hurston's works and the marking of her grave site in Florida. Though Walker found herself drawn to Flannery O'Connor, **Jean Toomer**, and **Langston Hughes**, she claims her pursuit of black women writers as a search for the texts she should have been able to read during her education. Another essay in part one relates her difficulties devising a curriculum to teach ninety black women

how to pass on black heritage to their students. Other essays review authors Walker considers as models: Jean Toomer, Buchi Emecheta, and **Rebecca Cox Jackson**.

Part two characterizes the **civil rights movement** and how it affected black communities and herself. In these essays she discusses place, **community**, **home**, her role as a writer during the revolution, her anxiety at combining **motherhood** and writing, Langston Hughes, Cuba, and a **film** made by a black sorority.

Part three contains the namesake essay of the collection that describes the need to reevaluate how creativity, art, and **literature** are defined and asserts, as Virginia Woolf did, that women have always been creative but often were disallowed to produce because of oppression. That is, Walker looks low to find creativity in her own mother's garden as proof of a black women's **history** of creativity. Also in this section is an interview, a published letter to *Ms.*, and a rejected one to *Black Scholar*.

In part four she delineates on topics such as antinuclear activism, imperialism, civil rights, and motherhood. In "Writing *The Color Purple*," she reveals the impetus for the novel, her own struggles to write the novel in New York, her eventual move to San Francisco, and how quickly the story was written there. The estimable collection culminates with an essay from *Ms.*, "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self," which chronicles the experience that led her to accept her once disfigured and completely blinded eye. Scholars have written on numerous aspects of this text.

*See also* Womanism

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*Laura Madeline Wiseman*

### IN SEARCH OF SATISFACTION

The novel *In Search of Satisfaction* was published in 1994 by **J. California Cooper**. It is an epic saga about the lives of three families. Cooper's use of vernacular has caused her narrative style to be compared to **Zora Neale Hurston** and **Alice Walker**, and this is very apparent in this novel. Like Janie in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Celie in Walker's *The Color Purple* (1985), the characters in *In Search of Satisfaction* speak in black dialect. At the same time, the need to learn standard English as a means of becoming more successful is emphasized, as is the importance of

education. Cooper conveys the idea that knowledge gives one power and that this is especially true for the doubly oppressed black woman.

The Bible and **religion** play prominent roles in much of Cooper's work, but this is perhaps most apparent in *In Search of Satisfaction*. The novel explores the role of good and evil as the characters attempt to become upwardly mobile after **slavery** has been abolished. God and, especially, Satan appear to guide the characters as they make important life decisions. As she does in much of her work, Cooper has many moral lessons to convey in *In Search of Satisfaction*, and a major theme in the novel is the idea that life may be difficult, but it is important to do the right thing and follow the Ten Commandments. As well, there is a warning to be wary, for there is much evil in the world; therefore, one must beware of those who do not respect the Commandments.

The hardships of poverty and the superficiality of wealth are visible in the novel. Many characters find that they cannot escape poverty because of their limited education and experience. For example, characters such as Joel and Ruth have the simple, respectable dream of owning a **home** and sending their son, Lincoln, to college. Other characters are seduced by the trappings of the rich and are willing to sacrifice their values in order to live in luxury. Yin, for example, is full of envy and craves the abundance of the material world. Even the wealthy, white, and powerful Befoes, who are worth millions, are so consumed by greed that they take advantage of the town's poorest inhabitants. Ultimately, some, but not all, recognize that this superficial lifestyle does not bring them complete fulfillment, and they realize that they will find greater satisfaction through **love** and **family**.

Cooper acknowledges that we are all "in search of satisfaction" but that we pay for the choices that we make; therefore, we must choose wisely.

*See also Family; Homemade Love*

*Diane Todd Bucci*

## **INTERRUPTION OF EVERYTHING, THE**

Reflective in tone, **Terry McMillan's** sixth novel explores the trials and tribulations of midlife. Forty-four-year-old Marilyn Grimes is ready to settle down to a comfortable life that includes a peaceful marriage. Unfortunately, Marilyn learns that life is not so simple; there are always interruptions.

First, there is her husband, Leon, who is going through a midlife crisis of his own. His distant moods and rebellious behavior wreak havoc on their marriage. Authorine, Leon's mother, lives with the Grimes **family**. Although elderly, she begins a relationship and eventually marries Prezelle, an elderly man who is still full of life.

Marilyn's children do not give her much peace either. Sabrina, Marilyn's oldest child, lives a bohemian lifestyle in Berkeley. Marilyn struggles to hold back her opinion as she witnesses her daughter deferring her dreams in order to fulfill family obligations—a path Marilyn once took. Simon and Spencer are

Marilyn's college-age twins. Each has a different view of success, and Marilyn keeps her fingers crossed that they will accomplish all of the goals they set for themselves.

While her **home** life is nothing less than chaotic, Marilyn also struggles with the declining health of her mother, Lovey; she later discovers that Lovey's unusual behavior is due to the onset of dementia. Marilyn's adopted sister, Joy, behaves irresponsibly and has two children. The rapid decline of her mother's health and the tragedy that later strikes Joy figure in Marilyn's decision to open her home to her extended family and begin the job of primary caretaker all over again.

*Interruption* is a vivid portrait of the foibles that come with aging. Marilyn learns that life is not a straight trajectory, but a recursive cycle of progress and defeats.

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Catherine Ross-Stroud

### **IOLA LEROY**

Poet, orator, journalist, and activist **Frances E. W. Harper** published her novel *Iola Leroy* in 1892 at the age of sixty-seven. Harper's novel was published both in Boston and Philadelphia, and within its first year of publication, it had gone through five printings. Frances Smith Foster suggests that *Iola Leroy* was probably the bestselling novel by a pre-twentieth-century African American writer.

Written in response to the political and social exigencies of the post-Reconstruction United States, *Iola Leroy* can be read in the context of Harper's lifelong activism and social reform **work**. Throughout her life, Harper advocated a universal **love** realized by a commitment to humanity. In her speeches, writings, and activism, Harper was committed to securing equal rights for all and was active in word and deed for causes such as abolition, temperance, and suffrage. After the failure of Reconstruction, Harper was particularly committed to **healing** the personal and communal wounds caused by the "cancer" of **slavery** and to building strong African American communities from within.

*Iola Leroy* looks at America's past, present, and future and the role black women could play in the future of the nation. The eponymous Iola is the daughter of Eugene Leroy, a white plantation owner, and Marie, the descendant of a black woman. Although Leroy manumits Marie and establishes

their children as his rightful heirs, an avaricious cousin challenges the legality of Marie's manumission upon Eugene's **death** and declares Eugene's will invalid. The cousin claims Eugene's property and sells Marie and her children into slavery. Iola is lured from the North and sold as a slave; her **beauty** makes slavery particularly perilous for her. Harry is forewarned of his fate and joins the Union army, where he enlists with a black regiment. Iola is rescued by another slave who, charmed by her beauty, brings her to the Union army, where she works as a nurse. Significantly, Iola and her brother Harry are both able to pass for white, yet they choose to "link their fortunes" to the black **race** and to work toward its healing and elevation. Both Leroy children embody the characteristics of ideal citizens: Harry is a "manly and self-respecting" man, and Iola is a "useful and self-reliant" woman.

Much of the novel is concerned with **family** members searching for and finding each other, establishing happy homes, and helping to raise strong future leaders and citizens. In promoting these traditionally female endeavors, Harper underscores the centrality of African American women in the processes of healing and elevating not only the race but the nation as well.

When Iola asks what she can do for her race, she is told to write a book that will "inspire men and women with a deeper sense of justice." Harper's own *Iola Leroy* is such a book, and Iola's ideas frequently echo those found in Harper's other writings, particularly those of love, hope, and optimism. Iola and Harper both believe there is "a brighter coming day" on the horizon and that African American women are especially suited for ushering it in.

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Heidi L. M. Jacobs







## JACKSON, ANGELA (1951- )

Angela Jackson is a recognized African American poet whose verse unifies her African heritage, small-town southern roots, and urban experiences. Jackson was born in Greenville, Mississippi, the fifth of nine children born to George and Angeline Jackson. Her family relocated to Chicago when she was a young child. It was in Chicago where she began to forge her distinctive poetic voice that plumbs heartfelt, accessible, and everyday subjects. Her poems, continually drawing from African motifs, resonate with an innocent southern childhood charm and an eclectic cosmopolitan culture. Jackson attended Northwestern University, where she quickly gained a reputation as a gifted poet for her unmistakably inventive style, penetrating voice, and accessible subject matter.

Jackson is primarily a poet who has published many collections of verse, including *Voo Doo/Love Magic* (1974), *The Greenville Club* (1977), *Solo in the Boxcar Third Floor E* (1985), *Dark Legs and Silk Kisses* (1993), and *And All These Roads Be Luminous: Poems Selected and New* (1998). Her **poetry**, enriched by her deeply rooted cultural voice and complex yet mundane metaphors, explores the abstract and prosaic. Her subjects are the familiar and everyday: **love**, **family**, cultural **memory**, politics, and African American heritage. In “Transformable Prophecy,” the poet develops the metaphorically rich language, centered on the traditional African folktale of a spider that appears in many of her poems, to describe the recreation of the world: “When the world ends / a

great spider will rise like a gray cloud / above it.” Her authentic voice resonates with the here and now in “The Autumn Men,” as Jackson describes the familiar scenes and smells of men raking leaves in the family yard, while young girls think about falling in love. Her images are sharply focused, distilled down to basic emotions. Although love in the prose piece “Witchdoctor” may be elusive, the language is poignant and vivid.

As an emerging playwright, Jackson’s repertoire includes *Witness!* (1978), produced in Chicago and Milwaukee by the Ebony Talent Readers Theatre; *Shango Diaspora: An African-American Myth of Womanhood and Love* (1980), produced in Chicago, Cleveland, and New York; and *When the Wind Blows* (1984) produced in Chicago.

Jackson’s artistic style and sensitivity have been shaped through her involvement with Chicago’s Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) during the 1970s. OBAC is a conclave of writers and other artists that promotes the articulation of the African American aesthetic. She joined the organization in 1970 and helped to fashion the group’s manifesto that stresses high standards for literary expression and critical evaluation of creative works within the black context. Her first book *Voo Doo/Love Magic*, a collection of fifteen poems, strongly reflects the aesthetic and sociopolitical foundation of OBAC. The small volume carries a dedication to the members of OBAC and to Hoyt Fuller, the workshop’s leader until 1976, when Jackson assumed the direction of OBAC.

Included among the many awards she has received are a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and an American Book Award for *Solo*. She was elected chairperson of the board of directors for the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. She received international recognition when she represented the United States at the Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture (1978). In 1983 Jackson received the Hoyt W. Fuller Award for Literary Excellence.

In her early poem “Voo Doo/Love Magic,” Jackson declares that she is going to get into the reader’s soul, where she will place a magical love spell. The poem’s final line declares: “I’m gonna put a hex on you.” Jackson’s spirited and ebullient canon of writing does indeed place a hex on the reader.

### Works By

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Michael D. Sollars

## JACKSON, ELAINE (1943– )

Elaine Jackson, actress, playwright, and teacher, was born in Detroit, Michigan, and later graduated from Wayne State University, where she studied speech and education. Upon graduation, Jackson pursued a career as an actress. She moved to the West Coast and as an off-Broadway actress performed in a number of plays including the Negro Ensemble Company's production of *Liberty Call* (1975). Jackson became a published playwright and a part of the black theater movement in 1971 when *Toe Jam* appeared in Woodie King and Ron Milner's *Black Drama Anthology*, a collection of plays by a number of notable African American dramatists, including **Amiri Baraka**, **Kathleen Collins**, and **Langston Hughes**. The New Federal Theatre, the Greenwich Mews Theater, and the American Folk Theatre produced many of Jackson's plays.

**Black feminist** perspectives are presented in most of her work. In three acts and seven scenes, *Toe Jam*, produced by the New Federal Theatre, features Xenith Graham as she struggles to carve out a creative space for herself, a space that will bring her into her own. She dreams of becoming a famous poet, actress, and playwright, though her mother demands that she stop pretending and find financial security and "honor" for herself by marrying Kenneth, the son of a doctor. *Cockfight* (1976) focuses on relationships between black men and women as the premise of the play surrounds the dissolution of a marriage. According to the Schomburg Center, *Cockfight* (1976) was originally titled *Kenya Cowboys* ("Cockfight" is handwritten on the title page of *Kenya Cowboys*). Apparently the Greenwich Mews Theater produced the play in 1976 under the title *Cockfight*.

*Paper Dolls* (1979) is a satire concerned with mainstream ideas of **beauty**. Margaret-Elizabeth, Miss Emancipation of 1930, and her colleague, Lizzie, who was first runner-up, have traveled to Canada to judge an international beauty pageant. Along the way, they reminisce about their days as beauty pageant contestants. Pinched noses, straightened hair, tightened lips, and bleached skin are among the many efforts these aging beauty queens have used to obtain "beauty." The play exposes the destructive nature of hair and skin politics on women's lives. Margaret-Elizabeth and Lizzie decide it is not too late for them to reinvent themselves in order to help future generations realize the beauty that rests in black women's natural appearances.

Other works by Jackson include *Birth Rites* (1978), a comedic **drama**, produced by the American Folk Theatre of New York. The action of the play takes place in a hospital in New York where several expectant mothers of diverse backgrounds contemplate **motherhood** as they look forward to the birth of their newborns.

Jackson has received several awards for her work. She was awarded the Rockefeller Award for Playwriting in 1978–1979, the Langston Hughes Playwriting Award in 1979, and a National Endowment for the Arts Award for playwriting in 1983. Jackson’s work is reflective of her interest in black female **identity** development, empowerment, and self-actualization. Jackson is applauded for her work as a dramatist who recognized the need to make the voices of young black women audible in the theatrical world.

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*KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson*

### JACKSON, MAE (1946– )

Mae Jackson, poet, playwright, activist, and educator, was born on January 3, 1946, in Earl, Arkansas. She studied at the New School for Social Research in New York City from 1966 to 1967 and later during the 1970s. Her work has appeared in numerous periodicals, including *Black Creation*, *Essence*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, and *Negro Digest/Black World* and anthologies, such as *The Poetry of Black America* (1973), *BlackSpirits* (1972), *Night Comes Softly* (1970), and *Black Out Loud* (1970).

Jackson published *Can I Poet with You* (1969) during the height of the **Black Arts Movement**. In the introduction, **Nikki Giovanni**, one of Jackson’s mentors, suggests that Jackson is a natural poet, a “people poet,” committed to addressing the concerns of the **community**. The volume of **poetry** contains nearly thirty poems on a range of topics from black pride and Black Power to

black **love** and black art. Above all, *Can I Poet with You* demands that the black female presence in the revolution (and the Black Arts Movement) is recognized and documented. In the poem “For Some Poets,” from which the book’s title comes, Jackson asks several leading poets—“roi” (LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka), “nikki” (Nikki Giovanni), Marvin X (Marvin Ellis Jackmon), and others—“Can I . . . poet with you please?” In 1970, Jackson received the Conrad Kent Rivers Memorial Award of *Negro Digest/Black World* for *Can I Poet with You*.

During the 1970s, Jackson turned to writing plays. She was a playwright with the Negro Ensemble Company Playwrights Workshop and a member of the Brewery Puppet Troupe. Three unpublished plays—*Sketches in Black and White* (1976), *When I Grow Up I Want to Be* (1976), and *Cafe Who* (n.d.)—written by Jackson are housed in the Schomburg Collection. She has also authored several children’s plays: *The Harriet Tubman Story*, *The Jackson Five Meets Malcolm X*, and *When Kwanzaa Comes*. She has also worked as an instructor at Cell Block Theatre, Bronx Men’s House of Detention, Queens Men’s House of Detention, Metropolitan Correctional Facilities, Loft Film and Theatre Center, and South Jamaica Senior Citizens Center. Jackson also wrote a documentary titled *The Prison Movement* for Pacifica Radio. Jackson has been a Pacific News Service commentator and director of “Children without Walls,” a program teaching art to the children of women in prison. In 1997, Jackson wrote a moving commentary titled “The Fire Next Time—Lessons of the Shabazz Tragedy” for *Jinn Magazine*. The article discusses the implications of fire around, first, the house of **Malcolm X**’s youth, then the apartment he lived in, in 1965, and finally the fire set by Malcolm’s grandson that resulted in his wife Betty Shabazz’s **death**. Further, she laments that fire continues to consume her own generation. Jackson was a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the H. Rap Brown Anti-Dope Movement. Jackson’s work reveals her commitment to activism and **community** uplift.

### Works By

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*KaaVonnia Hinton-Johnson*

**JACKSON, MATTIE (1843-?)**

Forging hope under seemingly insurmountable circumstances, Mattie Jane Jackson's life is a testament to never giving up and always believing that a better day would come. Jackson's life story is also the celebration of the woman as heroine as she witnessed firsthand the heroics of her mother, Ellen, in standing up to her owners and in sacrificing her **freedom** so that her children could gain their freedom first.

Born in St. Louis in 1843 to slaves Ellen and Westley Jackson, Jackson endured separation from her **family** early in her life; her father and mother lived on separate plantations when she was born. Her father eventually escaped with the assistance of his wife and with the hope of reuniting with his family, but **slavery** would prevent such a reunion and would leave Jackson's mother to raise her and her sister alone.

Jackson's life unfolded under several different slave owners. One owner, William Lewis, was the result of the family being sold after attempting to escape some two years after the father's departure. A partnership between Lewis and his brother-in-law further separated the already broken family by sending Jackson to live with the brother-in-law and his wife. Jackson eventually returned to the Lewis residence and to her mother, who had remarried and had two more children. Ellen would again be left alone to care for her family because this husband, too, escaped to freedom.

Change was on the horizon, though, for Jackson and her family, for the Civil War had begun. Jackson's owner held out hope of victory until the Union army took New Orleans. Jackson and her mother were overjoyed that freedom was almost at hand because their owner, mostly in retaliation, treated them horribly. A beating by Lewis left Jackson with a permanent scar on her head, one that she said would be a constant reminder of her treatment as a slave.

Yet another owner would gain possession of Jackson and her family and separate them. She would fare far worse under this owner; she was not fed enough and was given constant and difficult **work**, but this did not stop her from plotting her escape. Daily for six months Jackson awoke in the early morning hours to find someone to help her escape using the **Underground Railroad**. She finally succeeded and arrived in Indianapolis a free woman for the first time.

Once there she was encouraged by the Unionists to read, write, and pursue her literary interests. The dreams that Jackson had held for as long as she could remember were finally coming true. The hopes that she had for her family would come true as well; Jackson's mother joined her in Indianapolis, finally successful after six escape attempts and more than forty-three years as a slave. Jackson and her mother returned to St. Louis, where Ellen remarried. Jackson moved on to Lawrence, Massachusetts, and in 1866 dictated the story of her life to her stepmother.

**Work By**

*The Story of Mattie J. Jackson: Her Parentage, Experience of Eighteen Years in Slavery, Incidents During the War, Her Escape from Slavery: A True Story.* Lawrence, MA: Sentinel Office, 1866.

*Lamara Williams-Hackett*

**JACKSON, REBECCA COX (1795–1871)**

An early African American feminist, Rebecca Cox Jackson was born free around 1795 near Philadelphia. A religious visionary, Jackson believed that she had been chosen to make known God's will to His people. For Jackson and many other women in the nineteenth century, a call to serve God as a preacher brought with it a sense of personal empowerment that frequently conflicted with patriarchal restrictions on women's participation in the public sphere. Not surprisingly, Jackson faced opposition from her brother Rev. Joseph Cox, her husband Samuel Jackson, and clergymen in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. But despite strong resistance from men who viewed her call to preach as nothing more than female impertinence/arrogance, Jackson persevered and gained considerable recognition as a preacher and founder of a black Shaker **community** in Philadelphia.

First published in 1981, Jackson's writings detailing her spiritual journey are compelling and easy to read. Readers will be fascinated by Jackson's brilliant descriptions of her extraordinary dreams and visions. Women readers may feel a special connection to the dreams involving **domestic** activities such as women taking care of children, sewing, cleaning house, and preparing meals. These traditionally feminine tasks assume symbolic meanings in Jackson's writings.

According to Jackson's spiritual **autobiography**, her religious awakening occurred during a thunderstorm in 1830. An inner voice told her she will die and go to hell. Jackson then prayed and asked for forgiveness. Subsequently, she was converted and felt a tremendous **love** for God and all humankind. Another turning point in Jackson's spiritual development was her decision to embrace a celibate lifestyle. Influenced by her inner voice, Jackson perceived sex as sin. Therefore, she refused to engage in sex with her husband, thereby liberating herself from male sexual dominance. Moreover, Jackson's inner voice led her to preach and pray in public without the approval of the male leadership of the AME Church. Following her conversion, Jackson received spiritual guidance and authority from God through visions and dreams. Consequently, she did not feel bound by limitations that men set for her in the church or elsewhere.

In 1831, Jackson received a vision of "God's true people," the Shakers. She was impressed by the Shakers' commitment to celibacy and their feminist theology, which included a Mother and Daughter as well as a Father and Son



in the godhead. She was also enticed by the idea of Holy Mother Wisdom balancing the traditional Almighty Father. Because Jackson believed Shakers were God's chosen or "true people," she felt compelled to bring other blacks into the predominantly white Shaker community. While living in the Watervliet Community of Shakers in 1851, Jackson requested permission from Eldress Paulina Bates to evangelize among blacks in Philadelphia. Displeased with Jackson's strict obedience to her inner voice, Bates denied Jackson's request. Undeterred by Bates's refusal, Jackson left Watervliet and devoted six years to preaching among blacks in Philadelphia. In the "Dreams of Home," Jackson was welcomed back into the Watervliet community, where she acknowledged Eldress Bates's authority as leader and received her blessing. Jackson and her friend, Rebecca Perot, returned to Philadelphia and established a community of black Shakers that survived forty years after Jackson's death.

### Work By

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*Elvin Holt*

### JACOBS, HARRIET (1813–1897)

In her long and tumultuous life, Harriet Jacobs fought not only for the **freedom** of enslaved blacks but also for their dignity. In her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), which she wrote pseudonymously as "Linda Brent," **race** and gender intersect to underscore the particular trials of the female slave. Jacobs masterfully weaves a tale of **love** and hope, fear and degradation, as she appeals to her largely white audience in the North.

Jacobs was born in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina, to Delilah, daughter of Molly Horniblow (both enslaved), and her husband, Elijah Knox, a carpenter by trade, who, although a slave himself, was allowed to **work** and live

with his **family**. As a girl, Hatty (as she was called) had no knowledge of her own enslavement. Upon her mother's **death** in 1819, when Hatty was only six, she first learned of her position as a slave. Her family was of mixed race, with her grandmother, Molly, the daughter of a white man who had been Molly's mother's master, and race and concerns about race figure prominently in Jacobs's narrative. The family had been allowed to live together and must have maintained some semblance of normalcy for Jacobs to write at middle age that her awareness to her condition of enslavement occurred when she was sent to serve her mother's mistress after her mother's death.

Although Delilah's mistress, Margaret Horniblow, promised that she would protect Delilah's children, Miss Margaret died prematurely while still in her twenties. During Miss Margaret's lifetime, Hatty led a comfortable life in service to her young mistress. Doing the almost unthinkable, Margaret taught Hatty to read and write and supervised her religious education. Despite the strong bond that clearly developed between the mistress and her slave, in a deathbed codicil to her will Margaret bequeathed the girl to her three-year-old niece Mary Matilda Norcom. (Interestingly, the fact that the codicil was never signed by Margaret Horniblow has led Jacobs's biographer Jean Fagan Yellin to question whether it was Margaret's intention to will Jacobs to her niece or whether this was the result of the machinations of Margaret's lecherous brother-in-law, Dr. James Norcom.)

Nothing about her experiences up until age twelve when she came to live in the Norcom household could have prepared Jacobs for her life there. From that time and for the next quarter of a century, Jacobs would live in fear of Dr. Norcom's power over her very life. In her narrative, Jacobs describes Dr. Norcom's (he is named "Dr. Flint" in the text) attempts to manipulate her into a sexual relationship despite the fact that she was only fifteen years old, and he was over fifty. Retelling the stories of the indignities she suffered at Norcom's hands was clearly troubling to Jacobs as she wrote her narrative. Nonetheless, she explicitly claims in her narrative that she uses these episodes, even though her modest sensibility shrinks at their recounting, in order to stir the sympathy of northern white women for the plight of southern black women still enslaved. It becomes clear to Jacobs that for the young slave girl virtue is not an option, and she loses no opportunity to share this appalling situation with her readers.

Because of her status as a slave, Jacobs was denied the basic right of marriage to the man of her choice. When she fell in love with a local freeborn black man, Dr. Norcom scoffed at her choice and, like a jealous lover scorned, told her that if she ever spoke to the man again, he would have him whipped. Determining that a lover of her choosing is better than concubinage with the despised Norcom, Jacobs began a relationship with a local lawyer, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, who was sympathetic to her plight. Her relationship with Sawyer produced two children, Joseph and Louisa Matilda, whom, along with herself, Jacobs hoped Sawyer would purchase and free. Through her relationship with the affluent and aristocratic Sawyer, Jacobs was able to

sidestep Dr. Norcom's attentions. As Norcom's social superior, Sawyer could offer a modicum of protection to young Harriet.

In her narrative, Jacobs makes the claim that **slavery** is degrading to both black and white women, which is vividly illustrated in her contentious relationship with Mrs. Norcom. Well aware of her husband's attention to Harriet, Mrs. Norcom first keeps a nighttime vigil over the slave girl and then, as her jealous passions erupt, bans her from the house altogether. Despite the fact that Jacobs moved out of the Norcom home to once again live with her grandmother, Dr. Norcom kept up his sexual entreaties and threats, although it appears that he was too cautious to act upon them.

Jacobs lived with her grandmother Molly for six years, but upon once again rejecting Dr. Norcom's sexual advances, she was sent to live on the family plantation to serve Norcom's son and his new wife. During this time, Jacobs learns that Norcom plans to send her children to the plantation, too, so they can be "broken in" to the life of the slaves. This knowledge coupled with her growing awareness that Norcom will never sell her (or her children) to Sawyer compelled her to formulate a plan for escape. Although she could not have known it at the time, true freedom was over seventeen years away—seven of which would be spent hiding in a space so small she could not even stand erect.

Jacobs's conviction that she must either run away or die a slave began a new era in her life. On the night that would mark this change, Jacobs completed her chores, locked up the house, and retired to her room to wait. At midnight she crept down the stairs, opened the parlor window, jumped out, and never looked back. Although she would remain a slave on paper for another seventeen years, she never again lived as one. On that fateful night, she ran to her grandmother's house, asked a friend to hide her clothing (to make it look as if she had fled northward), and lit out for a hiding place at an unidentified friend's house. When a snake bit her in her hiding place, she was taken into the home of a sympathetic white woman (also a slaveholder) and concealed there until the fear of discovery became too great.

While Jacobs waited in the snake-infested swamplands nearby, her uncle constructed a tiny garret room (what Jacobs, referencing William Cowper's "The Task" (1785), called in her narrative "The Loophole of Retreat") above the storage shed at her grandmother's house where she spent the next six years and eleven months in near-constant confinement. Unable to stand up or move about freely in the space, Jacobs's only consolation was that her children were never far away, and she could occasionally catch a glimpse of them from a peephole she had fashioned in the wall. The little "room" to which she had retreated may have saved her life, but she suffered the physical effects of this dramatic confinement for years afterward, at times being unable to climb stairs or walk without pain.

In the meantime, Dr. Norcom, enraged at Jacobs's flight, jailed all of her relatives under his authority—both of her children, her brother, and her aunt Betty. Using a slave trader as an intermediary to mask his own involvement,

Sawyer stepped up his negotiations to buy the children, and Norcom eventually relented. The children became the property of their father (as did Jacobs's brother, John) but were still not emancipated, as Jacobs had years before hoped. Several years later, Sawyer took John north with him, where John proceeded to run away. Two years after that, when Sawyer moved north with his new wife and baby, he brought Louisa along, leaving her in New York with his cousins. Following their lead, two years after her daughter's departure, Jacobs finally fled to the North aboard a ship accompanied by another slave woman. Terrified and exhausted by the experience, Jacobs made friends among the abolitionists in Philadelphia, who offered her financial assistance for her train fare to New York (which she did not need, thanks to her grandmother's support) and, perhaps even more important to the young woman who had never been out of Edenton and its environs, a kind welcome in a strange new world.

Making her way to New York, Jacobs was reunited with her beloved daughter but was distressed to learn that the child's father had "given" her to his cousin as a maid and she had been ill-treated and neglected by her new "mistress." Jacobs found employment in the home of writer Nathaniel Parker Willis and his first wife, Mary Stace Willis, tending to their baby daughter, Imogen. Upon learning that her whereabouts had been betrayed to Dr. Norcom by one of Samuel Tredwell's relatives, Jacobs confessed her story to Mary Willis, who helped Jacobs and her daughter flee to Boston. She had previously fled to Boston on another occasion and had at that time called for Joseph to be sent to her. That time she had returned to the Willis employ in New York; this time she did not—at least not immediately.

The Jacobs family spent several years together in Boston, but upon the death of Mary Willis, Jacobs was once again called upon to help tend Imogen. Jacobs's sympathy for the motherless child, as well as the extra earnings she would make as her caregiver, prompted Jacobs to accompany Willis and his daughter to England in 1845 on a visit to Mrs. Willis's relatives. Jacobs found her travels in England to be a liberating experience, not only because according to British law she was not chattel but, even more significantly, the British people never treated her as such. In her experience abroad with the Willis family, she found the British to be curiously egalitarian. She was even allowed to ride in the same railway car as her white employer. Jacobs and the Willises returned to the United States after a ten-month absence.

Jacobs returned to Boston to find that Norcom, still in hot pursuit, had given the New York police a detailed description of her appearance and offered a \$100 reward for her capture. She also received letters from Norcom's son John, from his son-in-law Daniel Messmore, and from Mary Matilda Norcom Messmore, Jacobs's "mistress," all entreating Jacobs to return to them. Several years later in 1852, after having been cut out of her father's will, Mary Matilda and her husband arrived in New York in pursuit of Jacobs. In a panic, Jacobs went into hiding, and her friend Cornelia Grinnell Willis, Willis's second wife for whom she had been employed,

purchased her freedom from the Messmores for \$300. Although Jacobs was relieved to be finally rid of the yoke of slavery, she was disturbed that she could be bought and sold like so much property in the free state of New York.

Once this period of her life ended, Jacobs was better able to put her experiences as a slave into perspective. Prompted by her friend abolitionist and reformer Amy Post, Jacobs wrote the story of her years of enslavement and her road to freedom. Jacobs's first thought was to give her story to someone else to write; however, she was rebuffed in her efforts by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who suggested incorporating Jacobs's story as an example in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* rather than publishing it on its own. Jacobs secured the support of Lydia Maria Child, who also edited her text and wrote an introduction to it; however, in the economically volatile publishing world of the mid to late nineteenth century, Jacobs was initially unable to find a publisher who did not go bankrupt before the book's publication. Eventually, Jacobs bought the plates to her book and had it published herself. Her story was well received, and it, along with her brother's activism, put her into contact with a number of leading abolitionists, among whom she became something of a celebrity.

In the years that followed, Jacobs devoted herself to the plight of her fellow African Americans—the enslaved, the fugitives, and during the Civil War, the refugees. She volunteered at a refugee camp in Alexandria, Virginia, and was shocked and overwhelmed by poor treatment of the refugees streaming in from the **South**. In 1864, she and Louisa opened a school in the refugee settlement in Alexandria to teach the formerly enslaved children. In 1865 they also established a school in Savannah, Georgia.

In 1867, Jacobs returned to Edenton, North Carolina, for the first time since she had fled so many years before. She hoped her visit would ascertain whether or not she could feasibly make Edenton her **home** once more. Over the course of her visit, she found that although the former slaves were free, they were still subject to some of the same brutal and unjust laws and attitudes that had been the foundation of their enslavement. The visit clearly illustrated for Jacobs that Edenton could never truly be home to her.

In 1878, Jacobs and Louisa moved to Washington, D.C., where Jacobs spent the remaining years of her life. As Jacobs aged and suffered from illness and poverty, her old friend Cornelia Grinnell Willis came to her aid, helping her settle into a small house. Forced to nurse her mother, Louisa was unable to earn money to support them. Friends and activists took up a small collection to help her out; however, following a fall from a wheelchair that injured her hip, Jacobs died on March 7, 1897. She was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. By the time of her death, she and her narrative had already faded into obscurity and would remain so until the republication of *Incidents* in 1987.

*See also* Slave Narrative

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*Jennifer Dawes Adkison*

## JAZZ

The roots of this rapidly evolving music can be traced back to the methods of communication used by slaves working on plantations and in private homes. Both field hollers and the nineteenth-century “ring shouts” performed in New Orleans’s Congo Square were interpreted by white observers as mere entertainment, but for the participants themselves, they helped to preserve African heritage, convey plans for escape, and defy the oppressive social customs of America. A similarly complex agenda defined the work of the early-twentieth-century “classic **blues**” singers. Blues music evolved from the call-and-response strategies of early African American gospel music and the themes of loss and hope that characterize **slavery** songs. It is the central musical precursor to modern jazz. Classic blues vocalists such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, and Ethel Waters enjoyed an economic **freedom**, social mobility, and expressive potential rare for black women of the time. Their lyrics’ exploration of social inequality, **domestic** abuse, sexual autonomy, and other controversial topics has been cited by cultural critics like Hazel Carby and **Angela Davis** as important evidence of **black feminist** sensibilities.

Jazz styles, such as the ragtime piano of Jellyroll Morton and the Dixieland bands that featured soloists like trumpeter Louis Armstrong, emerged as a tradition independent of blues in the 1910s and 1920s. These evolutions, while affording new opportunities for black male musicians to profit by their art, offered little compensation for women musicians. Classic blues’ popularity declined in the late 1930s as the Great Depression limited African American consumers’ ability to purchase “**race** records” and a new crop of male “urban blues” singers usurped performance spaces. The development of a highly commercialized style, swing, also redefined jazz in the 1930s as a dance music. Swing music usually featured a big band with stringed, brass, and wind instruments playing rapid, upbeat tunes and a vocalist who served as both soloist

and the visually attractive symbol of the band. This style encouraged women in jazz to pursue careers as singers. Such a venture was considered more ladylike than instrumental performance, and women singers often found that their medium was more acceptable to their male colleagues. Ella Fitzgerald, one of jazz's most celebrated singers, began performing at New York's Savoy Ballroom in 1935, at the age of seventeen. Just four years later, after making recordings of hits like "A-Tisket, a-Tasket" and "My Last Affair," she became the leader of Chick Webb's band, a position she held for two years. Singer **Billie Holiday**, later nicknamed "Lady Day," joined the Count Basie band in 1937, leaving after a year to join Artie Shaw's band. Her voice's gritty quality, her talent in improvisation, and her **beauty** helped to secure her a successful solo career and many recordings, including her signature denunciation of lynching, "Strange Fruit."

Bebop developed in the early 1940s as a reaction against swing's commercialism and uniformity of style. Its practitioners were interested in monophonic tunes, chromatically inflected improvisation, complex solo riffs, and the equal participation of all ensemble members. Many African American women jazz singers who began their careers with swing bands gained acclaim in later years for their scat singing and solo improvisations. Ella Fitzgerald scatted with ease and brilliance; her recordings from the period include "Lady Be Good," "How High the Moon," and several Tin Pan Alley show tunes. Billie Holiday was a featured soloist at clubs around the country, often earning more than \$1,000 per week. Sarah Vaughn, who claimed saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie as her major influences, made many recordings of jazz standards, pop tunes, and religious ballads. She is admired for her skill in scat improvisation and her strong, full voice. Betty Carter, nicknamed "Betty Bebop," is known for the speed of her improvisations and the richness of her voice's lower register. She toured with several blues and jazz artists, including Muddy Waters and Sonny Rollins, and eventually formed her own record company.

Black women instrumentalists also contributed to the technically difficult, improvisatory creations of bebop. Some of these players were associated with bandleaders or their already famous spouses at the beginnings of their careers. Many were pianists for reasons similar to those of the women vocalists. Lil Hardin Armstrong, who was married to Louis Armstrong from 1924 until 1932, began her career playing with bands like King Oliver's. She also led several of her own groups and composed tunes such as "My Heart" and "Lonesome Blues." Mary Lou Williams, one of jazz's most gifted pianists and wife to baritone saxophonist John Williams, started her career in Kansas City, where she performed with such jazz greats as Art Tatum. She became a sought-after arranger and composer, producing experimental pieces like *Zodiac Suite*. Alice McLeod Coltrane, a pianist who married saxophonist John Coltrane in 1965, collaborated with her husband on modal compositions. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, a group formed at a high school in Piney Woods, Mississippi, in 1938, was the country's first integrated

all-women jazz group. They performed extensively in the United States, toured Europe, and were featured in some short **films**.

Other black women instrumentalists have helped to define the unique position that women hold in jazz. Their involvement in many facets of the music reflects the proliferation of styles—cool, free, modal, fusion, neoclassical, and so on—that occurred post-bebop. Trumpeter Clora Bryant became famous during the 1960s for her skills in improvisation but has pursued composition, singing, and bandleading into the twenty-first century. Trombone player Melba Liston worked as a performer and arranger with Dizzy Gillespie for several years, led the jazz division of the Jamaica School of Music in the 1970s, and returned to bandleading in the 1980s. Most black women in jazz play in ensembles, make recordings, and teach music; many also play blues, rock, and classical music to support their main interest. Today the work of these and other African American women jazz musicians, including vocalists like Cassandra Wilson, belies traditional conceptions of women as participants on the sidelines of jazz.

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Jennifer Denise Ryan

### JAZZ

*Jazz* (1992), **Toni Morrison**'s sixth novel, is set primarily in “the City” in the 1920s, the decade that witnessed the peak of the Jazz Age, the height of the **Harlem Renaissance**, and the effects of the Great Migration of rural African Americans to northern urban centers. Reflecting the cacophony of the city itself, the novel is composed of various narrative voices, including those of the primary characters and an unreliable, semiomniscient narrator that at times seems to be a person, the city, or the book itself and that initiates readers into the private, female discourse of **community**. The voices combine to tell the story of Joe and Violet Trace, a Virginia couple who danced into the city on a train in 1906 and end up knowing each other only after Joe shoots and kills his young lover Dorcas and Violet is thrown out of the church for trying to stab the dead girl at the funeral.



On a larger level, the novel centers on **motherhood** and tells the tale of broken families and broken people putting themselves back together. Dorcas's parents were killed in the 1917 East St. Louis riot. Her best friend Felice saw her parents only 600 days out of seventeen years because they worked for whites in another town. Violet's mother, Rose Dear, jumped into a well two weeks before her long-gone husband returned bearing gifts and laughter, too late to save his wife. By then True Belle, Violet's grandmother, had already come and put the world right-side up, but (as a slave) True Belle herself had years before left her two daughters to go to Baltimore with her white, unmarried mistress who was pregnant with a black man's child.

When True Belle returned to Virginia to help Rose Dear raise her five children, she told Violet stories of the golden-haired Golden Gray, the son of Vera Louise, who grew up thinking he was white and went to the **South** to find his father when he found out he was not. On his trip to the South, the narrator muses, Golden Gray first scares, then saves, a naked, pregnant black woman who embodies the untamed, unfettered, female independence that lurks within all the text's women. When Henry Lestory returns from a hunting trip, he finds a woman in labor and a white-skinned son that he never knew was in the world. Lestory names the woman Wild after she bites him in the cheek. Refusing to talk or to nurse her baby boy, she rejects her role as mother and returns to the woods and the redwings that always mark her presence.

Her baby, Joe, names himself Trace, because that is what his parents disappeared without. Joe tries to find Wild three times, only wanting to know if, as Lestory had hinted, she was indeed his mother. On the third trip he finds the cave she lives in, but she refuses to show herself or speak. Her silence drives him away from the country and himself and sends him dancing with Violet into the pulse of the City and the illusion that you can lose yourself without losing. When Joe hunts through the streets looking for Dorcas, not intending to use his gun, he is as much hunting for his mother Wild as he is for the girl who exchanged stories with him beneath the sheets and who filled the silence his wife surrounded herself in.

Violet Trace does hair, but not in the legally licensed parlor, and drinks milkshakes to try to fill in the behind she swears she once had or, at least, the Violet who lived in Virginia once had. Her husband's infidelity forces her to confront and reconcile the fragments of her self, to mend the cracks in the world that made her sit down in the street one day instead of taking the next step forward, the cracks that made her steal a baby and laugh out loud, the cracks that let *that* Violet through to find a missing knife and disrupt a funeral. When she realized she could not count on the words that came out of her mouth, she stopped talking rather than sound crazy and lose Joe. Her silence, however, does more than protect her. It conceals the rage, hunger, fear, and weariness that pulses within the text's women, each of whom find their own ways to conceal it, to resist, to sew the next stitch or take the next step. But when the silence no longer holds the pieces of her self together, when rage slips through a crack and drives a knife toward a dead girl's face, Violet

must face the losses in her life: her mother's suicide, her father's absence, the specter of a golden boy, her three miscarried or aborted children, the parrot that she turned out in freezing weather because she could not hear him say "Love you" anymore. She develops a friendship with Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt, and with Alice can admit that another time she might have loved the girl young-enough-to-be-her-daughter. After nights staring at Dorcas's picture, days full of Joe's tears, and visits from a girl with gone-too-much parents, Violet finally finds the "me" that she had lost.

The novel closes with stories rather than silence. Felice visits the Traces, purportedly looking for a ring she had let Dorcas borrow but even more to tell Joe that he should stop crying. Dorcas, the girl who swallowed fire watching her house and her mother inside burn and whose voice owns less than five pages of the text, fed off danger, secrets, and the power of pushing people. Felice also confesses that Dorcas let herself die by insisting that no one call the police or an ambulance (which did not come even after Felice did call) and tells Joe privately that Dorcas's last words were of him. Her message: that there is only one apple in the garden. Joe tells Felice that he shot Dorcas because he did not know how to love. The three dance out of the novel a reconstructed **family**: Felice becomes a surrogate daughter for Joe and Violet; Joe stops crying and gets a job; Violet gives up the doll baby she had slept with since mother love had hit her hard. Finally, Joe and Violet begin to tell each other their stories. The fissures of dislocation, abandonment, and isolation begin to heal, as they become the necessary things for their nights.

*See also* Beauty; Identity; Jazz

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

## **JEZEBEL**

Along with **Mammy** and **Sapphire**, Jezebel is one of the three most widely recognized **stereotypes** applied to African American women. The Jezebel stereotype takes its name from the biblical Queen Jezebel, wife of King Ahab. Jezebel's foreignness (as the Phoenician wife of the king of the Israelites), her active support for the worship of pagan deities, and her influence over her husband have earned this figure, one of the Bible's more notable women characters, a lasting reputation as the incarnation of female evil, gender transgression, idolatry, and sexual indiscretion. Applied to African American women, the Jezebel stereotype draws most heavily on the biblical queen's strong association with sexual indiscretion and what has been perceived as her undue influence over her male partner. When used as a negative stereotype, the term *Jezebel* refers to the black woman-as-seductress, the sexually indiscriminate African American female who uses her erotic appeal to attract and manipulate men.

The Jezebel stereotype perpetuates the damaging but widespread perception that African American women are always already aroused, available for, and open to sexual activity. As such, this stereotype has played an instrumental role not only in justifying but in sanctioning and normalizing the sexual exploitation of black women. During the antebellum period, the **myth** of the black Jezebel's insatiable sexual appetite was invoked to excuse white owners' abuse of their female slaves. During the century that followed, the Jezebel myth formed the underpinnings of a social hierarchy that tolerated and even encouraged the white, male sexual exploitation of black women servants (housekeepers and child-care workers). This exploitation was compounded by the inability of black women so victimized to seek legal recourse against their attacks. Viewed by the white-dominated legal establishment through the lens of the Jezebel stereotype, African American women's accusations of **rape** and molestation were viewed as categorically unfounded.

The Jezebel stereotype differs from the Mammy stereotype in that it seeks to underscore rather than repress or deny the **sexuality** of African American

women. The Jezebel stereotype is similar to the Sapphire stereotype in its emphasis on black women's interactions with men. In addition, like Sapphire, the Jezebel stereotype is predicated on the myth of black women's capacity to exercise power and control over males. Whereas the Sapphire figure controls men through her emasculating insults and jibes, the seductress Jezebel undermines men's control (especially white men's control) over their own sense of sexual propriety through her primal and irrepressible erotic advances.

The influence of the Jezebel stereotype on African American **literature** is most evident in black women's writing of the antebellum period. **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), **Harriet E. Wilson's** *Our Nig* (1859), and the antebellum **poetry** of **Ann Plato** and **Frances E. W. Harper** each are meticulous in their representation of African American women whose sexual propriety is unimpeachable. Similarly, black male writers of the period take special pains to underscore the plight of their African American women characters as innocent victims of a **race**-based economic system that facilitates their sexual exploitation. Most notable among this second group of texts is the autobiographical *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and **William Wells Brown's** pioneering novel *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853).

The influence of the Jezebel figure on African American literature of the antebellum period, and in subsequent decades as well, highlights the function of this and other stereotypes as controlling images. The popular understanding of African American womanhood as an **identity** category defined by a narrow range of negative typologies that justifies the limitation of black women to certain occupations, social strata, and economic classes creates for African American women writers a circumstance in which black women's occupation of roles and settings that fall outside of those defined by the established stereotypes as the rightful place for African American womanhood is perceived as an aberration. As such, the representation of, for example, a sexually modest African American woman, as in Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is received by the broader reading public as counter-hegemonic (as in counter to the popular understanding of black women's sexual status), and thus the author, in order to tell the story of her young protagonist, must first explain away the perceived aberration of her sexual propriety.

As well-established paradigms against which African American women writers must first position themselves or their characters in order to depict ways of being black women that run counter to the visions that they offer up, Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, and other stereotypes have effectively controlled the terms on which African American women writers have been able to depict their black female subjects. As such, the stereotypes, constructed as tools to facilitate the continued subjugation of black people, have also come to shape the way that blackness becomes visible and thus the means by which African American writers can.

*See also* Aunt Jemima

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*Ajuan Maria Mance*

### JOHNSON, AMELIA E. (1858–1922)

Amelia Etta Hall Johnson's early life is found mainly in government records. Yet what they tell us is revealing. According to her **death** certificate, Johnson was born in Toronto in 1858, a time when Ontario's black population had swelled due to the Fugitive Slave Law. The 1880 Baltimore census tells us that her mother Eleanora was from Maryland; her father Canadian. From Toronto, the **family** relocated to Montreal, a multilingual society that, to Amelia's benefit, did not enforce segregation in education. It is likely that she encountered less racism in Montreal than she would have in Maryland, especially given her fair skin. Nevertheless, following the pattern of many blacks who returned from Canada following the Civil War, in 1874 the family relocated to Maryland. There Amelia met, and in 1877 married, Rev. Harvey Johnson, pastor of Baltimore's Union Baptist Church.

The wife of a minister was expected to assume substantial responsibilities, and Johnson was no exception. Certainly her literary productions—Christian and educational—would have assisted in establishing the reputation of her husband's congregation. After the birth of her children, Harvey, Jr. (n.d.), Jessie Eleanor (1878), and Prentiss (1883), Johnson began publishing for youth. In 1887 she established the *Joy*, a literary periodical for youth, where she also hoped African American women might publish. A year later the *Ivy* appeared, directed at the same audience but with **history** as its subject. Johnson's writing was also included in *National Baptist*, *American Baptist*, and *Sower and Reaper*.

In 1890 the first of Johnson's religious novels, *Clarence and Corinne; or, God's Way*, appeared, followed by *The Hazeley Family* (1894) and *Martina Meriden; or What Is My Motive?* (1901). All were imprints of the American Baptist Society, one of the era's largest publishers, and marketed across **race**. While Johnson has been criticized for creating characters who are not identifiably black, in featuring characters without racial markers Johnson's characters were not so much "white" as they were ambiguous. Yet race is inevitable in the reception of

her novels, as readers were aware of hers. Her texts' assertion of Christian morality, then, resonates within a history of linking it with racial justice.

For Johnson this yoking of **Christianity** and racial advancement would have been unremarkable. Notably, her husband's church was socially and politically active, and he was instrumental in bringing **Frederick Douglass** to Baltimore in 1898—making their meeting likely. Reverend Johnson was also active in agitating against laws that penalized unwed black mothers and in integrating Maryland's legal and teaching professions.

Johnson's involvement in the activities of her husband merits consideration. Reports state she “read, typed and edited the numerous articles written and published by her husband,” and in 1903, when her husband published his only book, Johnson wrote the introduction—in addition to any other input. After her death her son recalled, “We always kept our mother busy in telling us stories, fairytales, etc. She was so interesting to us, for she was a writer, you know. . . . My mother was my father's best friend, and his chief comfort, his guide in all his business matters. Looking back over fifty years, I still consider this union a perfect one” (Kroger 22). In this light, it is worth reconsidering Johnson's designation as a potentially apolitical author, instead recognizing her as integral in the social activism of turn-of-the-century black Baltimore.

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*Jennifer Harris*

**JOHNSON, ANGELA (1961– )**

Angela Johnson was born in Tuskegee, Alabama, and grew up in a small farm town in northeastern Ohio, where she was encouraged by her parents but reports she was a bitter teenager who wrote very dark **poetry** and read the Beat poets. She enrolled at Kent State University, thinking she wanted to be a social worker or teacher. Johnson did not write at all while in college but began again after she dropped out of school. Her first picture book, *Tell Me a Story, Mama* (1989), was well reviewed and won an Ezra Jack Keats New Writers Award. This story, and other picture books that followed, such as *Do Like Kyla* (1990), *When I Am Old with You* (1990), and *One of Three* (1991), emphasized warm, loving, African American intergenerational families who helped children facing typical developmental challenges and **family** situations. Even in her picture books, her writing tended to be spare and both realistic and poetic. *When I Am Old with You* won her the first Coretta Scott King Honor Award of her career.

*Toning the Sweep* (1993), a Coretta Scott King Award winner, was her first book for older readers. This touching story combines a present-day coming-of-age novel in which fourteen-year-old Emmie and her mother drive to the California desert to help Emmie's beloved, independent grandmother, Ola, settle her life as she is dying of cancer, with a back story about the brutal killing of Ola's husband by the Ku Klux Klan in 1964. Rich in symbolism, Ola's life is celebrated by her friends as she prepares to move back to the Midwest with her daughter. The story is told by all three generations, each a strong, resilient female. Other powerful novels followed including *Humming Whispers* (1995), in which a teenager fears she will develop schizophrenia at the same age as her older sister did. Two books of poetry from the viewpoint of adolescent girls, *The Other Side* (1998), about a teenager in a small Alabama town, and *Running Back to Ludie* (2001), in which a girl reunites briefly with her almost unremembered mother, explore the pains and triumphs of growing up female in particular times and places, again with universal resonance.

A giant step for Johnson was the novel *The First Part Last* (2003), her first novel with a male main character, a sixteen-year-old unwed father who is determined to raise his newborn daughter when the young mother tragically dies. His parents and friends are skeptical, but Bobby perseveres until he finds a solution. This book won the Michael Printz Award for young adult **literature** and another King Award. Johnson believes it is her most accessible novel. In 2003, Johnson, who lives in Kent, Ohio, was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Foundation fellowship, which she feels reflects the current respect given to young people's literature.

*See also* Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Susan L. Golden

### JOHNSON, CHARLES (1948– )

One of the most interesting and unusual contemporary African American novelists, Charles Johnson draws on an eclectic background in writing his **fiction**, including journalism, cartooning, advanced study in philosophy, and a long-standing interest in Eastern religions and martial arts. His novels are both densely intellectual and extremely comic, with highly visual imagery and sharp dialogue. He credits the influence of John Gardner, with whom he studied creative writing in college, for helping him to develop an original voice and to break free from what he found to be the restrictive conventions of naturalism. In Johnson's view, African American writers have only begun to plumb the complex depths of African American experience and have too often narrowly depicted the limited views of sociologists, resulting in stereotypical portrayals.

Born in Evanston, Illinois, in 1948, Johnson came of age during the 1960s and was politically active through his writing from the beginning of his college career at Southern Illinois University, where he wrote for the campus newspaper and published cartoons in a number of publications. As an undergraduate, he majored in journalism but switched to philosophy when he entered graduate school, first receiving a master's degree from Southern Illinois and then pursuing his doctorate at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He published his first collection of cartoons, *Black Humor* (1970), while still an undergraduate, and his second, *Half-Past Nation Time* (1972), followed shortly thereafter. His first novel, *Faith and the Good Thing*, written after six unsuccessful novels were discarded, was published in 1974. Johnson's next two novels, *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage*



(1990), which won the National Book Award, are both historical novels of **slavery** written in the first person, or **neo-slave narratives**, and both play philosophically with the **slave narrative** form. His collections of short stories, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1986), and *Soulcatcher and Other Stories* (2001), like these two novels, deal largely with slavery, both historical and philosophical. Johnson's most recent novel, *Dreamer* (1998), also deals with **history**, this time with the 1960s and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Johnson currently holds the Pollock Professorship for Excellence in English at the University of Washington, where he teaches creative writing.

Another substantial area of production for Johnson has been screenwriting. With over twenty screenplays to his credit, Johnson has been active in shaping the presentation of African American history through **work** on such projects as "Booker" (1985), a children's television **drama** about the life of Booker T. Washington, which received the international Prix Jeunesse Award and a Writer's Guild Award, and the PBS series *Africans in America*.

While critics were initially slow to deal with Johnson's work, Johnson has been repeatedly honored for his contributions to **literature**. His short stories in particular have been well received, included in the collections *Best American Short Stories of the Eighties*, *Best American Short Stories* (1992), and the *O. Henry Prize Stories* (1993), as well as in many anthologies. *Oxherding Tale* was awarded the 1983 Washington State Governor's Award for Literature, and when *Faith and the Good Thing* was produced, in 1995, as a stage play by City Lit Theatre and the Chicago Theatre Company, it was awarded two Black Theatre Alliance awards. In addition, Johnson has won a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, in 1979; a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1986; a MacArthur Foundation grant in 1998; and an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2002.

In addition to writing novels, Johnson has also published a book of criticism, *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970* (1988), which analyzes African American fiction in philosophical terms, particularly in light of phenomenology. As the title suggests, Johnson first confronts the ontological problem of "being" as it is played out in racial terms, then considers how recent writers have confronted this issue in their writing. Historically, Johnson argues, African Americans have produced a tradition of tragedies in which African American characters primarily react to white oppression and live as socially alienated persons who seek but never find real homes. He praises writers such as **Ishmael Reed** and **Clarence Major**, whom he considers to have broken out of this tradition of tragedy and whose play with form and narrative allows them to write novels that reimagine and transform conceptions of **race** and **identity**. He considers male and female writers separately and, by and large, is more critical of the women. While he recognizes that the intersections of **race** and gender oppression have presented unique issues for African American women writers, and praises individual writers such as **Toni Morrison**, for creating Sula, a character he believes transcends race, he

generally concludes that, as a whole, the women he discusses have not been as innovative formally or philosophically as the men.

Critics of Johnson's own fiction have often praised him for just this type of formal innovation. His two neo-slave narratives turn the tables on expected conventions, inviting readers to "decalcify" their perceptions of race and of history in the process. In fact, much of the humor in Johnson's fiction as a whole stems from these inversions of reader expectations and parodies of genre conventions. In *Oxherding Tale*, for instance, the main character, Andrew Hawkins, is mixed race, but rather than being the son of the white slave-master and a female slave, Andrew is conceived when the master decides to trade places for the night with his slave, George, and sends George to the white mistress's bed. Sexual **stereotypes** are again inverted when Andrew, emerging into adulthood and intent on earning his way out of slavery, becomes the sexual companion to Flo Hatfield, the owner of a neighboring plantation. *Middle Passage* begins with a freed slave who stows away on board an illegal slave trader in the 1830s and travels back to Africa, thus reversing as well as reimagining the seminal event in African American history. Both Rutherford Calhoun, *Middle Passage's* trickster protagonist, and Andrew Hawkins are highly educated and shift easily between philosophical observations, street savvy, and jokes. Other characters, too, shift quickly and easily between discussions of slavery and anachronistic commentary on affirmative action, for example, and this pastiche of discourses offers new and often comically liberating perspectives on the way race has historically functioned.

Other critics, however, particularly early critics of *Oxherding Tale*, have considered Johnson's philosophical play with the concept of race to be ultimately troubling. The plot of *Oxherding Tale* might seem to invite this critique, as Andrew Hawkins, after his sexual enslavement to Flo Hatfield, ultimately escapes slavery by **passing** for white, marries a white woman, and becomes a schoolteacher. When, after his marriage, his former slave lover, Minty, whom he had intended to buy and then seemingly forgot, is sold at auction in the town in which Andrew has settled, Andrew feels guilt but is quickly relieved of this burden of the past when Minty, horribly ill with pellagra, forgives him, approves of his wife, and then conveniently dies. One possible reading of this turn of events is that the black female **body** remains the site of racial inscription and is defiled by it, while the male, apparently unencumbered by racialized embodiment, can simply choose to free himself from the past through an act of philosophical imagination. In other words, in the view of some critics, Johnson's depictions of race and identity as performative liberate only some characters and not others, and access to this liberation is marked by gender.

But nothing is that simple in Johnson's fiction, and other critics have focused on the ways in which female characters in these novels, like many of his other characters, are drawn as composites of cultural stereotypes, whom the protagonists must learn to understand and see differently. Rutherford Calhoun initially sees Isadora Bailey, in *Middle Passage*, as a staid, conventional

schoolmarm, intent on trapping him in a life of boring respectability and unimaginative social conventions. He is thus unprepared when she acts completely outside of these stereotypes even while partially fulfilling them, enlisting the aid of the gangster, Papa Zeringue, to blackmail Calhoun, agreeing to pay off his debts, and thus save him from prison, if he will marry her and reform his trickster ways in return. After Calhoun's months on the slave trader, where he is exposed to the enslaved Allmuseri's philosophy of the unity of being, he is transformed into someone who sees Isadora not only as a desirable woman but also as an independent actor, able to break free herself from the very conventions he had assumed dictated her life.

Johnson's first novel, *Faith and the Good Thing*, offers his only female protagonist, the symbolically named Faith, who, at the age of eighteen, sets out on a quest for the "good thing" after the **death** of her mother. This novel is part folktale and part philosophical inquiry into the place of faith in the modern world. Prompted by the mystical Swamp Woman, a woman who is both conjurer and trickster, Faith leaves her rural Georgia home and travels to Chicago, following the historical migration of African Americans in the twentieth century. In the city, Faith, a naive idealist not unlike the young protagonist of **Ralph Ellison's** *Invisible Man* (1952), is raped, becomes a prostitute, then a housewife, and finally dies in a fire after experiencing a grim life. After her death, however, her soul returns to Georgia, where she becomes the Swamp Woman and completes her quest. The novel, while drawing heavily from the African American folk tradition, also blends this with Eastern philosophy, as well as references to Western philosophers from Plato to the present. It juxtaposes the Baptist tradition of Faith's past with Buddhism, and many of the male characters in this novel function as symbols of separate Ways, in the Buddhist tradition: Faith's high school lover, Alpha Omega Holmes, is dedicated to the "Way" of romantic art; her husband, Isaac Maxwell, is dedicated to money; and others to philosophy or traditional **religion**. None of these, though, offer Faith the "good thing" she pursues. This novel has not received as much critical attention as Johnson's later work, and reading his later work in light of this novel would offer new territory for considerations of gender in his work.

In *Dreamer*, Johnson takes a different approach to considering the nature of the self and its relation to history. This novel offers a philosophical examination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of integration, ironically by considering a kind of disintegration of King through providing him with a doppelganger, Chaym Smith. Rather than functioning as a fully human and rounded character here, King becomes simply the locus of an idealized vision, and Smith, who shares his birthday, physical appearance, and intellectual heritage, functions as the locus of the human and flawed, the center of self-consciousness and unfulfilled desire, who may or may not have a hand in assassinating King at the end of the novel. Two young acolytes, Matthew and Amy, work to protect and promote King's vision and are left, after his death, to sort out its legacy.

Recently Johnson's work has received greater critical attention, with a number of books devoted to his fiction, but much work remains. Johnson's complex portrayal of history, his deep philosophical interrogations of race and identity, and his narrative innovations and experimentalism are substantial contributions to the tradition of African American literature and will continue to provide a fruitful field for critical investigation.

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Suzanne Lane

**JOHNSON, GEORGIA DOUGLAS (1877–1966)**

Georgia Douglas Johnson was one of the first black female poets to gain distinction as a poet. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, to Laura (Jackson) and George Camp, she was educated in public schools and completed the “normal course” at Atlantic University before pursuing music studies at Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Cleveland College of Music in Ohio. Returning to Georgia, she taught school in Marietta and became an assistant principal in Atlanta. On September 28, 1903, she married Henry Lincoln (Link) Johnson, an attorney and active member of the Republican Party. She and Henry had two sons, Henry Lincoln Johnson, Jr. (b. 1906) and Peter Douglas Johnson (b. 1907). In 1910 the **family** moved to Washington, D.C., where, in 1912, President Howard Taft named Henry Johnson recorder of deeds, a post he held until 1916.

Despite the discouragement of a husband who felt that her duties lay with being wife, mother, and homemaker, Johnson continued with her music and began to write stories and poems, sending them to newspapers and small magazines. Johnson was introduced to poet William Stanley Braithwaite, who became her mentor, and by 1928 she had published three volumes of **poetry**, *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems* (1918), *Bronze* (1922), and *An Autumn Love Cycle* (1928).

One of the more prolific black women writers of the **Harlem Renaissance**, Johnson wrote numerous dramatic works during the 1920s and 1930s, but only a few of her scripts have survived. In 1926, her play *Blue Blood* won honorable mention in *Opportunity's* playwriting contest and was later produced by the Krigwa Players. *Blue Blood* touches on the subject of white men's sexual exploitation of black women and deftly leads to a disturbing revelation as two black mothers discover their children, who are engaged to be married, have the same white father. *Plumes*, which concerns the struggle of a poor rural southern black mother who must deal with poverty and her daughter's **death**, won *Opportunity's* first prize in 1927 and was produced by the Harlem Experimental Theatre. Johnson, who became active in the antilynching movement of the 1920s, used theater to speak out against social injustices by writing plays with powerful antilynching themes: *Safe* (c. 1920), *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (c. 1920), *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *A Bill to Be Passed* (c. 1920), and *And Still They Paused* (1920s).

After the death of her husband in 1925, Johnson became conciliatory for the Labor Department for eight years, during which time she continued to feverishly produce literary work, maintaining a column for a number of weekly newspapers, editing books, and writing songs. Johnson hosted literary gatherings at her home on S Street in Washington, D.C., which became known as “Saturday Night Soirees” where leading political and literary figures, black and white, would gather, including **Langston Hughes**, **May Miller**, **Marita Bonner**, Mary Burrill, **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson**, and **Zora Neale Hurston**. While Johnson ultimately found more success as a poet than as a

dramatist, perhaps her more lasting legacy was that of nurturing **community** among the promising black literary talent of her day.

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Sherry Engle

**JOHNSON, HELENE (1906–1995)**

Helene Johnson was the youngest and among the most talented of the **Harlem Renaissance** poets. Her circle of friends included most of the major writers—**Zora Neale Hurston**, **Langston Hughes**, **Countee Cullen**, **Claude McKay**, **Gwendolyn B. Bennett**, and Wallace Thurman, among others. They praised and encouraged her work and clearly expected her to find literary success. Hurston, for example, promoted Johnson's work on book tours throughout the **South**, and Thurman observed in 1928 that Johnson "alone of all the younger group seems to have the 'makings' of a poet" (210).

Helen Virginia Johnson was born in Boston on July 7, 1906, to Ella Benson Johnson of Camden, South Carolina, and George William Johnson of Nashville, Tennessee. Her parents migrated north around the turn of the century, married, and apparently separated shortly after their daughter's birth. An only child, Johnson was reared in a large, female-centered household, which included her maternal first cousin, the novelist and short-story writer **Dorothy West** (1907–1999), and several of her mother's sisters. The **family** pooled their resources and purchased a small cottage on Martha's Vineyard, where they summered, and leased a large four-storied brick house in Boston's Brookline neighborhood. It was there, at 478 Brookline Avenue (the property is now a playing field with a baseball diamond) that cousins West and Johnson came of age.

According to West, Johnson was shy, something of a jokester, and the family genius: "Helen was the kind of person who'd buy herself four doughnuts and go sit down at the Battery and stare at the water all day" (Guinier 211). While admitting that she was painfully shy and that she did well in her coursework, Johnson insists that she was not particularly bright. Her **poetry**, however, along with her studies at the prestigious Boston Girls' Latin School and at Columbia University, suggests otherwise. Before beginning elementary school, West and Johnson took dance and piano lessons and were tutored at **home** by their mothers' friend, Maude Trotter, sister of Monroe Trotter, founding editor of the influential Boston *Guardian*. A few of Johnson's early poems were first published in the *Guardian*. Asked in a 1987 interview when she initially started writing poetry, eighty-year-old Johnson replied, "Ever since I can remember" (Wall n.p.).

Johnson's earliest verse, such poems as "Metamorphism," "Trees at Night," and "Fulfillment," focus on nature and draw their inspiration from the hills, trees, and beaches of her beloved Massachusetts. Her verse became more experimental and more concerned with issues of **class**, **race**, and gender after she and Dorothy West moved to New York City in 1926 and began living on their own. For example, the July 1926 poem "Fiat Lux," Latin for "let there be light," dramatizes the flogging of an imprisoned black woman, while "A Southern Road," published four months later, protests the lynching of a black man.

More often, however, Johnson focuses on romantic **love**. "Cui Bono," Latin for "of what good," satirizes a young woman who sits all day, dreaming of

love. When a potential beau approaches, she refuses his offer, reasoning that it was made too hastily. And so she continues sitting, dreaming of love, and growing quite anemic. Because Johnson was raised as a proper Bostonian, perhaps unduly concerned with decorum, it is tempting to read this poem as a gently mocking self-portrait. The long dramatic monologue “Widow with a Moral Obligation,” also concerned with love and decorum, is clearly not autobiographical since Johnson, who wed William Warner Hubbell (1914–2002) in December 1932, was never a widow. The poem canvasses a widow’s complex emotional, physical, and psychological torment as she begins to date. By poem’s end, the widow realizes her obligation is not to her late husband but to herself and her new friend: Thus she determines to have a night of love (her gown undone) and **death** (burying her late husband’s intruding **memory**) in one.

Whether exploring the hurly-burly of young love or the passion and sensuality of more mature lovers, Johnson’s love poems repeatedly call for women to parry the wide array of social constraints used to limit them, especially as sexual beings. The young speaker in the arresting poem “Futility” is characteristic. Weary of restrictive, bourgeois rituals of courtship (much like the heroine of **Gwendolyn Brooks**’s “a song in the front yard”), Johnson’s young woman determines to search for love out back, in the alley, consequently defying the teachings of family, class, and church. Other prominent themes in Johnson’s oeuvre include the importance of the African past; the sensuousness of nature; joy gained from music, color, and dance; and black cultural pride. Stylistically, Johnson was one of only a handful of poets who was as comfortable and adept with the sonnet as with free verse.

Johnson’s last published poem, “Let Me Sing My Song,” appeared in 1935, three years after her marriage. She gave birth to a daughter, Abigail, in 1940 and then, apparently busy working inside the home and outside (as a correspondent for Consumers Union), she largely disappeared from public view. Although she continued to write, it is nonetheless unfortunate that such a remarkable poet faded from the literary scene.

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Verner D. Mitchell

### JOHNSON, JAMES WELDON (1871–1938)

James Weldon Johnson is well known for composing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which he wrote along with his brother John Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954) in 1900 for a special celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Twenty years after composing the song, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for which Johnson served as field secretary in 1916 and later became its secretary, adopted the song as the Negro National Anthem. However, Johnson was also an author and a poet, producing an important body of work during the **Harlem Renaissance**. Concerned about the negative image black Americans suffered, Johnson combined his artistic endeavors with civic and political involvement to undermine racist attitudes in America. He used writing positively to present the complexity of black life in America. Although he has a substantial body of work to cull from, some of his most memorable are *God's Trombones* (1927), *Along This Way* (1933), and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912).

*God's Trombones*, a slim book of **poetry**, illustrates the importance of ministers to the black **community**, and it demonstrates the oratorical prowess of those ministers. The book consists of seven poems or sermons often delivered to black congregations and a preface that Johnson uses to explain how to read

the sermons for maximum enjoyment and understanding. Like other artists during the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson writes the book of poetry for reasons other than art for art's sake. He argues that the poems can be used to garner respect for black ministers and, by extension, blacks in general. By demonstrating his artistic ability and providing positive representations of his subject, white America would be challenged to reassess its prejudiced and racist attitudes. Johnson's belief that art is beneficial in breaking **stereotypes** and undermining racism is illustrated in the preface to his book *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), where he writes, "No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior." Still promoting this vein of thought, Johnson posits in "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist" that racism was being fought on religious, education, political, industrial, ethical, economic, and sociological fronts but that individual artists were playing a very important role in helping to combat racism. To that end, Johnson's poems/sermons in *God's Trombones* illustrate from a historical biblical perspective through the present the importance of the minister to contemporary American culture in general and black Americans in particular.

Johnson's choice of poems/sermons portrays his intimate knowledge of what most ministers deemed essential messages for their congregations to know and to internalize. These messages are timeless in that they are still delivered today. For example, the first poem is "The Creation." In "The Creation," the biblical account is given, but Johnson's depiction of God creating is at once playful and human. God is portrayed not only as omnipotent but also as maternal. Johnson's version of the creation and the minister delivering the sermon serves to conjure up in the audience's mind a picture of a God who is tender, loving, and kind.

Other poems/sermons included in the book are titled "Go Down, Death," "Noah Built the Ark," "The Crucifixion," "Listen, Lord-A Prayer," "The Prodigal Son," and "The Judgment Day." As can be seen, the poems cover the gamut from alpha to omega and other crucial sermons in between.

Johnson illustrates his ability as a nonfiction writer in his **autobiography** *Along This Way*. In it he relates an incident in a Jacksonville bicycle shop that caused him to reflect on and to investigate his life. During a bit of verbal exchange among Johnson and other somewhat unfamiliar white men, Johnson is sarcastically asked by a nondescript white man what he would give to be a white man. Briefly taken aback, Johnson replies, "I am sure that I wouldn't give anything to be the kind of white man you are. No, I am sure I wouldn't; I'd lose too much by the change." As a result of this exchange, which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century when Johnson was a high school principal in Jacksonville, Florida, he began a method of self-examination that culminated in the writing of the autobiography. Most whites would assume that all black Americans wanted to become white, thereby giving up their birthrights, heritage, and culture. Indeed, many fair-skinned blacks decided to pass for white to escape the harshness of black life at that

time. Subsequently, Johnson constantly critiqued his motives, words, actions, and reactions to people, events, and racism to be sure that his response to the white man was genuine. In *Along This Way*, Johnson raises questions about the social privilege accorded to whites in America at the expense of nonwhites. He invokes the Constitution and its precepts that all men are created equal and have the right to pursue happiness. In doing so, Johnson fantasizes about a genie offering and granting four gifts to Johnson. The gifts are any amount of wealth, a desired boon, a change of place with another person, and a change of **race**. Johnson readily requests a modest amount of money, and the democratic rights enumerated in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, which would give him the opportunity to pursue happiness and be equally rewarded for his **work**. However, Johnson is perplexed about becoming another person and changing race. He realizes that to change either his person or race would constitute a loss of self. Consequently, Johnson ends the fantasy by refusing a change of person and race. He deduces that to participate in such an exchange would suggest that a person could totally remake himself or herself, obliterating his or her **identity**.

In an earlier novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Johnson depicts his unidentified narrator's attempt to obliterate his identity as a black or biracial man by **passing** as Caucasian. At a time in American **history** when being black and proud was not popular, mixed-race people who looked white sometimes chose to pass for white and cut all ties with their racially marked families. Some African Americans in the arts like **Josephine Baker**, **James Baldwin**, and others left America for Europe to escape harsh American racist treatment and to receive better compensation and recognition of their talents. Similarly, the fictional narrator in the novel is a musician who, along with his white patron, goes to Europe to live and perform. The ex-colored man is by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man. Although the ex-colored man resembles his white father more on the outside, in order to assume the identity as white only, he has to deny his black mother and his black birthright and culture. Choosing to be white causes him to publicly deny and change his person, thereby resulting in psychological self-doubt and feeling a sense of loss. Upon returning to America, the ex-colored man is faced with the dilemma of choosing to be white or black in a society that has changed geographically but not much socially, depending on the location.

Johnson was a multifaceted man who was involved in the arts, politics, and education during his lifetime. He was also a leader in pushing for advancement of black people through his work with the NAACP, becoming its secretary, the first black American to serve in that position at the time. Furthermore, he exemplified a productive life through his work as a lawyer, as a U.S. consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua, and a contributing editor for the *New York Age*. At the time of his **death** in 1938, Johnson was a professor of creative writing at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. His contributions to the arts and to humanity stand the test of time.

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*Juliette Bartlett Pack*

## JONAH'S GOURD VINE

Originally titled *Big Nigger*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) was the first novel published by **Zora Neale Hurston**. Based on the lives and deaths of her parents, this account is thought by some critics to be a more accurate representation of John and Lucy Ann Hurston than that found in her **autobiography** *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).

The principal characters representing Hurston's parents are John Pearson and Lucy Potts. The novel centers around the power of verbal play. Lucy is skilled in these word games, and she eventually teaches the techniques to John, whose command of them is instrumental in his assumption of a place of leadership in the **community**. John, who already had a gift for speech but not

for the nuances of performative or persuasive speaking, is initially attracted to Lucy because of her possession of these attributes. He had grown up on the other side of the creek with his mother and stepfather, Amy and Ned Crittendon, and it appears that he gets his natural gift of gab from Amy Crittendon. But Amy's gift is not appreciated by Ned, who resents her linguistic wit and regularly beats her, using his fists to assert his manhood because he is no match for her verbal skills. Soon John's male ego also begins to suffer, and he starts to resent Lucy's superior talent with words.

John comes to realize how powerful voice and the ability to sway others is, and this realization leads to problems in the Pearson marriage. He resents not only Lucy's natural verbal talent but also the role she has played in his own success. All of the men in Eatonville know that John is a "wife-made man," and they do not hesitate to throw it in his face, especially when he becomes a little too full of himself. His male pride wounded, John seeks ways to elevate himself while at the same time to silence Lucy.

In order to demonstrate the power of his masculine **identity**—to himself as well as to Lucy—he commits flagrant infidelities to prove that he is not "wife-made." When John fails silencing Lucy by outtalking her, he slaps her. He crosses a line here that he has never crossed before, and the damage is irreparable. When Lucy starts to deteriorate and eventually dies, John finds that her voice comes back stronger than ever.

A number of critics make an obvious comparison between Lucy and the character of Janie Crawford in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Lucy's only marriage leads to attempts by her husband to take away her voice as he forces her deeper and deeper into silence and into a subordinate position in their marriage. Janie's journey is one in which she successfully fights off the attempts of two husbands to silence her, eventually finding a voice and her own sense of self. Ironically, through her **death**, Lucy seems to find power again, as John cannot escape the guilt and shame he feels for striking her. Even though he seems to have found himself later in the novel through the earnest respect he shows his new wife, Sally, his tragic death soon after this revelation appears to suggest that he does not get off easily for his treatment of Lucy. In the end, it is Lucy's voice that comes through loud and clear.

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*Johnnie M. Stover*

**JONES, EVERETT LEROY.** See Baraka, Amiri

**JONES, GAYL (1949– )**

Gayl Jones was born in 1949 in Lexington, Kentucky, and grew up in the **South** listening to the stories that her grandmother and mother told. Her mother, Lucille, wrote stories for the children, and her grandmother, Amanda Wilson, had been a playwright. This maternal legacy of storytelling is thematized in Jones's novels, as her narratives are concerned both with the literary legacy of the oral tradition and with the sounds of storytelling—the cadences and dialects of African American speech. Jones attended Connecticut College, where she won the prize for original **poetry** two years in a row, in 1969 and 1970, and also won the Frances Steloff Award for **fiction** in 1970 for her short story “The Roundhouse,” which was later included in her collection of stories *White Rat*, published in 1977. After graduating in 1971, she enrolled at Brown University for her doctorate, where she worked with Michael Harper, producing a play, *Chile Woman*, in 1974, and her first novel, *Corregidora*, in 1975, the year she received her Ph.D. Her second novel, *Eva's Man*, followed in 1976. Both of these novels were edited by **Toni Morrison** at Random House. Jones's work, particularly *Corregidora*, has been critically acclaimed from the beginning, and she received the Howard Foundation Award in 1975, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1976, and one from the Michigan Society of Fellows from 1977 to 1979.

After her marriage to Robert Higgins, Jones left the United States in the early 1980s to live in Europe for a half dozen years, where she published *Die Vogelfängerin* (*The Birdwatcher*; 1986) in Germany. Jones is not only a playwright and novelist but also a poet, publishing the collections *Song for Anninho* (1981), *The Hermit Woman* (1983), and *Xarque and Other Poems* (1985). Her criticism, too, encompasses multiple genres; in her detailed scholarly examination *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (1991), she considers the development of voice and the use of **folklore** in poetry, short stories, and novels by African American writers from **Paul Laurence Dunbar** to Morrison. More recently, Jones has returned to fiction, publishing two more novels, *The Healing* (1998), which was a finalist for the National Book Award, and *Mosquito* (1999).

Almost all of Jones's writing presents a first-person narrator who uses the cadences and dialect of southern African American speech, and both the poetry and the fiction read as either oral tale told to an intimate listener or lyric meditation. While most of her characters are of the lower **class** and not classically educated, often working with horses, as beauticians, or in tobacco factories, the narratives are embedded with allusions to classical **literature** and **myth**, and the names of her characters are frequently symbolic. Ursa Corregidora, for instance, is derived from the Latin word for “bear” and the Portuguese for “magistrate” or “judge,” and Ursa's life is dictated by her need to bear judgment or witness against the original Corregidora, the slave

master of her grandmothers. Eva Medina Canada's name links to both Eve, calling up echoes of how Genesis characterizes woman as made for man, and Medusa, who holds the power to kill men. In *Mosquito*, the main character is Sojourner Jane Nadine Johnson—an obvious reference to **Sojourner Truth**, who redefined what it meant to be an African American woman and who worked to abolish **slavery**—an apt name, then, for Johnson, a.k.a. “Mosquito,” a truck driver who comes to **work** in a contemporary underground railroad, helping provide safe passage and sanctuary for illegal Mexican immigrants. Jones's vast reading in multiple languages and scholarly knowledge of African American **history**, combined with her ear for the sounds of everyday speech, make her novels multilayered, rich, and complex reading experiences.

Jones's thematic concerns as a writer have been consistent throughout her career: the influence of history, particularly the legacy of enslavement, **rape**, and sexual abuse, on the lives of African American women; female familial relationships; African American women's **sexuality**; the role of narrative in dealing with trauma and **healing**; and the relationship between African American fiction and the oral tradition—folklore, **sermons**, the **blues**, and **family** stories. She has been both praised for her vivid and unflinching depictions of troubled sexuality and gender relationships and criticized for what some readers have felt to be negative images of both African American men and women. Jones's early work in particular is filled with painful stories of **domestic** abuse, loss, and trauma, while her more recent fiction, as the title *The Healing* suggests, offers the possibility of redemption and reclamation of self in spite of this legacy. The relationship between self and other, between personal independence and commitment to family, lover, culture, and history, is worked out positively in *Mosquito* as well. Because Mosquito refuses to join the trucking union, and instead creates her own company, she remains economically and politically independent and can therefore fulfill her commitments to the illegal immigrants, whom she transports in her trucks.

In both her novels and her poetry, most notably the critically acclaimed *Corregidora* and *Song for Anninho*, Jones explores the history of slavery and its effects on African American **identity** and family relationships. *Corregidora* is a haunting and lyrical narrative that examines the legacy of racial and sexual oppression on the lives of four generations of African American women. The main character, Ursa Corregidora, is a blues singer whose mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother have produced her as a “witness” to replace the destroyed documentary evidence of their enslavement and rape by the Portuguese slave master Corregidora, who used Ursa's great-grandmother and grandmother as prostitutes and who fathered both her grandmother and mother. These women raise Ursa to “make generations”—to procreate in order to produce more witnesses, but within months of her marriage, Ursa's husband throws her down the stairs while she is pregnant with her first child, and she loses her womb. The novel intersperses the grandmothers' narratives of enslavement with Ursa's attempts to define herself and build a lasting

relationship with a man, so that these oral tales, which Ursa has heard her entire life, seem more her own memories than those of her **ancestors** and shape her actions and identity a century after slavery has ended. *Song for Anninho*, set in Brazil in the seventeenth century, is narrated by a female slave, Almeyda, who has also listened to her grandmother's stories and gained an identity through this narrative connection. This prose poem narrates the **love** between Almeyda and Anninho, two slaves who have escaped to Palmares, a maroon colony that was destroyed in 1695. In both texts, the women lose a physical symbol of gender, sexuality, and **motherhood** to **violence**; like Ursa's lost womb, Almeyda's lost breasts (a Portuguese soldier cuts them off) denote the lasting loss and scars resulting from slavery that impede African American women's ability to love and nurture their families.

*Eva's Man* deals most explicitly with the **stereotypes** of African American female sexuality that are a direct legacy of slavery. Eva Medina Canada, the main character and narrator, has grown up hearing and experiencing mostly negative stories about male-female relationships, and snatches of these remembered stories and encounters are interspersed with her meditations on why she committed her crime of murdering and orally castrating one of her lovers. Eva's choices as a sexual being seem culturally circumscribed; she hears repeatedly that women who are not whores ought not to be outside the house; that once a woman has sex she will not be able to control her desire for it; that women who do not immediately agree to men's desires are mean and evil. In her memories, every man she has ever met, whether a little boy or an old man, her own cousin, her mother's lover, or a random man on a bus, has assumed she wants to have sex with him and has tried, often violently, to force her into it. Eva thinks of herself as Medusa because she has the power to make men stiff, and she eventually thinks of herself as a Queen Bee because she stings men who want sex from her (before the murder, she had stabbed a man who solicited her in a bar). Her act of biting off her lover's penis echoes the violent acts that result in the loss of Ursa's womb and Almeyda's breasts, as well as the act of resistance Ursa's great-grandmother performed on the slave master Corregidora before escaping.

In *Corregidora*, this act of resistance, biting Corregidora's penis during felatio, is something that Ursa must imagine on her own, as her great-grandmother would never say what she had done. This is just one example of the tension between what is told—the legacy of slavery—and what is not told—fruitful modes of resistance and healing—that dominates many of these narratives as well. Familial stories can be either liberating or entrapping, as Ursa discovers in *Corregidora*, and for many of Jones's protagonists, the information they most need handed down from mother to daughter never arrives but instead remains shrouded in secrecy and silence. Both Ursa and Eva have mothers who do not tell them anything useful about desire, love, or marriage, and they are left to discover and fend for themselves, while the narratives they do receive (Ursa from her grandmothers, Eva from her mother's friend Miss Billie, and both from girls slightly older than they are) constrain their relationships with men and inhibit their desire. They see themselves as the



women in the historical narratives, rather than as individual actors able to define their own lives and relationships.

All of the novels employ a quest for self-reclamation and healing, in which telling one's own story plays a large part, but these plots are often not obvious as such because they are not linear. Within the fragments of disordered memories, *Eva's Man* offers the possibility of empowerment and obliquely suggests that Eva has turned to **lesbianism** in jail as a way to fulfill her desire without fulfilling a stereotype. *The Healing* is narrated backward from the present, in which Harlan is about to perform a faith healing, to the past, through Harlan's careers as rock-star manager and beautician and her affairs with various men, including an African German horse breeder and a medical anthropologist. The novel suggests that all of these earlier identities continue to constitute Harlan's identity as healer, that Harlan, unlike the protagonists of Jones's first two novels, has been able to integrate her history in a useful and fulfilling manner, rather than be entrapped by it. *Mosquito's* plot development is often displaced by narrative disquisitions on everything from the Central Intelligence Agency's illegal activities to movie stars' hair color, so that often this cultural commentary, rather than Mosquito's acts of providing sanctuary, seems to be the main point of the novel.

Because Jones skillfully controls African American idiom, parodies other texts, and signifies on American culture, reviewers have favorably compared her work to that of **Zora Neale Hurston**, **Ralph Ellison**, and **Ishmael Reed**. Both *Mosquito* and *The Healing* are replete with references to, and analysis of, other novels from *Invisible Man* to *Huckleberry Finn*. Much of Jones's brilliance lies in her ability to use the colloquial voice of working-class African American women to provide not only extensive social commentary but also intriguing metafictional discourse on the nature of narrative.

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Suzanne Lane

### JONES-MEADOWS, KAREN (1953– )

Like many artistic women, Karen Jones-Meadows possesses a wide range of talents. Her first career was as an elementary school teacher. For three years, she taught in both Boston and North Carolina public schools. When Jones-Meadows became disillusioned with the bureaucracy of the public education system and realized that writing, not teaching, was her true passion she began writing **poetry**. Those verses evolved into plays, and a career was born. In 1984, Jones-Meadows wrote *Henrietta*, a play set in New York City, that follows a bag lady and a black urban professional who become friends and whose lives grow as a result of learning from each other's differences. The play was produced by the critically acclaimed Negro Ensemble Company, and her reputation as a talented playwright was born.

Her career has since been marked by the success of the play *Harriet's Return* (2003), which she wrote and stars in. The **drama** chronicles both the public and private lives of Harriet Tubman, the revered conductor of the **Underground Railroad** who emerged during the twentieth century as an icon for African American people. The narrative begins with Tubman's childhood in Maryland, continues through her marriages, years on the Underground Railroad, her Civil War tour, and social rights activism. There are more than thirty characters in the play, all played by Jones-Meadows. The work has impressed audiences throughout the country and garnered numerous awards. Actors including Phylicia Rashad, Moses Gunn, and Oscar choreographer Debbie Allen have played the characters she has written. Jones-Meadows also wrote the plays *Tapman* (1987), *Major Changes*, and *Sala: An African Cinderella Tale* (1996).

In addition to traveling throughout the country performing *Harriet's Return* and *Henrietta* (1984), Jones-Meadows also gives workshops to promote **literacy**, writing, and the theatrical arts. She participates in her local **community**, serving as a member of the Screenwriting Conference in Santa Fe Board of Advisors. She has also set her sights toward Hollywood. In 1987, she had a small role as an emergency room nurse in the movie *Critical Condition*, starring Richard Pryor. She has written for television, including a teleplay titled *The*

*Trials of Juanita*, which was optioned but has not yet been picked up by a network. Other television writing endeavors include a series titled *Hip Hop in the Promised Land* for Comedy Central and a series of public service announcements for the Fox station in New York City. Most recently, Jones-Meadows has worked with entrepreneur Cleveland Hughes to bring Harriet Tubman's life to the silver screen in a **film** titled *The Life of Harriet Tubman*. Jones-Meadows moved to New Mexico in 1995, where she currently resides.

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Roxane Gay

## JORDAN, JUNE (1936–2002)

As an author and as an activist, June Jordan was distinguished by her clarity, her conscience, and her unfailing commitment to the creation of a just society. Jordan's passion for language—for the feel, sound, and rhythm of words—is evident in all her works, and those works cover a wide range of genres: political essays, **poetry**, **fiction** for young readers, screenplays, even the libretto for an opera set in post-earthquake Los Angeles, "I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky" (1995). Born in Harlem to Jamaican immigrants, Jordan began writing early, earning money by producing **love** poems and poetic put-downs for her schoolmates. After several years of public schooling, she received a scholarship to an elite New England preparatory school, then returned home to New York City to begin her studies at Barnard College. While in school, she met and married Michael Meyer; this interracial marriage (then illegal in forty-seven states) led to a son, Christopher, and then to a divorce, about ten years later. Shortly after her marriage, Jordan left school, finding little connection between her **community** in Bedford-Stuyvesant and the culture and curriculum of Barnard College. This experience is detailed in "Notes of a Barnard Dropout," a lecture given in 1975 while she and **Alice Walker** shared the Reid Lectureship at that school (1975; in *Civil Wars*).

During these years, Jordan cared for her son Christopher, primarily as a single mother, and continued studying independently. Her interest in architecture led to a friendship with Buckminster Fuller and to one of her first major published pieces, a 1964 essay in *Esquire* proposing a plan to redesign

Harlem for maximum community and livability. The essay helped her to garner the 1970 Prix de Rome Environmental Design Award; she also won an Architectural Design Award from the American Institute of Architecture, for a joint proposal for the African Burial Ground in New York, New York. It was by chance that, in the fall of 1967, Jordan began teaching English composition at the City College of New York, where **Toni Cade Bambara**, Barbara Christian, Adrienne Rich, and **Audre Lorde** were among her colleagues. Her teaching career took her to institutions including Connecticut College, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and the University of California at Berkeley, her academic **home** at the time of her 2002 **death** from breast cancer. Throughout these years, she remained a dynamic writer and educator whose interactions with her students nourished her writing and theirs. In fact, her inspiration and assistance led to publications such as *The Voice of the Children* (1970), a volume of poetry she produced with children from writing workshops she taught as a participant in New York's Writers and Teachers Collaborative, and *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* (1995), the result of her popular Poetry for the People classes at Berkeley.

Across all the decades of her writing and teaching careers, and across all the genres in which she published, Jordan circled repeatedly back to a number of issues that she examined and reconsidered in the context of a changing—and not so changed—American sociopolitical landscape. Although the body of Jordan's work and the singular, crisp beauty of her style cannot be reduced to any set of themes, those themes do identify some of her crucial areas of concern. Because Jordan truly believed in “liberty and justice for all”—and also in equality—regardless of **race**, gender, **class**, sexual orientation, or any other potential identifying characteristic—she tackled issues like racism, affirmative action, women's rights, education, **violence** of all kinds, and economic inequity, over and over again. She was not one to back down from a fight, and language was her chosen means of joining the fray.

In her memoir *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* (2000), Jordan describes how, as an infant and toddler, she “could not help but fall in love with words,” as her mother recited nursery rhymes, connecting each noun to a part of the girl's **body** and touching her at the moment she pronounced it. This love for language was reinforced by Jordan's attendance at church services where, even if she did not always understand what was happening, she was nonetheless transported by the unusual and incantatory, repetitive nature of the words used there—words clearly associated with a certain power. The power of words themselves, and the responsibility of their speakers and writers to ensure that those words express their own truths to bring about meaningful acts of communication, is affirmed by Jordan in essays and poems from throughout her career.

This concern surfaces in “The Voice of the Children,” a 1967 essay from *Civil Wars* detailing her involvement with the Teachers and Writers Collaborative. In her essay about this experience, Jordan comments on what will become a central element in her work, an element linking her concern for

language as the expression of an individual who participates in a particular culture with her insistence that educators see, understand, and respect their students as individuals. Although this concern initially grew from her demand for recognition of black English as a distinct, viable, and valuable form of expression, in “White English/Black English: The Politics of Translation” (1972; in *Civil Wars*), it eventually developed into a broader call for a “legitimately American language” in “Problems of Language in a Democratic State” (1982; in *On Call* [1985]). Her most impassioned statement on this subject is perhaps her 1985 essay, “Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan” (*On Call*). Here, her defense of black English is sparked by her black students’ initial rejection of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), a shock that leads her to undertake teaching a course on black English. When the brother of a student in that new course is killed by the New York City police, her students wrestle with the problem of how to express their outrage: in standard English, which may get published, or in black English, which allows them to be true to themselves? Jordan clearly sees the connection between devaluing a people and devaluing their language.

Because she saw this connection, much of Jordan’s time and energy as an educator and as an author was devoted to helping students recognize the quality of their own authentic languages and voices and the power of speaking about their own experiences. With this goal in mind, she also produced several books exploring black life from the inside for children and young adult readers. *His Own Where* (1971), an inner-city story of young love written entirely in black English, was a finalist for the National Book Award the year it was published. *Who Look at Me* (1969), an innovative text combining her own poetic text about double consciousness with paintings and sketches depicting African Americans, was also designed for young readers. Others of these books include *Dry Victories* (1972), which uses a dialogue format to compare Reconstruction with the civil rights era; the biography *Fannie Lou Hamer* (1972); *New Life: New Room* (1975); and *Kimako’s Story* (1981).

The pedagogical drive was an important aspect of Jordan’s writing, and she was devotedly committed to the ideal of truly democratic education. From her 1969 essay “Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person” (*Civil Wars*), supporting open admissions at City College and demanding change in the New York City school system, to “Of Those So Close Beside Me, Which Are You?” (1986), “Finding the Haystack in the Needle, or, the Whole World of America and the Challenge of Higher Education,” and “Toward a Manifest New Destiny” (1991; all in *Technical Difficulties* [1992]), Jordan continued to argue for multicultural education as vital to a pluralistic, democratic society existing in a heterogeneous world. Following the 1996 passage of California Proposition 209, gutting affirmative action in that state, Jordan once again turned her attention to policies for affirmative action, which she defined as “life on behalf of more life” in one of several essays on the subject in *Affirmative Acts* (1998).

Consistent with her views on education, Jordan's writing often considers the political from a personal point of view, or the impact of the political on the personal, and juxtaposes in surprising ways issues that are often seen as unconnected. Thus, her 1982 essay "Report from the Bahamas" (*On Call*) moves from her own experience as a black woman tourist in the Bahamas to the dangerous situation faced by one of her students, a black South African woman abused by her alcoholic husband. In the essay's startling conclusion, Jordan describes how this student is helped by another when solidarity develops across color lines, solidarity based on a similar **history** of suffering. She then calls for a new, universally human solidarity, based not on fear and danger but on positive connection—before it is "too late."

Jordan insisted on the interconnectedness of all struggles for **freedom**, justice, and equality and especially resented attempts by others to reduce these campaigns down to either/or oppositions in which only one type of pain, hope, or suffering was considered legitimate or worthy of concern. She tackles this topic playfully in "A Short Note to My Very Critical and Well-Beloved Friends and Comrades," from her 1980 collection of poetry titled *Passion*. Elsewhere, however, her treatments of this subject are more serious, as in the many essays documenting her refusal to be pressured into privileging or denying her **identity** as a woman, as a black person, as a bisexual. A survivor of **rape**—not once but twice—she recalls, in "Notes toward a Model of Resistance" (*Affirmative Acts*), that she could not resist her first attacker, a white man, until she thought of herself as a black woman being ordered about by a white man. Her second attacker, years later, was black; her racial consciousness did not help her to resist him, and her gender consciousness was not enough. She describes the experience in a short poem called "Case in Point" (*Passion*) and also in "Waking Up in the Middle of Some American Dreams" (*Technical Difficulties*). In a manifesto-style poem in *Passion*, Jordan unites all the aspects of her history and her identity, demanding justice for them all, simultaneously, *now*. Jordan understood that identity politics were grounded in the experiences of people's everyday lives, but she expressed her frustrations with their limits, too, as in "Waiting for a Taxi" (*Technical Difficulties*).

Jordan's acute awareness of her own gender identity stemmed in part from her father's disappointment at her birth and determination to raise her as a son, an experience detailed in *Soldier*. She fought back against her father's physical abuse and witnessed her mother's silent struggle, which ended in suicide. Later in life, Jordan's struggle with breast cancer was another reminder of the particular difficulties faced by women. These difficulties include a sometimes cavalier health system and a federal government that sees women's health issues as only a distant second priority, if that. "Besting a Worst Case Scenario" (1996; in *Affirmative Acts*) offers a detailed description of Jordan's own experience in dealing with breast cancer and the medical system; it also offers statistics on women's health in the United States and a call to action to change this lamentable situation. The problematic outcome of her mastectomy left her physically unable to write for months; "First Poem after

Serious Surgery” evokes her fear of this silence, in its temporary and menacingly more permanent forms (*Kissing God Good-Bye* [1997]).

Jordan maintained a steadfast devotion to her principles despite pressure when her positions did not fit into others’ political orthodoxies. For instance, her regularly repeated demands for a new foreign policy approach toward Israel and the Palestinians were not always well received. But she would not compromise and held to an unwavering sense of what was right. Principles, however, preclude neither a sense of humor nor an appreciation of **beauty**. And Jordan’s writing often testifies to both her comic sense and the lyrical aspect of her vision. “Letter to the Local Police” (*Passion*), a complaint about rioting roses, synthesizes the two, while many others represent her delight in the natural world.

Jordan’s notion of success was not limited to the merely individual, as is evidenced by her many collaborative endeavors. In 1979, she joined forces with Sweet Honey in the Rock and **Ntozake Shange** to produce a night of music, song, and poetry, “In the Spirit of Sojourner Truth.” Another collaboration with Bernice Reagon yielded the famous poems/ songs, performed by Sweet Honey, “Alla Tha’s All Right, But” and “Oughta Be a Woman.” Jordan’s individual accomplishments were, nonetheless, acknowledged and rewarded with numerous prizes and awards, including the Lila Wallace *Readers Digest* Award (1995) and the National Black Writers’ Conference Lifetime Achievement Award (1998), which she dedicated to her parents. Jordan’s legacy lives on in her writing and in the writing of her many students.

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**JUBILEE**

**Margaret Walker** Alexander exerted her most powerful literary effort in the crafting of her only work of **fiction**, *Jubilee* (1966). Drawing on the power of **history** and the significant importance to her of personal **family** history and the preservation of both, the author created a mock biography that explored the atypical life of her great-grandmother, Margaret Duggins Ware Brown.

The novel was inspired by stories that the writer heard told by her grandmother, Elvira Ware Dozier, and from family heirlooms and artifacts that had been stored for years in a trunk that came into her possession. She found enough information in the trunk to explore on behalf of her recreated **ancestor**, Vyry, vital questions of **freedom**, **race**, and **class** as well as the devastation of life in **slavery**.

The foundation of *Jubilee* was begun in 1942, nearly a decade after Walker had graduated from Northwestern University in 1935 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. She then went on to pursue and completed her Master's in Creative Writing at the University of Iowa in 1942, and there the **work** on *Jubilee* seemed for a time to come to an end.

Walker married hastily because she dearly wanted a family; in 1943 she wed Firnist Alexander. Together, they had two sons and two daughters. Over the years of rearing her family and to ensure their economic stability, she moved to Jackson, Mississippi, in 1946. At Jackson State University, a long academic teaching career ensued.

Well into a settled family life, Walker did not abandon *Jubilee*. Her youngest daughter Margaret with her, she returned to the University of Iowa to work on her Doctor of Philosophy degree. At the end of that endeavor, and after a hiatus from teaching at Jackson State, twenty-three years of incubating *Jubilee*, she returned to Mississippi with her degree in hand and the completed novel *Jubilee*.

*Jubilee* has stood the test of time. In the work, Walker gave dimension to Vyry that startled readers. Walker portrayed Vyry as the bedrock of strength, perseverance, and wisdom while she and company moved westward through Alabama to find a suitable place to settle. Vyry's husband, Innis, had learned that there was ample land to which no one held title that could be claimed by freed slaves.

Still, in search of a place to lay roots, the family was forced to go from place to place. Finally, Providence seemed to intervene. While passing through a white neighborhood, Vyry answered cries for help and gave assistance to a young woman in labor. The entire town was grateful to Vyry, and there she triumphed when her white neighbors promised her and her family protection. They then built a **home** for Vyry and her family.

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*Elisabeth S. James*



# **WRITING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN**



# **WRITING AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN**



*An Encyclopedia of Literature  
by and about Women of Color*

**Volume 2: K-Z**

**Edited by  
Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu**



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*This work is for Lee Burdette Williams—friend of the second half, sister of my heart's heart, my poem.*





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*You Know Better*

*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*



## **Thematic List of Entries**

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Burton, Annie Louise  
Craft, Ellen and William  
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Delany Sisters  
Drumgoold, Kate  
Elaw, Zilpha  
Holiday, Billie  
Jackson, Mattie  
Jackson, Rebecca Cox  
Jacobs, Harriet  
Keckley, Elizabeth  
Moody, Anne  
Potter, Eliza  
Prince, Mary  
Taylor, Susie King  
Truth, Sojourner

### **Children's/Young Adult Writers**

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Caines, Jeannette  
Greenfield, Eloise  
Hamilton, Virginia  
Hansen, Joyce  
Herron, Carolivia  
Johnson, Angela  
Lattany, Kristin Hunter  
McKissack, Patricia  
Meriwether, Louise  
Nelson, Marilyn  
Sanders, Dori  
Tate, Eleanora E.  
Taylor, Mildred D.  
Thomas, Joyce Carol  
Walter, Mildred Pitts  
Wilkinson, Brenda  
Woodson, Jacqueline  
Yarbrough, Camille

## xvi Thematic List of Entries

### **Dramatists**

Bonner, Marita  
Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward  
Childress, Alice  
Dunbar-Nelson, Alice Moore  
Franklin, J. E.  
Gibson, Patricia Joann  
Grimké, Angelina Weld  
Hansberry, Lorraine  
Jones-Meadows, Karen  
Kennedy, Adrienne  
Miller, May  
Parks, Suzan-Lori  
Rahman, Aishah  
Shange, Ntozake  
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### **Genres**

Autobiography  
Black Feminist Criticism  
Children's and Young Adult  
Literature  
Detective Fiction  
Drama  
Epistolary Novel  
Fiction  
Film  
Historical Fiction  
Neo-Slave Narrative  
Poetry  
Slave Narrative

### **Male Writers**

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Bradley, David  
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Cullen, Countee  
Dickey, Eric Jerome  
Douglass, Frederick  
Dunbar, Paul Laurence

Ellison, Ralph  
Gaines, Ernest  
Haley, Alex  
Harris, E. Lynn  
Hughes, Langston  
Johnson, Charles  
Johnson, James Weldon  
Kenan, Randall  
Komunyakaa, Yusef  
Major, Clarence  
Malcolm X  
McKay, Claude  
Reed, Ishmael  
Toomer, Jean  
Wideman, John Edgar  
Wilson, August  
Wright, Richard

### **Novelists**

Allen, Clarissa Minnie  
Thompson  
Angelou, Maya  
Ansa, Tina McElroy  
Austin, Doris Jean  
Bambara, Toni Cade  
Brown, Linda Beatrice  
Butler, Octavia  
Campbell, Bebe Moore  
Cartier, Xam Wilson  
Chase-Riboud, Barbara  
Clair, Maxine  
Cleage, Pearl  
Cliff, Michelle  
Collins, Julia C.  
Cooper, J. California  
Crafts, Hannah  
Danticat, Edwidge  
Fauset, Jessie Redmon  
Golden, Marita  
Harper, Frances E. W.  
Herron, Carolivia  
Hopkins, Pauline  
Hurston, Zora Neale

Jones, Gayl  
 Kelley-Hawkins, Emma Dunham  
 Kincaid, Jamaica  
 Larsen, Nella  
 Lattany, Kristin Hunter  
 Lee, Andrea  
 Marshall, Paule  
 McMillan, Terry  
 Meriwether, Louise  
 Morrison, Toni  
 Naylor, Gloria  
 Neely, Barbara  
 Nunez, Elizabeth  
 Parks, Suzan-Lori  
 Perry, Phyllis Alesia  
 Petry, Ann  
 Polite, Carlene Hatcher  
 Sanders, Dori  
 Senna, Danzy  
 Shockley, Ann Allen  
 Thomas, Joyce Carol  
 Walker, Alice  
 Walker, Margaret  
 West, Dorothy  
 Williams, Shirley Anne  
 Wilson, Harriet E.  
 Wright, Sarah Elizabeth

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 Clair, Maxine  
 Clarke, Cheryl  
 Cliff, Michelle  
 Clifton, Lucille

Coleman, Wanda  
 Cortez, Jayne  
 Cowdery, Mae  
 Danner, Margaret Esse  
 Davenport, Doris  
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 Dunbar-Nelson, Alice  
 Moore  
 Evans, Mari  
 Fabio, Sarah Webster  
 Fields, Julia  
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 Forman, Ruth  
 Giovanni, Nikki  
 Gomez, Jewelle  
 Gossett, Hattie  
 Grimké, Angelina Weld  
 Grimké, Charlotte Forten  
 Harper, Frances E. W.  
 Jackson, Angela  
 Jackson, Mae  
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 Douglas  
 Johnson, Helene  
 Jordan, June  
 Kocher, Ruth Ellen  
 Lane, Pinkie Gordon  
 Lorde, Audre  
 McElroy, Colleen  
 Miller, May  
 Moore, Opal  
 Moss, Thylia  
 Mullen, Harryette  
 Murphy, Beatrice M.  
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Wright, Sarah Elizabeth

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Jackson, Rebecca Cox  
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Stewart, Maria

### **Short-story Writers**

Anderson, Mignon Holland  
Bambara, Toni Cade  
Birtha, Becky  
Bonner, Marita  
Danticat, Edwidge  
Ferrell, Carolyn  
Lee, Andrea  
Millican, Arthenia J. Bates  
Moore, Opal  
Oliver, Diane  
Shockley, Ann Allen  
Walker, Alice

### **Social Activists/Educators**

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Brown, Hallie Q.  
Bush-Banks, Olivia Ward  
Cooper, Anna Julia  
Coppin, Fanny Jackson  
Davis, Angela  
Dunbar-Nelson, Alice Moore  
Golden, Marita  
Graham, Shirley  
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Harper, Frances E. W.  
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Beauty  
Body  
Christianity  
Class  
Community  
Conjuring  
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Family  
Freedom  
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Literacy  
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Womanism  
Womanist Conjure  
Work



### **KECKLEY, ELIZABETH (1818?-1907)**

Most of what we know about Elizabeth Keckley's life as a slave is derived from her postbellum **slave narrative** *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1868). She was born in Dinwiddie, Virginia, the only child of Agnes Hobbs, a slave to Colonel A. Burwell, and George Pleasant. Her earliest charge, at age four, was to care for her master's infant daughter, and her first beating came as a result of carelessness in her duty. At fourteen she was sent to live with her master's oldest son, a minister. After the family moved to Hillsborough, North Carolina, Keckley, now eighteen, was whipped by the schoolmaster and later beaten by her master to break her "stubborn pride" until her resistance shamed them into stopping. During four years of persecution by an unnamed white man, she gave birth to her only child, George. Keckley's fortunes began to change, however, after she went to live with the **family** of her old master's daughter. When the Garlands moved to St. Louis, they were so impoverished that Keckley's old mother had to be put out to service. The threat shocked the author into doing what she could to support the family. Before long Keckley had become a dressmaker for some of the best ladies in St. Louis, supporting a family of seventeen persons, black and white.

Through hard **work** and with loans from some of her women patrons, Keckley purchased **freedom** for herself and her son for \$1,200 and was emancipated on November 13, 1855. Her marriage to James Keckley ended

when she decided to leave St. Louis in 1860 and head north to improve her fortune. In Washington, D.C., she encountered obstacles to her success as a black businesswoman, but a white customer helped her get established. Women helping women, both black and white, was a hallmark of Keckley's success as a dressmaker.

Soon after her arrival in the nation's capital, Keckley's dressmaking skill led to her working for the wife of Jefferson Davis. Keckley soon achieved her dream: to sew for the inhabitants of the White House. As Mary Lincoln's personal modiste, "Madam Elizabeth," as President Lincoln called her, grew close to the family. Supporting Mary Lincoln through her grief upon the **death** of her son Willie, she became the First Lady's confidante. Keckley's own son, who had joined the Union army, died in 1861 on the battlefield.

In the aftermath of President Lincoln's assassination, Keckley was invaluable to the grieving widow. In Mrs. Lincoln's large debt, however, acquired while she was First Lady, lay the seeds of the "Old Clothes Scandal," and Keckley was asked to help her sell some of her wardrobe in New York City. The disastrous publicity that followed entangled Keckley and led to her increasing poverty and eventual estrangement from the Lincoln family. After teaching at Wilberforce University from 1892 to 1894, Keckley died of a stroke in 1907 in the Home for Destitute Women and Children in Washington, D.C.

### Work By

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New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

### Work About

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*Beth L. Lueck*

### KELLEY-HAWKINS, EMMA DUNHAM (?-?)

There is a certain irony that Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins published her first novel, *Megda* (1891), under the pseudonym "Forget-Me-Not." While time has preserved her name, her first and second novels (the second is *Four Girls at Cottage City*, published in 1898) and the photo that prefaced *Megda* are all that is known about this author.

While anonymous in her first literary endeavor, its success may have emboldened her to include her name as "Emma Dunham Kelley" in the 1892 reprint of *Megda*. Scholars assume that Kelley married between 1891 and 1898, since in her second volume the appended surname of "Hawkins" appears. However, no records have been located that might tell us more about

her life, origins, **family**, or background. Her photo has been read as both racially ambiguous and as unquestionably representing an African American woman of a mixed-race background. Geographically, the choice of a Boston publishing company, James H. Earle, indicates she is probably of New England origin, as do the plots of her novels, Cottage City itself being located on Martha's Vineyard. Her dedication of *Megda* to her "Widowed Mother" who endured "years of hard struggle and self-sacrifice" indicates a childhood touched by trouble, while her dedication of her second novel to "Dear Aunt Lottie, whom I have often and truly called my 'Second Mother'" suggests her reliance on female support for sustenance. The sacrifices and support these women offered may have been in order to enable Kelley's education, evident in her developed writing. However, we must remember that everything where Kelley is concerned is a matter of extrapolation and supposition.

What scholars are left with, besides a tantalizing puzzle, are the novels themselves. Both exemplify the Christian bildungsroman, which preached the sublimation of one's personal desires and ambitions in favor of a higher duty to Christ. This was not presented as effortless: Each novel features a high-spirited heroine who struggles to achieve salvation. The reward for doing so is marriage, with its privileged status of beloved wife and mother.

Ultimately, the plots of both novels are unimportant when compared to their purpose: to educate and form young Christian women who will be impervious to the superficial charms of worldliness, represented as theater, dance, and social elitism. It is here that Kelley's **fiction** differs most substantially from her female African American peers writing at the time: While most were writing what Claudia Tate identifies as "domestic allegories of political desire," which in some way condemned existing racial inequalities, Kelley makes no mention of **race** whatsoever. Indeed, if the photo of Kelley is read as racially ambiguous, her characters are delineated entirely in relation to **whiteness**. Linking whiteness and purity, Kelley's darker-skinned characters are generally presented as less moral than her blond heroines. Critical opinion is divided as to whether Kelley's characters are intended to be white or light-skinned **mulattos**. While some note that Cottage City became Oak Bluffs, an African American vacation spot, the reality is that the composition of Kelley's novel predates such a shift. The fact remains that the text gives us no clues—unless one reads Kelley's photo as racially *unambiguous* and therefore signifying on the heroines themselves.

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*Megda*. Boston: James H. Earle, 1891.

### Works About

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Jennifer Harris

### KENAN, RANDALL (1963– )

Born on March 12, 1963, in Brooklyn, New York, Randall Garrett Kenan moved to North Carolina when he was six weeks old. Following a temporary stay with his grandfather in Wallace, Kenan settled in Chinquapin, where he was raised by his great-aunt. Early life in the **South**, the landscape for all of Kenan's major **fiction**, was filled with much **death** and many funerals, including the loss of his great-uncle when Kenan was three. Kenan speaks of the event with astonishment when he considers the shock of a three-year-old taking a nap, waking up to find his father-figure dead beside him. Out of that experience, Kenan developed an intense curiosity regarding ghosts and spirits. Buoyed, in part, by his great-aunt's recollections of **family** members dying in her house and their subsequent hauntings, Kenan's awareness of the supernatural grew throughout childhood so that when he turned to authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and **Toni Morrison**, he found a vision of the world he identified with and understood.

The small-town South of Kenan's youth allowed him to gain appreciation not only for the supernatural practices of African Americans but for the language of the King James Bible, gospel music, and **spirituals** that accompanied services at First Baptist—one of only two African American churches, both Baptist, in Chinquapin. His inherited faith proved a great influence on him through college, when doubt began; **religion** continues to inform his fiction. The rural setting of Chinquapin also afforded Kenan an agrarian upbringing. On his great-aunt's farm he raised livestock, vegetables, and tobacco. Church and farm life as well as his high school education at the desegregated East Duplin High School in Beaulville offered invaluable experiences for his work to come, but when he entered college, Kenan had no intention of being a serious writer.

That decision occurred three-quarters of the way through his undergraduate career at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While there,

he majored in physics and intended to be a scientist. His precollege reading had included science fiction writers Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, and according to Doris Betts, Kenan expected to fill downtime from his laboratory **work** with the writing of science fiction novels. That plan changed during the summer after Kenan's junior year when he went to Oxford to study literary criticism. His senior year at Chapel Hill included several literary classes as well as a change in major. Among those classes was Betts's senior honors writing seminar. Upon completion of his English degree, Kenan left the South for New York and, with Betts's assistance, contacted Toni Morrison, who secured a job for him at Random House. Kenan repeatedly credits the importance and influence of the English faculty at Chapel Hill in many interviews, and in addition to Betts, he mentions H. Maxwell Steele, Daphne Athas, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Lee Greene, and Bland Simpson.

Working his way from office assistant to assistant editor in New York, Kenan found time for writing whenever he could. His first novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, appeared in 1989—four years after his graduation—to favorable reviews. That novel marks Kenan's entrance into the literary world and commences the still-unresolved critical dialogue on his place in the canon. Kenan represents a growing hybridization in both literary criticism and the practice of fiction. As diverse as his own writing, Kenan's literary influences extend beyond African American borders. His affinity for Japanese writers, in particular Yukio Mishima, is well documented, as is the importance he places upon Gabriel Garcia Marquez. He also values the work of southern women writers like Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Katherine Anne Porter, as he does Morrison's. Though he aligns himself with **James Baldwin**, Kenan sees important distinctions as well as similarities between them; notably, Kenan is writing as an openly gay author, while Baldwin cloaked his sexual orientation. Like Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* has the central protagonist wrestling with his homosexuality against a backdrop of conservative **Christianity**. The growing separation of *Spirit's* Horace Cross from his **community** and his faith amid issues of self-definition sounds a classic theme in African American **literature**, though his homosexuality confounds tradition. Horace feels distanced from family and friends in Tims Creek, North Carolina, in part because of the desires for other men he works to repress. Cross must confront his religious background in conversations with James (Jimmy) Malachi Greene, his cousin and the pastor of his church. In addition, Cross also must deal with his effeminate schoolmate Gideon and the outward signs of homosexuality he represents as well as encounters with the supernatural and ideas of possession. Written in both narrative and dramatic prose, Cross's story of fragmentation and suicide runs outside of conventional chronological time and shows a young man unable to rectify his sexual orientation with his community's standards of living.

The stories collected in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992) represent a further development of Kenan's Tims Creek fiction and move beyond to Washington, D.C., and New Jersey. Nominated for the National Book Critics

Circle Award in Fiction, *Dead's* stories tell of **history**, incest, death and dying, haunting, **love**, molestation, religion, community, and in several examples, strong women. In "Clarence and the Dead," five-year-old Clarence Pickett is touched with a psychic gift that allows him to communicate with the dead. Balancing the supernatural with the rational world, the community around Clarence looks on in wonder and feels a strange sense of relief when he dies. Clarence's ability to channel the dead proves disturbing to many in the town. His admonition from beyond to the town's also-ran, Ellsworth Batts—unstable since the death of Mildred, his former girlfriend, who offers the advice through the medium of Clarence—causes the controversial pairing of the themes of child molestation and homosexuality to underpin the story.

Homosexuality even affects seventy-year-old Maggie MacGowan Williams in "The Foundations of the Earth." After the death of her gay grandson Edward, Maggie invites his lover Gabriel for a visit. The agnostic Gabriel listens intently to the proselytizing of Maggie's friends gathered on the porch but understands his real reason for being there is to talk openly with Maggie—something that Edward could not do. At once transforming and cathartic, "Foundations" shows that Maggie—a product of her Calvinistic culture—is capable of extending her belief system to accept and embrace both the alternative lifestyle Edward chose and the lover he leaves behind in death. The strength of Maggie's acceptance manifests in her conversations with others, while her courage builds in the long-held family belief of the **healing** properties of sleep. Here, Kenan's use of folk culture underscores his connection to both southern and African American literature. Preserving the customs and manners of his past, Kenan offers Maggie as a woman deeply entrenched in the past yet capable of change. Dynamic in a static landscape, Maggie Williams becomes one of Kenan's finest creations.

"The Origin of Whales" continues Kenan's emphasis on strong women in a story centered on the elderly Essie's babysitting of the overly energetic Thad. In a story that blends **folklore** and the oral tradition against a backdrop of agelessness, Kenan shows that the fun and the serious of life can coexist, and must, because of age. When Essie receives a phone call that one of her contemporaries is hospitalized, the tone of the story changes, but Essie does not give in to the bad news and instead is brought back to the business of living by Thad's request for assistance on his homework. Kenan's most controversial story, "Cornsilk," offers a frank and disturbing look at incest from the perspective of the jilted brother longing for his sister's companionship.

Following the 1992 publication of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, Kenan published a biography of Baldwin in the Chelsea House *Lives of Notable Gay Men* series and began a move from fiction to nonfiction that culminated in his 1999 work *Walking on Water*. Abandoning the fantastic qualities of his fiction for a more factual writing style, Kenan demonstrates his versatility. During this period Kenan also began accepting academic appointments; he has been on faculty at Sarah Lawrence, Vassar, Columbia, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke, the University of Mississippi, and the University of Memphis in various creative writing positions.

Kenan's 1999 nonfiction work *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* represents over 600 pages of cross-country conversations and thoughts on the place and advancement of African Americans in America. Reminiscent of Robert Penn Warren's 1965 work *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Kenan's *Walking on Water* offers a unique contribution; it is written by and for African Americans and critically explores the African American influence on popular culture. Melding interviews with children and senior citizens, celebrities and laypeople, with attention to cultural detail, Kenan's meditations show the ongoing prevalence of racism more than a century after the abolition of **slavery**. Beyond that, he writes of the regional differences and influences shaping African America. In this sprawling yet compelling work, Kenan offers no apology for the impossibility of its scope; rather, he successfully provides a penetrating look at disparate cultures comprising African Americans.

Today Kenan continues his work on a novel in his Tims Creek saga that once again shows the intersection of faith and belief with contemporary life. The paucity of scholarship on Kenan's writing creates a noticeable gap in both African American and southern studies. Similarly, his omission from both the first (1997) and second (2004) editions of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* hints at an author open to critical consideration and canonical placement. In the ongoing development of African American literary theory, Kenan's **identity** as a southern, African American homosexual may well necessitate a new direction in scholarship, for like the African American women writers preoccupied with place and identity, Kenan, too, remains displaced.

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F. Gregory Stewart

### **KENNEDY, ADRIENNE (1931– )**

Best known for her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962) that won her first Obie Award, Adrienne Kennedy has been an influential playwright associated with the **Black Arts Movement**. Her highly acclaimed and often enigmatic works revolve around subjectivity under oppressive structures of **race** and gender, invoked through violent symbolism, radical experimentation, and hauntingly fragmentary lyricism. Her plays significantly pushed the conceptions of African American theater in demonstrating the political potential of abstract theatrical language. Kennedy is also known for her powerful short stories, mystery novels, and a memoir.

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Adrienne Lita Kennedy was the first and only daughter of Cornell Wallace Hawkins, a social worker and an executive secretary for the YMCA, and Etta Hawkins, a schoolteacher. Kennedy credits her mother as an early literary influence but also claims that the direction of her works was affected by the fact that her maternal grandfather was a wealthy white peach farmer. When she was four, her **family** moved to a multiethnic, middle-class neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio. Soon after receiving a degree in education from Ohio State University, she married Joseph C. Kennedy. He was sent to Korea six months after the marriage, but upon his return the family moved to New York. In New York, Kennedy studied creative writing at Columbia University (1954–1956), American Theatre Wing (1958), and later with Edward Albee at Circle-in-the-Square School (1962). Due to her husband's involvement in developmental efforts in West Africa, the family moved to Ghana in 1961, then to Italy. She had two sons, Joseph, Jr., and Adam, and divorced in 1966. Meanwhile, she was a member of the playwriting unit of Actors Studio from 1962 to 1965 and participated as a founding member of the Women's Theatre Council in 1971.

Kennedy has received three Obie Awards from *Village Voice*, among numerous other awards: two Rockefeller grants, a Guggenheim fellowship, a Third Manhattan Borough President's Award for Excellence, a Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund Writer's Award, an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Pierre LeCompte duNouy Foundation Award. She has been commissioned to write works for the Public Theater, Jerome Robbins, The Royal Court, the Mark Taper Forum, and Juilliard. In addition, Kennedy has been a visiting professor at many

universities, including Yale, Princeton, Brown, the University of California at Berkeley, Stanford, and Harvard.

Her first published work, "Because of the King of France" (1960), originally published in *Black Orpheus: A Journal of African and Afro-American Literature*, is a short story about a girl's haunting encounter with her estranged cousin. Kennedy weaves autobiographical detail with expressionism and surrealism to create evocativeness and complexity that continued to surface in her work. In this story, Kennedy places emphasis on cultural specificity of the African diaspora; the work "wears" the mask of conformity to Western cultural values and yet enacts a profoundly different worldview aimed at confronting an oppressive past and reaffirming the humanity and sensibility of black artists.

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962), coproduced by Edward Albee, Kennedy focuses on the tormented psyche of a young college student, Sarah, who is also in the text simply referred to as "Negro." Kennedy portrays her subjectivity as a site of struggle with crossings of race and gender, as well as family trauma, as painful moments of the past blends into the present. Kennedy dramatizes four aspects of Sarah's self through historical figures: Patrice Lumumba, Christ, Queen Victoria, and the Duchess of Hapsburg. These four figures all embody contradictions and oppressions, such as black and white, male and female, and colonialism and independence. As the play unravels, we learn about the tragic marriage between Sarah's "white mother" and Sarah's father, a dark-skinned aspiring revolutionary. Sarah's mother accompanied her husband to Africa, but she eventually fell out of **love** with him; one night, he raped her in drunken rage. Sarah, the child born of the **rape**, grows up watching her mother lose her mind as her father struggled with guilt. The play leads up to Sarah's final rebuff of her father, his subsequent suicide in a Harlem hotel room, and Sarah's own suicide as she fails to reconcile herself to her roots and the nightmare of her past.

Like her contemporary playwright **Lorraine Hansberry**, the power and distinctiveness of Kennedy's play is fueled by her critique of the social and political condition of black female subjectivity, as well as finding a reference point in personal experience. Yet unlike Hansberry's plays, Kennedy's one-act plays resist easy identification for the audience. Instead of allowing the audience to identify with the characters and follow the plot easily, her plays lead audiences to be shocked with the alienating circumstances in which these characters function. To the audience's bewilderment, setting and characters often keep changing, and the emphasis on repetition and non sequitur breaks down the sense of linear time. Her works are filled with shattering moments of disruption, dislocation, and violation, as she consistently defamiliarizes the audience's assumptions about the enlightened autonomous subjectivity. Her theater consists in producing astonishment rather than empathy and, in that sense, blends the historical avant-garde mode of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater and the modernist modes of surrealism, symbolism, and expressionism.

Kennedy's literary sensibility can be traced in her experimental **autobiography** *People Who Led to My Plays* (1987). Her entry on Lorca, for example,

allows us to see her inclination to move away from the “realistic setting” to a “dream setting.” Organized loosely in chronological order into six sections, each chapter of her memoir contains short entries that form sequences instead of a long narrative. Her entries are not confined to people like her family and friends but also discuss places, books, music, **film**, and objects from popular culture and everyday life that feed her literary imagination. The eclecticism of the entries allows us access to Kennedy’s sensibility that is shaped by the immediate personal life and places that she lived, as well as larger cultural and sociohistorical forces of influence.

Mostly because of her early plays, Kennedy is often characterized as a quintessential postmodern playwright. While we easily recognize postmodern aesthetics in her experimental aspects like fragmentation, decentering, and nonlinearity, Kennedy’s early works stand apart from literary postmodernism that fully emerged in the 1970s. Her works do not display fascination with the notions of deconstruction and do not flirt with novelty and marginality as formal strategy of value in itself. For instance, Kennedy’s portrayal of fragmented subjectivity is not synonymous with the poststructuralist preoccupation with the breakdown of subjecthood in works of Roland Barthes, in that she never questions the existence of subjectivity itself. Her stylistic experimentation is rather a serious attempt to articulate the previously unimagined consciousness of a racial, gendered, and colonized “other.” Her plays anticipate Luce Irigaray’s critique of the phallogocentric nature of psychoanalytic theory: Is “woman” the unconscious, as Lacan claims, or does woman have one? Kennedy’s work presses us to ask similar questions about the impossibility of representing the consciousness of those who are oppressed, not just by the structure of gender but further splintered through race and **class** specificity. Her plays question whether such oppressed subjectivity can be adequately represented through traditional models in Western modernity.

Kennedy’s **drama** significantly paved the way for black female writers to articulate marginalized and trivialized realities. Her sensibility is shared in works of later playwrights like **Ntozake Shange** and **Suzan-Lori Parks**, who also challenge the boundaries of realism in their new explorations of **identity** and the human experience. In addition, Kennedy’s theater also signals the emergence of **black feminist criticism** in that her works contest for the space of a black female subjectivity against the too often universalized white female subjectivity.

The dramatic retrospective featuring Kennedy during the 1995–1996 season at Signature Theater in New York has prompted renewed critical attention. The Adrienne Kennedy Papers are housed at the Harry Ransom Research Center at the University of Austin, Texas.

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*Rei Magosaki*

### KINCAID, JAMAICA (1949– )

Well known for her fierce self-assertiveness and frank expressions of her feelings in her writing, Jamaica Kincaid is widely viewed as one of the most important and provocative new voices in the current generation of Caribbean-born women authors. While Kincaid has admitted that she might owe much of her success to the “idea of feminism” and says that she does not mind if people place her in the feminist category, she also refuses to proclaim herself a feminist writer. “[T]hat’s just me as an individual,” she explains. “I mean, I always see myself as alone. I can’t bear to be in a group of any kind, or in the school of anything” (Cudjoe 221). But while refusing the label “feminist writer,” she does call herself a feminist and insists, “Every woman is a feminist” (Trueheart). Speaking openly about her life and work in her many interviews, Kincaid has frequently commented that everything in her writing is autobiographical. “I’ve never really written about anyone except myself and my mother. . . . I’m just one of those pathetic people for whom writing is therapy,”



she has tellingly said of her writing (Listfield 82). A **memory**-haunted woman who continually remembers and tries to make sense of her Caribbean past and her relationship with her mother, Kincaid writes to take control of her obsessive ruminations over the hurts of her past in her ongoing inner conversation with her mother.

Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson in 1949 and grew up in the West Indies on the island of Antigua in the shadow of her mother, Annie Drew, née Richardson. Characterizing her mother as an impressive and powerful woman but also as someone who should never have had children, Kincaid insists that the way she is “is solely owing” to her mother and that, indeed, her mother is the “fertile soil” of her “creative life” (Cudjoe 219, 222). The same mother who gave her daughter words by teaching her how to read when she was three and one half years old and giving her a *Concise Oxford Dictionary* when she was seven later became a source of intense pain, Kincaid recalls, and yet because of her mother, she is able to give voice to the pain. Although admired by her mother for her reading when she was young, later, when Kincaid read obsessively as an adolescent and consequently ignored her household duties at times, her mother became annoyed with her reading habits. When the fifteen-year-old Kincaid, who had been asked to baby-sit her two-year-old brother, Devon, became so absorbed in a book that she failed to notice that his diaper needed to be changed, Annie Drew, in a state of fury, gathered up all of her daughter’s treasured books and burned them. As an adolescent, Kincaid came to identify with the bookish—and to her, idealized—world of **literature**, a world, as she would later speculate, she tried to recreate in her writing as she attempted to bring back into her life all the books her mother had burned.

Kincaid was an only child until age nine, and from ages nine to thirteen her life was disrupted by the birth of her three brothers: Joseph, Dalma, and Devon. “I thought I was the only thing my mother truly loved in the world,” she states, “and when it dawned on me that it wasn’t so, I was devastated” (Listfield). Kincaid also recalls how her mother and stepfather favored their sons over her.

My brothers were going to be gentlemen of achievement, one was going to be Prime Minister, one a doctor, one a Minister, things like that. I never heard anybody say that I was going to be anything except maybe a nurse. There was no huge future for me, nothing planned. In fact my education was so casually interrupted, my life might very well have been destroyed by that casual act . . . if I hadn’t intervened in my own life and pulled myself out of the water. (BBC)

Educated in British colonial schools, Kincaid was a bright student but also was considered difficult by her teachers. “I was always being accused of being rude, because I gave some back chat,” as she comments (Garis). Not only did she refuse to stand at the refrain of “God Save Our King,” but she also hated “Rule, Britannia” with its refrain, “Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves, Britons never ever shall be slaves. I thought that we weren’t Britons and that

we were slaves” (Cudjoe 217). Kincaid, who had hoped to stay in school and then go on to the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, remembers with great bitterness how her mother removed her from high school in Antigua, claiming that she needed help caring for her three sons after her husband—Kincaid’s stepfather, David Drew—became ill. Her education in Antigua cut short, Kincaid eventually got her high school diploma and completed some college in the United States.

In 1965 the sixteen-year-old Kincaid was sent to America to **work** as an au pair so she could help support her **family**. At first, she sent **home** her paychecks like a dutiful daughter. “It dawned on me that my mother had made a terrible mistake in her life, that she had had children she could not afford, and I was supposed to help. . . . I remember taking it very badly, that feeling. That was the beginning of feeling outrage and injustice in me, that I should bear that burden” (Jacobs). Coming to realize the great sacrifice that was being asked of her, she stopped sending money to her family, broke off all contact with them, and lived selfishly as she set about reinventing herself. In an act of self-creation that also served as a self-protective disguise, she changed her name to “Jamaica Kincaid” in 1973, choosing the name “Jamaica” to designate her Caribbean origins. In changing her name, Kincaid was also, as she recalls, attempting to disguise herself so that her family would not know that she was writing, for she was afraid that she would fail, and they would laugh at her.

Despite her initial fears of failure, Kincaid became an almost overnight success as a writer. After being befriended by *New Yorker* writer George Trow, who began to quote her in his “Talk of the Town” pieces, she was hired as a staff writer for *The New Yorker* by the editor, William Shawn, who also published her stories in the magazine. And in 1979, she married Shawn’s son, Allen—a composer who teaches at Bennington College in Bennington, Vermont—and the couple eventually had two children, Annie and Harold. During the years of her marriage to Allen Shawn—the couple is now divorced—Kincaid rarely spoke about her marriage and her husband and children, determined to protect the privacy of her family life, although she did come to starkly divide her life into her unhappy Antiguan past and her successful writer’s—and domestic—life in Vermont. In 1983, with the publication of her first book of stories, *At the Bottom of the River*, Kincaid caught the attention of the critical establishment, and she has since become a widely acclaimed and often studied author, celebrated as an important voice in literature for both her **fiction** and nonfiction works.

In describing the trajectory of Kincaid’s literary career and life in the United States, interviewers often invoke the discourse of the American success story and the self-made individual—and her story does indeed follow such a script, as she tells it. But embedded in Kincaid’s literary success story is another story that she tells and retells in her writings—in her short-story collection *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), her coming-of-age novel *Annie John* (1985), and her portrait of herself as a young artist in *Lucy* (1990)—as she recounts her abiding struggle to make sense of her painful past and free herself from her obsessive **love-hate** relationship with her mother. “I’ve come to see that I’ve worked through the relationship of the mother and the girl to a relationship between

Europe and the place that I'm from, which is to say a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless, and the mother is powerful," Kincaid has remarked of her writing (Vorda 86). But even as Kincaid came to recognize that she must have "consciously viewed" her relationship with her mother as a "sort of prototype" for the larger social relationship between Antiguans and the British, she also insists that for her writing is "an act of self-rescue, self-rehabilitation, self-curiosity: about my mind, about myself, what I think, what happened to me in the personal way, in the public way, what things mean" (Birbalsingh 144, 149). "I am someone who had to make sense out of my past," Kincaid insists. "I had to write or I would have died" (Ferguson, "A Lot of Memory" 176).

In an artistic anticipation of *Annie John* and *Lucy*, Kincaid spoke openly and candidly about her Antiguan family in one of her first published stories—the heavily autobiographical "Antigua Crossings," which, like her story "Girl," appeared in June 1978. And yet in her other early stories—most of which originally appeared in *The New Yorker* between 1978 and 1982 and were subsequently published as a collection, *At the Bottom of the River*, in 1983—Kincaid drew on her Antiguan past, but she also worked to halfway conceal what she had revealed as she began to tell the story that drives and gives a kind of emotional urgency to her later work: her troubled relationship with her contemptuous and powerfully destructive mother, Annie Drew. If in *At the Bottom of the River* Kincaid uses a densely allusive and richly poetic style to partially obscure her meaning as she evokes the "bookish" idealized world of literature she came to love while growing up in Antigua, in *Annie John* she recounts, in a simple way, the story of her girlhood in Antigua under the control of her mother as she chronicles the early life of Annie John from ages ten to seventeen, describing Annie John's intense love for the idealized mother of early childhood and her equally intense hatred for the rejecting and shaming mother of adolescence. In *Lucy* Kincaid, through her daughter character, Lucy Josephine Potter, describes her experiences after leaving Antigua and coming to the United States to work as an au pair for a wealthy white family in New York City. A prisoner of her crippling past, Lucy, like Annie John, exists in the shadow of her powerful, and powerfully injuring, mother even though she is physically removed from her. When Lucy, in the final scene in the novel, begins to write, she finds the act of writing a painful process of recovering the past and confronting her abiding feelings of shame and despair.

The angry, contemptuous voice that pervades *Lucy*—a voice that Kincaid identifies as her mother's voice—is also the voice Kincaid adopts to great effect in her openly political writings, such as *A Small Place* (1988), in which she denounces not only the British and American tourists in Antigua and the remembered English colonists of her youth but also the current self-ruling black government in Antigua and the small-minded Antiguans. This voice also pervades Kincaid's portraits of her family—*The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), *My Brother* (1997), and *Mr. Potter* (2002)—works that are not only self-revealing but are also, in part, self-portraits. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, which derives from Kincaid's observation that her mother should not have

had children, Kincaid examines her matrilineal roots even as she talks and writes back to her mother. Through her fictional memoir of her mother, which includes family stories passed down by Annie Drew, Kincaid also retells the story of her own girlhood and adult relationship with her angry and contemptuous mother and examines aspects of her own **identity** in the figure of the narrator, Xuela Claudette Richardson. Just as Kincaid writes about herself in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, so in *My Brother*, her memoir of her youngest brother Devon Drew, who died of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) in Antigua, she also tells the story of the failed life she might have led, had she remained in Antigua under the influence of a mother hated not only by her daughter but also, as we learn in *My Brother*, by her three sons. And in her fictional memoir of her biological father, *Mr. Potter*, Kincaid, as she imagines and writes about the life of her absentee father, Roderick Potter, also deals with the missing and yet ever-present part of her repudiated identity, “Elaine Cynthia Potter,” the daughter-narrator in *Mr. Potter*. In telling the shameful story of her illegitimacy—like her biological father, she has a “line drawn through” her—she settles old scores against her biological father. But Kincaid also uses her writing to give narrative—indeed novelistic—dimension to her absent father and to provide a kind of artistic legitimacy to Elaine Potter Richardson, the shamed girl with the line drawn through her.

Kincaid, who traces her beginnings as a writer to William Shawn’s acceptance of her writing, recalls how she felt that she had lost her writer’s **home** after Shawn was removed as editor of *The New Yorker* in 1987. In 1995 she resigned from her staff job at *The New Yorker* after almost two decades of working for the magazine—from 1976 to 1995—after publicly denouncing *New Yorker* editor Tina Brown, casting the English woman in a familiar role in Kincaid’s own personal **drama**: that of the oppressor, both English and maternal, who threatens the inner life of the Antiguan artist/daughter. But if Kincaid once compared the loss of her writer’s home at *The New Yorker* to the experience of being orphaned, she has found a new kind of home at Harvard University, where she began to teach as a visiting professor of creative writing in 1992. And she continues to take deep comfort in her domestic and gardener’s life in North Bennington, Vermont. For Kincaid, domestic life is part of her writer’s life. “I don’t consider writing a career or a profession. . . . I think of it as part of my domestic life,” she insists (Listfield).

In *My Garden (Book)*—a collection of essays on gardening published in 1999, which began as a gardening column in *The New Yorker*—Kincaid professes her passion for gardening even as she reflects on the relationship of gardening to conquest. Like Kincaid’s other works, *My Garden (Book)*: draws on Kincaid’s life, for as she recounts details of her domestic and gardener’s life in Vermont in the present, she continually remembers her Antiguan past. In shaping her garden like a map of the Caribbean and reproducing in her Vermont study the look of the stash of books she once hid as a girl under her one-room house in Antigua—books that gave her comfort and that were burned by her mother—Kincaid remembers the past but also tries to undo some of its pain. Kincaid insists that she does not believe in **healing** and that she cannot and will not

forget. "I don't see why I should get along with myself," she remarks in her characteristic way. But in her domestic and gardener's life, which are part of her writer's life, she does find moments of contentment. While she remains haunted by the past, she does find solace in her writing. "I am writing for solace," Kincaid states. "I consider myself the reader I am writing for, and it is to make sense of something, even if to repeat to myself what has happened" (Holmstrom). Even though her creative assets are her memory, anger, and despair, she does find solace in her writing as she becomes the self-authored "Jamaica Kincaid" and, through her ongoing self-narration, fashions for herself a literary life and writer's identity that she finds livable.

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*J. Brooks Bouson*

## **KINDRED**

**Octavia Butler's** stand-alone novel *Kindred* (1979) is the story of a young black woman's journey into America's past and her interactions with her slave and slave-owning **ancestors** who inhabited this past. Dana, an aspiring writer living in California in the mid-1970s, one day feels dizzy; seconds later she finds herself beside a river in which a young, terrified red-headed white boy is drowning. Dana saves the youngster and almost immediately finds herself back in her own **home** and time—wearing wet clothes and with bruises developing on her shoulders where the drowning boy's mother hit her as she tried to administer cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Periodically thereafter, Dana is pulled back into the past—to nineteenth-century Maryland, she learns—always seemingly to aid Rufus Weylin, the red-headed boy, who somehow pulls her to him each time he thinks he is dying: She returns home only when she thinks she is about to die in Rufus's world. Dana recognizes Rufus Weylin's name from her **family** Bible but had not realized he was white. According to her Bible's family tree, he fathered a daughter, Hagar, who became Dana's great-grandmother. Dana worries that she must keep Rufus alive so he can sire her family line.

Dana's abrupt travels back in time are full of danger for a young black woman, and her responses and adaptations to life in Maryland during its slave-state days help Butler explore the psychology of **slavery**. Dana must act subservient to survive, and her greatest challenge eventually becomes to keep from internalizing the personality she projects, thus succumbing to a slave mentality. Butler demonstrates how easy it is for even an intelligent, strong-willed, independent woman like Dana to transform from a woman consciously acting the role of a slave to being as psychologically enslaved as any of the Weylin chattel. Butler also shows the process that turns a bright, likable boy like the young Rufus, whose two best friends were black, into a hard-hearted slave master who finds it acceptable to hurt those in his power, even those he loves. As Rufus ages, he becomes adept at the psychology of ownership, using threats, punishments, and deceptions to get what he wants from his slaves, especially Alice, a free black friend in his childhood whom he plots to possess as an adult.

Butler uses a number of women in the story to explore the intersections of **race**, gender, and power issues. Alice, Dana, Sarah, Cassie, and Tess illustrate the peculiar trials female slaves endured, both as sexual objects at the mercy of their masters' whims and as wives and mothers whose attachments to and fears for their children and spouses act as insurance against running away and revolts. Mrs. Weylin, Rufus's mother, illustrates forces helping to shape the slave mistress: the sexual double standard that keeps her from effectively protesting her husband's sexual use of female slaves; her sense that her social status depends on her idleness; and the age's ignorance of psychological problems such as postpartum depression and nervous breakdowns.

Eventually Kevin, Dana's white husband, also becomes trapped in the past, and readers get to see how different this experience is for a white male than for an African American female. Kevin's challenge, readers come to see, is to resist becoming desensitized to the immorality of a slave culture that on its surface often seems rather benign to him. The whites around him accept slavery as a natural social order and fail to notice the cruelties that lurk beneath the calm, quotidian surface of this **class** system. Dana worries that Kevin could learn to do the same.

Dana tries hard to sensitize Rufus to the brutality of slavery, but his inability to control his temper, his deep-seated fear of abandonment, his sense of entitlement, and his growing sexual attraction to her make this a dangerous strategy. As Rufus comes into adulthood, he shows himself more and more a man of his own era, and Dana must compromise more and more of her selfhood to ensure that both Rufus and Alice live long enough to give birth to Hagar. Although Alice catches the brunt of Rufus's power plays and his dangerous possessiveness, Dana too suffers from his angry determination to get his way. Her final, desperate attempt to return to the present (the opening scene of the novel) makes clear that even though she eventually escapes Rufus and the past, she will always be scarred by her experiences on the Weylin plantation, her lost arm an apt metaphor for the lasting damage of slavery on the African American psyche.

Dana is one of a number of strong black female heroes created by Butler. Her firsthand experiences in nineteenth-century Maryland raise a variety of race and gender issues and continue Butler's explorations of the uses and abuses of power. Dana's attempts to "feminize" Rufus—to mold him into a caring nurturer rather than a patriarchal oppressor—meet with only limited success, while Dana's brushes with racism and sexism in her 1970s life make clear that race and gender issues going back to our slavery **history** are so rooted into our social history that they remain unresolved, even many generations following emancipation.

*See also* *Bloodchild and Other Stories*; Parable Series; Patternist Series; Xenogenesis Trilogy

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Grace McEntee

### KITCHEN TABLE: WOMEN OF COLOR PRESS

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press was a progressive publisher in New York established and operated by feminist minority women in the United States with the purpose of publishing writings by women of color. It was founded by Cherríe Moraga, **Audre Lorde**, and Barbara Smith, leading minority feminist writers and scholars. Moraga is a Chicana poet, playwright, and editor. She participated in various feminist movements including organizing women of color groups against **violence**. Barbara Smith is a black feminist critic, writer, and scholar who is one of the pioneers of African American women's studies programs in the United States. She worked as the editor of the Kitchen Table until February 1995. Lorde was a Caribbean black lesbian writer, lecturer, and activist. She dedicated herself to feminism in America and oversees by publishing and organizing activist groups such as Sisters in Support of Sisters in South Africa (SISSA) and the St. Croix Women's Coalition.

With Gloria Anzaldúa, Moraga coedited *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), a collection of essays and creative writing by black, Chicana, and Asian feminists, both heterosexual and homosexual. *This Bridge Called My Back* was originally published by Persephone Press, a white



feminist publisher in Watertown, Massachusetts. When Persephone Press went out of business in 1983, Moraga and Anzaldúa retrieved the right for *This Bridge Called My Back* from Persephone and developed it into a second edition. However, no publisher in the United States would publish radical writings by lesbian women of color. Realizing the difficulty of publishing feminist writings of minority women in America, Moraga, Smith, and Lorde founded Kitchen Table, with the principle to run it by women of color and to publish works by women of color of all sexualities. One of the first books they published was *This Bridge Called My Back*. It won the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award in 1986, and it has been widely read, especially in women's studies programs.

Since Kitchen Table's founding in the early 1980s, it has published many remarkable feminist and creative works written by women of color. Their publications present various political, social, and cultural issues in the United States and the world from the perspective of feminist women of color. The topics of their writings include sexism, racism, **lesbianism**, international politics, sisterhood, and **motherhood**, and they present insightful analysis of the social construction of the United States and the world. Recognizing the importance of Kitchen Table's role as one of the few publishers in the United States promoting feminist writings by women of color, The Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press Transition Coalition was formed to support Kitchen Table to develop into "an independent and sustainable nonprofit organization." The members of this coalition are feminist scholars, artists, publishers, and activists such as Joo-Hyun Kang, Cathy Cohen, and Beatrix Gates.

*See also* Black Feminist Criticism

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Youngsook Jeong

### KOCHER, RUTH ELLEN (1965– )

The daughter of a black father and white mother, Kocher was born in Wilkes-Barre, a small city in northeastern Pennsylvania that was once a coal mining center. She grew up in a housing project along the Susquehanna River. Kocher attended the Bucknell University Seminar for Younger Poets and Pennsylvania State University, where she majored in English **literature** and creative writing. She moved to Tempe, Arizona, where she earned her M.F.A. in creative writing in 1994 and her doctorate in 1999 from Arizona State University. Tempe offered a stark contrast to life in Pennsylvania. Kocher's doctoral study emphasized early-twentieth-century women and writers of color. She has taught at Missouri Western State College and Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and is now a member of the faculty at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, where she teaches creative writing and American literatures. She lives in St. Louis with her husband, Coby Royer, and daughter, Kaylee. She is the winner of the 1999 Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award and the 2001 Green Rose Prize.

Kocher's scholarly publications offer keys to her poetics. Her articles have explored multiplicity, obstacles to the truth, **passing** and trespassing, and a woman's life as a site of cultural bondage. Kocher's **poetry** is demanding, elusive, multilayered, transgressive, and displacing. Her world is terrifying and beautiful, as she asserts through the Rilke epigraph that opens *Desdemona's Fire* (1999). A feminist reading of Kocher is aided by the goddess Kali. Terrible and beautiful, Kali is represented as a three-eyed, black or blue woman with four arms. She is often depicted with her tongue extended, full

breasted, and standing on the chest of her husband, Shiva. Her **home** is cremation grounds. Among her manifold attributes, she is the destroyer of ignorance, the liberator from false notions, the taster of life's offerings, and she who reveals pain and sorrow as a doorway to fullness of being.

*Desdemona's Fire* takes a mythic approach to the exploration of **identity** and claim. In addition to a retelling of *Othello* (1622), this volume references the Buddha, the Yoruba Orisa Esu Elegba, Eden, and figures from Greek **myth** and *The Odyssey* (800 BCE). Divided into two parts, the collection suggests that identity is the engagement of mother and father through crossroads and crossings, gardens and torn-up places, shadow and light. The poems show identity as origami: a paper-thin construct, folded upon itself. *When the Moon Knows You're Wandering* (2002) examines the awful and frustrating quest for home and self-location. Like Dante's *Inferno* (early fourteenth century), *When the Moon Knows You're Wandering* depicts a poet guided by other poets. James Wright, Osip Mandelstam, Hilda Doolittle, Martin Luther King, Jr., Norman Dubie, Ruth Stone, Pablo Neruda, Federico García Lorca, and Søren Kierkegaard usher Kocher to evanescence. *One Girl Babylon* (2003) probes captivity and self-alienation. Influenced by the Kabbalah and Western painting, it presents rites of passage for self-reclamation. In the way of Kali, the text is both site of captivity and platform for liberation. Each volume possesses its own secrets of joy, pain, and sorrow. Each presses to reveal new worlds in words.

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Monifa A. Love Asante

## KOMUNYAKAA, YUSEF (1947– )

In 1994, Yusef Komunyakaa received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the William Faulkner Prize from the Université de Rennes, and the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award for his book *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* (1993). These awards catapulted him to international acclaim and established him as one of the finest living poets.

The oldest of six children, Komunyakaa was born in 1947 in Bogalusa, Louisiana, a small town seventy miles northeast of New Orleans. He wrote his first poem for his high school graduation, a 100-lines-long effort that he now terms ridiculous. He would not write again until after he had returned from the Vietnam War, where he served from 1969 to 1970 as an information specialist and won the Bronze Star for gallantry in combat. In 1973 Komunyakaa enrolled in a creative writing workshop at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs; he reports that he has been writing ever since. He double majored in English and sociology and went on to earn an M.A. in creative writing from Colorado State University and an M.F.A. from the University of California at Irvine.

His earliest and most enduring literary influences include Shakespeare, **Gwendolyn Brooks**, Robert Hayden, **Amiri Baraka**, and the **Harlem Renaissance** poets **Jean Toomer**, **Helene Johnson**, and **Langston Hughes**. The latter three, along with **Zora Neale Hurston**, are in his view the most innovative voices of the Harlem Renaissance.

Critics tend to agree that American **history**, Komunyakaa’s war experiences, his childhood in the rural, Jim Crow **South**, and a lifelong **love** of **jazz** and the **blues** inform much of his **poetry**. Receiving far less mention is that many of his best poems focus on women and children and raise feminist concerns. “Stepfather: A Girl’s Poem,” for instance, is a chilling work that deals with child abuse. Told from a young girl’s perspective, she discloses that for years her stepfather’s eyes have undressed her. Now, **home** early from **work**, he enters her bedroom and lifts her dress. The particular ending to this tale is left to the reader, for as Komunyakaa explains, he wants his reader to be a “co-creator of meaning.” “Re-creating the Scene,” from his Vietnam War collection *Dien Cai Dau* (“crazy” in Vietnamese; 1988) paints an equally riveting portrait, this time the gang **rape** (and subsequent cover-up by military officials) of a Vietnamese woman by three Confederate flag-waving soldiers.

With such poems as “*Dui Boi, Dust of Life*” and “*Toys in a Field*,” Komunyakaa explores the particularly horrific effects of the Vietnam War on children, thousands of whom were maimed, physically and psychologically, and orphaned. As “*Toys in a Field*” ends, the spotlight shifts from a group of Vietnamese children playing among abandoned weapons to—in classic understatement—the little Vietnamese boy with American eyes.

The search for love is another subject that runs through Komunyakaa’s writing. His love poems are commonly set in bars or nightclubs, often with the mellow syncopation of a Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, or John Coltrane tune reverberating in the background. In “*Jasmine*,” a man and woman make eye contact and flirt from across the room; “*Woman, I Got the Blues*” features a couple who meet, slow-draw, and bebop, before ending up half-naked on his living room floor; “*When in Rome—Apologia*” captures a man who, caught up in the music, gives too much attention to another man’s wife. Although Komunyakaa’s work is at times difficult and not easily decipherable, the love poems have been greeted with great excitement and are among his most commonly anthologized.

Since 1998, Komunyakaa has been a professor of the Council of the Humanities and Creative Writing at Princeton University. In 1999 he was elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. There is wide agreement that his is a vital American voice.

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Verner D. Mitchell

### **KRIK? KRAK!**

In the first seven of **Edwidge Danticat's** nine stories (plus an epilogue) in *Krik? Krak!* (1995), she presents women at various stages living in the aftermath of male destruction. In order to cope following the 1937 massacre of Haitians by Dominican forces, some find comfort through entering the realm of insanity; some resist with silence; some gild their own gutter to forget; some fight in order to die. Danticat's last two pieces occur in New York and deal with more contemporary Haitian American daughters, clearly less aware of what their mothers endured.

In some of the stories it seems as though the more contemporary daughters, both in Haiti and in America, are sentenced to repeat their mothers' folly. But only the casual reader would say that Danticat leaves her female characters to gather themselves up or to fall apart. Instead, the women learn control through ritual. Most successfully, many of the women in these Haiti-centered pieces form a secret society offering protection, a practice later echoed in the States. While Caroline's mother in "Caroline's Mother," the collection's final piece, mourns that the past "fades a person," it is that very past that Danticat's female characters perch on for support, even those who lament **history's** effects. Danticat purposely leaves many unanswered questions in this work, emphasizing that historical events have no beginning, middle, and end. Instead, Danticat's characters live in a historical moment, without beginning or end, the only sense of history being one's fragmented own.

Further defying the limits of categorization is Danticat's deliberate presentation of nine separate stories. *Krik? Krak!* is described as a collection, but Danticat's word choice is so precise that the stories read poetically. That Danticat means to imply the ties between the women is clear, but the ties are meted out so rarely that the gulfs between generations can emphasize the difficulty in connecting with history's participants. Yet Danticat's deceptively simple, separate short stories actually depend on one another deeply, as when Marie, who has picked up a discarded corpse from the streets, naming it Rose, transforms the infant into one of the ghost women—her dead mother, aunts, and grandmothers—above her bed. These ties have far less to do with plot than with the emotional understanding of women's lived experience, so much so that when Danticat offers the few direct connections between the women

that she does, they profoundly affect the reader's sense of people and place, as when the isolated and imprisoned Défilé is revealed to be surrounded by generations of women.

The presence of absence—absent mothers, aunts, grandmothers—becomes the motive for the construction of a woman's **identity**, echoing the rootless diasporic existence of Haiti's inhabitants. While the few male characters of Danticat's stories are concerned with the functions of law, Danticat's female characters struggle with the confusion of time. Danticat's female characters turn backward, returning to location, or at least a sense of historical location, confounding time patterns and even physical law. They need to return to points of historical entanglement, repeating their mothers' acts even while resisting them, for Danticat demonstrates it is only through ritualized repetition that a daughter, or a future generation, can hope to escape the cycle and progress. If the repetition were to stop, hope would be lost and the lack of ritualized action becomes a kind of collapse. In the end, it is their mothers' folly that more contemporary daughters must repeat in Danticat's work. That Danticat's daughters repeat their mothers' madness, however, does not mean their destruction but their strength.

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*Lisa Muir*



### **LANE, PINKIE GORDON (1923– )**

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to William and Inez Gordon, Pinkie Gordon Lane has been well acquainted with **death**, change, and survival. Her three siblings did not survive infancy. Her father, a longshoreman, died the year the seventeen-year-old graduated from high school. His death resulted in her postponing college to **work** as a factory seamstress. Five years later, her mother died. Gordon moved to Atlanta to attend Spelman College. During her senior year, she married Ulysses Simpson Lane. After graduating in 1949 she taught in the **South**. In 1955 she entered Atlanta University for graduate study. In 1956 after earning her M.A., the Lanes moved to Louisiana. She taught at Leland College and Southern University, where she served for many years and later directed the English Department. Her only child, Gordon, was born in 1963. She earned her doctorate at Louisiana State University in 1967, the first black woman to do so. In 1970, her husband died. She did not remarry. Lane has traveled extensively and taught at institutions throughout the United States.

Both lauded and critiqued for her intimate, “quiet” occasional **poetry**, Lane has been underappreciated for the measure of her work. Nominated for major awards and belittled for subjective focus and lack of **Black Arts Movement** aggressiveness, Lane’s explorations of impermanence, persistence, and cyclical reconfiguration have been largely overlooked. Expert of imagery and metaphor, Lane served as Poet Laureate of Louisiana from 1989 to 1992. Some



have ascribed this honor to the dominant role of the Louisiana landscape in Lane's work. If the laureate is an emblem of the Oracle at Delphi and her transfiguring bay leaves, as well as a title for the poet who serves as memorializer and keeper of the flame, Lane's position takes on added appropriateness. Influenced by **Gwendolyn Brooks**, Anne Sexton, **May Miller**, **Margaret Esse Danner**, **Sonia Sanchez**, and Naomi Long Madgett as well as **Clarence Major** and Western male poetics, Lane has developed a body of work devoted to the classical, female trinity of song, **memory**, and meditation and aligned herself with the African tradition of the griot. Like the women poets who have influenced her, Lane reaches through her personal experiences with **love**, death, work, and place to resist containment and claim the patterns, energies, and spaces that are dark and female. Lane dedicated her first collection *Wind Thoughts* (1972) "To All the Beautiful Women of the World." The collection tenders a chain of poems that are linked through verbal play and metaphor. Like her second collection, the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *The Mystic Female* (1978), *Wind Thoughts* professes that the heart and driving force of all things is female. Lane's subsequent collections *I Never Scream* (1985), *Girl at the Window* (1991), and *Elegy for Etheridge* (2000) are in the tradition of **Zora Neale Hurston**. They offer previously visited and new work in new contexts. Like Hurston's great talent, Lane's gift for reorganization and expansion provides for greater understanding of her testimonies of grief, oppression, courage, and connectedness.

Some of Lane's works may be found in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. The Louisiana State University houses the Pinkie Gordon Lane Papers, compiled by Rose Tarbell.

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*Monifa A. Love Asante*

## LARSEN, NELLA (1891–1964)

Nella Larsen is best known as the author of *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), two short novels of the **Harlem Renaissance** that deal eloquently with the subjects of racial construction and **passing** in the lives of middle-class African American female protagonists. These works of **fiction** are memorable for both their psychological insights into female characters and their taut, lyrical writing style. *Quicksand* received a bronze medal from the Harmon Foundation in 1928. In 1930 Larsen became the first African American woman to win a Guggenheim Fellowship. She used the money to travel to Spain and pursue **work** on a third novel, which was never published. In the same year her short story "Sanctuary" became the center of a plagiarism controversy. Larsen was eventually exonerated, but she published nothing further after this event, although she attempted several other works of fiction during the 1930s. After her return from Spain and an unsuccessful attempt to revive her failing marriage to Fisk University professor Elmer S. Imes, she moved back to New York but gradually withdrew from public literary life during the mid-1930s, cutting off ties with all of her friends in 1937. For the last two decades of her life she worked full-time as a nurse. At the time of her **death** in 1964, she was so removed from her literary fame that no obituary was published and only her nursing colleagues attended her funeral.

An acute observer of social constructions of **race** and **identity**, Larsen also carefully crafted her own public persona. Information about her birthdate, birthplace, **family**, education, and travel has been shrouded in ambiguity and misinformation, some of which was deliberately perpetuated by Larsen herself. Her biographer Thadious M. Davis spent years with primary documents tracing Larsen from her birthplace in Chicago to her eventual **home** in New York City. Davis's biography *Nella Larsen Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance* is deemed the authoritative study of Larsen's life.

Larsen was born on April 13, 1891, as Nellie Walker to Mary Hanson Walker and Peter Walker, a cook, designated "colored" along with his daughter on the birth certificate, although no information was given about his age or nationality. Her elementary school records, however, give her name as "Nellie Larson" and her father's as "Peter Larson." Whether Larson was her stepfather or her birth father with a newly "ex-Negro" name remains unclear, but he was the only parent who signed school records. Her junior high school

records list her as “Nellye Larson.” In 1907 she left Chicago for Nashville, Tennessee, to complete her high school education at Fisk University, where she enrolled as Nellie Marie Larsen. She stayed at Fisk for only one year, but during the year she adopted “Nella” as the final version of her first name. When Nella entered Fisk, her family moved to a largely Anglo-Saxon neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side. Peter Larson changed the spelling of his name to the more Scandinavian “Larsen” at the time of the move; Nella would retain this spelling of her surname for the rest of her life. In the 1910 Illinois census, Peter and Mary Larsen listed their race as “white” and their country of origin as “Denmark.” Mary Larsen also reported that she had given birth to only one daughter, Nella’s younger sister Anna, who resided with them. Anna’s birth year was 1893, the year that Larsen later gave as the year of her own birth. Some records also suggest that before her entrance to elementary school in 1901, Larsen may have lived apart from her family in an institution. These details, and the secrecy surrounding them, give added poignancy to Larsen’s fiction, which probes the problems of identity, alienation from family, and the complex psychological dimensions of passing for white.

Although Fisk University in 1907 was the leading black university in the United States, apparently Larsen did not feel at home in this environment for long, as she left after one year. No clear record exists for Larsen’s whereabouts between 1908 and 1912. She attended the Lincoln School of Nursing in New York City between 1912 and 1915 as Nella Marian Larsen and then took a position as supervisor of the Nursing Department at Tuskegee Institute. Unlike Fisk, which favored an academic curriculum and had as its vision the creation of race leaders, Tuskegee emphasized vocational training, loyalty, duty, and manual labor. Nella felt even less at home in this African American institution of higher learning than she had at Fisk and left after a year to return to New York.

Larsen’s own version of her family background is that she was the daughter of a white Danish mother and a West Indian father who had died when she was two. Her mother’s subsequent remarriage to a man of her own race and the birth of another daughter made Nella the only “black” member of this family. While this version of the story certainly explains Nella’s estrangement from family, it was also, as Davis points out, a story that also both gave her **freedom** from scrutiny and protected her family’s anonymity, especially pertinent as several of her Harlem Renaissance acquaintances had family connections in Chicago. In *Quicksand*, which has autobiographical ties to Larsen’s own story, the protagonist Helga Crane has an “Uncle Peter,” who has supported her in the past but who also rejects her at the insistence of his new wife when she visits him in Chicago to ask for money. The father of Irene Redfield, in *Passing*, shares the same Chicago house number as the real Peter Larsen. Whether or not Peter Walker and Peter Larsen were the same person, it is clear that Peter Larsen assumed the major responsibility for Nella’s upbringing and supported her education at Fisk, which equipped her for a life in the African American **community**. Her mother’s name was used only once by Larsen, on her marriage certificate, and was given as Marion

Hansen. Whatever her relation to her mother, it is clear that they were not at all close. Like her protagonist in *Quicksand*, Helga Crane, Larsen spoke of spending time in Denmark with her mother's relatives during her youth and even claimed to have attended the University of Copenhagen as an auditor, but no U.S. passport was issued to Larsen during the relevant time periods. When Helga Crane reacts with panic and suffocation to Robert Anderson's references to family background and pedigree in *Quicksand*, she echoes feelings with which Larsen was all too familiar.

In 1919 Nella Marion Larsen married Elmer S. Imes, then a research physicist and member of a prominent African American family. Their home together was her first real home as an adult, and through her husband she also acquired powerful family connections. The couple lived in the greater New York area, and both continued to pursue their careers—he as a scientist, she as a nurse. Both began to publish as well. While Imes published scientific articles, Larsen began her first literary efforts, a series of pieces based on “pleasant memories of my childish days in Denmark” for **Jessie Redmon Fauset's** *The Brownies' Book*, which she published in 1920 under the name Nella Larsen Imes. The Imeses moved in a privileged circle of mixed-race acquaintances during the postwar era when new opportunities were opening up for African Americans, and Elmer introduced Nella to several famous persons who later became her close friends, among them the photographer and writer Carl Van Vechten. Although Larsen had no family pedigree to match her husband's, Davis speculates that she played up on the white, Danish part of her heritage to establish a sense of superiority in her relationships with members of the black elite who might have otherwise considered her a “nobody.” Nella quit her nursing job at Lincoln Hospital after a change in the administration, then began to work as a volunteer at the New York Public Library, where her recent publications in children's **literature** enabled her to land a job as a librarian in the children's section. She became one of the few persons of color to earn a certificate at the New York Public Library's prestigious school, which later became part of Columbia University. The couple moved to Harlem in 1927. Although the marriage grew troubled and eventually ended in divorce in 1933, it was during her marriage that Larsen produced all of her published writing. In addition to her publications for *The Brownies' Book* and several book reviews, she published a number of stories under the pseudonym “Allen Semi,” an anagram for “Nella Imes.” By the time her two novels were published in 1928 and 1929, Larsen had decided to use her maiden name professionally.

When Larsen won a Guggenheim Award in 1930, Elmer Imes entered into discussion with Fisk University about a professorship there. During Larsen's travels in southern Europe in 1930–1931, Imes moved to Nashville to begin his job at Fisk. Although she had heard rumors that Imes was involved with another woman during her absence, Larsen moved to Nashville upon her return from Europe, at the urging of the Fisk University president, in an attempt to repair her marriage with Imes. During this time Imes's relationship with a white Fisk employee Ethel Gilbert, who worked as a fund-raiser for the

Fisk Jubilee Singers, continued to be a source of gossip in the community. Attempting a reunion with her husband at Fisk proved disastrous for Larsen in terms of her physical and emotional health. Beyond the pain of his infidelity was her rejection by a man who had once cherished her for a white woman, a pattern perilously close to her own family's rejection of her based on her skin color. Larsen attempted several writing projects during this time, but none came to fruition. In 1933 she finally filed for divorce on the grounds of "cruelty" and was awarded a substantial settlement that enabled her to reestablish herself in New York, this time on the Lower East Side. Harlem had changed dramatically, partly because of the depression, since the Imeses' earlier residence there, and publishers were no longer clamoring for work by black writers. For a few years Larsen continued friendships with several artists and writers—notably the actress Dorothy Peterson and Carl Van Vechten. She "disappeared" from all social life in 1937, leaving mysterious messages with friends, refusing to answer the phone or the doorbell, and then moving to an apartment across the street. She managed to live on alimony payments until Imes's death in 1941, when Larsen took Mrs. Nella L. Imes as her legal name and referred to herself as a widow.

In 1944, Nella Larsen embarked on the last phase of her career, as a full-time nurse working the night shift, first for seventeen years at Governour's Hospital, then at Metropolitan Hospital in New York. Her excellent training and skills enabled her to quickly rise to the level of nursing supervisor. When she died in the early spring of 1964, it was her nursing colleagues who sent flowers and arranged for the funeral. But none of them was close enough to her to find her **body** until a week after her death from acute congestive heart failure in her apartment while reading in bed. During 1963, Nella had traveled to California to see her sister Anna in an attempt to establish connection with her family but returned in a deep depression, her spirits permanently injured. Her sister had refused to allow her to enter her house because of her skin color. Even after Larsen's death in 1964 (her body was discovered on March 30), Anna expressed surprise at being informed by the will's executors that she had a sister and refused direct contact with any representatives of Nella's estate, even though she was the recipient of substantial funds. Larsen's apartment was ransacked during the time of her death, and none of her unpublished manuscripts have come to light. The name on Larsen's death certificate reads "Nella Larsen Imes."

Whatever the reasons for her prolonged silence after a brief period of remarkable literary achievement—psychological trauma, the emotional repercussions of her divorce, the depression and resulting lack of support for black writers, the changing times and contexts—Larsen's cleanly crafted modernist fiction with its evocations of a particular historical moment has earned her a place in the **history** of African American writers. As Thadious Davis eloquently suggests, Larsen, who had long been rejected by her family of origin, could not have anticipated the place her Harlem Renaissance novels would earn for her in the family of African American writers with the flourishing of **black feminist criticism** and the renewed interest in African American writing in the last three decades of the twentieth century.

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*Ann Hostetler*

**LATIMORE, JEWEL C.** See Amini, Johari

**LATTANY, KRISTIN HUNTER (1931– )**

Kristin Hunter Lattany's interest in being a writer was likely kindled by her parents' earliest act on her behalf: choosing her name. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to schoolteacher parents George and Mabel Eggleston Hunter, Kristin was named after the main character in *Kristin Lavransdatter*, a novel written by Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset, winner of the 1928 Nobel Prize for Literature.

From an early age, Lattany wrote. As a child, she wrote **poetry** and articles for school and **community** publications. As a teen and young adult, she was a columnist for the local edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, covering social issues including racial disruptions in nearby Camden, New Jersey.

After a brief foray into teaching elementary school at her parents' behest, Lattany returned to writing. Professionally, she wrote ads; independently, she wrote short stories and dramas. In 1955, her hard **work** paid off when she won a national competition sponsored by CBS for her television script *Minority of One*. Her story about a white student being sent to an all-black school was ultimately revised to include a French student at an all-white school due to the broadcaster's concerns about controversy. That was the first—and only—time **race** would be subjugated as an aspect of Lattany's writing.

Lattany's writing typically focuses on themes of poverty, aspirations, pain, **family**, and community in African American life. Her characters are often living in poverty. They contend with primarily economic barriers as they try to escape the slums they live in. Her books are sometimes grim and sometimes optimistic, but they are always realistic.

Her first book, *God Bless the Children* (1964), is the story of Rosalie Fleming, a girl living in a segregated urban neighborhood who wants to make a better life for herself and her family but who ultimately succumbs to despair and **death**. The book won the Philadelphia Athenaeum Award.

In addition to her novels for adults, Lattany has written several works for younger audiences. Her first novel for young adults, *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968), is the story of a group of African American teens who see music as their key to leaving the ghetto. After one of the teens is killed by police who mistake an epileptic fit for an assault, they overcome their urge for vengeance and instead record a song of eulogy that becomes an instant hit.

Lattany's writing is both realistic and hopeful. During the course of her career, she has explored a variety of powerful, controversial issues. Recipient of the Moonstone Black Writing Celebration Lifetime Achievement Award, Lattany continues to write today, although she has retired from her university career.

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*Heidi Hauser Green*

### LEE, ANDREA (1953- )

A Harvard graduate and a regular contributor for *The New Yorker*, Lee has been nominated for the National Book Award for her memoir *Russian Journal* (1981), for which she finally won the Jean Stein Award from the American

Academy and the Institution of Arts and Letters. Her work also includes a novel, *Sarah Phillips* (1984), and a collection of short stories, *Interesting Women* (2002). She currently lives and works in Italy, which provided the setting for many of the stories in *Interesting Women*.

The book, which is her best-known work, makes clear that Lee's aesthetics is informed by feminism. The women who populate its pages are "interesting" in that they eschew patriarchal definitions of femininity. For example, Ariel in "The Birthday Present," who invites two prostitutes to spend an evening with her Italian husband as a birthday gift, proves to be no conventional and stereotypical woman. Like Ariel, Lee's women are not afraid to experiment with **love** and openly exhibit sexual desire without being punished for it. Overall, the book creates a mosaic of women who take their chances and are thus active, complex, resourceful, bold, and highly independent. Throughout the pages we are invited to share their point of view, to see gender relations with fresh eyes, and to reconsider traditional definitions of love and womanhood. Similar to other women writers, Lee foregrounds the female voice and perspective, and in doing so she ends up reconstructing female **identity**.

In *Sarah Phillips* the struggle for identity is also on the forefront. Sarah's rejection of the baptismal rite is evident of her need to break free from the limiting black bourgeoisie world. Yet Sarah's attempt at amnesia is often tinted with nostalgia. Throughout her quest, Sarah explores her limits and experiments with relationships **home** and abroad only to realize that she cannot escape her past since her gender identity is inseparable from her racial one. Although the ending of the story may be considered disappointing, as it shows Sarah returning home to all that she had rejected, her desire for a different reality unfulfilled, this disappointment may ultimately give rise to a critique of all those institutions and conventions that hindered Sarah's quest. Furthermore, Sarah's return to her **community** is a common motif in many African American women writers who underline through their work the importance of the cultural past for the individual. In this context, the novel can be said to belong to an African American feminist tradition that privileges both a female perspective and ultimately fights amnesia by underlying that "nothing can be dissolved or thrown away."

In her work, Lee seems to create her own "personal landscape," as she herself confesses in the foreword to her *Russian Journal*, writing only about what pleases and excites her. Thus, the female voice arising from her narratives is strong, highly independent, and feminist in its intent.

*See also* Black Feminism

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*Chrysavgi Papagianni*

### LEE, JARENA (1783–?)

Known first and foremost for receiving a call to preach, for responding to that call even though a woman, and for writing about it, Jarena Lee, a free black woman from New Jersey, stands out as one of the earliest recognized African American female itinerant preachers. Critics have discussed how the conversion to **Christianity** and the call to preach are important elements of spiritual **autobiography**. Notably, Lee spends a lot of time in her narrative *The Life and Religious Experience of Mrs. Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1836) on her conversion, in part because she may have felt unworthy to receive it, particularly as a woman. Like many early female preachers, Lee was shocked to receive a call from God to preach. After much consideration and testing of God's call, Lee responded by asking permission from Reverend Richard Allen, leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. Not surprisingly, he denied her request on biblical grounds that women should not preach. Lee went on to marry Joseph Lee, a minister, in 1811, and they had two children. Until her husband died in 1818, Lee did not pursue the ministry. Instead, she completed her **domestic** and wifely duties, which she documented with subtle frustration in her narrative. Once a widow, however, Lee petitioned Reverend Allen once again. This time Allen relented, in large part because he heard her spontaneously preaching when substituting at the last minute for another minister. Like her audiences to come, Allen was moved by her fervor as well as her gift for preaching.

Not only did Lee defy gender norms by preaching and writing; as an itinerant preacher she traveled in the public sphere in a way many women did not. Though a free black woman, she continued to visit slave states and mixed-**race** church audiences—a brave task. While in her shorter first autobiography Lee focused more on her conversion and call, in her second autobiography, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving the Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1849), she narrates at length the details of her travel to the extent that some critics have seen it more as a travelogue than as a spiritual autobiography. Unfortunately, after 1849, Lee's activities remain unknown. Regardless, it is crucial to understand that Lee helped to inaugurate a tradition, along with **Zilpha Elaw** and **Julia A. J. Foote**, in which feminism and Christianity are interwoven in spiritual autobiography such that one sometimes complements, sometimes contradicts, and sometimes cancels out the other, but they always

remain in conversation. While many of the early narratives, like Lee's, were written with the motive of converting followers, it is clear that there is also a covert, and sometimes overt, need to be recognized as a woman with something crucial to say. Part of the outcome of the growth in criticism addressing early African American female itinerant preachers is the understanding that these women linked gender, **spirituality**, and **race** in ways that become important for later writers whose lives or characters also defy gender norms, such as **Zora Neale Hurston** and **Toni Morrison**.

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Karlyn Crowley

## LESBIANISM

It has proven difficult to trace a cohesive social, political, artistic, and cultural **history** of African American women, often exiled from historical annals, relegated to the margins of American culture, and rendered invisible in arts

and **literature**. Outlining a unified trajectory of black lesbian feminism, then, is even more problematic. Clearly, African American women engaged in passionate and loving relationships with each other long before the lesbian was identified as a suspect **identity** category. Scholar Karen Hansen recently discovered correspondence between two African American women occurring between 1861 and 1867 that indicated that they shared a deep erotic connection. Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus exchanged **love** letters and likely had an intimate relationship lasting several years. Although only the letters of Addie Brown were recovered, it is clear that both women were deeply committed and loyal to one another.

A great deal of focus has been placed on the white lesbians of the 1920s and 1930s, concentrating on the modernist movement and American ex-patriots Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Djuana Barnes. But analysis dealing with black lesbians of the era has been scant at best, despite that these years were known as the **Harlem Renaissance**, a burgeoning of black cultural and literary activity. Although some discussion has occurred around the bisexuality of **blues** legends Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, further analysis regarding black lesbians would enrich the study of this period. One scholar who has extended the view on lesbianism in the Harlem Renaissance, Anne Stavney, examined the life of cross-dressing blues performer Gladys Bentley. Gloria A. Hull has also explored lesbian **sexuality** expressed in **Angelina Weld Grimké's** **poetry** and diary entries. Additionally, Maureen Honey has compiled a collection of poetry by women of the Harlem Renaissance and includes a nuanced and important analysis of women's sexuality and lesbianism.

Another area that demands further excavation is the African American lesbian presence in the early homophile movements. Although the majority of members of the Mattachine Society, formed in 1951, and the Daughters of Bilitis, its lesbian contingent that splintered off in 1955, were mostly white and privileged, there is some evidence that there was at least a small black presence in those organizations. Two scholars who delve into the working-**class** experience of both white and black lesbians, Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, have illuminated the existence of a strong black lesbian **community** in 1950s Buffalo, New York. In addition to reconsidering how the working class helped shape the mid-twentieth-century gay and lesbian movements, queer scholars have begun to consider the important black lesbian presence in the Stonewall riots of 1969. By many reports, African American lesbians were at the center of the struggle that occurred when police raided the Stonewall Inn.

Although many believe that the formation of the African American lesbian feminist movement followed the larger, mostly white, lesbian feminist movement in the late 1970s, in fact, black lesbians were concurrently shaping a black lesbian ideology of their own. Though involved in the second wave of the women's movement, the black lesbian feminists knew that their subjugation was not merely predicated on gender and the patriarchy but also on the intricate relationship between **race**, class, and sexuality. The combined issues of racial difference and sexual difference complicated the idea of the

universal woman. Just as lesbian feminists questioned their allegiances to the greater women's movement, black lesbians recognized their status as triply marginalized: They were black. They were women. They were lesbian.

Black lesbian feminists experienced and challenged the racism that pervaded the women's movement, and it is important to note that white lesbians were guilty of racism as well. Women of color also dared the white majority in the women's movement to recognize the privilege that their **whiteness** afforded them. Many black lesbian feminists, including **Audre Lorde** and Anita Cornwell, argued that both the women's liberation movement and the lesbian feminist movement mandated that black feminists place their gender or sexual identity above that of their race. While it is true that the impulse to gather and speak out as a black lesbian collective was fueled by racism occurring in the women's movement, it was also fueled by the misogyny and male privilege that pervaded the black **civil rights movement**, the Black Panthers, and the **Black Nationalism** movements. While Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, and other women of color challenged black male activists and white feminists to investigate and recognize the misogyny, homophobia, and racism running through these movements, they also acknowledged their debt to the earlier movements, where they learned to organize.

One of the first active black lesbian feminist groups, the **Combahee River Collective**, issued a statement in 1977 that outlined the genesis of contemporary **black feminism**. In this essay, the collective does not circumvent the topic of lesbian sexuality, nor sidestep issues of racism and white privilege within the women's movement. It also articulates these women's solidarity with black men without evading a discussion of the sexism that pervaded the early black liberation movements. This seminal piece voices a politics of difference in which no one identity would be privileged over another. In fact, coining the term "identity politics," the Combahee River Collective envisioned a revolutionary society, a world stripped bare of racism, homophobia, classism, and misogyny. Also in 1977, Barbara Smith published her searing and influential "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" in the second issue of *Conditions*. In this essay, Smith acknowledges that she is one of the first to carve a space for black women writers and a black female presence on the hallowed ground of literature—and that this action is not only unprecedented; it is treacherous.

Since the early work of Barbara Smith, **Alice Walker**, Audre Lorde, and many other artists, theorists, historians, and educators have entered the scene, extending and enriching the archive of black lesbian feminism. In a fascinating study, Siobhan Somerville explores the concurrent cultural impulses at the close of the nineteenth century to pathologize black bodies and queer bodies. Regarding black lesbian **fiction**, the impulse is often revisionist, inserting black lesbians where previously they were absent. For instance, in *The Gilda Stories* **Jewelle Gomez** (1991), creates a world where black lesbian vampires have sexual agency and desire. She swerves from the traditional rendering of the black woman as either a **Mammy** figure or a Hottentot Venus, instead offering a rendering where **myth** is woven with the impulse to acknowledge her foremothers. Although space does not allow for a detailed

enumeration of others who have contributed to the canon of African American lesbian literature, it is clear that in the twenty-first century the field is expanding, exciting, and vital.

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Lorna J. Raven Wheeler

### **LILIANE: RESURRECTION OF THE DAUGHTER**

Published in 1994, *Liliane* is as innovative in form as many of Ntozake Shange's other works, including *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) and *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1983). The character/narrator Liliane comes to us in a collection of narrative fragments and voices. She is an artist who combines creative expression and

the making of political **identity** for black women in the United States. Shange's aesthetic here is similar to that in *for colored girls*: It is an embodied **spirituality**, a creative energy based in the erotic as **Audre Lorde** wrote about in her essay on the "Uses of the Erotic" in black women's lives, especially in artistic and political realms.

Liliane struggles through a series of relationship conflicts and attempts to emerge whole: her own self-creation. As in *for colored girls*, there is a dramatic struggle to take control of the language and make it reflect a new, woman-centered reality. The narrative form of *Liliane* is complex. Multiple narrative voices create a pastiche of Liliane's story. Shange appropriates elements of psychoanalytic discourse and distributes them in fragments throughout the narrative. Liliane's analyst inserts her voice into Liliane's narration; suddenly questions to Liliane will appear. But there are more voices than Liliane's and her analyst's. Liliane's childhood friends as well as her lovers also add their voices to the story of her evolving sexual identity.

This novel also orchestrates an international concert, as it were, of voices: Creole, Latino, French, Portuguese, and African. Liliane wishes to make all of them a part of her **community**. She wants to someday learn all of the languages that the slaves ever spoke. This resonates with a choral line repeated in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* by the three sisters who are also artists of various sorts: They identify with "the slaves who were ourselves." The chapter titles in *Liliane* are dense with imagery, and there is a distinctive vocalized quality to them, as in this call-and-response title: "I Know Where Kansas City Is, But Did Wilbert Harrison Ever Get There?"

Shange's work has contributed to the shape of African American feminist culture for over thirty years.

*See also* Sexuality; Womanism

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Sharon Jessee

**LILITH'S BLOOD.** See Xenogenesis Trilogy

### LINDEN HILLS

*Linden Hills* (1985) by **Gloria Naylor** is an offshoot of *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) that magnifies life in Linden Hills, a black suburb and onetime **home** of Kiswana Browne, a character from Naylor's first novel. In this book, Naylor criticizes the trend of the black upper middle **class** to erase remnants of their heritage as they press forward toward financial progress.

The neighborhood of Linden Hills is designed according to a Dantean model reminiscent of *The Inferno*, in its many spirals and levels of hell. It is a secluded area in which upwardly mobile blacks seek residence, virtually selling their souls to Luther Nedeed in the process. Those who remain closer to their cultural heritage live at the top of the spiral on First Crescent Drive, and those of a heightened moral bankruptcy reflective of Nedeed live closer to Nedeed at the bottom near Tupelo Drive. At the novel's beginning, the Tupelo Realty Company has been owned by the Nedeed **family** for generations.

The figure around which all the other characters revolve is Luther Nedeed. Some critics have noted that his last name translates to "of Eden" or "de-Eden" if viewed backward, for Nedeed is representative of the devil in the text. Residents cannot simply buy a residence in response to a "for sale" sign. Luther Nedeed himself approves leases only on three conditions: (1) the house should stay in the family; (2) if the house must be sold, it must be sold to another African American; and (3) the property can only be gained after signature of a thousand-year-and-day lease. Thus, those who live in Linden Hills have tied both themselves and their families to the Nedeeds for generations to come.

The lives of the characters are revealed as Lester, who is a third-generation resident of First Crescent Drive, and his friend, Willie, from nearby working-class Putney Wayne, travel through the neighborhood doing odd jobs as Christmas approaches. While several stories are revealed, perhaps the major focus of the novel is the matrix of stories involving the Nedeed wives.

For the four generations that the novel spans, the Nedeed wives are called Mrs. Nedeed by their husbands. These wives begin with Luwana Packerville, who the first Luther Nedeed buys from her white master. He keeps the bill of sale as a sign that he still owns her, although she had thought the purchase just a formality. The next Nedeed wife, Evelyn Creton, experiments with culinary methods to kill her husband if not herself. Priscilla McGuire is from a virtual promised land called New Canaan, yet her vibrant spirit fades next to her husband and son. Finally, Willa Prescott marries the last Luther Nedeed well after most of her college mates have married. She finds solace in her **identity** as mother and wife. However, Nedeed banishes Willa and their son to the basement because Sinclair, their son, does not have the signature dark skin of his forefathers. While in the basement, Sinclair dies, and Willa discovers the remnants left behind by the Nedeed wives before her. Ultimately, she ascends the steps, with a dead Sinclair in her arms, to reclaim her role as wife and mother, but in Nedeed's attempt to repress her, they become entangled and mistakenly become engulfed by a fire that sets the entire house ablaze, thus ending the reign of Luther Nedeed and his brand of patriarchy.

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*Sharese Terrell Willis*

## LITERACY

Learning to read and write occurs within social and ideological contexts. Literacy scholars like Deborah Brandt argue that along with the technical skill of decoding words on a page, becoming literate also demands an understanding of how these skills allow one to participate in cultural and economic life.

In American **history**, slave masters shaped the meaning of literacy for slaves by prohibiting them from learning to read and write as a way to keep them subservient. Slaves commanding language so threatened slave owners that they commonly suppressed communication among slaves and prohibited their use of African languages. So participating in the exchange of written words used by white Americans, for a slave, was typically viewed as a privilege akin to **freedom**—and an act of subversion. The courage and defiance associated with literacy molded the writing skills of the nineteenth-century black female writers studied by Jacqueline Royster, who traces the acquisition of literacy among African Americans to developing a rhetoric of advocacy.

Even though many antebellum free blacks in northern states were taught reading and writing in schools, African Americans as a group faced a culture skeptical of their literacy skills. By the eighteenth century, attitudes throughout Europe brought literacy in association with an elevated status: socially, socioeconomically, intellectually, even morally. Texts produced in Europe during the Enlightenment extolled the progress of the human **race**, moving Western cultures to view rational thinking as the preeminent feature of human existence—literacy being prerequisite to rational engagement. European nations and their colonies found justification for enslaving Africans because they did not qualify for human by white European standards. Proof of African inferiority rested largely on the belief that Africans were not advanced enough to develop a written language, rendering them illiterate. Standards for defining—and redefining—literacy that subordinate African Americans have been used after slavery as well. Up until the Voting Rights Act of 1965, several states used literacy tests to prevent black Americans from voting. Today, labels of illiteracy plague African Americans who confront



social and economic limitations because they do not possess the mainstream literacy standards.

The racial judgment associated with “being literate” has put African Americans in the position of proving themselves able to meet the communicative standards set by the white mainstream. Reading and writing standard English has served as a gatekeeper to privileges in publishing, education, and employment. Never were the stakes of these privileges so high as when the first black author emerged. When slave **Phillis Wheatley** published a book of **poetry** in 1773, her master prefaced the edition with his witness to her uncommon abilities “to the great astonishment of all who heard her.” Eighteen prominent men of Boston also attested to Wheatley’s literacy after interviewing her.

The achievement of literacy by slaves and the works they produced became important tools in the movement to abolish **slavery**. Narrating their accounts of inhumane cruelty under slavery, literate slaves assumed some power in turning public opinion toward abolition. As **Frederick Douglass’s** narrative made most famous, literacy became a symbol of African American potential by asserting arguments from a black perspective and by expressing an **identity** particular to African American experience. Whereas Douglass’s narrative establishes literacy as the foundation for a man’s identity in a free society, **Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative** offers a woman’s view of slavery. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Jacobs provides insight into the added injuries suffered by women under slavery, describing emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Jacobs reaches out to her sex, not her race, to resist slavery by “arous[ing] the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South,” as she says in her preface. But viewing literacy as a bulwark against slavery is too simplistic and falls into what Harvey Graff calls the “literacy **myth**.” Acquisition of literacy was not enough to reorder the social hierarchy that subordinated blacks.

After Emancipation, concern over the acquisition of literacy for African Americans became subsumed in issues of access to education. In the late nineteenth century, African Americans worked to build an educational system for black students, teaching in boxcars the way Clark Atlanta University started, and in church basements, as was the case at Spelman College. As W.E.B. Du Bois comments in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) on the history of African American education, “If the Negro was to learn, he must teach himself.” Many great black educators emerged after the Civil War intent on “uplifting” the race, such as **Fanny Jackson Coppin** and Mary McLeod Bethune. African American leaders valorized educated black women who devoted their skills to teaching poor illiterate black children, such as the main characters in **Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*** (1892) and **Victoria Earle Matthews’s “Eugenie’s Mistake.”** Of the 15,100 African American teachers identified in the U.S. Census of 1890, female teachers (7,864) outnumbered male teachers, introducing a trend that continues today.

For African Americans, literacy education has meant matching up to the standards set by ruling European Americans. Because of the racist origins of

the preferred standard, a tradition of challenging it has also persisted among African Americans. **Hallie Q. Brown**, back in the early 1880s, published an elocution textbook, *Bits and Odds*, that put writings by Shakespeare and Mark Twain right beside Negro, Irish, and German dialect pieces, suggesting that any literacy standard is performative and can be learned. **Harlem Renaissance** writers such as **Langston Hughes**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, and **Claude McKay** claimed a unique African American literary expression that used language and rhythms developed in black communities. More recently, linguistics professor Geneva Smitherman has confronted the presumption that being literate means reading and writing in standard English by using black English in her academic articles.

The racist assumptions that separated African Americans from literacy, especially the literacy valued by European Americans, have put in motion two hard-fought efforts to include blacks in the discourses of enfranchised Americans. One drive has been for access to empowered literacy practices; the other toward equal respect for literacy practices in black communities. These two urges lead scholars like Smitherman to recommend that African Americans view literacy acquisition as multiple.

*See also* Autobiography

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*Caleb A. Corkery*

## LITERATURE

### **Antebellum Period (1746–1865)**

In 1746, when a sixteen-year-old woman penned the poem “Bars Fight,” detailing the ambush of two white families by a group of Indians in Deerfield, Massachusetts, her ballad of rhymed tetrameter couplets became the earliest recorded work of literature by an African American of any gender. **Lucy Terry**, a poet, skilled storyteller, and public speaker, argued for three hours before the board of trustees of Williams College, condemning their racist and

discriminatory practices when they denied admission to her son. Neither **slavery** nor the fact that she lived during an era when women were expected to be silent prevented Lucy Terry Prince, the mother of six children, from becoming a poet, a teller of tales, and a fighter in the causes of **freedom** and justice. Was she a feminist? Undoubtedly, she would not have referred to herself as such. However, the distinction between feminist and traditionalist is not mutually exclusive. When feminism is defined as those activities by women or men that challenge the status quo (male authority), the label becomes less important than the more instructive analysis of the activities and behaviors of those in question.

While literary historians often refer to 1773 as the beginning of African American literature, citing the publication of **Phillis Wheatley's** first book of **poetry**, 1746 underscores the fact that whether freeborn or slave, literate or not, African American women, who during the antebellum period suffered under the slave laws and restrictions placed on their **race** as well as their gender, became the creative forerunners of the **black feminist** tradition in literature today. These women rarely had leisure to create literature. Housework, child care, sewing, and food preparation, if one lived in a northern city or was fortunate enough to be a house servant, or, otherwise, hard field labor, prevented the literary expressions of many would-be writers. African American women who managed to write in spite of their conditions are an amazing testimony to the tenacity of human will.

Lucy Terry Prince and Phillis Wheatley mark the beginning only of the African American written tradition. Inasmuch as black women used metaphorical language, poetic rhetoric, and cryptic mother wit, oral literature survived the **Middle Passage**, developed alongside, and informed the burgeoning literate tradition. Black women fully participated in the creation of both the oral vernacular and the literate traditions.

That the first black women writers appear in New England as opposed to the **South** is no accident. As early as 1652, Rhode Island passed the first law against slavery. In 1712, Pennsylvania outlawed the slave trade, and the Great Awakening religious movement that swept the colonies preaching salvation for all included blacks. In contrast, six years before Terry's poem was written, South Carolina made it a crime to teach slaves to write, making life in the southern colonies far less conducive to any literary production than life in the North. Even free blacks in the South could not travel freely nor assemble as blacks could in the North. On the other hand, life in the North was no haven. The hierarchical Puritanical obsession with order made life especially difficult for women deemed "disorderly." Any behavior out of the ordinary could result in one being labeled a witch.

Black women often have been described as headstrong, rebellious, and rarely submissive. While these ideas are part of the **folklore** and stereotyped images of black women, they are not without some veracity. Slavery in North America ignored the gendered division of labor and instead created a system where black men and women were forced to share **work** normally reserved for men only. In fact, black women were forced to work in the

cotton, tobacco, and rice fields, whereas white indentured women servants were not. In addition to the hard labor of the fieldwork, black women did the reproductive work but as childbearers were not protected as were other women. Unlike black men, black women also were charged with the **domestic** work in the slave cabins. After working in the fields, it was their duty to cook and clean for black men and children. If they survived, it is not unlikely that strong-willed, self-sufficient women emerged unwilling to genuflect before the throne of male hegemony.

The antebellum women's movement by 1820 was well established. Black and white women agitated for education, temperance, abolition, and women's suffrage. The ideology of "Separate Spheres" and the "Cult of True Womanhood" emerged to reinforce the notion that woman's proper sphere, a trope for place, was the **home**. A true woman was pious, pure, and submissive, interested only in and circumscribed by domestic duties. These ideas influenced black feminists in interesting ways as they wrote to subvert the restrictive definition yet appropriate to themselves the privileges of womanhood.

In 1826, Isabella Van Wagener walked away from slavery in New York a year before it was outlawed, changed her name to **Sojourner Truth**, and left a legacy of oral texts that inform the black feminist literary tradition. In 1831, **Maria Stewart** became the first woman of any race to participate in public political debate. At the age of twenty-eight, she addressed an audience of the New England Anti-Slavery Society at Boston's Franklin Hall and published *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1832). In 1836, Sarah Forten adopted the pseudonym Ada and began her contribution as a poet and essayist in the *Liberator*. Forten advocated for antislavery and women's rights and helped to organize the Female Anti-Slavery Society. In 1819, against all social and religious custom, **Jarena Lee** began to preach. She published *Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach* in 1836. **Ann Plato** printed *Essays; Including Biographical and Miscellaneous Pieces, in Prose and Poetry* (1841) in Hartford, Connecticut, making her the first black person to publish in this genre. Mrs. Juliann Jane Tillman, ignoring the restrictions placed on women by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, began to preach in 1844. While her sermons are not preserved in any literary format, Mrs. Tillman overcame the objections of both her husband and brother to take a feminist stance in the masculine domain of the clergy. **Zilpha Elaw's** *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experiences, Ministerial Travels and Labours, of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, an American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America* (1846) was published in London by the author.

Publication, always difficult, was especially so for women who for the most part were not highly educated and who belonged to a race of people whose very humanity was called into question by the prevailing science of the day. Undaunted, they published their own works or had them published abroad or as pamphlets like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a prolific writer of essays and letters who printed the pamphlets *Conditions of the Colored People* (1849) and *A*

*Plea for Emigration, or Notes of Canada West* (1852). In 1854 **Frances E. W. Harper's** *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* was published in Boston and Philadelphia, making her one of the most popular black poets of this era. Her famous "Bury Me in a Free Land" and "The Slave Mother" appeared in this volume.

The first black woman novelist, **Hannah Crafts**, wrote *The Bondswoman's Narrative* in the early 1850s. **Harriet E. Wilson** published *Our Nig* in 1859. Her fictionalized biography is a political indictment of the system of servitude in the North. **Charlotte Forten Grimké** published *The Slave Girl's Poems* in the *Liberator* in 1856 and 1860. *The Deeper Wrong; or, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was published in 1861 by **Harriet Jacobs**, pseudonym Linda Brent, and picked up by a London publisher in 1862. This work introduced into literature the sexual coercion of black women by white slaveholding men. Jacobs establishes the sexual vulnerability of black women with her autobiographical novel, and it becomes an underlying motif in the literature during the period of Reconstruction.

### **Reconstruction (1865–1910)**

During the Civil War (1861–1865) black women literally fought for freedom. Harriet Tubman led as many as 800 soldiers in military raids, while other women disguised as men and fought alongside the soldiers. Still others worked as army nurses, cooks, and laundresses. Reconstruction was the federal government's effort to reunite the country and to secure economic and civil rights for the newly freed blacks when the war ended. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 enfranchised black men who voted themselves into political offices. This exercise in democracy enraged southern whites, many of whom could not conceive of racial equality. White southerners enacted black codes to limit the rights of the newly freed. Black freedom was met with white **violence** in the form of race riots and individual attacks on black people. Black optimism that followed the 1863 emancipation was squelched, and freedom for many blacks remained elusive. The circumstances for black women workers in freedom were not significantly different from what they had been during slavery. As wage earners, they faced seven-day workweeks and double duty in their homes. In 1881, 3,000 laundry workers in Atlanta organized the grassroots Washerwoman Strike. Reconstruction ended in 1877, and the federal government and Freedman's Bureau withdrew from the South, leaving black people without protection or resources to defeat the rising tide of white racism. The Ku Klux Klan made lynching as much a part of its organization as the hoods and burning crosses. Women and children were not excluded from Klan violence, as they too were lynched.

As hard-won freedoms disappeared, black women organized clubs and associations, which included benevolent associations, mutual aid societies, local literary societies, and numerous church organizations, to benefit the race and offered themselves as ambassadors of the black **community** to white America. They identified education and **literacy** as the keys to success and

for maintaining their freedom. Racism in the national women's movement, the suffragettes, and the temperance movement, undermined black women's effort to voice their concerns, thus forcing black feminists to form separate organizations.

Black women writers protested injustice for black people in general and for black women in particular. During the antebellum period they were writers, editors, and publishers even though restricted to the "women's pages" of newspapers and journals. In the "woman's era," they became editors of ladies' magazines. These magazines influenced what black women bought, wore, read, and cooked and how they thought about certain issues. In 1894, *Woman's Era* was created for black women. *Our Women and Children* (1888), *Ringwood's Afro-American Journal of Fashion* (1891), and *Half-Century Magazine for the Colored Homemaker* (1916–1925) are other examples. **Pauline Hopkins** became editor in chief of the *Colored American Magazine* in 1900. The black press, *Colored Citizen* (1866), and *Afro-American* (1885) also offered opportunities for black women writers and editors.

Black women writers adapted the **slave narrative** as a literary genre to suit their own political and artistic needs. Prior to the Civil War whites seemed to possess a voyeuristic impulse to read slave narratives, but following the war the narratives were not in vogue and stories of ex-slaves had no audience. Black women writers adapted their narratives to attract a readership. Some writers drew on the Christian biblical tradition and others on explicitly political and secular forms. The postbellum narrative reinterpreted slavery and declared that it was damaging to everyone, master and slave alike. To what extent being published depended on this reinterpretation is not known. **Elizabeth Keckley's** narrative is the prototype. Keckley's narrative, like Jacobs's, deals with the sexual vulnerabilities of black women. Another literary model to emerge during Reconstruction centers on the American dream of individual success through hard work and perseverance.

In 1872, Frances Harper's *Sketches of Southern Life* set the standard for black political poetry that combines formal structure with experimental form (dramatic narrative) and black vernacular rhythms. **Julia A. J. Foote** wrote *A Brand Plucked from the Fire* (1886); Clarissa Thompson, *Treading the Winepress; or, A Mountain of Misfortunes* (1885–1886), a serialized novel; and Garrison serialized *A Ray of Light* (1889–1890). These works ushered in a new era for black women writers. In 1890 **Amelia E. Johnson's** novel *Clarence and Corinne; Or, God's Way*, Josephine Henderson's collection of poems, *Morning Glories*, and **Octavia V. Rogers Albert's** *The House of Bondage or, Charlotte Brooks and Her Friends* appeared within months of each other. The landmark publication in 1892 of **Anna Julia Cooper's** *A Voice from the South* and **Ida B. Wells-Barnett's** *The Reason Why: The Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* and *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* equal in importance the works of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, but until recent feminist scholarship rediscovered them, they were little known. Black women's writing, as Cooper pointed out, had been witnessed but not proclaimed. Cooper proclaimed the black woman's need for sexual autonomy,

and Wells-Barnett led the fight against lynching by making the world aware of the number of people lynched, the crimes of which they were accused, and pointing out the innocence of the majority of those accused.

By the 1890s women had established the genre labeled *domestic literature*. Amelia Johnson, Sarah Allen, **Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins**, Ruth Todd, Marie Burgess Ware, J. McHenry Jones, Pauline Hopkins, and Frances Harper adapted popular white women's domestic **fiction** to dramatize and protest the plight of black people. The basic theme of this kind of fiction included a lone heroine forced to make her way in the world without parental guidance or support. After many trials, she triumphs, marries, and lives happily ever after. In black women's fiction, the heroine's marriage becomes a means for enhancing and continuing her efforts to uplift the race.

Black women writers used their pens to advance political agendas. Frances Harper's speech to the World's Congress of Representative Women at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago on May 20, 1893, heightened black women's desire for political power. They also made concerted efforts to counter the distortions and **stereotypes** of the Plantation School of southern writers who romanticized slavery and southern life. Defending the virtue of black womanhood became a major motif in the works of black women writers. Some women tried to write across the color line by using racially ambiguous characters, others focused on **religion** and morality like Emma Dunham Kelly-Hawkins in *Megda* (1891), refusing to be limited by race issues, continuing a tradition begun by Terry and Wheatley. **Lucy A. Delaney's** *From Darkness Cometh Light; Or, Struggles for Freedom* (1892) synthesized religious issues with those of race. Cooper's book was a feminist manifesto that demanded racial, sexual, and social equality. Just as there were race men, so too were there race women. These black women writers considered themselves spokespersons for both their race and their gender.

**Gertrude Mossell** called the twentieth century the "Woman's Century." In many ways she was correct, for during the twentieth century women fought for and won the vote, greater access to higher education, affirmative action and equal protection for women (resulting from the **civil rights movement**), an approach toward parity between men and women's salaries, and reproductive rights.

Some women of the Reconstruction era became transitional figures, living and working well into the middle of the twentieth century. **Mary Church Terrell**, founder and first president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (1896), was the apotheosis of the New Woman, breaking from the Victorian idea of the Cult of True Womanhood, the standard by which women measured themselves and were measured by others. A true woman's virtues were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. The growing consumer culture and materialistic society fueled by the Industrial Revolution threw the known world into chaos. The stereotyped ideal woman confined to her proper sphere—the home—was the only stabilizing force in the world gone money mad. Only female virtue could be counted on to save men from themselves, so they claimed.

Clearly a contradiction existed between the ideal and the real lives of women, especially so for wage-earning black social critics and political organizers. In the Age of Reform, these women followed their own mandate to uplift their race through education, service, and community building, which took them far beyond the so-called feminine sphere.

### **Harlem Renaissance (1910–1940)**

The dates of the Harlem Renaissance have fluctuated over the years. Generally confined to the 1920s, recent literary historians have argued that the flowering of literary talent and other cultural expressions began at a much earlier date. All of the activity was not confined to Harlem; Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Philadelphia were also centers of black artistic expression, and for that reason the term is a bit of a misnomer. The term “New Negro movement,” by which the era is also known, to some scholars seems more accurate.

The Harlem Renaissance was far more than a literary movement. It consisted of visual artists, musicians, actors, playwrights, and dancers as well as poets and novelists, essayists, short-story writers, and white philanthropists who provided financial support to the aspiring artists. Garland Anderson’s full-length play *Appearances* becomes the first written by a black person to open on Broadway, in 1925. Duke Ellington’s move to New York in 1922 becomes a driving force on the **jazz** scene, and Madame C. J. Walker’s, the first female millionaire black or white, move to the city and her **beauty** salon helped create the elements that produced the New Negro.

The flowering of literary talent in black women began earlier than the 1920s. Five books by black women were published in 1910: Cordelia Ray’s *Poems*, Gertrude A. Fisher’s *Original Poems*, Maggie Pogue Johnson’s *Virginia Dreams*, Christiana Moody’s *A Tiny Spark*, and **Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman’s** *Fifty Years of Freedom, a Play in Five Acts*. The next years would see the publication of Carrie Clifford’s *Race Rhymes* (1911), *A Narrative of the Negro* by Lelila Amos Pendleton (1912), and *A Biography of Norris Wright Cuney* (1913), written by **Maud Cuney-Hare**. They continued to publish in a steady stream, and while the themes of these works were not necessarily feminist, the mere fact that they possessed the chutzpah to claim a public voice was itself a feminist act.

Black periodicals and newspapers continued to provide significant outlets for black women writers. *Half-Century Magazine for the Colored Homemaker* (1916–1925) and black newspapers—the *Pittsburgh Courier* (1911), *Chicago Defender* (1912), and *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912) among the most popular—were important for employing black women as editors and developing a black readership. The founding in 1910 of *Crisis* magazine, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, created still another outlet. From number 20 Vesey Street in New York City, Du Bois made encouraging and developing black literary and artistic talent one of the magazine’s goals. In October 1919, **Jessie Redmon Fauset** became literary editor for the *Crisis*, taking it to new



heights. Another magazine to contribute significantly to the publication of young black renaissance writers was the official publication of the National Urban League, *Opportunity*, launched in October 1911, when the Committee for Improving the Industrial Conditions of Negroes in New York, the Committee on Urban Conditions, and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women merged to address the problems of urban blacks. Pauline Hopkins, for the second time in her career, became editor in chief of a magazine, the Boston publication *New Era*, in 1916. In 1918, *Negro World*, published by Marcus Garvey, brought another political perspective to Harlem and the world. *Woman's Voice*, a periodical established by black women in 1919, addressed black women and highlighted their own achievements.

The black feminist agenda begun during the era of Reconstruction continued under the leadership of transitional women from that decade. In 1914, Mary Church Terrell wrote the Delta Creed of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. The feminist aspect of this creed demands continued protest against double standards of morals. The National Association of Colored Women's Club (NACWC) formed in 1896, the merger of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, the Women's Era Club of Boston, and Colored Women's League of Washington, D.C., to promote the education and protect the rights of women and children, raise the standards of the home, improve conditions for **family** living, work for moral, economic, social, and religious welfare of women and children, secure and enforce civil rights for the race, and promote interracial understanding. Terrell's agenda called for job training, wage equity, and child care. The clubwomen raised funds for kindergartens and vocational schools, and in 1912 they launched a national scholarship fund for college-bound black women. NACWC endorsed the suffrage movement in 1912, two years before its white counterpart, the General Federation of Women's Clubs. Community service, child care and equal pay still remain principal black feminist issues.

In 1916, the first birth-control clinic in the United States opened in Brooklyn, New York. Also in 1916, **Georgia Douglas Johnson** published three poems in the *Crisis*, and **Angelina Weld Grimké's** controversial play *Rachel* appeared, challenging the notions of **motherhood**. Black women contributed to the *Birth Control Review*, introducing new themes of liberation that challenged Victorian mores. Mamie Mary Burrill, an educator, actor, and playwright, published her one-act feminist play in 1919, *They That Sit in Darkness* in the *Review* in the same issue as Angelina Grimké's short story "The Closing Door." Burrill's play encouraged the use of birth control. Birth control and voluntary motherhood were becoming a black feminist philosophy that they thought would benefit the race.

Grimké, a closeted lesbian, and Burrill at one time were lovers. Their relationship, uncovered in letters researched by black feminist scholar Gloria Hull, introduces another dimension to female **sexuality** and reveals the painful frustration of unclaimed identities by women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. In the speech "The Social Emancipation of Woman," Grimké sees woman as man's equal and calls for the right to vote and the freedom to

reject traditional marriage and motherhood, as she had chosen to do. In 1918, the Cornhill Company published Georgia Douglas Johnson's *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems*. The poems, highly autobiographical and explicitly feminist, deal with motherhood and the frustration of gender roles, although these elements of her poetry were not discussed during the Harlem Renaissance. Not until the rediscovery of Johnson by feminist scholars does the rereading of her poems enable their feminist perspective. Johnson's second volume of poetry, *Bronze: A Book of Verse* (1922), was published by B. J. Brimmer Co. in Boston. In the poem "Aliens," Johnson introduces the "neo-treatment" of the tragic **mulatto**. The poem entitled "Black Woman" clearly rejects motherhood, and her one-act play, *Safe*, carries the theme further by having a young mother commit infanticide at the same time that a young black boy is being lynched. Thus she combined feminism with racism, creating a perspective unique to black women.

**Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson's** diary (1921–1931) provides valuable insight about her life during this era, revealing her lesbian longings and her critique of black men's attitudes regarding black women, which she characterizes as stultifying and imitative of white men. Jessie Redmon Fauset's novels, for so long dismissed as middle-class novels of manners, have been recovered by black feminist scholars. Deborah McDowell has designated Fauset as a pioneer black feminist. Her novels show women controlling their own lives, and her themes of incest, promiscuity, and sexual exploitation are unconventional. Angela Murray and Martha, characters in *Plum Bun* (1928), clearly articulate a feminist perspective regarding women's roles as homemakers and mothers. **Nella Larsen's** *Passing* (1928) also portrays sexism in her delineation of the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, a black preacher who exploits the women in his congregation. Larsen's is perhaps the first to expose in fiction the negative behavior of black men, choosing a clergyman, the most respected position in the black community. Decades later, **Alice Walker** and other feminist black writers would be harshly criticized for exposing the foibles of black men in their literary creations.

Black women writers of the 1920s embraced more literary genres including **drama**, the short story, and biographies. Playwrights of the era included Ruth Gaines-Shelton who wrote the prize-winning comedy and satire of black church politics; *The Church Fight* (1925); **May Miller**, the most widely published woman playwright of the Renaissance; Eulalie Spence; and **Marita Bonner**, who wrote *The Purple Flower* (1928), a revolutionary play using the term "white devils" long before the Black Muslim rhetoric of the 1960s. Bonner's play was published in *Crisis* as well as her avant-garde essay "On Being Young, a Woman and Colored" (1925), which critiqued racism and sexism.

At the height of what Alain Locke termed the New Negro movement, he guest edited the March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* that announced "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro." Locke articulated the New Negro's social, political, and artistic position with a compilation of works by the writers later published in his anthology, also titled *The New Negro*. Elsie Johnson McDougald's

essay in *Survey Graphic*, “The Double Task: The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation,” defined the New Negro woman. McDougald challenged the representation of black women in American society. Focusing on advertising and the arts, she critiqued the stereotypical treatment of black women’s sexuality and discussed the **class** differences that existed among black as well as white women, criticizing the monolithic way in which black women were perceived. **Hallie Q. Brown**’s 1926 publication of *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction* documents for posterity the contributions of black women, one of the few works to do so before the contemporary efforts of feminist scholars.

One of the greatest changes to occur during the “Jazz Age” was the financial support available to writers. From the William E. Harmon Foundation, Nella Larsen won a prize for her novel *Quicksand* (1928), and *Crisis* received money from Amy Spingarn to support literary prizes. *Opportunity Magazine*, edited by Charles S. Johnson, awarded prizes for poetry, short stories, essays, and plays. But it would all come crashing down with the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange. Financial support dried up, not all at once, but gradually support decreased as the interest of wealthy whites waned.

For black Americans the 1930s was an extension of the vitriolic hatred that emerged during the southern Reconstruction, except that it now extended, as **Malcolm X** once observed, to the Canadian border. The 1895 publication of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s *Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States 1892–1894* and *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases* (1893), as well as the formation and work of the NAACP, combined to make America and the rest of the world aware of dysfunctional southern democracy. For several decades, Klan activity decreased, although it did not cease, but in 1915 the Klan reemerged and by the middle of the 1920s claimed as many as 4 million white women and men members. In an effort to explain this resurgence of hatred, some historians have suggested that the declining agricultural prices, economic hardship on the white farmers, and the migration of large numbers of black people to the North could have provoked the scapegoating of blacks, Jews, and “foreigners.” However, economic depression cannot fully explain the phenomenon because the Klan also flourished in communities that were prosperous. The economic depression then simply heightened feelings of animosity toward black people. This very aspect of American life and culture is what has made black women writers and intellectuals into a different kind of feminist. During slavery, the black woman could not be free until her family was free. During the postbellum years of Reconstruction, she privileged family and community by focusing on racial uplift. Even during the “progressive” period known to whites as the “Roaring Twenties,” the “Red Summer of Hate” that occurred in 1919, the Rosewood Massacre of 1923, and the failure of antilynching legislation were clear reminders that nowhere in America could black women be just women—feminist, focusing on issues pertaining to themselves. They were black women, and that fact alone altered their agenda.

During the depression, black wage-earning women found their jobs taken by white housewives who had not been employed outside of their homes. With almost one-third of the people in the United States unemployed, those at the bottom of the economic rung were hardest hit—black women. When relief came in the form of government assistance (1933), the New Deal disproportionately benefited white men. Sex segregation of the labor force enabled the public works projects to discriminate against all women. In 1935 Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, and black clubwomen formed what was referred to as Mrs. Roosevelt's black cabinet. They advocated for equal treatment of women and black people and addressed the discriminatory practices of the New Deal like lower pay for minorities and women and the majority of relief jobs going to white men.

The climate that black women writers faced continued to be overwhelmingly political. Between 1930 and 1939, there were twenty-one lynchings. A new generation of writers would need to assume the mantle as the elder feminists passed away. In August 1930, Pauline Hopkins died from injuries she sustained in a fire. Ida B. Wells-Barnett died in 1931. A young Ella Baker would continue in their footsteps. In 1935 she published an essay with Marvel Cooke, "The Bronx Slave Market," in *Crisis*, protesting the exploitation of black women domestic workers. Jessie Fauset published two more novels in the 1930s, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and *Comedy: American Style* (1933), making her the most prolific novelist of the Harlem Renaissance.

An interesting aspect of the New Deal was the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Some black writers were able to take advantage of this program devised to employ artists and bring art to the public as well as record the story of Americans in photographs, paintings, and narratives. **Zora Neale Hurston**, **Margaret Walker**, and **Dorothy West** were fortunate enough to participate in the project. The salary was deplorable but the experience invaluable for developing their fiction. The WPA supported a Federal Theater Project as well. During the depression, **Shirley Graham** directed the Negro Theater of the WPA in Chicago. Graham, a graduate of Oberlin College and emerging playwright, produced *Elijah's Ravens* in 1930 and in 1932 *Tom-Tom*. Black artists, more than other black folk, were able to continue to be productive through the federally funded programs in spite of the economic depression.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s newspapers continued to enable black women to publish and through their written word influence others. The black press was the major medium of mass communication. Black people who might not afford books could and did purchase the newspaper. Marian Campfield, city editor of the *Chicago Bee* in the 1930s and 1940s, was directly responsible for the newspaper's general reporting and focused remarkable attention on the coverage of women. She also used the newspaper to sell black **history** and literature books and raise the consciousness of black readers. **Gwendolyn Brooks**'s first published poems appeared in the newspaper. In 1947 when the *Bee* folded, Campfield became women's editor of the *Chicago Defender*.

Zora Neale Hurston's 1935 publication of *Mules and Men* and 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, laid the groundwork for contemporary black feminism. Hurston divorced herself from politics, something that her predecessors had been unable to do. She did not protest against racism or discrimination, and her attitude toward it was not anger but amazement. It astonished her that anyone could deny themselves the pleasure of her company. Her attitude angered many class-conscious black people who felt that she exposed the worst aspects of black folk culture in her work and did not protest in ways that they deemed acceptable. For her uniquely feminist stance she earned black male scorn, and not until decades later would her works be appreciated.

As the spotlight slowly faded from Harlem, a renaissance of sorts began to emerge in Chicago. Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, **Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs**, **Richard Wright**, and others were Chicago Renaissance artists supported by the Federal Art Project (a division of the WPA) and the locally sponsored South Side Community Art Center. The American Negro Exposition in Chicago from July 4 to September 2, 1940, brought attention to the South Side as a center for culture and art. When Margaret Walker won the Yale University Younger Poet's Award in 1942, for her first volume of poetry, *For My People*, it marked the new era for black women poets who had not published a volume of poetry since 1918. The young Margaret Walker's call for "a second generation full of courage" did not fall on deaf ears, and although her famous poem ends with the masculine imperative for a race of men to rise and take control, she inspired her sisters to rise as well.

### **Protest Movement (1940–1959)**

The end of the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II mark a period of unprecedented political protest for black Americans. As the Great Migration brought the so-called Negro problem to the North where de facto segregation limited black freedom just as de jure had in the South, African Americans demanded their rights. The war against fascism abroad would intensify the battle against racism at home. Chicago and other major cities had restrictive neighborhood covenants that even though illegal still effectively kept black people limited to ghettos. Violence continued to mark white response to black progress. In 1943 race riots erupted in Detroit and Harlem. Ironically, Detroit was nicknamed the "Arsenal of Democracy" because of the defense plants that manufactured war weapons. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters protested the treatment of black people and the segregation of blacks in the military. Mary McLeod Bethune organized the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) in 1935 to express black women's concerns regarding national and international affairs. The national headquarters, established in Washington, D.C., in 1942, published the *African American Women's Journal*. Collectively these groups protested everything from the lack of human and civil rights, unequal pay, fair housing, equal educational opportunities as well as

the right to fight in the U.S. armed forces as full-fledged citizens of democracy during World War II. Black women were excluded from the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) until near the end of the war, although they served as WACS (Women's Army Corps) and nurses and in the U.S. Civilian Air Patrol.

In 1945 with the publication of *A Street in Bronzeville*, Gwendolyn Brooks answered Margaret Walker's charge in *For My People* and began what later characterizes the works of black women writers: their literary talking to each other through their speakerly texts. *Bronzeville*, the alternate name given to Chicago's Southside ghetto by its black residents, focuses on the ordinary lives of the people confined to kitchenette apartments, captures the cadence of black speech patterns, and masters formal poetic devices in ways that make Brooks's poetry more politically astute and feminist than many were willing to grant. Even she claimed to have been more political after her encounter with young students of the **Black Arts Movement** who criticized her formal poetry. However, "The Mother," with its arresting first line, speaks volumes about gender, race, and class, as does "Kitchenette building," particularly with regard to artistic production. The Pulitzer Prize-winning *Annie Allen* (1949) and Brooks's only novel *Maud Martha* (1953) contain feminist subtexts that indict sexist and racist oppression of black women.

The atomic age ushered in by the end of World War II, the postwar economy that produced a rise in blue-collar jobs, and the possibility of achieving the American dream of a house in the suburbs, two-car garage, television set, two and a half kids and a dog for many black people remained unattainable. The success of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) cast literary protest into the mode of natural realism. While his influence is undeniably great in terms of social protest fiction, many other writers regarded Wright's mode passé. They focused instead on integration and the challenges of modern life. One of the challenges continued to be the marginalization of black people and the refusal of America to live up to its promise of democracy. Ann Petry's novel *The Street* (1946) moved beyond the naturalistic tradition of Richard Wright by demonstrating the interconnections of race, gender, and class. In *The Living Is Easy* (1948) by Dorothy West satirizes Boston's black petit bourgeoisie and critiques patriarchy with her feminist portrayal of Cleo, a headstrong woman who refuses gender typing.

The 1950s' popular culture of Sputnik, Donna Reed, June Cleaver, and *Father Knows Best* was unprepared for the Civil Rights Movement that forced massive changes in the fabric of American culture. The 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and all of the federal legislation that followed appeared to enact what Reconstruction had left undone. A fitting close to this era of protest was Lorraine Hansberry's hit *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). The play articulated the integrationist impetus of many black people who hoped for inclusion in American society. Ironically, for other black people, integration would prove to be too little, too late. Beneath, the Afrocentric feminist who challenges traditional gender roles, articulates the most forward-looking aspect in Hansberry's play because

by the end of the decade integration was becoming suspect, especially for urban blacks in ghettos of the North and West.

### ***Black Arts Movement (1960–1969)***

From the end of the 1950s throughout the revolutionary 1960s, America was forced to awaken from its dream of peace and prosperity. A sexual revolution occurred that destroyed any remaining Victorian mores. A new psychology espoused by Wilhelm Reich postulated that sexual repression was destructive, distorted psychological development, and led to authoritarian behavior including fascism and racism. The youthful cry “Make love not war” spoke for the antiwar peace movement against the Vietnam War as well as for sexual freedom. However, the decade of the 1960s was anything but peaceful and loving. In 1963 President John F. Kennedy’s assassination unleashed a wave of violence that would bring white America face to face with what African Americans had suffered for centuries. Thus, Malcolm X’s statement about the chickens coming home to roost was not insensitive to the pain Kennedy’s assassination caused; rather it was seizing a teachable moment in order to show America that the violence they had allowed to go unchecked as long as it was confined to the black communities had now come for them. The decade ended with the murders of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy.

The Black Arts Movement was the literary counterpart to the political Black Power movement that split from the nonviolent civil rights movement of the 1950s. The Black Arts Movement was as different from **protest** literature as Black Power was from passive resistance. Whereas the latter stressed integration and racial harmony, the former expressed **Black Nationalism** and revolution. Poetry became the dominant genre of the movement. For Black Americans, particularly the young, the lyrics of popular music summarized the movement’s sentiments. James Brown’s 1969 “I’m Black and I’m Proud” epitomized the era, and Aretha Franklin’s rendition of “Respect” articulated what black women were demanding. In the 1960s the New Negro turned black. In poetry **Amiri Baraka** called for words that could kill, and **Nikki Giovanni** posed the question, “Nigger can you kill?” No longer could critics refer to black women’s poetry as prim and proper.

The Black Arts Movement differed from previous literary eras in several significant ways. The first and most obvious was in the appropriation and use of language heretofore deemed derogatory. Both the words *nigger* and *black* were used to undermine white definitions. Alternate spelling of words to reflect urban black speech and the lack of capitalization and/or punctuation characterizes the movement’s poetics. The second major shift was that of audience. Black Arts Movement writers addressed their works to the black masses. As a result of this shift in focus, they expected the critiques to come from black people and ignored white criticism as irrelevant.

Black women poets, militant and feminist, articulated feminism differently from their antebellum and postbellum sisters. They differed from women of

the protest period as well, and not just in terms of degree and technique. While it is true that Black Arts Movement poets were not subtle, they screamed and cursed, and moreover, they were the first generation of black women writers to openly reject and criticize their mothers. Clearly, not all militant feminists took this approach, but enough did to call attention to the shifts taking place. They were daughters of revolution and poets of rebellion. Nothing was sacrosanct, and mother-daughter relationships were scrutinized.

**Carolyn Rodgers's** "Jesus Was Crucified" is an early poem in which she critiques **Christianity** and her mother's seeming willingness to be nailed to the cross of white America. Rodgers later recognizes her mother as the bridge she "crossed over on." Nikki Giovanni's "Woman Poem" clearly is a feminist comment on gender roles as well as a critique of how black women treat each other. Many of the black women writers of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) begin with militant reactions to racism and evolve into militant feminism, something not counted on by black male critics, theoreticians, and definers of the black aesthetic. Theories of black art and black aesthetic did not include or acknowledge a feminist premise.

It would take time for black women novelists to catch up in print with the publications of the women poets. Many of the poets assumed responsibility for publishing their own works. Performance poets had the advantage of creating a following from their public readings as well as marketing their poetry on record albums and tape recordings. Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), a historical novel about her great-grandmother's life from slavery to Reconstruction, although published during the BAM, adhered to an earlier tradition. Certainly it celebrated female wisdom and strength by portraying Vyry as a self-sustaining woman, but it could not, in light of historical facts, condemn the gender roles.

On the other hand, **Sarah Elizabeth Wright's** novel *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969) and **Kristin Hunter Lattany's** novels present settings that enable the interrogation of gender, race, and power, especially in *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968). *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) by **Anne Moody** introduces a woman-centered **autobiography** instead of a race-centered one. The end of the decade saw the publication of books for young people by black women writers not only interested in instilling pride of history but joy and power for the female gender. **Virginia Hamilton's** *Zeely* (1967) is one of the first black publications to examine race and gender in **children's and young adult literature**. The 1970s would witness a flowering of feminist fiction and other writing, undoubtedly begun during the Black Arts Movement but not published until the decade of the movement had ended.

### **Contemporary (1970–Present)**

The women's liberation movement characterized the 1970s. Shirley Chisholm's political autobiography *Unbought and Unbossed* (1970) and **Toni Cade Bambara's** anthology *The Black Woman* (1970) ushered in the new wave feminism for black women. The 1971 publication of *MS.* magazine, the widespread



availability of the birth-control pill and other forms of contraception, the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* granting women the constitutional right to abortion, Chisholm's election to Congress in 1968, making her the first black congresswoman, her run for the presidency in 1972, the creation of Black Women Organized for Political Action (BWOPA 1973), and Congress' passing of the Equal Rights Amendment and sending it to the states to ratify made this a decade of victories for women.

By the end of the 1960s, the civil rights movement collided with feminism. Black women marginalized within the civil rights and Black Power movements faced what Frances Beale called their double jeopardy: race and gender. Black female strength and sacrifice for family and community had become suspect and, according to some social scientists, threatened **black masculinity**. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), known as the infamous Moynihan Report, critiqued the black family as pathological because of its failure to imitate the white patriarchal model. The study introduced into currency the term *black matriarch* as a negative signifier for usurping male authority and for symbolically castrating black men. If the public arena defined the black man's domain, black feminists would turn to the home as the site for their resistance. It was home that women chose to write about; as sisters, mothers, daughters, lovers, and wives, they constructed the stories that they knew best.

The year 1970 proved to be a watershed for black women writers. Race no longer took precedence over gender issues, nor did the needs of family and community. Rather, these feminists insisted that race and gender could not be separated—that both must be reckoned with simultaneously. They challenged the oppressive nature of male privilege, and the politics of self became an overarching concern. **Mari Evans's** collection of poetry *I Am a Black Woman* proudly proclaimed her female strength, and **Maya Angelou** celebrated matriarchal strength in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. **Toni Morrison** and Alice Walker published feminist novels that critiqued black men as husbands and fathers. Cholly Breedlove as incestuous rapist in *The Bluest Eye* and Brownfield Copeland, child abuser, wife beater, and murderer in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* represented what many black men perceived as attacks aimed for literary castration of their body politic.

In 1974, the publication of **Ann Allen Shockley's** lesbian novel *Loving Her* broadened and deepened the politics of black female literary representation as well as examined the nature of black and white women's relationships to each other. **Pat Parker's** bold declaration in *Pit Stop* (1974) that her lover was a woman urged many black lesbians to claim their identity and linked, in the minds of many black women and men, **lesbianism** with feminism. However, even among radical white feminists, racism alienated many lesbians of color. The **Combahee River Collective** *Black Feminist Statement* revealed the intersectionality of race, sexual orientation, class, and gender and challenged white feminists to recognize and to not deny difference.

By the middle of the decade, **Ntozake Shange's** feminist choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975)

opened on Broadway. Both **Sherley Anne Williams** and **Gayl Jones** published books in 1975. Jones's *Eva's Man* contains the literal castration (with teeth) of a man by the central character, Eva Medina Canada. In 1977, **Wanda Coleman's** *Art in the Court of the Blue Fag* extended the challenge, begun in the 1960s, to eradicate the "nice lady poetry" of previous decades. Her use of black English and ghettos continued the audacity of the women poets from the Black Arts Movement, **Jayne Cortez**, **Sonia Sanchez**, and others.

The decade closed with **Audre Lorde** claiming all of her identities: black woman, mother, daughter, feminist, lesbian, and poet with the publication of *The Black Unicorn* (1978). *Kindred*, the critically acclaimed science fiction novel by **Octavia Butler**, was published in 1979, making her the first black woman recognized in the genre. The decade was one that honored black women in all of their shapes, forms, and fashions and challenged black men to reject the ideas of male privilege and oppressive hierarchical structures including within the family. Not only were black feminist voices heard; their efforts were rewarded. In 1978 Sonia Sanchez received the American Book Award for her collection of poems *I've Been a Woman*. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and **Lucille Clifton** was named Poet Laureate of Maryland.

Politically, the decade spelled disaster for the law and order Republican Nixon administration that apparently believed that it was above the law. Vice President Spiro Agnew was forced to resign in 1973 and pleaded no contest to tax fraud. The Watergate scandal forced Richard Nixon to resign in August 1974. The Nixon White House represented the so-called silent majority who were tired of civil rights, human rights, and women's rights. Despite the scandals and setbacks, they would not be silent for long and would erect stiff opposition against gains in civil and women's rights.

The political reaction of the silent majority resulted in the activism of the Moral Majority in the 1980s. Fundamentalist Baptist preacher and leader of the Moral Majority, Reverend Jerry Falwell led the most organized backlash against abortion, gay rights, and affirmative action. The organization was influential in helping to elect conservative candidates to political office. Despite efforts to the contrary, in 1983 the Supreme Court reaffirmed the *Roe v. Wade* decision. However, in 1982 the states failed to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

Works by black women writers continued to flourish in spite of Reaganomics and the trickle-down economic theory. The 1982 publication of Alice Walker's clearly feminist novel *The Color Purple* politicized many black women who were uncomfortable identifying themselves with the F word. Thus in 1983, Walker coined the term **womanism** as more appropriate for black feminists. Womanism, defined in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), was an all-inclusive as opposed to exclusive term. Many people thought of feminists as man-hating separatists at best and lesbians at worst. Walker's term embraced women who preferred women's culture, loved each other sexually or nonsexually, loved men, sexually or nonsexually, and who were in charge of their own lives and

responsible for their own happiness. Feminism paled in comparison to womanism, like lavender in the presence of purple.

Not all black women writers shunned the feminist label. Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) embraced feminism in her critique of sexism within the black community. She reaped the wrath of many blacks both men and women. Sociologist Robert Staples wrote a heated reply titled "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists" in the *Black Scholar* (March–April 1979).

Black lesbians found it necessary to establish their own press. In 1980, Lorde and other politically active women founded the **Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press**. The press was responsible for bringing to print seminal works including *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983) and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). The 1980s also witnessed the emergence of black women feminist theorists. In 1981 bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman* examined issues of racism and feminism. Her 1984 publication *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* was among the first to bring the study of black feminist politics into the academy. Prior to hooks, Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith edited the groundbreaking book *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), an indictment of the academy's black and women's studies programs for their failures to acknowledge black women in terms of both race and gender.

Black feminist theorists not only examined the politics of black feminism and exclusion but also undertook the serious critical study of black feminist artistic works. Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition* (1980) and *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985), Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist* (1987), Joanne Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (1989), and Marcia Ann Gillespie's "The Myth of the Strong Black Woman" in *Feminist Frameworks* (1988) shaped the study of black feminist literature.

The 1980 publication of *The Black Woman*, edited by La Frances Rodgers-Rose, extended the issues raised in Barbara's 1970 volume of the same title, particularly by discussing the black woman's role in the family. As in the past, magazines and journals edited by black women offered publication opportunities unavailable elsewhere. *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* began publication in 1981 and addressed issues ignored in other publications such as black mother-daughter relationships and black female-male relationships.

Popular culture during the decade of the 1980s shifted from the highly political, socially engaged activity of the previous two decades to an obsession with MTV music videos, cable television, and personal computers. The beginning of Internet culture, the outbreak of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), twenty-four-hour television news (CNN), hip-hop, and break dancing as well as the widespread use of the banal phrase "shop until you drop," aimed to remind women of their gender-based role as consumers, acted like anesthesia on the politically conscious.

The 1990s brought a change in political atmosphere and an end to Republican politics. President Bill Clinton's sex scandal, his impeachment trial,

and O.J. Simpson's murder trial foreshadowed issues that still plague feminists today: sexual harassment, pornography, abuse, violence, and death. Other major issues facing contemporary feminists include equal treatment in military academies and in the armed services, leadership in religious organizations and worship, surrogate motherhood, balancing family and career, and after so many years, once again the issue of women's reproductive rights.

American women have made steady progress in spite of political backlash to impede their progress for total equality. Black women, feminist or not, have worked to advance the cause. The final decades of the twentieth century began with the unprecedented appointment of a woman as bishop in the Episcopal Church. That woman, the Rt. Reverend Barbara C. Harris, was black. The Episcopal Women's Caucus and other feminist groups worked to raise the consciousness of both men and women to achieve this advancement in the private and sacrosanct area of organized religion. As executive director of the Episcopal Publishing Company and publisher of the *Witness* magazine, Harris used the written word to work for women's rights.

The 1990s saw the rise of black women novelists like **Terry McMillan**, whose work became increasingly popular. Other writers to continue or extend the trend of writing feminist novels in the sense that they contain strong women characters and address women's issues of sexual and political liberation include **Marita Golden**, **Tina McElroy Ansa**, **Gloria Naylor**, **Bebe Moore Campbell**, Lorene Cary, Shay Youngblood, and poets Natasha Trethewey and **Sapphire**. The black feminist intellectual tradition continues to be uncovered and documented. Patricia Hill Collins's 1990 publication *Black Feminist Thought* and her 2004 book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* are excellent examples of the ongoing work of black feminists.

The twentieth-first century offers another kind of publication opportunity for writers through the electronic media, and many black women writers will take advantage of E-publications. As long as issues of equity and racial and gender discrimination constitute a part of the black woman's experience in America, undoubtedly there will continue to be black feminist writers.

*Nagueyalti Warren*

**LITTLE, MALCOLM.** See Malcolm X

### **LIVING IS EASY, THE**

*The Living Is Easy* (1948) was the first novel of **Harlem Renaissance** author **Dorothy West**. Originally, the book was to have been serialized by the *Ladies' Home Journal*. West recalls her elation at the unprecedented fee she was to have received; she also recalls the decision of the editorial board of Blackwell's, who published the magazine, to retract the offer, as they feared losing both advertising dollars and southern subscribers. Instead, *The Living Is Easy* was published by Houghton and Mifflin in 1948.

West's novel is drawn from her upbringing by an extended southern **family** in a northern household that strove to achieve the respectability of Boston's black Brahmin caste. Nevertheless, she rejects many of their prejudices and satirizes others. At the center of the novel is Cleo Judson, the southern wife of a Boston businessman. Cleo ruthlessly maneuvers to destroy her sisters' marriages and prospects for independence as a means of gathering them and their children around her in her northern home. Abusing her husband's generosity, terrorizing her shy and adoring daughter into corroborating her lies, and demanding that her family recognize her authority, Cleo is a less-than-sympathetic character and one uncommon in African American **literature** at the time. Yet she is always believable in her desire to better her family—whatever her methods—and to be loved. West's portrait of Cleo's daughter provides a perfect counterpoint; Judy's childish perspective on, and conflicted **love** for, her mother allows a more sympathetic portrayal than an adult perspective would.

*The Living Is Easy* includes many thinly veiled portraits of individuals West knew or with whom she was familiar. Booker T. Washington is treated with dignity, despite West's initial impulse to represent him comically, stemming from her family's disdain for his politics. Editor Monroe Trotter appears as Simeon Binney, though he was offended by West's representation of his family as "genteel poor." Businessman J. H. Lewis is represented as Mr. Harnett. But most notable is the resemblance of the Judson family to West's own, from the occupation of the father and aunts to the number of siblings, and the characters of all. West admits that her mother was the model for Cleo. According to her niece, this and the revelation of other family secrets in *The Living Is Easy* was not without controversy; the book "caused such a catastrophic uproar in the family that most members stopped speaking to Dorothy. To this day many family members still don't speak to each other as a direct result of that book" (McGrath 124). But West defends the character of Cleo, saying that her meanness had a positive effect on future generations. The portrait of West's mother recorded by her niece concurs: "The fact that she was mean and gave those girls a life a high intellect and misery is key" (McGrath 125). This is also key to *The Living Is Easy*—how one woman can inspire both creativity and repression and can be a subject of both adoration and hatred.

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Jennifer Harris

**LOFTON, RAMONA.** See Sapphire (author)

**LORDE, AUDRE (1934–1992)**

Audre Lorde called herself a "black lesbian feminist poet warrior mother" (Hall 146). She was born in depression-era New York to Linda Belmar Lorde and Frederic Byron Lorde, immigrants who never quit thinking of the West Indies as **home**. For Audrey Geraldine, their youngest child, the Caribbean island of Grenada became "my truly private paradise," if only in her imagination (*Zami* 14). In the experimental **autobiography** *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Lorde emphasizes that American racism was a "new and crushing reality" for her parents, who had emigrated as young adults in hopes of better employment (69). The positions they found were low paying and exhausting. In 1928, the year before the first of her three daughters was born, Linda Lorde lost her twelve-hour daily job as a scullery maid when a New York teashop owner realized that she was black instead of Spanish.

Yet Lorde also describes her mother as a powerful woman, strong in ways that distinguished her from most other women, regardless of **race**. At home, she mixed oils to heal bruises; on the streets, she projected an image of "in-charge competence" (*Zami* 16). Years later, Lorde understood that Linda Lorde must have worked hard to hide her actual powerlessness as a black female foreigner from her children. The biographer **Alexis De Veaux** says Audre Lorde was "both intimidated and erotically fascinated" by her mother, while she regarded her father as a "hardworking, silent, and shadowy figure" (14). Lorde told an interviewer for *Christopher Street* magazine that neither parent "thought of our upbringing in feminist terms," yet they raised their daughters outside the "feminine **stereotype**" (Hall 23).

Byron Lorde was determined to have a "dynasty," with a doctor, a teacher, and a lawyer in the next generation; the sex of his children was irrelevant to his dream (Hall 18). Ambitious to improve his own status, he attended night school and managed buildings for white owners before saving enough money to invest in boarding houses and other rental property. During World War II

he also worked at a manufacturing plant to avoid the draft, and his wife assisted him at his Harlem real estate office, often leaving the older daughters to babysit for Audre. In *Zami*, Lorde relates that she slept in her parents' bedroom as a young child and envied her sisters, Phyllis and Helen, for their "magical and charmed existence" in a tiny bedroom where she was not welcome (43). Although her siblings considered her the spoiled baby of the **family**, De Veaux suggests that Lorde's own early **memories** "became almost mythic constructions of an ugly duckling" (14): overweight, stuttering, darker skinned than her sisters or mother, clumsy, and alone. She was further isolated by extreme nearsightedness and by her limited efforts at verbal communication.

Lorde credits Augusta Baker, a children's librarian, with introducing her to a life-saving resource after Linda Lorde brought Audre to the 135th Street branch library at the age of four. Enthralled by Mrs. Baker's storytelling, she let her mother teach her the alphabet so that she could read books in large type. Audre's new language skills extended to oral expression; she often spoke to her family in lines of **poetry**. Before she began school, she dropped the "y" from "Audrey" and printed her whole name as one smooth word, AUDRELORDE. Thus, "Audre" became the first of many transformations alluded to in the subtitle of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. "Zami," she explains, is the Carriacou island word for "women who work together as friends and lovers," and Lorde's "biomythographical" memoir depicts many of the supportive women in the first three decades of her own life (255).

In *Zami*, she describes her mother as a devout Catholic who prayed to the Virgin Mary at every crisis yet followed such West Indian traditions as lighting candles before All Souls Day. Aside from Audre's brief enrollment in a public school's sight conservation kindergarten, the three children attended parochial grade schools, but Audre's objections to traditional Christian **religion** began early. She challenged the nuns' instruction at the all-black St. Mark's Academy, where her sisters were known for their obedience to authority. After the Lordes moved to a white ethnic area of Upper Harlem in 1945, Audre was teased by her new classmates as the first black student at St. Catherine's School.

Her sensitivity toward racism was heightened on a trip to Washington, D.C., when her family was refused counter service in an ice cream parlor across from the Supreme Court. At thirteen, Audre was "outraged"; she told interviewer Nina Winter that when she returned home, she typed "an impassioned plea for justice filled with every cliché you can imagine" (Hall 15). That same year, she began to attend the academically distinguished, all-female Hunter High School, where she was the only black member of The Branded. She portrays this outsider group in *Zami* as a "sisterhood of rebels" that conducted séances, read the British Romantics, and exchanged their own poems (81). Diane di Prima, in particular, became a lifelong friend and supporter of Lorde's work. During high school, Lorde's favorite writers included Edna St. Vincent Millay and Helene Magaret; she published her first poem in *Seventeen* after it was rejected by the Hunter literary magazine.

In Harlem, she had a separate group of black female friends and was especially close to Genevieve Johnson, an adventurous ballet dancer and one of the few African Americans at Hunter High. Gennie's suicide at fifteen was painfully difficult for Lorde, who called her "the first person in my life that I was ever conscious of loving"; she later regretted that their relationship had not been sexual (*Zami* 87). With Gennie, she roamed New York in a series of disguises. "Bandits, Gypsies, Foreigners of all degree, Witches, Whores, and Mexican Princesses—there were appropriate costumes for every role," she says (88). De Veaux comments on Lorde's "ambivalent" **sexuality** (33), observing that her intense friendships, like her strong attraction to some of her women teachers, "were unquestionably homoerotic" (28). At the same time, she dated white males, despite her parents' disapproval; during her first year at Hunter College, she had an abortion. In spring of 1952, Lorde attended weekly meetings of the Harlem Writers Guild, where she met **Rosa Guy** and **Langston Hughes**; one of her poems appeared in the group's quarterly journal.

Lorde made sporadic progress on a college degree in **literature** and philosophy, supporting herself with pink-collar and blue-collar jobs in hospitals and factories. Retreating from the political climate of the McCarthy era, she spent several months of 1954 in Mexico. The **beauty** of Cuernavaca sharpened her insight into the possibilities of poetry, and she was so intrigued by Mexican legends that she wrote the short story "La Llorona" about a Medea-like mother figure. Lorde's encounter with the journalist Eudora Garrett clarified her sense of lesbian **identity**. In *Zami*, she describes their relationship in erotic, almost mythic terms; after her return to New York, she became increasingly involved in "gay-girl" culture.

Lorde compared young lesbians to their "sister Amazons," riding Dahomey's "loneliest outposts" (*Zami* 176). She read Gertrude Stein and felt "crushed" when the *Ladder*, a lesbian magazine, rejected her poetry submissions (210). Few black lesbians were out of the closet, but Lorde said gay girls were "the only Black and white women who were even talking to each other" in 1950s America, "outside of the empty rhetoric of patriotism and political movements" (225). Whether butch or femme, she adds, lesbians saw their "connection in the name of woman" as their source of power. At the end of *Zami*, Lorde remarks that, during her twenties, her life became "increasingly a bridge and field of women" (255). She pays tribute to several friends and relatives but also to the African goddess MawuLisa and her trickster daughter Afrekete, who are subjects of several of her poems. Even though she mentions completing her coursework at Hunter and earning a graduate degree in library science from Columbia University, Lorde's most important female teachers in *Zami* were not in the classroom.

For several years, Lorde thought of herself not as a writer but as a librarian who wrote. In studying library science, she hoped to gain access to the sort of information that could improve society. Setting up libraries for children in Manhattan and Mt. Vernon was also a creative outlet. In 1962, she married Edwin Ashley Rollins, a legal aid attorney whose sexuality was as complicated



as hers; Lorde continued her lesbian liaisons. The same year, her poetry was anthologized in two collections; however, she did not publish her first book until 1968, when Poets Press, run by her high school friend Diane di Prima, printed *The First Cities*. With several poems about **love**, **motherhood**, and children, the volume was considered less confrontational than much contemporary African American poetry. Lorde told *Callaloo* editor Charles Rowell that she felt women were excluded, to a large degree, from the **Black Arts Movement**.

Although they had a young daughter and son, Elizabeth and Jonathan, Rollins encouraged Lorde to accept a National Endowment for the Arts residency grant in the spring of 1968 at Tougaloo, the historically black college from which **Anne Moody** had graduated. During this period of great racial tension, members of Mississippi's White Citizens' Council practiced target shooting near the campus at night to frighten black residents. Lorde said her experience as a creative writing instructor at Tougaloo was "pivotal" in her decision to begin a new career as a writer and teacher (Hall 94). Over the next two decades, she taught at New York universities, including Hunter College, where she was named Thomas Hunter Professor in 1987. **Jewelle Gomez** was a student in her poetry workshop at Hunter.

At Tougaloo, Lorde met Frances Clayton, a visiting psychology professor from Brown University, who became her longtime partner after she divorced Rollins in 1970. De Veaux observes that Lorde chose to "reinvent herself" in "a life wholly grounded in lesbian identity"; the feminist movement and "an African, female-centered **spirituality**" became crucial elements of this identity (De Veaux 111). Her 1970 collection *Cables to Rage* includes the long poem "Martha," which some literary critics see as her first published expression of **lesbianism**. Establishing a household with Lorde on Staten Island, Clayton shared in raising the children to adulthood. In an interview with **James Baldwin** for *Essence* magazine, Lorde revealed her worries about the dangers faced by black adolescents, including destructive images of **black masculinity**.

When a major company, W. W. Norton, published *Coal*, her fifth collection, in 1976, Lorde reached a larger reading audience. Her seventh book, *The Black Unicorn* (1978), with its inventive use of **myth**, was especially well received. But Lorde was as well known for her social activism as she was for her eleven volumes of poetry. Several of the speeches and essays gathered in her books *Sister Outsider* (1984) and *A Burst of Light* (1988) reflect her involvement in major movements of the 1960s through the 1980s: women's liberation, gay/lesbian rights, and the **civil rights movement**. These pieces include "Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface," "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities," "Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986," and "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference."

"Difference" was a key word for Lorde, who saw herself as both an outsider and a bridge. In 1981, with Barbara Smith, she cofounded **Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press** as a resource for those women who were often overlooked by mainstream publishers because of their ethnicity. Lorde was

alert to divisions within communities to which she belonged. Discussing African American gender battles, she told **Mari Evans** that black men must admit that obstacles to their own liberation come from the “same constellation of intolerance for difference” that produces “sexism and woman-hating” (Hall 78). Critical of some white feminists for undermining the goals of **black feminism**, Lorde nevertheless forged alliances across races, including her long friendship with poet Adrienne Rich. When Lorde, Rich, and **Alice Walker** were nominated for the 1974 National Book Award in poetry, they refused to act as if they were in competition. Rich, as the winner, read a statement prepared by all three poets, accepting the prize for all “unheard” women (Hall xxi).

After Lorde dissolved her partnership with Frances Clayton and moved to the Virgin Islands to live with social scientist Gloria Joseph in the late 1980s, she spoke out increasingly against American intervention in world affairs. In 1982, she had criticized the U.S. military invasion of Grenada; later in the decade, she described the negative impact of American companies and American tourism on St. Croix. Lorde’s international perspective on land-rights struggles and other global issues was broadened by travel to Africa, Europe, and Australia. Beginning in 1984, she made several teaching trips to Berlin, where she compared prejudice against Afro-Germans to prejudice against Jews. Lorde told interviewers for *Listen* magazine that the white women’s movements in America and Germany would “fall apart” if they failed to acknowledge that “racism is a feminist issue” (Hall 167). In collaboration with Orlanda Women’s Press editor Dagmar Schultz, Lorde helped to organize the first Afro-German anthology, published in 1986 as *Farbe bekennen* and translated in 1991 as *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*.

In Germany, Lorde sought homeopathic alternative therapies for liver cancer, metastasized from the breast cancer that had necessitated a mastectomy in 1978. She spoke with Schultz about the importance of acquainting women’s organizations with available treatments because cancer is “a woman’s concern” and “a feminist concern of the twenty-one-year-old feminist who doesn’t know it is” (Hall 135). Lorde told interviewers that struggles with cancer helped her to formulate a theory of the erotic, celebrating the pleasures of the **body**, including her love of laughter and dance. In 1981, the American Library Association named Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* Gay Caucus Book of the Year; her 1988 essay collection *A Burst of Light* includes “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer.” In this long essay, she describes cancer as “another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph” (49). Lorde emphasizes that women should engage the “core problems” confronting their nations because “Feminism must be on the cutting edge of real social change if it is to survive as a movement in any particular country” (64).

In October 1990, more than 2,000 people from twenty-three countries gathered in Boston to honor Audre Lorde at the conference “I Am Your Sister: Forging Global Connections across Difference.” The same year, she was awarded the Publishing Triangle’s Bill Whitehead Memorial Award for

Lifetime Achievement in Gay and Lesbian Literature. New York State appointed her to a two-year term as Poet Laureate in 1991, a term she was unable to complete. On November 17, 1992, Lorde died in Christiansted, St. Croix, supported by Gloria Joseph and three close friends from Germany: Dagmar Schultz, Ika Hügel, and May Ayim. Thousands of mourners attended a memorial service on January 17, 1993, at New York's Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, where tributes were paid by Lorde's children, **Sonia Sanchez**, **Angela Davis**, and many others. Her biographer Alexis De Veaux sums up her complex relation to the feminist movement, which initially offered Lorde a "longed-for home" (122). Involvement with white feminists, however, led her to "challenge their perspectives on sexuality, the meaning of feminist sisterhood, and race" (De Veaux 122). As Lorde famously said, "Your silence will not protect you" (*Sister Outsider* 41). In speaking her challenges, she changed the shape of the movement.

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Joan Wylie Hall

## LOVE

Love is a universal and essential human emotion and, as such, is a dominant theme in the creative works of African American writers from **slavery** to **freedom**. In the **literature** love manifests itself from ideal and spiritual love to erotic and sexual love.

The earliest African American literature of the eighteenth century primarily consists of narratives by slaves about their predicament. The topic of love rarely comes up. For example, **poetry** by **Phillis Wheatley** (1753–1784) focuses on themes of freedom and **religion**. The love that she refers to is the love of God. This is typical of many of the works of this period.

Early works from the nineteenth century also include many of the **slave narratives**. Writers such as **Sojourner Truth**, Nathan Beauchamp, Elizabeth Johnson Harris, Emma Crockett, **William Wells Brown**, and others created autobiographical works. The themes of survival and the quest for freedom dominate this period. **Harriet Jacobs** (1813–1897) went against traditional nineteenth-century values by choosing to have a sexual relationship with a white man to protect her children and **family** from the persistent sexual harassment by her master. In doing so she preserved her right to choose, her integrity, and her self-esteem—a form of love. The complications caused by this action make her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) an interesting and important slave narrative of the nineteenth century. **Paul Laurence Dunbar** (1872–1906) was among the first black writers not born in slavery. He addressed the difficulties encountered by members of his **race**

and the efforts of African Americans to achieve equality in America. He sometimes wrote poetry in the style of classic English poets, for example, "Invitation to Love." Other times he wrote in an evocative black American dialect of his times. "A Negro Love Song" is written in this style.

From 1917 until about 1935, an outburst of creative activity among African Americans occurred in all fields of art. The **Harlem Renaissance** was more than a literary movement and more than just a social revolt. The theme of love in African American literature is more prominent from this point forward. **Gwendolyn B. Bennett** (1902–1981) was known for raising her voice against social injustice and hatred, in the hope that the past would never be repeated. Her poetry shows a great range of emotions from hatred to a healthy self-love as seen in her poems "Hatred," "Secret," "Sonnets," and "To a Dark Girl." **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson** (1875–1935) wrote about race and gender conflicts. She also published occasional stories in magazines and newspapers. Her diaries written during the 1920s and 1930s deal with topics such as **sexuality**, **family**, and **work**. Her compilation of stories *Laughing to Stop Myself from Crying* (2003) deals with the subject of adultery, which men disguise as love. **Zora Neale Hurston's** (1891–1960) landmark novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) portrays a woman's search for self-fulfillment. Her idea of true love in marriage slowly erodes as her husband becomes abusive and disinterested in her. Janie reinvents herself into a lively woman after his **death** and finally finds love with another man. Many of **Ann Spencer's** (1882–1976) poems deal with the human search for **beauty** and meaning in life and are not devoid of love. "Black Man O' Mine," for instance, uses erotic imagery to celebrate black love. The major theme in **Angelina Weld Grimké's** (1880–1958) poetry is lost love. Her poetry is a record of her attempt to love and be loved by another woman—"The Garden Seat," for example. Strangely, some of her poetry is written in the nineteenth-century classic male poet's voice. Her poem "My Shrine" is a good example of this style. **Nella Larsen's** (1891–1964) novels primarily deal with issues of **identity**, not love. **Langston Hughes** (1902–1967) is the most influential poet and essayist of this period. He melded the beats of **jazz**, sweetness, and the simplicity of folk songs in his poetry. His works, even when not explicitly dealing with the topic of love, are filled with love for people. **Ralph Ellison's** (1914–1994) *Invisible Man* touches on the subject of love only peripherally. The unnamed hero is searching for the ultimate truth. His search gets him expelled from his southern college and brings him to New York, where he finds brotherhood in a communist group. After being disenchanted, the hero quits the Communist Party, wondering: "Could politics ever be an expression of love?"

The 1970s saw an upsurge in feminist African American literature. **Maya Angelou** (1928– ) is one of the earliest modern feminist voices in African American literature. Her themes are love and the universality of all lives. Her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published in 1970. The protagonist, Marguerite Johnson, is a victim of her color and her gender. She has internalized the belief that black is ugly. The **autobiography** tells us about her childhood life torn between the loving grandmother and the

glamorous mother as well as her sufferings from color prejudice and sexual abuse. All of this was enough to keep a little girl spellbound for a long time, until she comes out of her shell, confronts the world, and becomes a champion of the black woman's cause. Patrice Gaines's (1949– ) *Laughing in the Dark* (1995) has a similar theme. It is a story of one woman's journey from the dark world of racial prejudice, sexual abuse, assaults, and broken relationships to a brighter world where her daughter would be proud of her, where she would become a woman capable of independence and love and would live with dignity. It is a journey toward the land of self-esteem.

**E. Lynn Harris** has written about love, friendships, and family. His first novel, *Invisible Life* (1991), is a coming-of-age story of a young black man who is confused about his sexuality. His search for answers and for lasting love brings him to New York where following a serious illness and death of a friend he is finally able to face the truth about himself. *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues* (1993) is a nonfiction collection of writings by **Marita Golden** and fourteen other African American women authors. The pieces are very personal and provocative. The women talk about their experiences of love, lust, and a strong quest for freedom. They show us ways to become better men or women and how to create better loves.

**Sonia Sanchez** (1934– ) is a prominent playwright and poet of this era. Her plays deal with the themes of love, beauty, time, change, **history**, and music. She examines black women's characterizations in her works to show the evolution of the black female through time. In her poetry collection *Like the Singing Coming off the Drums: Love Poems* (1998), Sanchez writes of the many forms love can take, such as burning, dreamy, disappointed, and vulnerable. **Ann Petry's** (1908–1997) novel *The Narrows* (1953) deals with the forbidden love affair between a twenty-six-year-old black man and a wealthy married white woman. This classic novel deftly evokes a racially divided era in America's not-so-distant past. **Elizabeth Nunez's** novel *Grace* (2003) is a moving love story. It shows us how a deferred dream can take its toll on a marriage and how life can sometimes put us to the test. Another one of her novels, *Discretion* (2002), is written in oral storytelling style. Here she explores monogamy versus the African culture of polygamy. The main character faces the dilemma of loving two women at once. In fiery language, bell hooks (1952– ) writes about racism and sexism. Yet her book *All About Love: New Visions* (2000) explores the ultimately elusive question, "What is love?" *All About Love* shatters the **myths** of the sentimental and often fleeting aspects of love such as lust. She explores the problems that frequently arise from the confusion between the two; hooks reveals that the true force of love lies in its spiritual, redemptive power.

**Nikki Giovanni's** (1943– ) poetry is well known for its call for black people to realize their identities and understand their surroundings as a part of a white-controlled culture. She is considered a leader in the black poetry movement. Her poetry collection *Love Poems* (1997) contains bold, romantic, and some erotic poems such as "Seduction," "I Wrote a Good Omelet," and "My House." **Rita Dove** explores the mother-daughter **drama** of love in her book of poetry *Mother Love* (1995).

Two important collections of short stories and novel excerpts by black women writers edited by Mary Helen Washington were published in 1975 and 1980. *Black-Eyed Susans* contains the voices of groundbreaking female authors such as **Toni Morrison**, Jean Smith, **Gwendolyn Brooks**, **Toni Cade Bambara**, **Alice Walker**, and **Paule Marshall**. For the first time in literature black women were defining themselves and breaking the **stereotype** of the black woman as strong but shrill. The stories all deal with the experience of being black and female. Two topics that specifically deal with the theme of love are black mother/daughter relationships and the disappointment of romantic love. In the second collection, *Midnight Birds*, the voices are more brave and free. Women's friendships and solidarity form the basis for new love for these women now. They demonstrate the strength found in each other's help and support.

As is evident so far, narratives written during slavery had little room for romantic or familial love. As more of the freed slaves began writing, the early works began showing an awareness of sexuality. These works primarily deal with love in terms of sexual relationships. The real liberation of the soul took a long time to happen. We see more and more narratives dealing with the emotional complexities of love in contemporary African American literature written by both men and women. Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953), for example, is about an ordinary woman living her ordinary life who faces racism, sexism and classism every day. This simple act of being able to experience love in its natural form was missing in literature written during slavery. Toni Morrison explores ambiguous areas of love in her novels such as *Jazz* (1992), *Beloved* (1987), and *Sula* (1973), where **violence** is paradoxically an act of love. Eva Peace in *Sula* kills her son Plum to save him from lifelong suffering caused by his emasculated existence. In *Beloved* the mother kills her baby daughter to spare her from a life of slavery. Both of these mothers choose physical death over the death of the spirit for their children. Equally ambiguous in moral terms is Joe Trace's murder of his lover Dorcas in *Jazz*. The novel shows how racial tensions and oppression can lead to distorted love. Alice Walker in her 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* equates abusive behavior with an expression of self-hatred and shows that healthy self-definition stems from self-knowledge and self-love. She portrays lesbian love as natural and freeing. Her novel *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000) is an exploration of love, sex, and friendship. The autobiographical story "To My Young Husband" contains a series of letters written by a black woman to her white ex-husband.

No feminist study of black literature would be complete without mentioning **Gloria Naylor's** (1950– ) novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1983). The stories of seven women whose lives touch each other at Brewster Place make up the novel. The novel deals with many complex issues, but in the end there is hope. Love and hope serve as a backdrop for social ills such as homophobia, racism, sexism, violence, and alcoholism. **Audre Lorde** (1934–1992) often described herself as "a black lesbian feminist mother lover

poet.” She wrote poetry about racism in the feminist movement, sexism among African Americans, and about **lesbianism** and love. She said that there is no such thing as universal love in literature. There are only specifics. As such, almost every work of literature can be said to be about love, since it is a basic human instinct.

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Pratibha Kelapure

### LOVE

**Toni Morrison's** eighth novel, *Love* (2003), is set on the East Coast in the 1990s in a town called Silk. The book recounts the traumatic lives of the women who orbit Bill Cosey, the owner of Cosey's Hotel and Resort, once a prestigious vacation spot for African Americans. *Love* is a culmination of the themes in Morrison's earlier novels: the sexual abuse of a child, the spiritual bond of girlfriends, intra and interracial tensions within the black **community**, the intricate emotional ties of **family**, the complexity of mother love, the nuances of madness, and the power of the black patriarch.

As in Morrison's second novel *Sula* (1973), a friendship between two girls from different socioeconomic classes drives the story. Too young to recognize culturally designated difference that might otherwise separate them, Christine (granddaughter of Bill Cosey) and Heed the Night (illiterate daughter of poor parents) form a bond of friendship that ultimately transcends the restrictive, selfish, and sexualized relationships of the adult world. However, the girls, both scarred in early adolescence by Bill Cosey's sexual impulses yet trapped by their desire for his approval, attention, and affection, allow their **love** for each other to manifest itself as hate for over fifty years.

The rift begins when fifty-two-year-old Cosey commits the novel's unspeakable act: He marries the eleven-year-old Heed. Cosey refrains from intercourse with his child bride for a year, until she begins to menstruate. When they return from their delayed three-day honeymoon, the bewildered Heed finds an enemy where she had left a friend. Encouraged by her mother's prompting, Christine feels displaced in her grandfather's affections, but Heed does not understand her friend's anger. Each girl's sense of betrayal develops into a literal and figurative battle of wills that drives the story.



The novel opens with Christine and Heed in their sixties, both living in the Cosey mansion but separated by two floors, an obscurely worded will, and a shared resentment. Never fully conquering her illiteracy and unable to erase the community's **memory** of her lower-class origins, Heed has spent her life in the shadow of her long-deceased husband, "Papa," whose portrait hangs above her bed. She is also emotionally scarred by the miscarriage of her only pregnancy, the result of a single adulterous affair. Christine, sent to boarding school by a mother battling madness, has lived a distinctly different life. After a failed marriage to a cheating Private, a long stint in the **civil rights movement** with a man named Fruit, three arrests, seven abortions, a brief respite in a house of prostitution, and a three-year affair with a married doctor that ends with her displacement and arrest, Christine returns to Silk in 1976 with a few pair of underwear and the twelve diamond engagement rings her grandfather had won at cards. Although she nominally returns to tend her dying and insane mother, she stays even after her mother's **death**, intent on reclaiming her inheritance.

Cosey's will, scratched in the margins of a hotel menu, bequeathed the bulk of the estate to his "sweet Cosey child," an appellation both Christine and Heed claim. Their two-decade-long battle intensifies with the arrival of Junior Viviane, a young woman with wild hair, a short skirt, merged toes, and long leather boots. Junior, a character who would have felt at **home** at the Convent in Morrison's seventh novel *Paradise* (1998), has emerged from a life of poverty, illiteracy, and juvenile detention in answer to Heed's ad for a personal assistant. Willing to physically resist unwanted sexual advances (the Corrections Administrator attempts and fails to force oral sex from her), Junior also prefers rough sex. Her sexual relationship with fourteen-year-old Romen Sandler encapsulates in graphic form the relationships between Bill Cosey and his women. He abuses for his own gratification; however, the women, shaped by a patriarchal system that stunts their self-esteem, are complicit in their own subjugation. It is fitting that Junior and Romen's sexual relationship turns physically violent only in the attic of Cosey's long-abandoned hotel.

The hotel is also the site of Christine and Heed's ultimate reconciliation. Junior has taken Heed to the hotel to find a box of old menus, from which Heed plans to forge a will that leaves the estate more clearly to her. Christine follows, finding them in the hotel's attic just before the rotting floor gives way and Heed falls into the bedroom below. The scene allows a metaphoric regrounding: The world that Bill Cosey built, the very ground beneath their feet, collapses. Left together, alone, Heed's frail body broken, the two friends reconcile, reviving their secret childhood language and understanding that in different ways they had both been commodities, sold on a patriarchal market.

Regardless of whether Cosey "bought" Heed from her poverty-stricken parents as some suspect, Cosey's money did allow him certain freedoms. No one openly condemns his marriage to Heed because he is the wealthy, powerful, well-connected patriarch. Although individual characters privately condemn his act, the novel itself refrains from condemning Bill Cosey the man. As Morrison readers expect, a morally questionable (and arguably reprehensible)

act is contextualized within a cultural and psychological domain. Cosey is not the saint Vida Sandler remembers him as, nor is he the “Good Man” of Junior’s dreams. He is a man warped by his father’s racial betrayal, prevented by cultural convention from marrying the one woman he truly loves, and abandoned to his own sense of power. Although this contextualization mediates his act, it does not excuse it. The women in his life pay the cost of his pain, loneliness, and unrestrained masculine impulse to create, control, and coerce.

The text offers Romen Gibbons as an alternative to Bill Cosey and his destructive abuse of patriarchal power. Early in the novel, Romen releases a girl tied and gang-raped at a party rather than take “his turn.” Rejected by his friends who construct his act as one of weakness and betrayal, Romen finds temporary solace and self-respect in his rough sexual relationship with Junior. By novel’s end, however, Romen rejects a violent articulation of **black masculinity** for a compassionate one. Romen speeds to the hotel to help the Cosey women. Although he brings only one back alive, the friends remain united in spirit.

The italicized voice that closes the novel—the same voice that opens it—is that of L., the title character and a voice from beyond the grave. Christine and Heed remember L., Cosey’s longtime cook, as the only stable adult in their lives. However, by novel’s end, L. is also revealed as the controlling force in the text, ultimately thwarting even Bill Cosey’s desires. After Cosey makes a will bequeathing everything to the “sporting woman” Celestial, who figures throughout the novel as his one true love, L. poisons him, substituting her own version of his will, the one scrawled on a hotel menu. L.’s act redirects Cosey’s fortune and the lives of the Cosey women, bringing them together in hate so that they could find love.

L. tells the reader that every story has a monster. In *Love*, it may be the Police-heads, mysterious creatures who rise from the sea to punish wayward women and children; it may be men who turn women’s love for them into hate for each other; or it may be the power of love itself. Ultimately, Bill Cosey destroyed the lives of the women who loved him because they let him, the novel’s warning to women. Its promise: If love for men can destroy them, love for each other can save them.

*See also* Literacy; Sexuality; Violence

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

**LUCY: A NOVEL**

“My mother . . . was a betrayer of her sex,” **Jamaica Kincaid** remarks as she draws a connection between the mother character in her 1990 novel *Lucy* and her own mother, Annie Drew (Listfield). In *Lucy*, a novel Kincaid says is filled with “thick female stuff,” she wants to be “very frank,” “unlikable,” and “even unpopular” (Listfield; Perry 506). *Lucy*, she insists, is not about “**race** and **class**” but instead is about “a person figuring out how to be an artist, an artist of herself and of things” (Kennedy). In *Lucy*, Kincaid, who was born Elaine Potter Richardson, continues her ongoing fictional recreation of her early life begun in her coming-of-age novel *Annie John* (1983) as she describes her experiences after leaving Antigua and coming to the United States to **work** as a nanny. Because of the similarities in the experiences and memories of Annie John and Lucy Josephine Potter, who shares Kincaid’s birthday and the surname of her biological father, Roderick Potter, and because of the close connection between Kincaid’s life and that of her characters, informed readers are likely to read *Lucy* as a sequel to *Annie John*. *Lucy* is connected to but also represents an important departure from *Annie John* as it records Kincaid’s experiences after she left Antigua and as it describes Kincaid’s attempt to forge a new invented writer’s **identity** and to become the self-possessed “Jamaica Kincaid” rather than the mother-dominated “Elaine Potter Richardson.”

The linear, but fragmented, sections of the novel describing Lucy’s first year in the United States are so constantly interrupted by Lucy’s intrusive memories of her past on a small unnamed island in the Caribbean that she seems to live as much in the past as in the present in an unnamed city, unspecified places that readers knowledgeable about Kincaid’s life readily identify as Antigua and New York City. Plagued by the same depressive feelings that overwhelmed Annie John, Lucy, as she settles into the **home** of the wealthy white couple—Lewis and Mariah—who have hired her to serve as an au pair, recognizes the grip that the past has on her as she obsessively recalls her Antiguan **family**. Ambivalent in her response to Mariah, Lucy is in part drawn to and even idealizes Mariah, but she also repeatedly expresses scorn for Mariah’s joyful embrace of life, which becomes symptomatic to Lucy of Mariah’s political naïveté and unthinkingly privileged way of life.

Once told by her mother that she was named for Lucifer, Lucy turns this maternal insult into a badge of honor. Even though Lucy/Lucifer represents an oppositional “bad” identity—an identity forged in defiance of the repressive societal rules and regulations enforced by the shaming mother—Kincaid’s character, despite her physical separation from her mother, still exists, as she comes to see, in the shadow of her powerful, and powerfully injuring, mother. When Mariah learns that Lucy was deeply hurt when growing up because her mother preferred her sons over her daughter, she explains the universality of Lucy’s experience of gender shaming and gives Lucy a copy of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* to read, but Lucy eschews the universalizing assumptions of de Beauvoir’s feminist theory, focusing instead on her own subjective experiences as a daughter. Continuing the story of *Annie John* by recalling the scene in

which Annie's mother denounced her daughter for behaving like a slut, Lucy writes a cold and condemning letter to her mother in which she declares that she finds her life in the United States as a slut very enjoyable. But behind Lucy's defiant anger and bitterness lies a deep sense of woundedness, for she has spent ten of the twenty years of her life, as she comes to recognize, mourning the end of her great **love** affair with her rejecting mother. Aware that she is reinventing herself, Lucy, as she begins to write in the journal given to her by Mariah at the end of the novel, remains a prisoner of her unhappy past as she becomes an artist not only of **memory** but also of anger and despair.

*See also The Autobiography of My Mother*

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*J. Brooks Bouson*





## **MAJOR, CLARENCE (1936– )**

With more than two dozen books to his credit, Clarence Major's prolixity is matched only by his artistic versatility. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1936 to Clarence and Inez (Huff) Major, Major's artistic ability was evident at a very young age. In *Come By Here: My Mother's Life* (2002), Major's memoir of his mother, Inez Major proudly recounts the story of when Clarence's school-teacher, Mrs. Bellamy, shows her his drawing of a car, pointing out that Clarence's car, unlike the other children's cars, had four wheels rather than only two and how this was a sign of exceptional artistic ability. Mrs. Bellamy advised Mrs. Major to encourage her son, suggesting that one day he would make her proud.

By 1948 Major would be taking art lessons from Gus Nall in Chicago and, between 1951 and 1953, was attending the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago on a fellowship. If Major demonstrated a **love** of drawing and painting rather early in life, he also showed a passion for reading and writing (and Major's novels make it clear that painting has greatly influenced his writing and his interest in formal experimentation). According to Inez Major, while attending Wendell Phillips Elementary School in Chicago, the same school **Nella Larsen** attended between 1901 and 1907, young Clarence would come home from the Oakwood Public Library with a stack of books; Clarence spent so much time reading that she, though encouraged, worried about him not getting enough exercise. But his mother's fears would be replaced with

pride when in 1954 *The Fires That Burn in Heaven*, Major's first book of poetry, was printed. Major's writing life had begun.

With the publication of *Come By Here*, readers of Major's work are better able to appreciate the important role his mother played and continues to play in his life. Though authored by Major, *Come By Here* is Inez Major's story as recounted in first person by Inez herself. One of Major's strengths is his ability to create strong female voices, and in *Come By Here*, Inez's voice, as she tells of her life in the segregated **South** and then in Chicago, comes through poignantly, often passionately, with little or no sentimentality. And while, from a feminist standpoint, it could be argued that in *Come By Here* Inez's voice is subordinated (because mediated) by her son's—as critics have argued is the case in the court scene in **Zora Neale Hurston's** *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), in which Janie's voice is subordinated to Hurston's—Major has made it clear in a number of interviews that he believes it is possible for a man to write from a woman's perspective, and vice versa. Major's pen has given birth to a number of memorable women, including Annie Eliza, the black matriarch of *Such Was the Season* (1987).

In *Such Was the Season*, *Come By Here*, and *Painted Turtle: Woman with Guitar* (1988), Major deftly creates powerful women with distinct voices and personalities, and each of these works has been well received by feminist critics who have found in Annie Eliza, Inez Major, and Painted Turtle unique, independent spirits, making their way in singular fashion, often unaided (Inez) or in defiance of her people (Painted Turtle). And while Major has been praised for his ability to write from a female point of view, his first and most controversial novel, *All-Night Visitors* (1969), an amalgamation of four or five failed novels, has drawn a lightning storm of criticism for the way in which the male protagonist objectifies women.

*All-Night Visitors*, set in Chicago, is the story of a young black man, Eli Bolton, and his attempt to piece together not only the “jigsaw puzzle of [his] heritage” but of his fragmented life. Abandoned by his mother as an infant, Eli was raised in an orphanage, where he was beaten severely by the violent female warden, watched a young boy gut a puppy with a switchblade, and felt an undefined sexual attraction for the cook who, with her “coal-black skin” and “giant tits,” was not only the object of his desire but the source of a deep longing for his absent mother. In one of the more graphic scenes in the novel, Eli, now in Vietnam, recounts a “sadistic inhuman monstrous incident” in which Moke and Dokus Mangy, two fellow soldiers, violently **rape** and kill a child, an incident that would haunt Eli throughout his life.

But while violent scenes such as this are rare in *All-Night Visitors*, Eli's protracted sexual encounters with a host of women, from dropouts and run-aways to Harvard-bound college students, are not. From Tammy, the twenty-year-old homeless woman, whose name, the narrator tells us, is not really important, to Anita, with her natural fellatio skill, the women who come in and out of Eli's life are simply objects, “things” meant to satisfy his sexual desire. In the opening scene of the novel, Eli comes home to find Tammy, who he has taken in, sleeping, and he begins to think of a way to get her to

wake up and perform oral sex on him. He does not want to have sex with her because the dried sperm on her pubic hair turns him off; the clean receptacle of her mouth, he explains, is more appealing. And when Tammy would not wake up, Eli feels an evil streak come over him. He wants to *force* her. He wants to force her mouth open like a doll and choke her with his penis.

In Anita Eli finds a woman whose sexual knowledge, her ability to please men, is “in the very pores of her skin.” This sexual knowledge, according to Eli, is like “deep wisdom,” a knowledge that is in her genes, and Major puts Anita’s knowledge on display in an oral sex scene that goes on for roughly ten pages. Both Tammy and Anita, to Eli, are sex objects, “the idea of a body, a commodity,” nothing more, nothing less. And Eli’s attitude suggests that women, or at least these women, are genetically wired to perform sexually. Neither Tammy nor Anita is granted a sense of individuality or autonomy. They are only seen through the eyes of Eli, whose misogynistic attitude toward women is the most blatant and unsettling aspect of this formally experimental novel.

While Tammy and Anita (and Eunice) function only to satisfy Eli’s enormous sexual appetite, Cathy, a young white woman and a “volunteer in service to America” (VISTA), has a more positive affect on Eli. As he does with all of the other women he encounters, Eli longs to possess Cathy sexually. Yet Cathy is different from the other women in Eli’s life. When Cathy leaves to go to California, Eli becomes depressed, and he realizes Cathy had become a kind of mental crutch for him. But in stark contrast to his past relationships, Eli regains the ability to love through his relationship with Cathy. Cathy functions as a catalyst for Eli’s regeneration. And while Cathy’s role, in this sense, is admirable, the emphasis, as it has been throughout the novel, is on Eli Bolton (*Eli* in Hebrew, Eli tells us, means god), and women only serve to bolster his existence. The only altruistic act we see Eli perform in *All-Night Visitors* comes when he invites a Puerto Rican woman and her children into his apartment, evidence of his newly regenerated capacity to love.

If in *All-Night Visitors* women are simply objects of the male protagonist’s sexual desire, and therefore play a subordinate role, in *Such Was the Season*, with Annie Eliza at center stage, Major shows his ability to create a character whose sense of individuality and autonomy, despite being in her late sixties, is still intact. *Such Was the Season* is Annie Eliza’s first-person account of her nephew Juneboy’s weeklong visit to her **home** in Atlanta, Georgia. In contrast to Major’s early novels, *Such Was the Season* is told in a straightforward narrative and has a wonderfully intimate feel to it. Because Annie Eliza is personally telling us—whom she often addresses directly as “child” or “girl”—her story, we are able to get inside Annie Eliza’s head and to appreciate her self-described old-fashioned ways. She admits to being just a “plain down-to-earth common sense person.” It is also clear, however, that Annie Eliza is quite serious. Her **religion** is very important to her, as is her **family** (Annie Eliza has two sons, Jeremiah, a preacher, and DeSoto, a police officer), but



when Jeremiah gets caught up in the Greenhouse Tomato conspiracy, she is unwilling to shield him from the wheels of justice (social or divine).

While Annie Eliza feels an abiding fealty toward her family and friends, she does not hesitate to criticize those with whom she disagrees. She endlessly criticizes Renee, Jeremiah's wife, for her materialism and her modern ways, and while she eventually supports Renee's decision to run for elected office (and changes her party affiliation from Republican to Democrat, to the dismay of some of her friends), her initial reaction betrays a latent conservatism, a conservatism evidenced by her (admittedly paradoxical) reaction to Jeremiah's **sermon** on women's rights. She believes that women have all the rights they deserve and that they tend to mess up the ones they already have. And that, she says, is "the truth!" Yet Annie Eliza goes on to criticize Jeremiah for not preaching about strong, liberated women, like Mary in the Bible. She begins to think about her own mother and how she is the perfect example of a strong woman, one who "took her own rights and made everybody respect them." Major will say the same thing about his own mother in *Come By Here*.

In Annie Eliza we get a portrait of a woman in all her complexity. Her voice, like her independent spirit, is strong and her attitude, feisty. One moment she is telling Juneboy (a pathologist) that he is welcome to stay with her for a year if he wants to, yet in the next she admits to being tired of having him around. His presence has not only exiled her to the couch but has made her life feel scattered. Major's achievement here is his ability to bring Annie Eliza to life, to give her the same kind of vitality that would mark the life not only of his mother, Inez, but also that of the legendary Zuni, Painted Turtle.

*Painted Turtle: Woman with Guitar* is the story of Mary Etawa, a Zuni folk-singer and poet who, Old Gchachu prophesied, would become legendary among the Zuni. While Major's first five novels are formally experimental, *Painted Turtle* is equally unique in form and style, combining both poetry and prose, and captures beautifully the story of a young woman struggling to find her voice in song. Raped and subsequently impregnated at a very young age, eventually giving birth to twins (a sign of bad luck), Mary Etawa, known as Painted Turtle, becomes a prostitute and leaves her people for the cantina circuit, playing her songs of sorrow and redemption to sleepy drunks in sleepy towns throughout the Southwest. Painted Turtle's story is narrated by Baldwin "Baldy" Saiyataca, a Navajo-Hopi mixed-blood musician and Painted Turtle's lover, the man to whom Painted Turtle would tell her story. Major began this novel with Painted Turtle recounting her own story firsthand, as Annie Eliza would in *Such Was the Season* and Inez would in *Come By Here*. Unable to find Painted Turtle's voice, he turned to a male narrator, yet Painted Turtle's voice comes through in her songs and in Major's prose if we listen closely as her life unfolds.

The **beauty** of Major's poetry and prose comes from its highly visual nature. As a skilled painter, Major has translated his visual **literacy** into the kind of prose that leaps off the page, giving us portraits of multifaceted

women like Annie Eliza, Painted Turtle, and, of course, Inez Major, for whom Major's artistic accomplishments are not only a cause for celebration but a source of great pride.

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*Benjamin D. Carson*

**MALCOLM X (1925–1965)**

Malcolm X was a Black Nationalist leader whose birth name was Malcolm Little. He made famous speeches on racism and the **civil rights movement** and was critical of other African American civil rights leaders' strategies of integration and nonviolence; he called for active protest against white racism and proclaimed Pan-African internationalism. He wrote *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1966) with the help of African American writer **Alex Haley** in 1963–1964; it was published posthumously. His speeches are also published in several books such as *Malcolm X Speaks* (1990).

Malcolm X was born in 1925 to a Baptist preacher, Reverend Earl Little, and his wife Louise. Earl Little was a loyal follower of Marcus Garvey, a Black Nationalist from Jamaica, and a member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Louise was an educated **mulatto** born as the result of **rape** by a white man. Their **family** lived in constant threat from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) while Earl Little preached Garvey's **Black Nationalism**, called "Back to Africa," to the black **community**. Their house was burned by the KKK, and in 1931, when Malcolm was six, Earl Little was run over by a trolley car. People in the community believed that he was killed by the local KKK. After Earl's **death**, Louise took care of the family by herself for several years, but later she had a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized in Kalamazoo. Her children were separated and sent to foster homes.

In spite of his family difficulties, Malcolm X was a successful and popular student. He was elected class president by white classmates in the seventh grade. However, when he expressed his wish to be a lawyer, his favorite teacher told him that it is "no realistic goal for a nigger." This experience disappointed him so deeply that he shut down his feelings from white people and the American system. When he was fourteen, he left school and went to Boston to live with his sister Ella. Although his sister was well established in the black community, he quickly became involved in criminal life. He became a hustler, a pimp, and a thief, gaining his nickname "Detroit Red." He was arrested for burglary and sentenced to ten years in prison, which is an unusually long period for such a crime. In prison, he was introduced to the Nation of Islam (NOI), whose adherents are commonly known as Black Muslims. NOI was first established in 1930, following W. D. Fard's teaching, and Fard's mentee Elijah Muhammad was the leader of the NOI. Besides learning about Islam, Malcolm read various books about **religion** and philosophy and developed a deeper understanding of Islamic teaching and politics surrounding black people.

After he was released from prison, he joined the Nation of Islam and changed his last name to X. He married Betty Sanders, whose name was Betty X after she joined NOI, in Lansing in 1958. They had six daughters, including the twins Betty was pregnant with when he was assassinated. He became a Muslim minister in New York and a famous spokesperson for Black Muslims. His speeches were eloquent and powerful, so he drew attention

from blacks and the media. As Malcolm become more famous and popular, other Black Muslim leaders, including Muhammad, felt threatened and jealous. Malcolm also started to criticize Muhammad for his lavish lifestyle and affairs with women. Upon John Kennedy's assassination, he commented that Kennedy "never foresaw that the chickens would come home to roost so soon," although Muhammad ordered him not to comment on the assassination. Malcolm X was suspended, and he finally broke with Muhammad and the NOI the next year, 1964. He organized "Muslim Mosque, Incorporated (MMI)," a Black Nationalist political organization.

After Malcolm X left NOI, he traveled to Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, where he made speeches in parliaments and met the heads of states in many countries. In Mecca, where he earned his religious name El-Hajji Malik El-Shavazz, he started to think that people of other races, including white, could be allies against racism. He organized the Organization of African American Unity (OAAU), through which he tried to develop Pan-African internationalism. At the African Summit Conference he attended to represent the OAAU, he called attention to the issue of blacks in the United States. His trip abroad also changed his attitude toward women. He was impressed and influenced by the active role of women in African organizations. Black Muslims emphasize women's **domestic** role and patriarchal order, and Malcolm X's speeches reveal a patriarchal view of women. However, his organization gave a more active and equal role to women than did the Nation of Islam. Women in the NOI were not allowed to be part of the decision-making process. In the OAAU, Lynn Shriflet had the leading role from its establishment in 1964, and one of the active leaders was Sara Mitchell. During his trips, he was welcomed by political and social leaders in many African and Middle Eastern countries; the French government, however, did not permit his entrance to the country.

On February 21, 1965, when Malcolm X started to speak at an OAAU rally, he was fatally shot. Talmadge Hayer, Norman 3X Butler, and Thomas 15X Johnson were arrested for his murder and sentenced to life in prison. Since he had become famous, he often felt his life was threatened, and his house was fire-bombed in 1965. He often said publicly that Black Muslim leaders wanted to kill him, but the day before his assassination, he told Alex Haley that he had started to think that the people who were trying to kill him were not Black Muslims.

His outspoken, eloquent, direct speeches about **race** and Black Power inspired and appealed to blacks and also scared many white people. He was called a "black supremacist," a "hatemonger," and a "dangerous fanatic." The moderate civil rights movement activists also considered him an extremist. He was cynical about the moderate civil rights movement of Martin Luther King, Jr. He believed that integrating into American society would not liberate blacks but that uniting and offering strong resistance would.

*See also* Autobiography

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Youngsook Jeong

**MAMA**

Set in the 1960s, **Terry McMillan's** first novel *Mama* (1987) is a narrative of a poverty-stricken black **family** that resides in the fictional Point Haven, Michigan. A departure from many contemporary African American novels that feature portrayals of child rearing, *Mama* is a revisionary text that deconstructs the **myth** of **motherhood** to include discussions about the tensions between ideal motherhood and realistic versions of this role. Mildred Peacock, the wife of Crook Peacock and mother of five children, Freda, Money, Doll, Angel, and Bootsy, struggles to keep her family together throughout bouts with an abusive, drunken husband and poverty.

The title of the novel suggests that readers will witness the ins and outs of a mother of a typical black northern family. Ironically, however, the setting of the novel and the images used to describe the text imply that the Peacock family is indeed a typical black family, but one similar to that of a southern

plantation family. The streets of Point Haven are mostly packed dirt. The houses are rundown and resemble shacks, and many of the homes lack a father figure. In homes such as the Peacocks', a father figure is present, but readers are alerted to the fact that this is only temporary, as the marriage between Crook and Mildred is volatile. Moreover, the 1960s setting suggests that readers should pay attention to the oppression that the women in the novel suffer at the hands of the black male characters. Ironically, the 1960s is a moment in black **history** where racial uplift was the mantra; however, the residents of Point Haven were not beneficiaries of such movement.

Throughout the novel, readers witness Mildred's transformation from a woman who places significant value on pregnancy and childbirth to a divorced mother of five on welfare, to a factory worker, then a prostitute, and finally, an entrepreneur in the sense that she opens her own day-care center by the end of the novel. In the early stages of her transformation Mildred hangs on to dominant Eurocentric ideologies regarding femininity and motherhood. Although her first marriage is dissolved, she holds out hope for marital bliss; however, her focus has changed. Her subsequent marriages are defined by necessity and practicality. Mildred learns early on that marriage for **love** does not fit her historical subjectivity as a black woman. Instead, she marries for food for her children and money for rent.

Similar in many ways to McMillan's life, the narrative of *Mama* reminds us of the problematic relationship between dominant ideologies and black women's realities. Set during a time of racial uplift, McMillan presents a female character who learns to redefine womanhood on her own terms.

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Catherine Ross-Stroud

### MAMA DAY

*Mama Day* (1988) by **Gloria Naylor** captures a black **community** separate from the mainland United States in geography and ideology. The people of Willow Springs develop and maintain their own customs, their own sense of **spirituality**, and their own life's tempo. The progenitor of Willow Springs is Sapphira, a woman who somehow obtained the deed to the land and her bill of sale from the slave master Bascombe Wade. These two acts firmly set her in charge of her own fate and the future of Willow Springs. In this authority, she names her seven sons for Old Testament prophets. The next generation produces seven sons with New Testament names. Miranda Day, who comes to be called Mama Day, is one of three daughters of the next generation.

Then there are Peace, Grace, and Hope before the final generation in first cousins Ophelia (Cocoa) Day and Willa Prescott Nedeed (of *Linden Hills*, 1985).

Day is the name that Sapphira gives to her descendants, and by **family** order it sticks regardless of marriage. The genealogy in the front of the book indicates that Willa disregarded this family rule. Whether in the Day line or not, all the residents of Willow Springs look to Sapphira as a kind of great mother with divine or magical powers. For them she is the beginning of life in Willow Springs, not Bascombe Wade, and they look to Mama Day for guidance in the present. Mama Day is herself a spiritual force whom residents seek out for **healing**, going beyond the natural if necessary. She is seemingly interminable, close to 100 years old and showing no signs of decline.

*Mama Day* is as much about the **love** story of George and Cocoa as it is about community, healing, and faith. It is the relationship between Cocoa and her new husband George that drives the reader and the plot to Willow Springs. The island's customs are baffling to George because he has no sense of community or family, as he was raised in a **home** for boys. In this alienation from his roots, George represents the growing body of African Americans who have no sense of their **history** and their relationship to their communities. George was intimidated by Cocoa's sense of her family legacy and confused by the community's dependence on what he considered to be illogical, inefficient customs such as building a bridge to the mainland only sturdy enough to last until the next storm.

For all its emphasis on women's strength, the novel is troubled by the mother/daughter relationship. The relationship between Mama Day and Cocoa is perhaps the closest mother/daughter relationship in the novel; they are actually great-aunt and great-niece, not mother and daughter. However, the relationships of biological mothers and daughters in the novel are corrupted by insanity and finally **death**. Mama Day's own mother and Cocoa's mother succumbed to their insanity.

Although a jealous Willow Springs woman put a hex on Cocoa, Cocoa will not yield to the insanity that plagues her because George ultimately sheds his own blood as a messiah figure to save her life. At the novel's end, George's spirit is still in Willow Springs, and Cocoa goes to visit and talk to him once a year as they rehash their story, trying to get it right.

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Sharese Terrell Willis

## MAMMY

The Mammy **stereotype** originated during the late antebellum period, as one of a number of caricatures developed to refute the growing body of eyewitness testimonies—in **slave narratives**, abolitionist newspapers, and memoirs—of the harsh brutality of **slavery**. The Mammy figure—middle-aged or elderly, obese and dark-skinned, hardworking and loyal, her satisfaction with her subordinate position evident in her broad smile and hearty laugh—was developed as a rejoinder to northern white readers’ growing awareness of the sexual subjugation of black female slaves. While first-person accounts like **Harriet Jacobs’s** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), depict black women servants terrorized by the sexual desires of their masters and, in the case of Harriet Jacobs, willing to take extreme measures to escape his predatory desires, representations of the Mammy depict her as proud to serve the white **family** that owns her and even willing to risk her life in defense of her white employer-owners. At the same time, her age, obesity, and skin color were interpreted through the aesthetic lens of white supremacy and, as such, were presented as irrefutable evidence of Mammy’s inherent unattractiveness to white men.

“Aunt” or “Auntie,” the titles by which Mammy was most often known (hence the **Aunt Jemima** of pancake-flour fame and Aunt Chloe, the loyal matron in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* [1852]) overtly suggest her acceptance as “one of the family” by the household that she served. At the same time, however, the “Auntie” label suggests the degree to which any identities or attachments (as wife or mother) to her black family were subordinated to the interests of the white landowners she served. Indeed, a key component of the Mammy **myth** is her prioritization of the welfare of her master’s children over the nurturance and upbringing of her own. In addition, the “Auntie” title, with its allusion to family, implies a connection between Mammy and her white mistress and master that, while intimate, is unambiguously nonsexual.

Historical evidence indicates that the Mammy was primarily a figure of myth, with little basis in the reality of plantation life. The popular image of antebellum slave life, characterized by gracious mansions, surrounded by acres of fields, tended by dozens of African American workers who performed every duty from agricultural labor to household maintenance to child care, is largely the product of late-nineteenth-century nostalgia and fantasy, reinforced and further



disseminated in the first half of the twentieth century through **films** like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939). In reality, however, the overwhelming majority of white slaveholders could afford no more than a few slaves, most of whom were needed for fieldwork and other agricultural duties.

If the fiscal realities of slavery fail to support the economic viability of the Mammy phenomenon, so too do the social realities of slavery undermine the physical stereotypes associated with that figure. Many historians have pointed out that the realities of household servitude under slavery point to a woman servant whose physical attributes are very much in contradiction to those associated with the Mammy stereotype. In those households that did employ slaves as domestics laborers, house servants tended to be young (fewer than 10 percent of black women lived past fifty years of age), thin (black slaves were poorly fed), and of mixed-**race** descent, quite the opposite of the fat, jolly, matron of plantation myth.

As a mythic figure, however, the Mammy has permeated almost every aspect of U.S. culture, influencing the popular perception of slavery, subservience, and black womanhood even into the present day. Many scholars have suggested that the prototype for this figure was first introduced in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in the figure of Aunt Chloe, introduced in the following passage: "A round, black, shiny face is hers, so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with the whites of eggs. . . . Her whole plum countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under a well-starched checkered turban." The link between Stowe's vision of a plantation Mammy and the many representations of that figure to follow is clear. As influential as Stowe's physical description of Mammy would turn out to be, however, it was her reference to Aunt Chloe's **domestic** skill—"Aunt Chloe was universally held and acknowledged" as "the first cook of the neighborhood"—that foreshadowed the most common incarnation of this image, in the form of what author Phil Patton refers to as a "commercial icon."

Indeed, Mammy has achieved her widest recognition, her greatest longevity, and her deepest incursion into the heart of the American **home** and into the collective imagination of the United States as a commercial image. Much attention has been paid in recent years to depictions of Mammy in film—Hattie McDaniel's iconic portrayal of Mammy (for which she received African America's first Academy Award) in *Gone With the Wind*, Louise Beavers's 1934 portrayal (and Juanita Moore's 1959 reprisal) of a Mammy-like servant in the "tragic **mulatto**" melodrama *Imitation of Life*, and others. Indeed, these productions created lasting and heartfelt images that continue to both attract and disturb viewers today. Any qualities or associations reflected in these roles only reinforced the messages that were being transmitted in U.S. households every day, through white and black Americans' daily contact with a veritable army of household products that used images of the Mammy as a trademark.

In addition to Aunt Jemima pancake products, there was Luzianne coffee, Auntie brand citrus fruits, and a variety of household laundry detergents,

cleansers, produce brands, and baking supplies. Add to these the variety of functional decorative items depicting the Mammy, primarily intended for use in the kitchen and dining rooms. Such objects included cookie jars, salt and pepper shakers, syrup dispensers, toothpick holders, and peg boards. The overall effect of these items was to associate household maintenance—especially cleaning and food preparation—with the cheerful subservience of the black domestic. At the same time, Mammy’s bright gaze and contented smile—staring out at white homemakers from their kitchen walls and cabinets, refrigerator shelves, and countertops—conferred a form of approval on their efforts, an approval that was noteworthy. As Phil Patton explains, the ubiquitous presence in white women’s households of images of these “‘idealized servant types,’ especially during the first half of the 20th century, suggested heartiness, quality, [and] the approval of those who really ran the kitchen, who knew food.”

While modified, updated Mammy images still appear on a handful of products, this figure primarily lives on in film and on television. Contemporary depictions of the Mammy serve a far more troubling purpose than the simple approval for white women’s domestic efforts their commercial and decorative counterparts confer. In their happy and dedicated service to white families—by both their literal presence within their white television homes and their implied presence within the homes of their white viewers—the Mammy-like protagonists in films like Queen Latifah’s *Bringing Down the House* and television programs like Nell Carter’s *Gimme a Break* offer absolution to white descendants of Euro-American slave owners and to those whose connection to slavery is indirect but whose white skin privilege is rooted in the unequal hierarchy of the slave system. Their adoption of the white employers’ personal interests and challenges as their own communicates that most conciliatory and comforting of all messages, for which Mammy is most beloved—above and beyond her smiling countenance, her witty rejoinders, and her expert cooking skills. In her happy service and unshakable loyalty Mammy comforts all those who see her with the simple message that simple, hardworking black people like herself desire nothing more than that status that is conveyed by the **love** of one’s white employers.

See also Douglass, Frederick; Neely, Barbara; Plantation Tradition

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*Ajuan Maria Mance*

**MARSHALL, PAULE (1929– )**

Paule Marshall has emerged as a major writer of feminist, African American, and Caribbean American **fiction** in the latter half of the twentieth century. Born of Barbadian parents, Marshall writes narratives of self-discovery often embodied in black female characters but encompassing larger social critiques of gender, **race**, and economics in Western capitalist culture. Marshall's body of **work** includes five novels and two collections of short stories. For her works, the most well known of which are *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), and *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Marshall has garnered prestigious awards such as a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Columbus Foundation American Book Award, and a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship. Her stories chronicle the pitfalls of sexism, racism, and materialism in Western culture but reveal the hope of renewal through the embracing of cultural heritage and communal relationships.

Born in 1929 in Brooklyn, New York, Marshall spent her childhood within a close Caribbean and immigrant **community**. Her parents came from Barbados and returned with nine-year-old Marshall for an influential visit after which the budding writer was inspired to compose her first lines of **poetry**. Since those early verses, Marshall's writing has explored the female and Caribbean voices of her youth with affection and honesty. In her famous essay "The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen" in *Reena and Other Stories* (1962), Marshall credits the gathering of her mother's friends around the kitchen table for teaching and inspiring the art within her. From the hours of conversation she overheard, Marshall says, she learned to weave a story with grace, truth, and humor.

Marshall's grappling with the obstacles of black life in Western culture have been appreciated by many scholars including biographer Joyce Pettis and critics Dorothy H. Dennison, Hortense J. Spillers, and Barbara Christian. Marshall's writing follows many different characters as they struggle to define themselves within a materialist culture that devalues African and West Indian heritage. Some of her characters, like Marshall herself, travel back to their Caribbean homeland and rediscover a wholeness missing from their lives. The journey of self-discovery becomes symbolic and thematically connects much of Marshall's oeuvre.

In her exploration of dominated peoples in a patriarchal and capitalist culture, Marshall's writing can also be considered globally feminist. Not only does she examine issues specifically feminine such as familial and marriage relationships, **motherhood** and childbirth, and female friendship and community, but Marshall's work also illustrates alternate forms of self-identification in a dominant culture. Finding strength in the tension of community rather than in strict self-reliance, and epiphany within cultural tradition rather than in typical Western self-enlightenment, marks Marshall's writing as largely feminist in scope.

Many of Marshall's young female protagonists spend their childhood attempting to balance the demands of **family** versus the outside culture. As

children of immigrant parents, Marshall's characters must learn to balance their own growing dreams with the expectations of a demanding community. Selina, in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, constantly negotiates the conflicting demands of her mother and father, as well as those of her new American **home** and her West Indian heritage. Likewise, Merle and Avey, in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, respectively, must figure out how to first define themselves as wives and then redefine themselves as women after their marriages end. In both marriage and family responsibilities, Marshall's characters often encounter some aspect of African or West Indian heritage that helps them unearth new paths toward self-discovery.

Motherhood and childbirth recur in Marshall's texts as constant issues in the lives of her female characters, representing both mothers and daughters. Not only do the characters face these questions of **identity** common to most women, but they also must look past their roles as someone's mother or daughter to find fulfillment. Marshall does not allow her protagonists to become dominated by their role as wife, mother, or daughter but instead portrays their struggles as individuals in tension with those roles. *Daughters* (1991) especially confronts the role of motherhood and childbirth in the personal lives of the characters Estelle and Ursa as well as the political life of the country of Triunion; abortion becomes a central metaphor for loss, pain, and ultimately the regeneration of the personal and the communal.

Female friendship and community are constant backdrops in Marshall's stories. From her own **love** of her mother's friends to the many descriptions of women's communities in her writing, Marshall clearly locates both problems and solutions in the gathering of women. Often groups of black and immigrant women provide both tension and support for the development of Marshall's protagonists. Selina must struggle against her mother's group of friends in order to find her own individuality, for example, but where the community does not exist for Avey in *Praisesong for the Widow*, the character must seek it out in order to find **healing** within herself.

Marshall's stories should be considered feminist for the many themes she develops around women's emotional, physical, and spiritual lives. But her constant interest in her male and female characters' ability to heal and regenerate can be understood as more broadly feminist. Whereas the traditional Western masculine narrative locates an individual's enlightenment in internal and intellectual exploration, Marshall's texts demand her characters' interaction with the self and the community. Incorporating individualism and communal identity, present cultural norms as well as ethnic heritage, Marshall's characters do not focus on the self to the exclusion of all else. On the contrary, Marshall illustrates that the only possibility for healing an oppressive **history** and encouraging an egalitarian future comes through interaction with self and community. The tensions created by her characters' honest confrontations of these many pressures place her within feminist discourse.

While many of Marshall's themes focus primarily on female characters and community, men also figure prominently in her stories. Not all of Marshall's

characters are female, nor are they all of African or West Indian descent. But the lives of African Americans and women come to represent the inequalities present in an often disjointed and materialistic mainstream American culture. The journeys toward wholeness that Marshall's characters experience offer a path to healing and self-integration available to the culture as a whole. Marshall shows that rejuvenation is possible for those willing to confront often painful histories to reconcile generations of oppression.

Marshall has lectured in creative writing and black **literature** at many prestigious institutions such as Yale, Columbia, and Oxford. She currently holds the Helen Gould Sheppard Professor in Literature and Culture at New York University.

*See also Fisher King, The*

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*Laura Baker Shearer*

### **MATTHEWS, VICTORIA EARLE (1861–1907)**

Victoria Earle Matthews was among the literary elite of her day, a national leader in the struggle for the rights of black women, and an instrumental figure in the social reform to “uplift” African Americans. When she was thirty-three, a column in *Woman’s Era* predicted her name would become a household word. Given her contributions, American **history** has made little notice of her, perhaps because of her early **death** to tuberculosis at age forty-five or because many of her writings have been lost.

Matthews succeeded through much adversity in her life, a path she worked to recreate for other women of her **race**. Born a slave in Fort Valley, Georgia, Victoria Earle endured a cruel master who her mother escaped from after several attempts. Victoria’s mother earned enough money after eight years to return for her **family** to bring them to New York. Once in school, Victoria showed great promise as a student but was forced to leave school to help provide for her family. She found employment in a **home** with an extensive library, which her employer allowed her to use when time permitted.

At eighteen, she married William Matthews and began a successful journalistic career. Initially she substituted for reporters at several prominent daily papers, such as the *New York Times* and *New York Herald*. Eventually she became a highly sought-after reporter, by both black and white newspapers.

Matthews’s extant writings portray her as an advocate for and educator of her race. Through her columns she defended the morality of black women and the progress of African Americans; she also wrote tributes to heroes of abolition. “We owe it to our children to uncover from partial oblivion and unconscious indifference the great characters within our ranks,” she says in a piece on Harriet Tubman. Of the nine short stories she published in the *A.M.E. Church Review*, three have survived. Perhaps Matthews’s best-known work, “Aunt Lindy: A Story Founded on Real Life,” represents one of the first uses of a dialect-speaking Negro as a central character. She also edited a collection of works by Booker T. Washington in *Black-Belt Diamonds* (1898).

Complementing Matthews’s **work** as a writer was her leadership among organizations advocating for her race and sex. She helped sponsor a fund-raising rally for anti-lynching crusader **Ida B. Wells-Barnett** in 1892. The same year she also established the Women’s Loyal Union of New York and Brooklyn. In

1895, Matthews joined the effort to organize a national black women's club by speaking at the first National Conference of Colored Women on "The Value of Race Literature," highlighting the accomplishments and distinctiveness of African American literary works. She later became chair of the executive committee of the Federation of Afro-American Women.

With the death of her only child in 1897, Matthews followed a calling to help other people's children. She established the White Rose Industrial Association after witnessing how southern black women became exploited as prostitutes when migrating to northern cities. Inside the Association's home, new arrivals to New York City found shelter and training in **domestic** skills, as well as access to a library rich in African American history and **literature**. It is believed she contracted tuberculosis doing her mission work at the wharves in New York Harbor.

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Caleb A. Corkery

## MAUD MARTHA

Gwendolyn Brooks's only novel, published in 1953, relates the autobiographical coming-of-age story of a poor, dark-skinned African American woman living on the South Side of Chicago during the 1930s and 1940s. The novel comprises thirty-four brief chapters, or vignettes, that offer not a narrative about its heroine but rather glimpses of her intellectual and emotional struggles on various occasions during her childhood and young adulthood. Some of these occasions are traditional landmarks in a girl's maturation into womanhood: her grandmother's **death**, her first boyfriend, her marriage, the establishment of her married **home**, and the birth of her first child. Others emphasize the heroine's day-to-day existence: children on their way to elementary school, the young couple reading in bed, and Maud Martha's struggle to dress a chicken, for example. Overall, the novel immerses us in the ordinariness of Maud Martha's life, which is uniquely her experience but, simultaneously, representative of the vast majority of lives. By giving us a complex, imaginative heroine who identifies more with the dandelions in her backyard than with the rarer **beauty** of lilies, Brooks teaches her reader to value the commonplace.

Critics tend to concentrate on the novel's aesthetics and thematic coherence. Brooks brings the tightly compressed but vividly precise language of her **poetry** to her prose work. Each chapter conveys a mood, delicately evoked through telling images. She effectively employs juxtaposition, alliteration, fragmentation, and repetition—stock tools of the poet's trade—in delineating moments in Maud Martha's development. By representing Maud Martha as sensitive, creative, and acutely observant, Brooks gives us a portrait of the artist as a young woman. Brooks's aesthetic choices enable her to suggest succinctly such broadly resonant themes as the relationship between life and death, the damaging effects of white racist and black color-conscious definitions of beauty, and the chafing constraints that gender norms place on potentially extraordinary women.

The novel has been instructively compared with **James Baldwin's** *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and **Ralph Ellison's** *Invisible Man* (1952), which were published contemporaneously with it. While Ellison's and Baldwin's debut novels garnered serious critical attention and appreciation, only quiet and cursory notice was given to *Maud Martha*, despite Brooks's status as a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. **Black feminist** critics subsequently attributed this difference in reception not only to the shorter length and stylistic innovations of Brooks's work but also to the extent that it frustrated expectations that African American novels would portray a protagonist's heroic response to epic



and tragic racial conflict. *Maud Martha* instead relentlessly filters issues of **class**, **race**, and gender oppression through the interior world of its heroine, who in turn remains confined within the claustrophobic **domestic** realm. It is ironic that this novelistic critique of the silencing of women was marginalized precisely because it speaks, though in a third-person narrative voice, almost entirely through Maud Martha's thoughts and impressions. Only recently has the novel been recognized as significant in the African American literary tradition, especially as a forerunner of the particular concerns of late-twentieth-century black women novelists.

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*Evie Shockley*

### McELROY, COLLEEN (1935– )

An award-winning writer of poems, stories, dramas, and memoirs, Colleen Johnson McElroy has spent much of her life in motion. Born in 1935 in St. Louis to Ruth Celeste and Purcia Purcell Rawls, McElroy's parents divorced when she was three, leading to her first move, into her grandmother's **home**. It was there, while playing with her grandmother's Victrola, that McElroy developed a "romance with language." When Ruth married army sergeant Jesse Johnson in 1943, the **family** resettled in various locations, including Germany and Wyoming. After earning an associate's degree at Harris-Stowe College in 1956, she attended the University of Maryland and the University of Pittsburgh before earning her bachelor's and master's of science degrees in language patterns at Kansas State University. McElroy worked as a speech clinician and a television talk show moderator before completing her doctorate

at the University of Washington in 1973, when she joined the faculty. In 1983, she became the first black woman at the University of Washington to be promoted to full professor.

McElroy's passion for language has assumed both scholarly and creative dimensions. In 1972, she published a study of language development in preschoolers, followed the next year by her first collection of **poetry**, *The Mules Done Long Since Gone*. This chapbook grew out her frustration with 1960s-era poems that mythologized African American women's experiences. Inspired by her Washington surroundings—as much by fellow poets Richard Hugo and Denise Levertov as the rainy, mountainous landscape—McElroy's early poetry draws upon her discovery of black poets like **Anne Spencer**, **Gwendolyn Brooks**, **Margaret Walker**, **Langston Hughes**, and Robert Hayden. She has since published nine collections of poetry, including *Queen of the Ebony Isles* (1984), which won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award in 1985. In *Queen*, McElroy explores territories both familial and exotic, moving from mother-daughter relationships through Latin American travels to comic book heroines.

The recipient of numerous National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) fellowships and Fulbright residencies, McElroy has traveled widely, listening to storytellers and learning new ways to render human experience. Not surprisingly, her writing often draws from **memory**, whether the experience originates in her past or is sparked by someone else's words. Her story collections *Jesus and Fat Tuesday* (1987) and *Driving Under the Cardboard Pines* (1990) explore acts of complicity and resistance, from the controversial seduction/**rape** of a nineteenth-century backwoods girl ("A Brief Spell by the River") to the joyride of a black war widow through postriot Watts ("Sister Detroit"). In 1999, her passion for storytelling and travel converged in *Over the Lip of the World: Among the Storytellers of Madagascar*, a collection of translations and travel memoirs. Attuned to ways language transcends time, place, and **race**, McElroy is a writer constantly returning "home/a stranger in love with words/with tart sweet clusters of poems."

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*Rebecca Meacham*

### McKAY, CLAUDE (1889–1948)

Claude McKay, poet, novelist, and journalist, was born Festus Claudius McKay on September 15, 1889, in Jamaica, West Indies. Both of McKay’s parents were farmers, and McKay’s early **poetry** exhibited an interest in the life of “folk” people, like his parents, who were struggling to gain economic stability in an often-unstable economic environment. The youngest of eleven children, McKay was sent at an early age to live with an older brother and his **family** in order that he could gain access to a better education. McKay’s brother was a schoolteacher who had a large collection of English novels, poetry, and scientific texts. McKay was encouraged to pursue his interest in reading and writing, and he began writing poetry at age ten. In 1907 while apprenticing to a wheelwright, McKay met Walter Jekyll, who would be influential in his development as a writer. It was due to Jekyll’s influence that McKay constructed his early poetry using Jamaican Creole (a.k.a. Patois), in effect capturing the true essence of the “folk” culture from which he was raised. Jekyll would later set some of McKay’s dialect verse to music.

In 1911 McKay became a constable in Spanish Town, Jamaica, an experience that would be reflected in his early poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (both 1912). McKay’s decision to write his poetry in Jamaican Creole spoke of his criticism of colonial and postcolonial British influence in the Caribbean. The collections *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* reflect McKay’s social awareness as well as his understanding of the different economic locales he occupied; *Songs of Jamaica* deals with McKay’s life in the

country, while *Constab Ballads* reflects his time in urban Kingston and Spanish Town. McKay's concern for the working-class members of the community is maintained in his second collection of poetry. It is during his time as a constable that McKay gathered the material for his collection *Constab Ballads*. This collection not only reflects his experience in urban Jamaica; it provides insight into McKay's struggle to reconcile his societal position as a constable with his view of himself as product of a peasant community. This is perhaps most heartfelt in his poem "The Heart of a Constab." McKay's Jamaican Creole poetry helps to affirm his connection to his Caribbean home and demonstrate his awareness of the political climate in the Caribbean, an awareness that continued to appear in McKay's work even after his migration to the United States. McKay's determination, in Creole poetry, to link himself with the peasant populations is critical as it reflects the position McKay would take during the **Harlem Renaissance**, maintaining concern for and interest in the lifestyle of working-class blacks in Harlem.

Written under the pseudonym Hugh Hope, McKay's poem "Song of the New Soldier and Worker," though written in 1920 during McKay's "pre-communist period" and while he was living in England, clearly could have been applied to Jamaican country folk or to the low-class blacks of Harlem.

In 1912 McKay migrated to the United States to attend Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, hoping to pursue a career in agronomy. While at Tuskegee, McKay felt firsthand the reality of black and white relations in America, experiencing the overt racism that was still a way of life in the United States. From 1913 to 1914 he attended Kansas State University, studying agriculture, before moving to New York City in 1914. It was through the financial support of Walter Jekyll that McKay was able to make this move to the American North.

In 1917 McKay began publishing ("Invocation" and "The Harlem Dancer") under the pseudonym of Eli Edwards. McKay's notoriety came in 1919 when he published "If We Must Die" in Max Eastman's *Liberator*; "If We Must Die" is often identified as one of the critical starting points of the Harlem Renaissance (a.k.a. New Negro movement). The poem was written during the Red Summer of 1919, a period of racial violence against blacks. The poem's ardent influence came not only from its insistence on maintaining the struggle for equality but also because of its open recognition of the humanity of African Americans and the black experience in America. McKay was identified by other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as **Langston Hughes** and **Countee Cullen**, as an inspirational leader. McKay's Harlem Renaissance literature focused on contemporary race issues. He chose to focus on the working-class community rather than the middle-class population that W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke wanted to see exhibited in art during this time period. Du Bois's attempt to make the Harlem Renaissance a movement of art as a form of propaganda and his insistence that artists present positive images of a middle-class, educated, upwardly mobile community caused conflict for writers such as McKay who desired to represent a "true" image of the black experience in America. McKay and the members of

the Harlem School of Writers resisted Du Bois's and Locke's political agenda and produced art that reflected the experience of the working-class people.

McKay's Harlem Renaissance poetry breaks from the literary tradition he developed in his writing in the West Indies. His use of the traditional sonnet form and standard English to discuss racial issues pertinent to early 1900 America was a noticeable change from his previous use of "folk" language. Despite McKay's shift in language, his interest in the working-class community is maintained and reflected throughout his literary pieces written in America and during his time in Europe.

Although the Harlem Renaissance is often presented as a Harlem-centered phenomenon, like many artists of the time McKay spent little time in Harlem. He lived in England from 1919 to 1921 where his interest in Karl Marx and Marxism began. McKay spent a year working for the Marxist periodical *Workers' Dreadnought*. Upon returning to New York in 1921 McKay began working for the *Liberator* as an associate editor. He continued to write, publishing the essay "How Black See Green and Red." *Harlem Shadows*, McKay's collection of poetry, was published the following year.

In 1922–1923 McKay journeyed to Russia and addressed the Third Communist International in Moscow. These years mark his expatriate years in Europe and North Africa. In 1925 McKay wrote and destroyed his first novel *Color Scheme*. In 1927 Alain Locke, often identified as the "father" of the Renaissance movement, published *Four Negro Poets*, which contained work by McKay.

McKay's novel *Home to Harlem* was published in 1928 with much acclaim, though not without some controversy. The novel's candid portrayal of the working-class Harlem community directly subverted the focus on middle-class ideals that was the hallmark of the Renaissance. *Home to Harlem* focused on the life of a young black soldier living in Harlem after his return from World War I. McKay has often been criticized for writing *Home to Harlem* in response to and modeled after Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) in order to gain prominence from the coverage that *Nigger Heaven* had received. Although a relationship between the two texts cannot be denied, McKay's distinct and particular use of dialogue and his focus on the lower class of Harlem clearly distinguish his work from Van Vechten's.

In 1929, McKay published *Banjo* while living in France. Both McKay and the novel *Banjo* influenced Léopold Sédar Ségheur, Aimé Césaire, and other participants of the Negritude movement.

*Banana Bottom* was published in 1933. This novel is McKay's literary return to the Caribbean, focusing on the homecoming of a young woman who had been sent to England to be educated. The book emphasizes the importance of a return to home and culture in determining **identity**.

McKay had moved to Morocco in 1930, but due to financial concerns, he returned to the United States in 1934. The following year he published the essay "Harlem Runs Wild." He participated in the Federal Writers' Project in 1936. McKay published his autobiographical text *A Long Way from Home* in 1937. In 1940 *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* was published.

McKay never returned to Jamaica, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1940. During the later years of his life, McKay suffered from high blood pressure and heart disease. Having previously given up his association with communism, McKay developed a strong Catholic faith, moving to Chicago in 1944 to work for the Catholic Youth Organization. McKay died of congestive heart failure in 1948 in Chicago; he was buried in New York following a service in Harlem. *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, McKay's second **autobiography**, was published posthumously in 1979.

From a feminist perspective, *Home to Harlem* is perhaps McKay's most crucial text. In a first reading of *Home to Harlem*, Jake, McKay's African American protagonist, appears to be a character of simple means, driven by his sexual desires and without any sense of morality. His movement throughout the novel is made possible by his encounters with women; these encounters are primarily sexual and exploitative. The women in the novel lack motivation and are political and socially unaware. They are portrayed as primitive beings driven by their **sexuality** and base emotion. The women reflect the racial and cultural biases of the Harlem community at that time. For most of the novel, the majority of women are limited to purely physical tasks—having sex, drinking alcohol, or fighting each other over the men.

On one level, *Home to Harlem* can be read as a romance novel, paralleling Jake's relationship and search for Felice. Jake's relationship with Felice serves to pull the novel together. Felice is the first woman, and appropriately the last woman, that Jake encounters when he is in Harlem. *Banjo*, where we find the couple still together and still "in love," clearly establishes the viability of Jake and Felice's relationship. The movement of the novel parallels Jake's search for Felice after they lose contact. However, Jake must assert his manhood before he and Felice can meet again. It is ironic that Jake's journey to manhood, signified by his search for Felice, is made possible through his demoralizing and limited relationships with women. Jake's movement in the novel is hinged on his relationships with women. *Home to Harlem* uses women as social markers, and this is particularly noticeable in the emphasis on color that pervades the novel. The narration uses color and erotic female images to characterize the local hangout, the Congo, as "African." Rose, the singer at the Congo, is compared to a leopard, a description that complicates any reading of the text. Rose is objectified throughout the novel; to Jake, she is a sexual object. Rose is, however, significant to Jake's "rite of passage," because she is symbolic of the type of woman that Jake can never commit to. Rose is the antithesis of the proper woman; the text renders Rose's character in a negative light, positing her as an unacceptable female figure. When Rose, in an attempt to pacify Jake, demands that Jake beat her, Jake's denial helps to solidify Rose's inadequacy. Rose acts as a springboard for Jake's psychological advancement; she provides Jake with a lesson that allows him to continue on his journey. McKay's representation of women as "steps" for male acquisition of status and power places women in a marginal position, leaving them without a viable voice and without a legitimate role within society.

Collections of McKay's works are held as follows: James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale University; Schomburg and H. L. Mencken collections at the New York City Public Library; the William Stanley Brathwaite Papers at Harvard University; the Alain Locke Papers at Howard University; the NAACP Papers in the Library of Congress; the Eastman Papers at the University of Indiana, Bloomington; the Rosenwald Fund Papers at Fisk University; the Countee Cullen Papers at Dillard University.

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*Josie Brown-Rose*

### McKISSACK, PATRICIA (1944– )

Patricia L'Ann Carwell McKissack grew up in the segregationist **South** experiencing many of the horrors and inequities of Jim Crow. These experiences left her with a deep understanding of the necessity to have representative voices that tell the countless stories of the people of the United States. After graduating from Tennessee State University in Nashville in 1964, McKissack married her college sweetheart Fredrick and became a junior high school teacher in Missouri. As the mother of three boys, Fredrick Jr. and twins Robert and John, and years spent as a teacher, McKissack witnessed

firsthand the lack of writings for children that underscored African American heritage and culture. In the face of this drought, McKissack picked up her pen and began to write of the African American way of life.

The depth of McKissack's narrative can be attributed, in part, to her experiences growing up in a **family** that practiced and appreciated oral storytelling. Her maternal grandmother and fraternal grandfather often regaled the family with stories of what it was like growing up African American during the early decades of the twentieth century. These stories fueled her mind and planted a seed that prepared her for a storytelling future. McKissack's **historical fiction** and nonfiction narratives celebrate wide-ranging African American experiences and contributions that bring alive the facts and figures of African American **history** in an accessible way for children. Although McKissack writes of both male and female leading characters, many of her books present prominent female characterizations that position young African or African American girls as role models for young readers today. McKissack designs her work to be suitable for the youngest reader, with stories that include *Ma Dear's Aprons* (1997), *Goin' Someplace Special* (2000), and *Flossie and the Fox* (1986), and for older readers including *A Picture of Freedom: The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl* (1997), *Color Me Dark: The Diary of Nellie Lee Love, the Great Migration North* (2000), and *Nzingha: Warrior Queen of Matamba* (2000), all showcasing outstanding young female heroines.

McKissack and her husband have worked together on many publications. These collaborations include the *Great African Americans* biography series that relates the lives of **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**, **Mary Church Terrell**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, and Madam C. J. Walker, to name only a few. McKissack's writings, which number over 100, have received numerous awards including the Newbery Honor Award, Coretta Scott King Award, *Boston Globe/Horn* Award, and Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work for Children. In 2004 McKissack won the King Author Honor Book award for her 2003 publication *Days of Jubilee: The End of Slavery in the United States*.

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Wanda G. Addison

### McMILLAN, TERRY (1951– )

Born in Port Huron, Michigan, on October 18, 1951, Terry McMillan is the daughter of Madeline Washington Tillman and Edward McMillan. After her parents' divorce when McMillan was thirteen, her mother supported the **family** by working in a factory. One of six children, McMillan attended Michigan public schools, where as a library worker she discovered works by black authors such as **James Baldwin** and **Zora Neale Hurston**; however, at this point, McMillan admits to not reading these authors out of embarrassment and fear. Moreover, McMillan was not sure if these black writers would have anything different to say than Thomas Mann, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

It was not until junior college at the City College of Los Angeles that McMillan became reacquainted with black writers. Her enrollment in an African American **literature** course is where she finally read Baldwin and Hurston. While inspired by these writers, she was also influenced by the work of **Langston Hughes** and **Frederick Douglass**. McMillan asserts that she did not consider emulating these authors. McMillan goes on to explain that she was just reading them at the time, not thinking of herself in any way as a writer. She was just in awe that there were black people who wrote books.

After her completion of studies at Los Angeles City College, McMillan spent six years as a student at the University of California in Berkeley, where she initially considered majoring in sociology. Still not defining herself as a writer, McMillan began writing political essays and editorials for a magazine called *Black Thoughts*. Soon she was recruited as a writer for the university magazine.

In her junior year at Berkeley, McMillan was required to declare a major. Still not defining herself as a writer, McMillan was perplexed as to what major she should choose. After initially choosing sociology as her major, she soon discovered that it was not intellectually and spiritually sustaining. It was not until her adviser suggested journalism that McMillan was able to envision herself in a profession that would be fulfilling, though she still ignored her gift as a writer. She did not consider something (writing) that came so easily to her as warranting serious consideration as a career choice. McMillan was reminded by her adviser that difficulty choosing a career is not a requirement for being taken seriously as an adult. Instead, one should choose a career path that one has a passion for instead of one that is expected. Armed with her adviser's advice, McMillan officially declared journalism as her major.

Although McMillan declared journalism as her major, she soon discovered that this, too, was not fulfilling. It was not until McMillan's senior year at Berkeley, when enrolled in a **fiction** course taught by **Ishmael Reed**, that she recognized her connection with words. There she acknowledged her passion for creative writing. It was also in Reed's course where her short story "The End" was published. On the advice of Reed, McMillan moved to New York upon her graduation from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1979, with a journalism degree in hand.

In New York, at the advice of Reed, McMillan joined the Harlem Writers Guild. With the encouragement of her fellow writers in the guild, McMillan began to take herself seriously as an author. In 1983, while a single parent to her son Solomon, a graduate student in the M.F.A. program in **film** at Columbia University, and a typist, McMillan enrolled for a two-week stint at an artists' colony in upstate New York, where she completed a draft of what would be her first novel, *Mama*.

After the completion of her formal education, McMillan began her teaching career. She has held positions at Stanford University, the University of Wyoming, and the University of Arizona in Tucson where she gained tenure. Following her teaching career, McMillan began to focus all of her attention on writing full-time. Her first novel, *Mama* (1987), gained McMillan wide recognition; however, it is her second novel *Disappearing Acts* (1989) that brought McMillan to fame. Her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), became an instant *New York Times* bestseller and remained on the bestsellers list for thirty-eight weeks. The novel then became an award-winning motion picture. As a result, African American women across the United States gathered in theaters where applause and cheering was heard as the protagonists of the film claimed their right to self-actualization. Following *Exhale*, McMillan's fourth novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), was an instant success. Described by McMillan as the novel closest to autobiographical, *Stella* remained on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for twenty-one weeks and sold more copies than the wildly popular *Waiting to Exhale*. That novel was also transformed into a major motion picture.

Largely based on McMillan's own life, *Stella* tells the story of a May/December relationship, but with a twist: The older partner is female. While all of her novels can be labeled as departures from the conventional forms of the female quest for romance narrative, *Stella* is at the forefront of such challenges in that McMillan creates a female protagonist who demands her right to be in touch with her passions—something women are traditionally socialized to repress.

Similar to her novel, McMillan traveled to the Caribbean for a respite after suffering the losses of her mother and her best friend. It was in Negril, Jamaica, that McMillan met and fell in **love** with twenty-year-old Jonathan Plummer, a hotel worker, who helped McMillan rediscover her passion for her art and for love. With Jonathan, McMillan was able to experience unconditional acceptance—something she did not always experience while dating men her own age. In interviews, McMillan has described the early stages

of the relationship as something that is happening for the time being. However, the couple was married in 1999 after a five-year courtship.

With the publication of her fifth novel, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001), McMillan comes full circle in her discussion of the importance of gender and racial pride. *A Day Late* can be described as McMillan's "adult" novel because it is the work that is the greatest departure from the romance novel form. The characters operate as reminders to the reader of the dangers of not looking backward and acknowledging "truths," in order to learn how to move forward. The novel closes with what the narrator (and indirectly McMillan) sees as important rules to live by: have hope and faith; remember family is all one has; self-forgiveness is the first step toward peace; if one does not love herself, then she will not attract and keep love in her own life.

Writing novels that are loosely structured like popular romance fiction is racially and politically risky for black women writers. Such a form carries sentimental connotations that are in direct opposition with the unspoken demands that black literature should be artistic, but artistic in a way that exemplifies the work's political significance. At first glance, one may view McMillan's work as apolitical. However, a closer look reveals that McMillan came of age during the 1960s **Black Arts Movement** where black authors were supposed to reflect racial uplift. All of her novels include representations of characters with redeeming qualities. Through these characters, readers are left with a sense of hope as they witness McMillan's commentary on the complexities and the **beauty** of black life.

Similarly, McMillan's novels serve to revise the narrative of what it means to be a woman in today's society. The female characters in her novels come to the realization that their oppression is borne out of the refusal to let go of dominant ideologies of womanhood. McMillan constructs plot lines that show her female characters on both sides of the master narrative. First, McMillan's women are constructed in plot lines where the female characters ascribe to the rules of the Cult of True Womanhood. By novel's end, these characters discover that self-empowerment and liberation come when one defines herself on her own terms.

*See also Interpretation of Everything, The*

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Catherine Ross-Stroud

## MEMORY

Preserved and contested, cohesive and divisive, infallible and faulty, memory remains one of the central themes in African American women's writing. In the hands of female African American writers, memory often becomes paramount to logic or knowledge. As a vessel of the past, memory is sacred; as an organizing textual device, it raises issues of questions of reliability. For example, one finds the painful memories of **slavery** recorded in various **slave narratives** and sees them transform into a shared, cultural memory present in **historical fictions**. In other forms, the embodiment of memory is in the **ancestor** figure whose stories reveal one's inheritance. Regardless of its shape, the tangible intangibility of memory informs African American **fiction**, prose, and **poetry**.

As a literary device, memory looms large, becoming, at times, a character unto itself. There are educable moments where one character imparts wisdom through memories, but memory often proves unreliable. Imbued with psychological qualities, as in **Gwendolyn Brooks's** "When You Have Forgotten Sunday: The Love Story," memory takes on yet another form. There, associations dictate the outcome of memory. Unquestionably multifaceted, memory is at best a duality that prevents a single, fixed definition. Similarly, memory, though discriminatory in what one chooses to remember, is not

hierarchical insofar as characters both ordinary and extraordinary rely upon it. From something as trivial as a birthday meal to something as meaningful as the rivers **Langston Hughes's** speaker recalls in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," memory's confluence with and contribution to knowledge remain unmistakable.

**Harriet Jacobs** uses the recollections of her time both in slavery and her flight from it to compose her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). In that book, Jacobs offers a look at the devastating effects physical and sexual violation cause. More so, Jacobs positions slavery as the primary memory of African American women and establishes an ultimate legacy to which all memories may return. In contemporary African American women's writing, however, the triumph over slavery replaces the cruel inhumanity of the institution. Unlike historical knowledge, the memories preserved in slave narratives offer an alternative entrance into understanding. Time's role in memory certainly changes recollections by softening some incidents or adding strength to others so that long-forgotten sources feel a new bruise. For example, a flood of **family** memories triggered by the **death** of her father sustains **Lucille Clifton**. In *Generations: A Memoir* (1976), Clifton comes to see the power of memory to transform the present. Her father's reliance on memories of his life and the knowledge that he was descended from Dahomey women offer Clifton a lineage and a legacy. By holding on to his preslavery Dahomey heritage, Clifton's father sees memory as empowering rather than crippling. Likewise, Clifton takes from her father's memory the realization of its corrective quality that illuminates the past as something more far-reaching than slavery.

Perhaps the most well known of characters serving this theme, Sethe in **Toni Morrison's** *Beloved* (1987) confronts both memory and rememory. More immediate and visual, rememory is often involuntary and lacks the depth and detail of memory. Akin to a photograph rather than an entire experience, Sethe's rememory of Sweet Home, for example, is deceptive and limited, while her actual memory of the place retains omitted details. In *Beloved*, memory is repressed and the consequences reveal memory's more dangerous capacities. Meanwhile, the men of Ruby, Oklahoma, in Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) change the nature of memory from selective and personal to ironclad and indisputable. In the hands of Steward and Deacon Morgan, memory becomes a propagandist tool used to keep order among the **community**. The Morgans' transformation of memory into **myth** offers not only self-proclaimed justification for the Convent massacre but also an additional caveat to the power of memory. Here, masculine memories dictate what is appropriate to feminine memory; communal memory transforms into knowledge, while individual memories become discredited.

Similarly, **Gloria Naylor's** *Bailey's Café* (1992) echoes and expands the dangers of memories that become sentimental and static. While Eve uses her memory of each grain of delta dust as a reminder of how bad the past can be, she carries that knowledge into her present and moves forward in order not to repeat it. Others who stay at her house have to learn that the past is not a

prison and memory can be misleading. Still, for Sadie, who never enters Eve's house, memories delude her alcohol-induced reality and prevent her from moving beyond the passive life of memory into activity and decision.

Amy Hill Hearth's editorial decisions in *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* (1993) expose the problem one faces in creating an order for the recounting of memory. While Sarah L. and A. Elizabeth Delany told their century's worth of memories to that *New York Times* reporter, she chose to structure the book primarily around their memories of racial tensions. Thus, she crafted memory to a specific end and in the process changed its dynamic, stream-of-consciousness quality into something artificial and contrived—in other words, from healthy narrative into propaganda.

Additionally, withheld memory can privilege conjecture over knowledge, as Nella Larsen illustrates in *Passing* (1929) by never revealing Irene Redfield's true, initial disdain for Clare Kendry. Brooding over memories can destroy life, as the case of Joe Starks in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) demonstrates. Starks holds on to the memory of Janie's insult and allows it literally and metaphorically to kill him. Like Jacobs and Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Ntozake Shange, Rita Dove, and Gayl Jones provide additional examples of the multitude of African American women who use memory in their writing to show its perversions and clarifications. In the individual memories of *Beloved's* Sixo or the communal memory behind *Song of Solomon's* (1977) Not Doctor Street we see the power of memory to isolate and recall importance otherwise lost in the same manner Nikki Giovanni does in "Knoxville, Tennessee." In all these diverse manifestations, memory consistently offers a window to the past that connects individual and communal African American history.

See also Delany Sisters

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F. Gregory Stewart

### MEN OF BREWSTER PLACE, THE

*The Men of Brewster Place* (1998), the sequel to Gloria Naylor's award-winning first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1980), focuses on the lives of seven men who live in the Brewster Place project. Naylor establishes an intertextual relationship between the two works by repeating the narrative

structure, seven related stories, that she used in her first novel and by resurrecting Ben, a character who dies in the first book, to serve as narrative voice in *The Men of Brewster Place*. Although the sequel examines the lives of seven black men struggling to discover what it means to be black and male, women also play a prominent role in the book.

Ben describes his relationship with three women. His Grandma Jones, a hardworking woman who washed clothes to earn money, reared Ben. She taught him the value of self-reliance and the dignity of hard **work**. His wife, Elvira, lacks the compassion and tolerance that ennobled his grandmother. Convinced of her ugliness and unworthiness like Pauline Breedlove in **Toni Morrison's** *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Elvira worships everything associated with white culture and hates all things black. Elvira humiliates Ben and tramples on his manhood, making him feel worthless and inadequate. Moreover, she is openly hostile and abusive toward their crippled daughter. Consequently, the daughter suffers from a severe case of low self-esteem. Ben tries to shield his daughter from Elvira's attacks, but he cannot protect her from the sexual exploitation that she experiences from her white employer.

Naylor calls attention to other mothers in the book. Mildred, mother of Brother Jerome, the mentally retarded **blues** musician, remains emotionally detached from her son. He spends his days and nights alone playing the blues on the piano, and he entertains his mother's guests on demand. Significantly, Jerome's father abandons Mildred and their son, leaving her without the emotional and financial support that she needs to cope with their disabled son. Keisha, also a single mother with two little boys, is verbally abusive toward her sons and seems to view them as an unwanted burden. Like Mildred, Keisha feels used and abandoned by her sons' father. Basil, whose mother in *The Women of Brewster Place* had to rear him without a husband, marries Keisha to offer her sons a loving, nurturing environment like his mother provided for him. Ceil, the long-suffering wife of Eugene, the bisexual dockworker, is also a mother whose husband refuses to behave responsibly. Despite Eugene's repeated infidelity, she clings to him, allowing him to leave her alone to care for their child and to return when his guilty conscience overwhelms him. Like Ben, Eugene despairs over a painful sense of unfulfilled manhood. Because he has failed to achieve his dream of owning his own **home**, Eugene sees himself as less than a man. Like many women, Ceil blames herself for their dysfunctional marriage. She is a classic example of a woman whose **love** for her husband covers his faults and enables him to wallow in self-pity.

For the Rev. Moreland T. Woods, women are merely objects of pleasure. Although he respected and admired his strong, Jamaican grandmother, he shows little or no regard for other women, including his wife. Like Rev. John Pearson in **Zora Neale Hurston's** *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), Reverend Woods routinely violates his marriage vows. His wife accepts his infidelity as inevitable. Ironically, Reverend Woods's reputation for infidelity works against him when a disgruntled **community** activist hires several pregnant women to picket city hall, claiming that Reverend Woods is their babies'

father. Reverend Woods is forced to resign his seat on the City Council. Through her portrayal of Ben's daughter, Mildred, Keisha, Ceil, and the nameless women in Reverend Woods's narrative, Naylor highlights ways in which black women are exploited and devalued.

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*Elvin Holt*

### MERIDIAN

The central question of *Meridian*—whether or not the title character would kill for the revolution—illustrates **Alice Walker's** own ambivalence about the **civil rights movement** and the **Black Arts Movement**. Published in 1976 after Walker left the **South**, the novel chronicles Meridian's shifting self through adolescence, college, and adulthood, though not in chronological order: Walker said that she wanted the novel's structure to mimic that of a "crazy quilt," in which time sense and story focus may seem disjointed but in fact are intricately planned. Augmented with tangential anecdotes, like the stories of Feather Mae and Louvinie, Meridian's story depicts the unique struggle of a black woman in 1950s–1970s America.

Meridian Hill is raised by a judgmental and indifferent mother and a kind and distant father, neither of whom explains their constant rejoinder to "be good." Consequently, Meridian gets pregnant by and marries Eddie, after which she understands her own mother's disaffection for **motherhood**. Having a child, for both Meridian and her mother, signals an end to independence, excitement, possibility, and joy. Rather than perpetuate her mother's resentment, Meridian gives up her son, leaves Eddie, and attends the all-black Saxon College. At Saxon, once Saxon Plantation, she meets Anne-Marion, whose energy and militancy contrast with Meridian's own sense of quiet suffering and reserve. They become involved in civil rights protests and with a group of civil rights workers. Meridian falls in **love** with one of the workers, Truman, but only consummates their affair after he begins dating Lynne, a white New Yorker also working in the movement. Their unsatisfying



encounter results in pregnancy; Meridian aborts the fetus, undergoes tubal ligation, and experiences a profound depression, of which Truman is unaware.

Truman and Lynne marry, have a daughter, and live in the South, working for the movement. Just as Anne-Marion contrasts with Meridian, so too does Lynne. Lynne's **whiteness** endangers the black men in their group, providing white racists with fodder for their acts of **violence** against black men. After Tommy Odds is shot, he becomes bitter and blames Lynne, not just because her presence may have incited violence but because all white people are guilty of all racial injustice. Tommy's subsequent **rape** of Lynne acts as a wedge between her and Truman; Lynne becomes disillusioned with the movement, and Truman begins seeing other women. After their daughter is killed and they move to New York, Lynne and Truman separate.

Meridian stays in the South, working for civil rights. She lives like a monk, or a mystic, without possessions or the support of a civil rights group. Living in a series of small communities, she stands up to incidences of racism, after which she experiences both physical deterioration and spiritual transcendence. She also acts as a referee and a comforter to both Lynne and Truman, who begin to see by her example the true mission of the civil rights movement. After several years, Meridian decides that she is done with self-sacrifice and leaves her mystic's life, replaced by Truman.

Walker's novel shows that while the civil rights movement may have been internally divisive because of sexual politics, racial ambivalence, and lofty but abandoned ideals, individuals can achieve real change. Meridian's decision not to kill for the revolution later manifests as her later determination that no one—Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and others—should die for it, either. This tension between sacrifice and confrontation illuminates Meridian's **work** for civil rights as well as the other characters' development, plot trajectory, and Walker's presentation of the **history** of the civil rights movement.

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Kate Cochran

## MERIWETHER, LOUISE (1923– )

Though her literary light shines less brightly than her contemporaries', Louise Meriwether has written in a variety of genres, producing works that highlight African American **history**, culture, and achievements. Her first novel *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970), praised by **James Baldwin** for its candor and insight, is still her best-known work.

The only daughter of Marion Lloyd Jenkins and Julia Jenkins, Meriwether was the third of their five children. Born in Haverstraw, New Jersey, she relocated with her **family** to Harlem while still a child. Meriwether later completed a B.A. in English at New York City College and earned an M.A. in journalism from the University of California in Los Angeles (1965).

The degrees in English and journalism indicate Meriwether's early **love** of writing. As a journalist, Meriwether worked for the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, contributing biographical articles on accomplished but little-known African Americans. Upon joining the Watts Writers' Workshop in the mid-1960s, Meriwether turned her full attention to **fiction** writing. Meriwether spent five years writing *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, and excerpts were published in *Antioch Review* and *Negro Digest*. The completed novel was published by Prentice-Hall in 1970.

*Daddy Was a Number Runner* is a coming-of-age novel told from the perspective of a thirteen-year-old black girl living in depression-era Harlem.

Francie Coffin adores her number-running father James, who tells his children stories about their African heritage. As the depression continues, it becomes increasingly difficult for the Coffin family to survive economically. Unable to provide for his family, James leaves rather than bear witness to its disintegration. Francie's maturation process includes a shift from loyalty to her father to identification with and appreciation of her mother, Henrietta. Meriwether brilliantly illuminates the consequences of James's abandonment while fostering empathy for both parents. The harshest judgment of James comes from Francie when she learns he has moved in with another woman; evoking his stories about the **ancestors**, Francie tells her father that he forgot that he was one of Yoruba's children.

Despite the critical acclaim for her first novel, Meriwether turned her attention from adult to **children's and young adult literature**. Motivated by the omissions and distortions in American history books, Meriwether published juvenile biographies of three important African Americans: Civil War hero Robert Smalls, heart surgeon Daniel Hale Williams, and civil rights activist **Rosa Parks**. Her insistence on inclusive and truthful history inspired both her literary pursuits and her political activism. Meriwether played a key role in the protest by black **community** members that blocked the proposed **film** adaptation of William Styron's historically inaccurate *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967).

Meriwether returned to fiction writing in the 1990s and published two more novels. *Fragments of the Ark* (1994) revisits the story of Robert Smalls, this time as **historical fiction** that imagines and explores the personal relationships of the historical characters. Painstakingly researched, the novel fills in gaps in American history while telling a compelling story of the impact of **slavery** on individuals, families, and communities. Meriwether's third and most recent novel, *Shadow Dancing* (2000), takes place in 1980s New York. Set in the black professional **class**, the novel has some autobiographical traces in terms of the main character, a writer for *BlackSpeak* magazine who moves from journalism to fiction writing, echoing Meriwether's own career path.

Whether fiction or fact, Meriwether's writing engenders respect for African American ancestors and achievers. Her literary contributions deeply enrich our understanding of history and humanity.

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Janelle Collins

## MIDDLE PASSAGE

Scholars, historians, and scientists have not been able to settle on the exact number of enslaved Africans who were transported across the Atlantic on the crossing called the Middle Passage because of the sheer numbers who died en route and the lack of historical documentation providing specific numbers. The number has been estimated to be anywhere from 10 to 60 million. The route from the coast of Africa that cargo ships took to transport slaves to the French and British Caribbean Islands, South America, North America, and Central America consisted of one of the most brutal forms of human rights abuses historically.

**Slave narratives** such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by **Harriet Jacobs** and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1791) by Olaudah Equiano captured the country’s imagination when they were published. Jacobs’s account provides insight into the plight of female slaves, and much like her life of sexual abuse at the hands of her master, it has been documented that African women on slave ships endured **rape** and other forms of abuse.

Along with the autobiographical accounts of the enslaved were testimonies by unlikely eyewitnesses. The English surgeon Alexander Falconbridge took many voyages on slave ships as a paid surgeon, saw horrifying atrocities, and recounted his experiences. His nonfictional description *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa* (1788) provides vivid detail of the horrors the enslaved endured, making specific references to the imminent **death** and extreme suffering the female slaves faced. His experiences led him to fight for the abolition of **slavery**. His account became popular among abolitionists, and he eventually governed a colony of freed slaves in Sierra Leone.

Compelling fictional accounts of the horrors of the Middle Passage include **Toni Morrison's** *Beloved* (1987) and **Charles Johnson's** *Middle Passage* (1990). With astounding detail, Morrison carefully crafts and fictionalizes the horrors of slavery that the Middle Passage resulted in. Sethe's infanticide is another atrocity that the enslaved were forced to engage in as a way to avoid the brutality of slavery. To escape the unknown anguish that lay ahead, slaves committed suicide by throwing themselves overboard and perhaps even committed infanticide.

In 1807 the British Parliament prohibited the slave trade, and America followed suit, banning the slave trade in 1808. However, the legacy of the Middle Passage and the slave trade continue to reverberate worldwide. African women were valued solely for their reproductive capabilities and strength to withstand the harsh life on plantations in the new world. Their children became property, and their offspring with white slave masters created a perplexing caste and color system that privileged light skin and kept African Americans' inferiority intact. The psychological, physical, and economic repercussions have not yet been fully comprehended and, because of the complicated nature of the events, have remained unmeasured.

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*Zisca Isabel Burton*

### MILLER, MAY (1899–1995)

May Miller, the daughter of writer and professor Kelly Miller, contributed to the New Negro literary movement of the mid-1920s, establishing her place as an important female voice in an era of burgeoning civil rights and social consciousness. Miller's plays, **poetry**, and prose convey the African American woman's experience with female characters of various ages and backgrounds who are deliciously compelling and densely textured. Miller's characters, both male and female, frequently grapple with the division between knowledge and emotion, and the human condition and a higher power. She often uses children and images of childhood to explore the assimilation of innocence

with knowledge and the transformation of girl to woman, boy to man. Miller's works also engage in the juxtaposition of **slavery** and the fight for **freedom** with the modern African American struggle for equality. Her works underscore her conviction that education is the way to elevate the African American condition and empower black women. The influence of South Carolina **folklore** lends a wistful air to her poetry and a cultural richness to her plays that bespeaks Miller's **love** of language and learning.

Miller grew up in Washington, D.C., and graduated from Howard University in 1920, earning her degree in **drama**. During her college years she acted, directed, and produced numerous plays, winning an award for her one-act play *Within the Shadows*. But it was with a third-place award for her play *Bog Guide* (1925), a tale of a daughter's revenge for the **death** of her father, that established Miller as a member of the early **Harlem Renaissance**. In 1929, Miller's one-act drama *Scratches*, a commentary on black poverty, **class** differences, and **stereotypes**, was published in *Carolina Magazine* of the University of Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1930, William Richardson identified Miller as one of the most promising black playwrights and anthologized Miller's *Riding the Goat* (1928) and *Graven Images* (1930) in his *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro* (1930). In 1935, Richardson and Miller collaborated on *Negro History in Thirteen Plays*, in which three of Miller's plays appeared: *Christophe's Daughters*, *Soujourner Truth*, and *Harriet Tubman*.

For twenty years Miller taught English and speech at the **Frederick Douglass** High School in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1943, Miller retired from teaching and returned to Washington, D.C., where she began to concentrate exclusively on writing poetry. Miller's first collection of poetry, *Into the Clearing*, was published in 1959; followed by *Poems* (1962); *Lyrics of Three Women*, with Katie Lyle and Maude Rubin (1964); *Not That Far* (1973); *The Clearing and Beyond* (1974); *Dust of Uncertain Journey* (1975); *Halfway to the Sun* (1981), a volume of children's poetry; and *The Ransomed Wait* (1983). Miller served as poet-in-residence at Monmouth College in 1963, University of Wisconsin in 1972, Bluefield State College in 1974, Exeter Academy in 1973 and 1976, and Southern University in 1975. Miller was the poetry coordinator (1964, 1965) and chairperson of the **literature** panel (1970–1978) for the Friends of Art Commission of the Arts and Humanities in the District of Columbia. She has been widely published in journals and anthologies.

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Debbie Clare Olson

### MILLICAN, ARTHENIA J. BATES (1920– )

Arthenia J. Bates Millican was born on June 1, 1920, in Sumter, South Carolina, to Susan Emma David Jackson and Calvin Shepherd Jackson. Bates was always inspired by the written word and published her first poem at the age of sixteen. She received a B.A. degree in 1941 from Sumter College in South Carolina and pursued an M.A. degree at Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, where she was able to participate in a creative writing workshop led by **Langston Hughes**. Hughes took Bates under his wing as a protégée. This relationship nurtured her craft and would lead to a prolific career in several genres. She graduated in 1948 and would continue her lifelong **love** of learning. She eventually received a doctorate degree in 1972 from Louisiana State University, writing her dissertation on **James Weldon Johnson** and his influence on the African American literary tradition.

In addition to being a lifelong student, Millican is also an educator, her teaching career spanning four decades. At Morris College, Millican served as chair of the English Department. She also taught English at Norfolk State University, Mississippi Valley State University, and Southern University, from which she retired in 1980.

In 1976, Millican received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts for her short story "Where You Belong." She has been named a distinguished alumnus of Morris College, and collections of her works are maintained at the Sumter County Historical Society, South Carolina Library at the University of South Carolina, and Beinecke Library at Yale University.

Throughout the years, Millican has published **poetry**, **fiction**, and non-fiction in a myriad publications ranging from *Essence Magazine*, *Negro Digest*, and *College Language Association Journal*. She was a contributing editor for the literary journal *Callaloo* from 1976 to 1984 and *Obsidian: Black Literature in*

Review from 1974 to 1976. She also served as contributing editor to the compilations *James Baldwin, a Critical Evaluation* (1977) and *Sturdy Black Bridges: A Vision of Black Women in Literature* (1979).

In 1969, Millican published the critically acclaimed collection of short stories *Seeds beneath the Snow: Vignettes from the South*. Each of the twelve stories focuses on life in the black rural **South** and examines many of the influential forces of the South—relationships between parents and children, husbands and wives, people and God. In 1973, Millican published her first and only novel, *The Deity Nodded*. She currently resides in her hometown of Sumter, South Carolina.

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Roxane Gay

## MODERNISM

Literary **history** has long placed African American “modernism” as separate from the “**Harlem Renaissance**,” although friendships and influences between black and white writers of this era were many. American modernism thus defined refers to works by a group of primarily white European American writers inspired by European experimental writing, especially that of the French symbolists. The Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand, is a term equally racialized in its application to black writing produced between World Wars I and II. The Harlem Renaissance has most frequently been characterized in terms of its contribution to a “Negro aesthetic,” informed by debates between advocates of racial uplift through the arts (W.E.B. Du Bois) and advocates of expressive black culture through the idiomatic and vernacular (**Langston Hughes** and **Zora Neale Hurston**). While modernism tends to be distinguished by its experimental character, Harlem Renaissance writing is most often characterized by its central concern with the subject matter of **race** and embodiment, emphasizing experience over experiment in its obsession with African American culture and struggle. These distinctions between the mind (literary experiment) and the **body** (experience), associating white modernist writing with the mind and black modern writing with the body, articulate a racist dichotomy that has played out since the Enlightenment and that has found its latest incarnation in the critical dialogues



between “essentialism” and “constructivism” in the **identity** politics of the late twentieth century.

With recent reevaluations of modernism in the wake of postmodernism, critics are articulating an array of “modernisms” in American **literature**, including writing by black American authors. A closer investigation of the relationship between black and white writers during the world wars of the first half of the twentieth century reveals a relationship between them that was far more nuanced and complex than previous accounts suggest. Recent studies of **Jean Toomer** and **Nella Larsen**, for instance, investigate the relationship of these writers to modernist writers and artists as well as their influence on the development of modernist aesthetics. Other writers who used literary experimentation while exploring African American subjects include **Ann Petry**, **Gwendolyn Brooks**, Melvin Tolson, Robert Hayden, and **Ralph Ellison**.

A number of recent studies have gone beyond the examination of individual African American writers in relation to modernism and have focused on the ways in which the development of African American art during this period created a foil for developing white artists who wished to “alienate” themselves from the status quo. The ways in which both black and white cultural production shaped each other is the subject of several pioneering studies by Houston Baker, Michel Berube, Aldon Nielsen, Michael North, and Eric Sundquist. As the list of authors here suggests, this has been an area in which the work of male scholars predominates. Their work is valuable but should also suggest, in the context of a feminist encyclopedia of African American writers, the need for more studies of women writers and more theorizing by women critics in this area.

In *The Dialect of Modernism*, North argues that African American culture was essential to the development of mainstream modernism because the impersonation of black voices by such writers as Gertrude Stein (“Melantha”) and T. S. Eliot (dubbed “Possum” by Ezra Pound in the spirit of the “Uncle Remus” tales) was essential to the development of literary personas “alienated” from the status quo. This impersonation of blacks by white writers complicated the use of dialect and experimentation with literary style among African Americans, as the literary “dialect” available was often invented by whites, rather than speech reflecting black cultural authenticity. North interprets the **film** *The Jazz Singer* (1927) as an archetypal tale about this sort of appropriation. And as Nielsen points out in *Reading Race*, the persistence of modernism’s debt to African American culture and cultural impersonation is illustrated in the dedication of John Berryman’s second “Dream Song” to Daddy Rice, credited with inventing the Jim Crow dance in 1828. On the other hand, African American writers during the Harlem Renaissance often felt constrained by white patrons from writing about social issues, lest they violate the stylistic conventions of modernism.

From the beginning, Harlem Renaissance literature was infused with the spirit of literary experiment and a consciousness of style and invention, although critics have often deliberately overlooked style in order to focus on

content in black writing. Jean Toomer, often credited as the author whose experimental work *Cane* initiated the Harlem Renaissance with its publication in 1923, was well read in the French symbolists and incorporated what he learned from them into his portraits of southern black women in *Cane* as well as in the suggestive, elusive structure of this three-part book of short, lyrical prose passages interspersed with poems. Toomer's literary colleagues during this period included modernist writers and artists such as Waldo Frank, Alfred Stieglitz, and Sherwood Anderson. When he traveled with Toomer in the **South**, modernist Waldo Frank often passed for black. Although William Faulkner never acknowledged a debt to Jean Toomer, the opening passages of *Light in August* (1932), written a few years after the publication of *Cane*, reflect a stylistic treatment of the rural South akin to that of Toomer's in *Cane*'s first section, set in rural Georgia, especially in the portrait of Lena Grove.

Among African American women modernists, the work of Nella Larsen stands out, particularly her short novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), that bear comparison to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, published a few years before, in their concise, elegant, symbol-laden prose, particularly with regard to its use of color. While Fitzgerald's celebrated use of color symbolism associates characters and their dreams in *The Great Gatsby*, the use of color in Larsen's work draws the reader's attention to the crudeness of the stark black and white terms used to describe the color spectrum of race in America and to foster nuances and complexity in the reader's understanding of race and culture. Larsen's innovative use of modernist literary techniques to reveal the complex surface tension inherent in interracial relationships and racial mixing shows how modernism and social issues, textual experiment and lived experience, can be effectively interwoven. Furthermore, *Quicksand* not only incorporates modernist literary techniques; its plot brings together the European and the American, two worlds in which the protagonist finds herself constructed differently, but in both places as a body rather than as a stylish text. In fact, *Quicksand* can be read as a parable of the African American modernist author in the racialized literary context of the 1920s—no matter how hard she works at attending to “surfaces”—literary experiment—and no matter how hard she works at escaping the limits of physical experience—the racial body—she is still construed as a “body” by others, whether in the context of a black college in the American South as the body who will breed the “talented tenth” or in Denmark as the “exotic primitive” on which the white European artist (Axel Olson) projects his own desire for warmth and sexual fulfillment. Larsen's novel *Quicksand*, like Toomer's *Cane*, uses the bodies of black women as a metaphor to dramatize the mind/body dichotomy underlying racially charged distinctions between “modernist” work and work that is socially conscious.

Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953) can be viewed as a response to Stein's *Melanctha*, a reappropriation of the body and voice of the dark-hued black woman. Thus from the beginning, modernist texts by African American writers displayed not only a double consciousness but a triple

consciousness—inflected by both race and gender awareness in the construction of the “black body” in racial discourse. A mind/body dualism that insists on dichotomizing aesthetic creation and experiential authenticity haunts not only conversations about modernism and race but also the broader disciplines of African American and feminist criticism. African American critics (especially during the 1960s and 1970s) have chastised African American writers who drew on European or modernist forms as not being true to the charge of African American literature—to articulate art from the black experience. **Black feminist criticism**, during its rise in the 1980s, was rife with dispute over the authenticity of representations of African American women’s experience by African American women writers, and whether criticism should be based on essentialist notions of culture or theorized by what was often viewed as “European American” ideological paradigms.

Contemporary African American poets have integrated experimental poetics and the exploration of subjectivity, defying the binaries of identity politics while exploring the ways in which social and political realities are constructed through language. They have drawn on an experimental heritage of modern American poetics including the contributions of African American vernacular and **jazz** as well as the innovations of language **poetry**. Some of the women in the forefront of contemporary experimental writing include **Elizabeth Alexander**, **Harryette Mullen**, Claudia Rankine, **Sapphire**, and Natasha Tretheway.

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*Ann Hostetler*

**MOODY, ANNE (1940– )**

By most accounts, today Anne Moody lives an almost reclusive life, although her formative and young adult years are well documented in her powerful **autobiography** *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968). The eldest daughter of sharecroppers in Wilkinson County, Mississippi, her younger years were shaped by a somewhat nomadic existence as her **family** moved quite frequently. To help out financially, Moody began working at the age of nine as a **domestic** for various white families in the area. It was then that she was exposed to the racial inequality and injustice to which blacks were subjected; however, this new awareness sparked a spirit of defiance in Moody that would drive her passion for social activism at the dawn of the **civil rights movement**.

By the time Moody was in her early teens, she had heard of several lynchings in the **South**. But one lynching in particular instilled in her a hatred and intense, almost palpable fear of whites—the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till. In *Coming of Age in Mississippi* she says, “Before Emmett Till’s murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil. But now there was a new fear known to me—the fear of being killed just because I was black” (107). Moody did not, however, allow her fear to incapacitate her.

She earned excellent grades in school and was a standout basketball player. She attended Natchez Junior College in 1961 on a basketball scholarship and continued her education at Tougaloo College, where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1964.

During college, Moody became active in the civil rights movement. She joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Her activities exposed her and her family to retaliation from racist factions in the South, but she was a determined woman who was committed to the fundamental goals of the civil rights movement.

Moody participated in numerous voter registration drives in Mississippi. She also traveled to various counties speaking out against racism and black apathy for the movement. She helped set up boycotts and was a demonstrator during the “sit-in” movement at a Woolworth lunch counter in Jackson in 1963. She helped organize protest marches, including one in response to Medgar Evers’s murder. Moody experienced threats and intimidation by white officials and the Ku Klux Klan and was jailed several times. It was the assassination of John F. Kennedy, however, that filled her with a sense of hopelessness.

Her autobiography ends by foreshadowing her disillusionment about the movement effecting positive social changes in Mississippi. She eventually broke away from the organized movement and relocated to New York. Moody published one other novel, but her autobiography detailing her years of social activism is what earned her the most acclaim.

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*Toni E. Smith*

**MOORE, OPAL (1953– )**

Opal J. Moore—poet, short-story writer, educator, scholar, and literary critic—is a Chicago native who graduated with a B.F.A. from Illinois Wesleyan University's School of Art in 1974. It was at Wesleyan that feelings of powerlessness in the face of racism led Moore to begin writing journals and **poetry**. Moore continued writing at the University of Iowa, where she earned an M.A. from the School of Art in 1981 and an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1982. In 1985 she took a position with Virginia State University teaching creative writing and African American **literature**. In addition to faculty appointments at Virginia Commonwealth University, Kassel University, and Radford University, Moore has also taught as a Fulbright Lecturer at Johannes Gutenberg-Universität in Mainz, Germany, and was Jessie Ball DuPont Visiting Scholar at Hollins College. In 1997 she joined the faculty of Spelman College, where she is currently serving as chair of the Department of English.

Moore, once coeditor of the "Cultural Pluralism" column in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, has focused much of her scholarship on visual and textual representations of African Americans in **children's literature**. In her essay on the censorship of **Maya Angelou's** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), Moore asserts that children do not need to be protected from the novel's difficult themes but rather should be allowed to grapple with the harsh truths it portrays. Similarly, Moore's **fiction** and poetry cast a clear, unflinching gaze on reality and frequently address the painful struggles of women attempting to live "sane lives." Her 1995 short story "The Fence" tells of a young black girl's beginning lessons of survival in the face of, among other things, her uncle's sexual abuse. Moore's 1999 poem "A Woman's

Virtue: Sister I Need to Hear You Sing That Song” remembers the suffering of uncelebrated women, silent and silenced.

Moore’s work often deals with making sense of the everyday: with the small incidents that go on to shape life’s larger purposes. One such shaping incident for Moore was her mother’s attempt to teach her children table manners by insisting that they “excuse” themselves before leaving the dinner table. Moore, who only understood “excuse me” as a request for forgiveness, refused to utter what she perceived as a false admission of guilt, and so sat silently. Moore credits her mother for recognizing her refusal as meaningful and not punishing her apparent disobedience. Questions of obedience are taken up in her most recent work, a collection of poetry titled *Lot’s Daughters* (2004), which focuses on the choices women make to obey or defy cultural directives. The collection also reflects on what it means for women to “look back” and considers the stories and practices that people keep secret within a culture. Currently, Moore is collaborating with artist Arturo Lindsay on a collection of images and poems that excavate the story of the *Delfina*, a Portuguese slaver ship on which fifty-one people died en route to Rio de Janeiro in 1832.

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Stacy Grooters

### MORRISON, TONI (1931– )

Chloe Anthony Wofford was born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, the second of four children born to George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford. They had moved north to escape a life of sharecropping and vigorous southern racism. They succeeded on both counts. George became a shipyard welder, and in the ethnically diverse steel town, Chloe grew up without encountering the worst of American racism. Although she was the only black child in her first-grade class, she was also the only one who already knew how to read. From early childhood, Morrison was an avid reader, a pastime fostered by her parents. The Woffords told their children stories and **folklore** from the black **community** and thus instilled in them a deep appreciation for and interest in heritage.

After graduating with honors from Lorain High School, in 1949 Chloe Wofford moved to Washington, D.C., and matriculated at Howard University, one of America’s most distinguished traditionally black universities. While at Howard, Chloe changed her name to “Toni,” an abbreviated version of her middle name, reportedly because people had difficulty pronouncing “Chloe.” In a 1990s interview, Morrison admits regret at having made the change; however, even earlier, the theme of claiming one’s name surfaces in her **fiction**. In her third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), Milkman Dead cannot connect past to present nor understand his own heritage until he discovers his grandfather’s true name. By obscuring **identity**, the name Macon Dead—assigned by an intoxicated and indifferent white official at the Freedman’s Bureau—encapsulates white culpability in the cultural breach between Africans and diasporic people. Similarly, the protagonist of her fourth novel *Tar Baby* (1981) has two names: Jadine (the name used by blacks in the novel) and Jade (the name used by whites). The dual names signify the pressure the character feels to define and claim an identity in a

culture that defines and delimits individuals by **race**, gender, and **class**. But in 1953, when Toni Wofford graduated from Howard with a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in English and minoring in classics, her novels were still almost two decades in the future. Her immediate goal was a master's degree from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Having completed a thesis on suicide in the work of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, she graduated in 1955.

After two years of teaching at Texas Southern University in Houston, Toni Wofford returned to Howard University as a member of the faculty. There she met Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect. The couple married in 1958 and had two sons, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. In 1964 they divorced, and Morrison left her teaching position at Howard. With her sons, Morrison moved to Syracuse, New York, and took a job as a textbook editor for Random House. During this period, Morrison began writing at night after her children were in bed. She found writing therapeutic, a balm for the loneliness she felt. In 1967, she transferred to Random House's headquarters in New York City and became a senior editor. In that capacity, she edited many acclaimed African American women writers, including **Toni Cade Bambara** and **Gayl Jones**.

Morrison also continued to teach during these years, holding appointments at State University of New York–Purchase (1971–1972) and Yale University (1976–1977). In 1983, having already published four acclaimed novels, she left Random House and, in 1984, was appointed Albert Schweitzer chair at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Albany. She stayed at SUNY–Albany until 1989 when she was named Robert F. Goheen Professor of the Council of the Humanities at Princeton University. The appointment made Morrison the first black woman to hold a chair at an ivy league university.

Throughout Morrison's distinguished career, she has taught at a number of prestigious colleges and universities, including Bard College, Rutgers University, and Princeton University. She delivered the Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, and the Massey Lectures at Harvard University. She has also received numerous honorary degrees, including those from Brown, Columbia, Dartmouth, Georgetown, Harvard, Sarah Lawrence College, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale. Although Morrison is perhaps best known for her fiction, she has written successfully in several other genres as well, including **drama, children's and young adult literature**, short story, and criticism. Morrison has published *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination* (1992) and two collections of critical essays: *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality* (1992) and *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case* (1997). Her awards include the highest writers can receive. Morrison is a member of the National Council on the Arts and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. She won a National Book Critics Circle Award and the Distinguished Writer Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1977; the Pulitzer Prize in 1988; the Pearl Buck Award and the title of Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters in



1994; and the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 1996. In 1993, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, making her the first African American and only the eighth woman to receive the prize. The body of work for which she was awarded the Nobel Prize began with a simple story.

In the late 1960s, Morrison had joined a writing group for which she penned a short story. That story became the basis of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison established her recurrent concern with the meaning and place of black female identity; the novel explores the psychological damage the white standard of **beauty** does to black girls in America. Pecola Breedlove wants the blue eyes that will validate her identity and make her worthy of **love**. Although Morrison's fiction often focuses on the place of African American women in a racist, patriarchal culture, it also explores the ways black men are psychologically shaped by those same cultural influences. Many writers of Morrison's generation explore such themes; however, Morrison's work allows for a nuanced complexity that many other writers miss. Morrison's novels often turn on a specific act that is morally reprehensible. In *The Bluest Eye*, this act is Cholly Breedlove's **rape** and impregnation of his daughter. Although these acts—which include child rape, incest, child abuse, infanticide, and murder—are condemned, the perpetrators themselves are not. Morrison places her characters within contexts that explain, if they do not excuse, each character's complex actions. Cholly Breedlove, warped as a young teen by white racism, is certainly not a hero; however, many readers ultimately feel some compassion for him despite his heinous act.

Morrison shifts her focus away from the **family** dynamic that fuels *The Bluest Eye* to focus on black female friendship in her second novel, *Sula* (1973). The story of Nel Wright and Sula Peace, *Sula* explores not only the psychological connection between two young girls, disparate in class and desperate for friendship, but also the ways black women are subject to and defined by community. The black community of The Bottom, like so many of Morrison's fictional communities, is necessary for growth, happiness, and self-knowledge, but it can also be crippling, especially for black women. The novel thus explores the communal forces that shape and limit Nel and Sula's identities and the psychological consequences of the rift in their friendship. Nel is a respectable married woman with two children whose husband leaves her after an adulterous affair with Sula; Sula is a demonized single, childless woman who (like her mother) openly expresses her **sexuality** by sleeping with any man she chooses. After their break, Nel lives in an emotional abyss, and Sula dies alone, one suffering the consequences of living within the confines of patriarchal community and the other, those of living outside of it. More popularly received than her first novel, *Sula* earned the nomination for the National Book Award and thus helped solidify Morrison's place as a premier writer of her time.

Her bestselling third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), offers for the first time a male protagonist, Milkman Dead. However, the story is as much about the

women in Milkman's life as it is a record of his journey to trace his family's heritage, another theme that Morrison develops in later novels. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison offers, as she did in *Sula*, a three-generational matriarchal family. *Sula's* Eva, Hannah, and Sula are revised in Pilate, Reba, and Hagar. Lacking a navel, Pilate functions as a maternal force that exceeds the confines of embodiment, just as she exceeds the restrictions of the patriarchal community. Her daughter also rejects traditional, patriarchal morality by celebrating her sexuality with an abandon that seems as joyous as it is innocent. Hagar, however, is one of Morrison's many characters who loves too much. She dies after being rejected by her cousin Milkman with whom she has had a fourteen-year affair. Like her great-grandmother Ryna, Hagar cannot live without the man she loves. The novel garnered international attention for Morrison as the main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the first novel by a black author to be selected since **Richard Wright's** *Native Son* in 1949. The novel also won the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award.

*Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison's fourth novel, turns the focus away from the black community to explore more directly the complex connections between blacks and whites. Even within her most interracial setting, however, the novel continues to focus on familiar themes: black heritage, black female subjectivity, and the mysteries of mother love. Jadine Childs is an internationally successful model who struggles to understand her identity in a world that defines people by race, class, and gender. Margaret Street, one of Morrison's few white female characters, also struggles to understand her self and her role in a world that classifies people by educational level and economic status. In a complex reaction to her early **motherhood** and her much-older husband, Margaret abuses her only child, a son whom she also idolizes. As in *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby* explores the causes and consequences of victimization on both victims and victimizers.

Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987), is the first book of a loosely defined trilogy that chronicles three important historical moments in African American and American **history: slavery**, the Great Migration, and the civil rights era. *Beloved*, which met with significant critical and popular acclaim, focuses on the psychological damage of slavery and the consequences of a mother's love so thick it transcends reason. The protagonist, Sethe, is a newly escaped slave who murders her daughter to keep her safe from the slave-catchers who have come to reclaim them under authority of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The baby returns, first in spirit, then in flesh, to haunt Sethe's life until she can come to terms with her own brutal act of love. After the book failed to win the National Book Award in 1987, forty-eight prominent black writers published an open letter in the *New York Times Book Review*, lauding the work. In 1988, Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize in Literature.

*Jazz* (1992), Morrison's sixth novel and second in her trilogy, explores the effects of the Great Migration of rural, southern blacks to northern, urban centers in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The novel focuses on

the psychological damage caused by dislocation at the individual, familial, communal, and cultural levels. As in *Song of Solomon*, the male protagonist, Joe Trace, must return to the **South** to come to terms with a familial past that includes abandonment and uncertainty. His wife, Violet, must reconcile an identity fractured by time and place and accept her feelings of loss and lack, because she has no children. Although the story, which is told in discourse that is both communal and female, begins with Joe's murder of his young lover, it ends with reconciliation and a new surrogate family for Joe and Violet.

With the publication of *Paradise* in 1998, Morrison completed her trilogy. Like *Jazz*, *Paradise* focuses on the effects of dislocation. The novel also explores the gendered and generational gap that opened in the civil rights era for an all-black community in rural Oklahoma. As in many of Morrison's novels, the characters must reconcile past with present and self with community before they can achieve any sense of identity. The characters (mainly women) must also heal the psychological damage done to them by a violent racist and patriarchal world. *Paradise* is arguably Morrison's strongest statement on the damaging effects of patriarchy on both men and women, as nine of the leading townsmen murder five women in the novel's opening scene. The tensions in this novel are not just between men and women, however; they are also about internal psychological tensions created by racial, sexual, and moral trauma. The ending, both ambiguous and hopeful in typical Morrison style, allows an image of strong, independent, united, and healed women.

Morrison's eighth novel *Love* (2003) explores many of the themes of her earlier novels: female friendship, community, patriarchy, class, sexual abuse, sexuality, dislocation, heritage, marriage, and love. The novel details the relationships between one man, Bill Cosey, and the women whose lives he shapes. What drives the story, however, is the relationship between two women whose hate is both born from and dissolved in love. *Love* is an apt title not only for her eighth book but also for Morrison's oeuvre, as in many ways the manifestations and manipulations of love are what each of her novels explores.

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

### MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

**Zora Neale Hurston** published *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, her third novel, in 1939. As is obvious from its title, the novel is a re-creation of the biblical story of Moses, but this story has a black cast of characters. While the focus for the most part is on the presentation of Moses as a "born leader," gender concerns are a constant in the development of the story line. The gender issue is established early in the novel as we witness the oppression under which Hebrew women must deliver their babies. These women are forced to deliver in silence for fear that their cries would draw the attention of the Egyptian soldiers who are on alert because of the rumors that a Hebrew leader is to be born. Other indications of the oppression or devaluation of women are found in the following incidents: the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter is told that all she was born for was to serve as a "passageway for boy children"; Jethro is called "weak" because he has all daughters, no sons; it is suggested that women are faithless in that they are always ready to go with the conqueror; vanity and pettiness are often presented as female traits; and when the spoils of war are catalogued, women are listed along with cows, mules, wine, and household vessels.

The most obvious and dramatic examples of sexual bias, however, are connected with the presentation and development of Miriam, sister to Moses and Aaron. Although Hurston shows her to be clever, creative, and intelligent, Miriam is only reluctantly recognized as a person of voice by Moses;

more often than not, Hurston shows that Moses resents Miriam's intrusions and her attempts to be a part of the leadership. For instance, when Moses summons the Elders to discuss the plight of the Israelites, he is surprised (and not pleased) when he sees Miriam among them.

Miriam, like the other women in the novel, is accused of being vain and self-centered, focused on her own success and wealth. Moses's wife, Zipporah, is presented as short-sighted, looking back at what men had been, while Moses, the born leader, is able to look forward to what men can become. While women are criticized for their ambition, Hurston demonstrates that men who focus on achieving success and wealth are not criticized. When Aaron brags to Moses about what a great and powerful man he (Aaron) will be once they arrive in Canaan, he is not denigrated for his self-serving aspirations. At one point, Moses becomes frustrated with the outspokenness of both Aaron and Miriam and calls them to the Tabernacle to be judged by God. God punishes Miriam by making her a leper, and she remains very silent for the rest of her life, speaking only in whispers. Aaron, who has been just as outspoken, is not punished. Miriam has been subdued to the point that when she wants to die, she seeks consent from Moses.

Perhaps in the end, Moses realizes that the actions of Miriam have been pivotal in his assuming the position of "born leader" and in the Hebrews' ultimate achievement of **freedom**, because after her **death**, Moses makes sure that the young Israelites remember her efforts. While this action may appear to preserve the positive characterization of Moses, Miriam still suffers in the end.

Hurston presents Miriam as an exceptional female character, one who does not conform to the traditional female roles of wife and mother. Moses even tells Miriam at one point that the trouble with her is that nobody ever married her. Perhaps Hurston uses *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and Miriam to demonstrate that the woman who would defy gender limitations determined by the society in which she lives is destined to struggle.

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*Johmie M. Stover*

### MOSS, THYLIA (1954- )

Thylia Rebecca Brasier Moss was born on February 27, 1954, in Cleveland, Ohio. Her **family** was working **class**, with her mother, Florida Missouri Gaiter Brasier, working as a maid and her father, Calvin Theodore Bruiser,

working for the Cardinal Tire Company. Moss was an only child and met her husband when she was sixteen years old and married him at age nineteen. They have two sons together, Dennis and Anisted. Having written her first short story at age six and her first poem at age seven, Moss intended from an early age to become a professional writer. She graduated with honors from John Adams High School and attended Syracuse University for two years. She later returned to college and received her B.A. in creative writing from Oberlin College in 1981. In 1983, she finished her M.A. in English at the University of New Hampshire.

The author of six collections of **poetry**, two plays, and a memoir, Moss has been publishing steadily since her first collection of poetry, *Hosiery Seams on a Bowlegged Woman*, was published in 1983. She won the Academy of American Poets College Prize for the poem "Coming of Age in Sandusky" and was named first-runner-up for the Best of Great Lakes Prize for a First Book for *Hosiery Seams on a Bowlegged Woman*. Books to follow were *Pyramid of Bone* (1989), *At Redbones* (1990), *Rainbow Remnants in Rock Bottom Ghetto Sky* (1991), *Small Congregations: New and Selected Poems* (1993), *I Want to Be* (1993), *Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler* (1998), and *Tale of a Sky-Blue Dress* (1998).

Moss's poetry has been described as having an angry, hostile, and sometimes resentful tone. Her themes range from personal **identity**, **freedom**, racism, human brutality, womanhood, **motherhood**, and **spirituality**. Although not all her poems are specifically for and about women, there is a decidedly feminist perspective present in her work. The poems in *Hosiery Seams* are reflective, emotional, and individual, whereas in *Pyramid of Bone* she begins to pose questions about larger issues regarding womanhood, spirituality, and ethnicity. She does this using thought-provoking imagery and sometimes tormented wording. *At Redbones* is a bit less negative in tone and seems to be influenced by her own childhood experiences in church and with her father's whiskey-induced Saturday night philosophical musings. The collection focuses on racism and brutality, problems she faced as a young black woman growing up. Her fourth book, *Rainbow Remnants in Rock Bottom Ghetto Sky*, departs from the rage of her first collection and focuses on joyous women's issues like pregnancy, identity, friendship, and womanhood itself. Moss uses unique metaphors in this collection, which were generally not well received by critics. Moss's feminist themes are continued in *Last Chance for the Tarzan Holler*, which includes topics such as motherhood, **sexuality**, and spirituality.

Perhaps Moss's most powerfully feminist book is her memoir *Tale of a Sky-Blue Dress*, in which Moss describes the abuse she suffered as a child. A teenage babysitter who lived in the same apartment building as the Mosses subjected Moss to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, shattering the safe, comfortable world her parents had created for her. At the babysitter's encouragement, Moss was raped by the babysitter's brother. As a result of this abuse, Moss had several adolescent relationships with men that were abusive.

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*Kyla Heftlin*

**MOSSELL, GERTRUDE (1855–1948)**

Gertrude Bustill was born to a prosperous Philadelphia **family** who could trace their ancestry in the United States back to the time of the Revolutionary War. She began her career in Philadelphia as a schoolteacher, and although she would ultimately make her greatest mark in the field of print journalism, she viewed herself throughout life as an educator and civic reformer.

By the early 1870s, Bustill had become a regular contributor to several of the city's leading black periodicals such as the *AME Church Review*, *Philadelphia Echo*, and the *Independent*. Her work also appeared in Philadelphia publications directed primarily at a white readership, including the *Philadelphia Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Philadelphia Press*. Outside of the city, she printed editorials and reports in several national periodicals like *Indianapolis World*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *New York Freeman*.

The *New York Freeman*, which grew to be one of the largest and most influential African American newspapers in the country during the Reconstruction era, proved fertile ground for Bustill's social and political interests. In December 1885, she began her own column, "Woman's Department," the first women's column in an African American newspaper. A firm supporter of women's suffrage and educational reform, Bustill used her column to advise African American women about uplift through vocational opportunities and independent thinking. She offered practical advice on such matters as dealing with recalcitrant husbands, rearing children, and managing money.

In 1893, Gertrude Bustill married Nathan F. Mossell, a Philadelphia physician and the founder of **Frederick Douglass** Memorial Hospital. The marriage produced two daughters and resulted in the new appellation, Mrs. N. F. Mossell. Under this name, Mossell published a collection of eight essays and seventeen poems called *The Work of the Afro-American Woman* (1894). In 1902, she authored the children's book *Little Dansie's One Day at Sabbath School* (1902).

Her 1894 essay collection chronicles the achievements of black women, listing inventors, land prospectors, and musicians, among others. In "A Sketch of Afro-American Literature" and "The Afro-American Women in Verse" she pays tribute to the literary innovations of women of color and takes a particular interest in the burgeoning work of **race** historians. She points out the attractiveness of a career in the field of journalism and proffers useful advice to beginning women journalists in areas ranging from newspaper layout to interviewing techniques. Her essay "The Opposite Point of View" goes on to challenge conventional gender proscriptions, which maintained that a woman's only true vocation was **motherhood** and **domestic** service for her husband. A happy woman, Mossell argues, must possess a mind of her own.

Throughout her life, Mossell remained active in the black **community** of Philadelphia. She worked tirelessly as a fund-raiser for African American health services and as a sponsor for black media, helping originate the idea for the founding of the Associated Negro Press. In 1899 she organized the Philadelphia branch of the Afro-American Council, the forerunner of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

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*Judith Mulcahy*

## MOTHERHOOD

Mother Africa—the birthplace of humanity. Images of motherhood in African American feminist **literature** are rooted in the foundations of African culture.



The transcending resonance of the experiences of all African mothers lingers in the heart of each African American mother. **May Miller's** "One Blue Star" describes a black mother's connection to Africa's maternity:

And I, who had but once conceived, who had for one brief period only felt life within my womb, knew the stirring of generations within me, suffered the agony of multitudinous birth. Life of dim eras, of far-flung continents swept through and over me. . . . I was one with timelessness—I became the black mother.

The image of the mother is deeply rooted in every aspect of African society, **folklore**, and culture, and the image of the African mother filters through in all aspects of life.

In African **family** units the relationship between mother and child is of primary importance and is the foundation for a healthy kinship group. African mothers forge deep and lifelong bonds with their children. For women, their mothers teach them all of the **domestic** arts as well as the feminine ones. Men honor their mothers and provide for their comfort and security. Grandmothers also hold a special place in African society as the holders of family **history**, folklore, and other traditions. Grandmothers command very high status in African society and are perceived as occupying a special place between the earth-bound family and the **ancestors**. Grandmothers are an integral part of the familial relationship and are deeply respected and valued in African kinship groups. The **rape** of Africa by white societies' slave traders threatened to destroy the African family and, most particularly, the maternal relationship.

Grandmothers were particularly important within the fractured remnants of slave families and were the bearers of surviving tradition and wisdom. Older female slaves took on the role of grandmother and/or mother to those young black children who were ripped from their mothers' loving arms. For those fortunate slaves who were not sold from their nuclear kin, their blood grandmothers became the bedrock upon which small family groups were allowed to exist. In **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the horrors of **slavery** rival the greater horror of losing the **love** and respect of her grandmother. For Jacobs, an estrangement from her grandmother is unthinkable. In **Zora Neale Hurston's** *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Janie spends considerable time being taught by her grandmother, Nanny. In one poignant scene, Nanny passes on the experience of her slavery and explains to Janie her mixed heritage. When the master's mistress finds out that Nanny's child was half white, the mistress threatens her with a hundred lashes. Nanny took her baby, Janie's mother, and fled in the night to eventual **freedom**. Janie learns from her grandmother that she has the freedom to dream. Marilyn Fullen-Collins's "Mama" describes the speaker's grandmother who "grins big and safe." In **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson's** "The Stones of the Village" (1905) a young boy's grandmother is the only parent he has ever known. In **Paule Marshall's** affecting tale "To Da-Duh, in Memoriam" (1967) a young modern black girl meets her grandmother in Barbados for the first time. Marshall's story is a charming, yet bittersweet,

meeting of old ways and new, of a grandmother who tries to impart to her citified granddaughter the wonders of her age-old wisdom and of her beloved Barbados. In Nora Brooks Blakely's poem "To Grandmother's House We Go" her grandmother represents the venerable forces of love. **Black feminist** literature is resplendent with images of African American grandmothers, whose acumen and perseverance gave birth to, and prepared, generations of black mothers.

African American feminist writers own, define, and celebrate their maternity, a vitalizing expression of freedom from white racist beliefs about black women. Whites defined black motherhood within the context of slavery, thereby devaluing black maternity, creating then reaffirming white **stereotypes** of black motherhood as occupying only certain roles: **Mammy**, breeder, or cook. Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* describes her grandmother's reputation as a great cook. In **Frances E. W. Harper's** novel *Iola Leroy* (1892), Iola loves her Mammy, "just as much as I do my own mother." In her defense of slavery, Iola argues that her Mammy "loves us just as if we were her own children" despite the fact that Mammy could be sold at a whim. **Dorothy West's** "Mammy" is a clever satire uniting the role of Mammy, the modern welfare system, and slavery. A Negro Welfare Investigator is charged with reviewing an application for Old Age Assistance from Mrs. Mason, former Mammy to the Colemans. Mrs. Coleman desperately wants Mammy back. The young Black Investigator must return Mammy to the Colemans, despite Mammy's protest and desire for freedom. Her application for benefits is denied. In **Rita Dove's** play *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994), Phoebe tells of the fate of her mother, a faithful Mammy and servant to the Big House, who catches the fever by sneaking food to infected field hands.

Slavery fractured and dissipated the very condition of motherhood for African American women, reducing and then defining black motherhood as merely breeding for profit, a commodification of their bodies as well as a commodification of their ability to reproduce. African American motherhood itself was also a victim of white defeminization of black women. Black female slaves were regarded as nothing more than breeders, effectively separating white ideals of motherhood from black motherhood, thereby justifying the removal of a black woman's children by slaverholders. **Sojourner Truth** describes her pain as a slave mother in her 1851 speech at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio: "I have borne thirteen chilern and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman?" Black female slaves had to defend against both white denial of their femininity as well as denial of their right to feel the human condition of motherhood. **Mary Prince**, in *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831), gives a chilling account of her mother, who was given the task of preparing her own children for the auction block; her mother then had to transport her children to the marketplace and stand by and watch while each one was sold. Maya Angelou's "Grandmothers" begins with a mother's flight to freedom and the terrified children she struggles to save.

African American feminist literature is suffused with heart-wrenching images of children torn from their mothers. Tragic images like these are common throughout **slave narratives** as black writers, both women and men, attempt to articulate the numbing horror of children ripped from their mothers' arms and sold to an unknown fate. Frances E. W. Harper's "The Slave Mother" describes a mother's torment as her son is taken from her. Much of Harper's **poetry** contains images of children severed from their mother's arms. In "Bury Me in a Free Land" the speaker witnesses "her babes torn from her breast/like trembling doves from their parent nest." In Harper's "Eliza Harris" (1853) a desperate mother runs to freedom to save her child. In **Toni Morrison's *Beloved*** (1987), Sethe attempts to kill her children to save them from the slave catcher; to Sethe, the only way to save her children from suffering the hell of slavery is to "put [her] babies where they'd be safe." Paul D tells Sethe her love is "too thick." Morrison's *Beloved* exposes how slavery disfigures and corrupts that thick love bond between mother and child, laying bare slavery's assault upon African American mothers.

Motherhood and mothering images take on a wide variety of forms in African American feminist literature. As black women writers validate their femininity in their works, they also recapture and reframe their experience as mothers, free of white constructs. In **Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral*** (1929), Angela learns from her mother that there is a dazzling world of joy and freedom that is wholly black. The motherhood bond was discombobulated by the commodification of the black **body**, both male and female. African American feminist writers reconfigure the white dehumanization of black motherhood by revealing, within their essays, poetry, and **fiction**, a profoundly authentic motherhood experience that survived all efforts to destroy it. Gladys Casely Hayford's "The Nativity" celebrates the wonder and unity of black motherhood. In Frances E. W. Harper's "My Mother's Kiss," a young man expresses the gentle **memory** of his mother's comfort. The simple kiss pressed "on my brow" that represents when "all my life was fair." **Marita Bonner's** "One Boy's Story" presents a charming and loving portrait of a mother from a child's point of view. **Alice Walker**, in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1983), explores the artistic repression of the African woman who "dreamed dreams no one knew. . . . Our mothers and grandmothers, some of them; moving to music not yet written. And they waited. They waited for a day when the unknown thing that was in them would be made known; but guessed, somehow in their darkness, that on the day of their revelation they would be long dead." And in Frances E. W. Harper's "The Two Offers" (1859), the rich gift of motherhood becomes the greatest artistic endeavor of all: "Every mother should be a true artist, who knows how to weave into her child's life images of grace and beauty, the true poetry capable of writing on the soul of childhood the harmony of love and truth, and teaching it how to produce the grandest of all poems—the poetry of a true and noble life."

African American feminist writers' rich literary voices continue the boundless connection between all African American mothers, who captivate

their daughters with age-old wisdom and a compelling sense of belonging. Their voices continue the tradition of the souls of many mothers lifting and supporting each other, timeless and eternal.

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Debbie Clare Olson

### MULATTO/A

The word *mulatto*, derived from the word *mule*, embodies within it the idea that people with one parent of African descent and one parent of European descent fit uneasily, if at all, into the existing natural and social orders. The question of whether Africans and Europeans were separate species, and mulattoes hybrids between the two, was debated by American and European scientists throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In **literature**, the idea that mulattoes are inevitably divided beings, beset by a crippling internal conflict between opposing racial tendencies, was most common during the early twentieth century, especially in **fiction** that constructed **race** through the conventions of naturalism. This literary movement, influenced by Social Darwinism, treated human character as the product of interactions between genetic inheritance and environment. In 1933, African American poet and critic Sterling Brown coined the phrase “tragic mulatto” to refer to the internally conflicted biracial characters in fictions of his own day, including Geoffrey Barnes’s *Dark Lustre* (1932) and, better known now thanks to two movie adaptations, Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life* (1934). **Nella Larsen’s** *Quicksand*, published in 1928, portrays a heroine similarly torn between conflicting racial heritages, though with considerably more nuance than the fictions Brown criticized, through his use of the term “tragic mulatto,” for their simplistic portrayal of supposedly inherent racial traits.

Sterling Brown also used the term “tragic mulatto” to refer to characters in earlier fictions, particularly those of the abolitionist era. However, as he recognized, these mid-nineteenth-century characters shared little with their early-twentieth-century counterparts except their authors’ apparent belief that

certain traits are both heritable and racially linked. In antebellum fictions, mulattoes, rather than being crippled by their mixed racial heritage, are often the most admirable of the slave characters, possessing intelligence, bravery, and **beauty** beyond that of their darker-skinned counterparts (and, sometimes, their white masters). When they die—as they often but not always do—it is because of external conflict with a racist society that has not made a place for them (though, their creators imply, it could and should), not because of an internal conflict between supposedly incompatible racial heritages.

Despite their ability to expose the illogic and injustice of social systems based on race, the mulatto characters in abolitionist fiction were open to the criticism, often raised by proslavery reviewers, that they exemplified the best traits of their European **ancestors** rather than their African ones, and so presented a poor argument for either abolition or racial equality. Perhaps the most famous characters in this category are Eliza and George Harris of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the title character of **William Wells Brown's** 1853 *Clotel, or the President's Daughter*. Brown's novel follows a slave daughter of Thomas Jefferson on her journey through households representing various manifestations of the slave system, ending in Clotel's eventual escape, through suicide, from the slave catchers, and the survival of her daughter in exile in Europe. Brown, perhaps as a result of observing audience reactions to abolitionist lectures by the light-skinned escaped slave **Ellen Craft** and her dark-skinned husband **William Craft**, seems to have been especially aware of the potential pitfalls of focusing on mulatto characters. Although he kept his heroine light-skinned through several revisions of the novel, he transformed his original mulatto hero into an equally heroic character of unmixed African descent in later versions of the book. Stowe, too, created a heroic black character in her second antislavery novel, *Dred* (1856), but also included a sensitive and intelligent mulatto hero, Harry Gordon.

Abolitionist writers' tendency to focus on light-skinned protagonists, and especially light-skinned heroines, carried over into postbellum African American fiction. Authors including **Frances E. W. Harper**, **Charles Chesnutt**, **Pauline Hopkins**, and **Jessie Redmon Fauset** centered novels around mulatto protagonists. The dark-skinned heroine of **Gwendolyn Brooks's** 1953 *Maud Martha* is usually cited as the first major exception to this pattern. In some turn-of-the-century novels, such as Harper's 1892 *Iola Leroy* and Hopkins's 1900 *Contending Forces*, the focus on light-skinned characters played some of the same roles it had in abolitionist fiction, reminding readers of the socially constructed nature of racial dividing lines and exposing—though often somewhat obliquely—the sexual victimization of black women by white men. For Hopkins as well as Chesnutt, and later Larsen, mulatto characters also provided an opportunity to examine the social and psychological significance of **passing**.

While mulatto characters often allowed African American authors to explore in useful ways the intersecting constructions of race and **class**, the prevalence of light-skinned protagonists in the early African American fictions

had other, less positive, effects on the developing African American literary tradition. As **Alice Walker** points out in her 1982 essay “If the Present Looks Like the Past, What Does the Future Look Like?” (republished in 1983 in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*), one of the most troubling legacies of the literary focus on mulatta heroines is its ability not only to reflect but also to help perpetuate Eurocentric standards of beauty, and the associated phenomena of colorism and light-skin privilege, both in American society at large and within African American communities.

The recovery of nineteenth-century African American women’s literature in the last quarter of the twentieth century provided new insight into the systems of sexual and racial domination, ranging from **rape** to more complex forms of sexual exploitation, that led to the birth of mulattoes. The 1987 republication of **Harriet Jacobs’s** 1861 **slave narrative** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, long thought to be a novel but revealed by Jean Fagan Yellin’s research to be based on real people, places, and events, opened a window on the complicated choices made by a slave woman who, threatened with rape by her master, evaded him by choosing another white man to father her children and later negotiated the task of telling her story to an audience of white northern women whose concepts of sexual morality were shaped by their own relatively sheltered experience. **Harriet E. Wilson’s** 1859 *Our Nig*, republished by Henry Louis Gates in 1983, centers around a mulatta heroine whose more unusual origins reveal intersections between class and race; her white mother, abandoned by a white seducer, accepts an offer of marriage from an African American man, only to abandon their daughter, Frado, to a form of indentured servitude that is little different from **slavery** after her black husband dies and she returns, with a new lover, to a white world that would not accept her mixed-race daughter.

Fiction of the late twentieth century also explores African American women’s exploitation during and after slavery and the continuing legacy of those experiences in contemporary black women’s lives. **Gayl Jones’s** 1975 *Corregidora* tells the story of a 1930s **blues** singer charged by her great-grandmother with remembering the story of her own and her daughter’s exploitation by the same white master and still seeing the effects of this white heritage—jealousy from darker-skinned black women, desirability to black men—in her own life. **Octavia Butler’s** 1979 *Kindred* traces the legacy of slavery further into the twentieth century, telling the story of an African American woman in 1976 who finds herself repeatedly transported to the nineteenth century to rescue a young white boy who will grow up to coerce her great-great-grandmother into a sexual relationship and so become her ancestor. **Barbara Chase-Riboud’s** *Sally Hemings*, also published in 1979, explores in detail the same relationship that had inspired William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*: the then-rumored, now almost certainly confirmed, long-term liaison—in Chase-Riboud’s interpretation, a genuine **love** affair—between Thomas Jefferson and his late wife’s slave and half sister, Sally Hemings.

In more recent years, authors have begun to explore the experiences of biracial children conceived in the very different, but still complicated, racial

atmosphere that prevailed during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and its aftermath in the 1970s. **Danzy Senna's** 1999 novel *Caucasia* tells the story of two sisters, one light-skinned like their white mother and one dark-skinned like their black father, separated by their parents' divorce but eventually reunited as each seeks to define her own **identity**. James McBride, in his 1997 memoir *The Color of Water*, reflects on the experience of growing up with a Jewish mother who passed as black, while Rebecca Walker, daughter of Alice Walker, tells her own story in *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2002).

Though American understandings of race have changed considerably over the course of the last two centuries, much can still be learned about the construction of racial identity in the United States by examining the lives—real or fictional—of Americans who embody two or more different “racial” heritages. At the same time, if an accurate picture of the workings of race in America is to be formed, such accounts cannot be the only or even the dominant voice but instead must continue to be balanced by others exemplifying the full variety of African American experiences.

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Catherine E. Saunders

### MULES AND MEN

One of the strengths of Part I of **Zora Neale Hurston's** ethnography *Mules and Men* (1935) is its evaluation of gender roles within specific southern black folkloric communities, represented here primarily by the people of Eatonville, Florida. Part II takes Hurston into the world of Hoodoo where she becomes a student of several Hoodoo priests, eventually becoming a priest herself. While Part II is an interesting account of the secretive world of Hoodoo ceremonies, this entry focuses on the gender issues more clearly raised in Part I of this text.

Hurston used her own literary voice to develop an ethnography that did justice to the authenticity of black folktales by placing the predominantly black male text within a black female frame. What emerges is a richer and more realistic picture of the black storytelling **community** than a strict, unadorned anthropological listing of the tales could have provided. In constructing this study, Hurston also gives the reader insight into how the struggle over the control of language affects the public and private places of the men and women of the community, pitting black males against black females in linguistic battles for power. In Part I of *Mules and Men*, twenty-eight of the storytellers are men, while only four are women; of the seventy stories related, sixty-five are told by men, five are told by women, and only one (Mathilda Mosley's "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men") is told from a woman's perspective. The more Hurston experienced these storytelling sessions (which were called "lying" sessions), the more she recognized how gender specific the tales were. While the storytellers in traditional West African villages were usually women, Hurston shows how that tradition reverses itself in these African American communities, mirroring the European American tradition of privileging the male. Hurston confronts and tackles this cultural reversal in the structuring of *Mules and Men* by putting her female voice in the privileged position as overall narrator.

The residents of Eatonville located their primary site for lying on the porch of Joe Clarke's store. But, as Hurston demonstrates, the actual physical site was not crucial when it came to the act of storytelling; the community could function anywhere as long as there was a storyteller, a story, and an audience that shared the same sense of community, thus creating a common setting. The storytelling in *Mules and Men* shifts to a number of locations as the participants move around to various open spaces: the sawmill, the swamp, the fishing lake, and so on. What is notable, however, is that the lying sessions recorded by Hurston all take place outside—that is, in what was traditionally seen as the public male space. The indoor spaces—the "jook" joints and houses—seem to resist the act of storytelling. Even when the men visited Hurston at her **home** to share their lies with her, they take her outside to do it. That indoor, private, female, **domestic** space is not conducive to the male appropriation of storytelling, so they remove the telling to their venue as a reassertion of their power and control.

After recounting her Hoodoo adventures in Part II of *Mules and Men*, Hurston ties the two parts of the ethnography together and asserts her own power as storyteller by relating the tale of "Sis Cat." "Sis Cat" is an apt conclusion to *Mules and Men* because, as a folktale that Hurston herself tells, it brings full circle the anthropological, literary, cultural, and gender factors that Hurston encounters and tries to re-present in her ethnography. Just like the clever and subversive Sis Cat, she has successfully devoured the mouse and can now calmly sit back, "washing [her] face and usin' [her] manners."

*See also* Folklore



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Johnnie M. Stover

### MULLEN, HARRYETTE (?– )

Harryette Mullen is a poet and critic who was born in Florence, Alabama, and raised in Texas. Known for her experimental poetics and her critical attention to often overlooked black writers, Mullen is the author of six books of **poetry**, including *Tree Tall Woman* (1981), *Trimnings* (1991), *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T* (1992), *Muse & Drudge* (1995), *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002), *Blues Baby: Early Poems* (2002), and a book-length critical study titled *Freeing the Soul: Race, Subjectivity, and Difference in Slave Narratives* (1999). Among other honors, she has received the Gertrude Stein Award in Innovative Poetry, the Rockefeller Fellowship from the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Women's Studies, and nominations for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Awards. Mullen is associate professor of English and African American studies at the University of California at Los Angeles.

The poems in Mullen's first book, *Tree Tall Woman*, are written in a voice intended to represent black **community**, but it is a voice she now describes as not entirely her own. In response to this realization, Mullen began to write poems in which the subjectivity of the speaker would shift. The books that followed demonstrate a break with forms of poetry in which the range of possibilities in speaker's **identity** is assumed to be static and knowable. In *Trimnings*, Mullen explores the way the category "woman" is constructed through language about women's clothing. Her short prose poems allow the many meanings of words associated with feminine clothing or objects for women (including articles of clothing, colors, and clothing metaphors) to direct the narrative. In the next book, *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*, Mullen explores consumption and capitalism through prose poems about the supermarket. Each poem takes a different area of the supermarket as a field of language through which meta-narratives about **race**, **class**, and gender are inscribed. The personas of both books trouble the idea of an authentic, stationary self.

After publishing *Trimnings* and *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*, Mullen noticed that her audiences had become increasingly white, a stark difference from her audience for *Tree Tall Woman*. In response, she set out to write *Muse & Drudge*, a book of poems that would unite her audiences by continuing to use innovative forms

and by bringing a varied, inclusive perspective on African and diasporic traditions. Mullen's next book, *Freeing the Soul*, is a critical study of the ways in which narrative silences and other conventions of the **slave narrative** genre are gendered. She followed with *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, a highly acclaimed book in which narratives about gender, race, nationality, and class are threaded through poems with a playful take on the dictionary and thesaurus. *Blues Baby* includes the poems of *Tree Tall Woman* as well as other early poems that were previously uncollected.

Mullen's feminist concerns can be read in the content of her works, but they are also present in her attention to form. Her explorations of women's language, women's dress, and the ways in which the spaces women inhabit shape their narratives give form to her poems and critical essays. In Mullen's work, representations of gender are complicated by other forms of difference, such as race, nation, and class.

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*Mendi Lewis Obadike*

### MURPHY, BEATRICE M. (1908–1992)

Beatrice M. Murphy was born in Monessen, Pennsylvania, in 1908. Though a lesser figure of the **Harlem Renaissance** and the ensuing years, Murphy did play a significant role in encouraging the artistic and literary endeavors of

young black writers. She spent the majority of her life in Washington, D.C., where she graduated from Dunbar High School in 1928. Her literary career began as a poet and writer with the African American newspaper the *Washington Tribune*, and she eventually became the publication's reviews editor. Murphy converted to Catholicism in the 1930s and began to extend her efforts toward her **community** as part owner of a circulating library that would eventually become part of a special library collection.

During the 1940s, Murphy worked for the Office of Price Administration (OPA), a federal agency established during World War II to prevent wartime inflation. The OPA could control prices and ration consumer products and was successful in keeping the consumer market stable during the war years. The agency was disbanded in 1947.

Like many artists and writers during the 1950s, Murphy was persecuted during the McCarthy era, a time when the U.S. government, following the lead of Senator Joseph McCarthy, actively sought out members of the Communist Party. Murphy was accused of membership in a subversive community organization, but she successfully disproved the charges and, unlike many of her peers, was able to clear her name. During the 1960s, Murphy gained prominence in the black literary community through her **work** with the Negro Bibliographic and Research Center (NBRC), which eventually became known as the Minority Research Center. The Negro Bibliographic and Research Center aimed to chronicle the works of African American writers and published a journal titled the *Negro in Print*, a bibliographic survey. Murphy served as editor of this journal between 1965 and 1972. After Murphy moved on to other endeavors, the NBRC continued to chronicle the black community through a variety of bibliographic tomes covering subjects including black English and the black church.

Throughout her lifetime, Murphy was a tireless advocate for black writers—promoting their work whenever possible and offering support, emotional and otherwise, to writers in need. Murphy's special collections form the bulk of material at the Black Studies Division of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, D.C. The noncirculating reference collection includes rare books, textiles, pamphlets, bibliographies, **slave narratives**, and other historical artifacts. She died in 1992.

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Roxane Gay

## MURRAY, PAULI (1910–1985)

Pauli Murray was a remarkable woman whose life and career mark her as a true Renaissance woman. A lifelong warrior for civil rights, she challenged both racial and gender discrimination policies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Harvard, respectively, and though both challenges were unsuccessful, they were crucial steps to eliminating the exclusive policies at both schools. She received her undergraduate degree from Hunter College in New York City and went on to attend law school at Howard University, where she engaged in several nonviolent protests in the 1940s, long before their popularity in the 1950s and 1960s. Murray received graduate degrees in law from the University of California at Berkeley and Yale University; later she would practice law as well as teach at the Ghana School of Law and at Brandeis, where she not only taught law but also was responsible for helping to design their first African American Studies program. Murray was also an ardent advocate for women's rights, coining the phrase "Jane Crow" to refer to women's second-class status in the United States and serving as one of the founding members of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. In 1973, at the age of sixty-two, Murray entered divinity school and in 1977 became one of the first women, and *the* first African American woman, ordained a priest in the Episcopal church in the United States. Murray died on July 1, 1985.

Murray was also a gifted writer and is most well known for her autobiographical works. *Proud Shoes* (1956) chronicles the story of her maternal grandparents, Robert and Cornelia Fitzgerald, who raised her, the former a free black man from Chester County, Pennsylvania, who came to North Carolina during Reconstruction as a teacher devoted to educating the newly freed slaves, and the latter the offspring of a slave woman named Harriet and her owner Sidney Smith, a member of a prominent Orange County family, who raped her repeatedly. Later Sidney's brother Frank would claim Harriet for himself and produce three more daughters. Mary Ruffin Smith, the Smith brothers' unmarried sister, raised eyebrows when she took the girls into her household, brought them up much differently than other Smith slaves, including instilling in them a sense of their aristocratic blood, and bequeathing each of them substantial parcels of land upon her **death**. The book is a milestone, not only for its recounting of the success of an African American **family** during Reconstruction and the early twentieth century but also for the way it tells the national story of America's tangled **race** relations and racial identities; it makes a worthy companion to **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

In 1987, two years after her death, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage*, the **autobiography** she was working on with editors up to the time of her death, was published. The autobiography recounts Murray's awakening to both racial and gender inequities and eloquently explains how she shaped herself into the civil rights' activist and feminist she became. The autobiography

won the Lillian Smith Award in 1987, was widely and positively reviewed, and was later reprinted by the University of Tennessee Press as *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet*.

Murray also published one volume of **poetry**, *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (1970), which has largely been neglected but deserves greater attention. The collection can be characterized as containing a significant number of poems that speak to racial and economic injustices as well as a section of beautiful, striking, and conflicted **love** poems that are particularly intriguing, especially in light of the struggles Murray underwent in the 1930s and 1940s with her gender **identity** and **sexuality**, when most of the love poems were written. Murray found herself emotionally and sexually drawn to women but was unable to accept **lesbianism** as a respectable identity. Her distress over her attractions to women and her deep belief that she was really biologically a man resulted in several psychiatric hospital stays and finally abdominal surgery to assure her that she did not have “hidden” male sex organs. Following this surgery, Murray seems to have relinquished her struggle over her gender and sexuality and turned her energies toward her **work**; nonetheless, the love poems are significant for they can be read as helping to establish an African American lesbian tradition in poetry brought to fruition in the work of such writers as **Audre Lorde**, **June Jordan**, and **Pat Parker**.

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*Christina G. Bucher*

## MYTH, USE OF

Readers typically associate the word *myth* with classical figures such as Odysseus or Hercules, but many African American female writers allude to biblical myths more frequently than classical ones to develop images and metaphors that reflect the struggle for **freedom** and dignity in a sexist and racist world. Christian mythology is an integral part of African American **literature** and dates back to the singing of **spirituals**, which are biblical songs sung by the earliest slaves. Black female writers are especially fond of using biblical examples of hope to engage their readers' imagination. The Jews' captivity described in Exodus is mentioned so frequently by female authors that scholars now consider the Jews' enslavement as a common trope that captures the African Americans' experience with **slavery**. **Frances E. W. Harper** in *Moses: A Story of the Nile* (1869) discusses her personal sacrifices in relation to the Jews' bondage; likewise, **Phillis Wheatley** in her letter to Samson Occom likens slave owners to the Egyptians and slaves to the chosen people of God. The **history** of African American feminist literature spans approximately only 250 years, yet a majority of black female writers express a common thematic concern: the struggle of black women to seek dignity and freedom in a racist and sexist environment. Central to the literary expression of this struggle are the biblical myths used as thematic declarations by black feminist writers who searched for a voice, respect, and the freedom to explore their **identity** through literary writings.

Biblical myths play an important part in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black women's literature. Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) represents one of the few literary works that mingle biblical and classical myths to underscore thematic concerns. "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England" invokes the aid of the Muses of epic **poetry**, then alludes to the Jews' captivity and, later the shedding of Jesus' blood. Wheatley's book created a stir among readers who believed that artistic expressions such as poetry were beyond the capabilities of slave girls like Wheatley, yet her skillful poetics and grasp of current events, which exposed the horrors of slavery, earned laudatory reviews from her contemporaries, including **Sojourner Truth**.

Wheatley's biblical metaphors and their relation to slavery encouraged other feminists such as Sojourner Truth (born Isabella) to use the Bible's teachings to critique social concerns such as slavery and women's rights. Truth was illiterate, but she convinced Olive Gilbert to write and publish the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850), a **slave narrative** that in part silences a minister's accusations by pointing out that Christ came into the world through the efforts of God and a woman and that no man had any part in the birth of Christ. Truth uses biblical myths to support her struggles for freedom, but her views infuriated the leaders of numerous religious sects, including Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Universalist ministers, who often used the Bible as an authoritative document to support racial and patriarchal oppression.

The question of biblical interpretation dates back to the practice of singing spirituals, which were songs that depicted the slaves' interpretations of biblical myths. The spirituals were an oral expression of hope and redemption that encouraged the slaves to struggle against oppression, and while scholars are uncertain whether or not women composed spirituals, black women's literature certainly echoed the spiritual songs' thematic use of biblical myths to encourage their struggles against oppression.

For feminists such as Sojourner Truth and **Maria Stewart**, the Bible clearly describes exemplary human behavior. Truth's most famous speech "Ar'nt I a Woman?" (1851) challenged racial and sexual **stereotypes** by reminding the audience that Jesus was befriended numerous times by women, such as Mary and Martha. Stewart also utilized biblical metaphors and myths to raise awareness of feminist struggles. Her *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1835) is a social critique that scholars credit for encouraging subsequent writers to use literature to effect political and cultural changes, but by the time Stewart begins writing, black feminists are already beginning to address gender as well as slavery concerns.

Writers such as Frances E. W. Harper and Ada (Sarah L. Forten) contributed to antislavery journals such as the *Liberator* and the *Abolitionist* but were also well known for emphasizing a lifestyle that followed biblical teachings. Harper's *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects* (1854) addresses the anguish of slave mothers who lost their children, and the conclusion of "Woman's Political Future" reminds audiences that Rome once protected the apostle Paul because he was a natural citizen. Harper ultimately suggests that, like Rome, America too should care for its own citizens, male and female, black and white.

Harper's works encouraged other black women to find their literary voice, though by the time the Civil War ends, the literary structure of the **protest tradition** begins to change. Writers still refer to biblical teachings and metaphors, but within an evolving literary style. In the landmark novel *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North* (1859) by **Harriet E. Wilson**, she examines the typical African American by incorporating literary realism into a text that features, in part, a questioning of heaven's existence for the African **race**. Nineteenth-century feminists do not doubt the existence of God or the validity of the Scriptures, but changing literary styles suggest that subtle transformations in cultural attitudes toward race and gender are taking place before and after the Civil War.

The Civil War brought an end to slavery but not to the struggle for the rights of African Americans. Many black women aided the Civil War effort with their writings, and they continued to fight against patriarchal social structures after gaining their freedom. Feminists such as Frances E. W. Harper encouraged other writers such as **Anna Julia Cooper** to aid the cause of black women everywhere. Cooper was one of the first black women to receive a Ph.D., and she is remembered by scholars for her lifelong **work** educating black women by using a philosophical approach firmly rooted in biblical morals and beliefs.

Promoting biblical myths and teachings became easier with the emergence of an African American press, which featured publications such as *Freedom's Journal*

and the *Mystery*. The African American press allowed writers such as **Pauline Hopkins** and **Ida B. Wells-Barnett** to reach an audience sympathetic to their political and social exhortations for equality. Hopkins's *Contending Forces: A Romance of Negro Life North and South* (1900) addresses social concerns of African American women, and later activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois credit Hopkins for bringing to America's attention the tension that precedes social changes. The African American press also enabled a generation of black writers to promote social upheaval through their writings, and by the time World War I began, black men and women were publishing works in every genre and style. The African American press greatly aided the efforts of social reformers, and subsequent writers were encouraged to use literature to effect cultural changes. Many feminist writers of the **Harlem Renaissance** produced literature concerned with patriarchal oppression and, like their predecessors, relied upon biblical myths to address racism and sexism.

The quest for freedom and respect continues for writers of the Harlem Renaissance, but the women authors most commonly associated with this era—**Zora Neale Hurston**, **Gwendolyn B. Bennett**, and **Anne Spencer**—are well known for their reliance on biblical and classical myths to discuss feminists concerns. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) celebrates the individual woman's triumphs over sexism and poverty, but in terms that recall biblical teachings. Hurston's novel begins with Pheoby and Pearl discussing other townspeople, but Pheoby soon rebukes Pearl for implying that couples should use their marital beds only to praise God. Spencer uses classical and biblical myths to celebrate gender and race; in "Before the Feast of Shushan," she creates a monologue that extols the independence of women by parodying the first twelve verses of the Book of Ester, which tells of King Ahasuerus's anger at Queen Vashti's refusal to come when he calls. And Spencer concludes "At the Carnival" (a poem celebrating the poetry of **Paul Laurence Dunbar**) by alluding to Neptune to praise Dunbar's poetry. Like Hurston, Spencer and others such as Bennett underscore their works with parodies of biblical myths, though the range and scope of their imagery expand considerably over that of the previous generation's writers.

The women writing after the Harlem Renaissance often celebrated the mundane to emphasize their struggles, though many authors still drew from biblical myths to enhance their poetic expressions. **Gwendolyn Brooks**'s *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) captures the everyday life of Chicago's ghettos, but through metaphors that recall the struggles of black women and their reliance on the Bible. The speaker in "the preacher: ruminates behind the sermon" begins by speculating about God's probable loneliness, then immediately suggests that His stern master persona promotes isolation. **Margaret Walker**'s poetry has been noted by scholars for its rich biblical imagery, due undoubtedly to the influence of her father, a minister; indeed, critics often liken the title poem of Walker's *For My People* (1942) to a sermon. Black writers, however, still center their writings on the struggles (especially racism and sexism) of women everywhere.

**Ann Petry** and **Lorraine Hansberry**, for example, reproach the naive efforts of black women trying to survive in a patriarchal society. Petry's *The*



*Street* (1946) concentrates on the efforts of a black woman's failure to secure a respectable living for herself and her son. And in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) the implication that Beneatha will probably never attend medical school undercuts Mama Younger's marginal success at the play's end; Beneatha's dream is deferred by Walter's mismanagement of most of the family's money.

The focus on the struggles of young women and their relation to biblical myths shifted during the **Black Arts Movement** of the 1960s. Writers such as **Sonia Sanchez** abandoned the use of biblical myths to emphasize the struggles for individuality. Sanchez's "Summer Words of a Sistuh Addict" features a rebellious narrator who uses drugs to alter her feelings immediately after attending church services; **Carolyn Rogers's** poem "Jesus Was Crucified" features a speaker who discredits the Bible's teachings and celebrates individual expression. The writers of the Black Arts Movement are known more for their celebration of liberty and black culture than for their use of biblical myths as literary expressions, though later writers such as **Maya Angelou** return to biblical myths to underscore feminist motifs.

Angelou's *And Still I Rise* (1978) encourages women to confront destructive forces in their lives; likewise, **Toni Morrison's** *Song of Solomon* (1977) address the history of racial struggles in America, and **Adrienne Kennedy's** *Funnyhouse of the Negro* (1969) centers on the harmful effects of cultural clashes between Africans and Europeans. Literary works by black women today often maintain subtle references to biblical myths; Celie in **Alice Walker's** *The Color Purple* (1982) grieves about abusive treatment in letters addressed to God; **Rita Dove's** poem "Receiving the Stigmata" alludes to the five wounds of Christ; and the speaker in **Michelle Cliff's** "Within the Veil" states plainly that God's love alone will not overcome racism. Beginning with **Lucy Terry**, black women writers have expressed their frustrations with racism and sexism, and although the structure of literary expressions has evolved from folk and gospel songs to highly polished prose, poetry, and **drama**, the cry for freedom—and its relationship to biblical myths—is still heard today.

*See also* Christianity; Religion

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*James N. Ortego II*



## ***NARROWS, THE***

Through its main characters, Link Williams and Camilla Treadway, **Ann Petry's** *The Narrows* (1953) studies the psychology of **race** and its pernicious impact on both black and white communities. Set in New England, Petry's third novel builds upon naturalistic elements introduced in *The Street* (1946), yet extends themes introduced in this award-winning novel by exposing the impact of racism not just on individuals but on communities as a whole. Unlike other black writers who, at the time, used predominantly black settings to study the impact of racism on African Americans, Petry's choice to situate the novel within a disconnected New England city mirrors her feminist critique of the isolation and psychic fragmentation that occurs when black Americans are separated from their past, their people, and their **history**.

*The Narrows* tells the story of Dartmouth-educated Link, a black man who, through a chance, heroic encounter, meets and falls in **love** with Camilla, the married, well-to-do daughter of the town's most affluent and powerful white **family**. Hiding her marriage and status behind a false name, Camilla begins a relationship that ends abruptly when Link learns that she is married and that their engagement is a sham. Camilla cries **rape**, Link is arrested, and in the midst of a very public media scandal, he is kidnapped and murdered. In the same way that 116th Street in Harlem served as the setting for Petry's literary excavation of the impact of place upon the human psyche in *The Street*, the relationship between Link and Camilla offers a similarly poignant commentary

on the pervasiveness of racism in both black and white communities. Each character has inherited a set of behavioral codes formed from a racist history; in the end, neither can escape the stereotypical roles that history has created.

Even though black women play primarily supporting roles in *The Narrows*, the novel's focus on **community** connects it to a tradition of black women's **fiction** where, even without a female protagonist, the **literature** nevertheless maintains feminist elements. Protagonist Milkman Dead's reclamation of his collective history in **Toni Morrison's** *Song of Solomon* (1977) is facilitated, in part, by female relatives Pilate and Hagar; Link's downfall, in contrast, is that he lacks female family members to connect him to his history. Petry's fictional Monmouth, Connecticut, is completely dislocated from black culture and history. In the end, Link's tragedy is not that he is naive and weak; his tragedy is that he lives without a familial connection to black women and, by extension, his cultural heritage.

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Shanna Greene Benjamin

### NAYLOR, GLORIA (1950- )

The oldest child of migrants from Robinsville, Mississippi, Gloria Naylor grew up in the burroughs of New York City. She was born on January 25, 1950, just one month after Roosevelt and Alberta McAlpin Naylor left the **South** in search of better **work** opportunities for themselves and better education for their future children. Roosevelt worked as a transit worker, while Alberta worked as a telephone operator.

Although it would not be until she enrolled at Brooklyn College that Naylor would realize the existence of **black feminist** writers, her own familial legacy gave Naylor her first gleanings of black feminists. Her maternal great-aunt Sadie worked in vaudeville, while another great-aunt, Aunt Mae, was "a successful bootlegger" who also owned two apartment buildings in Harlem that served as way stations for **family** members making their transition to a better life for themselves. Of the family stories that Naylor inherited was one of her paternal grandmother, Callie Canada Naylor, who was reported to have held a shotgun to Gloria Naylor's grandfather and a young woman. Her maternal grandmother, Luecelia Johnson McAlpin, was rumored to have had an affair with the local blacksmith, who visited quite frequently, despite the fact that the McAlpins did not own a horse.

Naylor's mother, Alberta, was the conduit to this feminist legacy as she emphasized the acquisition of knowledge as the key to advancement. Restricted

from checking out books from her local library in Mississippi, Alberta saved money from a weekend job to join a book club that would send her books. In fact, it was Alberta who insisted that her children not be born in Mississippi because of the state's paltry record of restricting education to blacks. It was also Naylor's mother who fought and won the battle with her husband to ultimately settle in Queens, where she believed their children would receive better educations than in the upper Bronx, where Roosevelt felt most comfortable.

As a child, Naylor had a shy temperament that her mother recognized, giving her a diary to express herself. The young Naylor was a voracious reader and would dream stories that would continue from night to night. She also fantasized about the idea of being a writer, but she did not believe that to be even a remote possibility until her introduction to **Toni Morrison**, **Ntozake Shange**, and **Alice Walker** while Naylor was a student at Brooklyn College.

In 1963, Alberta Naylor joined the Jehovah's Witnesses religious group, and two of her three daughters accompanied her, including the oldest, Gloria. Still, Gloria was not baptized into the faith until 1968 when she was eighteen years old. (The group only allowed adults to be baptized.) Instead of going to Hunter College at this point, as she had planned, Gloria Naylor began full-time ministry, a trek that would last seven years. During that time, she lived in Dunn, North Carolina, and Jacksonville, Florida, as part of her ministry duties. However, in 1975, when Armageddon had not arrived as the Jehovah's Witnesses had prophesied, Naylor left the sect and enrolled in Brooklyn College.

Before graduating from Brooklyn College in 1981, Naylor had worked full-time as a switchboard operator, published a short story in *Essence* magazine, and sealed a deal to publish *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). In this six-year span, Naylor was introduced to black women novelists, and by the end of it, she was among their ranks. For the first time, she read **Gwendolyn Brooks**, **Nikki Giovanni**, and other black women writers and began to identify with these women. In the works of these writers, she discovered feminism and African American **literature** and expanded her self-definition as more than her parents' child, a Christian, and a switchboard operator. Before her discovery of Toni Morrison in a creative writing class, Naylor wrote **poetry** but did not have confidence in her ability to write prose **fiction**. Naylor's first short story was published in *Essence* in 1979. A contract with Viking followed shortly thereafter. The *Essence* story in addition to several others became *The Women of Brewster Place*, essentially a collection of seven short stories made a cohesive unit by the common residence that the characters share at a dead-end street punctuated by a brick wall that separates the characters from the rest of the city.

Naylor subsequently enrolled in Yale University to pursue a Master of Arts in Afro-American studies with plans to pursue a Ph.D. in American studies. Her plans were thwarted by her realization that academic inquiry and creative writing required different levels of energy and that her allegiance was to her creative work. After one year in the master's program, Naylor negotiated an arrangement that would allow her to use *Linden Hills* (1985) as the thesis required for graduation. *Linden Hills* was a follow-up to *The Women of Brewster*

*Place* in which Naylor explored issues inherent in the increase of the black middle and upper **class**. In 1983, Naylor was also writer-in-residence at Cummington Community of the Arts. From 1983 to 1984, she was visiting lecturer at George Washington University, and in 1984 she became a contributing editor to *Callaloo*, a leading African and African American literary journal.

Her other accomplishments include service as a cultural exchange lecturer with the United States Information Agency in India in 1985, a stint as scholar-in-residence at the University of Pennsylvania, and a visiting professorship at New York University in 1986, a visiting lectureship at Princeton University (1986–1987), and a visiting professorship at Boston University (1987). She also served as a Book-of-the-Month Club judge in addition to serving as the Fannie Hurst visiting professor at Brandeis University in 1988. She has adapted *Bailey's Café* (1992) into a play and founded One Way Productions, an independent **film** production company. In addition, she has written for *Southern Review*, *Ms.*, *Life*, *Ontario Review*, and *People*.

One of the common threads to be found in at least Naylor's first four novels is the strength inherent in communities of women. Whether the strength is embraced or not, the reservoir is there for sustenance if it is desired. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, women are there to nurture in times of disappointment and heartache. In *Linden Hills*, it is not the living women who reach out to each other for support but the dead Nedeed wives who speak to Willa through the relics in the basement, telling her of past horrors and that her own despair is nothing new. Perhaps they, as the reader and author herself do, want her to choose a path other than that they lived. *Mama Day* (1988) is steeped in the mysteries of womanhood, of ushering forth life and even creating it or withdrawing it. Still, it is a woman who is sought out to wield power over life and **death** and a woman who leads the characters in their reverence for their **ancestors**.

Although Naylor's body of work bears tremendous emphasis on the trials and triumphs of the African American woman, her work ultimately becomes the story or stories of the black couple—male/female, female/female, and male/male. Naylor and other black women writers have often been criticized for the negative portrayal of black men in their novels. However, Naylor has commented that she went to great lengths to do the converse in *The Women of Brewster Place*. A kind of justification and airing of the men's perspective is given in her fifth book, *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). Largely, though, her work is about how women have negotiated, survived, or succumbed to their often tumultuous relationships with men or the structures or barriers to progress that they impose.

The concept of space is a strong one in Naylor's novels. In each, the characters are set apart from some other person or group of people. For instance, the residents of Brewster Place are separated from the rest of the city by a brick wall. They come to embrace this city-mandated seclusion, forming their own sense of **community**. Nonetheless, they finally reject the wall for the restriction that it represents and the despair that festers as a result of its presence. Space operates on at least two levels in *Linden Hills* in which Willa

has been relegated to a dungeonlike space as punishment for having a light-skinned child. While a space of confinement, the basement also privies Willa to women's stories that she would not have known otherwise. Alternately, the entire novel is concerned with what the most desirable space is to be in and what price the characters are willing to pay to be in that space of residence—the space also of certain relationships and a particular professional existence. For Linden Hills residents, the price of living in their suburban space causes havoc in the other segments of their lives to the point of divorce, alcoholism, specious marriages, and even suicide. In the first two novels, residential space appears to be defined by a construct of **whiteness** either directly or through some reaction to white oppression. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the residents are outcasts from the mainstream of the city. In *Linden Hills*, blacks create their own enclave, realizing an unspoken exclusion from other places. However, the characters in *Mama Day* claim their own space. Although once owned by a slave master, Willow Springs is owned by the black residents of Willow Springs never to be relinquished to whites again. It is an unspoken agreement that Willow Springs belongs to the people of Willow Springs only. They claim that in its geographical separation from the United States it does not even belong to or in the United States. Naylor demonstrates the very tenuous connection between the two worlds in the bridge that goes out intermittently. No permanent bridge is desired. The people of Willow Springs own their space in a way that other Naylor characters do not. Finally, the world in *Bailey's Café* is a place of escape, actually the last hope for survival. At first, it is the only place the characters can go, but it becomes a place where the characters choose to stay, a place where characters find they belong. Because of the ethereality of the café, those exiles or runaways can be at **home** and coexist with one another.

Willa's story is threaded throughout *Linden Hills*. On the surface, she has all the advantages of a modern woman (education and a strong familial legacy of women) that would lead one to believe that she would choose for herself the benefits now available to women, a broader definition of womanhood other than mother and wife, at any cost. To the readers' and the author's dismay, she chooses to be a wife and mother even to the death. Even in marrying Luther Nedeed, she chooses the ideal of marriage over the value of herself. When her husband restricts her to the basement, she learns that her marriage has never been about her and would never be. She serves only a biological function for her husband, as all of the Nedeed wives before her had done. Willa never usurps her feminine power, as she has the opportunity to do.

Mattie Michael's story is more complete than any other in *The Women of Brewster Place*. The reader sees her sexual initiation, the rejection she receives from her father when she refuses to tell him the name of her baby's father, her migration, and her struggle as a single mother. Although Mattie is an elderly woman for much of the novel, she perhaps never loses her innocence, and that is to her undoing. Her wide-eyed, youthful innocence leads to her first sexual encounter with Butch Fuller, which leads to her pregnancy. It is also her same trusting nature that leads her to post bail for her son who was

charged with murder. When her son skips bail, she moves to Brewster Place. There, she is the mother to all, finding a place where the others are even more lost than she is. On Brewster Place, Mattie seems to find direction. Brewster Place needs a mother and finds one in Mattie Michael.

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Sharese Terrell Willis

### NEELY, BARBARA (1941– )

Barbara Neely began her writing career in 1981 with the publication of her short story "Passing the Word" in *Essence*; since then her stories have appeared in a

variety of magazines and anthologies. In 1992 she published her first novel, a mystery titled *Blanche on the Lam*; the immediate popularity of her sleuth character ensured the success of the Blanche books that followed. Neely is now best known as the author of the Blanche White mystery novels.

*Blanche on the Lam* introduced Neely's protagonist, a middle-aged, heavysset, dark-skinned African American **domestic** worker saddled with the incongruous and redundant name Blanche White and blessed with a personality marked by its feisty humor. Blanche's no-nonsense behavior and her savvy tell-it-like-it-is observations immediately endeared her to readers. Although Blanche solves some mystery in each novel, her assertive personality and outspoken commentary on social issues often take front seat to the plot. Neely has Blanche respond to social ills both through her behavior and her pointed observations about life. The Blanche mysteries illustrate how racism, classism, and sexism permeate everyday life, especially for the poor and for women of color.

Neely's use of **detective fiction** as a vehicle for speaking out about social injustices is just one more dimension of a life that has centered on social activism. Born in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, in 1941, Neely went through school being, more often than not, the only African American in her classes. In 1971 she moved to Philadelphia, where she worked for the Philadelphia Tutorial Project and became involved with various inner-city issues, especially housing. This interest led to her earning a master's degree in urban studies from the University of Pittsburgh. Upon graduation she took a job with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, where she helped to establish and then run the state's first **community**-based women's correctional facility.

Concern for social inequities is a constant in Neely's life, expressed through a wide range of jobs—including administering a YWCA and a Head Start program—and despite several relocations. During a stint in Raleigh, North Carolina, she produced radio shows for the African News Service and was a writer for *Southern Exposure*. She has been a director for Women for Economic Justice and was a founding member of Women of Color for Reproductive Freedom. Neely has received several awards for her commitment to social action, including the Women of Courage and Conviction Award for Literature. In addition to her current writing career, Neely hosts *Commonwealth Journal*, a radio public affairs program. She lives in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

Not surprisingly, Neely's fiction is an extension of her social activism. But it is also good entertainment. When the first Blanche White mystery, *Blanche on the Lam*, hit the market, it garnered enthusiastic reviews and won several accolades, including the prestigious Agatha, Macavity, and Anthony awards. Neely followed this success with three other Blanche White books, *Blanche among the Talented Tenth* (1994), *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998), and *Blanche Passes Go* (2000). Each story highlights some social ill, and Blanche offers plenty of opinions about the problem as she does her sleuthing.

*Blanche on the Lam* examines the effects of **race** and **class** stereotyping, with special focus on how the **Mammy (Aunt Jemima) stereotype** affects African American women. Blanche spells out the power these social constructions of



race have to do psychic damage and the strength it takes to resist internalizing their demeaning images. Blanche fits the Mammy physical type, and she is a longtime domestic worker, but her very un-Mammy-like thoughts and behavior leave no doubt that she has not bought into this stereotype, although she sometimes manipulates this image to become invisible or to stay safe. Her need to do so is just one of the indignities that comes with being “the help.”

*Blanche among the Talented Tenth* criticizes the African American color hierarchy, in which lighter skin brokers into greater social status. Blanche sadly notes how this attitude has produced a large market for skin lighteners, hair straighteners, and other products that tempt African Americans to accept a white world’s standard of **beauty**. In *Blanche Cleans Up* Neely address issues that are not as specifically race related as those in her first two books. Here a cluster of social ills weaves through the story, including homophobia, lead poisoning, and teen pregnancy. In *Blanche Passes Go* Neely uses her protagonist to illustrate the life-changing effects of physical **violence** on women. In this story Blanche tries to come to terms with her long-ago **rape**. Her search for peace and **healing** is difficult, partly because she keeps noticing other brutalized women, including victims of sexual assaults, domestic violence, and murder.

In addition to her social commentary, Neely contributes to the mystery genre a memorable cast of African American characters, helping to fill a need in this mass-market category. Casting her sleuth as a heavyset, middle-aged domestic worker with dark skin and an attitude is a particularly strong contribution, filling a near void in a genre with plenty of strong, sassy women sleuths but few of color, few not trim and fit, few near poverty, and few who use their stories as vehicles for social commentary.

*See also* Detective Fiction

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Grace McEntee

## NELSON, MARILYN (1946– )

Poet Marilyn Nelson is also an award-winning writer for children, a skilled translator, and critic. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, the daughter of Melvin M. Nelson, a career serviceman in the U.S. Air Force who wrote **poetry** and **drama**, and Johnnie Mitchell Nelson, a teacher who was herself the descendant of teachers. Growing up largely on military bases, Nelson had started composing poetry by age eleven and was writing seriously by the time she was in college. She holds a B.A. from the University of California, Davis; an M.A. from the University of Pennsylvania; and a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota.

Nelson’s books of poetry include *For the Body* (1978), the title of which suggests the collection’s central metaphor; *Mama’s Promises* (1985), which further considers the **body** as grounds of female **spirituality**; and the multigenerational **family** collage *The Homeplace* (1990), which won the 1992 Annisfield-Wolf Award and was a finalist for the 1991 National Book Award. Later collections are *Magnificat* (1994) and *The Fields of Praise: New and Selected Poems* (1997), which won the 1998 Poets’ Prize and other awards and was a finalist for the 1997 National Book Award. Another collection that treats a remarkable historical subject, *Carver: A Life in Poems* (2001), won several awards, was named a Newbery Honor Book and a Coretta Scott King Honor Book, and became a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award.

Nelson has translated poems by Halfdan Rasmussen, Inge Pedersen, Thornkild Bjornvig, and others; has written a young adult book, *Fortune’s Bones* (2004), to be performed with music by Ysaye Barnwell of Sweet Honey in the Rock; a book of sonnets for young adults, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*

(2005); and other publications. Nelson's version of Euripides's play *Hecuba* appeared in the Penn Greek Drama Series in 1998. She has also published articles on **Paule Marshall**, on poetic form, on N. Scott Momaday, and on the tradition of African American writing.

Nelson's many awards include a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship that supported her work on "The Cachoiera Tales," (2005) a long poem depicting a group of Aframerican tourists in Brazil on a pilgrimage that evokes Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1380). In addition, Nelson has received two Pushcart Prizes; two creative writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts; a Fulbright Teaching Fellowship; the 1990 Connecticut Arts Award; and a Contemplative Practices Fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies. In June 2001, Nelson was named the poet laureate of the state of Connecticut for a five-year term.

Nelson has taught in Denmark and Germany; at St. Olaf College; at the University of Connecticut, where the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center houses a selection of her papers; at the University of Delaware; and as a visiting writer at many other schools in the United States and abroad. With Martín Espada, she directs the Third World Villanelle Society.

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Katharine Rodier

## NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE

Generally speaking, neo-slave narratives can be defined as fictional texts whose primary unifying feature is their central thematic focus on new world **slavery**. Many of these narratives were written to fill in the gaps and recover the silences often left in the original **slave narratives** and as such engage with themes of **history**, **memory**, and **identity**. Like the slave narratives and abolitionist **fiction**, which appeared in a variety of forms and for a variety of reasons, neo-slave narratives are also heterogeneous. Yet despite this formal variety, neo-slave narratives can be loosely organized into two general types: narratives that mimic the autobiographical form of the original slave narratives and narratives that engage with the larger cultural and historical effects of plantation slavery.

Although there are quite a few slave narratives by and about women, the most famous being **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), an overwhelming majority of the original slave narratives focused on the lives of male slaves. This was despite the fact that the average new world slave was female. As a result, issues of gender and **sexuality** became paramount to many writers of neo-slave narratives.

Early narratives such as **Harriet E. Wilson's** *Our Nig* (1859) and **Hannah Craft's** *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (2002) take the form of first-person narratives. Like the female slave narratives by Jacobs and **Mary Prince**, these narratives tend to focus on the specific details of female enslavement. They recount the unique distinctions of slavery as experienced by women. More specifically, the writers of this type of neo-slave narrative frequently engaged with the manner in which **sexuality** became another way for slave owners, both male and female, to abuse their slaves. They also attend to the particularities and difficulties of slave families. They spend a great deal of time discussing the difficulties of being a female slave and in particular a light-skinned female slave. Although these narratives also attend to the various ways in which slave women were victimized, they also provide evidence of female agency.

A significant number of African American female writers began to turn to the neo-slave narrative in the 1960s and 1970s during the burgeoning women's movement. Writers such as **Toni Morrison** and **Sherley Anne Williams** frequently sought to foreground the political ramifications of the neo-slave narrative form. These writers very often focused on the specifically female

aspects of questions of history, memory, and identity, which were foregrounded in the slave narrative form. In these narratives, women are often represented as the repositories and carriers of the African American communities' histories and memories. While many of the male slave narratives engaged with the question of identity from a frequently singular perspective, the female authors often complicated these questions of identity by focusing on the fluid, fragmentary, or communitarian aspects of identity and history.

Many of the female writers of neo-slave narratives not only sought to recover the voices of the marginalized and previously silenced but also questioned the appropriateness of the singular form of the progressive narrative often modeled on the novel form. These writers frequently incorporated alternative methods of storytelling thought to better accommodate the specifics of new world slavery and the cultural heritage of the African diaspora such as employing narrative methods that emphasized orality, fragmentation, and provisionality thought to be connected to a shared and universal African heritage.

The neo-slave narratives that mimic the original first-person slave narratives frequently focus on issues of individual identity. The writers of neo-slave narratives often emphasize the interiority or psychology of the slaves and new world slavery, a topic frequently overlooked in the original narratives, which took as their mandate to describe the institution of slavery itself.

The second group of narratives include texts such as **Gayl Jones's** *Corregidora* (1975), Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003), and **Octavia Butler's** *Kindred* (1979) and engage with the peculiarities and paradoxes inherent in new world slavery as an institution as well as questions of communal history. For example, *Corregidora* depicts the very different manner in which memories of slavery are recalled and interpreted by different generations of the African diaspora.

Texts such as *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Ann Williams, *Middle Passage* (1990) by **Charles Johnson**, and *Cambridge* (1992) by Caryl Phillips draw upon the connections between history and how stories of slavery are written and by whom. For example, in the case of *Dessa Rose*, although the character of Mr. Nehemiah is supposed to be writing an "objective" history of slavery, his perspective is shown to be compromised by his inability to see slaves and Dessa herself as anything other than animals. Williams contrasts this with Dessa's ability to "read" Nehemiah despite the fact that she is illiterate. Unlike Nehemiah, who is enthralled by Enlightenment positivism, Dessa's alternative knowledge enables her to narrate the truth of her story to her descendants.

Another theme prevalent in this second group of narratives concerns notions of history, including our knowledge and understanding of the institution of new world slavery as history. For example, in the novel *Cambridge*, Phillips foregrounds the impossibility of comprehending the full story of slavery without paying attention to those frequently marginalized by history, such as women and blacks.

One of the most famous neo-slave narratives is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). Although the narrative primarily focuses on the story of Sethe, its use of postmodern and poststructural ideas and narrative form, as well as its exploration of the psychology of slavery, it is also concerned with detailing and elaborating the role of the **community** during slavery.

One of the unifying themes common to both types of neo-slave narratives is that of the persistence of history and its entanglement with personal and communal memories of slavery. Just as African American feminist historians acknowledge that the past is never just the past, these revisions of new world slavery highlight the manner in which the institution and effects of new world slavery continue to haunt us both as individuals and as members of a global community.

*See also Family; Historical Fiction; Jubilee*

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*Nicole N. Aljoe*

### NUNEZ, ELIZABETH (1944– )

Elizabeth Nunez was born in Trinidad on February 18, 1944, and immigrated to the United States after receiving her secondary school education. She earned a B.A. degree in English from Marian College Fond du Lac in Wisconsin in 1967 and a master's (1971) and Ph.D. (1976) in English from New York University. She is presently a CUNY Distinguished Professor of English at Medgar Evers College, the City University of New York. In 1986 Nunez, along with John O. Killens, founded the National Black Writers Conference sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Nunez has written six novels: *When Rocks Dance* (1986), *Beyond the Limbo Silence* (1998; IPPY Award-Independent Publishers Book Award Multicultural Fiction, 1999), *Bruised Hibiscus* (2000; American Book Award, 2001), *Discretion* (2002), *Grace* (2003), *Prospero's Daughter* (2006). She has edited *Defining Ourselves: Black Writers in the 90s* (1999, with Brenda M. Greene) and *Stories from Blue Latitudes: Caribbean Women Writers at Home and Abroad* (2005, with Jennifer Sparrow).

Nunez investigates the ways in which women and men in the African diaspora negotiate **love**, hate, resentment, desire, and greed in patriarchal

societies that have in place prescriptions for the way they are to think and behave. Her settings on the continent of Africa, the Caribbean Islands, and the United States introduce the reader to an international cornucopia of characters, ideas, rituals, and beliefs. She demonstrates how an abundance of elements unfolds in a myriad of environments. At every narrative curve, her plush and vivid descriptions of land make obvious her love for Africa and New York and her intense adoration for Trinidad, its culture and **history**.

Each of Nunez's stories explores the myriad of ways Afro-Caribbean/American women negotiate emotions, desires, and identities that inevitably compel them to summon the courage to consider and initiate agonizing decisions. A Nunez protagonist is a woman who will disturb the stability of her marriage or any other union either via infidelity, the sheer need to protect her children, or to answer the call for self-protection from a union threatening to strangle the very spirit from her **body**. Her novels *When Rocks Dance* and *Bruised Hibiscus* best illustrate the women Nunez creates who fight for individuality and expression inside relationships and cultures that demand unabbreviated adherence to sociocultural norms.

*When Rocks Dance*, her debut novel, is set at the turn of the twentieth century on Trinidad, the Caribbean island under British colonial rule. The quest for Trinidadian soil by Afro-Caribbean women is the main focus of the novel. Emilia Heathrow consorts with Hrothgar Heathrow, a British plantation landowner, because he promises her land if she bears him male heirs. All of her children are strangled in childbirth because Emilia has yet to pay homage to the African tradition and ritual of obeah. After she consults with and obeys the edicts of Taro, the obeahman, Emilia has a daughter she names Marina. Emilia and Marina, however, are displaced from Hrothgar's house due to a misunderstanding of his last will and testament; Emilia then invests her hope for the acquisition of land in Marina—without disseminating Taro's knowledge to her. Emilia's neglect places the spiritual life of Marina, who is married and pregnant, in danger. Nunez's panoply of characters, settings, imagery, and symbolism illustrate her belief that if Afro-Caribbean women give over their souls and spirits to British colonial dictates for land acquisition, they will only experience unhealthy dispirited relationships—even the threat of **death**. Once Emilia and Marina reconcile themselves to obeah, their lives are rightly aligned. Marina can regenerate life and finally own Trinidadian soil.

*Bruised Hibiscus* is set in British colonial Trinidad in 1954. Nunez interlaces a story around a real-life horrific crime whereby a decapitated white woman's body wrapped in a coconut bag is found by a fisherman on Freeman's Bay. A **rape** witnessed between a hibiscus bush by two native Trinidadians—Zuela and Rosa, the daughter of a white English landowner—happened prior to the murder. Even though these young girls share this scene in girlhood, they go their separate ways. The murder and decapitation of the white woman reunite Zuela and Rosa in their adulthood.

Nunez explores wider social issues: colonialism, racism, sexual and emotional abuse, and power relations between men and women of different races. But her study of the negotiations made by Zuela and Rosa as they manage

their abusive marriages makes for a more textured narrative. Zuela, “adopted” by Ho Sang, a sadistic Chinese immigrant battling his own demons, has borne ten children by him. Not only does she endure his insistence on having intercourse while she is pregnant; she also lives under the constant threat of being made homeless. One of the things he demands of her is to “smoke” opium for him and blow the smoke into his nostrils and mouth to satisfy his addiction. She agrees so that Ho Sang will never cast his eyes on her children. But Ho Sang rapes her daughter Agnes while she is away. Once Zuela sees Agnes curled up in a fetal state, counting her fingers, she unleashes her rage and blows enough opium on Ho Sang that he overdoses.

Zuela’s love for her children and the “blessing” of shelter provided by Ho Sang undergird her life. Through Zuela, Nunez makes known the harrowing circumstances of young girls made powerless due to circumstances beyond their control. Ho Sang takes full advantage of Zuela’s vulnerable state (her youth and lack of **family**) made manifest by her own father’s inability to protect her as well as the installed notions of patriarchy in Trinidad. What is intriguing, however, is once Zuela decides to escape Ho Sang, she is aided by Tong Lee, an admirer of Zuela from afar, with whom she and her children live a healthy, fulfilled life.

Rosa, on the other hand, fails to survive. The daughter of white English landowners, Rosa bears up under the constant psychological and verbal abuse of her husband, Cedric, son of a black fisherwoman and East Indian man—all without the support of her mother, Clara Applegate. Nunez creates a character who must come to terms with her reason for marriage: Rosa marries Cedric only to satisfy her own sexual desires. After her appetite for Cedric diminishes, Cedric becomes irrational and cruelly aggressive in his treatment of Rosa. Fueled by the murders in Trinidad, Rosa travels to the Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in the economically depressed village of Laventille. Here, Zuela’s and Rosa’s paths converge, only to be marred by memories of the rape that bruised the hibiscus bush during their adolescence.

The 1960s is the setting for *Beyond the Limbo Silence*. The novel is a painstaking journey into a young Trinidadian woman’s coming of age in the United States during the turbulent civil rights era. A small Catholic college in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, awards college-bound Sara Edgehill a full scholarship. A black Catholic priest acts as messenger, and tells her family the college is determined to unearth fresh raw talent from Trinidad, a place considered by the college administrators as a “primitive” environment. A myriad of experiences causes Sara to examine her Trinidadian sensibilities as well as her upbringing. Sara, quite knowledgeable of **race** relations in Trinidad, has to negotiate her **identity** in the United States, a nation whose racial politics cut deeper. Attendant to her coming of age is the demystification of the America she has learned about through **film**. All the while Sara has to come to terms with the troubled past of her elders: It is legend that Bertha “Mad Bertha,” Sara’s White Creole great-grandmother, goes insane after abandoning Sara’s grandmother and being cast out by her family for the shame she has brought upon them by becoming impregnated by a native West Indian. The possibility



that the “sins” of her great-grandmother could be visited upon her causes her anxiety. Although Sara thrives in her new Midwestern **home**, she is all too aware that students from other countries use strategies to assimilate and erase difference in the all-white setting. The childish ignorance of her native land, Trinidad, its history, and its customs expressed by the privileged young white women in the college alienates Sara from them. That they attempt to taunt her into carrying a bucket on her head without dropping it, for example, humiliates Sara. Not that she is ashamed of her people, but the incident brings Sara to the realization of the **stereotypes** held for West Indians by the young women in the college. She carries a greater weight of awareness of her skin color since her parents make subtle references to their disappointment that her skin is too dark. All of these perceptions, beliefs, and feelings get challenged as Sara is pulled into the vortex of the civil rights movement. The intimate relationship she forms with Sam Maxwell, an attractive black law student, alleviates much of her alienation, but even that union casts a burden on her. Sara’s and Sam’s interactions with each other bring up the problem of native- and foreign-born African Americans. Even though Sam and Sara have the same skin color and hold dear affection for each other, Sam’s fervent involvement with the **civil rights movement** and his strong comradeship with black and white activists weigh heavily on the union; the relationship eventually crumbles under Sam’s commitment to his beliefs.

Nunez takes another turn in her writing whereby her male protagonists have to wrestle with the reality that lovers and/or wives no longer share common ground with or interest in them or the partnerships they have formed. As a result, they desperately fight for their marriages, all the while searching themselves for the culprit that made the tear in the seam; some of them rescue their women from depression and others from memories that haunt them. Some remain in partnerships out of sheer commitment only.

*Discretion* begins with the ruminations of Oufola Sindede, an African-born male who has moved through the political ranks to become foreign ambassador to the United States for his unnamed country. He is married yet feels a passionate love for his lover, Marguerite, a New York artist living in Harlem. Nunez takes a nonjudgmental stance as she explores the “what if” of a desire and affection held by a man who loves two women—a love that is compromised by his commitment to his wife and marriage. Important to the novel is Nunez’s survey of the complexities of marriage and how its elements of stability and constancy hold their own merit. What is more, Nunez’s characterization of Marguerite illustrates the angst and/or the interior discomfort of the “other woman” who enters into an extramarital relationship. In the end, Oufola chooses to remain with his wife, as both he and Marguerite bear up under the knowledge of their love for one another.

*Grace* opens with the contemplative voice of Justin Peters, a Harvard-educated professor of British and classic **literature** who has come to realize that his wife, Sally Peters, has lost interest in him and the marriage. Their only stabilizing force is their daughter Giselle. Justin refuses to allow Sally’s disinterest to deter him from finding out why. Through a course of actions,

Justin anchors Sally as he encourages her to face a vortex of haunting memories and horrific events that have assaulted her ability to create **poetry**. In the process, Justin faces his own frailties only to summon the courage to be gentle and patient until Sally finally sees herself again first as a poet, then as a mother, and finally, as a wife. Justin's belief in Sally's abilities summons in her the strength to be.

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*Kwakiutl L. Dreher*





### **OLIVER, DIANE (1943–1966)**

Diane Oliver was born on July 28, 1943, in Charlotte, North Carolina, the daughter of William Robert and Blanche Rann Oliver. She grew up in Charlotte during the time of the 1954 Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. Board of Education*, which desegregated schools. Not letting racism or sexism stop her, Oliver graduated from West Charlotte High School and enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1960.

During her college years, she started her brief but flourishing writing career by being the managing editor of the school newspaper the *Carolinian*, studying under the poet Randall Jarrell, and writing short stories. In 1964, Oliver won a college writing contest sponsored by *Mademoiselle*. Her award was being its guest editor for June. Her first short story “Key to the City” was published in the 1965 fall edition of *Red Clay Reader*. Because of this story, she obtained a scholarship to the University of Iowa and used it to enroll in its Writers’ Workshop in 1965.

More published stories followed. In the spring issue of *Sewanee Review*, her first and third stories “Key to the City” and “Neighbors” were published (1966). Oliver’s second and fourth stories “Health Service” and “Traffic Jam” were published in the November 1965 and July 1966 issues of *Negro Digest*. Eventually, she was awarded the O’Henry Award for Short Fiction and received an Honorable Mention in *Mademoiselle’s* **fiction** competition.

Oliver's promising career was cut short at the age of twenty-two. A few days before receiving her Master's in Fine Arts degree, she died in an automobile accident on May 21, 1966. The University of Iowa bestowed her degree posthumously.

Oliver's work infuses the natural southern tradition with issues of feminism and **race**. Influenced by such authors as William Faulkner, **Richard Wright**, and **Lorraine Hansberry**, she still has her own unique style. All of her stories focus on strong but struggling black women of the 1960s who are trying to survive in a society that is unsympathetic to their plight. Usually abandoned by a father or a significant other, they try to keep what remains of their **family** intact. Unfortunately, they eventually are abandoned or ignored by the society that they reach out to for assistance. Despite these problems, they demonstrate determination against the forces that threaten to destroy them; however, they usually end up being resigned to their unfortunate circumstances, creating a downward spiral that seems impossible to escape. By writing these stories set in rural and city settings, Oliver shows how not only racism and sexism but indifference as well are major problems.

Oliver's amazing achievements at such a young age clearly indicate that she was destined to be one of the most important writers of her generation regardless of her sex and race. Oliver was ahead of her time; her short stories serve as a precursor to the budding feminist movement of the 1970s. Furthermore, her influence is also reflected in the more positive and sympathetic social changes of that same era. Although her career was tragically brief, her stories are relevant today.

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*Devona Mallory*

### **OSBEY, BRENDA MARIE (1957– )**

What is most remarkable about the **poetry** of Brenda Marie Osbey is the vivid sense of New Orleans mystique, beautiful, yet haunting, that carries the reader into the mesmerizing allure of Louisiana's African American Creole culture. Osbey creates portraits of black womanhood resplendent with dimensions of **beauty** and madness, melancholy and innocence, **love** and hate. Her poetry weaves a spicy symbiosis between woman and place, exploring the charm and complexities within each.

Osbey's first published volume, *Ceremony for Minneconjoux* (1983), combines love, murder, and insanity in a series of small visceral portraits—murky windows through which Osbey carefully guides the reader. *In These Houses* (1988) continues her theme of madness as she explores the traditional realm of women—the house. Akin to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Osbey probes the dark side of the female world behind closed doors, as her “houses” exemplify the inscrutable balance between sanity and madness. *In These Houses* also includes a glossary of cultural terms and place names that work to further draw the reader into the African American Creole world. *Desperate Circumstances, Dangerous Women* (1991) is a book-length narrative poem replete with hoodoo **spirituality**, where past and present are inextricably entwined into daily Margigny life. Osbey's most recent publication, *All Saints: New and Selected Poems* (1997), continues her tendency to merge the past and present by exploring **death** and the important role **memory** plays in keeping lost loved ones alive. Osbey has also been published in numerous journals, collections, and anthologies.

While Osbey's poems are an affirmation of the strength and charisma of black womanhood, frequently through images of hands and feet, they also offer a unique ambience of African American Creole culture, and each poem is a fetching reminder of the unity of black women's experiences that transcend time and place. Osbey's use of local idioms, coupled with the bewitching sounds and images of memorable characters, create a poetic dance of mesmerizing black womanhood.

Osbey received her B.A. from Dillard University and an M.A. from the University of Kentucky, and she attended the Université Paul Valéry at Montpellier, France. She was awarded the Academy of American Poets Loring-Williams Award and a 1984 Associated Writing Programs Poetry Award and has been a fellow of the MacDowell Colony, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Kentucky Foundation for Women, the Millay Colony, and the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College, Harvard University. She was the recipient of a 1990 National Endowment of the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. She was awarded the 1993 Louisiana Division of the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. Osbey's collection of poetry *All Saints* received the American Book Award in 1998. Osbey was awarded the Camargo Foundation Fellowship for 2004 and was in residence at Cassis, France, completing her newest manuscript. She has taught French and English at Dillard and African American and third world literatures at the University of California at Los Angeles. She has been twice appointed scholar-in-residence at Southern University and visiting writer-in-residence at Tulane University. Osbey currently teaches at Loyola University in New Orleans.

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*Debbie Clare Olson*

## **OUR NIG**

**Harriet E. Wilson's** 1859 text *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North, Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* existed in near obscurity until a scholarly second edition was published in 1983. In this groundbreaking edition, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., provides evidence to

confirm Wilson's **race** and gender, thus proving *Our Nig* was the first novel published in the United States by an African American writer and the first published by an African American woman. Additional recovery **work** within the field of nineteenth-century African American **literature** may at some point disprove the "first novel" status of *Our Nig*, but it will nevertheless remain a significant and remarkable work.

Published for the author in 1859 in Boston, *Our Nig* emerged in a time and place of fervent abolitionism. Unlike the numerous first-person **slave narratives** published, read, and distributed for abolitionist ends, *Our Nig*'s third-person narrator conveys Frado's life in the North as an indentured black servant. Anticipating the final chapters of **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Wilson exposes that racism and racial oppression exist in the North as well as the **South**.

Frado's story illustrates the extreme physical and emotional hardships a young African American girl encounters in a racist society. At age six, Frado is left with the white Bellmont **family** when her father dies and her mother cannot support her. Thus abandoned, Frado becomes an indentured servant to the Bellmont family and victim to the abuses of the tyrannical "she-devil" Mrs. Bellmont. Although Mr. Bellmont and several Bellmont children are sympathetic toward Frado, they cannot fully protect her from Mrs. Bellmont's cruelties. At age eighteen, Frado is able to leave the Bellmont **home**. Her troubles, however, do not end; economic survival is difficult due to society's racist attitudes, and she suffers ill-health caused by a lifetime of abuse. Frado's troubles are compounded when she is abandoned by her husband and must support herself and their young son on her own. Frado attempts to make a living sewing straw bonnets and selling hair tonic, but at several points she becomes dependent on public aid and the kindness of the few sympathetic Bellmonts. In the concluding paragraphs of the novel, the narrator notes that Frado is still an invalid and asks for the readers' sympathy and aid.

Critics are divided as to whether this text is **fiction** or **autobiography** since it embodies elements of both. Strong parallels exist between Frado and Wilson; *Our Nig* has provided strong leads for finding biographical information about Wilson. For reasons that are not entirely known, Wilson's self-published text received little, if any, critical notice or public attention. Thus *Our Nig* spawns two stories: a nineteenth-century story about an African American woman who hopes her story will support her and her son in a racist world, and a twentieth-century story about the challenges of reconstructing the life of the African American woman who wrote a literary landmark.

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*Heidi L. M. Jacobs*



**PARABLE OF THE SOWER.** See Parable Series

**PARABLE OF THE TALENTS.** See Parable Series

### **PARABLE SERIES**

The most recent novels of science **fiction** writer **Octavia Butler** are installments in her Parable series, which so far include *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). *Parable of the Sower* is a postapocalyptic tale that opens in 2024 with national, state, and local governments no longer able to provide reliable communication, electrical, health, or safety services. Years of drought, epidemics, and economic depression have left water as expensive as food, and gasoline and electricity affordable only to the rich. Hoards of homeless people depend on looting, prostitution, or assault to get the necessities of life. Desperate women sell themselves or their children for food. Violent drug gangs roam the streets; a new popular designer drug provides, with its high, an intense attraction to fire, so arson and even self-immolation abound. What is left of middle-class urban populations have walled in their communities; they keep armed patrols and leave their neighborhoods only in groups.

Protagonist Lauren Olamina lives in one such **community**, where families struggle to maintain a life that approximates better times. Lauren sees that a yearning for the past has blinded her neighbors to their need to prepare for

the worst. She places some of the blame on traditional religions, which valorize faith, hope, and suffering, not action. Lauren does not believe in her father's Baptist God or in any **religion** she has heard of; she does, however, feel that people need some kind of faith system to help them survive. So she formulates a new religion, Earthseed, that asks individuals to take responsibility for shaping the future. This religion recognizes Change as the deepest, most fundamental principle of life; hence, it preaches that God is Change. But this God is not to be worshiped; rather, Earthseed followers are urged to anticipate and prepare for Change, adapt to Change, and to foster the responsible shaping of Change, thereby shaping God. One of Earthseed's goals is for humankind to branch out from Earth, a move necessary for species survival. The destiny of Earthseed, Lauren preaches, is to take root among the stars. She means this literally.

Lauren's ability to adapt to and shape change is tested when her neighborhood is razed by a band of violent looters. One of the few survivors, she heads north in search of **work** and safety. The novel follows a quest pattern as Lauren begins to collect other travelers around her; they eventually become her first Earthseed converts. The group is ethnically diverse, underscoring Butler's insistence that solutions to social problems should reflect contributions from many groups and be for everyone. Lauren lives in a world reverting to racism, sexism, segregation, and even **slavery**, but her group welcomes members from a variety of ethnic origins, from both genders, and from a wide range of generations and economic classes. Lauren does not offer fellowship to the violent, the mentally deranged, or those who have become desensitized to their own humanity, but she takes in the weak and vulnerable as well as the strong.

*Parable of the Talents* picks up in 2032. The early part of the novel gives Lauren's memories of the final days of her commune, which grew and prospered until a fast-growing fundamentalist group, Christian America, branded Earthseed a dangerous cult and sent their Ku Klux Klan-like militia to wipe it out. Imprisoned and brutalized in an internment compound reminiscent of a Nazi concentration camp, Lauren almost lost her will to shape Change but finally found the courage to strike back against her oppressors.

The story's present occurs years later, with the country on the road to economic recovery, with most mob **violence** in the past, and with a right-wing Christian America president. Lauren by now has rejected the idea of concentrating Earthseed into a single commune; her religion must spread quickly if it is to be an effective agent of change. So she turns to public media and locally run community seedgroups to spread her faith.

A second plotline follows Lauren's eighteen-year-old daughter Larkin. Kidnapped as a baby during the raid on the commune, she has been raised in a Christian American **home** in which she feels unloved. Larkin (renamed Asha Vere) is an unhappy young woman who comes to blame her mother for her misery. A third major character is Lauren's brother Marcus, whose response to the horrors he has lived through is to become a preacher for Christian America. Marcus and Lauren, unable to reconcile their differences, part after a brief

reunion, and when Marcus eventually locates Larkin, he does not tell his sister. Instead, he forms a secret relationship with his niece, the only relative he feels close to.

Contrasting religious visions form the backdrop of this story. The fundamentalist Christian America with its ultraconservative political agenda is used to explore how a repressive religious climate targets women. Lauren's Earthseed is used to propose an alternative approach to social change; it also explores the heartbreaking choices a leader of a movement must sometimes make. At the novel's end Lauren is a respected religious leader—some call her a saint—but she has been unable to heal her damaged relationships with Marcus and Larkin, her only living **family**.

Lauren Olamina follows in the footsteps of Butler's other strong African American female protagonists who courageously seek new perspectives and solutions. These women reject patriarchal worldviews in favor of more inclusive, compassionate, egalitarian models of life. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren acts out an archetypal hero's quest, demonstrating how that story changes when it addresses women's concerns, everything from including tampons in one's survival pack and valorizing nurturing to an emphasis on sexist social practices and violence against women. Lauren founds her commune on feminist principles: inclusion, egalitarianism, nurturing, and family. *Parable of the Talents* tracks the results of her quest—its triumphs and joys as well as its hardships and costs. *Parable of the Sower* is a Nebula Award finalist; *Parable of the Talents* is a Nebula winner.

See also *Bloodchild and Other Stories*; *Kindred*; Patternist Series; Xenogenesis Trilogy

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Grace McEntee

### PARADISE

**Toni Morrison's** eighth novel *Paradise* (1998) is a historical odyssey chronicling the gendered and generational effects of the Civil Rights era and the Black Power movement in Ruby, Oklahoma, a rural, patriarchal, all-black town where, by covenant with God, no one dies. The novel is divided into

nine sections, each titled for a female character, and begins with a graphic description of patriarchal **violence**: Nine of Ruby's leading townsmen murder five women living at the Convent. Throughout the novel, what happens in the predawn hours of that July day in 1976 is slowly and intricately woven into an unfolding of Ruby's complex **history**.

In 1890, nine dark-skinned black families, fleeing both the racism of the Redemption **South** and the prejudice of light-skinned blacks, established Haven, Oklahoma. Returning from World War II to find Haven failing financially and morally, the fifteen men (descendants of the original nine) take their families and the Oven, the symbolic center of the town despite its associations with the womb, and move 240 miles west to begin again. Their new haven remained nameless until 1954 when Ruby Morgan died because no white hospital would admit her. A constant reminder of American racism, the town's name reinforces its protective, exclusionary impulse. However, Ruby's efforts to isolate itself ultimately prove futile; the town cannot escape the sociopolitical changes sweeping the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, one of the primary struggles in the novel results from the efforts of Ruby's youth to challenge their parents' generation. Unable to accept any challenge to their patriarchal authority and unwilling to acknowledge their own culpability in the town's unrest, Ruby's men need a scapegoat. They find one in the women of the Convent.

A sprawling mansion erected by an embezzler, the Convent was originally replete with sexually explicit décor: paintings, faucets, doorknobs, ashtrays all shaped as men's and women's genitals or depicting graphic sexual encounters. After one orgy in the nearly completed mansion, the embezzler was arrested. Years later, his house, located seventeen miles outside of Ruby, was redeemed by Catholic nuns as Christ the King School for Native Girls. The nuns promptly destroyed, hid, or painted over any sexual material, just as they "cleansed" the native Arapaho girls of their native language and customs. Thus, the Convent evolved from a place of sexual exploitation of women to one of repression, oppression, and enforced conformity to a particular set of moral and cultural codes. After losing funding, however, the school—known by then as the Convent—underwent one final transformation, one that finally resisted women's sexual and cultural oppression. At novel's opening, it is a haven for the dispossessed, abused, confused, weary, or abandoned and the **home** of Consolata (Connie), Mavis, Grace (Gigi), Seneca, and Pallas (Divine).

Consolata Sosa is brought by Mother Mary Magna to the Convent in 1925 at the age of nine, having been sexually abused and abandoned in the streets of Brazil. At thirty-nine, she has an intense affair with Deacon Morgan, ten years her junior, already married, and one of Ruby's most prominent men. Deek ends the affair after Connie bites his lip and licks his blood during sex. Echoing Paul D's critique of Sethe in Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved* (1987), Deek argues to himself that her behavior is that of an animal. However, the text suggests that he ends the affair because he cannot reconcile his patriarchal mores or his **black masculinity** with Connie's deep, unrestrained female

**sexuality.** After the affair, Connie saves Deek's son's life by "stepping into" him and thus becomes friends with Soane, Deek's wife. Their relationship encapsulates the connections between Ruby and the Convent: These two women **love** the same man and give life to the same son; however, their similarities are obscured for Ruby's citizens by differences of convention. One is redeemed in marriage, the other considered a whore.

By 1971, when Mother Mary dies, wayward women—all scarred by the men in their lives—have already begun to join Connie in the Convent. The first, who comes in 1968, is twenty-seven-year-old Mavis, a woman running from the accidental murder of her newborn twins and convinced that her husband and three remaining children are trying to kill her. Reminiscent of the haunting power of a mother's guilt in *Beloved*, Mavis begins to hear the laughter of her dead twins and stays without ever deciding to. Grace (Gigi), who loves to be naked, joins them in 1971, running from bloody memories of the Oakland riot and searching for the preplanned rendezvous spot with a lover who never shows. After an affair with Coffee Smith (the Morgans' nephew) that ends abusively, she focuses her sexual energy on the newcomer, Seneca. In 1973, Seneca is twenty-three and on a failed mission to get bail money for her boyfriend. Abandoned by the mother she thought was her sister, abused by a foster brother, and used as a sex toy by a rich woman for three weeks, Seneca repeatedly cuts herself to see the blood pool in surgically precise wounds. The sixteen-year-old Pallas, most likely the white girl shot in the novel's opening line, arrives pregnant in 1975. She is running from the **memory** of her boyfriend having sex with her mother and of two white men chasing her in the night. In 1976, Pallas delivers a baby boy.

After Connie begins to receive visits from a strange, floating man with cascading brown hair, she starts to tell the Convent women of Piedade, a beautiful, maternal woman who sings like paradise. Connie inspires the women to a new sense of purpose: They clean themselves, shave their heads, begin to **work** together, and participate in sessions of "loud-dreaming" that allow them to excise the ghosts that haunt them. They paint images of themselves, their pasts, and their fears on the basement floor and walls and tell each other their stories. When Soane sees them again, just before the attack, she believes they are no longer haunted. As they dance in the predawn rain, they have become holy women. Meanwhile, Ruby's men participate in their own ritual. They prepare for battle, eating rare steak and gathering their weapons. The Convent's menless women—signs of their failure, disintegration, loss of control, and their own human weaknesses—must be eradicated to ensure the patriarchal stasis of Ruby.

Ruby's citizens, marshaled by Lone DuPres, the town's aging and no-longer-needed midwife, arrive too late. Although the women put up a fight, they are all presumably shot. After Deek unsuccessfully attempts to stop his twin brother Steward from shooting Connie, a rift opens between the twins. Deek begins to understand that the isolated, unchanging, patriarchal new "haven" they had attempted to create was impossible, that they had become what their grandfathers hated: those who attack and destroy others because

they are seen as different. When the coroner arrives, the bodies, along with Mavis's Cadillac, are gone. In their place is an inexplicable opening, a door or a window, into another plane. Billie Delia Cato, who once found refuge in the Convent, believes that the women have left to prepare for battle against Ruby, men, and all who have subjugated them. The readers do see each of the women again, as they confront people from their pasts, armed, determined, and united. Regardless of whether the women have survived the attack or occupy some liminal, spiritual space, the novel ends with hope for reconciliation between genders and generations. The strong, militant image of women armed for battle is juxtaposed with the final image of Connie sitting at the ocean's edge with her head in Piedade's lap, in peace and in Paradise.

*See also* Community; Identity; Motherhood

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

### PARKER, PAT (1944– )

Pat Parker was born on January 20, 1944, in Houston, Texas, the youngest of four daughters in a working-class African American family. In the early 1970s she moved to Oakland, California, where she became involved in a range of political activism including participation in the Black Panther Party and the Black Women's Revolutionary Council. She also played a part in the formation of the Women's Press Collective. Between 1978 and 1987 Parker was medical coordinator of the Oakland Feminist Women's Health Center, where her tireless work made her a national leader on issues of women's health, particularly regarding domestic and sexual violence. Parker has also been actively involved in diverse gay and lesbian organizations.

Parker's narrative **poetry** draws strongly from working-class oral traditions employing vernacular speech, wry humor, and strong language to attack social injustice while avoiding the pitfalls of didacticism in political poetry. As such, her words, which incorporate chants, curses, and jokes, require hearing as well as reading. Indeed Parker's poetry was honed not only in bookstore readings but in bars and coffeehouses. Often her work incorporated musical performances. In Parker's powerful performances the activist and artist found their sharpest articulation.

Her poetry was part of a much larger personal and political engagement. Both as a political activist and as a poet Parker was at the forefront of efforts to link struggles for racial, gender, and sexual equality and against class exploitation. Parker's work expanded the visions of her contemporary political allies to bring racial equality together with gay liberation while bringing a black working-class feminist perspective to recurring themes of **love**, political alliances, family legacies, and ultimately liberation and justice.

In all of this, Parker's work resists containment by notions of **identity**, whether queer or feminist, which suggest a singular or unified subjectivity. Instead her work emphasizes unity within diversity. Her work continues to speak to the silences around matters of **race** and class within lesbian feminism and the women's movements in the United States.

Parker's writings speak against the ongoing marginalization of working-class lesbians and lesbians of color within much of contemporary queer theory. At the same time they situate queer theory within the particular histories of working-class lesbians and lesbians of color.

Central to Parker's poetry are the tensions around notions of identity. These tensions express a creative political force through the author's consciousness of producing poetry from experiences of multiple oppression.

Parker's poems are elements of struggle that refuse marginalization in the face of racism in women's communities and homophobia in African American communities. In addition, and crucially, her words also tear away middle-class presumptions of mainstream movements against racial, gender, and sexual oppression. Underlying all of this is a constant commitment to the possibilities of social transformation, even as she offers critiques of specific strategies for change that have limited the movements in which she has participated.

Through her poems and her activism Parker asserts a radical identity, beyond capture by essentialist categories. In an essay titled "Revolution: It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick," which appeared in *This Bridge Called My Back*, she states, "I am a feminist. I am neither white nor middle class. And the women that I've worked with were like me. Yet I'm told that we don't exist and that we didn't exist."

Although some critics dismiss Parker's straightforward style, the directness of her poems articulates a transgressive and contestatory identity spoken from the sites where complex power relations intersect. Parker's poems affirm the identities of the silenced while always remaining conscious of the disapproval and contradictions that serve to keep those identities silent in a society marked by homophobia, racism, and class exploitation.



For Parker these identities are collectively experienced and articulated, and her words speak of, from, and to collective resistance. Poetry is but one tool in the construction of those “liberation fronts” in which the ongoing struggles for collective transformation, or revolution, are engaged.

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*J. Shantz*

### PARKS, ROSA (1913–2005)

Rosa Parks, a seamstress, boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955. When told to give up her seat, in accordance with Jim Crow laws that mandated blacks were to give up their seats to whites, Parks refused. As a result of her refusal, she was forcibly removed from the bus, arrested, jailed, and fined. News of Parks’s courageous stance and subsequent treatment ignited the passion that fueled the Montgomery bus boycott and earned her the title “mother of the **civil rights movement**.”

Parks was born in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1913. Her mother, Leona Edwards, was a schoolteacher, and her father, James McCauley, was a carpenter. She spent her early years in Pine Level, Alabama, in the **home** of her maternal grandparents. In 1924, Parks, her mother, and brother relocated to segregated Montgomery, Alabama. She attended the Montgomery Industrial School for Girls, which she commonly referred to as “Ms. White’s school.” Despite the curriculum’s focus on **domestic** science, Parks gained vital knowledge beyond home economics. It was at Ms. White’s school that Parks experienced being treated with dignity, regardless of **race** or gender.

After graduating from Ms. White’s school, Parks continued her education at Booker T. Washington High School, where she graduated in 1928. She attended the Alabama State Normal School (Alabama State University) but was unable to complete her degree, due to the illnesses of her mother and grandmother. In 1932, she married Raymond Parks, a barber whom she credits with further awakening her activism. Parks’s civic responsibility was reflected in her membership in the Montgomery Voters League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Youth Council.

The day after she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat, Parks and the Women’s Political Council produced and distributed 52,000 leaflets concerning a one-day bus boycott. The boycott was so successful that the Montgomery Improvement Association, led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., decided to continue its strike until white lawmakers met black demands and ended the practice of segregation on city buses. On December 20, 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that segregated seating on the buses in Montgomery, Alabama, was unconstitutional. Parks is cited as having said she had no idea that the small action of refusing to give up her seat would facilitate the dismantling of segregation laws throughout the **South**. Parks and her husband subsequently moved to Detroit, Michigan, in 1957, due to numerous **death** threats. However, Parks continued her activism.

Parks was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor, by President William Clinton in 1999. Parks received many additional accolades and honors as a result of her strong civic commitment to human rights and efforts to incorporate the disenfranchised. In hopes of encouraging youth and promoting high scholastic achievement, she founded the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development. In *Rosa Parks: My Story* (1992), *I Am Rosa Parks* (1999), and *Quiet Strength* (2000), she humbly articulates her pioneering efforts to bring about equality and change. Pioneer Rosa Parks died on October 24, 2005.

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*Karen Arnett Chachere*

### PARKS, SUZAN-LORI (1964– )

Suzan-Lori Parks was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky, but grew up in several different places due to her father's career as an army colonel. As a result of her parents' interest in truly experiencing the places they lived, she had opportunities to be fully immersed in other cultures. For example, while living in Germany she attended a German high school instead of the American schools for the children of military personnel. At this point as a teenager, she had already begun writing short stories, and she credits working so closely with another language as pivotal in her ability to capture language and dialogue.

Parks attended Mount Holyoke College, a women's liberal arts college, and studied **fiction** writing with renowned author and essayist **James Baldwin**, who after hearing her read her works aloud, suggested she consider **drama**. The exploration of works by African American playwrights **Adrienne Kennedy** and **Ntozake Shange** were key in the development of her art form. Both Kennedy and Shange provided a more freeing and individualistic context for Parks, who was looking to tell her stories in ways that were not structured by the confines of traditional drama. Her own first plays were similarly experimental, and although she won honors from the theater department for her first work *The Sinner's Place*, it was declined production because of its innovative form.

This was not a setback for Parks, who continues to write and shape her art in a way that allows her to manipulate the confines of traditional drama. In fact, her approach to language has become a signature quality to her work. And as a result of her commitment to representing her talents on stage in her own way, language, time, and sense of **history**, she has reaped tremendous success. Her interviews and writings reveal that she is interested in examining the known history in order to discover things that have been missing or hanging on the sides of the cracks; she is committed to telling the unchronicled events.

Her writing is imbued with posing and answering questions regarding the individual and collective **identity** of African Americans and people in general. She not only tells these stories through words but with sound, using repetition that often has the ability to create a hypnotic effect. Although the theatrical and phonetic way in which she writes may look daunting to the reader, Parks has been successful at carrying on a tradition of African American culture

and writing where the English written word is deliberately taken apart and reshaped to make new meaning. This not only allows the audience to experience the story through several senses and through their imagination, but for Parks, who is interested in challenging the actors, she gives them an opportunity to experience it in their diction and diaphragm. Parks is invested not only in providing **work** for black actors but also in challenging more than their emotional instrument.

The playwright, screenwriter, and novelist has received numerous accolades for her work. Most recently, in 2002 she won the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Topdog/Underdog* only days after the play opened on Broadway, making her the first African American woman to win for drama. She was the Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2000 for the play *In the Blood* that tells the story of a homeless black woman who is a single mother of several children by different fathers. In 2001 she received a \$500,000 MacArthur Foundation “genius grant.” In addition, she garnered the 1990 Obie Award for Best off-Broadway Play for *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and the Whiting Foundation Writers Award. She won the MacArthur Award in 1986. She has received two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships for Playwrights, the Lila-Wallace Reader’s Digest Award, and the CalArts/Alpert Award in the Arts and has been awarded grants by the Rockefeller Foundation, Ford Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, and New York Foundation for the Arts.

In addition to writing for the stage, she has also written three plays for radio: *Pickling* (1990), *Third Kingdom* (1990), and *Locomotive* (1991). She has written two screenplays, *Anemone Me* (1990) and *Girl 6* (1996), which was directed by Spike Lee, and a novel, *Getting Mother’s Body* (2003). She is currently working on an adaptation of **Toni Morrison’s** novel *Paradise* (1998) and a stage musical, *Hoopz*, about the Harlem Globetrotters.

Parks holds degrees from Mount Holyoke College and the Yale School of Drama. She has taught or worked as writer-in-residence at several institutions including the Yale School of Drama, the University of Michigan, New School for Social Research, and the Pratt Institute for the Arts. She is currently the director of the California Institute for the Arts and lives in Venice Beach, California.

*See also Venus*

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Brandon L. A. Hutchinson

### PASSING

In the context of African American culture, *passing* refers to the act of denying an African American ancestry and assuming a white **identity**. Perhaps because the concept of racial passing calls into question the relation between physical appearance and identity and thus challenges the very definition of **race**, it has been one of the most explored and controversial themes in African American **literature**.

The passing character is often portrayed in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American literature as a tragic victim—one who enjoys a certain amount of power in assuming a white identity but must, in the end, return to his or her cultural roots. Some African American authors would depict doomed interracial couples and **mulattoes** to emphasize the danger of miscegenation and the folly in denying African heritage. For example, in *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Frank J. Webb presents the story of an interracial couple who attempt to escape racial prejudice by moving to Philadelphia but ultimately cannot and are eventually murdered. Their light-skinned son, who is discovered passing for white and attempting to marry a white woman, is socially rejected. **Charles Waddell Chesnutt** uses passing characters in *The Wife of His Youth* (1889) and *The House behind the Cedars* (1900) to expose the

dangers of being seduced by white cultural values. Rather than portraying **whiteness** as an identity to be envied, Chesnutt shows that the consequence of adopting white values is the loss of the self.

If these narratives encourage African Americans to unite in a defined **community**, some African American writers would deploy the narratives of passing to illustrate the precarious nature of the color line. In what is recognized as the first African American novel, *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853), for example, **William Wells Brown** draws a sympathetic portrait of the quadroon daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings, even as he reminds his audience that with the rise of such interracial coupling, racial heritage will become increasingly difficult to define. In what is recognized as the first extensive exploration of racial passing, **James Weldon Johnson's** *Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man* (1912) complicates the very idea that one who has a mixed racial heritage can claim an identity as either an African American or a white man. Its depiction of a fair-skinned man who denies his African American heritage to enjoy the privileges of being white ends in complete ambivalence with a short description of the protagonist's psychological turmoil over his success at passing.

In more complex and subtle ways, some African American women writers have used the theme of passing to critique both racism and misogyny. **Frances E. W. Harper's** heroine in *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), for example, is a light-skinned heroine who embraces her African American identity and actively engages in her fate by refusing to marry a white doctor and vowing to **work** for the progress of African American people. Because the protagonist marries another light-skinned African American character who also refuses to pass, however, to some extent the novel suggests the impossibility of social progress without marriage. Similar to Harper's protagonist in her refusal of a white man for an African American as a husband is **Jessie Redmon Fauset's** all but white character Angela Murray in *Plum Bun* (1928). For Angela, who refashions herself as Angèle Mory when passing for white, passing yields a state of empowerment and social prestige, but only for a short time. To some extent, then, *Plum Bun* represents passing as a clash between feminist empowerment and racial denial. Mixed-race African American women have no recourse but to rely on their racial brothers or fathers to attain social visibility. Not only does Fauset portray the impossibility of African American women's independence, thereby subtly criticizing the patriarchal ideology of African American culture, but also she shows how the phenomenon of passing brings out new, more complex forms of prejudice. In the ironically titled *Comedy: American Style* (1933), for example, a dark-skinned character commits suicide because he is rejected by his light-skinned mother and sister.

**Nella Larsen**, one of the most intriguing writers on the concept of passing, would further complicate and greatly expand the concept of racial passing. Her work in *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) not only reacts against conventional ways of representing the narrative of passing but also widens the term to encompass other aspects of identity, especially **class**, gender, and

**sexuality.** For this reason, several critics from Martha J. Cutter to Judith Butler suggest that Larsen's representations of passing are empowering in that they emphasize the fluidity of identity and destabilize traditional oppressive boundaries. In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane "passes" by continually adopting new identities, and the striking deterioration of her roles as the narrative moves forward—from independent teacher to entrapped wife and mother—illustrates the extent to which cultural prejudice about the expected role of a black woman, even within the black community, actually damages African American culture. After experiencing empowerment through her ability to change her identity as one would a wardrobe, the heroine's fate as a minister's wife imprisoned in her own **body** strongly suggests that without feminist revision, African American beliefs about gender would ensure political regression for the entire race.

If *Quicksand* satirizes the conventional narratives of passing, which at times radically reinforce racist and sexist boundaries, *Passing* introduces two light-skinned heroines who approach their mixed racial identity very differently. Like Helga Crane, Irene Redfield occasionally enjoys the privileges of being an exotic "other" but ultimately perceives passing as a deception and denial of identity. Unlike both Helga and Irene, trapped as they are by their choices to assume conventional roles as decidedly African American women, Clare Kendry not only refuses to confine or direct her desire but also escapes the text altogether through an enigmatic **death** in the end. To some extent, then, *Passing* fragments the meaning of the term *passing* so that it indicates the performances of various identities, the deaths or "passings" of others, and the obliteration of the idea of a single definable self.

Larsen's transformative representations of passing foreshadow its treatment in contemporary literature, where it is no longer simply about crossing a color line as an empowering strategy used to transcend boundaries of race, gender, class, and sexual, ethnic, and national identity. Though the concept of racial passing remains controversial as it threatens the idea of a purely African American identity, the broader idea of passing has come to play a crucial role for contemporary scholars who see identity as a performance or an act, rather than a simple biological claim.

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Kathleen M. Helal

## PASSING

**Nella Larsen's** second novel, *Passing*, published in 1929, explores a relationship between two African American women who are able to pass for white, a social practice common among light-skinned urban African Americans at the time of Jim Crow laws, black migration, and the one-drop rule. While some "passed" for occasional convenience (for instance, to eat at a restaurant or to sit in a preferred section of a train), a few others entered white society, completely shedding their African American **identity**, as in the case of **James Weldon Johnson's** *Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man* (1912). Irene Redfield, the protagonist of *Passing*, belongs to the former category. Married to an African American doctor in New York, she is comfortably well off and securely established within the black bourgeoisie. But her accidental meeting of a childhood acquaintance, Clare Kendry, at a Chicago hotel, where both are **passing** for white, shakes her to the core. The stunning and unforgettable Clare, with her mixed-race **family** background, has embraced passing as a way of life as the glamorous wife of a white businessman who is unaware of her mixed racial heritage. She expresses a desire, through Irene, to reconnect with her African American roots, although doing so is perilous to her current lifestyle.

Much of the novel focuses on Irene's intense fear of and fascination with Clare and, in return, Clare's pursuit of the reluctant Irene. The psychological tension invokes the doppelgänger theme: The two women become shadows of what the other both fears and desires. For Clare, Irene represents acceptance and connections within middle-**class** black society, which has treated Clare as an outsider. For Irene, Clare represents the outrageous—living a bald-faced lie on her own terms, without regard for rules, morals, or responsibility to the **race**. Irene's life, on the other hand, is centered around playing by the rules. One of her triumphs is keeping her restless husband, Brian, in practice in New York, distracting him from a desire to explore the riskier dream of living and working in South America. Managing the desires of others in order to serve her needs for a certain social status and standard of living is at the center of Irene's adult existence. Clare's presence in her life threatens to reveal to Irene the self-centered nature of her own life and the lies she is also living.

The tension builds as Clare engages Irene's complicity in her charade—forcing her to pass as white, along with another acquaintance, Gertrude, at a meeting with Clare's husband in which he reveals his distaste for Negroes and divulges his nickname for Clare, "Nig." Irene's paranoia mounts as she suspects Clare of seducing her husband, Brian, conflating Clare's daring and



Brian's restlessness into a double threat. The melodramatic ending, in which Irene and Clare exchange places as perceived victim and perpetrator, makes it clear that only one of them can survive, introducing another meaning of "passing." The "peace" (Irene) and "clarity" (Clare) symbolized by the names of the protagonists cannot coexist; one is achieved at the repression of the other.

Larsen's keen insights into the psychology of passing and her skillful, spare narrative have intrigued critics since its revival in the 1970s by **black feminist criticism**. The strange tension between Clare and Irene has led some critics to posit a latent homoerotic tension between the women. A recent Lacanian reading of this text by Brian Carr posits that, in fact, *Passing* is about "nothing." While the object of desire may, in fact, be nothing, the desire to pass was caused by material circumstances in a highly race stratified time and place. Although Larsen herself did not pass for white, her mixed parentage gave her grounds for understanding the complexities of racial construction. That her own family may have rejected her in order to pass for white is a possibility suggested by Larsen's biographer, Thadious Davis.

*See also* Harlem Renaissance; Lesbianism; Mulatto; *Quicksand*; Sexuality

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*Ann Hostetler*

### PATTERNIST SERIES

**Octavia Butler's** Patternist series consists of (in the saga's chronological order) *Wild Seed* (1980), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Patternmaster* (1976), *Clay's Ark* (1984), and *Survivor* (1978). These novels follow the rise of a **race** of telepaths and describe the culture these beings create, sometimes with centuries separating the stories. Of these works, *Wild Seed* has received the most critical attention.

The first in the series, *Wild Seed* relates the beginnings of the telepathic culture. Doro, the founding father, is a being like none other. The origin of his power is unknown, but Doro is apparently immortal, for he is able to

project his consciousness into a new **body** at will, an act that both feeds him and provides a surge of pleasure. Consuming the “selves” of persons with mental talents such as telepathy or telekinesis is especially satisfying, so over time Doro collects and breeds telepaths as an ongoing source of food and pleasurable kills. Eventually whole settlements of his special people exist, with residents who both **love** and fear him.

The story opens when Doro meets an African named Anyanwu, herself a near immortal. But Anyanwu’s longevity comes from her power to heal, not from stealing others’ bodies. She can repair any organism whose genetic structure she is familiar with, and she can shape shift into any creature whose anatomy she understands. Unlike Doro, who takes over others’ bodies, Anyanwu stays alive by altering her own genetic makeup, living most often as an elderly woman but sometimes changing into a young woman, a man, a porpoise, leopard, bird, or dog.

Doro forces Anyanwu to go with him to America and join his colony there; allusions to the cross-Atlantic slave trade are obvious. For many years she lives quietly, happily married to one of Doro’s sons, a man devoted to her, and breeding with whomever Doro brings to her—the usual pattern for Doro’s people. Anyanwu needs to feel connected to **family**; her greatest sorrow is that she outlives all those she loves. Her family members have been granted immunity from Doro’s feedings, but Doro still uses them to coerce Anyanwu to his will. After many decades, Anyanwu’s beloved husband dies, and she finally flees Doro, whose casual killings she abhors. She knows he must kill to live, but her attempts to curb his unnecessary kills have been futile; she hopes now to find a sanctuary where she can live peacefully, surrounded by loved ones.

The story follows Doro’s search for her and their final showdown. Neither comes out a winner; their strengths, although opposites in nature, are equal in force. The story ends with their recognition that although their natures are irreconcilable—Doro a killer, Anyanwu a healer—they (and only they) can provide one another companionship lasting perhaps for eternity. To effect this, though, they must learn to accept one another. Anyanwu must let Doro kill; Doro must accept Anyanwu’s rules about what kills are off limits. This is a story of the feminine principle versus masculine principle: Anyanwu, a life force, advocates familial ties, equality, **community**, **domesticity**, and **healing**, while Doro, a **death** force, refuses social obligation, preferring solitary individuality, patriarchal authority, rootlessness, and **violence**. The book ends with an uneasy alliance between the two.

*Mind of My Mind* picks up some generations later and follows the life of Mary, the most powerful telepath Doro has yet sired. After “transition,” the risky period when one’s powers become active, Mary finds she has the ability to mentally link other telepaths to herself—and once linked, they are unable to regain autonomy. She uses her power to create The Pattern—an ever-growing community of linked telepaths. Together they construct a social system that provides a haven for tormented telepaths unable to function elsewhere, a place where one’s powers can be explored, augmented, and made productive.

As Mary seeks out telepaths from around the world and compels them to join her—her own kind of feeding—Doro begins to fear what his daughter is creating. The story ends with the showdown between the two. Like Anyanwu, Mary represents an alternative to Doro's tyranny, but she also enslaves, albeit much more benevolently. And both Mary and Doro oppress the easily enslaved nontelepathic "mutes." Collectively, these two books explore the uses and abuses of power.

*Patternmaster* occurs eons after the telepaths' complete conquest of the mutes. With telepaths in charge, society has evolved into a feudal, non-technological age. The story follows two brothers' rivalry for the position of Patternmaster, controller of The Pattern. The protagonist is the younger son, Teray. As he makes a daring move to claim The Pattern, Teray comes to understand the consequences of continuing the telepaths' feudal social structure, a structure bereft of compassion that pits telepaths against clayarks, a race of monstrous mutants. The previous book in the series, *Clay's Ark*, relates the evolution of these mutants, whose origins began when an astronaut brought a dreadful genetic plague back to Earth. The last book in the series to be written, *Clay's Ark* is only loosely connected to the rest of the Patternist series. *Survivor*, the final story, tracks the life of Alana, a girl who escapes the plague by migrating to another planet. There, she becomes a victim of war between two rival factions, which she undertakes to reconcile. Alana is one of Butler's early female protagonists who strives to bring people and races together.

This series collectively explores the effect of enormous power on individuals and societies, and it suggests that a feminist model of government that values compassion and equality, uses power to help others, and brings people together as family, not master/servant, is the only model where happiness and contentment are likely. Only those characters who think in terms of family, personal connections, and healing find even a modicum of peace in these books.

*See also Bloodchild and Other Stories; Kindred; Parable Series; Xenogenesis Trilogy*

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*Grace McEntee*

**PERRY, PHYLLIS ALESIA (1962– )**

The 1998 publication of Phyllis Alesia Perry's debut novel *Stigmata* granted the young author membership into the ranks of the highly acclaimed African American female writers from the **South**. These writers are women who have lived almost exclusively in the South or who living elsewhere have chosen not to sever ties with their historical and **family** southern roots. In many instances, these women authors have used **historical fiction** to chronicle the sojourn of their people, tracing their journey back to the land of those **ancestors** who still exercise a firm grip on the lives of the authors' twenty- and twenty-first-century fictional characters. By doing so, as does Perry in *Stigmata* and her other writing, these historically conscious writers establish a sense of unity between the past and present, evidenced by a reaffirmation of sisterhood.

Perry, a native southern, was born in Atlanta, Georgia, and grew up in Tuskegee, Alabama. She graduated from the University of Alabama in 1982 with a degree in communications and worked for several southern newspapers after college. While writing for the *Alabama Journal*, she was a member of a team of reporters who won the Pulitzer Prize and a Distinguished Service Award of the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, for the investigation of Alabama's high infant mortality rate.

The publication of her first novel in 1998 brought Perry worldwide attention as a young but serious novelist. The carefully crafted book tells the story of a young woman whose existence is unexpectedly altered by the inheritance of a trunk and handmade quilt from her deceased grandmother. Sensing a cloud of mystery surrounding the quilt, the main character, Lizzie, goes on a journey to confront her family's past.

Following the publication of *Stigmata* in Germany and the United States, the book quickly found its way to bookstores in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, and other countries. The novel became the Book of the Month Club Quality Paperback Selection and was nominated for the Quality Paperback Book Club New Voices Award. Perry also received the Georgia Author of the Year award in the first novel category in a ceremony held on the campus of Mercer University in 1999.

Her latest book is *A Sunday in June* (2003), a prequel to the earlier written *Stigmata*. *A Sunday in June* relates the story of three Alabama sisters living in the early years of the twentieth century. These young women are far from normal. They carry their grandmother's gift of second sight: They can see into the future and experience the pain of the past. Unexpectedly, the sisters experience paranormal connections to the days of **slavery** in America's past.

The novelist grew up in a **home** where writing was encouraged. Her father, Harmon Perry, preceded his daughter's association with the southern white press. He was the first African American reporter hired by the *Atlanta Journal*. During his reporting at the *Journal*, the elder Perry was part of a group of writers that received an award for investigation of racial tensions between Atlanta's African American and white citizenry. Additionally, he won four awards from

the Georgia Press Association in recognition of the quality of his individual **work**.

As a female novelist, Perry has been compared to other writers in the rich tradition of African American literary artists such as **Toni Morrison** and **Alice Walker**. Perry currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

*See also* Quilting

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*A Sunday in June*. New York: Hyperion, 2003.

*Shirley Walker Moore*

### **PETRY, ANN (1908–1997)**

Born Ann Lane to Peter C. and Bertha James Lane on October 12, 1911, Ann Petry spent the first thirty years of her life in and around Old Saybrook, Connecticut, a small New England town that informed her literary aesthetic and **work** ethic. The consummate New Englander, hardworking and self-reliant, Petry graduated from high school in 1925 and earned her Ph.G. from then Connecticut College of Pharmacy in New Haven in 1931. Petry returned to Old Saybrook to work in the **family** drugstore business until 1938, when she married Louisiana native George D. Petry and moved to New York. Committed to becoming a writer, Petry worked as a journalist for the Harlem-based *Amsterdam News* and as a reporter for the Harlem weekly the *People's Voice*. While employed at the *People's Voice*, Petry edited the woman's page and soon thereafter helped to found Negro Women, Inc., an advocacy group for Harlem consumers. After honing her craft at Mabel Louise Robinson's creative writing workshops, Petry published "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon" in the *Crisis*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in 1943. This short story marked the beginning of Petry's notoriety in popular literary circles.

To be sure, Petry's life and work testify to her commitment to women's issues in the public and literary spheres. Specifically, Petry's **literature** offers a **black feminist** critique of **violence**, poverty, **motherhood**, **race**, **class**, gender, and **sexuality**. Her work shifts the gaze of naturalistic **fiction** established by **Richard Wright's** *Native Son* (1940) from the black man to the black woman; her work expands African Americanist notions of **home** through her depictions of black life in New England; her work recasts literary conventions and tropes within the context of **black feminism** and a black feminist experience; her work offers a fearless look at the needs and desires of black women in a world overrun by racism and sexism; her work sings a **blues** song for a black female experience that places survival—the singing of one's song even in the face of tragedy—above all else.

Petry inherited this survivalist ethic as well as her self-assuredness from the strong-willed women in her family. Even though Petry's first profession, pharmacy, suggested that she might follow in the footsteps of her father, it was the tenacity and entrepreneurial spirit of her mother and maternal aunts that encouraged her to view the world through eyes unencumbered by fallacious gender limitations. Bertha Lane, mother, wife, and sister, was also a hairdresser, barber, chiropodist, creator of cleaning products for the home, and maker of tonics for the hair. One aunt was, like Petry's father, a licensed pharmacist; the other was an educator. All three helped Petry to see that powerful women existed and that this strength was her birthright.

Author of a wide variety of texts—short fiction, three novels, **children's and young adult literature**, a screenplay, and several essays—most of Petry's blues narratives explore black experience in America. The tale that started Petry's literary career, "On Saturday the Siren Sounds at Noon," (1943) tells the story of a troubled black man who is reminded of the day he found his children burned to **death** at home, left alone by his philandering wife, whenever he hears the air raid test siren on Saturday afternoon. Rendered through flashbacks, readers learn that, overwhelmed by anger at his wife who placed her own selfish needs over the protection of their children, the protagonist murders her and commits suicide by throwing himself into the path of an oncoming train. Even though the story offers little in the way of explicitly feminist themes, Petry's manipulation of **history** (the tale was based on true events) and desire to speak on behalf of otherwise silenced voices (in this case, African American men) demonstrate the feminist foundation upon which her work stands.

Intent on expanding the settings and spaces typically associated with African American experience, Petry's literary oeuvre also reflects a complex rendering of the psychology of black and white experiences, both communal and individual, in America. Petry's award-winning first novel, *The Street* (1946), tells the story of Lutie Johnson: an industrious black woman who moves from Long Island to Connecticut, then to Harlem in search of a better life for herself and her son. While living on 116th Street in Harlem, Lutie must learn to deal with the "street"—a metaphor for the race, gender, and class conflicts that accompany her new life. As an attractive black woman, Lutie's **beauty** becomes a liability as she must constantly ward off advances from a cadre of men in her **community**: a neighbor who wants her to become a prostitute; the building superintendent who, infuriated by Lutie's rebuff to his sexual advances, introduces her son Bub to a life of crime; and a rich white Harlemite who also wants Lutie for himself. As a poor inner-city woman without much success in securing gainful employment, the street becomes emblematic of the oppression that faces Lutie at every turn. While many scholars and readers consider *The Street*, like other texts by Petry, to be overwhelmingly depressing, her style reflects her early training in journalism. In *The Street*, Petry reports with an unflinching journalistic eye the story of a woman on the periphery of American life—a story that would otherwise be left untold. This novel, therefore, reflects her feminist impulse to give voice to marginalized women's experiences.

In her second and third novels, *Country Place* (1947) and *The Narrows* (1953), Petry returns to New England settings and fixes her black feminist gaze upon white and black communities to explore the destructive nature of intolerance and prejudice within each. *Country Place* centers around two sets of characters—most of whom are white—and their inability to reconcile gender and class tensions in the small town of Lennox, Connecticut. Without major black characters or a story line driven by racial conflict, *Country Place* was a hard sell among critics and readers accustomed to Petry's biting commentary on race and gender. Petry's willingness to step beyond the arbitrary constraints of what constitutes "black" literature, however, expanded the subject matter and settings available to black writers. In this profound feminist act, she rewrote the rules and expanded the territory for all African American writers by turning her New England experiential knowledge into transformative literature. *The Narrows*, also set in New England, builds upon naturalistic elements introduced in *The Street* by exposing the impact of racism on individuals as well as the communities they represent. In this tragic tale of interracial **love** between a well-educated black man and a well-bred white woman, Petry explores the impact of American history, and the **stereotypes** and racist values formed out of that history, upon black and white relations. A raw exploration of the politics of gender, race, violence, community, and class, *The Narrows* continues Petry's feminist analysis of the intellectual and spiritual costs of black psychic fragmentation established in earlier works.

As a black feminist interested in telling stories with communal value, Petry turned to children's fiction and nonfiction in 1955 to extend the choices for African American youth interested in culturally relevant texts. As in Petry's fiction, her nonfiction for black youth also offers deep psychological portrayals of complex figures. *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955) and *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964) relate the stories of their protagonists—the first, a former slave who helped to free hundreds of slaves, the second, a female slave from Barbados who was accused of being a witch during the Salem witch trials—with elegance and depth. By challenging established tropes and accepted norms, Petry's work anticipates the literature of later black women writers who relate African American experience through a distinctly black feminist lens.

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Shanna Greene Benjamin

### PLANTATION TRADITION

The plantation tradition refers to a body of **literature** that offers a nostalgic representation of "the Old **South**" as well as a highly romanticized portrait of the institution of **slavery**. Revolving around life on agricultural southern estates primarily in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s and composed primarily by white southern authors, literature of the plantation tradition insists on the nobility of the white southern aristocrat and the virtuous passivity of the white southern belle and contests the image of slavery as a violent and dehumanizing institution that was presented in antebellum **slave narratives** such as **Frederick Douglass's** *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and abolitionist novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). In addition to avoiding any mention of the physical, psychological, or sexual abuse of slaves and obscuring their desire for liberation, plantation literature typically portrays the plantation **community** as a stable and harmonious **family** unit and likens the relationship between masters and slaves to that of caring parents and their loving, obedient children.

The representation of the plantation community as a cohesive and content family largely depends on its depictions of African American slaves as devoted and docile servants, which helped generate a number of racist **stereotypes** that were later propagated in other cultural forms, including **film** and advertisement. One of the most prominent of these stereotypes is the **Mammy** figure. Immortalized in Margaret Mitchell's bestselling novel *Gone With the Wind* (1936), "Mammy" presents an image of a completely desexualized and simple-minded black woman who consistently demonstrates an unwavering loyalty to and affection for her white mistress, even, in some cases, to the extreme of preferring to care for the white children in her charge over nurturing her own children. The male counterpart to the Mammy stereotype in plantation



literature and an identifiable progenitor of the popular minstrelsy shows of the early twentieth century is the Sambo figure, a content, childlike character who wants nothing more than to continue his tranquil existence as a slave and to please and entertain his white masters.

Plantation literature first emerged in the decades prior to the Civil War with the publication of works such as John Pendleton Kennedy's *The Swallow Barn, or a Sojourn in the Old Dominion* (1832), a work that consists of several sketches that relay the "seeings and thinkings" of northerner Mark Littleton during his first visit to the South and his stopover at the southern estate of Frank Merriwether. Addressed to a northern audience, Littleton, though initially morally opposed to slavery, becomes convinced during this journey that while slaves might become more "respectable" in another social system that afforded them self-governance, they could not possibly obtain any greater state of happiness than they already had on the southern plantation. The success of *The Swallow Barn*, which was republished in 1851, paved the way for the appearance of numerous other plantation novels, including Caroline Gilman's *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1836), William Gilmore Simms's *Woodcraft* (1852), and Caroline Hentz's *The Plantation's Northern Bride* (1857).

While effecting the emancipation of African Americans and, accordingly, the deconstruction of the socioeconomic structure of the "Old South," the Civil War did not terminate the plantation tradition. Rather, plantation literature gained new prominence during the post-Reconstruction era with the publication of Thomas Page Nelson's *In Ole Virginia* (1887), a collection of stories narrated mainly by loyal ex-slaves who fondly recall life in the Old South. In addition to epitomizing the racist conventions of the antebellum plantation tradition, Nelson's collection also marks what Lucinda H. MacKethan has identified as a major development in plantation literature of the late nineteenth century—the creation of dialect plantation stories told through the perspective of African American narrators. While in the hands of writers such as Page, this form of narration functioned to further emphasize African Americans' "simplicity" and desire to please, it also complicated the political implications of the tradition, as Joel Chandler Harris's famous collection of dialect tales, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880), illustrates. Although the debate over Harris's relationship to the racist ideology of the plantation tradition continues, critics such as Amy Kaplan have complicated the prevailing assumption that the text uncritically participates in the tradition. Like Page's *In Ole Virginia*, *Uncle Remus*, Kaplan claims, "participate[s] in the nostalgic recuperation by framing slave stores in the voice of an elderly black 'uncle' entertaining a white boy, but the stories themselves often speak in the subversive voice of a popular oral tradition that provided a cultural source of resistance to slavery and racism in the past and the present" (244).

The majority of plantation literature of the post-Reconstruction era, however, was generally written to support the maintenance and expansion of systematic forms of racial oppression. Whereas prior to the Civil War, it aimed to counteract the influence of abolitionists, after Reconstruction, it typically

served to promote segregation. In addition to offering an idealized depiction of the antebellum South that posited a connection between social order and prosperity and forms of racial “control,” plantation literature’s stereotypical portrayal of African Americans led to the construction of other racist character types such as the **Jezebel** figure, an overly sexualized and morally deviant black temptress, and what has been termed “the Black beast,” an image of an animalistic and violent black male that was propagated in Thomas Dixon’s radically conservative, white-supremacist novels, particularly *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905). These images fueled the idea that African Americans posed a moral and physical threat to white southerners and, therefore, that interaction between the races should be severely restricted. Moreover, the stereotypes rooted in plantation literature also helped support the systematic disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South that was instituted primarily through poll taxes, property requirements, and **literacy** tests. In essence, the portrayal of African Americans as both simple-minded children and moral deviants insinuated that they lacked the mental capabilities and moral requirements necessary to make decisions for themselves, let alone for others.

African American artists’ efforts to dismantle the racist **myths** of the plantation literature have constituted a major tenet of African American literary history. Such efforts are perhaps most overt in **Charles Waddell Chesnut**’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899), which consciously evokes the conventions of the plantation tradition only to subvert them. Reminiscent of Page’s *In Ole Virginia*, the work is a collection of stories about plantation life prior to emancipation told by ex-slave Uncle Julius in black dialect and framed by the narrative of a white northerner. When he is initially introduced in the first story of the collection, “The Goophered Grapevine,” Julius immediately recalls the Sambo figure of conventional plantation literature. Sitting leisurely on a bench, eating grapes in an exaggerated way, he reveals a fearful superstition of “goopher” and displays a strong eagerness to both aid and entertain two white northerners, John and Annie. Julius’s tale about the haunted McAdoo plantation, however, suggests that this initial appearance is nothing more than a veneer, as it centers on the systematic economic exploitation of African Americans that calls attention to the reality that, after years of having labored on the abandoned vineyard, Julius does not have the financial resources to purchase it; moreover, it can be interpreted as an effort to scare off the white northern couple who does. Although the strategy ultimately fails, and John and Annie eventually purchase the vineyard, the tale underscores the superficiality of the stereotypical image of African Americans as devoted and docile servants, the image on which plantation literature’s nostalgic depiction of the Old South largely relies.

While a notable trend in African American literature in general, revisions of the representations of slavery and African Americans in literature of the plantation tradition have played a particularly prominent role in African American women’s writing throughout the past two centuries. Jacobs’s antebellum slave narrative, for instance, challenges the tradition by countering

the romanticized image of slavery as a paternal institution with revelations of her own experiences of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse during her enslavement on a southern plantation, and **Frances E. W. Harper's** *Iola Leroy* (1892), which depicts a formerly enslaved heroine as she attempts to locate her lost relatives after Emancipation, emphasizes how slavery destroyed rather than constituted a form of family.

Literature by African American women of the twentieth century has continued to debunk the “plantation myth” in diverse and complex ways. While novels written during the “Jim Crow” era such as **Nella Larsen's** *Passing* (1929) and **Zora Neale Hurston's** *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) examine the multifaceted destructive legacies of slavery for the African American community, more recent works such as **Alice Walker's** *The Color Purple* (1982), **Gloria Naylor's** *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and **Toni Morrison's** *Beloved* (1987) have, for instance, highlighted the strengths, complexities, and diversity of African American women that the stereotypes of the plantation tradition vehemently deny.

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Kara L. Mollis

### PLATO, ANN (1820–?)

Not much is known about the life of Ann Plato. What little is known comes mainly from the only book she published, *Essays: Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces of Prose and Poetry* (1841), and from various printed sources. Plato’s volume is the second published by an African American woman. She also has the distinction of being the first African American woman to publish a collection of essays and one of the first to publish **poetry**. From the information provided, she may have been a free African American who lived in

Hartford, Connecticut, and was certainly a member of Hartford's Talcott Street (Colored) Congregational Church.

Her book contains four biographical compositions, sixteen short essays, and twenty poems. The book itself was produced inexpensively and suggests that limited copies were published for the local area. Reverend James W. C. Pennington, the pastor of her church, wrote the introduction, which is known more for the information he leaves out about Plato. In this introduction, he states that Plato is a member of his church but does not record the amount of time that she has been a member. He says she is young but never gives her age. The only **family** information he provides claims she comes from modest means.

Unfortunately, Plato is even less forthcoming about her background. At the time of publication, she was either studying to be a teacher or already one. Lending credence to this theory, other sources state that she taught at one of the all-African American schools in Hartford, the Elm Street School, otherwise known as the South African School, from 1844 to 1847. Even though Plato is African American, she makes few references specifically to **race**. However, one of her poems, "To the First of August," positively refers to the end of **slavery** in the British West Indies, which occurred on August 1, 1838.

Plato's essays and poetry correspond to the typical standards of the time. The main topics of her essays are **religion** and education, while her poetry follows the elegiac technique of the eighteenth century. Plato's essays have a didactic and uplifting tone that enhances her attempts to convert readers to Protestantism at the same time it seems that she tries to convince them that the African American students of Hartford need a better educational system. She does not need to mention race; it is implicit in her message. The various types of work correspond to the typical style of the time because she has to prove that African Americans have the capacity and capability to be educated according to the standards of the day. Plato's purposeful citations of historical figures such as Aristotle, Benjamin Franklin, and John Milton enhance this action.

Information about Plato stops after 1847. Because of the lack of information and her adherence to the writing techniques of her time period, her value to African American **literature** has been overlooked until recently. Hopefully, more extant information will become available that demonstrates Plato's bravery in defending the rights of all African Americans to be educated.

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*Devona Mallory*

## **PLUM BUN**

**Jessie Redmon Fauset's** second novel *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral*, first published by Frederick A. Stokes in 1928, focuses clearly and intensely on one particular character, Angela Murray. Philadelphia born, Angela is a white-skinned daughter of a dark-colored father and a light-colored mother; she is, to cite a bitter conjunction used several times in the novel, a "white nigger." She thanks God that she has inherited her mother's paleness, unlike her dark sister, Virginia. *Plum Bun* is, in part, a bitter meditation on segregation between blacks and whites—even within families. Angela's father cannot be acknowledged in the streets by Angela and her mother.

On reaching adulthood, the individualistic, ambitious Angela moves to New York. She eschews black **community**, settling in the Village, where she can learn to draw and paint in white colleges. All the time she passes for white, hiding her ethnic **identity**. She is courted by a number of white men and is accepted into the company of white, middle-**class** groups. Frequently she hears friends and suitors, particularly the rich Roger Fielding, make extremely violent remarks against blacks. Her response is not to flee the company of these racists but to be convinced further that her mixed-**race** origins are a curse that must be suppressed at all costs, because only whites can have a fulsome life. On one highly symbolic occasion, Angela pretends not to know her sister Virginia, "cutting" her, lest the black-hating Roger discover her ethnic identity.

The appalling attitudes and conduct of Roger work effectively to bring Angela to her senses. His attacks on both blacks and on her chastity encapsulate the novel's twin anxieties: the subjugation of African Americans by whites and the subjugation of women by men. When eating in a restaurant, Roger acts swiftly to ensure that a black **family** does not receive service, even offering to pay any legal costs that the establishment might incur. He worries, with sincerity, about any possible illness that seeing the blacks may have caused Angela, but he does not ask her opinion about the situation. He arrogantly deigns to speak for them both. Angela and Roger sleep together, before marriage has been even discussed. It is unclear about how much force he uses to achieve the "surrender" of Angela, but it is clear that he is the sole instigator of the sexual union.

Gradually, Angela quashes her naive notion that **passing** will earn her **freedom** from racial prejudice. Infuriated when a talented black classmate is refused a scholarship on grounds of color, Angela declares her true racial

affiliations, earning the respect of her sister and of her favored suitor, Anthony, a young **mulatto** of Brazilian origin. She learns that pretending to be white will not impede racism; the only possible advantage would be to achieve material comfort at a cost of personal integrity. She also learns, however, that not all whites despise blacks and that not all men are reckless and violent toward women. *Plum Bun* is, supposedly, “a novel without a moral,” but the moral is loud and clear: All systems of generalized prejudice are fundamentally flawed and inappropriate.

See also *Chinaberry Tree, The; Comedy: American Style; Passing, There Is Confusion*

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Kevin De Ornellas

### POETRY

Stylistically, African American feminist poetry negotiates two traditions. On the one hand, it strives to equal the formal principles of traditional, European forms such as the Shakespearean sonnet. On the other hand, African American feminist poetry—like other forms of black **literature** such as the poetry of the **Harlem Renaissance**—seeks to achieve new forms adequate to the struggle against patriarchal formality itself. Thematically, this poetry represents the African American woman as heroic in her own right. Unlike *The Odyssey* (800 BCE), *Paradise Lost* (1667), or *The Canterbury Tales* (1380), the

heroes of such lyrics do not embark on grandiose trips, focusing instead on life as it is lived in the **community** or at **home** and illustrating a more understated form of heroism that includes such roles as witness to racial discrimination, mother, and celebrant of African American **history** and culture.

While the majority of African American feminist poets write from their experiences as women, such male poets as **Claude McKay**, **Jean Toomer**, and **Langston Hughes** have also written feminist verse celebrating the African American woman and defending her against racial **violence**. McKay's "The Harlem Dancer" (1917), for example, represents the double life of a lovely African American performer reminiscent of **Josephine Baker**, a representation that takes the form of a traditional Shakespearean sonnet. Illustrating that the African American poetic tradition can indeed master the stylistic qualities of canonical writers, McKay's fourteen-line sequence follows precisely the Shakespearean rhyme scheme, with the last couplet offering the final twist; this African American **beauty** is not simply prostituting herself for the gaze of others but, rather, has managed to transcend her earthy reality, ultimately becoming more worthy than her position on the streets acknowledges. Likewise, Toomer's "Portrait in Georgia" (1923), while written in a wholly unique form that relies on flashes of images separated by em-dashes, also pays homage to Shakespeare as a master but goes one step beyond in order to signify on the idea of objectified beauty that Shakespeare portrays in his famous sonnets. Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, for example, enumerates the physical features of a woman; similarly, Toomer's "Portrait" depicts the portrait of a lady, but it also depicts the portrait of a lynching in Georgia, comparing a woman's hair to "a lyncher's rope" and describing her **body** as "white as the ash / of black flesh after flame."

Like Toomer, Hughes juxtaposes lynching—unlikely material for a poem dedicated to a woman—with the lyric. "Song for a Dark Girl" (1927) appears, in the first line, as a simple song with an uncomplicated and catchy rhythm similar to a child's song. However, Hughes undercuts the assumption established by his rhythm with the violent representation of a young black woman's lynching. Here, he repeats two phrases within parentheses: "(Break the heart of me)" and "(Bruised body high in air)"—the most powerful lines in the poem, despite, or because of, the parentheses themselves. In "Song for a Dark Girl," Hughes necessarily connects **race** with this young lover's lynching, putting into tension such key phrases as "black young lover" and "white Lord Jesus." This reference to a "white Lord Jesus" seeks to undercut racist language and practices by calling attention to the uninformed assumption that Jesus was, in fact, white.

While these three Harlem Renaissance poets have achieved a feminist poetics in their own right, perhaps the most powerful feminist statements regarding historical atrocity come from African American women themselves. **Rita Dove**'s "Parsley" (1983) refers to the moment on October 2, 1957, when the dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo (1891–1961), ordered 20,000 blacks killed because they could not pronounce the letter *r* in

*parejil*, the Spanish word for parsley. The poem develops that narrative in two sections, refusing consolation even in the end by suggesting that the general “will/ order many, this time, to be killed/for a single, beautiful word” (lines 70–72). In linking the beauty of language, in this case, the poetical sounding *parejil* with the brutality of humankind, Dove actually reinforces the strangely productive relationship between poetry and historical calamity. For Dove, the only possible way to communicate traumatic events is through the language of poetry, a language that, while beautiful, has the power to carry with it the most brutal acts of **violence**.

African American feminist verse not only focuses on violence against women, however. It also celebrates the physical attributes of African American woman traditionally devalued by the mainstream Anglo-Saxon aesthetic. Like her poem “My Race,” **Helene Johnson’s** “What Do I Care for Morning” (1927) establishes binary oppositions between morning and evening, as well as the sun and the moon. Typically, morning is associated with the sun, which is also associated with **whiteness**, while evening is associated with the moon and with darkness. Yet Johnson complicates the sun versus moon, day versus night, and white versus black oppositions by proclaiming the “whiteness” of the moon for her celebration of night. Johnson undoes simplistic race rhetoric, for instance, by asking for “the beauty of the evening/[with] the moon like a love-sick lady,/Listless and wan and white.” The formal properties of this poem **work** simultaneously as an acceptance of—and rejection of—Anglo-American conventions for canonical poetry. In the opening and closing four lines, Johnson seems to reject the expectations for end rhymes in her lines, but in the middle she has a formal, iambic meter and rhyme scheme, pairing “night” with “white,” “hill” with “still,” and “hair” with “fair.” **Nikki Giovanni’s** 1968 “On Hearing the Girl with the Flaxen Hair” takes this project one step further by associating hard work on the cotton plantation with African American beauty. It is work and experience that make one beautiful, she suggests in this poem, not innocence and protection from the grit of everyday life.

**Audre Lorde’s** “Coal” (1976) draws on associations between the hard work performed in coal mines and the beauty of blackness. Further, “Coal” is self-consciously experimental, using words to function as parts of speech that are different from their traditional uses. For example the “I” of the first line is not a pronoun but a noun: “I is the total black, being spoken.” In lines 3 and 7, “open” seems to work neither as a verb nor exactly as an adjective but as an idea: “there are many kinds of open,” and “Some words are open like a diamond.” By placing the image of coal beside the image of diamonds—both substances created from carbon—Lorde alludes to the process of evolving (as a woman, as a carbon) under tremendous pressure while also theorizing the radical potential of language.

Contemporary poetry about African American beauty is more forthcoming, by contrast. **Lucille Clifton’s** “Homage to My Hips” (1991) celebrates the attributes of “big,” “mighty,” and “magic” hips. Written without the formal use of capitalization, this poem rejects the Anglo Saxon ideal of narrow



hips on a woman and, ultimately, illustrates the sexual power of such girth. Patricia Smith's "Blonde White Woman" (1992) similarly rejects the cultural imposition of white beauty. In keeping with **Toni Morrison's** *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Smith tracks her maturation as a woman from her blonde fantasies as a young girl to her commitment to reading *Ebony* on the morning train.

Often, such poems idealizing African American beauty emphasize the relationship between beauty and desire, in keeping with Mae V. Cowdery's "Insatiate" (1936). This poem establishes a tension between constancy (line 20) and uncertainty (line 27), appearing to offer up sexual desire as a synecdoche for African American women's experience as a whole. In the first three stanzas of the poem, for example, it appears impossible fully to satisfy the persona; however, this fact changes significantly when she imagines what it would be like if her **love** took another lover. Paradoxically, this dynamic "cures" the persona of her insatiability, demonstrating the vexed sexual politics in the African American women's literary tradition that continues today with such writers as **Terry McMillan**.

By contrast, African American feminist poetry appears to celebrate stability rather than uncertainty when it addresses the theme of **motherhood**. For example, the exemplary poetry of **Gwendolyn Brooks** uses issues of motherhood to bridge concerns of race and representation with **class** and gender tensions. The granddaughter of an escaped slave, Brooks was the first African American to receive the Pulitzer Prize. Brooks published her first poem at the age of thirteen in the popular magazine *American Childhood* and received encouragement early in her career from the African American modernist poet Langston Hughes. From the beginning, Brooks followed Hughes in focusing on the lives of ordinary African Americans in her work. Her poetry examines the contradictory impulses, choices, and lifestyles of contemporary African American women, depicting women's encounters with racial and class oppressions, sexual betrayal, and the racial violence during the pre-civil rights era of the late 1940s.

Brooks's "The Mother" (1945) is a poem that at first appears to be inappropriately titled, as the perspective it takes is of a woman who chose not to be a mother. And yet, with the first line, "abortions will not let you forget," the poem seems to say that memories of "the children you got that you did not/get" always make one a mother. As such, this poem introduces a paradox from the beginning and continues to oscillate between examples of mothering, on the one hand, and an illustration of what it means to forgo motherhood, on the other hand.

"The Mother" is also significant to Brooks's oeuvre—indeed, to the history of African American feminist poetics—because it dismantles rhyme schemes out of suspicion of traditional forms that celebrate consistencies in rhyme and meter. For example, there are three lines in this poem that do not fit the rhyme pattern at all. In a poem about decisions that do not let a mother forget, these very "failures" appear to succeed in "not letting" the reader forget.

**Ai's** "The Mother's Tale" (1986) also celebrates motherhood while simultaneously refusing to romanticize it. Although it begins as an apparently

comfortable dialogue between mother and child, “The Mother’s Tale” eventually turns into a confusing tangle of love, jealousy, possession, and abuse, often shifting not only representations of affect but perspective as well. Finally, **Toi Derricotte’s** 1983 *Natural Birth*—a volume that has gone out of print and has since resurfaced in a new volume with a compelling new author’s note (2000)—uses lyric to describe what it is like to become pregnant accidentally at nineteen while being expected to overturn all negative **stereotypes** of African American women. Derricotte, in her introduction, suggests that the form her poem took in dealing with the pregnancy, labor, birth, and eventual life with her newborn son was unrecognizable to her—and to her editors—early on but was later celebrated because of this very experimentalism.

While the formal properties of African American feminist poetry about motherhood tend to be as messy as childbirth and motherhood itself, the verse written by African American feminists about life in the United States and the double consciousness that accompanies it appears to be more measured even when raging against injustice. **Phillis Wheatley’s** “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773) reveals her formal training with the prominent Boston **family** who owned her. When she was eight years old, Wheatley was taken from West Africa and brought to Boston in July 1761. Wheatley worked in the house for this family rather than the fields and expresses satisfaction with her life. Still, it is hard not to read her poem as deeply ironic in our present day. Wheatley writes in the opening line, “Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land”—which leads us to wonder how bad life was at home that a little girl of eight would be grateful for being taken from her family and put to work in a foreign country. Many critics read this poem not as sarcastic but rather as evidence of the success of Christian missionaries, who told people from Africa that they were “saving” them into eternal life after they had lived previously as “pagans” in Africa. Wheatley, perhaps, was the ideal student, as evidenced by her flawlessly constructed iambic pentameter so valued by the Anglo poets of her day. She was not entirely complacent, however. Wheatley lent a strong voice for improved race relations. In this poem, she undoes the strong sentiment that pits white people against black people, by suggesting in her last couplet that true Christians would organize society through the contrast of “Christians versus non-Christians” rather than “slaves versus their owners.”

Written over 150 years after Wheatley’s tribute to America, **Georgia Douglas Johnson’s** “The True American” (1927) not only defines the African American son as a true American but, in the process of doing so, also redefines what it means to be American generally. For example, most readers, when seeing a title like “The True American,” may consider a person’s citizenship only within the nation’s borders; however, Johnson extends the meaning of the “true” American to include a site of coalescing nations and of cosmopolitanism—a particularly powerful move significant for its ability to redefine African Americans within U.S. society. A potentially controversial poem for its time period, Johnson embeds her message in a more traditional form, conveying formal, if not thematic, complacency.

In addition to providing political and philosophical insights about life in the United States, African American feminist poetry also addresses the day-to-day reality of living in American communities. **Margaret Walker's** "Childhood" (1942) is often read as a biographical portrait of the poet, who lived in Ishkooda, a town south of Birmingham, Alabama, until she was five, and later near New Orleans, Louisiana. Embracing more traditional verse forms, the poem is a sonnet; the first octet describes life in Ishkooda, and the sestet describes New Orleans. Strikingly, this poem seems to have less to do with childhood—as its name suggests it might—than about the recognition of unhappy miners and famine, terror, flood, and plague, which are hardly things associated with childhood. Yet perhaps this is the point. Walker buries within a perfect sonnet with a perfect lulling rhythm—itsself associated with children's songs—the experiences of oppressed others that children often recognize before adults, who typically bury them under the details of their daily lives. The poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks similarly juxtaposes child's play with adult concerns. Her poem "a song in the front yard" (1945), for example, is a revision of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794), using the "front yard" as a symbol for innocence and the "back yard" as a symbol for experience. "I've stayed in the front yard all my life," reports the persona: "I want a peek at the back / Where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows."

If Brooks's persona has played too often in the front yard, then Tracie Morris's persona in "Project Princess" (1998) has played too often in the back. However, the poem's title alone establishes a potential oxymoron from the beginning, begging the questions: Can a young woman both be a princess and from the projects? Is the difference in worlds between the projects and the princess something that can be negotiated? Further, Morris's "project" might be less about housing projects than about the narrative of the poem's "urban goddess" seeking self-improvement (a personal project) via her own style.

Upon an initial reading, it is unclear whether Morris's persona embraces or dismisses the "princess" in the U.S. projects. At first, the speaker's tone seems catty, even judgmental, as the short staccato sounds of the *t*'s and *d*'s and *p*'s hint at a kind of impatience and mocking disapproval. However, we learn later that this is probably not the case, as the poem's last lines embrace this attitude of survival—much like Claude McKay's "Harlem Dancer": "It's all about you girl. You go on. Don't you dare stop."

As Morris's performance poetry suggests, African American feminist poetry has changed dramatically since the eighteenth century when Phillis Wheatley began writing in verse. While Wheatley's formal training and poetic talents suggested to her readership that African American poets were indeed able to master traditional verse forms, contemporary performance poetry focuses not only on how a poem *sounds*—a quality that all poetry shares—but also on the staged theatrics of poetry. When poets such as Morris *perform* their poetry, they enliven poetry by taking it off of the page and presenting it bodily through sound and motion. The result is an actual embodiment of the feminist project

of African American poetry—an invocation of the movement of Josephine Baker as well as the lyrical insights of all who have contributed to this rich and remarkable tradition.

*See also* Alexander, Elizabeth; Amini, Johari; Angelou, Maya; *Annie Allen*; Baraka, Amiri; Bennett, Gwendolyn B.; Birtha, Becky; Black Feminism; Black Feminist Criticism; Boyd, Melba; Carter, Xam Wilson; Coleman, Wanda; Cullen, Countee; Danner, Margaret Esse; Dunbar, Paul Laurence; Evans, Mari; *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*; Jordan, June; Kocher, Ruth Ellen; Komunyakaa, Yusef; Lane, Pinkie Gordon; Major, Clarence; *Maud Martha*; Moss, Thylas; Mullen, Harryette; Nelson, Marilyn; Osbey, Brenda Marie; Parker, Pat; Rodgers, Carolyn; Sanchez, Sonia; Shange, Ntozake; Spencer, Anne; Thomas, Joyce Carol; *Thomas and Beulah*; White, Paulette Childress; Williams, Sherley Anne; Womanism

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*Aimee L. Pozorski*

### POLITE, CARLENE HATCHER (1932– )

Carlene Hatcher Polite was born on August 28, 1932, in Detroit, Michigan, to John and Lillian Cook Hatcher, who were international representatives of the UAW–CIO (United Auto Workers–Congress of Industrial Organizations). Growing up in a secure middle-class atmosphere, she possessed the financial and creative **freedom** to accomplish whatever she wanted. She studied at Sarah Lawrence College but later quit to attend the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. She was an accomplished professional dancer and later instructor of dance at various theaters from 1955 to 1963.

Demonstrating her parental influence, Polite's career shifted from dancing to practicing politics and fighting for civil rights for African American artists and intellectuals. As a Democrat, Polite was elected to the Michigan State Central Committee in 1962. To protest the Birmingham church bombings, in June 1963, she coordinated and participated in the Walk for Freedom and the

November 1963 Freedom Now Rally. Also in 1963, she was an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and organized the Northern Negro Leadership Conference.

Polite's career interests again shifted, this time to writing. Although she had started writing prose poems at twelve, she wanted to develop this gift undistracted. So she moved to Paris, France, in 1964, where she lived until 1971. Under the influence of her mentor, French editor Dominique de Roux, who encouraged her to move after they met in Detroit, she published the novel *The Flagellants* in French in 1966. It was translated into English a year later. Because of this novel, Polite received a National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Fellowship in 1967 as well as a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in 1968. Back in America, her second and last novel, *Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play*, was published in 1975. In 1971, Polite became an associate professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Currently, she is an associate professor emeritus of that university.

Her published novels have been largely overlooked because of their experimental and unique nature. Influenced by existentialism and satire, Polite's unique prose style and form and her use of various African American dialects that honor the oral tradition reflect the emotional highs and lows in dancing choreography. Besides the influence of dancing, her novels are infused with symbols and ideas of African American culture and art and deal with issues of **race, identity**, and freedom from oppression. Polite's unique combination of dance elements and activism in her novels place her among her contemporaries such as **Ishmael Reed**, Charles Wright, William Melvin Kelley, and Ronald Fair. She paves the way for African American postmodern **fiction** writers such as **Gayl Jones**.

Polite's career changes—from dancer and instructor to civil rights and political activist, author, and academic scholar—demonstrate her ability to be fully creative, insightful, and totally adaptable to the changing times. Polite's success in a variety of fields is a prime example to all African Americans that much can be accomplished through hard **work**, creativity, and determination.

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*Devona Mallory*

## **POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY**

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) brings back many characters from **Alice Walker's** earlier novel *The Color Purple* (1982). Tashi is the young African woman that Celie's son Adam marries in *The Color Purple*. Like *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), the story is told from the perspective of a variety of characters including members of Tashi's **family**, Tashi, the anthropologist Pierre, and two psychotherapists. Tashi's sister dies as a young girl due to a complication with the tribe's traditional initiation rite of female genital mutilation. Female genital mutilation is performed on girls around the age of eleven and involves, with some variation, the removal of the clitoris and inner and outer lips of the vulva, scraping away the inside of the vagina, and is finalized with a tight sewing up of the wound. As the mythical tribe the Olinka become increasingly influenced by other cultures, including Christian missionaries, the practice of female genital mutilation begins to dwindle among those converted. To preserve the tradition before her move to the United States and as rebellion against others who warn her, Tashi goes to M'Lissa, the Olinka tribe's administrator of this particular practice. It is only after this ritual is performed that Tashi realizes the magnitude of her actions, blocks the **memory** from her mind, and suffers for most of her life. Tashi seeks therapy in America as she descends further into madness to distance herself from the loss of her **sexuality**. Tashi feels her only recourse for what was done to her is to pay retribution to M'Lissa. The novel ends with Tashi's execution for murdering M'Lissa, a venerable icon of the Olinka.

Walker describes in painful detail the procedure of female genital mutilation, a description that is further explicated in her **film** *Warrior Marks* (1993) and the nonfiction account of the film's making by the same name. In some ways this novel is her political stance on female genital mutilation and her call to arms for women to join together and eliminate this practice that continues globally today and denies women pleasure from all sexual activities. This particular custom passed on by oral tradition eradicates the ability for women in such places to question the ideology behind such practices. In the case of Tashi, all her adulthood searching for why her sexuality was stripped does not provide her with a clear understanding of this initiation rite, why it started, and why it has not perished. Scholars have focused on many aspects of this novel including **myth**, characters as archetypes, and didactic use of **literature**.

*See also In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens; Womanism*

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*Laura Madeline Wiseman*

### POTTER, ELIZA (1820–?)

Though behind-the-scenes, tell-all books rarely get honorable mention in the genre of women's **literature**, Eliza Potter's **autobiography** *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life*, published anonymously "for the author" in 1859, gives a rare glimpse into nineteenth-century manners and customs and an unusual critique of white standards of **beauty** and fashion. As a literary achievement, her autobiography was the first in the genre of behind-the-scenes books by African Americans, setting the stage for African American women writers such as Lillian Rogers Parks (seamstress/maid to the White House, 1929–1961) and **Elizabeth Keckley**, who also wrote biographies about their experiences in service to white employers. Many African American women held a historical position as marginal observers to the intimate secrets of white society, and Potter's *A Hairdresser* provides unique historical and social context for the study of posh Cincinnati society and the white woman's world.

While there is very little archival information about Potter, it is known that she was **mulatto**, grew up in New York, moved to Philadelphia when she married, gave birth to two mulatto children, a girl and a boy, and then promptly gave in to her desire for "roving." Potter's autobiography provides a unique and compelling view into the world of white fashion and beauty. Potter recounts with humor, wit, and sophistication her experiences as a prominent hairdresser to Cincinnati's upper-**class** white society. She was witness to the intimate details of polite white society and recreates genteel Cincinnati society through her distinctive rhetorical style. Though her profession required her to create images of white style for her clients, she was a harsh critic of the white standard of beauty and fashion, an interesting juxtaposition. Her candid portrayal presents her experiences, not as a subservient young black woman but as an autonomous woman full of enthusiasm, resourcefulness, and quiet dignity.

Potter's autobiography also serves as a window through which to view the manners and customs of the various societies where she lived and worked. Potter traveled extensively, never content to be in one place for too long, and from her unique perspective observed the nuances of social customs and behaviors in such places as New York, Saratoga, Canada, Paris, and London. Potter's observations provide a wealth of information about social nuances and interpersonal relations between various classes and genders of nineteenth-century American society. Not surprisingly, within the various social customs, Potter exhibited a high degree of personal reverence and never failed to

enlighten those who were negligent in exhibiting proper courtesy or respect for her person and/or her position. Potter's demeanor elicited equal treatment from both men and women, regardless of color or class.

Potter enjoyed an unusual autonomy, relying on her skills as a hairdresser to achieve an economic **freedom** unusual for a woman, especially a black woman of that time. Though she enlightens the reader with the intimate secrets of white society, she remains an invisible observer throughout her own tale, revealing only scant information about herself. Potter was married briefly, which she explains as a very natural expectation for young black women. But she considered her stint at matrimony a weakness and instead went "roving," a prelude to the modern woman's quest for independence. Potter was an advocate for abolition and took in many young black women to train them in the art of hairdressing. She used her skills to help other black women achieve an independent, self-directed existence.

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Debbie Clare Olson

### PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW

**Paule Marshall** most fully develops her concerns with cultural heritage, individual and collective **memory**, and self-integration in her third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). Continuing the themes of fragmented **identity** introduced in her earlier novels *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) and *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), Marshall enacts one character's journey toward personal enlightenment and self-discovery through reconnection with African ritual and heritage. This novel received the Columbus Foundation American Book Award and cemented Marshall's literary reputation as a major African American woman writer in the twentieth century.

The novel's protagonist, Avey Johnson, begins the story as a woman embedded in the materialist American life. When her husband dies, Avey finds herself completely disconnected from herself, her physical well-being, and her heritage and thus unable to approach her new life as a widow. Her journey toward self-discovery begins, unbeknownst to her, on a Caribbean cruise and with a vigorous physical illness. As she sails, Avey begins to recollect early memories of **family** and **religion**; these memories continue to regress into the collective memory of her **ancestors** and their capture into **slavery**. Amid these memories, Avey's physical illness and her location on a sailing vessel reenact the **Middle Passage**.



Initiated with her **body's** negative reaction to her ancestors' enslavement, Avey continues to physically experience and reconnect with her personal and cultural past. When she becomes delayed in her return to New York, she encounters an island **community**, the Carriacou people. It is in these relationships that Avey's physicality turns from a negative purging to a positive and regenerative experience. Through the Carriacou, Avey comes in contact with African rituals and traditions she previously disparaged. As the novel progresses and Avey learns to grieve both her personal loss and eventually her ancestral enslavement, she finds wholeness through physical expression. The story climaxes with Avey's joining in a ceremonial African dance, where she at first tentatively and then robustly dances for her **ancestors**.

*Praisesong for the Widow* explores many of the themes Marshall introduces in her earlier works. Here she presents an American woman of Caribbean and African heritage who must find reconciliation with her personal past as well as her ancestral **history** in order to find peace and self-integration. Avey experiences a more full and hopeful rejuvenation than Marshall's early characters, however, as she reintegrates her ancestral heritage through physical ritual. This connection of the mind and body through collective memory offers the most complete opportunity for personal and social **healing** that Marshall presents in any of her writings to this point. Marshall embodies in Avey's reclamation of her heritage the potential for individual and cultural healing and progress. Notably, *Praisesong for the Widow* is dedicated to Marshall's own ancestor, her grandmother "Da-duh."

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*Laura Baker Shearer*

### **PRINCE, MARY (1788–?)**

Born a slave in Brackish Pond, Bermuda, Mary Prince published what is considered the first full-length narrative by a female slave, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, in England in 1831. In this often harrowing narrative, Prince documents her experiences under **slavery**, detailing the physical and often psychological abuse she was forced to suffer as a female slave.

In excruciating detail Prince describes the trauma of learning what it means to be a slave as a young girl, including being sold at a slave market, flogged while naked, raking salt for ten years in the harsh marshes of the Turks islands, and being subjected to sexual abuse. In 1828 Prince's owners, the Woods, agreed to take her with them to England. While in London, the Woodses' continued and increased abuse of Prince culminated in her decision to walk away from slavery. In 1772, abolitionist and lawyer Granville Sharpe had successfully argued in the case of James Somerset, the black versus Charles Stewart, that since British common law made no explicit reference or provisions for slavery, that at least while physically in the metropole of Great Britain, slaves were free.

Because her husband was still in Antigua, Prince desired to return to him there but wanted to do so as a free woman. With the aid of the Anti-Slavery Society, she sued the Woods, claiming that since they had violated the Amelioration Act of 1823, which prohibited excessive cruelty by slave owners, she should be completely manumitted. As a means to document evidence of their cruelty, Prince dictated the details of her life, which were transcribed by Susanna Strickland, an aspiring poet, and edited by Thomas Pringle, a writer and the secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. Because the narrative provided

a female slave's perspective, it became immensely popular and went through three editions in quick succession. Hoping to hinder public acceptance of the narrative, writer James MacQueen in an article for *Blackwood's Magazine*, accused Pringle and Prince of fabricating the narrative to spread abolitionist propaganda. Pringle sued MacQueen for libel, and although judgment was found in his and Prince's favor, the damages paid by MacQueen were a paltry £3. This ideological triumph would be short-lived, however, because the court decided against Prince in her suit for **freedom**, claiming she had exaggerated her abuse by the Woods out of revenge. Other than the trial summaries in *The Times*, and attendance at Susanna Strickland's wedding to Captain Moody, further written documentation of Prince is limited to a brief mention in Strickland's 1851 short story "Rachel Wilde, or, Trifles from the Burthen of Life," in which the main character, loosely based on Strickland, admits that she knows the narrative is not false, because she took it down herself.

Prince's narrative highlights not only the various spectacular punishments she and other female slaves were forced to endure but also the complexity of power relationships under slavery. Although a female slave, the narrative details Prince's enterprising endeavors and participation in both the formal and informal aspects of the **plantation** economy. She describes how she would make money by hiring herself out and selling produce and goods at local markets. Also, Prince documents her efforts to assert what critic Jenny Sharpe has described as "a certain kind of freedom" by choosing to develop sexual relationships with white men who could help her attain freedom. Although other critics have focused on Prince's inability to fully and completely document her sexual **history** due to the strictures of readership, what is most remarkable about Prince and her narrative is the manner in which she asserts her voice. In particular, she relates a story in which she saves one of her master's daughters from being beaten by him. Also, at several points in the narrative she speaks directly to her readers, claiming voice and authority through her experiences as a slave. She even details the many ways in which her masters engaged in hypocritical Christian behavior.

Prince's narrative is often treated as problematic because it was dictated to and edited by white amanuenses. However, the prohibition on teaching slaves to read and write complicates this privileging of single-author narratives. As she says in her narrative, Prince's goal was to "tell the truth to the English people." If her narrative were not taken down, it would probably not exist. Her narrative leaves us with a compelling portrait of the fortitude and resilience of slave women under a system that sought to destroy them emotionally and physically.

### Work By

*The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself.* Ed. Thomas Pringle. London, 1831.

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Nicole N. Aljoe

## PROTEST TRADITION

The written record of black women's protest efforts spans two centuries, extending from the early-nineteenth-century writer-activist **Maria Stewart** to contemporary figures comprising the **womanist** cultural formation. This tradition, including its social message, rhetorical strategies, and literary devices, has evolved historically according to the social and political conditions in which black women lived and worked. They have protested black women's multilayered burden of interlocking (**race**, gender, and **class**) oppressions to white America, black men, and the bourgeois rulers—what **black feminist** critic bell hooks calls the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Whether enslaved or bonded, black women have written for and to one another throughout the tradition, inspiring and nurturing each other's creativity, **spirituality**, and vision of human possibility.

Maria Stewart was the first woman, black or white, to deliver a political speech to a gender-mixed audience; she did so in 1832 in Boston. She was a staunch advocate of black **freedom** and women's independence and saw no contradictions inherent in black women's freedom. She wrote for the *Liberator* and *Freedom's Journal* on behalf of abolitionist and nationalist agendas. In 1835 she published selected essays and selected speeches in *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*. Inspired by militant political analyst David Walker, and defying the cult of domesticity, Stewart felt compelled by spiritual calling to fight for abolition and expose colonizationist programs. Ahead of her time, she is well known for her daunting speeches and writings on blacks' right to self-defense, women's equal worth and value in the struggle, and the unflinching way in which she delivered her ideas publicly. She was a forerunner and inspiration to other black women of similar tenacity and vision in her century like **Sojourner Truth**, **Rebecca Cox Jackson**, Harriet Tubman, and **Anna Julia Cooper**.

Stewart's audience was both black and white; each was exhorted with different agendas. In her speeches and writings she uses varying rhetorical strategies and literary techniques, as well as varying intellectual sources, to express her social critique and vision of human possibility. She was an early crafter of the black Jeremiad, mastering the black idioms of thundering exhortation, parataxis, anaphora, and the rhythmic patterns of call and response. She drew on the Constitution, classical **literature**, and the Bible to fashion her prose and speeches. To whites Stewart spoke and wrote of the impending doom of black rebellion if they continued enslaving blacks, who had no choice in her eyes but to defend themselves by any means necessary. God would be on the side of the vanquished, and a mighty thunder would smite the slaveholders, she exhorted. This was a particularly bold stance for any black person of this period, and especially for a black *woman*, because whites, particularly Irish and German Americans, rioted black neighborhoods with impunity to contain black social mobility and autonomy. She charged blacks with the responsibility of defending their homes and suing for citizenship rights, for they had built up America.

Black women were integral to the struggle, she argued, citing historical and biblical instances where women played key roles in their others' survival. Stewart is known as one of the earliest proponents of women's rights in America and the first black woman to speak out publicly. For her outspoken opinion, often contrasting that of her black male contemporaries, she was retired from the public lecture circuit fairly early in her career by her male contemporaries. Stewart continued her crusade, writing for abolitionist periodicals, and later wrote her **autobiography**.

Runaway slave women protested the contradiction between **slavery** and the country's professed ideals of self-evident freedom and Christian brotherhood. **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), **Harriet E. Wilson's** *Our Nig* (1859), and *Celia: A Slave* (1991) by Melton McLaurin are well known. Telling their stories and educating the nation on the horrors of bonded women's lives was challenging, for they had to express themselves in generic codes (of **domestic fiction** and True Womanhood ideology) that contradicted their experiences of racialized gendered powerlessness. Gender made slave women sexually exploitable by white slaveholders to reproduce human capital for the system and forced them into moral dilemmas that diverged from black men's experiences and that white women could have never even imagined. Slave women's vulnerability to **rape** raised quandaries of whether to birth or spare their child a life of misery (abortion and infanticide)—particularly if it were a female; of whether to endure forced sex by slaveholders to protect their families from abuse. Their autobiographies were conscious (yet subtle) protests against racist mythologies of slave women "**Jezebels**" who raped white slaveholders. They aimed to set the record straight on the increasing population of **mulattos** in the **South**. Ex-slave women's memoirs also revealed how their experiences of slavery were gendered differently from men's. The escape prospects of slave mothers were burdened by having children. They also exposed the hypocrisy of white womanhood

as anything but pious and honorable—as cruel, conniving, and spiteful when dealing with blacks. Written with literary genius and narrative strategy, many slave women’s autobiographies are some of the earliest analyses of intersectionality in black feminine subjectivity.

In *A Voice from the South* in 1892 Anna Julia Cooper eloquently described black women’s dilemmas in relation to the suffragist movement and racial uplift in the late nineteenth century, including the omission of black women’s concerns in both struggles. She criticized the institutionalization of patriarchy via racial uplift, pointing out the hypocrisy of black men creating roadblocks to black women’s education and social equality. Echoing Stewart decades later, Cooper was one of the first to argue that blacks could never be free until emancipation was extended to black women: that the Negro race’s entrance into “**history**” as a subject is not complete until black women are empowered as subjects. From the late nineteenth century to the 1940s, covering both Reconstruction and the **Harlem Renaissance**, black women launched an antilynching crusade through journalism, theater, novels, and short stories. Among these were **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**, **Angelina Weld Grimké**, **Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson**, Mary Burrill, **Georgia Douglas Johnson**, **May Miller**, Regina Andrews, and Myrtle Smith Livingston. They were a part of the anti-lynch movement and used journalism and theater to stake a claim to public discourse of protest. Wells-Barnett launched a scathing exposé of lynching in her newspaper articles and pamphlets. In the *Red Record* and other journal publications, she tackled the politically charged subject at the heart of lynching, white women’s duplicity, which scandalously hinted that white women were anything but chaste. Not only was their purity suspect, her critique implied; they willingly transgressed the patriarchal law with the most hated target of white men’s rage—black men. Lynching was a tactic that white men used to terrorize blacks into political and economic submission, which simultaneously functioned to clear white women of suspicion that they had coveted the unspeakable. Disseminating such deconstructions of lynching and dissecting its underlying political economy in national periodicals and pamphlets got Wells-Barnett run out of Memphis with a healthy reward for her capture.

At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, the **poetry** and plays of Grimké, Nelson, and Burrill also demystified the predominant rationale for lynching black men and argued for blacks’ right to self-defense. They often exposed the role of white women in maintaining the system of white dominance and attacked the real reasons behind lynching, white hatred of black suffrage and social mobility. They dramatized connections between **motherhood** and lynching in efforts to stir white women’s maternal sensibility, which contributed to the eventual formation of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching in 1930. Writers often drew on Christian imagery as a way of shoring up the contradiction between America’s professed religious values and the system of second-class citizenship set up for blacks. The politics and aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance literati underwent a significant change in black women’s protest productions in the black arts and social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The voices of revolutionary protest in the 1960s and 1970s became more demanding and militant in poet-writer-activists such as **Sonia Sanchez**, **Nikki Giovanni**, **Toni Cade Bambara**, **Margaret Walker**, **Pat Parker**, **Mari Evans**, **Alice Walker**, and **Gwendolyn Brooks**. As in the productions of antilynching crusaders before them, the undercurrent of urgency to end state-sanctioned terrorism against blacks runs throughout their works. Experimentation with innovative verse structures and language by these poets reflected their affirmation of black life and culture and their rejection of dominant literary and poetic standards. They drew on a black urban wisdom and reached back to a diasporic cultural past for poetic inspiration and looked less to biblical or classical **literature** for substance. They drew on the hip slang of the black urban idiom, incorporating so-called ungrammatical constructions like multiple negation, the invariant “be,” the zero copula and possessive, and clipped verb endings. They used other gestures like call and response and signifying from the **blues** (and black church), as well as other features like tonal semantics and narrative sequencing, which are rooted in certain African oral traditions.

Unrelenting critics of America’s democratic hypocrisy, many black women activist-writers refused to allow readers the comfort of distance from the harsh realities of black struggle that language as a system of signifying often affords. Their protest repertoire included the intransigence of white supremacy, police brutality and state repression, urban poverty and environmental racism, as well as specific incidents in the struggle like the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and **Malcolm X** and the murder of James Chaney, Andy Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi in 1964.

Many writers connected the oppression of the African diaspora to the historical persecution and annihilation of indigenous Americans and European Jewry. Pat Parker’s “Where Will You Be, When They Come” (1978) cleverly uses the language, imagery, and symbolism of Nazi fascism to frame the historical oppression of blacks and queers and to raise black consciousness of the necessity of solidarity in revolutionary struggle. Often these poets also related blacks’ experience to other anticolonial struggles in Africa and Asia/Pacific Islands and demystified the military’s function—including the state’s recruitment of black male revolutionaries—in maintaining Western dominance and black oppression both in America and abroad. This is a thematic of Sonia Sanchez’s “final solution/the leaders speak” (1979) in which the poet outlines the available choices of blacks: either assimilate to the American democracy agenda—that is, fight the white man’s wars to colonize other colored peoples—or die in the prisons, projects, and poverty. Black women poets drew on a wide range of rhetorical techniques and poetic structures from the black vernacular and African orature and idiom, as well as the classical tradition. Some included circumlocution, ellipsis, satire, onomatopoeia, diasporic folktales, hyperbole, irony, alliteration and assonance, dys/tactical constructions, and grammatical disruptions.

Black women also dared to take up questions that many black male revolutionaries shied away from, like the rule of pigmentocracy (or colorism) in

black communities as a legacy of slavery engendering black self-loathing and shame and undermining black unity. **Toni Morrison's** *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and **Kristin Hunter Lattany's** *God Bless the Child* (1964) explore this subject, as well as others like black male sexism and oppression of black women. Black women and the writers who expressed their concerns found themselves in a peculiar position in the women's and black movements: invisible in the movements' agendas but usable as an resource of endless energy, labor, and emotions for these movements. This is the void of silence and omission out of and against which many black women writers protested to their own comrades. Many writers responded to direct pronouncements by Stokely Carmichael that the only place for women in the revolution is prone as baby-making machines. Writers like **Audre Lorde** and Alice Walker explored the ways that this view of black women was not only sexist and counterrevolutionary but also racist—no different from how white slaveholders viewed bonded women a century earlier. Much of black women's literary protests today fall under the rubric of “**womanism**,” which Alice Walker defined in her 1983 collection of short stories, poems, and essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Walker formulated the concept as a testimonial to black women's struggle, creativity, and spiritual resilience in surviving and making a life in racist-sexist America. She resignified its original pejorative sting of “acting womanish,” a term that is often hurled at young black girls to remind them of their place in the **family/community** hierarchy, to a more positive meaning of precocious and curious. Her works explore how black women's lives are underwritten by a matrix of race, gender, and class oppression in which they must navigate through ideologically charged paths and contradictory social positionings in pursuit of fulfilling paths. *Meridian*, *The Color Purple* (1982), *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981), and *In Love & Trouble* (1973) especially examine subjects of taboo in black communities like incest, rape, **lesbianism**, interracial relationships, colorism, black bourgeois assimilationism, and domestic abuse. Perhaps nothing was more perplexing and insulting to Walker, as for others before her such as Cooper, than black men's disinterest in disarming patriarchal institutions and relations of servitude. Some of Walker's more insightful critiques involve showing how racism inheres in certain forms of black male chauvinism such as the idea that black women's primary contribution to the struggle lies in birthing future warriors, which echoes white slaveholders' degradation of slave women as breeders (raw material) of (future) human capital (wealth). Many contemporary writers, some from the 1960s and 1970s, are part of this womanist cultural formation that has continued protesting black people's economic, patriarchal, and racial plight and the suffering of black women from within.

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Angela Cotten



## **QUICKSAND**

Nella Larsen's first and best-known novel *Quicksand*, published in 1928 by Knopf, was greeted with acclaim, winning a Bronze Medal from the Harmon Foundation and words of praise from W.E.B. Du Bois as the best piece of **fiction** written by an African American since **Charles Waddell Chesnutt**. The novel tells the story of Helga Crane, a young woman of mixed parentage—a Danish American mother and a West Indian father—who becomes an outsider in her own **family** when her mother remarries a white man and has a child with him. Larsen's penetrating psychological character study moves beyond earlier representations of the tragic **mulatto** to reveal the ways in which **race** and gender inevitably construct **identity** and consciousness. Helga attempts to transcend racial categories by defining herself in terms of "taste"—surrounding herself with material possessions and aesthetic surfaces. But when she is confronted with the economic, social, or genetic basis of such material surfaces, as well as her own sexual desires, Helga responds with flight. Beginning with her artfully arranged teacher's apartment at Naxos, a fictitious Negro College where Helga is employed, she moves through a series of spaces that provide diminishing possibilities for self-realization as she struggles to define herself.

The meaning of the title becomes evident as her story progresses; the harder she struggles, the deeper she sinks. Each of Helga's moves—from Naxos to Chicago to New York to Copenhagen to New York to Alabama—is precipitated

by a crisis involving a confrontation with race or **sexuality**. She flees from Naxos when its handsome young president, Robert Anderson, suggests that she is a woman of good breeding. She leaves Chicago when her last family connection, her Uncle Peter, withdraws his support at the insistence of his new white wife. Helga finds a job as companion to a wealthy widow and “race woman” who takes her to New York, but she is put off by the attitudes of black Harlemites toward whites and those who associate with them. Overwhelmed by a **jazz** party scene at a Harlem nightclub, she decides to leave for relatives in Copenhagen, where she is taken in and pampered by relatives who are enchanted with what they perceive as her exotic nature. In Denmark Helga is courted by a famous painter but refuses to marry him when she realizes that he values her as an “exotic other,” a sexual object rather than for herself. Returning to New York, Helga runs from a potential sexual encounter with Robert Anderson, now the husband of her closest friend, and takes refuge in a church revival meeting where she meets a southern preacher whom she ends up marrying. Her move with him to rural Alabama is a reversal of the migration narrative of upward mobility and economic opportunity; her four pregnancies within two years mock her earlier attempts to establish a destiny independent of race and gender as biologically constructed. Because Helga does not feel at **home** in either black or white society, her character highlights the “constructed” nature of race and the ways in which it is internalized.

**Black feminist criticism** has restored *Quicksand* to the canon of African American women’s writing. Some critics have viewed the ending as flawed and hasty; others, notably Deborah McDowell, have viewed *Quicksand* as a pioneering exploration of black female sexuality. Hazel Carby has noted that Larsen’s fiction provides the urban counterpart to **Zora Neale Hurston’s** evocation of the heroine’s journey to selfhood in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The story of Helga Crane bears some resemblances to Nella Larsen’s life, as revealed in Thadious Davis’s biography.

*See also* Harlem Renaissance; Passing; *Passing*

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*Ann Hostetler*

## QUILTING

Quilting is a process that has been a part of the African American culture for over 200 years. The process seems simple but requires time and artistic flair. Quilting involves “piecing” together strips or squares of fabric into larger blocks that are then connected by hand sewing, machine sewing, or even knotting the fabric together. These connected blocks of fabric are formed into larger blocks to produce a bed-size covering. A second layer of batting or soft material is next, with a final piece of fabric attached to the back, forming three layers. This is a process that is time-consuming, particularly if all of the steps are done by hand, as would have been the case during **slavery**.

In the past, typically, women were the primary quilters in the **family**, although then and now, a few men quilted as well. When one considers the contributions of women to the support and care of their families, it is easy to overlook quilting; however, this process reaps many benefits in the black culture, among them helping to form a shared **community** of quilters who through their talent express a sense of pride, creativity, and **love**. In addition, quilting is a way to pass along African Americans’ cultural heritage, and the quilts themselves serve as historical artifacts in the African American community.

In a practical sense, quilting was a necessity in most slave families. They had only minimal provisions for their comfort, and warm blankets were a luxury, so the women would make quilts to keep everyone warm. These women had to be resourceful, so they might use flour or corn meal sacks as fabric for the quilts. They also used clothing and various pieces of material. Of course the women were expected to **work** the fields each day, but after their daily labor, they would gather with other women on the plantation to work on their quilts. These slave women might work on one quilt until it was completed and then begin another. No doubt, this was a time to commiserate with others about the sadness and fears of slave life, but it was also a time to experience some comfort by sewing into the quilt the love they had for their families.

Black women quilting to express their love for their families is still an African American tradition today. In many families, mothers and grandmothers give their children and grandchildren quilts to mark milestones in their lives, such as a high school or college graduation or an engagement or marriage. Sometimes, particularly valuable hand-stitched quilts may be passed down from one generation to the next. Many times the quilts are used for their intended purpose, but in some cases, the idea of using these priceless heirlooms is seen as shortsighted and unappreciative of their value. In a story by **Alice Walker** titled “Everyday Use” (1973), the author explores this ongoing dilemma.

Whatever one feels about this question, there is no question that quilting is a way of expressing creativity. Quilts are “pieced” together in various patterns and geometric shapes. The colors are many times vivid and bold, and when hung outside on a fence or line, the quilts can be seen from great

distances. Numerous techniques and styles exist for putting the fabric together, thus altering the appearance of the quilts and their aesthetic qualities. For example, quilts can be constructed in blocks, strips, or even strings of fabric. Various genres of quilts also exist, such as Bible quilts, story quilts, or appliquéd quilts. One well-known quilter was former slave Harriet Powers, who is famous for her quilts that depict stories from the Bible; one of these can be seen at the Smithsonian Museum of American History.

For African Americans, quilting provides a connection to heritage and **ancestors**. Many times, young girls watch their mothers quilting and, in doing so, learn the tradition themselves, which they then pass down to their children. Because clothing is often used for the fabric, the mothers sometimes tell stories about the person who wore the clothing, or events that person experienced when they wore the clothing.

These stories are ways of remembering family **history**. During slavery, important records, such as births and deaths, were not formally documented, and family members were sold so frequently that keeping track of family histories became tenuous at best. Quilting very easily fit in with the oral tradition and became a way of maintaining a connection to the slaves' ancestors and "documenting," in some sense, family lore.

In recent years, quilt lovers and scholars have begun tracing the history of quilting in the African American culture. This has proven to be a formidable task because many of the slave quilts were not preserved. However, quilt experts like Maude Southwell Wahlman, Gladys-Marie Fry, and others have conducted countless hours of research and have interviewed hundreds of African American quilters all across the country in search of a more in-depth understanding and appreciation of African American quilting, particularly from a historical and cultural perspective. Their research continues today.

One topic hotly debated among scholars recently is the idea that slave quilts were used to provide information to runaway slaves traveling the **Underground Railroad**. This possibility is the topic of quilt researchers Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard in their book *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. Researchers will no doubt continue to debate this topic.

Some may think of quilting as insignificant "women's work" and the quilts as simple bed covering, but to do so is to diminish one source of the history and legacy of a culture and a people. African American quilts are artifacts that tell a story about blacks in this country and provide a link to their roots in Africa.

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*Toni E. Smith*





## RACE

Race plays a crucial role in the treatment of women and in American attitudes about women, and feminist **literature**, especially that written by African American women, reflects this reality. Using their literature as a response to institutionalized racism, black women writers have continually challenged **stereotypes** of black women and men that have permeated society. While black men like **Ralph Ellison**, Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, **Langston Hughes**, **Richard Wright**, and **James Baldwin** are typically viewed as writers who brought the discourse of race to the forefront of America's consciousness, their female counterparts were also addressing the issue of race in their writings, though these did not instantly receive the same amount of recognition. Black women writers' concern with race and the ways it has intersected with gender and **class** produces literature that illustrates the unique and multifaceted experiences of black women.

African American women writers have long argued that black women's experiences are informed by a combination of their race, gender, and class and that one cannot be separated from the other, or privileged over the other forms of discrimination. The desire to integrate inseparable **identities** has been a fundamental issue for many African American women. Contemporary books such as the groundbreaking *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (1982), edited by Gloria T. Hall, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, and *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*



(1989), by Elizabeth V. Spelman, started conversations about this faulty categorization. **Sojourner Truth's** "Ain't I a Woman" Women's Convention speech in Akron, Ohio, in 1851 testified to the importance of gender in a world that refused even to recognize black women as women. Because of race, black women were delegated to positions of inferiority and were denied membership to the "Cult of True Womanhood" that focused on the attributes of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity that afforded middle-class white women respect and deference from society. Black women were immediately excluded from this classification of womanhood because of their race. It was *because* of race that black women were subjected to the philosophy that they were automatically inferior and not "real" women to be respected.

In America, black women's experiences began with the brutal institution of **slavery** that denigrated men and women based on race. The literature frequently examines the societal view of black women's inferiority that began with slavery and still continues today to some degree. The literature enlisted the support of white Americans and reached out to other blacks with liberatory messages of hope and empowerment. Born into slavery, both Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman provided black female writers with powerful examples of bravery and eloquence in the face of the utter disregard of slave women's rights. Olaudah Equiano and **Frederick Douglass's** **slave narratives** struck a nerve with white America, and around the same time, black female writers started to raise the issue of gross inequality and the lot of the enslaved. *The Bondswoman's Narrative* by **Hannah Crafts** (1850), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by **Harriet Jacobs** (1861), and *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* by **Harriet E. Wilson** (1859) were some of the first texts by black women designed to appeal to the outside world to consider the brutality and injustice of slavery. These works focus on the inequalities that had become normalized in American society and the ways these young women's lives were dominated by **violence** and prejudice. Contemporary depictions of slavery, such as **Sherley Anne Williams's** *Dessa Rose* (1986) and **Octavia Butler's** *Kindred* (1979) illustrate the ways race irrevocably impacted the main characters' lives in their poignant narratives.

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1865 freed the enslaved and led the country into Reconstruction from 1865 to 1870, which proved to be the beginning of an erosion of the rights to **freedom** that emancipation had afforded. Many black female activists who fought for racial equality in America helped bring institutionalized racism to the forefront of society's consciousness and provided the impetus for many activists and women writers to protest the system of inequality in America. Activists like **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**, **Mary Church Terrell**, **Mary McLeod Bethune**, **Anna Julia Cooper**, and **Fannie Lou Hamer** dedicated their lives to eradicating discrimination and struggled gallantly against the complicated nature of a racist system. Many black women's literary works at the time exposed the complex issues within the black **community** such as miscegenation, light-skin privilege, and internalized racism that were some of slavery's legacies. Slavery

established a complicated demarcation of race that classified blacks as **mulattos**, quadroons, and octoroons, based on the amount of “black blood” they had. Through the story of a young woman who is raised in a wealthy white **family** without knowledge that her mother is half black, **Frances E. W. Harper’s** *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) addresses the realities of black life in America after slavery. Iola refuses to pass for white once she knows the truth of her heritage; instead, she goes on to uplift the African American community by embracing her sense of social responsibility, becoming involved in suffrage for African Americans. The writers often illustrate the **work** of activists and in many cases were activists themselves. Harper’s response to the injustice of slave laws was to contribute her time and energy as a lecturer as part of the antislavery movement. The roles of the black woman writer often included being an activist, artist, and truth-teller in a society that undervalued the creative contributions of African Americans, especially the women.

When regular American universities remained closed to African Americans on the basis of race, historically black colleges provided places of intellectual growth. In the years following emancipation, historically black colleges received federal aid, and African Americans could receive a higher education, which was a welcome relief from the prohibition against teaching slaves to read in the antebellum period. African Americans perceived education as a way to escape the limiting constraints of racism, since through education came power and a chance to receive qualifications that would offer life improvements. In 1881, the ten women, including former slaves, with whom Spelman College was started helped the founders Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles embark on their mission to provide black women and girls with excellent instruction. This mission, and others like it, played a vital role in the perception and acceptance of black female intellect. Many pieces of **fiction** refer to the role of education in the perceived improvement of black people’s lives. **Lorraine Hansberry’s** *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), the first play by a black woman to be produced on Broadway, examines Beneatha Younger’s dream to become a doctor and the brighter future that she has because of her college education and her desire to learn more about her connection to Africa. *Meridian* (1976) by **Alice Walker** describes the title character’s journey, including college life, ending with her work that encourages traditionally disenfranchised African Americans to register to vote. In this novel the focus of many women’s colleges at the time to produce ladies is subtly critiqued. *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970) by **Louise Meriwether** ends with Francie Coffin’s mother pleading with her to get an education so that she can avoid her mother’s fate of becoming a **domestic**—a fate many black women lived during the Great Depression of the 1930s. **Nikki Giovanni’s** 1969 essay “I Fell Off the Roof One Day (A View of the Black University)” outlines the necessity of all-black institutions that were under attack at the time for being racist. The promise of historically black colleges and all the opportunities that they represented in the 1800s provided a sense of hope that would not last long.

The Supreme Court's *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision in 1896 heralded the legalization of segregation in America and made the discrimination, hatred, and fear of blacks legal. The brutal Jim Crow laws, named after a black minstrel, regulated every aspect of black life and kept blacks and whites separated physically (for example, banning intermarriage), politically (making it illegal for blacks to vote), and philosophically (prohibiting political organizing in favor of equality). The Jim Crow era eliminated any notion of equality that emancipation had promised. These laws continued to mandate separate facilities for blacks and whites until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which legally dismantled segregation. Sarah and Elizabeth **Delany** share their reality during these repressive years in their **autobiography** *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* (1997), vividly conjuring up a world in which they could not drink from the same water source in a public park as white people. The two sisters additionally mention the influence of the Ku Klux Klan on society and its horrifying effect on the psyche of blacks.

During the Jim Crow years, the **Harlem Renaissance**, spanning from 1920 to the 1930s and coinciding with the Great Migration of blacks from the rural **South** to the North, provided blacks an opportunity to escape the rigid negative connotations of their race and celebrate their creativity. African American artists experimented with artistic forms, creating **jazz** and new forms of **poetry**, prose, dance, and art. Alain Locke, the African American Rhodes Scholar and Harvard graduate, named the purveyors of this cultural explosion the "New Negro," a black person with a sense of social responsibility to uplift the black community with art, education, and self-respect. Locke edited an anthology of the same name in 1925, showcasing young African American authors such as Langston Hughes and **Claude McKay** and forcing the literary world to take these black writers seriously. At the same time, writers like **Zora Neale Hurston**, **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, and **Nella Larsen** addressed issues of race in their fiction, as did singers **Billie Holiday** and **Josephine Baker**, ushering in a new outlook on African Americans' contributions to art and literature. Fauset became the literary editor at *Crisis* magazine, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), while W.E.B. Du Bois was the editor, helping to publish authors such as **Jean Toomer** and **Countee Cullen**, who were making tremendous contributions to the conversation on race in America. Fauset explored the roles of race and internalized racism in her prose. In her 1928 novel *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral*, Fauset's protagonist Angela Murray realizes she looks white and eventually ends up living as a white woman in New York, facing not racism but sexism. During this time many African American writers needed to have white patrons to provide much-needed financial support in the publishing world. Both Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes received financial support from their patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, with whom they eventually parted ways because of the restrictive relationship. Hurston's 1935 anthropological *Mules and Men* provides an insight into black culture that many literary figures denounced as being too focused on **folklore**. Alice Walker revived Hurston's works after she fell into obscurity after her **death**.

The Harlem Renaissance segued into the **protest** movement and opened the door for authors like **Gwendolyn Brooks**, who became the first black woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1950, for *Annie Allen*, which explores injustice in America.

The beginning of the civil rights era found an American society that historically separated women's inexplicably intertwined identities of race and gender. Civil rights groups often delegated women to the margins, and black women also found themselves excluded from the struggle for women's rights. As Black Nationalists, women like Assata Shakur and **Angela Davis** protested police surveillance of blacks and were incriminated and jailed for their outspoken activism. Shakur's autobiography *Assata* (1987) exposes the reality of political prisoners in America who were discriminated against based on their race. The **Black Arts Movement**, which was embraced as the artistic articulation of the Black Power movement, provided a means for authors to articulate their outrage over the political and social discrimination that African Americans continued to experience. **Maya Angelou**, **Rosa Guy**, Nikki Giovanni, **Sarah Elizabeth Wright**, and **Sonia Sanchez** were prominent African American women writers in this period; their writing generated literary responses from black feminist literary critics such as bell hooks, Barbara Christian, and Barbara Smith, who began the conversation of the role of black women's literature as liberatory discourse. Other black feminist critics such as Nellie Y. McKay, Hazel Carby, Deborah McDowell, Mary Helen Washington, and Cheryl Wall continued the conversation. **Toni Cade Bambara's** 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* gave a voice to women such as **Audre Lorde**, the black lesbian feminist poet whose poem in the text is about natural beauty, and Abbey Lincoln, the great jazz singer who is concerned with the many burdens that black women experienced. **Toni Morrison's** *The Bluest Eye*, published in the same year, examined the effects of racism on the psyche of the main character Pecola Breedlove and provided the world with further insight into racial politics in America.

Contemporary writers such as Alice Walker, **Gloria Naylor**, Toni Morrison, **Bebe Moore Campbell**, **Paule Marshall**, and **Suzan-Lori Parks** all make social and political statements about the role of race in America. The Pulitzer Prize-winning and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison challenges readers with the deliberate omission of race in her description of the protagonists in the novel *Paradise* (1998). This omission was viewed as a bold move, revealing the significance of race in black women's fiction, by withholding the racial identities of the characters. Alice Walker's *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997) explores the struggle many black female activists engage in and reminds her readers of the social activism of many black female authors. In 1987, **Rita Dove** won a Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), the story of her grandparents' lives. Bebe Moore Campbell's novel *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1982) offers a profoundly complex story revolving around the most notorious lynching in America. The story of the murder of the teenaged Emmett Till is brought to life in the brilliantly crafted narrative of revenge, redemption, and denial.

Many African American women authors have been expected to portray black women in a positive light to counteract the fundamentally racist images presented historically in **film**, literature, and the news media. Some writers have risen to this challenge, others have rejected it, but most have addressed race or racism in a variety of ways in their writing. The literature has countered the stereotypes of black women as the contemptuous “**Sapphire**,” the asexual, self-sacrificing “**Mammy**,” and the overly sexual “**Jezebel**.” The literature has also provided black women with the voice to dispute the discrimination and subjugation of African Americans, and women of all races have used the literature as a forum for social activism, presenting protagonists as activists or engaging in activism themselves. Using literature as the tool for liberation, black women have come from the most debasing period of **history** and have managed to recover their self-respect through their creativity and their social and political activism.

*See also* Black Feminist Criticism; Black Nationalism; Civil Rights Movement; Whiteness

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*Zisca Isabel Burton*

### RAHMAN, AISHAH (1936– )

Aishah Rahman (born Virginia Hughes) is a playwright and author whose avant-garde and surrealist works are considered “underground classics.” Although her plays tend not to be performed in major, mainstream theaters, they have been hailed and widely appreciated by smaller audiences at university campuses, in regional theater, and in off-Broadway productions. In many of her works, she produces a surreal ambience by utilizing strong symbolism, the unexpected, and the irrational. She is particularly skilled at revealing the quirks and obsessions found in her various characters. She also incorporates what she calls a “**jazz** aesthetic,” which unveils a particular character’s multiple “levels of reality.” Many of her plays are centered on the life of a famous artist or person, whom she portrays in a fictionalized setting.

Rahman was born in New York City and grew up in Harlem. She received a B.S. in political science from Howard University in 1968 and a master's degree in playwriting and dramatic **literature** from Goddard College in 1985. She taught at Nassau Community College and was director of the Henry Street Settlements Playwrights Workshop at New Federal Theatre. Rahman became a faculty member at Brown University in 1992, where she continues her teaching career. She is also the founder and editor of *NuMuse*, a journal that includes plays and essays by student and professional writers from Brown University. A recipient of fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Foundation of the Arts, she has also been honored with the Doris Abramson Playwriting Award, a Theater Communications Group Collaborative Grant for Artists, and several Audelco Awards.

Rahman's creative work started to receive attention in the early 1970s, when she wrote a play about the jazz phenomenon **Billie Holiday**, titled *Lady Day: A Musical Tragedy* (1972). One of her more celebrated works, *Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage*, was premiered at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1977. This play juxtaposes the suffering and challenges of five unwed mothers who must make difficult choices regarding the future of their babies with the **death** of jazz legend Charlie Parker, who passed away on March 12, 1955, in the apartment of his former lover who is a rich baroness. Rahman also wrote the **blues** musical *The Tale of Madame Zora* (1986), which is centered on the life of **Zora Neale Hurston**. Then in collaboration with composer Akua Dixon Turre, she wrote the libretto for *The Opera of Marie Laveau* (1989), which was renamed *Anybody Seen Marie Laveau?*, and is based on the New Orleans voodoo queen. Some of her other plays include *The Mojo and the Sayso* (1987), *Only in America* (1993), *Chiaroscuro: A Light and Dark Comedy* (2000), and *Mingus Takes (3): Three One Acts* (2003). In addition, she has published a memoir titled *Chewed Water* (2001), which was originally titled *Illegitimate Life*. This memoir tells of her coming of age in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s and details the first eighteen years of her life as the foster child of a woman who abused her both emotionally and physically. It also recounts how she worked to overcome obstacles in her life and developed the desire to become a playwright.

*See also* Drama; Harlem Renaissance; Historical Fiction; Memory

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*Deborah Weagel*

**RAINBOW ROUN MAH SHOULDER**

**Linda Beatrice Brown's** first novel, *Rainbow Roun Mah Shoulder* (1984), tells the story of Rebecca Florice Letenielle from 1915 to 1954 as she struggles with her gift/curse of **healing**, with her relationships with **religion**, men, other women, and with Jim Crow discrimination. The story opens in New Orleans in 1915 and closes in North Carolina in 1954 and traces Rebecca's journey to becoming Florice and finally her full self.

In 1915 New Orleans Rebecca is conflicted about her relationship with her husband Mac and over loyalty to the church and her attraction to priest Father Theodore Canty. Finally she flees to North Carolina, where Mac leaves her. With Mac gone, she drops the name Rebecca and begins going by Florice. Living with her sister Marie, Florice is befriended by Alice Wine and settles in Jacksonville, North Carolina, to **work** as a cook and babysitter. When Marie and her husband move to Chicago, Florice and Alice decide to move to Greensboro, where they find work as cooks at a Negro college. The foreground story of their lives is shadowed by a background that includes a chilling lynching and lack of opportunities for blacks in the **South**.

In Greensboro, Florice once more falls in **love** with a clergyman, Robert Brown, a married preacher. When he leaves town, she tries to take her own life in a horrifying voodoo ritual. Saved by her friend Alice, Florice gradually comes to terms with herself and with the gift for healing that she has long denied. Because some see her as a witch, Florice insists that those she heals keep her role in their cure a secret. Part of her personal growth is in her relationship with her goddaughter, Ronnie Johnstone. Ronnie also has gifts

that Florice helps her learn to appreciate. Florice finally leaves Greensboro to visit Robert on his deathbed and to seek the peace of the beach for her own final hours. All of these events are illuminated by the deeply spiritual values that Florice holds and develops.

To underscore the evolving nature of Florice's and her other characters' lives, Brown interweaves italicized sections in the narrative that describe the life cycles of butterflies and moths, stressing the necessary stages of molting or changing form, of assuming protective coloring, and of being toxic to some predators. The novel ends with a passage describing the diversity of size and shape of butterflies and moths and the widespread nature of their habitats, reinforcing for us the metaphor that butterflies and moths, like people, are vastly different from one another but serve vital functions in the continuation of all life.

Brown's style in this first novel resounds with poetic diction, creating scenes of vivid intensity and/or lasting **beauty** in the readers' minds as the story takes the readers through terrible experiences to arrive at Rebecca Florice's final rainbow vision. The enduring support of friends and **family** in the individual's struggle for self-knowledge and spiritual certainty emerge as the chief thematic values in a work that combines beauty and power.

*See also* Historical Fiction; Violence

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*Harriette C. Buchanan*

### **RAISIN IN THE SUN, A**

*A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) was the first play by a black female playwright to be produced on Broadway. The author, **Lorraine Hansberry**, led the way for recognition of both female and male black artists on the Great White Way by becoming the first black recipient of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play. She was only the fifth woman and the youngest person to receive the award. Its premier production brought together the talents of Lloyd Richards, the first black director on Broadway in over fifty years, who would go on to become dean of the Yale School of Drama and artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theater, and future Oscar-winning actor Sidney Poitier, as Walter Lee Younger, Jr. The cast also included three powerful female actors in the roles of the other Younger adults: Claudia McNeil as Mama Lena; Ruby Dee as Ruth, and Diana Sands as Beneatha. All these actors would reprise their roles for the 1961 Columbia Pictures **film**, directed by Daniel Petrie, which



garnered Hansberry a nomination for Best Screenplay of the Year by the Screenwriters' Guild of America and the Gary Cooper Award for "outstanding human values" at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival. Adapted as the musical *Raisin*, the play won Broadway's Tony Award for Best Musical of 1974. Black female playwrights like **Adrienne Kennedy** and **Ntozake Shange**, while diverging from Hansberry's realistic mode, have found inspiration in her example and success in bringing their own black characters to the stage.

*A Raisin in the Sun* confronts the disadvantaged situation of poor, working-class black families in Chicago's Southside. The play's setting, a small two-bedroom apartment with a shared bathroom down the hall, is **home** to three generations of the Younger **family**: Mama Lena Younger; her adult children, Walter Lee, a chauffeur, and Beneatha, a student with ambitions to be a doctor; Walter's wife, Ruth, like Mama, a **domestic** worker; and Walter and Ruth's son Travis. Their circumstances offer little hope for bettering their social conditions. The dramatic tensions arise from Mama's receipt of a \$10,000 life insurance payment on her deceased husband. The play's epigraph, which also provides the title, is a **Langston Hughes** poem, "Harlem," from his collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). The Younger family and the demoralizing effects of dreams too long deferred become Hansberry's montage. The money offers the Youngers the hope of a better life, but the means of realizing their dreams differ, especially for Walter Lee and Mama. Walter Lee wants the money to invest in a liquor store. Instead, Mama uses part of it as a downpayment on an affordable house in Clybourne Park, an all-white neighborhood. Recognizing her son's desperation, Mama relents and hands over to him the remainder of the money, part of which is meant for Beneatha's medical school education. Walter Lee foolishly entrusts it to one of his potential business partners, who disappears with it. Tempted to recoup part of his losses, he achieves personal triumph when he rejects the bribe from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association to stay out of its white neighborhood and asserts his pride in himself and his family and their right to live peacefully wherever they choose. At the play's end, the Youngers' determination to move carries hope, but not without the sense of their continuing struggles as black Americans for basic human rights against the white majority's bigotry, represented by the Clybourne opposition.

Walter Lee's discovery of his moral center forms a significant part of the **drama**, but *Raisin's* female characters draw much of the play's attention, celebrating in diverse ways the potential of womanhood. Despite the **memory** of Walter Sr., the Younger apartment is an intensely female space with its three adult women; Mama considers it her house. Hansberry's presentation invokes the **stereotype** of the emasculating black matriarch who considers the black male incompetent and unreliable. But Mama's transcendence comes in recognizing before it is too late her son's destructive hopelessness, and she acts decisively to rectify the damage. Despite her overbearing ways, Mama is a figure of **love**, nurturance, and growth, symbolized by her plant and her association with gardens. Her daughter-in-law, the play's other mother, is less strident but equally strong. Ruth's insights often reconcile the family's tensions.

Her pregnancy emphasizes her vitality, but her plans for an abortion, because of their impoverished circumstances, provide one of the play's strongest social commentaries, for Ruth's livelihood, looking after the children of other mothers, presumably white, falls short of allowing her to mother her own black children.

Beneatha suggests endless possibilities for black womanhood. Intelligent and ambitious, she places her studies before marriage. Her motivation to become a doctor, to cure people, suggests her social conscience. Intent on exploring her black **identity**, she pursues an interest in Africa. She is also the female character against whom misogynistic attitudes are most often directed. Walter openly questions her intent, as a female, to become a doctor. Her two suitors, George Murchison of the black monied **class** and the African Asagai, are both preoccupied with her attractiveness and are intent on molding her into their conception of the desired female. Partly through the influence of the play's other women, Beneatha learns compassion without any loss of self-assertion.

The dramatic power of *A Raisin in the Sun* has not diminished since its opening on Broadway almost half a century ago. Subsequent productions, such as the twenty-fifth Anniversary Revival at the Roundabout Theater in New York (1986), and the American Playhouse Television version, based on this production (1989), restored some of Hansberry's original material, sharpening its enduring appeal. The play's themes of racial and sexual discrimination, social injustice, the conflict between material needs and moral values, and independence for black peoples worldwide remain relevant, and Hansberry's dramatic ability to lay bare the rich inner life of her characters, balancing despair and hope, anguish and humor, makes the play timeless. Its revival on Broadway in the spring of 2004, with Sean Combs (rap artist Puff Daddy/P. Diddy) in the role of Walter Lee and Phylicia Rashad as Mama, ensures its exposure to a new and diverse audience.

See also Beauty; Black Masculinity; Motherhood

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Rita Bode

## RAPE

Rape has been a major motif in African American **literature**, reflecting the predominance of rape as both a fact and a trope in American culture. Rape was a regular practice within the institution of **slavery**, particularly the rape of black female slaves by white men with power over them. It is not surprising, then, that the **slave narrative** and other early African American literature deal with this reality. Sometimes such interracial rapes are named explicitly as such. More often, in an era when depictions of **sexuality** of all kinds, including sexual **violence**, were unspeakable, such rapes were implied by a narrative "blackout" and the woman's subsequent pregnancy. The term *rape* itself may not have been used in slave narratives and other early accounts of interracial relations; our contemporary understanding of the term as nonconsensual sex, often involving sexual violence, is a recent one. In early U.S. culture, "rape" was one man's theft of a woman's **body** from another man (specifically her father or her husband); rape was a power struggle between men. The man who "owned" the woman—father, husband, or slave master—was seen to have rights over her sexuality, whether or not the woman was an enslaved or a free person. The woman's consent, then, was not seen as a primary issue but was superseded by the will of the man who had property rights over her.

While many early African American writers may condemn what we would today call rape, they are more likely to condemn it as part of a larger system of slavery and white privilege, in which an enslaved woman's ownership of her proper body and her ability (or inability) to consent are always already denied, than to single it out as a specific social ill to be protested. Even so, many explicit and even more implicit rapes appear in the pages of U.S.

literature about slavery, including **William Wells Brown's** *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853) and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), among many other works. Later African American writers, too, return to this earlier **history** of white enslavers raping enslaved black women. Often the reality of the rape of enslaved women by white men serves as a metaphor for what was done to African Americans in the United States; in such literature African Americans may be figured as both victims and children of rape.

**Angela Davis** has argued that rape has not only been a reality in the lives of African Americans; it has also served as a cultural trope, or encapsulating image, for black-white relations in America. Even as white male power was embodied and solidified by the ability to control/dominate black female bodies, there was also emerging “the **myth** of the black rapist,” a myth that had helped to justify slavery but that gained its greatest life after Emancipation. In this American cultural mythology (ironically a reversal of the more prevalent reality of white male rapes of black females), black men innately lusted after white women, whom they would readily rape if they were not kept in check (by white men). Rumors of black men attempting to rape white women abounded. (For example, the famous 1953 lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was instigated by rumors that he had ogled and whistled at a white woman.) Although the actual occurrences of such rapes were almost surely minimal relative to the myth, the myth had tremendous power in inciting fear and in creating the “need” to police black male bodies. Such policing was sometimes legal—for example, many of the Jim Crow laws developed for this reason—and sometimes illegal or extralegal—for example, many lynchings were instigated by the accusation that the black man had raped or sexually abused a white woman. An exemplary novel illustrating the myth of the black rapist is **Richard Wright's** *Native Son* (1940). Bigger Thomas is hailed into this myth and is so afraid of being accused of raping a white woman, Mary Dalton, that he ends up accidentally killing her. In the end, his **death** sentence assuages the outrage aroused by the fantasy of a black man committing sexual violence on a white woman—whereas Bigger's *actual* rape and murder of his black girlfriend Bessie arouses little outrage from the white populace or even from Bigger himself.

Because the myth of the black rapist was used to justify lynchings of black men, antilynching activist women were put in a difficult position on the issue of rape. For example, **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**, one of the most famous antilynching activists, had to at times undermine white women's charges of rape in order to defend black male victims of lynching. Such tensions between black and white women in the women's movement around this issue have persisted. The “Second Wave” feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s partially replicated the racialized trope of rape. While it was very important in bringing about legislation to protect rape victims and prosecute rapists, feminist antirape activism was not always careful enough in disentangling ideological mythologies of **race** from the facts and realities of rape. Susan Brownmiller, for example, in her groundbreaking book *Against Our Will*, inadvertently perpetuates the myth of the black rapist by claiming that black

and underprivileged men may be more likely to rape because more acceptable forms of masculine power are unavailable to them. Such arguments end up unreflectively incorporating racist myths into antirape activism. Furthermore, such Second Wave feminist antirape activism, in singling out rape as a distinct issue, sometimes overlooked interconnections among violence, racism, and economic inequities. So the analysis and protest of conditions that give rise to rape may have been minimized in relation to the call to prosecute rapists and aid rape survivors. Since rape charges have been disproportionately leveled against black men, African American feminists could once again find themselves caught between both sides of the rape issue. Furthermore, enduring U.S. cultural myths of black women (and other women of color) as more promiscuous and/or “tougher” and “harder” than white women have led black women’s charges of rape to be taken less seriously and treated with less legitimacy than white women’s complaints of rape.

Meanwhile, rapes of African American women remain both far too prevalent and at the same time far too invisible in the mainstream U.S. cultural consciousness, and many feel that the rapes of black women (by both black and nonblack men) remain the least prosecuted and the most neglected instances of rape in the United States (and elsewhere). Much of African American literature, particularly in the last half-century, and particularly by women, attempts to rectify this neglect. **Maya Angelou’s** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), **Alice Walker’s** *The Color Purple* (1982), **Toni Morrison’s** *The Bluest Eye* (1970), **Ntozake Shange’s** *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), and **Sapphire’s** *Push* (1996) all powerfully address the effects of rape on black girls and women.

While this entry has focused on the rape of women by men (the most commonly understood notion of the term), “rape” could be understood more generally as any kind of nonconsensual sexualized violence. In this understanding, lynchings, especially those involving castration and/or sodomy (both of which are documented practices in vigilante violence as well as in military and police brutality), could be seen as a kind of rape. Such acts of sexual violence against men of color by authority figures (legitimate or illegitimate) gain particular power metaphorically from their sexist signification as emasculation and castration. Nonconsensual sexual violence, in a variety of forms, including interracial and intraracial, remains rampant. Likewise, both literal and metaphoric rapes remain active tropes in U.S. literature and culture.

*See also* Black Masculinity

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*Deborah Thompson*

## REED, ISHMAEL (1938- )

Ishmael Reed's reputation as a major player in African American literature has been built on writing that spans more than thirty-five years. He has produced a diverse body of work that includes **fiction**, **poetry**, and essays that celebrate all facets of life for black Americans while at the same time satirizing American political, religious, and literary expression.

In satirizing various elements of American life, Reed's own work has received mixed reviews from an eclectic assortment of critics. These critics include authors such as **James Baldwin** and Harold Bloom. In addition, his work has been reviewed in publications such as the *Boston Globe* and the *Saturday Review*.

Reed's work, racy and provocative, attempts to deconstruct Western civilization. Reed is also known for his political activism. Of the many books he has written, the most useful to look at here is *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Not only is *Mumbo Jumbo* controversial, but it is also filled with a mixture of artistic forms that render the text complex. In *Mumbo Jumbo* Ishmael Reed exposes and interrogates the conflict between traditional cultures and modern/Western civilization employing such techniques as voodoo, witchcraft, and **jazz**.

Voodoo (sometimes spelled voodoo, vodou, or voodoo) means God Creator or Great Spirit. However, it has been greatly distorted and misused as a justification for human sacrifices, vampires, dripping blood, and devil worship. Reed uses the characterization of Jes Grew as a **healing** agent for the Negro communities of the 1920s. Hence, Reed emphasizes that voodoo plays a major role in the life of Africans in the diaspora in the portrayal of events, characters, and forms of symbolism throughout the text. Numerous characters in *Mumbo Jumbo* are associated with voodoo rituals. Papa Labas, for example, can be viewed as a "witch doctor" who prepares medicine for ailing African Americans. Departing from Western medicine, Reed construes voodoo with its many spirits as something that is outside of chronological time and has infinite spirits that can be used to heal.

Papa Labas, functioning as a witch doctor, practices hoodoo, a blend of African, Indian, Haitian, and European folkloric mythical systems. He is a voodoo doctor like many others before him who resided in New Orleans, where the Jes Grew antiplague began. Reed presents voodoo as not necessarily religious but as an eclectic mixture of practices that are less rigid and less structured than traditional Western **religion**. According to Lawrence Hogue, voodoo symbolizes flexibility, adaptability, mysteriousness, heterogeneity, and individual creativity. As a result, voodoo has the potential to infiltrate all other major religions and nationalist movements.

Hogue, in his analysis of *Mumbo Jumbo*, posits that Reed “uses jazz aesthetics to undermine instrumental reason and to show how the novel and Western metaphysics are constructs.” As such, difference and absolute truth, among other concepts, do not exclusively belong to European-centered post-modernism. By extension, Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* demonstrates the universality of jazz, which is a creation of African Americans and the first original American music form. *Mumbo Jumbo*, like jazz, is improvisational and fluid. This fluidity allows Reed to create a text that goes beyond a typical Western novel.

Reed, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, attempts to show the significance of reconciling African traditions with the beliefs in the future and power of Jes Grew while incorporating other unorthodox characters. Whereas Western thought characterizes voodoo as foolishness, Reed suggests that voodoo’s traditions are important to reconciling Africans in the diaspora with their historical roots. Jes Grew is also a symbol of African culture and traditions dispersed throughout the diaspora attempting to drive out European ghosts that haunt the minds of Africa’s children. Although the music that carries the healing of Jes Grew sounds different in different parts of the world, it carries the same cure and has the same effect on its people, dancing the dance of liberation.

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## RELIGION

Religion has always been part of the African American experience and hence part of the literary heritage as well. However, demonstrations of both religious expression and allegiance have been contentious. The forcible transport of slaves to America began a process of deculturalization in which the adoption of **Christianity** played its part in the deemphasizing of the slaves' human rights, cultural background, and right of return to Africa.

**Slavery** and its consequences created a Christian **community** of African Americans who sought to detach Christian spirit and **identity** with the racist and ethnophobic attitudes of slave owners and white Christian communities. Ballads and folksongs identify strongly with the exiled tribes of Judah and with the "desert wanderings" of Old Testament heritage. At the same time, other traditions of religious observance survived: the practice of non-Western rituals and the maintenance of a spirit-led "voodoo" heritage among some Haitians and African Americans is one cultural expression of the survival of African religious traditions. The Christian community among African Americans played a key part in the development of the **civil rights movement**, especially under Martin Luther King. Following **Rosa Parks's** memorable act of civil disobedience, women were a key part of this movement and have always had a strong role in African American religious life. However, Christianity has never been the sole monotheistic religion among African Americans; Sylviane A. Diouf's book *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* estimates that from 10 percent to 25 percent of all enslaved Africans shipped to the Americas from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century were Muslims. In 1887 Edmond Blyden published *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, which argued that Islam was a more appropriate religion for African Americans, an idea taken up by many in the twentieth century. This was followed by the Ahmadiyya movement, an Islamic order with roots in nineteenth-century India that began proselytizing in the United States during the 1920s. The Nation of Islam followed, in 1930. Made famous by the **work** of **Malcolm X**, this movement preaches a racially segregationist creed and is highly repressive to women. Malcolm X himself disowned this movement, embracing orthodox Islamic belief. Feminist scholars of African American culture have been careful to distinguish between the free and liberated identities of Islamic black and African American women in general and the very oppressive conditions prevailing for female members of the Nation of Islam.

In recent years, theology from Africa has begun to play a role in the African American religious experience, with writers such as Ernest Ezeogu and Emmanuel Katongale publishing in the West. Theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye have engaged with African religious identity from a feminist perspective. Feminist scholars working in this field have had to engage not merely with the aftereffects of white colonization but with the highly discriminatory legacy of African phallocentrism and the reality that many African women are highly oppressed today.



Women writing of the African American experience in religious terms have used different labels with which to do so. **Womanism** has sought to draw parallels between feminist questions of identity and experience and the African American experience. **Alice Walker's** theory and writing have acted as a significant founding influence.

Religion remains a site of struggle and of conflict, as well as a vibrant part of African American life. It is a contested site of feminist identity but also a potentially joyous and celebratory aspect of African American identity and culture and may be seen as a creative and affirming force.

*See also* Spirituality

*Kerry Kidd*

### **RODGERS, CAROLYN (1945– )**

Born in Chicago, Illinois, on December 14, 1945, Carolyn Marie Rodgers attended the University of Illinois and Chicago's Roosevelt University and holds postsecondary degrees from Chicago State University (B.A.) and the University of Chicago (M.A.). Rodgers published her first volume of **poetry**, *Paper Soul*, in 1968. Since that time she has produced an impressive range of broadsides, collections, and works in other genres (short stories and a play); but Rodgers is primarily recognized for her audacious and insightful poetry on **race**, gender, and the revolutionary politics of the **Black Arts Movement**. Her stinging condemnations of white supremacy, her witty and irreverent critiques of masculinist bias in the Black Nationalist art and politics, and alternately, her unabashed celebration of black male **beauty** alongside her thoughtful explorations of mother-daughter relationships have found a warm reception in the pages of African American and women's **literature** anthologies. The outrageousness, anger, and the liberal use of vulgarity that defined Rodgers's earliest poems were well received by many in the broader literary establishment, even as these elements of her work were criticized within her own black arts **community**. One of Rodgers's most highly acclaimed poems, "The Last MF," is a direct response to those male writers within the Black Arts Movement who condemned her use of expletives as unwomanly and inappropriate, even as they continued to use many of the same words and phrases in their own work.

Rodgers was deeply influenced in her development as a poet by her participation in the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) Writer's Workshop, where she encountered such influential black arts poets as Haki Madhubuti (formerly Don Lee) and **Johari Amini** (formerly Jewel Latimore). Eventually OBAC would change its name to the **Gwendolyn Brooks** Writers' Workshop to reflect that poet's instrumental involvement in Chicago's growing African American poetry community. Another early influence on Rodgers's development was the mentorship of Hoyt W. Fuller. Described by the poet as her "literary father figure," Fuller encouraged Rodgers's

growth as a poet and was a key force, along with Brooks, behind the publication of her first book.

Composed of poems written by Rodgers and selected by Brooks, and with an introduction by Fuller, *Paper Soul* was a critical success that brought increased attention and accolade to the poet and her work. In the months following the publication of this volume, Rodgers was honored with the first Conrad Kent Rivers Memorial Fund Award. Shortly after the appearance of her second book, *Songs of a Blackbird* (1969), the poet was presented with the Poet Laureate Award of the Society of Midland Authors, as well as a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Rodgers's 1975 volume *How I Got Ovah: New and Selected Poems* represents a change in her focus and her perspective. Having experienced her own and other young poets' embrace of and eventual departure from the strident excesses of the black arts aesthetic, Rodgers sets forth in this, the first of two volumes that she published with the mainstream Doubleday Press, to reexamine her relationship to the rigid politics of the Black Arts Movement. In the poems of *How I Got Ovah* Rodgers places special emphasis on the intersections between blackness and womanhood and the way those links open up for her a new understanding of the personal **history** of struggle, survival, and victory embodied in the figure of her mother. The culmination of Rodgers's journey through revolutionary nationalism and into a new understanding of black womanhood is summed up in the closing line from "It Is Deep (don't never forget the bridge that you crossed over on)," in which her mother is the "sturdy Black bridge" that supports her. While Rodgers's black liberation-based consciousness remains firmly in place, some of the less tolerant aspects of the black arts aesthetic (the dismissal of "negroes" as counterrevolutionary adversaries, the rejection of **Christianity** as a tool of white supremacy) have given way, in this poem, to a broader capacity to recognize and honor the diversity of black struggle.

Since *How I Got Ovah*, Rodgers has further expanded her vision for black liberation and consciousness, exploring feminism, Christianity, and **love** as tools for group empowerment, self-awareness, and transcendence. In *The Heart as Ever Green* (1978), Rodgers ponders the nature of truth, transformation, and renewal, using images and impressions from nature to offer a message of hope. *The Heart as Ever Green* was the last volume that Rodgers published with Doubleday. Between 1978 and 1980 she created her own imprint, Eden Press, through which she continues to release collections that record her ever-expanding vision of empowerment and spiritual growth.

In addition to producing her own work, Rodgers remains active in fostering the development of younger writers. She has taught at a number of postsecondary institutions, including Columbia College, University of Washington, Malcolm X Community College, Albany State College, and Indiana University. She has served as a book critic for the *Chicago Daily News* and as a columnist for the *Milwaukee Courier*, and she is a member of the Organization of Black American Culture.

*See also* Black Feminism

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*Ajuan Maria Mance*



## **SALLY HEMINGS**

The United States' national consciousness is embedded with a historical romanticism that spurs most citizens to embrace a messianic optimism. In short, many Americans believe that God blesses, guides, and preserves the American Experiment despite some missteps along the divinely appointed path. Most important, they expect that most past wrongs will eventually be made right. Many Americans turn hostile when parts of that three-part formula are exposed as a lie, which accounts for the critical ice storm that swamped **Barbara Chase-Riboud's** 1979 novel *Sally Hemings*.

The author, who lives in France, raised a largely undesired question: Could a white master hold romantic **love** for a black slave?

The novel, inspired by Fawn Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974), blends imagined dialogue with the heady social scene of eighteenth-century Paris. Most reviews cast the work as bad writing and worse **history**. In interviews, Chase-Riboud acknowledged the scarcity of firsthand reports on Jefferson's and Hemings's love lives. Hemings's papers were burned after her **death**. Jefferson did not write about Sally or the children other than as property, although during his life Richmond journalist Thomson Callendar charged that Jefferson fathered several children by her. In the end, she said the real aim of the work is for Americans to consider the country's "**mulatto**" character. That was a lot to expect for the time.

Two years prior, the **film** version of **Alex Haley's** novel *Roots* (1976), a **slavery-to-freedom** saga of a black **family**, spurred most Americans to acknowledge a horrible slave legacy. Chase-Riboud pushed the public consciousness to move past the widely touted images of raped black slave girls and grapple with consensual, romantic relations between white masters and African slave women. She punched a perennial “hot button”—interracial relationships.

Despite *Sally Hemings's* bestseller status, many in literary circles remain cool toward its merit. The consensus is that the author broke too many rules and leaves the reader confused. Criticisms range from unauthentic dialogue to a convoluted plot to a misrepresentation of Jefferson's racial attitudes.

*Sally Hemings* provokes thought about the real nature of women, **race**, and family, considerations for which most Americans are unprepared. Even in 2004, after genetic evidence has shown what a Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation (TJMF) report dubbed “a strong likelihood” that the third president fathered at least one of Hemings's children, most white Jefferson descendants and scholars do not accept Hemings's descendants as family. “Honorable people can disagree,” TJMF president Daniel Jordan wrote on the organization's Web site.

Still, the notion of romance between a black person and a white person in the midst of the degenerate American slave industry touches a spot in most American hearts. Many people want to believe some small good exists in even the most horrendous circumstances.

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Vincent F. A. Golphin

### **SALT EATERS, THE**

Published in 1980, **Toni Cade Bambara's** first novel concerns the legendary healer Minnie Ransom's attempt to return Velma Henry to some form of health and stability following her attempted suicide. Velma sits with Minnie

Ransom in the center of the Master's Mind, a group of twelve supporters and aides to Ransom, at the Southwest Community Infirmary. The novel's **healing** story, occupying just over two hours of chronological time, fragments into a past and future journey recalling and foretelling Velma's life, Minnie's training, and their connections to other characters inside and out of the peripheral setting of Claybourne, Georgia. At once spiritual, apocalyptic, mysterious, cacophonous, and destabilizing, *The Salt Eaters* offers a unifying epiphany of creation and **community**.

Velma Henry's life is one of devotion to activism within her community. Through time shifts and the dialogue of other characters, one sees Velma's dedication to causes pushing her forward into still other responsibilities that ultimately alienate her from her **family**. Her growing dissatisfaction with her marriage to Obie and the disintegration of their collective **work** at the Academy of the 7 Arts (a community education facility) as well as her recent alleged sabotage of records and files at the nearby nuclear power plant become the latest events in a long litany of tensions taking their toll on Velma. Her growing dissatisfaction with life proves the catalyst for other characters to reflect upon their own lives. Meanwhile, her healing becomes one of Ransom's most difficult because Velma cannot quickly answer the pivotal opening question of the novel, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"

Juxtaposed with Velma's suicidal temperament, other characters populating the novel also speak to the varying degrees of wellness. With their blending of traditional songs, stories, and customs, the Seven Sisters, a multicultural performance troupe including Velma's sister Palma, offer a healthy alternative to racial strife and division. Conversely, a man with a questionable past, Doc Serge, the eccentric administrator of the Infirmary, revels in **self-love** as the source of his strength. Dr. Julius Meadows, however, as the newest doctor at the Infirmary, lacks such strength and stability. Haunted by recurring thoughts of the Welfare Man, the African American male who takes advantage of the women in his life while eschewing responsibility, Meadows must move beyond generalizations of masculinity and blackness in order to find harmony in his **identity**. The wholeness that Campbell, the manager of the Avocado Pit Café, demonstrates affirms the novel's push toward wellness. He sees in the great, thunderous noise that coincides with Velma's healing a sign of Damballah, the god of order and creation. Campbell possesses the clarity that Meadows lacks and toward which Velma aspires.

Through Minnie Ransom's work, Velma comes to see a future filled with challenges greater than the ones already faced. Yet, she accepts the healing and becomes certain of her desire to be well. Though critical commentary notes the difficulty of the novel, that Bambara's work offers important consideration of one of the central questions of **black feminism/womanism**—cannot be denied. *The Salt Eaters* does not resolve the tensions that shape it; rather, it offers readers a meditation on social activism and the necessity of community as the strength of the individual and order as the remedy for chaos.

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F. Gregory Stewart

### SANCHEZ, SONIA (1934– )

Sonia Sanchez is one of the most recognized individuals associated with the **Black Arts Movement**. During that time, Sanchez emerged as a fresh and fierce voice that embraced black speech and sought to tell the truth about the black condition. Both qualities have remained part of Sanchez's work, now spanning more than three decades. She has authored a dozen books of **poetry**, three children's books, and several plays and contributed to or edited more than twenty anthologies. In addition to her literary production, she has traveled the world reciting her poetry and has taught at various universities. In 2000, Sanchez retired from Temple University after teaching there for more than twenty years. Sanchez has three children from two marriages: her daughter, Anita, and her twin sons, Morani Meusi and Mungu Meusi.

Sanchez was born Wilsonia Benita Driver in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 9, 1934, to Lena and Wilson Driver. She had an older sister, Patricia, and later a half brother, Wilson. As a child, she faced tremendous loss. Her mother died when she was a year old. Having lost her mother, Sanchez was raised in Alabama by her grandmother until her **death** five years later.

The death of her grandmother proved to be a significant turn in her life. While her grandmother was alive, Sanchez grew fond of the southern black language she heard her speak and often tried to imitate it. Following her death, Sanchez began to stutter, and verbal communication became difficult and embarrassing. She turned to writing things down as a means of expressing herself. Over the next three years Sanchez continued writing as she and her sister moved between different **family** members and friends.

At the age of nine, Sanchez and her sister moved to Harlem with their father. Although she finally overcame her stutter as a teenager, Sanchez continued writing, and her work was greatly influenced by the vibrant environment of New York City. On the streets she heard an urban black language that was

different from what she had heard in Alabama. Sanchez describes the language she heard as having its own cadence and rhythm, as being hip, smart, and straightforward. As in Alabama, she liked what she heard and would imitate it. Her father, a musician, took her to hear **jazz** and **blues** artists. The impact of the language and music would resonate in her poetry.

Sanchez also encountered a new world of **literature**. She regularly visited the public library and voraciously read book after book, discovering writers such as **Countee Cullen** and **Margaret Walker**. She was shocked and inspired by how many black writers existed. Later, Sanchez stumbled upon the Schomburg Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), which specialized in books by and about black people. She could hardly believe that such a library existed. Here she read W.E.B. Du Bois and **Zora Neale Hurston** for the first time. Although happy to discover the books, Sanchez was upset that such a discovery seemed to be in spite of rather than a result of her education. She had recently graduated from Hunter College, yet she had never heard of these writers. Resentful and angry that her education had not included this **history** and literature, she cried right there in the library.

Experiences such as this were motivation for Sanchez. She has said that poetry was for her a means of protest against the mistreatment and denigration of black women and men. Since her childhood she recognized something was wrong with the way black people were treated, but she did not know how to articulate it. Her involvement with the Congress of Racial Equality during the **civil rights movement** and her participation in the subsequent struggles for Black Power and **Black Nationalism** helped her articulate what she felt was wrong and unjust. On several occasions Sanchez has named **Malcolm X** as an influential figure in her life and work. His forthright and critical views of white America and his counsel to black America were highlighted by the black language that Sanchez had already come to regard as powerful.

In 1955, Sanchez graduated with a degree in political science from Hunter College. She then studied with the poet Louise Bogan at New York University. During the 1960s her poems were published in several leading black journals including *Nommo* and *Negro Digest*. It was in 1969 that her first book of poetry, *Home Coming*, was published. Around the same time she also wrote two plays, *The Bronx Is Next* (1968) and *Sister Son/ji* (1969).

In these works Sanchez brashly criticizes the institutional racism that exploits the contributions and hinders the development of black people in the United States. At the same time she promotes ideals of self-esteem, respect, unity, and **love** in the black **community**. Sanchez addresses the relationship between black women and men, taking issue with sexist characterizations of the struggle for racial justice that were so often offered by male leaders. Her stance was that black women should not settle for secondary status. *The Bronx Is Next* is especially explicit in this regard.

Her subsequent poetry, *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), and plays, *Uh Huh, But How Do It Free Us?* (1973) and *Malcolm/Man Don't Live Here No More* (1972), similarly criticize the oppressive conditions that stifle the intellectual, spiritual,



and economic development of black men and women. In *Love Poems* (1973) Sanchez turned her focus to intimate relationships and episodes in her life. This was a departure from the militant themes but still rooted in promoting the ideals of respect and love in the black community.

In response to much of this work, Sanchez faced criticism for being too confrontational with whites as well as for dragging feminist issues into the black struggle. Some also claimed she was repeating herself without saying anything new. Her supporters embraced her provocative voice and critical content. Many felt that confrontation was a necessary part of the Black Arts Movement.

In addition to the content of her work, Sanchez became known for her use of black language and her live readings. The rhythm and cadence that she heard on the street took center stage in her poetry. For Sanchez, this was the most appropriate language to communicate honestly with her black audience and get to the truth of their history and the oppressive environment they were in. The call and response, singing, and chanting that marked her readings were also integral to the forthright communication that the language afforded her. In her writing, the language was represented through the formal use of abbreviated spellings, dashes, and other devices.

Sanchez's writing, teaching, and activism attracted the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In 1969 she helped to establish the black studies program at San Francisco State College (now University), and she recalls FBI attempts to have her evicted from her apartment because of the curriculum she was teaching. She then joined the newly formed black studies program at the University of Pittsburgh (1969–1970), where she developed a course on black women, believed to be the first of its kind. Subsequent appointments included Rutgers University (1970–1971), Manhattan Community College of the City University of New York (1971–1973), Amherst College (1972–1975), the University of Pennsylvania (1976–1977), and finally, Temple University (1977–2000).

FBI interest in Sanchez was partially due to the perception that she was a Black Nationalist. This perception was heightened after she joined the Nation of Islam in 1972. One of Sanchez's most acclaimed books, *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974), was published while she was a member of the Nation. Described as a spiritual **autobiography**, the collection reflects her involvement with the organization and is a celebration of the evolution of black women. Despite the fact that the Nation expected women to play a background role in the organization, Sanchez maintained her stance of equal involvement for black women and men. Knowing that her beliefs were in constant conflict, and that some in the organization did not support her as a writer, she left the Nation in 1975.

The timing of Sanchez's departure from the Nation coincided with the decline of the Black Arts Movement. Despite these apparent disruptions, Sanchez remained active and continued to write and teach. *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984) was awarded the American Book Award from the Before

Columbus Foundation in 1985 and was followed by *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987). Her recent work includes *Does Your House Have Lions?* (1997), which was nominated for NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) Image and National Book Critics Circle Awards; *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums: Love Poems* (1998), which was dedicated to slain rapper Tupac Shakur; and *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Collected Poems* (1999).

Sanchez has acknowledged that her earlier writing was aggressive but that it reflected her anger and growing consciousness at the time. Over the years, as her views changed, so did her work. Perhaps not as confrontational as before, her work remains a means of protest against what she believes is unjust and has grown to connect the problem of racism and sexism with environmental concerns, war, and other global issues. Sanchez is still driven by the love of language and humanity that helped forge her voice decades ago.

See also Baraka, Amiri; Giovanni, Nikki

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*Raquel Rodriguez*

### **SANDERS, DORI (1935?- )**

Dori Sanders was born where she still lives, on one of York County, South Carolina's largest black-owned farms, established by her father in 1915. The daughter of a school principal and farmer and a housewife, she was the eighth of ten children. Her father always made sure the children had reading matter for the times between chores, and they also enjoyed making up and telling one another stories. As they grew up, most of the children went off to be educated and did not return, but she and one brother remained to **work** on the farm. She felt she was an underachiever but truly loved the farm work she continues to do during the season. During the off season she was living in Maryland with a sister when an employer saw her jottings and encouraged her to write. Motivated by this and other friends, she wrote a novel, which was not accepted, but the publisher encouraged her to submit further writings, and they accepted and published *Clover* in 1990. Published for adults, this accessible novel won excellent reviews, attained bestseller status, and was widely read by young adults as well.

*Clover Hill* is a gifted, strong-willed, ten-year-old rural African American child whose widowed father abruptly remarries a college friend, an educated white woman. On their wedding day, the newlyweds are in an automobile accident, and her beloved father dies. Her stepmother, Sara Kate, declares her intention to remain and raise her new stepdaughter, even though Clover's relatives distrust Sara Kate. Told by Clover in a convincing vernacular voice, the novel has periods of humor and poignancy as the two wrangle over different foodways and have other misunderstandings as they try to forge a **family**. **Race** is one issue here, but other obstacles include city versus country and the odd situation of strangers sharing a common grief and learning to respect each other.

Sanders's second novel is *Her Own Place* (1993), about the life of Mae Lee Barnes, a hardworking, determined mother of five who is eventually abandoned by her husband. She buys her own farm with money she earns working at a munitions plant during World War II, plus a loan from her parents, and raises her children to be successful, as the **South** she knows changes around her. After her retirement, Mae Lee becomes the first black volunteer hospital auxiliary member, and there are humorous moments as the old volunteers adjust to the new. Throughout, Mae Lee Barnes shows strength and shrewdness as she pursues her dreams for her family. Because the heroine is a mature woman, this is generally considered an adult rather than a young adult novel. Sanders has also written a popular cookbook, *Dori*

*Sanders' Country Cooking: Recipes and Stories from the Family Farm Stand* (1995), which combines family recipes and anecdotes with great charm.

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Susan L. Golden

### SAPPHIRE (Author) (1950– )

Born Ramona Lofton at Ft. Ord in 1950, Sapphire spent her early years moving with her military **family** to other bases in California, Texas, and Germany. After her parents divorced, she lived in Philadelphia and Los Angeles. She spent the early 1970s studying dance and identifying with the counterculture. After moving to New York in 1977, she graduated from City College and began teaching in various **literacy** programs for children and adults. For years, she indefatigably gave legendary (and controversial) readings at lesbian and black performance spaces, including Gap Tooth Girls and the Nuyorican Poets Café. In 1994 she received the MacArthur Foundation Scholarship in **poetry** and won first place in *DownTown Magazine's* Year of the Poet III Award. She received an M.F.A. from the writing program at Brooklyn College, where she studied with Susan Fromberg Shaeffer and Allen Ginsberg, in 1995. She lives in New York City and is working on a second novel.

Important strands of American ideology—especially an abiding faith in the individual-in-**community's** power to construct a self-thread through Sapphire's life and work. Hitchhiking to San Francisco at twenty-one, she began writing and dancing and changed her name. Traces of this “hippie” phase linger in her work, as does the exhilaration of resisting America's war culture. The **Black Arts Movement** and nascent feminist theater facilitated her escape from the denials of 1950s America. Her now rare *Meditations on the*

*Rainbow* (1987) deliberately evokes the title, colors, and experimental monologues of Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*, which Sapphire saw in progress. The "rainbow" on Sapphire's cover, however, is made of barbed wire, and many of the colors refer not to skin but to sexual practices. (The book is dedicated to "...the homosexuals, lesbians, queers, faggots, dykes, fairies, zami queens, jaspers, wimmen lovers and bulldaggers of the rainbow.") While Shange's characters find god in themselves "and love her fiercely," Sapphire politicizes and sexualizes that vision in "black," chanting desire for a volcanic earth goddess, in whose womb "god / is / the / clit / a / burning / red / projectile / amidst / the / damp / earth, / secretions / of / creation."

Haunted, driven by sexual betrayals, the early voice cannot forget or forgive. Without abating the angry energy of *Meditations on the Rainbow, American Dreams* (1994) places Sapphire's conflicted self within a particular family and social **history**, where ambition twists the dreamers. The abusive past of black/white and even black/black relationships entangles them. She sees that the split incestuous father—community leader by day/child rapist at night may himself have been abused or abandoned, that America has been built on "**rape** culture." Split between the hallucinatory comforts of the *Donna Reed / Father Knows Best* mind-set and the abuse in her own family, the poet's voice inhabits other victims in order to articulate their /her horror. "Mickey Was a Scorpio" sets a Disney fantasy against the sensations of a young girl being raped by her father. "Wild Thing" imagines the world of the young men convicted of raping the Central Park jogger in 1989, when few defended their humanity. (In light of the dismissal of their convictions in 1996, her poem now looks more prescient than sensational.) At the time, however, Jessie Helms made Sapphire a celebrity when he denounced her poem in the battle over National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) funding of artists' works; John Frohnmayer defended her work and lost his job.

Sapphire's first novel, *Push* (1996), shows her progress on several fronts. Her \$500,000 advance from Knopf and selection by the Book of the Month Club occasioned both admiring and critical comments. Her story of a child almost erased by abuse also provoked praise and blame. Most critics were captivated by the voice—ignorant, terrified, rebellious, dissociated, witty, evolving—of Precious Jones, a fourteen-year-old, illiterate, poor, black mother of two children by her own father, who manages to dream and laugh in a wasteland of contempt. Sapphire has emphasized that *Push* is Precious's story; its success is the uneven but powerful rendition of that voice. Patterned on a composite of her students, Precious *lives* for Sapphire; she is a more convincing character than her abusive parents, or even the good teacher, Blue Rain, whom **Cheryl Clarke** has called "the Shug Avery" of *Push* (1996). Indeed, Sapphire both celebrates and rewrites **Alice Walker's** *The Color Purple*. Rain reads the book to her struggling students and points out its "fairy tale ending." The students' journals echo Celie's desperate letters to God, but Precious's world is meaner than Celie's, and she gets no inheritance from her "real" father, except a positive HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) test. She is still homeless, and her children still spring from incest,

though in her son's **beauty**, she says, "I see my own." Her acquisition of literacy has enlarged her world, but the ending hardly guarantees triumph, or even survival, though, crucially, *she* writes it.

In *Black Wings and Blind Angels* (1999), Sapphire takes up earlier poetic themes differently. Her "Breaking Karma" series continues to articulate ceremonies of change; the "Gorilla in the Mist" poems and "Neverland" expand the contradictions of **black masculinity** in the grotesquely funny voices of, for instance, the penile implant nurse, the white racist cop, and Michael Jackson. In "False Memory Syndrome," she reverses her history, trying on agency. In poems like "My Father Meets God," she imagines the **freedom** of forgiveness. In "A Window Opens" and "Leave the Lights On," she is not erasing her life as sexworker, lesbian, or celibate woman but announcing another controversial change: loving men. Likewise, she experiments with form, resisting in "Villanelle" and "Sestina," producing in "Dark Sores" and "Today," tumbling into a new voice in "Broken." In some ways she has finished—she has made it; in others, her journey has just begun.

*See also* Lesbianism

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*Susan Nash*

### **SAPPHIRE (Stereotype)**

Alongside **Mammy**, the kindly and nurturing servant, and **Jezebel**, the alluring seductress, Sapphire is one of the most widely recognized and rigorously analyzed **stereotypes** associated with U.S. black womanhood. Unlike Mammy, the Sapphire label has no readily associated image. She is, however, readily identifiable by her manner. Just as the Mammy's characteristic contentment and subservience are rooted in her origins in the white antebellum household, so too does the Sapphire stereotype depend on the circumstances through which she was first introduced to the American public.

The Sapphire stereotype takes its name from the highly popular character featured on the groundbreaking television series *Amos 'n' Andy*. The first U.S. television program with an all-black cast, *Amos 'n' Andy* was based on the popular and long-lived radio show of the same name. First broadcast to listeners on March 19, 1928, on WMAQ in Chicago, the program was created by Freeman Gosden and Charles Corell. A pair of white comic actors, Gosden and Corell played the title characters, using an exaggerated and mocking version of southern black dialect. The television version of *Amos 'n' Andy* premiered on CBS in June 1951 and was broadcast weekly for two years. The series was withdrawn from the network in 1953, due to the combined influence of African American advocacy groups who objected to the stereotyped representations of black men and women and white advertisers, many of whom were reluctant to put their support behind a program with an all-African American cast.

The *Amos 'n' Andy* television program features the antics and misadventures of the Uncle Tom-like Amos Jones and the unpredictable Andy Brown, his friend and business partner. Their associates included the unscrupulous Lawyer Brown, the slow-witted janitor Lightnin', the scheming George "Kingfish" Stevens, and Sapphire Stevens, his wife. Played by actress Ernestine Wade, Sapphire entertained viewers with her antagonistic manner and the pointed insults that she directed at her on-screen mate. In her exchanges with Kingfish, she was sharp-tongued and overbearing. Her well-honed wit was most often channeled into put-downs and reprimands directed at her husband and his questionable schemes.

In the years after television's *Amos 'n' Andy* ceased production, Sapphire's name, and its association of her persistent efforts to restrain her husband's behavior, came to symbolize black women's perceived efforts to control or emasculate black men. Today Sapphire is a derogatory label, applied to those African American women whose assertiveness, wit, resistance, or dissent are perceived as infringing on or eroding black male dominance and power.

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*Ajuan Maria Mance*

## SASSAFRASS, CYPRESS & INDIGO

Ntozake Shange wrote *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, her first novel, in 1982. Her narrative account of three black women artists is interspersed with cooking and **healing** recipes and general observations like the one that opens the book: that the moon can fall from the mouth of a woman who “knows her magic.” Shange dedicates the book to all women in struggle, continuing the themes of her “choreopoems”—genre-blurring works of **drama**—into the medium of narrative **fiction**. But while *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* presents seven different women’s voices reading/dancing/singing a dozen poems, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1976) focuses on three sisters, named after natural dyes by their mother, Hilda Effania, a prominent weaver in Charleston, South Carolina. The novel form lends itself well to in-depth portrayals of characters’ sensibilities, their relationships, and their struggles, but while Shange uses this form, she also transforms it with her inimitable, innovative style.

Shange has said that when she writes, she is thinking of creating books or performances that can benefit young black girls. She wants to provide them with more artistic rainbows, and she does this with Indigo’s seemingly magical talent. It is significant that the youngest of the three sisters, Indigo, is the first perspective to be developed. Uncle John gives her his fiddle when she tells him the sad (to her) news that she has been forbidden to carry her doll and best friend, Miranda, out of the house anymore. When she protests that she does not know how to play the fiddle, Uncle John tells her that she does and that she should play something for her doll, Miranda, to “call her out” with her music since she cannot be reaching for her doll anymore. Indigo teaches herself to play the instrument, refusing the lessons her Mama offered. At first, she produces “noise” so offensive the neighbors complain. Eventually, however, she develops a sound of her own, a potent art that enralls adolescent boys and heals an old man. As a girl just beginning to menstruate, Indigo marks a key turning point in refocusing childhood imagination into creative expression.

Allusions to the **ancestor** through the repeated phrase “the slaves who are ourselves” ties together the arts of all four women: Hilda’s weaving,



Sassafrass's textile arts, Cypress's dancing, and Indigo's fiddle-playing. The ancestors helped Indigo with her music, we learn, and they are behind the other women as well. As Sassafrass and Cypress leave home, their stories are interspersed with letters from Hilda Effania. Cypress's dancing career resembles Shange's in some ways, as she moves to New York and learns to accept her **body** for the **beauty** it is, the power of her legs and buttocks as a dancer of her own style. Sassafrass finally untangles herself from her musician-lover Mitch, pouring honey down his saxophone and symbolically freeing herself to do her own art. The novel ends with all four women back in South Carolina for the birth of Sassafrass's baby. Indigo, however, has moved out of Charleston and into Aunt Haydee's "tabby hut." She is not just interested in **folklore**, as her mother thinks; she has become "the folks," dancing with ancestral men who came out of the sea. The sisters' stories are like the **blues**, as the many allusions to blues music suggest: open, not closed, incomplete, longing, laughing, and all at the same time.

Arlene Elder states that in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, Shange has grounded this tripartite coming-of-age story in African American cultural inheritances, not only in the content but also in the form of the novel. There are overt communal gestures to include the reader, as in the recipe "If Your Beloved Has Eyes for Another."

Orality is also a trait of the narrative, as in Sassafrass's poem about a "rooted" blues with some ripening berries "happenin'" inside. There is vivid description of Cypress's dance movements, not only in her rehearsals and performances with her troupe, "The Cushites Returned," but also when she is just moving around her apartment by herself. The richness of imagery is not, however, without historical focus. Elder notes that Shange's novel emphasizes a post-civil rights setting since it is "paradoxically reflective . . . of the illusion of political liberation, the problematic of sexual freedom, and the reality of Black female bonding" (136). However, while acknowledging the disillusionments of the post-civil rights era, the novel does not end with its protagonists in a state of alienation; rather, they are centered in their artistic processes, with no guarantees of security but with no boundaries either. Shange's work breaks new ground even as it draws from old traditions.

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Sharon Jessee and Fayme Perry

## SCHOMBURG LIBRARY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY BLACK WOMEN WRITERS

The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (1988), a thirty-volume series edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in collaboration with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and Oxford University Press, demonstrates the talent and scope of forty-five black women writers whose work revealed and defied the racial and gender oppression of their cultural climate. Each work includes an introduction by a prominent literary expert in the field. Feminist in its goals, the series challenges previous beliefs that little had been written by African American women in the nineteenth century. Indeed, black women's writing experienced a particularly prolific period between 1890 and 1910; however, much of that work had become inaccessible to late-twentieth-century readers and literary scholars. Out of print and relegated to shelves in rare book collections, these buried works taken collectively suggest that African American women published more in the last decade of the nineteenth century than African American male writers had in the latter half of the century. In total the series includes seven volumes of **fiction**, three volumes of essays, eleven biographies, and nine books of **poetry**.

In the early 1980s, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., inspired by the discovery of **Harriet E. Wilson's** novel *Our Nig* (1859), began working with several scholars, research assistants, and librarians to create a bibliography of African American women's writing published before 1910. The decision to locate and reprint many of these works as a "library" became possible through the assistance of the Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture, which held several of the texts in its own collection. The thirty-volume set contains previously rare texts, such as **Amelia E. Johnson's** *The Hazeley Family* (1894) and *Clarence and Corinne* (1890), **Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins's** *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1895), **Ann Plato's** *Essays* (1841), and several obscure women's **slave narratives**. The series also includes recovered works by well-known African American women writers, such as the most complete collection of **Phillis Wheatley's** poetry and letters, the first complete edition of **Frances E. W. Harper's** poetry, and three magazine novels by **Pauline Hopkins** that had never been published beyond their appearance in nineteenth-century periodicals. Several seminal works published between 1890 and 1910 are also reprinted here, including **Anna Julia Cooper's** *A Voice from the South* (1892), Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), **Paul Laurence Dunbar's** short stories, and Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900).

The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers strengthens both the African American and African American women's literary traditions, interwoven legacies founded by the poet Phillis Wheatley with her 1773 publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. For decades feminist scholars have attempted to trace a fuller tradition between Wheatley's groundbreaking verse and the rich and diverse literary works by African American women of the twentieth century and beyond. The

resurrected texts included in the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers allow us a much broader understanding of both traditions, as well as of black women writers' significant contribution to the study of American **literature**.

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*Elizabeth Armistead Lemon*

### SENNA, DANZY (1970– )

Danzy Senna has quickly established herself in literary and academic circles for candidly and intelligently tackling contemporary issues of **race** and **identity**. In interviews, Senna calls our attention to the "new **mulatto**," the one who has emerged in America's popular culture as "exotic," "in," "hot," and "improved." But Senna does not embrace this pop idea as easily as the populace; she dismisses stylish notions of racial identity as simplistic and incapable of addressing the complexity that is human, a complexity that Senna reveals through the development of strong female characters. Her novels displace what she calls pseudoscientific "one-drop" notions of race that attempt to define personal identity based on a drop of blood. Her conception of race is instead as much about one's **history**, experience, and consciousness as it is about one's color, an idea she credits to the Black Power movement. Senna creates female characters who face difficult dilemmas about race, rather than gender, and in this way subordinates feminist concerns to concerns about race.

Senna was born in Boston in 1970, the daughter of a black Mexican father, writer Carl Senna, and a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant mother, poet Fanny Howe, both of whom were activists in the **civil rights movement**. Having been born biracial and raised bicultural, Senna brings to her writing personal experiences of growing up in a racially conflicted 1970s urban American society, and this lends a tangible authenticity to her writing. While Senna has always considered herself black, this is not because of the one-drop rule but rather because of her own and her parents' consciousness. She points out that

in Boston in 1975 “mixed” was not an option: People were either black or white, there was no in between, and she *chose* black. Senna admits that in her youth her thinking was a product of that dichotomy; she had even gone so far as to think of those who identified themselves as mixed as being irresolute. As a woman who identifies herself as black and yet is frequently mistaken for being white, she has found herself simultaneously inside and outside the boundaries of the racial dichotomy that exists in America. As such she has had the strange experience of being “gray” in a world that thinks only in “black” and “white.” Because of this precarious positioning, Senna grew up privy to conversations that are generally limited to exclusively white audiences. In this way she has described herself as feeling like a “spy” and both unfortunate and fortunate to hear talk that usually goes on behind closed doors.

Senna’s characters Birdie and Cole, in her first novel, *Caucasia* (1998), are children who also find themselves growing up in a world that seeks to construct their identity for them and limit it to a one-dimensional racial category. The two are sisters, the daughters of a black father and white mother, like Senna, who also happen to be intellectuals and activists for civil rights. The autobiographical elements become clear at different moments, but the story is not a memoir. Senna says she likes to think of her narrators as cousins, that is, **family** but not immediate family, and she likes to present what could have happened in her own “story” but did not. The bond between sisters is in some ways celebrated in Birdie and Cole as they share something of a “twin’s” language: Elemenó. But while the girls are presented as so close that they create their own private form of communication, their relationship is not without complication. Birdie appears white to the outside world, whereas Cole appears black, and despite their sisterly bond, this color difference does not make them sisters in the world outside of Elemenó. In this way race supplants gender as their distinguishing characteristic.

Senna published *Caucasia* in 1998 when she was only twenty-eight years old. Her second book, *Symptomatic*, published in 2004, also confronts issues of racial identity through strong female characters, but it is unlike *Caucasia* in many respects. Senna describes the book as coming from her subconscious—she says she went into a sort of dream state while writing it—and more psychological than her first book, which she describes as social. While her debut novel might be called a coming-of-age tale, her second is more of a psychological thriller. Senna said she wanted to write something more hard-edged and minimalist after *Caucasia*. Since her adult character in *Symptomatic* is a woman living in New York who becomes the obsession of another woman, Senna had a greater opportunity to address head-on the difficulty of “**passing**” for white in a way that was not realistic for Birdie in *Caucasia*.

Senna received her B.A. from Stanford University and her M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of California, Irvine. *Caucasia* won the Book-of-the-Month Club’s Stephen Crane First Fiction Award, the American Library Association’s Alex Award, was listed as a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of the Year, and one of *School Library Journal*’s best books of the year for

young adults. It was nominated for both the Orange Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Prize. Senna received a 2002 Whiting Writer's Award. She currently holds the Jenks Chair of Contemporary American Letters at the College of the Holy Cross and lives in New York City.

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*Deirdre Fagan*

## SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE

*Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) was the last of **Zora Neale Hurston's** novels to be accepted for publication. It is distinctive because it is a narrative built primarily around a cast of white characters. It is also a noteworthy text because, except for *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), it most obviously addresses the sociopolitical limitations placed on women in early twentieth-century America. The female protagonists—black Janie in *Eyes* and white Arvay in *Seraph*—are poor women who struggle to identify and establish **identity** in a male-dominated world.

Marriage is introduced early in *Seraph on the Suwanee* as one of the few options available to a poor woman. The arrival of Jim Meserve in Arvay's hometown forces the question as he is determined that he will marry Arvay. The situation goes from interesting to disturbing when Jim "**rapes**" Arvay under the cover of her favorite retreat, the huge mulberry tree that up to this point has been symbolic of her youthful innocence. This is where Jim takes that innocence away. It is problematic for many readers that the "rape" is romanticized rather than depicted as the violent act that rape is. Arvay then

marries Jim without further protest. The child born nine months later, Earl, was never quite right, perhaps Hurston's way of personifying the destructive act of rape and of a society that allows the Jim Meserves ("serve me"?) of the world to brutalize women.

A number of critics note the constant suggestion of **violence** in Jim's determination to establish his power over Arvay: putting turpentine in her eye to "cure" her of her "fits"; raping her in the one place where she had felt safe; and tormenting her with the rattlesnake, knowing her deathly fear of snakes. The first episode was purely violent; however, the other two acts demonstrate the merging of **sexuality** with violence and suggest the man's attempt to totally subdue the woman.

Jim gives the impression that his primary concern is to show how much he loves and wants to take care of Arvay, but it soon becomes clear that all of his actions are self-serving and are aimed at binding Arvay to him. He tries to convince her that a woman needs a man to take care of her because a woman cannot think on her own. In return, the woman should constantly praise the man for these efforts. Because Arvay does not (cannot?) do so, Jim paints her as a failed wife and mother—the traditional roles of a woman. When Jim's act of bravado with a rattlesnake backfires and Arvay, frozen in her fear, fails to help him get free, Jim leaves her with the pronouncement that two people are not really married until they reach the same point of view—meaning his, of course. Jim goes to the coast to live on his boat, and Arvay is left to consider her options.

The ending of the novel leaves many questions unanswered. When Arvay decides to go to Jim on his boat and resume her position as his wife on his terms, some say that she weighed her options and made a choice, choosing to be subordinate to Jim in the institution of marriage. Others interpret Arvay's action as Hurston's way of showing that a woman entering into marriage has to relinquish herself for the sake of her husband's sense of security, thereby affording her no real options within that institution. The main question one might ask regarding the ending of the novel is, "If a 'seraph' is a protecting angel, who is the seraph in this novel, Jim or Arvay?" If it is Jim, then the oppressive condition of patriarchy is preserved. Ironically, if it is Arvay, then the oppressive condition of patriarchy is still preserved.

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*Johnnie M. Stover*

## SERMON TRADITION

The African American sermon tradition, an eloquent art form, has generated a richly varied and distinct voice in and out of the church. Originating in the infamous years of American **slavery**, the black preacher's sermon has a characteristic **history** of serving as a testament to fundamental faith, social responsibility, and individual accountability.

The ministerial vernacular has produced a sermonic structure marked by rich flexibility within defined standards. Black preachers mount the pulpit as storytellers, singers, actors, and religious and social activists. Despite historical changes in the church in dress, music, and public activism, the gospel message has remained steadfast in its impassioned adherence to biblical text and hyperbolic metaphor. Early-twentieth-century sermons reflect contemporary homilies. There is typically a vision of God who stands at the mountaintop of heaven and who tosses the devil and his sinners into the depths of hell.

The sermon can be readily divided into a series of characteristics, as identified by the folklorist Gerald L. Davis: The preacher clarifies that the day's message is inspired by God and is not the preacher's personal testimony; the sermon is founded on a biblical passage; and the main message often includes anecdotal testimony, homiletical musicality, and a closing statement intended to inspire the congregants toward self-reflection. The sermon, delivered in a jazzlike improvisational mode, relies on rhythmically sophisticated statements enforced with repetitions, long pauses, shifts in tone and pitch, and musical scores. The minister's sermonic narrative is punctuated with moans, chants, singing, and other voice inflections, while the message engages an audience energized by signs of dance, arm waving, and amen shouting. The homily is deemed to be practical and accessible, to incarnate religious abstraction.

The African American sermon tradition originated in the days of slavery, offering a welcomed voice for salvation and social change. Services were communal and held in informal settings when time and opportunity permitted. Richard Allen, a slave for decades before the Civil War, became the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. As a slave, Allen held a church meeting at the **home** of his master where he preached to other slaves on "Thou are weighed in the balance and found wanting." His master, who attended the service, converted to Methodism and declared slavery to be wrong. Another pioneering nineteenth-century black preacher was the Episcopalian minister Alexander Crummell. After twenty years as a missionary in Liberia, he returned to Washington, D.C., where he preached that the church should act as a foundation for not only worship but social service as well. Crummell's topics emphasized human destruction and restoration by the hand of an almighty God. Crummell served his congregation in both words and deeds; he went on to establish numerous charitable institutes. This same tradition in which Crummell and other early church leaders stressed moral guidance has continued with those like Peter Gomes, who in 1974 became the

first black preacher to become the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard University.

Women have long served in the evolution of the sermon tradition, influencing the pulpit from the earliest days of slavery in America. These spirited female voices have injected the practice of preaching with an articulation that both followed the prescribed male oration delivery and custom and struggled to gain an acceptance of the female presence and oration at the pulpit. Women have often sermonized on the twin towers of spirit and social responsibility. Two central themes have emerged from this long history of female sermons: that women share the same religious faith and calling to the ministry as professed by their male counterparts and that women enjoy a divine right to ascend to the pulpit to preach about religious and social issues. As noted in *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850–1979*, one fundamental aspect of the female sermon tradition has been the recurrent theme on the authority of the female preacher. Leora Ross and R. H. Harris, both in 1926, were the first women preachers to audio record their sermons for wider audiences and posterity.

From the codified and recognizable form of religious witness from the pulpit, the black preacher has migrated to the streets, assembly halls, rallies, schools, and the public airwaves to create a dialogue for change within the social context. The popular message of preparing congregants for a promised land has at times been transformed into a rhetoric directed at social transformation.

One of the most influential trends in sermon history is the electronic message delivered via radio and television. These ubiquitous media have become major outlets for the gospel message. Television broadcasts abound with Christian soldiers marching into viewers' homes, delivering faith and requesting donations. The preacher turned televangelist has adopted the skills of an actor to broadcast messages to a wide audience of faithful.

The sermon rhetoric has also transcended church walls with an often emotive, even radical, rhetoric targeted toward sociopolitical change. This voice, rising to national debate, explores **race** relations, politics, human rights, and national leadership. Martin Luther King, Jr., **Malcolm X**, and Cornel West, in particular, have taken the pulpit to the streets to influence a world assembly. King's eloquent "I Have a Dream" (1963) and "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) balance his strong Christian religious background and his polished oratory skills to argue eloquently for equal rights for black Americans. Malcolm X, in contrast, was a Muslim who in "The Ballot or the Bullet" (1964) describes his role as a Black Nationalist **freedom** fighter. Cornel West weaves together in the traditional fabric of the church threads of transcendentalism, socialism, and pragmatism and lectures on moral authority from the pulpit, in the classroom, and in such books as *Race Matters* (1993).

The sermon has played an important role in **literature**, often with a realistic tone that reflects actual church sermonizing. Works by **James Baldwin**, **Ralph Ellison**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, **James Weldon Johnson**, and others include an admixture of black religious biblical fervor and anecdotal passages



dressed in interactive sounds, shifting tones, and culturally compelling rhythms of the preacher's voice and congregation response. Johnson's acclaimed *God's Trombones* (1927) offers a series of seven sermons in verse form in which he pays homage to the "old-time Negro preacher." Johnson's fictional verse reflects with authenticity the tone and message heard in Sunday sermons. These addresses are highly charged with extended metaphors and abstractions. In Johnson's "Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon," God, sitting on his throne and surrounded by a band of angels, summons **Death** to the side of a woman lying in mortal pain.

African American sermonic rhetoric has evolved as a dynamic and improvisational oratory form with recognizable differences ranging from **religion**, denomination, sect, parish, and location. From the small Baptist church in the **South** to the Islam mosque in the North, the religious message varies in style and content. But despite variations in outward trappings, it is the preacher, flamboyant and spirited, who stands as a hub of a wheel of celebration and witness.

*See also* Christianity

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*Michael D. Sollars*

### SEXUALITY

The representation of black female sexuality since the nineteenth century has always been constructed as a binary opposite to white women. On the whole, such portrayals of sexuality have been made hypervisible, and also pathologic, within dominant discourses on sexuality. Such discursive portrayals have had effects on the lived experiences of various black communities in the United States. It would not be erroneous to state that to date there has not been a historically specific analysis on black female sexuality in the United States. It is important to inquire as to the reasons behind these silences. Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of absence. Hegemonic

discourses tend to equate the black female **body** within images of deviant sexuality. The task ahead of black female scholars—social scientists, historians, literary critics—is to examine the reasons behind these silences and to find discursive ways to address these silences.

The nineteenth century saw European colonization of Africa being undertaken on a large scale. The **history** of the representation of black female sexuality in the Western imagination can be traced to this time period, with Europe's contact with people from the African continent. Sander Gilman has examined how, in the iconography of the period, the prostitute was equated with the black female through the image of the Hottentot Venus—a black female from Africa. The Hottentot Venus most represented in Western discourses was Sarah Bartman, who was captured from South Africa. She was crudely exhibited and objectified by the European public and the scientific **community** because of what was regarded as unusual aspects of her physiognomy, her genitalia and buttocks. These were regarded as evidence of her primitive sexual appetites. Thus, the black female body was seen as antithetical to the white body and assigned to the lowest position on the human scale. By the end of the nineteenth century, disciplinary scholarship in the various social and scientific fields—anthropology, public health, biology, and psychology—concluded scientifically that the black female embodied the notion of uncontrolled sexuality. But there were also other sociopolitical events that made it possible for such a scientific conclusion. There was a fear among European elites, at this time, of sexually transmitted diseases; high rates of these diseases among black women were used to equate corrupt and deviant sexuality with the female body. Moreover, Western colonization in the nineteenth century also saw attempts by the Europeans to codify and control non-white sexuality, defined as the “other,” within a framework of deviancy.

The nineteenth century also saw issues of citizenship rights of nonenslaved blacks being debated in the United States. Racial and sexual differences legitimized why blacks would be denied full franchise to citizenship. Ideologically, it was argued that blacks were disenfranchised due to their unrestrained sexuality, specifically that of black women. To a large extent, in order to maintain white superiority, sexual difference between blacks and whites had to be maintained. **Slavery** was also justified by using a range of images of the sexually deviant black body. **Stereotypes**, also made possible by biological notions of essential difference, allowed justification of the enslavement, **rape**, and sexual abuse of black women by white men and the lynching of black men. Moreover, as African American women were considered property, they were denied social, political, and legal rights. What is surprising to many African American feminist scholars is how black women, under slavery, were able to devise ways of addressing **identity** by asserting a positive attitude toward their sexuality.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the binary opposition between black and white female sexuality was buttressed by the Victorian ideology. White women were cast as chaste, virtuous, and sexless and positioned in opposition to black women, who were considered impure and sexually promiscuous.

The middle-class American public considered the sexuality of blacks in urban centers and the new immigrants as undermining the moral values of the country. The dominant ideology of the Cult of True Womanhood always excluded black women. By the late nineteenth century, despite the fact that slavery had been abolished, black women reformers were engaged in strategizing ways through which they could rework dominant stereotypes regarding their sexuality that had been used to justify rape. It was, after all, not a simple method of reclaiming those characteristics of virtuous female sexuality.

One has to keep in mind that white female sexuality also worked in ways that undermined the black subject, both male and female. One of the important feminists of this period, **Ida B. Wells-Barnett**, drew attention to the connection between sex and politics and the reason behind state-sanctioned lynching and murder of black men. Despite the franchise given by the American state to blacks, they were denied the means to protect that right. Rape was construed as any interaction between white women and black men, and the state sanctioned the lynching and conviction of black men on the grounds that the sexualities of white women had to be protected. The black women's club movement has to be seen as also involved in the antilynching movement. Hazel Carby draws attention to the fact that the representation of black female sexuality was central to how these clubs operated. The clubs also focused on the fact that white women were to be made aware of their complicity in the oppression of black women.

By the early twentieth century, black women reformers changed their approach to how they engaged with dominant discourses on black female sexuality. A public silence regarding black sexuality was promoted. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has argued that such a strategy was undertaken in the hope that by doing so it would be possible to promote Victorian notions of morality to describe the sexuality of black women. By portraying a supermoral black woman, it was hoped that these images would enable the inner lives of black women to be protected from the dominant negative public discourses. This would allow black women to gain more respectability and justice and subsequently create opportunities for all black women. But this was not a very successful strategy. It did not end the negative stereotyping of black women. Moreover, middle-class women were involved in policing the behaviors of poor and working-class women on behalf of the race. But most important, what was seen as problematic was in the fact that by refusing to engage in ways to challenge dominant discourses on black sexuality, the politics of silence disempowered black women to articulate and describe their own sexualities.

To a large extent, this silence could be explained by the fact that the early twentieth century in the Western world saw the primitivist movement: a fascination with the exotic primitive. Black women were seen as sexually exotic other. Silence was accompanied by the fact that sexuality was displaced onto another terrain—mostly music, notably the **blues**. The early blues singers, who were from the working classes, were able to reclaim a certain

element of sexual subjectivity. Even as the image of the supermoral black woman was being written to counterengage women's sexuality, the blues singers defied and exploited those stereotypes. But neither of these two strategies was effective in dismantling the dominant discourses on black female sexuality. For that matter, black women were unable to successfully gain control of how their sexuality was to be portrayed.

Despite the fact that the socioeconomic conditions of black women have changed, a silence still envelopes their sexuality. Not only do black women not have a space from within which they can articulate their sexuality, but black feminist theorists are also unable to do the same. Black churches and black colleges have contributed in maintaining this silence. Positioned between race and gender, the black female subject is denied a position from which she can articulate herself. To a certain extent, this is the result of how power operates at the institutional and social levels. Undoubtedly, what feminist scholars in the present attempt to do is conceptualize ways of looking at how it is possible to articulate their sexualities; this is only possible if black women participate as social and cultural agents.

Silences of a different nature afflict black feminist scholars, as a result of their racial identity. Even if black women in academia are engaged in reclaiming a space from within which they can speak, a common concern often articulated is that they are not seen beyond their physical bodies and recognized as producers of knowledge, or as speaking subjects. The difficulty involved in breaking the silence is commented upon by scholars like Patricia J. Williams, bell hooks, **Audre Lorde**, and Ann du Cille. Because of the hypervisibility of black women in academia (as there are so few) and the dominant sex-inflected ideological constructions of black femininity, it limits the nature of their scholarship—of what they can and cannot speak. A kind of control operates whereby black women, in positions of power, are seen as “other” by the institution of academia.

What we should be aware of is that, at the present moment, silences imposed on the black female body have a material effect on the lives of black women. A large percentage of black women are affected with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), and the state is unwilling to extend its resources to find ways to cure them. Such an attitude can be explained if we consider the nature of dominant representations of black female sexuality, which is seen as promiscuous. Black women who are infected with AIDS usually tend to be poor, working-class single mothers, and they are frequently represented as drug users and possessing uncontrolled sexuality. This equation that the state makes regarding black women and AIDS reveals the dominant, institutional view of deviant black female sexuality.

We also need to be critical of the fact that black female sexuality is usually defined as heterosexual. Notable exceptions are in the works of **Cheryl Clarke**, **Jewelle Gomez**, Barbara Smith, and Audre Lorde. A heteronormative approach elides the possibility of black female queerness and lesbian sexuality. The usual scholarship on **lesbianism** tends to focus on the differences between black lesbian sexualities and white sexualities, without

acknowledging that black lesbians share a history with other black women. Doing so defines black lesbians as outsiders within the black community, which is why many black women are wary of identifying themselves as homosexuals or writing about queer desires. Audre Lorde is an exception. Her writings, with its emphasis on the erotics of lesbian desire, can be seen as one way of reclaiming the sexuality of the black female. This is one way in which the silence can be negated, and black female sexuality can be reclaimed.

*See also* Autobiography; Black Feminism; Black Feminist Criticism; Baker, Josephine; Combahee River Collection; Holiday, Billie; Jazz

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*Tapati Bharadwaj*

### SHANGE, NTOZAKE (1948– )

Ntozake Shange (*en-toe-zah-kay shang-ay*) was born on October 18, 1948, in Trenton, New Jersey. Originally named Paulette Williams, Shange is the daughter of Paul and Eloise Williams, a surgeon and psychiatric social worker/educator, respectively. Shange has a daughter, Savannah. She has earned degrees from Barnard College (B.A. with honors, 1970) and the University of Southern California (M.A., 1973). Shange's career as an artist and activist began in earnest in California while she was attending the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), but the groundwork of her thirty-plus years as a writer/artist/performer was laid in her girlhood. Her parents knew W.E.B. Du Bois, and his presence at her parents' **home**, along with frequent visits by

other African American intellectuals and **jazz** musicians, influenced Shange's direction as an artist, according to her.

Shange's work has contributed to the shape of African American feminist culture for over thirty years. She has won numerous awards and prizes, such as those given in one year, 1977, for her play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*: Obie Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, Audience Development Committee (Audelco) Award, Made-moiselle Award, and Tony, Grammy and Emmy nominations. Recognition of Shange's work has continued; in the 1980s she was awarded the *Los Angeles Times* Prize for Poetry and a Guggenheim Fellowship, and her 1980 adaptation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* won an Obie in 1981. A Paul Robeson Achievement Award came to her in 1992, followed by various achievement awards from numerous organizations, including the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Inc.; the National Black Theatre Festival; and the Pushcart Prize for Poetry.

When she adopted her African name in the early 1970s, she also adopted its etymology as the foundation of her **identity** as a black female artist: "she who comes with her own things" and "who walks like a lion." Frustrated by sexist, patriarchal culture, Shange fought through the gender "barricades," as the sites of resistance to women gaining power were called in that era. Women were fighting to enter the professional workforce and to develop personal relationships with men and women that were based on mutual equality rather than on the patriarchal model. Shange was in the middle of this political climate at UCLA and in San Francisco. In graduate school, Shange was attempting to do **work** as a war correspondent and play jazz music. She began writing poems and choreographing modern dances and performing them along with other women. The venues for these performance pieces were clubs in Los Angeles and San Francisco. What became of them eventually, by the time they reached the stage in New York in 1975, is the groundbreaking dramatic work *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*.

This "choreopoem," as Shange defines it, was a new art form that synthesized **poetry** with **drama**, dance, and music. *For colored girls* opened up an entirely new genre and an artistic "mooring space," in Karla Holloway's words, which has had a profound influence on African American dance and drama. The improvisational nature of the early forms of the piece when it was performed in San Francisco is retained even into the 1976 published version of the work; the seven women's voices merge and separate from one poem to the next. The ways in which Shange deftly merged dance and oral arts—poetry, music, and drama—in *for colored girls* is furthermore an aesthetic and political argument that carries over into Shange's subsequent works.

Shange's artistry testifies to **womanist** liberations in the post-black liberation age. In the novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) when Sassafrass pours honey into her lover Mitch's horn, she is finally answering with a defiant "no" to his many subtle and not-so-subtle subjugations of her artistic

expression. Sassafrass's weaving, like the honey she pours into the saxophone, can render ineffective the patriarchal dominations of black women. Shange's works are rich with images of womanist art and aesthetic expression: **healing** recipes, lunar influences, sexual and erotic affirmations of the female **body**, weaving, dancing, playing music. This playfulness, however, is quite serious. Women's creativity and wisdom are rendered into a radical language and style, creating linguistic spaces of resistance and empowerment for women of color. Recovery of female power and sensibility is not just play; it is a serious undertaking to redefine female subjectivity or identity in a sexist, racist culture.

In her introduction to *for colored girls*, Shange said that women's studies had connected her to other women, past and present, and thus to "an articulated female heritage and imperative." However, she goes on to say that modern dance had become her central medium for expression, because dance "insisted that everything African, everything halfway colloquial, a grimace, a strut, an arched back over a yawn, waz mine." Shange's work, like that of African American women writers such as **Audre Lorde** and **Toni Morrison**, creates discourse on the black female body that defies ideals and **stereotypes** of **beauty** repressing black women's looks and intelligence. Just as Claudia defies doll-beauty culture in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), so does the lady in brown who opens *for colored girls* with the declaration that this is a black female's art form, to teach her to remember her own voice and body because she has been "closed in silence so long" that she has forgotten them. Other choreopoems take up various threads of this project, from "dark phrases" through "latent rapists" and "sechita" to "somebody walked off with alla my stuff" and "a laying on of hands." In *for colored girls*, Shange breaks the silence that was still surrounding sexual abuse, patriarchal relations with black men, black lesbian relationships, and black women's **sexuality**.

Shange's next major dramatic works form a trilogy. First is *A Photograph: Still Life with Shadows/A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty* (1977). The second work is *Spell #7* (1979), which presents the audience with nine characters in a bar in New York discussing racial barriers for black artists and the stereotyped masks that even the successful ones must wear. Last in the trilogy is *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* (1979), one of Shange's most radical experiments in form, blending surrealist and fantastic elements into dramatic portrayals of being black and female in the United States. Shange wants to wake people up with her art; for her, this is the artist's job. Firmly within the context of the African American oral tradition, her works call for visceral responses, asking the readers to enter them, not just passively think about them.

Shange's **fiction** and poetry are radically experimental in form and subject matter as well. In her novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, the form is that of a narrative interspersed with recipes and letters. A very lyrical prose style develops the experiences of the three sisters, who were named after the natural dyes used by their mother, a prominent cloth-weaver in Charleston, South Carolina. Each woman eventually perseveres as an artist, though not

without hard work and overcoming difficulties. Sassafrass's weaving poem articulates what each one is experiencing, with images of berries ripening "inside" themselves, and the moon falling out of their mouths. *Liliane: Resurrection of the Daughter*, Shange's 1994 novel, presents fragments of Liliane Lincoln's sessions in psychoanalysis. She is trying to sort out her memories of her mother, who left Liliane and her father when she was a little girl to be with a white man. The overall texture is dense in **memory** and meditation.

Somewhat different than either the novels or choreopoems are several notable collections. One, a 1978 collection of poetry called *Nappy Edges*, demonstrates Shange's dexterity with language. There is an abiding emphasis on the beauty of words, their sounds and images, their movements toward compassion or humor. Syncopations, variations of themes, no full stops: These are a few of the qualities of the poems that perch at the edge of sense and logic. Nonstandard spellings and punctuation make her language dance. Yet these dancing words are also creating a form of resistance to standard English that teaches "colored girls" to hate themselves. Another significant work is *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*, a 1998 collection of essays, recipes, remembrances, and meditations. These conversational, lyrical fragments are organized around topics. For example, in the section "Better Late Than Never," Shange narrates some of the **history** of the numerous all-black communities of Texas, Oklahoma, and Indian territories in the latter half of the nineteenth century. She narrates the creation of the celebration of "Juneteenth," that day in 1867, two full years after the Civil War, when a proclamation was made by Major General Granger that "all slaves are free," the first time Texas blacks heard about it. But turn the page and you will find a recipe for "Texas Shredded-Beef Barbeque," followed by more history of African American cowboys and the "Cotton-Eyed Joe," a still-popular dance form that resonates with the African ring shout as well as the swing and square dance. After "Daddy's Barbeque Sauce" and a discourse on female hairdos, the section has its finale in "Chicken Fried Steak" and a commentary on the appetites of those hungry migrants who walked to Kansas and Oklahoma from Louisiana and Mississippi in the 1890s, the same historical context that figures prominently in Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* (1998).

Shange's body of "word-work," to use a phrase from Morrison, emphasizes orality and bodily movement as well as textuality in reframing subjectivity and **community** for "colored girls." Her verbal irony and humor, her sensual descriptions and cadenced voices, and her dances/dancers that people her works all capture a sense of committed passion. Her work is political but not dogmatic. It takes cognizance of difference while it performs communal rituals. Most of all, it is still growing out of Shange's vigilance over what it feels like, and what it means, to grow up black and female in the United States.

*See also* *Betsey Brown*; Black Feminism; Folklore; Lesbianism; Love; Rape; Spirituality; Womanism



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Sharon Jessee

### SHOCKLEY, ANN ALLEN (1927– )

Ann Allen Shockley began both her life and her writing career in Louisville, Kentucky. She published her first **fiction** in the *Louisville Defender* when she was eighteen before moving to Nashville, Tennessee, to attend Fisk University. After graduating from Fisk, Shockley earned her degree in library science from Case Western, working at several libraries before returning to Fisk in 1969, where she served as head of special collections until her retirement in 1998. Shockley has contributed to African American **literature** as a journalist, a librarian who published books and articles on collecting black texts and materials, an anthologist, and a fiction writer who was one of the first African American women to address the subject of **lesbianism** in her work. The latter two areas are especially pertinent in their relation to feminism.

In 1988, Shockley published a seminal anthology titled *Afro American Women Writers 1746–1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide*, which was the culmination of much of the earlier **work** she had done as an archivist in recovering the work of black women writers. The anthology includes not only well-known writers such as **Phillis Wheatley** but also more obscure writers such as **Victoria Earle Matthews**, a prolific journalist in turn-of-the-century New York, and Zara Wright, a Chicago novelist who offered a melodramatic revision of the tragic **mulatto** story in *Black and White Tangled Threads* (1920). The anthology is valuable both for its inclusion of writers who would otherwise be forgotten and the thorough introductions Shockley provides.

It is for her fiction that Shockley deserves the most recognition. At a time when few black women writers were addressing the subject of lesbianism, Shockley was tackling it in two novels and a collection of short stories. *Loving*

*Her* (1974) told the story of a black woman disappointed with heterosexual **love** who then turns to a white female lover. While the novel was criticized for its literary weaknesses, it nonetheless remains historically significant for its treatment not only of lesbianism but also of an interracial lesbian relationship. Shockley's short-story collection *The Black and White of It* (1980) is, according to bibliographer Rita B. Dandridge in *Ann Allen Shockley*, "generally considered the first published short story collection about lesbians written by a black woman" (xi). The stories explore a variety of lesbian characters, such as a famed concert singer who remains closeted fearing the prejudiced reaction she will get from her **family** when she and her white partner attend a family reunion. Shockley's most daring work is her novel *Say Jesus and Come to Me* (1982), which recounts the story of Reverend Myrtle Black, a charismatic minister who seduces the women of her congregation; the novel offers a biting critique of homophobia within the black church, which Shockley herself has said she intended. While Shockley's lesbian fiction has not always been highly regarded for its literary quality, she nonetheless deserves her place as a pioneer in the genre, paving the way for such later writers such as **Jewelle Gomez**, April Sinclair, and Shay Youngblood.

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### **SINGING IN THE COMEBACK CHOIR**

**Bebe Moore Campbell's** third work of **fiction** explores the intergenerational relationship between Maxine McCoy, a successful television producer in her mid-thirties, and her aging grandmother Lindy, a former singer with a penchant for men, cigarettes, and alcohol. Central to this work is the notion of **community** and the **family** ties that call a young professional African American woman, Maxine, **home** to her roots. The journey from Los Angeles back to Philadelphia is a symbolic one for Maxine; returning to her past she must consider the life she has carved out for herself as an accomplished African American professional whose success in the hostile world of Hollywood masks the emotional void and frustration she feels in her personal life. In this sense, *Singing in the Comeback Choir* (1998) is indicative of Campbell's earlier fiction in which introspective female protagonists engage in probing self-analysis to reach a point of reconciliation with their personal histories.

Maxine is five when her father dies in the Vietnam War; her mother wastes away shortly afterward, and it is Lindy who raises the young Maxine. Years later, when roles shift and Maxine returns to North Philadelphia to take care of Lindy, she finds a home once filled with laughter and people a silent tomb of bitterness and longing. Not only has the neighborhood, which is now filled with abandoned buildings that are littered with graffiti and drug dealers, changed; Lindy has changed as well. Gone is the woman whose life revolved around song, and in her place is a woman who refuses to participate in the shaping of her own life narrative at the end of her days. But Maxine is no mere rescuer; initially she cannot save Lindy because Lindy refuses to be saved. What granddaughter and grandmother realize is that they must rescue themselves, and doing so involves inserting themselves into a larger dialogue of what opportunities are available to African American women, what it means to find success, and what personal responsibilities they, as women, bear to themselves, to the community, and to others.

In *Singing in the Comeback Choir* **healing** is a central theme. Maxine learns from her grandmother to exercise kindness and forgiveness in her own life, particularly in her intimate relationship with her husband, Satchel. When Maxine suffers a miscarriage, she begins to withdraw from Satchel, who responds to her coldness and their loss by having an ill-conceived affair. His action drives Maxine to a further state of grief and isolation, which leaves her angry and bereft. From Lindy, who slowly comes alive under Maxine's affection and care, Maxine learns the power of forgiveness as a tool to redress the wrongs of the past and to create possibility in the present and future. Neither wants anger and despair, which has turned Lindy's neighborhood and Maxine's former girlhood home into a dim and lifeless world, to root in their own hearts. From this mutual acknowledgment, unspoken at first, they come to learn that faith in themselves and a belief in the possibility of change create an opportunity for redemption and hope. As the title suggests, each is able to make a "comeback" to heal the wounds of the past and to firmly locate themselves in the power of the present. While Campbell addresses the problem of urban blight and the plight of young,

single African American mothers and underemployed African American men that now scar Maxine's childhood landscape and Lindy's neighborhood, she suggests that the ability to change lies in the need for both communal and personal responsibility. As in many of Campbell's works, African American women must revisit painful histories, personally and collectively informed, that gave birth to them in order to give life to themselves.

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*Jennifer Driscoll*

### SLAVE NARRATIVE

African American **literacy** allowed black voices to at last authentically frame black experience. The slave narrative became the sword African Americans thrust into the heart of the inhumanity of **slavery** and white atrocities. The slave narrative is considered by most scholars to be the founding form of African American literary traditions, though the earliest form of the autobiographical slave narrative appeared in Great Britain in 1789 with Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, the first African-born slave to write his narrative free of white collaboration. Briton Hammon enjoys the distinction of being recognized as the author of the first published African American narrative, *The Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760). But it was the more developed form of American slave narratives such as **Frederick Douglass's** *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), Leonard Black's *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery, Written by Himself* (1847), and Henry Watson's *Narrative of Henry Watson, Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1848) that set the standard for publication between 1760 and 1894 of over 200 book-length slave narratives in the United States and England. From the early 1800s to the official end of slavery in 1865, the slave narrative dominated antebellum America; numerous American slave narrative books and pamphlets were published and well circulated before 1865. The slave narrative became the literary mouthpiece of choice for African American hopes, fears, aspirations, and resistance. Slave narratives and their graphic tales of the inhuman treatment by white masters functioned in part as a highly effective tool to fuel antislavery sentiment.

The first slave narratives followed a literary structure that mimicked early white Protestant religious testimonials and the Judeo-Christian redemption

mythology tales. The author is first lost in the wilderness of slavery, then achieves awareness of his/her humanity, then the desire for betterment or escape, and finally the journey to **freedom**. The narrative structure appealed to white audiences as it emphasized the black desire for Judeo-Christian ideals; many slave narratives include numerous biblical analogies and metaphors and an unconscious acceptance of white dominance. Yet the structure also allowed for detailed descriptions of the hellish reality of slavery and the barbaric cruelty of white owners within the context of religious references and a hero's journey, so much so that slave narratives became a popular propaganda tool to further support for abolition. Early black authors often had to include introductory testimonials by whites that validated the black author's character and trustworthiness. Slave narratives usually begin with a humble plea for the white reader to sympathize with the trials and sufferings of the author. Slave narratives often examine in detail the mental anguish of what it meant to be a human slave, usually opening with the innocence of childhood and an account of a significant traumatizing event that illuminated to the author his/her condition as a slave. Some early slave narratives include George White, *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African, Written by Himself* (1810); Nat Turner, *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831); Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (1838); Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841* (1853); Lunsford Lane, *Narrative of Lunsford Lane* (1842); Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy* (1843); George Horton, *Life of George M. Horton. The Colored Bard of North Carolina, from The Poetical Works of George M. Horton, the Colored Bard of North Carolina, to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, written by Himself* (1845); and **William Wells Brown**, *Narrative of William Wells Brown, an American Slave* (1849).

For men, the slave narrative became a way to expose a nonthreatening **black masculinity** and to exert desire for autonomy while bringing to light the social and ethical complexities inherent in slavery. Men wrote of the horrors of the slave experience, the brutality of white masters, and the barbarous cruelty of white punishment and dehumanization of black men. For black men, the slave narrative became a compelling device in the fight for their right to humanity. But for male slaves, their masculinity, though assaulted through the machinations of slavery, was never in doubt. Rather, white men feared the perceived superior prowess of the black male. Male slave narratives presented a masculinity that met extreme adversity with spirit and manliness intact, though presented in a humble, intelligent, and non-threatening way. But for female slaves, whites continually questioned their humanity and womanness. Slave women who undertook to write their narratives exhibited both a desire for autonomy and the struggle for affirmation of their very femininity.

The slave narrative became the most popular medium that female slaves adopted to voice their experience at the hands of white male masters. Male slave narrative authors tended to paint a picture of the helpless black woman

who was resigned to her lot. But when African American female slaves penned their own stories, the horrific truth they divulged put to rest any previous portrayal of the romanticized weak and helpless female slave. **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) was the first published slave narrative written by a black woman. Jacobs's account reveals in disturbing detail the horrendous sexual abuse and oppression that many female slaves endured. Along with the sexual abuse by white owners, female slaves suffered the unconscionable sale of their children as well as numerous physical atrocities.

Whites, acting as ghostwriters, often transcribed some of the early female slave narratives. One of the earliest narratives, the first about a female slave, **Mary Prince's** *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* (1831), was transcribed by a white man, Thomas Pringle. Pringle describes Prince as somewhat disagreeable, temperamental, and easily angered, which is an instance of the white lens shaping reader perception of slavery and Prince's experiences. In her narrative, Prince relates tales of extreme abuse and humiliations against her by her white owners, in response to their perception of improper slave conduct or Mary "giving herself airs." The narrative of **Jarena Lee**, *The Life and Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1836), was the first African American woman's spiritual narrative, and though Lee was not a slave (she was born to free parents), her spiritual experiences marked a new form of the women's slave narrative, one that illustrated the evils of slavery alongside the journey to spiritual awakening. The *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (1863) was unique in that ninety-seven-year-old Elizabeth's ghostwriter was also a black woman. Elizabeth's experiences as a slave mingle with her evangelical faith in a demonstration of how **Christianity** became a source of strength and comfort for female slaves. In her later years, Elizabeth was a minister of the gospel, believing herself divinely ordained, and she braved threats of imprisonment in her steadfast belief in preaching against the sin of slavery. The contradiction between Christian ideology and the practice of slavery became, for slaves like Elizabeth, a source of courage and empowerment in the struggle for an autonomous identity.

Slave narratives functioned as humanizing agents for African Americans in the face of white bestialization of blacks. For women, the struggle was two-fold, as African American women were not viewed as *women* but rather as female animals. The acquisition of literacy by blacks allowed female slaves the means to construct for themselves both their humanity and their womanhood. Slave narratives functioned as a testament to the suffering endured by female slaves at the hands of male and female masters. The dramatic cruelty of white women toward black women is one arcane element of slavery that female slave narratives exposed. Female narratives also acted as a celebration of self, a validation of both black **motherhood** and black femininity, keenly captured by **Sojourner Truth**, who asked, "Ar'n't I a woman?" in 1851. Slave mothers were often forcibly separated from their children by slave owners who regularly sold black children, who were viewed as

commodity much like horses or cattle. Slave women regularly witnessed the sale of their children, and the unimaginable emotional toll is clearly voiced in their narratives. For African American slave women the exercise of composing or reciting their narrative served as a luminous, yet powerful discourse that afforded them the freedom to claim their right to humanity.

*See also* Neo-Slave Narrative

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*Debbie Clare Olson*

## SLAVERY

Slavery has existed at various times and in diverse ways throughout **history**. It was practiced in Greece, Rome, Egypt, China, Japan, Korea, India, Europe, Africa, and other areas. In many cases, human beings were captured either through warfare or outright and forced to become slaves. Slavery was rarely voluntary and was the result of the strong exercising authority and dominion over the weak. The status of the slave in society was low and often involved treatment that was severe, cruel, and demeaning.

Some of the first black people who came to North America were not slaves but explorers. Some Africans, as well as others, came to the continent as indentured laborers and were freed after working for a specified number of years. However, chattel slavery was cheaper and more economically advantageous than other types of labor, and it eventually became institutionalized. From the mid-sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, millions of Africans were forcefully taken from their homes, held in dungeons, packed into ships, and sent off on the **Middle Passage**. Those who survived the arduous trip across the ocean were sold to white masters and were expected to lose their **identity** and past and completely subordinate themselves to their masters' wills.

A slave was viewed as a piece of property that was owned by the master. The slave usually had no rights, was restricted in moving about geographically, and had little input regarding the daily jobs to be performed.



Frequently the slave had no control over the placement of **family** members, including children. Thus, it was not uncommon for families to be split up and for fathers and/or mothers to be separated from their children. The most common type of slave was found in a household or **domestic** setting and usually worked in the **home** or outside in the fields. A slave was often treated like an animal and was completely subject to the master, who could punish and rebuke at will. Furthermore, the slave could not possess anything; technically, everything the slave had belonged to the master.

The master-slave relationship, in which one human being exerts power and authority over another human being, has come to represent a model for other relationships. For example, in a patriarchal society it can be viewed metaphorically as a paradigm for the relationship between men and women. In many civilizations, men have held the position of master of the home, even in relation to their own wives and daughters. For centuries, women in many cultures have been subject to their fathers and husbands. It can be said, therefore, that a female slave experiences double subordination. First, she is a woman who is expected to be subject to a man, and second, she is a slave, who is required to obey her master.

In most African societies, the patriarch was the head of the household, and women as daughters, wives, and mothers were subject to him. In this situation women experienced one level of servitude, yet it was one that included some respect, especially for mothers who brought forth and reared the new generation. However, when 10 to 11 million Africans were involuntarily taken from the home and sold into slavery, the women in particular experienced a second level of subjugation. They were no longer responsible to simply please a father or husband but were now also expected to **work** for a foreign master as well. Some women were born into this situation.

Young black girls on plantations in the **South** usually started to work at an earlier age than their male counterparts. Most frequently, they would begin by working completely or partially inside the house and would eventually be sent out to the fields. Girls were sometimes more industrious than boys and excelled at certain jobs, such as at picking cotton. Most slaves, both male and female, worked outside in the fields during their prime years. Some of the chores included planting, hoeing, and harvesting such crops as corn, peas, potatoes, turnips, wheat, rice, and cotton. Slaves would also prepare the land for planting, clean ditches and drains, work on roads and fences, and perform other miscellaneous jobs. Women who did not work outside were often employed in other capacities inside the home, serving as cooks, housekeepers, laundresses, seamstresses, and nurses. Slaves, despite their particular jobs, worked hard, long hours and were often exhausted after a day's labor. Women frequently returned to their cabins and performed additional tasks for their own families, such as cooking, washing, cleaning, sewing, knitting, **quilting**, and weaving. Their physical and mental health often suffered from overwork, and they frequently lacked the energy to nurture and interact extensively with their families and children.

Sunday, however, was a day of rest for both the slaveholder and the slave, which provided a break from the week's labor. Some masters also allowed slaves a day off for religious holidays, particularly Christmas. Although some slaves spent time catching up on personal chores during days of rest, many enjoyed the leisure time in various ways such as visiting with friends, dancing, singing, and telling stories. Through such interaction, the slave **community** provided strength to its members and helped provide relief from difficult and physically demanding burdens. Visiting with one another provided slaves the chance to articulate feelings, experiences, and challenges and to share in a common quest for emotional and physical survival.

Dancing and singing were a means of outwardly demonstrating inner frustrations. Slave dances were often less formal and controlled than those of the master (such as reels and minuets) and frequently included lustful **body** movements, with rhythmic footwork and somewhat wild motions of the arms and shoulders. Music also offered a sense of community and a means of expressing various experiences. Songs included details of their history, their daily lives, their dreams, and their fantasies. They sang of hard work, oppression, masters, slave patrollers, slave traders, as well as romance, sex, food, and **freedom**.

Slaves also told stories that not only perpetuated oral tradition but also passed on the wisdom of former generations. Although the stories provided rich entertainment, they also contained important messages and themes pertaining to survival and perseverance. There were tales of animal and slave tricksters, stories coded with lessons on life, tales explaining how things came to be, and stories of surviving in the briar patch of life. These stories were originally intended for oral transmission, and the tellers were often dramatic in their performances. A particular rendition often included nonverbal sounds, changes of volume from a whisper to a loud call, asides, and responses from the audience. Sometimes storytellers were competitive and attempted to outdo one another during a particular session. In some cases, a story might be started by one teller and completed by one or more subsequent tellers. Some of these tales were recorded and written. Two stories that deal specifically with women include "Why the Sister in Black Works Hardest" and "Why Women Always Take Advantage of Men."

Regarding male/female slave relationships, according to the slave codes, slaves could not be legally married. It was argued that a slave was a chattel, or thing, and chattels and things did not have the right to be married. Furthermore, the slave had no right to a legal contract and therefore could not be included in a marriage contract. However, in practice, many slaveholders in the United States encouraged marriage and child bearing among slaves and believed that a man who was happy with his wife and children was less likely to cause trouble or run away. Some masters encouraged and promoted sexual morality, while others did not interfere with the sexual habits of their slaves. It was not uncommon for enslaved women to give birth to children fathered by a variety of different men, both black and white. Some male slaves preferred to marry women from other plantations so they would not have to see their spouse beaten, ill-treated, or raped. However, most slaveholders

made final decisions regarding the marriages of their slaves and often encouraged unions among slaves on their own plantations. The marriage ceremony was usually simple, and in some cases the couple jumped over a stick to become husband and wife. Other times the pair might simply receive the master's permission to live in the same cabin.

One of the great challenges experienced by many female slaves was being raped and sexually abused by the master, his sons, and/or other men of authority. Many white men considered female slaves to be property that could be used to fulfill their own physical lusts and desires. Although some men offered small gifts in return for their pleasure, slave women were often expected to offer themselves freely and willingly. Refusal to comply could result in a beating or some other type of punishment. Slave fathers and husbands had little control over the sexual mistreatment of their daughters and wives. Furthermore, the mistress of the home was often hurt and angry by her husband's philandering and frequently retaliated by punishing the female slave in subtle or even overt ways.

It was against slave codes to teach a slave to read or write, so most slaves were illiterate. Specific rules varied from state to state in this regard, but there was usually some type of fine imposed on anyone who aided a slave in receiving instruction. For example, in North Carolina, if a free Negro gave a slave a book or pamphlet or taught a slave to read and write, the punishment was thirty-nine lashes or imprisonment. When a white person was guilty of such violations, the fine was \$200. Most slaveholders wanted slaves to remain uneducated and feared that increased **literacy** would cause problems and revolts on the plantation. Some masters believed that black slaves were incapable of academic learning. However, a small percentage of slaves received instruction in one way or another. For example, sometimes when a slave girl worked intimately with a slaveholder's daughter in the big house, she was exposed to books and writing. As the master's daughter was instructed in letters, she, in turn, would sometimes teach her favorite slave to read and write. Also, despite the code, some mistresses and daughters felt a responsibility to read the Bible to slaves and to include them in family prayers.

In addition to denying slaves the opportunity of becoming educated, the slave codes also refused them religious rights. The slave was viewed as a thing, not a being, and therefore in theory was not entitled to religious enlightenment. Furthermore, it was reasoned that **religion** was associated with the free agency of human beings, and slaves were not free agents. Basically, slaves were at the mercy of their owners, who could completely decline or allow them access to religious instruction and gatherings. In addition, the slaveholder could force his slaves to be exposed to religious teachings contrary to their own beliefs. In practice, many slaves were introduced to **Christianity** through camp meetings. The slaves in turn held their own services, where white preachers were frequently imitated. The black slave preacher was often intelligent, articulate, imaginative, and charismatic. He understood the plight and misery of the slaves and gave them hope in their times of trial and tribulation. However, since he was observed by whites, he also taught

the slaves to be obedient to their masters because failure to do so could result in a whipping.

The struggles, challenges, and agonies experienced by some men and women in slavery gave rise to a powerful and historically significant literary form: the **slave narrative**. Some former slaves with sufficient education wrote about their experiences and trials. **Frederick Douglass's autobiography**, titled *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), provides a rich and informative account of his life in slavery and of his successful escape. Another significant narrative is **Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*** (1861), which describes her life with a lustful and controlling master and her eventual escape to freedom. Writing a narrative provided former slaves the opportunity to reflect upon their past, to attempt to come to terms with it, to move forward in life, and to document and share their experiences with others.

The slave narrative provides a firsthand account of the challenges the writer faced to survive slavery. Jacobs penned one of the few extant memoirs by a female slave, and her account reflects some of the characteristics of slavery discussed above. For example, she was born a slave and lived in slavery twenty-seven years. Her parents were of light skin, were considered of mixed parentage, and were called **mulattoes**. Her maternal grandmother worked as a cook, wet nurse, and seamstress and performed miscellaneous other duties in the household of her master. Jacobs reiterates in her narrative that a slave is property and therefore cannot hold property. One of her early mistresses taught her to spell, read, and learn some passages from the Bible, which was a rare privilege for a slave. When Jacobs became the property of a new master, Dr. Flint, she was ordered to be obedient in all things, including **sexuality**, and her mistress, rather than helping her, reacted with fury and jealousy. In the narrative, Jacob relates a powerful account of her attempt to escape bondage and her ultimate success in this endeavor.

The theme of bondage and escape continues in some modern and contemporary **literature** today, in a genre called the **neo-slave narrative**. The works are predominantly fictional, often pay homage to oral traditions, and vary in emphasis and form. Some neo-slave narratives imitate the basic slave narrative, such as **Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*** (1986). Some represent a genealogical narrative, in which slavery is documented through the lives of a particular family and its **ancestors**, as can be seen in **J. California Cooper's *Family*** (1991). There are also narratives that deal with the relationship between contemporary society and slavery and include a connection between the past and present, as in **Octavia Butler's *Kindred*** (1979). In addition, one can find historical novels that take place during the times of slavery, such as **Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*** (1979). One common theme in the neo-slave narrative is the rejection of the obedient, complacent slave often seen in plantation romance works and the promotion of a slave society that was culturally vibrant.

Thus slavery has been the source of a literary tradition that continues in our current times. The oral tradition that was cultivated and enjoyed by

slaves represented a means of dealing with the challenges of subjugation and oppression. The telling of colorful and vivid stories of human nature, survival, and freedom provided entertainment, encouragement, and education. Furthermore, the slave narrative became an invaluable record of personal experience and testimony that documents life from a slave's perspective. For many, the theme of slavery has been and continues to be a topic of intense interest, debate, and dialogue. The relationship of the master and slave is an ongoing topic in numerous cultures, contexts, and disciplines and is an integral part of the American literary tradition in general.

*See also* Folklore; Historical Fiction; Motherhood; Spirituals

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*Deborah Weigel*

### SMITH, ANNA DEAVERE (1950– )

Anna Deavere Smith was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in September 1950, the eldest of five children in the middle-class **family** of college-educated parents who worked in business and primary education. She received her B.A. (1971) from Beaver College (now Arcadia University) and her M.F.A. (1977) from the American Conservatory Theatre. Her awards include a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Award in 1996, and she was nominated for

an APEX Award for her performance in *The American President* (1995). Her play *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities* won Obie and Drama Desk Awards, as did her work *Twilight: Los Angeles*, and she also was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. In 2002, Smith was included in *Fortune* magazine's list of the fifty most powerful women in business.

Smith has taught at some of America's most prestigious institutions, including Carnegie-Mellon, New York University, University of Southern California, Yale, and Stanford. Her most influential theater experiments are *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles*. In both she undertakes to explore real incidents where **race** has contributed to violent confrontation and retaliation. *Fires in the Mirror* is the result of extensive interviews with participants and observers of Jewish-black clashes in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in 1991; *Twilight: Los Angeles* attempts the same exploration of the riot that followed in the wake of the infamous Rodney King verdict in 1992.

Performance is Smith's primary avenue of exploration regarding social issues and **identity**. Although she has appeared in a number of **film** and television projects, the stage is at the core of her work, which resists the American model of method acting (which universalizes and naturalizes all human experience) and embraces the Brechtian model of alienation (which demands cultural and historical contextualization). Smith's contribution to the practice of American theater has been through her technique of interview, selection, and performance in which she dramatizes issues and incidents of race, gender, and **class** through such radical and alienating choices as playing, for example, a Jewish man, using his own words, gestures, and inflections, in spite of the fact that she is a black woman. In this way, clearly, the actor does not merge with the character but rather performs a constructed identity external to the actor's own.

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A. Mary Murphy

### SONG OF SOLOMON

In **Toni Morrison's** third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), she revises many of the themes explored in her first two: **identity**, **love**, marriage, **motherhood**, **sexuality**, traditional morality, **black masculinity**, and the effects of white racism within the black **community**. The story, set in Michigan and spanning the 1930s to the 1960s, follows Milkman Dead as he journeys to find lost gold and finds instead a sense of self, a flying tribe of Africans, and a **history** linking past to present.

Milkman's father, Macon Dead, embodies the novel's critique of both patriarchy and capitalism. In Macon's unforgiving resistance to change, his unwavering belief in the power of property, and his full investment in patriarchal values, he prefigures the character of Steward Morgan in Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise* (1998). Like Steward, and Cholly Breedlove in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Macon is also psychologically traumatized by white racism. As a child, he and his sister Pilate (whose mixed-race mother Sing dies in childbirth) witness two whites murder their father for his land. Macon retaliates by accumulating property, including his wife Ruth, daughter of the first black doctor in town. To the extent his marriage increases his financial assets, it also bolsters his self-respect and masculinity. However, after the first few years of marriage, Macon refrains from sexual relations, suspecting Ruth of an incestuous affection for her father. The stern and distant Macon becomes abusive, and when Ruth becomes pregnant with Milkman after she slips Macon an aphrodisiac, Macon forces her into several unsuccessful abortions. As his son grows to adulthood, however, Macon sees him as an extension of himself, encouraging Milkman to learn the **family** business of property ownership and accumulation.

Ruth Foster Dead, whose mother died in Ruth's childhood, has her own plans for her son: to be a doctor, like her father. Ruth copes with her husband's overt scorn, physical abuse, and sexual neglect by focusing on her

roles as mother and daughter. In those roles, Ruth commits the novel's unspeakable act that Morrison readers come to expect. However, rather than one overwhelming act—the **rape** of a daughter, the murder of a child—Ruth engages in a string of only potentially horrific acts, thus allowing the novel to explore the line between love and desire. As a teenager, Ruth meets the kisses she demands from her father each night with ecstasy; she kneels in her slip at her father's deathbed to kiss his dead but still-beautiful hands; she nurses her son until his feet can touch the floor; she makes secret night visits to her father's grave. Each of these acts is an attempt to fill an absence Ruth feels in herself, one created by a lack of self-esteem and the overwhelming desire for a father's approval, a desire she displaces onto her son. Because Ruth understands her identity only in relationship to the men in her life—idealized daughter, rejected wife, devoted mother—she fails to achieve any sense of self-knowledge and remains as static as her husband.

Ruth's daughters are scarred by their mother's overt devotion to their brother; however, they are affected even more by their father's stern indifference. College educated and raised to hold themselves above local blacks, the sisters are also isolated from the community. Their lives, like their mother's, are sterile and delimited by a desire for their father's approval. Although Magdalene, called Lena, never escapes her father's house, she does finally stand up to her brother. Referencing an incident when Milkman accidentally urinated on her as a child—symbolic of the relationship between the Dead men and their women—Lena tells Milkman that he has pissed his last in their house. First Corinthians fares better than her sister, managing (in her forties) to attain both independence and a mature sexual relationship. Returning **home** from her **domestic** job—which she represents to her **class**-conscious mother as an amanuensis position—she meets Henry Porter, introduced earlier in the novel in an unsuccessful, drunken attempt at suicide. Armed with a shotgun in an attic window, Porter first demands something to “fuck” and then urinates over the heads of the female spectators below. However, Porter is ultimately revealed as a passionate and compassionate man, and although at first ashamed of him, Corinthians finally escapes her crippling desire for her father's approval and chooses mature love over a classist pride.

Unlike his sisters, Milkman has more access to the world outside their turbulent home. Despite his father's prohibition, he finds refuge in the home of his aunt Pilate. As does Morrison's *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* offers readers an alternative to the patriarchal family. *Sula's* matriarchal triad of Eva, Hannah, and Sula is revised in Pilate, Reba (short for Rebecca), and Hagar. The six-foot-tall Pilate, whose lack of a navel marks her as something greater than flesh, stands outside the community, refusing to submit to patriarchal authority or traditional morality. Her own moral integrity, however, is clear: She refuses to take the gold of the white man Macon (may have) killed as a teenager and carries what she believes to be his bones as her “inheritance.” Pilate's only child, Reba, wins things without trying and gives away anything, including her **body**. Reminiscent of *Sula's* Hannah, Reba's



open celebration of sexuality and human contact exonerates her from a charge of immorality within the text, if not within her community.

Hagar is different from both Reba and Pilate, whom she calls Mama. Wild and spoiled, Hagar likes pretty things, one of which is her seventeen-year-old cousin Milkman. Although she is five years his senior, the two begin a sexual relationship that lasts fourteen years and ultimately consumes Hagar. Filled with a love that has grown into her one driving passion and spurred by the dispassionate “thank you” in his “Dear John” letter, Hagar attempts to kill Milkman. But unlike *Beloved*'s (1987) Sethe, Hagar is unable to kill what she loves and is left temporarily paralyzed, arms upraised in killing stroke. Indicative of his disdain for women, Milkman dismisses her with the suggestion that she drive the knife into her sexual organs. After days in a stupor followed by a frantic, fevered shopping spree to make herself beautiful for Milkman, Hagar dies. Her **death** embodies the dangers of a too-thick love that overwhelms individual female identity.

When Hagar dies, Milkman has already gone to seek his father's mythical abandoned gold. In Shalimar, Virginia, he finds instead comfort and rejuvenation in a woman named Sweet, a prostitute and the only woman in the novel unscarred by men. He then unravels his family's history, connecting past to present, **folklore** to family. The bones in Pilate's green bag are not the white man's but her father's. Milkman's great-grandfather, named alternately Solomon, Shalimar, or Sugarman, leapt off a cliff and flew back to Africa, leaving twenty-one children and a wife named Ryna who, like Hagar, could not live without the man she loved. Milkman's psychological and emotional growth on his somewhat Faulkneresque quest ultimately allows him to feel a compassionate responsibility for Hagar's death.

Pilate returns with Milkman to bury her father's bones on Solomon's Leap. She rises from her father's grave; a loud crack brings her back down. As she dies from a gunshot wound, a bird plucks from the grave the gold box earring that holds her name and flies away. The novel ends with Milkman's leap toward his friend Guitar, who is set on killing him, in a gesture of self-knowledge, surrender, celebration, and defiance. If Milkman spends the majority of his life working for his father, playing the role of the patriarch, he learns something vastly different at novel's end: that you can fly without leaving the ground.

*See also* Myth, Use of

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

## **SOUTH, INFLUENCE OF THE**

The first slave ship's landing at Jamestown in 1619 began an indelible link between African Americans and the South. Indeed, the legacy of **slavery** often overshadows any other considerations of African American connections to the South, although there are many. Much of the art, music, food, and culture associated with African Americans have roots in the South. Moreover, following the Civil War and Jim Crow period, the Great Migration to the North proved only temporary to many African Americans. Their return to the South as well as the preoccupation among many writers of color with the South as setting necessitate a consideration of its special influence upon African American women writers.

For African Americans the South represents a terrible duality; the worst experiences of African Americans occur in the birthplace of their major contributions to American culture. That duality is coterminous with the southern literary tradition. As southern authors wrote of the confrontation between a feminine landscape and a patriarchal governance, African American writers explored their existence in a region that denied them **identity** and value. As the marginalized Others in the South, African Americans moved to the North to leave behind the place tied to their oppression. In the wake of their return, a reshaping of their cultural **history** began. In effect, debates over issues like **passing** and **class** status became all but moot in the southern landscape—debates that began not in wealth and privilege but in division and poverty.

Inclusions to the modern southern canon include **Zora Neale Hurston**, **Richard Wright**, and **Ralph Ellison**—major literary figures already established within the African American tradition. Hurston's South, however, differs in tone from the one explored and chronicled by the men. Critics of southern **literature** who often dismiss that body of writing as a collection of racist prose oversimplify its themes and miss the importance in connecting the contributions of African Americans to the South. They also miss Hurston's Florida setting of Eatonville in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Joe Starks's transformation of Eatonville from its rural, agrarian inception to

preindustrial town. Hurston's major novel as a work of southern literature seemed at first an oddity. However, more and more critics open themselves to consider the import of the novel's influence in southern literature in general and see the value of Hurston's anthropological background as she preserves language, customs, and social history of the South itself. Likewise, in *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), Hurston's chronicle of Arvay Henson, a Florida "cracker" devoid of self-love, the hierarchical relationship between the races becomes secondary to the experience of Jim Meserve's attempts to provide for his **family** through an industrialized mastery of nature. In contrast to the more popular and critically considered African American southern literature of Wright or Ellison, Hurston's writing falls into a more traditional thematic of encountering a changing landscape and its people's response to it.

Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938) and Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) offer the more popular notion of African Americans in the South and their tales of escape, alive or dead, from white persecution. While Ellison's unnamed narrator reaches his epiphany only after his migration north, he remains aware of his southern birthright and connection. Wright's characters encounter a dark and more violent South where physical **violence** is the accepted result of black and white encounters. The lynching of Bobo, for example, as seen from a distance by Big Boy in "Big Boy Leaves Home," plunges readers into a South that is sharply divided by color and ascribes a much different list of southern traits to the literature. Similarly, Wright's autobiographical essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1940) reduces the South to a simplistically racist place. The larger gulf existing between Hurston and Wright in their political outlooks deepens when they are considered in a more broadly southern context. However, both authors are equally important when we consider how African American literature expands the view of southern literature.

Still, beyond Hurston's southern African American characters, few, if any, African American women writers use the South as setting within the literature of the 1940s through the 1960s, for they find little redemption within the landscape. Instead, theirs is an existence categorized by the cultivation of the same determination that slaves demonstrated in their escape plans of the 1800s to leave the South behind. The women novelists of the 1970s forward provide the most deliberate exploration of the South for African Americans. **Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, Paule Marshall,** and especially **Toni Morrison** explore the cultural and psychic landscape that the South remains to African Americans after more than a century of life there. Through their writing, the South becomes the great place of origin for African Americans. Due attention is paid to the cultural contributions made by African Americans to the region, and the resulting literature answers the oft-asked question on the future of southern letters in such a way as to give African American writing a primacy in a southern imagination that often takes Faulkner as synecdoche for its entire tradition. The African American presence in the South, long ignored or dismissed by white southern authors, fills out the region's literature and mandates a reconsideration of earlier texts in addition to a revision of traditional southern themes.

That impetus in African American southern literature to explore thoughtfully rather than merely indict historical atrocities helps move both the southern and African American traditions forward. Though vestiges of the Old South continue to exist in areas where **race** hatred proliferates, the **fiction** of African Americans does not shy away from confrontation. Morrison's thought-provoking meditation on the murder of Emmett Till in *Song of Solomon* (1977), for instance, makes clear the geographic line bordering the backward and racist South from the rest of the country. The historicity of the event is indisputable—it remains as it occurs—but the questions of how one responds to such an event resound as Milkman Dead learns from Guitar Bains the responsibility to stand up to injustice. In that example, the South acts as an inclusive and othered body of white racists who collectively murder Emmett Till and strike a blow to the collective African American population. While in part through the trial that acquitted Till's killers did the idea that the South murdered him become known, contemporary women writers see more to the South today than its racist **stereotype**. One cannot forget Morrison's placement within *Beloved* (1987) of Paul D in Alfred, Georgia, and its depiction of slavery as such a warning that the past of the South still reverberates within a changed landscape.

The resulting confrontation of African American writers with white southern history suggests more **work** is needed, but not all of it entails an adversarial placement of African Americans within the South. For Shange's Indigo in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), the South is a positive part of her identity. Shange uses the image of **community** to show how despite Indigo's growing awareness of the patriarchal, white South's cultural oppression, she finds within her own culture rich means to progress and thrive. Through acts of **conjuring** and **healing**, Indigo maintains her connection to the people existing in a South, contrary to traditional notions. Likewise, Paule Marshall's Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) recalls her great aunt Cuney's recitation of the triumphant return to Africa by the Ibos that reshapes the historical record of their mass-suicide. The South, for Avey Johnson, becomes the true connecting point for order in her life, due, in part, to the **memory** of Cuney and the associations with the Ibo spirit unifying the landscape. Outside of a racially disparate region, Shange's Indigo and Marshall's Cuney embody the best the South has to offer the African American. Such portrayals suggest that the influence of the South remains a vital part of African American literature due to its reentry into discourse by these female authors. The Old South was never intended by twentieth-century southern writers to be enshrined but rather seen as a tragic landscape; in contemporary African American women's writing it finds a deepened presence as those characters earlier consumed by the tragedy around them take control of that place and bring a sense of ownership to it in order to transform a once racist South into a territory worthy of reconsideration. Certainly, one moving from *The Color Purple's* (1982) depiction of Celie as lacking wholeness to *The Salt Eater's* (1980) healing of Velma Henry sees the scope of southern progress in a changed setting.

Today, the South remains a place of change. No longer relegated to a population of poor whites and poorer African Americans, the contemporary South of southern African American literature continues to expand and clarify the African American presence and contribution to the South throughout history. **Tina McElroy Ansa's** *Baby of the Family* (1989) and **Randall Kenan's** *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) both illustrate an ongoing exploration of the spiritual dimensions brought to and cultivated in the South, as well as a reworking of the southern journey motif as inward and psychological over physical. Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003) shows the upper-class side of African Americans in the South through Bill Cosey's Florida hotel frequented by the elite African Americans who summered there; at the same time the novel shows the problematic idea of southern womanhood.

Further, African American women writers also enter into an intertextual dialogue with southern literary figures in order to amend and expand a traditionally white vision of blackness in the South. Morrison has noted William Faulkner's experimentation with race in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)—and indeed the question of color permeates much of his work; Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Nancy Mannigoe in "That Evening Sun," and Joe Christmas in *Light in August* (1932) offer points of departure to further such consideration. The fugitive poets also find their vision of a patriarchal South corrected on one level of Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) when the novel shows that memory alone cannot govern a culture in the midst of change. Likewise, Alice Walker mentions Flannery O'Connor's work, alongside that of Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty, as seemingly having a preoccupation with race in the South. Walker ultimately comes to see that O'Connor's work offers something beyond the question of color and finds value in its technique and construction.

Through correctives as well as cultural explorations, African American women writers continue to mine the South and find within it a place of great worth. The pulsing improvisations of **jazz**, the lamentations of **blues**, the healing properties of food and herbs, and the **spirituality** inside and out of southern African American churches all commingle into a flourishing tradition. As the gaze of women writers focuses on the South, memory retains its historical wrongs but approaches them in myriad ways in order to clarify and amplify the positive contributions of a triumphant people who left only to return and reclaim a land as their own.

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F. Gregory Stewart

### SPENCER, ANNE (1882–1975)

One of the most remarkable and distinctive poets to emerge from the **Harlem Renaissance** was Anne Spencer. Spencer's complex and compelling blend of biblical, mythological, and botanical themes established her place as an important figure in African American **literature**.

Spencer was born Annie Bethel Bannister (later Scales) on a Virginia tobacco **plantation** on February 6, 1882, to Sarah Louise Scales Bannister and Joel Cephus, who owned a local saloon. She attended the Virginia Seminary and Normal School, graduating valedictorian in 1899 at the age of seventeen. She married her longtime sweetheart, Edward Alexander Spencer, on May 15, 1901. They had a son and two daughters. In 1924 Spencer began working as the librarian at the all-black Dunbar High School, Lynchburg, Virginia, a position she held for twenty years.

During her lifetime, Spencer published selected works in various periodicals and was anthologized frequently. To date, however, no collected volume of Spencer's work exists. Some of her most frequently anthologized poems include "At the Carnival," "White Things," "Before the Feast of Shushan," "Life-Long, Poor Browning," "Translation," "For Jim, Easter Eve," "Letter to my Sister," and "I Have a Friend." Her **poetry** was included in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, edited by **James Weldon Johnson** (1922); *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets*, edited by **Countee Cullen** (1927); *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea*, edited by **Charles Johnson** (1927); *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1970*, edited by **Langston Hughes** and Arna Bontemps (1949); as well as many other anthologies over the years.

Spencer's poetry reflects her nonconformist nature, and she was criticized at times for her lack of focus on racial issues. Instead, Spencer's poetry often comments on women's issues, particularly women's relationships with men. Spencer advocated women breaking away from patriarchal domination, and her poems frequently espouse a lyrical tartness that impels women to reject their subordination to men. Despite the criticism, however, Spencer was very active in civil rights and, with the help of James Weldon Johnson, was instrumental in founding the Lynchburg, Virginia, chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). When Spencer did write about racial conflict, she did it with such verve and ambiance that her images keenly capture the raw malevolence of American racism, as in "White Things." Spencer used her beloved garden, Edankraar, as the backdrop for many of her poems in which she frequently compared the

resplendent array of nature with the social iniquitousness surrounding her. Spencer's verse reveals her experience and observations of the tumultuous world in which she asks: "is Life itself but many ways of thought?" ("Substitution"). And indeed, Spencer's extraordinary thoughts, offered in poetry, richly capture the authentic complexity of life itself.

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*Debbie Clare Olson*

## SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is always a contested dimension of human experience, and this applies particularly to the context of African American and feminist studies. Spiritually based studies of faith, self, and **identity** can seem in this context to be counterproductive to notions both of African American cultures and feminism, since "spirituality" and religious topics can be read as necessarily restrictive, overladen with white-privileged notions of ethnicity and identity, archaic traditions, and oppressive reasonings that support a **history** of phallocentric white and culturally dominative patriarchal Judeo-Christian thought. Cultural materialist feminists argue that it is necessarily repressive and discriminatory. Yet "spirituality" may also have a liberatory and self-affirming agenda. Questions of spiritual identity and faith description are embedded deep within the texts of African American **literature**, and from their early beginnings in **slave narrative**, many feminists, female and male writers alike, have explored spiritual identity from an African American feminist perspective.

**Maya Angelou**, in her autobiographical series that begins with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) speaks of spirituality and ethical formation in the context of a broadly Christian pathway toward redemption and self-acceptance, but within a context of narrative storytelling that seeks to dismantle the traditional distinction between respectable society and the social-religious

outcast. Describing her time in a “whorehouse,” she dismantles the socio-economic and moralistic divisions drawn between ideas of social “good,” respectability, and those who have seemingly sinned. She also draws attention to the manner in which religious ideologies have sought to label, confine, and constrict black women’s **sexuality** in a negative frame. Angelou and her contemporaries present an African American women’s spirituality of growth, wholeness, and depth of experience. In this iconography even negative experiences of oppression, **violence**, and suffering can serve as a crucible for the development of better, wiser, stronger African American women, able to stand up on behalf of others and themselves, and capable of deep qualities of interpersonal understanding and compassion. Unlike many traditional religious definitions, African American feminist spirituality of this type sees little or no distinction between the political struggle for **freedom** and self-development, the self-determination of the human **body** (equalling sexual freedom), and the health of the human soul. Contemporary spiritualities of African American feminist identity, while famously diverse and hybrid, tend to share in this common affirmatory and liberatory theme.

Literary consideration of African American feminist spirituality has also led to a reassertion of normative, nonalienation “bedrock” theistic values. **Alice Walker** famously allows her heroine in *The Color Purple* (1982) to journey beyond what she sees as “God” as part of her journey toward feminist and lesbian maturity. The religious values she encounters as a child are dominating and oppressive. Her journey beyond them requires engagement with the wholeness of life and human values. At the same time she reencounters and reenvisioned the biblical narratives, exploring the narratives of African and post-African history. This does not lead to atheism, however; instead, Celie moves toward a more holistic vision of world and woman-affirming spirituality at the end of the book. Enthusiastically received, this work has underscored attempts to integrate accounts of spiritual liberation into African American experience.

At the other extreme, **Toni Morrison’s** *Beloved* (1987) creates a transgressive spirituality of ghost-hood that challenges comfortable spiritualities of belonging that attempt to deny social reality or bury the crimes of the past. At the same time Morrison forcibly reminds American culture of an authentic African American spirituality of storytelling that encompasses **folklore**, **myth**, and supernatural belief systems. This inclusive pattern challenges simplistic readings of American spirituality that would base all African American experience around the stories of the Bible. Morrison also challenges comfortable renderings of African American spirituality that would seek to place it too simplistically within the redemptive and patriarchal model of faith tradition favored by the West. By contrast, **Lucille Clifton’s** poetic work intersperses civil rights and political themes with a lyrical mysticism that draws from other faith traditions such as Judaism (the Old Testament) and Hinduism. Texts such as these present spiritual narratives of passionate engagement with society while also representing the walk of the human journey in spiritually inspirational and positivistic terms.



Other faith signifiers have also played a strong role in the development of a distinctively African American feminist spirituality. Magic, retrospective diasporic perspectives, and even Islamic voices have all been part of the pattern as feminist women have sought to define themselves against a white male tradition of sympathetic **fiction** that has nonetheless laid boundaries of domination between African American men and women. The wisdom tradition of spirituality is also represented imaginatively in African American literature, the perspectives and standards of older women repeatedly shedding light on the **domestic** sphere and also on the perspectives of younger generations. Such women appear repeatedly in both adult and children's African American literature. The example of Mama in **Mildred Taylor's** *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976) is an example of **home**-based black feminist leadership, dispensing guidance and instruction on sensitive spiritual themes.

Yet women have always played a crucial social role in the politics of public spirituality, too. Slave narratives such as **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) explore spirituality from the paradigm of the oppressed, drawing upon religious and spiritual as well as humanistic values. Examples of African American women preachers such as Old Elizabeth are celebrated by feminist historians today. In the public sphere, black women leaders of faith such as Shakers **Rebecca Cox Jackson** and Rebecca Perot have been cited by writers like Alice Walker as forming part of a historical **womanist** spiritual tradition; they may be productively juxtaposed to male African Americans Martin Luther King and **Malcolm X**, to provide a more inclusive reading of women's spiritual leadership up to the present time.

In recent years many attempts have been made to separate spirituality and **religion**. Founded in 1966, Kwanzaa is an attempt to separate religious faith and spiritual-cultural practice. Rather, it attempts to incarnate an inherent spiritual quality—a respect for the transcendent, the sacred, the good, the right. A spiritual rather than a religious holiday, Kwanzaa is practiced by Muslims, Christians, black Hebrews, Jews, Buddhists, Bahai, and Hindus as well as those who follow the ancient traditions of Maat, Yoruba, Ashanti, Dogon, and others. “Cynth’ya lewis reed” is one of the many female poets who has written on this theme. Kwanzaa affirms a nondogmatic and inclusive African American cultural paradigm of spiritual life.

In recent years more attention has been paid to the boundary between spirituality and psychotherapy. Nancy Boyd-Franklin's *Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African American Experience* explores issues of psychoanalysis and of spirituality. **Audre Lorde's** **poetry** and life writing describes the development of a contemporary lesbian African American spirituality. She speaks particularly powerfully of the dangers of silence in colluding with oppression and of the need for an African American spirituality of woman to be clearly articulated and voiced. Jacqueline Amos's work in both art and poetry draws upon the politics of disability and spirituality while making a clearly

voiced appeal to consider transcendence and spiritual identity as the birthright of all. With particular force she urges us to consider the need to turn to the spirits of traditional West African and Ghanaian spirituality, as well as the spiritual traditions present in America today.

The work of anthology making has been critical, too; a pattern of **quilting** and mutual collaboration among women of color reflects the postdiasporic experience of diffusion and reemergence and the encompassing of multiple perspectives. Gloria Wade-Gayles's *My Soul Is a Witness: Black American Women's Spirituality* may be considered a work of art in its own terms, so powerfully does it encompass so many African American women's spiritual perspectives.

Recent developments in theology have seen Alice Walker's womanist theory come to dominate African American spirituality studies. Like Angelou, Walker emphasizes how woman is connected to her spirituality not just through religious environment (often artificial and damaging) but through the rhythms of nature and her own body. This creates a strong demand for African American women's spirituality to be taken seriously, not just with regard to the ongoing struggle for women's rights but with regard to the increasingly serious situation with regard to environmental degradation. Cultural theorist Delores Williams argues that there is a symbiosis between disrespect for "people of the earth," such as African American women, and disrespect for the earth itself. Karen Baxter-Fletcher's prose and poetry provide eloquent meditation on this.

Other writers such as Morrison and **Ntozake Shange** have also created strong fictional role models for the development of a people-centered womanist theology. In recent years the development of diaspora studies has created a strand of interest in the African spiritual tradition and its effect upon African American women's themes. Cultural scholars Marsha Foster Boyd and Carolyn Stahl Bohler argue for a new ethic of collaboration between feminist and womanist political-spiritual thought. At the same time, emergent scholars such as Marla Frederick have begun to look at the politics of African American women's religious experience.

In such a vibrant environment there is clear cause for celebration. At one extreme, the spiritualities of women of color are being celebrated, published, and discussed as never before. However, women of color need also to guard and preserve their distinctive identities from too great an identification with dominant norms of contemporary American culture. The clear emergence of an accommodation and welcome reception for African American feminist literary spirituality in mainstream American culture is, however, a fact appropriately symbolized by Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, the staggering popularity of Walker's *The Color Purple* in American universities, and the fact of Maya Angelou's presence at President William Clinton's inauguration ceremony in 1991.

*See also* Womanism

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Kerry Kidd

### SPIRITUALS

The musical heritage of African Americans that grew out of **slavery** is fraught with pain and struggle. African American slaves first created the sacred music known as "spirituals" in rural spaces of **plantation** slave communities. In opposition to slave owners who prohibited slave worship, African American slaves met in "praise houses" or "hush harbors," which might have been a cabin in the slave quarters or even a secluded area under a tree in the woods. These clandestine places became sacred spaces where slaves worshipped stealthily but freely. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) W.E.B. Du Bois called spirituals "sorrow songs" that expressed the soul of African American slaves and were "not simply . . . the sole American music, but . . . the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas" (7). Representing a worldview that sees little distinction between the sacred and the secular, enslaved African Americans sang spirituals to transcend their physical environment while laboring in plantation fields and homes as well as in worship meetings.

Spirituals are a uniquely African American art form in that they are grounded in oral traditions from West and Central African cultures and the American experience of slavery. Although many enslaved Africans adopted the tenets of **Christianity** for moral and spiritual guidance, their religious worship practices and beliefs reflected African rhythms, structures, and worldview. For instance, many spirituals are adaptations of Protestant lined-out hymns. This practice was particularly effective for African American oral culture. However, in the tradition of African American spirituals, the hymns

are infused with distinctly African characteristics. These elements include call and response, which demonstrates a relationship between the leader and the group; complex rhythms with syncopation and polyrhythms of hand-clapping, foot-tapping, exclamations, and percussive sounds; often a five-note pentatonic scale that is African based as opposed to the eight-note scale found in much of European music; an existentialist religious outlook concerned with day-to-day lived experience; concreteness of abstractions such as **death** viewed in everyday experience; a lack of distance between God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and humans, which, though blasphemous by European standards, is reflective of an African worldview of gods not being “Sunday gods” but involved in day-to-day situations; and a philosophy in which feeling takes priority over meaning, that is, **religion** is not only a philosophical or theological system but an emotional experience.

The significance of the Africanist aspects of spirituals culminates in the yearning for liberation they express. The oral tradition of spirituals is embedded in the slave experience and the desire for **freedom** and deliverance—freedom to own the self, to worship and live autonomously, and deliverance from the dehumanizing practices of forced labor, **rape**, familial separations, and the arbitrary **violence** of slavery. American slave owners institutionalized illiteracy to prevent slaves from challenging their authority, on the premise that illiterates could not participate in legal or public discourses. Yet not only did many slaves gain **literacy**; in developing an active, powerful oral discourse, slaves appealed to a higher authority to challenge the very inhumane practices of and racist ideology supporting the slave institution. Some spirituals contain lyrics explicitly about freedom, like the traditional song “Oh Freedom.” Other lyrics were more covert and implicit. Biblical stories of deliverance and freedom often were sung to express faith in ultimate justice. Often the complexity of these allusions rendered powerful speech acts of agency and insurgence. For example, “Mary Don You Weep” combines two seemingly disparate stories, Jesus’s resurrection of Lazarus in the New Testament and the Old Testament’s story of the Israelites’ deliverance from Egyptian slavery—a situation commonly paralleled with African American enslavement—in a celebration of life (freedom) and triumph of justice (defeat of an enemy). The lyrics are consoling, celebratory, and subversive. Certain lines suggest slaves take an active role in the defeat of slavery. Just as Moses was empowered by God to destroy Pharaoh and his army, this spiritual calls enslaved African Americans to be agents in slavery’s abolition.

With Emancipation, spirituals took on a more public presence that was less threatening to the American sociopolitical landscape. In 1871 at a fund-raising concert in Oberlin, Ohio, the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University stunned the audience with their rendition of spirituals. The economic success of the tour convinced Fisk, Hampton College, and other black colleges that concert choirs with a repertoire of spirituals was a lucrative enterprise to fund black higher education. These choirs adopted both the vocal tonalities of European classical choirs and physical deportment of restrained motion with members firmly holding their arms at their sides or clasping their hands. In this more

rigid format spirituals—exuding the proper amount of dignity and restraint—became an acceptable musical genre to be performed before mainstream audiences, that is, both black and white middle-class Americans of the late Victorian era. Indeed many African Americans gained prominence on the concert stage singing spirituals. Artists such as Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, and Marion Anderson garnered worldwide attention with spiritual repertoires. The success of black college choruses gave rise to many **community**-based groups called “jubilee quartets” who performed spirituals in the manner adopted by black college chorales.

As opposed to the more formal performance style of spirituals by black college choirs and stage performers, members of traditional black churches in the rural **South** continued to praise and worship in song and service with African aesthetics. These African American denominations were mostly Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal (including Holiness, Sanctified, and Church of God in Christ) churches.

The dawn of the new century saw the beginnings of the Great Migration of African Americans from rural southern areas to urban centers; African Americans responded to the constraints and opportunities of migration through sacred music. Unfortunately, the change in geography did not mean change in socioeconomic and political structures. In urban spaces African American migrants struggled with racial subjugation, economic deprivation, and housing discrimination. In spite of and to combat these circumstances, many migrants continued their worship and praise practices that sustained their mental and physical survival in the rural South. The genre of gospel music grew out of this location of sacred music. Concurrent with the development of **blues** and **jazz** in the secular world, the birth of gospel represents the continuum of cultural traditions in the quest for freedom and wholeness in a repressive environment.

Gospel was nurtured in African American folk churches, small storefront churches that functioned as the contemporary counterpart to the praise houses of the past. Founded on a theological philosophy that promoted emotional expressions and physical manifestations of the Holy Spirit as evidence of godliness, these churches permitted congregants to worship freely and praise vocally—in the forms of testimonials, prayers, and invocative interjections—and physically—through hand-clapping, foot-stomping, hand raising, body swaying, and dancing. Anthropologist **Zora Neale Hurston** argued that gospel originated in sanctified churches but migrated to other black church denominations. Primarily the domain of black Pentecostal denominations, gospel music founded on this form of worship is evidenced in black Baptist and Methodist churches as well.

In addition to bodily involvement, gospel songs were accompanied by musical instruments—guitars, pianos, tambourines, drums—played with lively rhythms and driving intensity. Often acknowledged as the “father of gospel music,” Thomas A. Dorsey, in the late 1920s, combined the rhythms of blues and jazz with sacred lyrics and coined the term *gospel* to distinguish this music from the other sacred music. Although initially Dorsey, Mahalia Jackson, and

other performers of gospel were rejected and often prohibited by some churches because of the blues and jazz influences, gospel became accepted as a more liberating musical form based on performance meant to inspire spiritual transcendence and individual wholeness. The musical representation of the original philosophy of Bishop Charles H. Mason, founder of the Church of God in Christ denomination, gospel embodied the whole of the African American experience in song and became a means of survival. This philosophy called for liberation themes as well as style. The tradition of spirituals as liberation texts that are multivalenced informed the new gospel musical form. For African Americans in the early twentieth century, freedom from slavery did not mean freedom from despair, and so the desire for deliverance from racial, economic, social, and political subjugation is evidenced in gospels for spiritual and communal uplift. Far from being the passive lamentations of a victimized people, gospel music functioned as an active oral discursive method of historiography and sociopolitical analysis. As such, black women gospel singers became arbiters empowered to interpret African American experience and American injustice in a biblical context of sin and redemption.

Across denominations, African American women have pioneered gospel through composing, singing, and performing. In the Church of God in Christ, Arizona Dranes's up-tempo piano-style gospel, mixing ragtime and barrel-house forms, influenced other gospel and blues artists as varied as Sisters Ernestine Washington and Rosetta Tharpe and Aaron "T-Bone" Walker. Born blind in Dallas, Texas, Dranes was not only the first black woman religious soloist to record exclusively on "**race** records," she composed songs and traveled to churches throughout Texas, Tennessee, Oklahoma, and Missouri. More significant to the development of gospel, Lucie E. Campbell composed over 100 songs that have become standards in the repertoire of black religious institutions. Although Thomas A. Dorsey is often called the "father of gospel music," Campbell introduced Dorsey to the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the world's largest organization of African American Christians with over 6 million members. Elected the music director of the Baptist Training Union Congress in 1916, Campbell commanded great influence on the National Baptist Convention's musical program from 1919 to 1962. Second in popularity only to Dorsey's "Precious Lord," the lyrics of her 1933 composition "He Understands; He'll Say, 'Well Done'" were so powerful that scores of individuals experienced religious conversion after hearing it performed by her protégé J. Robert Bradley. While Campbell preferred to write gospels in the classical choral tradition, later compositions like "Jesus Gave Me Water" (1946), recorded by Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers in 1951, and "In the Upper Room" (1947), recorded by Mahalia Jackson in 1952, have assured Campbell's place as, if not mother, at least midwife of gospel music.

Composing aside, African American women have made the greatest impact on gospel in the church through performance. As members of choirs, duet and quartet groups, and soloists, women performers wield authority and

power, spiritually moving listeners not just to consider their souls in relation to eternity but—as gospel is born of African American experience—to recognize the assaults on both their bodies and souls caused by racial injustices. Achieving success and fame as no other gospel singer, male or female, has ever done (thirty years after her death, she is still roundly regarded as the greatest gospel singer), Mahalia Jackson epitomized black women gospel singers with the authority to move, if not mountains, then people to spiritual and social action. Gospel performance then allowed women to take center stage, so to speak, as voices inveighed against subjugation and discrimination and for liberation and social justice in America.

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## STEREOTYPES

African American women’s writing has been deeply influenced by the individual black women authors’ experience of “double consciousness,” the phenomenon described by W.E.B. Du Bois as the condition of being ever cognizant of the way that you are perceived by others outside of your specific **identity** category. For black women writers this double consciousness is characterized by an awareness of that set of stereotypes by which, in the popular imagination, African American womanhood is ordered and defined. Aware of those negative images and ideas disseminated about black female identity and the limits that they impose of black women’s movement and status within the larger society, African American women writers have historically used their **literature** to respond to these stereotypes. Writing against and in the context of the widespread familiarity of mainstream American readers with negative icons like the **Mammy**, the **Jezebel**, the **Sapphire**, and (more recently) the Welfare Queen, the Matriarch, and the Strong

Black Woman, many African American women have created their fictional narratives, poems, autobiographical writings, and plays with an eye toward both the stereotypes themselves and challenging the second-class treatment of black women that they tacitly endorse.

The capacity of stereotypes to shape the perception and treatment of a given identity group is one of the elements of negative iconography referred to by the use of the term “controlling image.” The concept of the controlling image, popularized by Patricia Hill Collins in her landmark study *Black Feminist Thought*, refers to the way that the widespread embrace of negative icons of black womanhood necessitates that black women first engage with and dismantle those stereotypes that define the ways that African American womanhood becomes visible in order to create a space for the depiction of black female subjects whose interests and characteristics contradict the popular understanding of the limits of African American women’s identity. The notion of the controlling image also, however, points to some of the important and often detrimental ways that negative stereotypes can shape and define the treatment and status accorded to a given ethnic, racial, **class**, or gender group.

Black women’s attention to the dismantling of negative stereotypes is most dramatically illustrated in the literature of the antebellum and post-Reconstruction periods, in which writers like **Harriet Jacobs**, **Harriet E. Wilson**, and **Frances E. W. Harper** created genteel, feminine, pious, often vulnerable African American women protagonists, as a counter to both the image of the Mammy, which depicted the black woman as a neuter or masculine figure, and the Jezebel stereotype, which depicted black women as oversexed seductresses, always already available for and desirous of penetration by any available males.

Stereotypes continue to shape and influence black women’s writing even in the contemporary period. African American women’s engagement with more recently evolved controlling images like the Matriarch, the Welfare Queen, and the Strong Black Woman are, however, less overt. African American women writers now rely on their representation of diverse black female experiences, none of which truly corresponds with any stereotype of black women’s identity, to demonstrate their rejection of even the most deeply ingrained understanding of black female subjectivity. Indirectly destabilizing the foundation on which widely held stereotypes of black womanhood are embraced, while directly addressing the broad spectrum of experiences that comprise African American female subjectivity, works like **Ntozake Shange’s** *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), **Toni Morrison’s** *Sula* (1973), and **Lucille Clifton’s** *Blessing the Boats* (2000) exceed the narrow spaces left open in the popular imagination for black female visibility and, in so doing, necessitate a renegotiation and eventually a wholesale abandonment of the limits and expectations for African American women’s identity.

*See also* Aunt Jemima



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*Ajuan Maria Mance*

### STEWART, MARIA (1803–1879)

Born Maria Miller in Hartford, Connecticut, to unknown parents who died before she was five, Maria Stewart spent her youth indentured to a minister's **family**. At age fifteen, she left the family and began a difficult existence as a **domestic** servant. She married black businessman James W. Stewart of Boston on August 10, 1826. Stewart, a veteran of the War of 1812, was several years her senior and quite successful. He introduced his new wife to Boston's lively free black **community**, which included his associate David Walker. When James Stewart died in 1829, though, Stewart was cheated out of her inheritance.

In the months following her husband's **death**, Walker was murdered and Stewart had a conversion experience. She began writing and, in 1831, published the pamphlet *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*, one of the earliest texts written by an African American woman. She published other essays soon after—in both pamphlet form and in the pages of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator*. In 1832, she gave her first public lecture, arguably the first such speech by a black woman; in 1833, hoping to build on her lectures in Boston, she moved to New York, where she became active in the Female Literary Society. In 1835, she published a collection of her speeches and essays, *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*. Her work from this period focused on encouraging antislavery and antiracist activism within an evangelical Christian framework. She specifically emphasized the egalitarianism she saw within Christian thought and considered radical means to achieve that ideal; in this, her work's evocation of Walker's infamous *Appeal* (1829) is marked. But the lectures and essays are also important in both their early attention to women's rights—Stewart has often and rightly been characterized as an early feminist—and for their construction of an audience of northern free blacks.

Though she attended both the 1837 and the 1850 Women's Antislavery Conventions, she essentially left the public lectern for the classroom. For four decades after leaving Boston, she taught in a range of schools—first in and around New York City, then in Baltimore, and finally, in and after the Civil War, in Washington, D.C. Her final years were spent as the Matron of the Freedmen's Hospital in Washington; as she had throughout her life, she also continued to teach Sunday school.

It was while in Washington in 1879 that she finally filed and won a claim for her husband's naval service in the War of 1812; with the funds she

received, she published an enlarged version of her collected works under the title *Meditations by Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* (1879).

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*Eric Gardner*

## STIGMATA

In her novel *Stigmata* (1998), **Phyllis Alesia Perry** uses fictional characters to document the painful sojourn of the black female in America, beginning with her capture in Africa. Perry provides a somewhat complex genealogy of three black women. However, the genealogical chart at the beginning of the book is helpful. Elizabeth, "Lizzie" DuBose, the principal character in the novel, serves as the presence of black womanhood dating back to the capture in Africa of her great-great-grandmother, Ayo, moving through succeeding generations to Ayo's daughter, Joy, Lizzie's great-grandmother; Joy's daughter Grace, Lizzie's grandmother; Grace's daughter Sarah, Lizzie's mother.

Significantly, Perry uses female **family** members to tell the story of the wounds, both emotional and physical, that were inflicted on the black female culture bearers who nurture and prepare succeeding females to carry on their collective presences. These females recognize no time boundaries or parameters; they suffer no such limitations. They, in this case, the African female who gives life to the African American female, are the "forever" people. Young Elizabeth "Lizzie" DuBose, the only child of the middle-class, educated Drs. John and Sarah DuBose, inherits the responsibility of connecting to the past, an incomplete journey started by her grandmother Grace who dies

before Lizzie's birth. Grace writes to her sister Mary Nell in a letter dated 1945 instructing her to pass Grace's trunk and its content, which are the keys to the past, on to her granddaughter, the yet unborn Lizzie.

Even as a young person, Lizzie already possesses a strong, pervading sense of the past. At age fourteen, as she awaits the memorial services for Aunt Eva, her last remaining maternal great-aunt, Lizzie recalls, "I feel older than old." Later, as a young adult, she tells Father Tom Jay, a visiting priest who provides her with the true explanation of the cause of her suffering, that she "is an old soul in a young **body**."

Father Tom Jay, who is at once the church and Lizzie's liberator, explains that the wounds she experienced come as a result of her intense identification with the sufferings of her great-great-grandmother, Ayo. He further tells her of the Christians, early as well as recent, who identified so closely with the sufferings of Christ that they experienced body wounds that corresponded with the sites on which the crucified Christ was wounded, for instance, ankles, hands, feet, forehead, shoulders, and back. Similarly, Lizzie experienced Ayo's bleeding wounds caused by the chains that bound her hands and feet during the time she was kidnapped after she had strayed away from her mother in the village. Later on during the **Middle Passage**, the reopened sores on Ayo's wrists bleed profusely, as do Lizzie's wrists. The bloody beating of Ayo's back inflicted by her mistress, Miz Ward, left deep scars. Lizzie also bleeds from her deeply scarred back.

The arts play a major role in Lizzie's search for the past. Early on, the illiterate Ayo demands that her semiilliterate daughter Joy write Ayo's recall of the events, mostly cruel, that shaped her life. Actually, the writing is a memoir, dictated to a close, trusted recorder. One could think, justifiably so, that Joy's recording of her mother's **history** is a forerunner of the **slave narrative**. Just as in the slave narrative, Ayo establishes her **identity**. She dismisses the name Bessie, assigned to her by whites. In doing so she emerges as an African capable of doing what only she, symbolic of millions of Africans can do: tell her own story, establish her own identity, recognize her own history uncluttered and distorted by outside forces. "I am Ayo. I remember."

As Lizzie gets in touch with her past, she finds that the journal Dr. Brun insists that she keeps draws her one step toward the completion of her journey. The art of **quilting** and the quilt itself are of vital importance to Lizzie. Ayo quilts as she dictates her memoir to Joy. Lizzie, at age fourteen, starts the journey to the past, when she engulfs herself in Grace's quilt, pulling it up her chin. Lizzie and Sarah put the closing stitches on a quilt made in **memory** of Sarah's mother, Grace. As mother and daughter recognize that they are Ayo, Joy, Grace, the journey is completed.

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## **STREET, THE**

**Ann Petry's** first novel, *The Street* (1946), follows the life of Lutie Johnson as she strives to transcend the constraints of **race**, **class**, and gender and seize a life of happiness for herself and her son. Earning Petry the Houghton Mifflin Literary Award and selling over a million copies—the first novel by a black woman to do so—*The Street* recasts a tradition of African American sociological realism introduced by **Richard Wright's** *Native Son* (1940) within the context of black female experience. Its focus on the life of a black woman situates *The Street* within a tradition of **black feminism** and black feminist **literature** where African American women adapt established themes, popular tropes, and literary conventions to reflect experiences overwhelmingly informed, and often constrained, by race and gender.

Fair-skinned, hardworking, and well-educated Lutie moves from Long Island to Connecticut to **work** as a maid for the Chandler **family**. While coping with her employers' improprieties, she learns that her husband, who takes care of their son Bud, and to whom she has been sending money, has a mistress. After divorcing her husband, Lutie takes custody of her son and moves to Harlem with the hope that life there will be much improved.

Lutie soon learns that life on 116th Street in Harlem is too harsh to nurture her seeds of hope. The American dream Lutie pursues is made elusive by institutionalized values that she had no hand in fashioning and is powerless against dismantling. Overwhelmed by **violence**, racism, and sexism, Lutie's story, while depressing to many, reads more like a **blues** song than a suicide note. In the tradition of **Harriet Jacobs** who, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), placed **freedom** over marriage, and **Gwendolyn Brooks's** poetic rendering of the otherwise simple life of Maud Martha, Lutie Johnson lives on to sing her song. Like the blues woman who sings the melody of her "brutal experience," Petry, however sorrowfully, gives voice to Lutie's song of transcendence. Lutie's transcendence comes through her survival, albeit brutal and horrific, not from her "success." Where rugged individualism, financial prosperity, and social success define classic white, male, mainstream versions of the American dream, Petry suggests that for black women who face race, sex, class, and gender oppressions in the same institutions from which they are expected to find prosperity, survival supersedes success. By the end of the novel, although Bud has turned to crime and his mother to murder, Lutie nevertheless departs for Chicago ready to begin again.

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*Shanna Greene Benjamin*

**SULA**

**Toni Morrison's** second novel *Sula* (1973) is set in the "bottom of heaven," the black **community** perched in the hills above Medallion, Ohio, and spans five decades, from 1919 to 1965. The novel follows the divergent paths of two girlhood friends, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, recounting both the difficulties of living outside of community and the dangers of living within it. The novel also explores various representations of **motherhood**, each marked by alienation, dysfunction, and its own form of **love**.

Nel Wright is the daughter of an obsessively respectable woman who has disowned her own mother, a New Orleans Creole prostitute. Journeying to her great-grandmother's funeral, Nel is repulsed by her mother's submission to a white train conductor. The trauma of her excursion into the white-dominated world extinguishes Nel's desire to leave Medallion ever again; however, the nascent separation from her mother provides a sense of individuality that empowers Nel to befriend Sula Peace.

Sula's disorderly **home** life is set in distinct contrast to the sterility and stability of Nel's. While Nel's mother (and eventually Nel herself) embodies the community's traditional morality in her roles as wife and mother, Sula's mother, Hannah, exudes an open **sexuality** that delights the community's men and confounds its women. Sula's grandmother, Eva, who reportedly sacrificed a leg for enough money to support her children, presides over the Peace home, a rambling and anything-but-peaceful maternal space that prefigures *Beloved's* (1987) 124 Bluestone: It shelters the dispossessed, the newly married, and the un-homed. But as in *Beloved*, the house is an uncertain refuge: After Eva's son Plum returns from the war strung out on heroin, she douses him with kerosene and lights him on fire so that he can die like a man. As in other Morrison novels, an act of **violence** serves in the perpetrator's eyes as a form of love, protection, and a way to regain some lost thing, here her son's **black masculinity**, independence, and selfhood. Later, however, Eva sees judgment upon her when Hannah catches fire while burning leaves. Eva throws herself from a third-story window but cannot save her daughter. Pervaded by a distant sense of satisfaction, Sula mutely witnesses her mother's **death**.

Sula's emotional distance from her mother crystallizes earlier when she overhears Hannah confess that she loves but does not like her. The declaration—heard

by the young girl as a denunciation—is followed by Sula’s accidental murder of a boy named Chicken Little, a death Nel mutely witnesses. The calm control Nel shows at Chicken’s death is matched only by Sula’s fierce devotion; she slices off the tip of a finger to show four white bullies the lengths she will go to in order to protect herself and her friend.

On Nel’s wedding day, Sula leaves town, returning ten years later in 1937 with a plague of robins, a college degree, and an open sexuality that resembles her mother’s. Sula sleeps with any man she wants, but unlike her mother, she subsequently spurns her conquests. The women who could at least accept Hannah’s sexual attentions as a compliment to their men feel Sula’s scorn as a judgment upon themselves. The birthmark on Sula’s eyelid, seen as a rose, a snake, a fish, represents to the community an evil that makes their own lives cleaner, purer, surer. Nel, too, condemns her girlhood friend after Jude, her husband and the father of her two children, becomes one of Sula’s men. Nel cannot forgive Sula for the failure of her marriage, and Sula cannot understand Nel’s possessiveness. To Sula, sex is disconnected from emotion, a disembodied act of the **body** that allows her to feel a sorrow unattainable through any other means. Not until Sula begins a sexual relationship with Albert Jacks (Ajax), a man ten years her senior, does she begin to understand Nel’s possessiveness. But at her first signs of nesting, Ajax leaves, abandoning Sula to a self that now understands a difference between loneliness and being alone.

By 1940, Sula is dying. During Nel’s last visit to her childhood friend, she articulates the crux of the community’s resentment. Sula cannot just live like a man: independent, free, playing sexual havoc. However, rejecting traditional concepts of gendered and raced morality, Sula suggests that being a colored woman and being a man are no different and that the only difference between her and other women is what they do on the way to dying. In this alternate configuration of morality, Sula suggests that it was she, not Nel, who was the “good” one all along. Sula dies, comforted by the finality and security of Eva’s boarded-up bedroom window.

Twenty-five years later, after being confused for Sula by an ailing Eva Peace, Nel finally refigures and understands her own pervasive sense of loss: Jude came between her and Sula. As in Morrison’s eighth novel *Love* (2003), the bond between women, forged in preadolescence, ultimately overrides the mature and restrictive sexual relationship between husband and wife. Although *Sula* is about the relationships between women—especially girl-friendships and different ways of mother love—it is as much an exploration of self and other, love and sorrow, independence and interdependence within the black community.

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

## **SYMPTOMATIC**

**Danzy Senna** is interested in the claustrophobia of **identity** and **race** and in relationships that degenerate from comforting to smothering. In her psychological thriller *Symptomatic* (2004), Senna focuses on two women of mixed race who find themselves in a bizarre, somewhat codependent, and tumultuous friendship based on their feelings of estrangement in a divided black and white world.

Unlike *Caucasia* (1998), the characters are adults, the protagonist (and unnamed first-person narrator) fresh out of college, and the antagonist a middle-aged coworker who, we eventually discover, has multiple identities. We first know her as Greta but later learn that she is also Vera and that her adoption of identities is not limited to these two. Senna describes her nameless narrator as a weak character, someone whom others project onto, and who is as yet unformed. She is such not because of her femaleness but because of her racelessness.

The narrator has moved to New York City to accept a fellowship at a magazine when she meets Andrew on the subway. The two quickly become lovers and are soon cohabitating, not through any real desire on the narrator's part but rather out of her desperation to escape residence at a dilapidated women's boardinghouse. Andrew represents the preparatory school world of wealthy white racists. When the protagonist reluctantly attends a party with Andrew's school friends, a game turns to bigotry for humor, and she retreats to the bathroom where, oddly, she falls asleep.

Enter jaded, bitter, and unstable Greta. Greta aids the narrator in securing a rent-controlled sublet belonging to Vera, whom Greta reports has fled the

country, and thus begins their bizarre symbiotic relationship. The narrator leaves Andrew and lives at Vera's, and much of the book develops the odd relationship she shares with Greta. Greta is half full of **love** and half full of hate for her "twin." She swings between glorification and loathing of the narrator, who eventually begins to suffer from the smothering nature of their relationship, while working carefully to escape Greta's grasp.

When given an opportunity to write a piece for the magazine, the narrator is confronted with the black and seemingly bigoted artist Ivers Greene. He does not seem to see her as black enough, as he asks if she is a "quadroon." He then asks whether she pronounces an epithet in "proper" English or in "black" English. The narrator is offended, curbing the interview, and exiting abruptly. Strangely, a romance is born.

The novel takes a dramatic turn when Greta is exposed as Vera, the sublet is revealed as having been her apartment all along, and Greta, the frightening doppelgänger, turns violent.

The book addresses many of the same themes as *Caucasia*: identity, mixed race, "twin" relationships, prejudice, and **violence**. Senna continues to tackle the dark issue of "**passing**" in America and in the process exposes something far darker: how such lack of identity, such namelessness, can lead to compliance or submission rather than resistance and strength.

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*Deirdre Fagan*







## **TAR BABY**

**Toni Morrison's** fourth novel, *Tar Baby* (1981), is set in the 1970s at the villa L'Arbe de le Croix on the Isle de Chevaliers, a Caribbean island that, according to **folklore**, made slaves go blind when they saw it. The Americanized isle is juxtaposed with the Caribbean town Queen of France, the rural black town of Eloë, Florida, and the urban metropolises of New York and Paris. The island itself is a microcosmic representation—a sociological greenhouse—of the complex interconnectedness of **race**, gender, **class**, nation, and **identity**. *Tar Baby* also explores the deep, delicate, and difficult relationship between blacks and whites and how that culturally articulated racial division affects individual identity.

Throughout the novel, Jadine Childs struggles with what it means to be a black woman in a racist, patriarchal, classist world and which of the three—race, gender, or class—forms the core of her identity. Her emotional paralysis stems from an inability to reconcile her disparate identities: Jade is a successful African American model with an art **history** degree from the Sorbonne; Jadine is an orphaned black girl from a working-class **family**. The novel opens with Jade already anxious that her white suitor, Ryk, loves only her exoticized blackness, but her repressed anxiety over her identity only fully surfaces when, in a Parisian market, Jade encounters a dark-skinned African woman in a bright yellow dress who looks at her and spits. The woman's disdain sends Jadine to L'Arbe de la Croix less for the advice of the

aunt and uncle who raised her than for some temporary escape from her own psychological confusion over her racial identity and responsibility.

Jadine's position at L'Arbe de le Croix, the **home** of the white Valerian and Margaret Street, encapsulates her liminality. Jadine is the niece of Sydney and Ondine Childs, who have been the Streets' primary servants for over thirty years. She is also serving as a paid companion to Margaret through the Christmas holidays and is further indebted to the Streets for financing her education. However, rather than sleeping and eating with her family in the servants' quarters, the pampered Jade sleeps upstairs in a guest room and eats with the Streets.

Jade feels safe in her retreat until the unexpected intrusion of the nomadic Son Green, a black man who, after a dishonorable discharge, returned to his hometown of Eloë and killed his wife Cheyenne when he found her having sex with a thirteen-year-old boy. Although Son is initially an intruder in the Street household, he soon becomes a guest, much to the Childs' dismay. Sydney and Ondine represent an older generation of African Americans, linked by profession to **slavery** but by pride to financially stable blacks who perpetuated their own sense of classist superiority. They are self-proclaimed "Philadelphia Negroes," always proper and perfect in their service and unwilling to recognize a shared heritage with Son or the novel's diasporic people. Jade, too, initially treats Son with disdain; however, she is also forcefully attracted to him.

The novel's crisis comes at the Christmas dinner Margaret cooks and their son Michael does not come to, the one dinner where black and white families sit down together to eat. After a dispute between the Streets and the Childs over who controls the hired help, Ondine confesses the secret she has kept for almost three decades: Margaret physically abused her son Michael. Thus Margaret commits the morally reprehensible act that is common in Morrison's fiction. Although direct culpability lies with Margaret (who suffers from guilt-induced mental lapses), the text also exposes the other characters' complicity. Valerian ignored clear signs of abuse to maintain the illusion of himself as loving father, and Ondine failed to expose the abuse for economic security; she feared losing her position.

In the Streets' dysfunctional marriage and the abuse of Michael, the text further exposes the corrosive pressures of a gendered class system on individual relationships: Margaret was a poor, ignorant girl married just out of high school and just off the **beauty**-queen float. Valerian was the Philadelphia candy king. Marking Margaret's lack of education and youth as significant liabilities, the rich women in her husband's set tell her that she should "get to **work** fast" (i.e., become pregnant). **Motherhood** is here understood as the primary way to maintain a higher class status for an uneducated woman. Margaret takes the advice but, unready for motherhood, begins to abuse the son she also idealizes; as Ondine explains, Margaret was hurting Valerian's baby, not her own. Valerian's horror over his wife's behavior and his own blindness to the abuse drives him into a mental feebleness that Margaret and the Childs promptly capitalize on by assuming power over him.

The explosive dinner also facilitates the consummation of Jadine and Son's relationship. Although the Childs disapprove of their niece marrying a white man, they disapprove more of her relationship with Son: Here, class trumps race. The pair flees to New York, where they spend a blissful few months replete with sexual and emotional intimacy. However, when they visit Eloë, the **community's** strict moral code demands they sleep in separate houses. In the home of Aunt Rosa, who calls her "daughter," Jade is haunted by all the women in her life, specters who surround the bed, their breasts exposed. Her horror at their silent demand is linked to her confusion over her own identity. She recognizes that she and Son are both black but believes they are from disparate worlds, divided by class and defined by gender. Her objectification of the people of Eloë through the lens of her camera, however, merely mimics the objectification of her own black female **body** through the photographer's lens in Europe. The text uses photographs—the magazine image of Jade as the bronze Venus and the black-and-whites of the citizens of Eloë—to illustrate how people frame cultural difference through their own objectifying gazes. After Jade and Son return to New York, their relationship quickly degenerates into one of abuse interspersed with raw **sexuality**. Jade finally leaves Son when she recognizes in their relationship what she foreswore as a child: a pack of dogs copulating with a bitch in heat.

During Jade's stop at the Isle de la Chevalier on route to Paris, the novel's discussion of what it means to be a black woman takes center stage. Ondine tells her niece that she has to learn to be a daughter first before she can be a wife, mother, or any kind of woman. But Jade hears in her aunt's words not only the echo of Aunt Rosa's "daughter" but also a plea for her to "mother" them in their old age, a shackling to a soldier-ant way of life that demands hard labor, sacrifice, and no dreams, as well as an identity limited by race, class, and gender.

The novel ends without clear resolution for either Jadine or Son, who pursues her. Thérèse, the blind, second-sighted woman, rows Son to the Isle de Chevaliers and urges him to choose the blind and naked ghost men who ride the hills and to forget Jade, who has lost her ancient properties. In the novel's closing lines, the reader leaves Son, after language indicative of a symbolic rebirth, running lickety-split toward the trees. Jade returns to Paris, perhaps as divided as she is at novel's beginning, perhaps ready to face all that haunted her: the women in her dreams, the leashed and straining dogs, her own self-doubts. The novel ultimately refrains from articulating a single definition of black womanhood or offering any wax wings to escape the intricate maze of race, gender, class, nation, and identity.

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*Julie Cary Nerad*

## TATE, ELEANORA E. (1948– )

Eleanora Tate was born in Canton, Missouri, where she experienced segregation during her early years. She graduated from Drake University in 1973, worked in journalism and public relations, and in 1981 won a fellowship in children’s **literature** for the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. She lives in Morehead City, North Carolina, and speaks frequently about **children’s and young adult literature** at schools, public libraries, and universities. Her books for middle-grade children deal with complicated issues including the importance of racial **identity**, understanding and appreciating black **history** and culture, and positive images of black **family** relationships, especially between fathers and daughters. She also discusses the importance of making the best of situations one cannot change. Tate’s young heroines and their struggles are engaging and realistic, so the stories avoid the didacticism some of her themes imply.

Her first novel, *Just an Overnight Guest* (1980), set in small-town Missouri, deals with a nine-year-old’s resentment when her parents take in an abused child who exhibits abusive behavior. Her loving father helps Margie accept

the situation and take responsibility for the girl. A **film** version of the book was aired on *Nickelodeon* and *Wonderworks*. The sequel, *Front Porch Stories at the One-Room School* (1992), concerns the stories Margie's father tells outside the abandoned one-room school about the **community** and its history, which lead the abused girl to tell her own sad story.

Three other novels concern a loving South Carolina family. *The Secret of Gumbo Grove* (1987) is about an eleven-year-old unhappy about her teacher telling the class that blacks had never done anything important in their coastal resort town. An elderly lady challenges Raisin Stackhouse to restore an abandoned church cemetery, and the curious history lover learns that the city's founder, a black man, is buried there and that the reason the community does not talk about its history is its sorrow about the segregated past and the fear stirring up white resentment. Feisty Raisin eventually sees her oral history tapes become a source of pride to her community. *Thank you, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.!* (1990) discusses the sensitive issue of skin color as Mary Elouise's white teacher and classmates disparage black history and show black people as victims. Mary Elouise also envies a popular white classmate and prefers her white dolls over her black ones. Through the encouragement of a visiting black storyteller, she learns to have pride in her heritage and produces a school play about black history. *A Blessing in Disguise* (1995) portrays Zambia, a twelve-year-old who lives with her loving and strict aunt and uncle but glamorizes her absent drug-dealing father. When she sees firsthand what drugs and crime do to a community, she joins the battle against them. Zambia also develops a realistic attitude toward her father. In Tate's latest novel, *The Minstrel's Melody* (2001), twelve-year-old Orphelia runs away from **home** in 1904 to join an all-black minstrel show on its way to the St. Louis World's Fair and learns some family secrets.

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Susan L. Golden

### TAYLOR, MILDRED D. (1943– )

One of this country's most distinguished and honored authors of **fiction** for children and young adults, Mildred Taylor was born in Mississippi but moved north with her **family** while a baby. She attended Toledo, Ohio's newly integrated schools and was often the only black child in her classes. She always felt intense scrutiny, as though all African Americans were to be judged by her behavior, and also noticed the dissonance between what little she read of black **history** in school textbooks and what she knew of her heritage from the oral history of her family in the South, whom she often visited. After her graduation from the University of Toledo in 1965, Taylor became a Peace Corps volunteer. She completed an M.A. in journalism at the University of Colorado, and she currently lives in Boulder.

In 1973 she won a prize for the manuscript of *Song of the Trees*. Published by Dial in 1975, it introduced the subject of most of her books: the Logan family of Mississippi. Grandfather Logan, a freed slave and skilled carpenter, bought the first 200 acres of the farm the family holds on to so tenaciously over the next century. Set during the Great Depression, Cassie Logan's father is away earning money to pay taxes when white men threaten to cut down trees on their land. Fortunately, Mr. Logan returns in time to stand up to the men. Strong feelings of family unity, racial **identity, love** of the land, and standing up to white racism are major themes of this book and the powerful, beautifully written books that followed, all of which are based on stories told and retold in Taylor's family and which follow the Logans up to the early 1950s. Southern history is masterfully interwoven into these novels.

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), the second novel, explores Cassie's first exposure to racism in everyday life. She and her brothers walk to an inferior black school with hand-me-down texts, while the white children are picked up by the school bus, which splatters the Logan children with mud as they trudge along. Mama is fired from her teaching job because she infuses black history into her curriculum. A terrible incident in which several black men are set on fire leads to a store boycott instigated by the Logans of the suspected ringleader and yet more repercussions for the black **community**. The impossibility of friendship between Cassie and a white boy is also highlighted. Although racism is a strong theme, there are several sympathetic white characters, and there are some villainous black characters as well. This Newbery Award book is widely taught in middle schools, as are other novels in the series. Taylor has won numerous other awards, including three Coretta Scott

King Awards. In 2003 she won the first NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature, awarded by the University of Oklahoma, and in 2004 the University of Mississippi's Oxford Conference for the Book celebrated Mildred D. Taylor Day in the state.

*See also* Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Susan L. Golden

### TAYLOR, SUSIE KING (1848-1912)

While there is no dearth of eyewitness accounts of the Civil War, Susie King Taylor's *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp W the 33rd United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C.* (1902) is the only such surviving document by an African American woman. As such, it provides invaluable information about the operations of the nation's first black regiment and importantly chronicles the shifting mood of African Americans during and following the Civil War.

While Taylor's title foregrounds her military service, it is notable that her account opens instead with a chronology of her female **ancestors** and their



achievements. Beginning with her great-great-grandmother, Taylor details her matrilineage, finally coming to her parents, Raymond and Hagar Ann Baker. While this emphasis on her matrilineal line in part reflects the realities of **slavery**, Taylor's knowledge of her antecedents is atypical and signals the specificity of her situation. Grest Farm, the Taylors' home, was on the Isle of Wight, Liberty County, Georgia, a **community** founded by Puritans and considered liberal by contemporary standards. Mrs. Grest was fond of Susie, and in 1854 Taylor and two siblings were allowed to move to Savannah to live with their grandmother, Dolly Reed, nominally freed by the Grests.

In Savannah, Taylor's grandmother ensured that the children received an education. **Literacy**—already a rebellious act—enabled the young girl to engage in further rebellions, writing passes and following “Yankee activity” in newspaper accounts. When the war reached Savannah in 1862, many African Americans fled. Taylor found herself on St. Catherine Island under the protection of the Union fleet. Upon learning that she could read and write, Commodore Goldsborough placed her in charge of the school on St. Simon's Island. There she met Sgt. Edward King of the First South Carolina Volunteers (later known as the 33rd Regiment), whom she married within the year. When the regiment was ordered to Camp Saxton in Beaufort, Taylor followed as a laundress. However, other skills were desperately needed, and Taylor was soon a practiced nurse. More is said of smallpox than of her marriage, reflecting the tenor of the war and the seriousness with which she treated her duties and those in her charge.

Taylor's position enabled her to interact with many notable whites, including Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, and Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Col. C. T. Trowbridge, both of whom wrote letters that preface Taylor's narrative. Yet while her genuine respect for them is apparent, it is the compassion with which she describes individual African American soldiers that most deeply characterizes her account of the war.

After being mustered out February 9, 1866, Taylor and her husband opened a school in Savannah. Unable to make ends meet, King took other **work**, sustaining injuries that resulted in his **death** on September 16, 1866. The arrival of free schools caused the young widow and new mother to give up school teaching for profit. However, her work as a laundress for a **family** that vacationed in New England introduced her to Boston, where she settled circa 1874.

In Boston, Taylor met her second husband, Russell Taylor, whom she married in 1879. There she also continued as an advocate for African American veterans, becoming a founding member of the Corps 67 Women's Relief Corps in 1886 and president in 1893. The death of her son in 1898 was a debilitating blow, not only emotionally but also in the insidious role racism played in hastening his demise. In her reflections on the lack of progress, Taylor muses, “Was the war in vain? Has it brought freedom, in the full sense of the word, or has it not made our condition more hopeless?”

Taylor died on October 6, 1912, at the age of sixty-one, ten years after the publication of her memoirs. She served the Union army for over four years

without pay and struggled in the cause of racial uplift. She is buried next to her second husband in an unmarked grave in Mount Hope Cemetery, Roslindale, Massachusetts.

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Jennifer Harris

### TEMPLE OF MY FAMILIAR, THE

Alice Walker's 1989 novel *The Temple of My Familiar* attempts in **fiction** to relate the **history** of the world through an African and female lens; it is, as the author calls it, a romance of the last 500,000 years. The novel includes a whole host of characters including Shug and a relative of Celie's from *The Color Purple* (1982). Instead of a book determined to create narrative tension, fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin notes characters seek answers to moral questions and push one another toward self-reflection, knowledge, and truth. Miss Lissie is a reincarnated woman who remembers each life of her past clearly except the first few that she recalls as dreamlike. She tells of her prehistoric lives in Africa, her time as a pygmy, her various returns as slaves, and many others, including her existence as a lion. Suwelo, a professor of American history, is Lissie's audience as he resides in his newly inherited house to escape temporarily from his wife Franny and lover Carlotta. Carlotta is married to musician Arveyda, who takes up with her mother Zedé, a South American exile rescued by a white woman. It is through these characters that readers are swept into a **myth** that inverts the hierarchy of man and woman, Europe and Africa. This myth sets Africa as the true center of all **religion** and civilization and casts man as a deformed female with an elongated clitoris and without breasts and a vagina. After listening to Lissie's past, Suwelo is able to return **home** to his wife, where he quits the academy by the end of the novel. Carlotta and Arveyda remain married but maintain separate residences. Zede marries a shaman in Mexico.

Critics have, on the whole, been negative in their reception of Walker's fourth novel, which followed the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple*.

These writers focused on a number of aspects including viewing it as a mythic fantasy, a **love** fable, a feminist manifesto, and a retold history. Some feminist scholars have centered on Walker's retelling of the historically documented goddess-worshipping past that was systematically destroyed by **Christianity** and other religions, though continued to crop up in small pockets through the eons. Other writers centralize their analysis of the novel on the **family** saga in southern **literature**, diaspora writing from a postcolonial perspective, Jungian influences on Walker's works, and the rewriting of history looking bottom up rather than top down.

*See also Possessing the Secret of Joy; Womanism*

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*Laura Madeline Wiseman*

### TERRELL, MARY CHURCH (1863–1954)

Mary Church was born the daughter of slaves in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1863, the year of the Emancipation Proclamation. Her father emerged from **slavery** to become a prominent Memphis businessman and the first black millionaire through his real estate investments. She was sent to Ohio for the best education available for a black woman, and she eventually graduated with a bachelor's and a master's degree from Oberlin College. After graduating in 1884, she became a schoolteacher and traveled to Europe before settling in Washington, D.C., and marrying lawyer Robert Terrell. The couple settled in Washington, D.C., and raised daughters, Phyllis (named after black American colonial-era poet **Phillis Wheatley**) and Mary. Although Terrell had given up a prestigious position at Oberlin to marry, after marriage she pursued a variety of social reform and **community** activities. Terrell ultimately emerged as one of the preeminent advocates of social justice of the first half of the twentieth century.

Terrell became the first woman president of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association and served on the board of education for Washington, D.C. Increasingly, Terrell was drawn into the feminist cause and worked tirelessly for the rights of black women in particular. She became the founder in 1892 of the Colored Woman's League, which in 1896 merged with another organization to become the hugely influential National Federation of Colored

Women (NACW), with Terrell as its first president. The NACW sought to bring together black women's voices on a range of issues of concern to their sex and **race**. Terrell was a suffragist, women's rights activist, and peace activist who fought against the segregation of other women's organizations, such as the predominantly white General Federation of Women's Clubs, which had many of the same goals as the NACW. As head of the NACW between 1896 and 1901 Terrell urged white reformers, and especially white suffragists, in the national organizations to join with their black sisters. She herself was involved in almost all of the major women's groups of the era, both nationally and internationally. She was one of the few black members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and served as a delegate to the 1904 International Congress of Women in Berlin.

In addition to her travels and organizational duties, Terrell was also a speaker and a writer who published in periodicals within both the white and black reform communities. Her numerous essays and lectures addressed women's rights and education, the **work** of the women reformers, segregation, antilynching, prison reform, and the accomplishments of individuals in **history**, such as her tribute to "Susan B. Anthony, the Abolitionist" (1906) and "Phillis Wheatley—An African Genius" (1928). Terrell's most substantial written work was her **autobiography**, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, published in 1940 and, as the title indicates, a reflection on the issues of racial segregation and of woman's subordination that had been at the forefront of Terrell's career as a reformer. She lived another fourteen years after her book was published and continued to be active in the feminist movement and the **civil rights movement** until her **death**. She lived long enough to be honored by her alma mater when Oberlin granted her an honorary doctorate in 1948.

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Tiffany K. Wayne

### TERRY, LUCY (c. 1730–1821)

Born in Africa, Terry (who is also listed in some records as “Luce”) became the slave of Ebenezer Wells of Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1735. She was taught to read and write by an area minister and joined his church in 1744. Only two years later she composed the poem she is best known for—and what seems to be the only example of her **work** and the first poem by an African American to survive—“Bars Fight.” In ballad form, the poem describes an attack by Native Americans on two white families just outside of Deerfield (at the time, *bars* was a commonly used term for “meadows”) on August 25, 1746. Some critics have argued that while it does contain some interesting formal variations, it is otherwise unremarkable. Still, it had notable power over a local audience; though not published until 1855, it seems to have been regularly sung for more than a century after its composition.

Abijah Prince (also known as Obijah or Bijah), a free black man more than two decades her senior, seems to have purchased Terry’s **freedom** in 1756, and the two were married on May 17 of that year. Prince had been the slave of Northfield minister Benjamin Doolittle, and Doolittle seems to have both freed him and left him a small parcel of land at his **death**. Prince also acquired land in Guilford and Sunderland, Vermont, and the couple moved to Guilford soon after being married. Between 1757 and 1769, they had six children: Caesar, Duruxa, Drusilla, Festus, Tatnai, and Abijah.

They seem to have moved back and forth between Deerfield and Guilford during the early years of their marriage and between Guilford and Sunderland in the later years. While local histories mark the Princes positively when

talking of the area's few blacks (mainly because of Terry's reputation as a storyteller), what seems to have been a **race**-centered dispute with the neighboring white Noyes **family** turned into a series of threats. The Princes appealed successfully for protection to the Vermont Governor's Council in 1785.

While modern historian David R. Proper has raised doubts about their accuracy, later-nineteenth-century sources also argue that Terry made a reputation as an orator through two public performances. When one of her sons was denied admission to Williams College, she supposedly spoke eloquently—but in vain—at a meeting of the trustees. Later, when the white Eli Bronson waged a protracted legal battle to take some of the Princes' land, Terry supposedly made successful arguments before the Vermont Supreme Court.

Abijah died on January 19, 1794, in Guilford, and some sources suggest the family lost some of the Guilford land. Still, they stayed in Guilford for several years before moving to Sunderland. Terry is listed in the 1810 Sunderland census as living with three other free blacks—most likely some of her children. Proper speculates that she spent her final days in Sunderland with her son Caesar.

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*Eric Gardner*

## **THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD**

**Zora Neale Hurston's** *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937 and continues to be Hurston's most read and most analyzed novel. On the broadest level, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* represents an African American woman's search for self-**identity**, self-knowledge, and self-understanding. The primary character, Janie Crawford, knows that there are adventures in the

world and a life for her beyond the horizon, and she devotes herself to experiencing that life.

Janie is the product of **rape**, as had been her mother. After her mother deserts her, she is raised by her grandmother on property owned by the white **family** for whom “Nanny” works. Janie has been so sheltered by Nanny that she does not even realize she is not white like the children on the property until she sees herself in a group picture. Nanny is convinced that black women are destined to be the “mules of the world,” destined to be objectified and used by men. One day, as Janie is reaching young womanhood, Nanny sees her kissing a young local boy and decides that the only way to guarantee Janie’s future is to marry her off to a settled, financially secure man. Janie, believing her grandmother, equates **love** with marriage and agrees to the union. Thus begins her search and the first of the journeys that are to determine her sense of self.

Janie’s growth and development are tied to her relationships with men, beginning with her first husband, Logan Killicks. Logan is a middle-aged, unattractive man who is obsessed with Janie’s **beauty** and sees her as a possession he has been lucky enough to have acquired. When Janie realizes that the blossoming passions of love she had felt when kissing Johnny Taylor do not exist in her marriage, she learns her first lesson—that love and marriage are not synonymous. She begins to resent the trap that her marriage has become; the more obvious she is in voicing her discontent, the more Logan tries to control her, to break her. He becomes verbally abusive and finally decides to stop treating Janie like a prize and to put her to **work** in the fields. While Logan is away, purchasing a mule that Janie can use for plowing, Joe Starks, the man who is to become Janie’s second husband, comes along. Joe (Jody) is a big talker and seems to share Janie’s ideas of adventure and passion, awakening the sense of blossoming in Janie that Logan “Killicks” had killed. So Janie leaves Logan, marries Jody, and heads off with him toward the horizon and the dream of a little, all-black **community** that Jody had heard about—Eatonville, Florida.

Jody is ambitious and is soon accepted by the residents as the leader of their community. Janie, however, finds that Jody is not prepared to share that leadership with her. While his “big voice” frees him, it silences Janie; Jody goes out of his way to depict Janie as someone without anything to say, and she “made her face laugh.” Again, Janie becomes an object, trapped in a relationship where she is merely one of the beautiful things that this man, “Mr. Mayor,” owns, just like he owns the store he has built and the big white house he has constructed on top of a hill. Jody even forces Janie to tie up her long, thick hair when she works in the store to further mark her as his possession and one not to be coveted by the eyes of other men. Janie remains married to Jody for seventeen years, until **death** takes him. They are years of silence and oppression for Janie, seventeen years in which she is reduced to being no more than “Mrs. Mayor.” Although outwardly Janie accepts her role, inwardly she resents this repressive condition. She knows that she has a voice, too, and that she could take part in community activities and tell stories

on the front porch, just like the men. However, as Hurston shows in her ethnography *Mules and Men* (1935), leadership and the telling of “lies” were the provinces of the men of the community.

A few years into their marriage, when Janie makes a comment to Jody while they are at **home** that threatens Jody’s control over her, he slaps her. At that point, something in Janie closes against him, and it never opens up again. It seems that both Logan and Jody react abusively when they feel that they are losing power over Janie—verbal abuse from Logan and physical abuse from Jody. Both acts seem to awaken Janie from her sleepwalk through life. While Janie continues to play her role in public as Mrs. Mayor, her heart is now closed to Jody. She also begins to use her voice, subtly and covertly criticizing some of the men in their beliefs about women—for instance, that a woman is so weak and helpless that a man has to do her thinking for her, the same as he does for “chillun and chickens and cows.” Janie wonders—out loud—how strong a man really is if all he has to strain against is “women and chickens.” Like she does with the character of Lucy Potts in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), Hurston notes the talent that Janie has with wordplay when given the opportunity.

Janie gets the opportunity to demonstrate her prowess with word games and signifyin’ when Jody becomes frustrated that he is showing his age while Janie continues to appear young and beautiful. He seizes upon an opportunity in his store one day to ridicule her in front of the other men of the community. The insult is so intimate and reductive in its attack on the female that it receives only embarrassed laughter from these listeners. Janie, however, has come into full voice and signifies right back, referring to Jody’s sagging manhood. While the men appreciate the quick wit and cleverness of Janie’s response, Jody feels emasculated and never recovers from this embarrassment. He dies soon afterward, and Mrs. Mayor takes over the store. It is not until Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods walks into the store and into her life that Janie experiences the full blossoming of love and mutual respect in a marriage.

With Tea Cake, Janie is not only encouraged to express herself—to play and to explore—she is expected to do those things. Tea Cake is important, not because he gives Janie **freedom** but because he does not claim possession of her, thereby making it possible for her to explore her own horizons and limitations. Unlike Logan and Jody, Tea Cake encourages and enjoys Janie’s verbal wit, and when they move to the muck with its atmosphere of passion and blooming, Janie is just as much a part of the lying sessions and wordplay as he is. The drawback, however, is that, isolated as it is, the muck and those living there still experience and respond to the gender-based influences of the larger community. Tea Cake’s one act of cruelty toward Janie results from his need to show the other men that he is the boss—the man—of his house. He beats Janie in order to establish his male superiority. Although Janie forgives him, Hurston has established a pattern in this novel. Tea Cake’s **violence** toward Janie, even after he has been a major factor in her discovery of self, cannot go unpunished. Tea Cake has to die because, in the end, as long as the male-female relationship exists within a system that is defined by the man’s



domination—that is, marriage—the woman cannot achieve selfhood. As in many of Hurston’s other novels, especially in *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), the institution of marriage is problematic.

Janie returns to Eatonville as a woman who has gone on an adventure, a coming-of-age activity usually reserved for men. She does not return home furtively; she walks down the middle of the street, head held high, wearing men’s overalls. She has grown as a person and a woman, having refused the limiting restrictions of Nanny, Logan, Jody, and even her true love Tea Cake, and her only advice to her friend Pheoby is that everyone must do two things for themselves: Go to God and “find out about livin’.”

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*Johnnie M. Stover*

### **THERE IS CONFUSION**

The first novel by **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, published by Boni and Liveright in 1924, has been both criticized and praised for its scale and ambition. *There Is Confusion* is a historical novel, set in the early twentieth century; it also contains elements of the bildungsroman and romance genres. Although there are many fully developed characters, two New York females dominate: Joanna is a light-skinned (**mulatta**) daughter of middle-class black man Joel Marshall; Maggie Ellersley is a black girl from an impoverished **family**. The novel traces the girls’ journeys into adulthood, describing their troubled routes to maturity. Maturity occurs when characters rise to succeed and to challenge white society’s discrimination against African Americans. The “confusion” of the title is the malaise of fecklessness that blacks can succumb to, because of their limited scope for betterment.

Maggie is the less brattish girl. Her first passion for Joanna’s brother, Philip, is thwarted by Joanna, who writes a callous letter to Maggie, pointing out that Philip could do better than to marry a girl of “lowly aims.” Maggie

then endures trials, including a marriage to an abusive conman, before finding her calling when nursing maimed soldiers in war-torn France. Here she has a surprising meeting with Philip, whom she marries despite his possibly fatal wounds. Joanna, too, has a tough journey to maturity. A talented dancer and singer, Joanna is driven to succeed: "I want fame. I've got to have it." Joanna places her ambitions above all else and is exasperated by her sweetheart Peter Bye's lack of ambition. Provoked by a bitter family **history**, Peter has a "mad" on white men, hating them all. Fighting in France changes him; he realizes that racist whites want blacks to become disillusioned, embittered, and directionless. Instead of perpetuating rueful idleness, he resolves to become a skilled surgeon, earning, eventually, the approval and heart of Joanna.

The ambitions of Joanna are influenced by her reading of accounts of exemplary black women, but her ambitions involve pleasing white people, not bettering the status of her own **community**. Despite numerous career disappointments caused by color-based prejudice against her, she maintains that her color will not hinder her. It is only after a media backlash for the disgrace of her representing "America" in a vulgar stage show that Joanna finally comprehends the scale of discrimination against African Americans. A meeting with an old friend who passes for white—who tells her about the wicked things that whites say about blacks—also convinces her of the necessity of fighting racism, not ignoring it.

After the Great War, Joanna marries Peter, abandons all thoughts of stardom, and determines to **work** hard to establish a family that will serve as an exemplary, hardworking, selfless unit for other African Americans to emulate. The trajectory of Joanna's and Maggie's lives, and the Bye family's convoluted history, is told by an intrusive, frequently comic, ironic, and even self-reflexive omniscient narrator. *There Is Confusion* is multitextured, complicated, sometimes grueling, and bitter about the lowly status of blacks and especially black women. But the main characters' eventual acquisitions of inspired insight and personal maturity mean that Fauset's first novel is ultimately rousing and upbeat.

*See also Chinaberry Tree, The; Comedy: American Style; Plum Bun*

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Kevin De Ornellas

### **THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND, THE**

Alice Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, was published in 1970 while she was living in Jackson, Mississippi, and working in the **civil rights movement**. At the time she was married to Mel Levanthal; their daughter Rebecca had been born only one year prior to the novel's publication.

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* follows the three intertwined stories of Grange, Brownfield, and Ruth Copeland, African Americans living in Baker County, Georgia, during the first half of the twentieth century. The novel begins with Brownfield, shifts back to his father, Grange, and then focuses on Ruth, Brownfield's daughter and Grange's granddaughter. The narrative time shifts and interdependent plotlines cohere in Walker's omniscient narrator, illustrating how specific incidents influence all three main characters' lives.

In Grange Copeland's "first life," he is a sharecropper, like Walker's own father, and is rendered desperate by his poverty, hopelessness, and lack of control over his life. After his wife, Margaret, gives birth to a child who is clearly the progeny of their white landowner, Mr. Shipley, Grange abandons Margaret, Brownfield, and the baby, living for a time with the prostitute Josie and in New York City. Grange's "second life," one characterized by racial hatred, reaches an apex when he watches a pregnant white woman drown in a Central Park pond; his resentment of whites then leads him to believe that the only way he can survive is to live separately from whites. His return to Baker County is marked by his marriage to Josie and his use of her money to fund his farm, separated both literally and figuratively from the white **community**. But Grange's "third life" revolves around his **love** for his granddaughter Ruth, whom he raises after Brownfield kills his wife Mem. In caring for Ruth, Grange breaks from his previous abusiveness—both that exacted on him in the form of sharecropping and racial prejudice and that he exacts in his beating of Margaret, abandonment of Brownfield, and manipulation of Josie.

Brownfield's story parodies that of Grange; he too escapes the subjugation of sharecropping to go north and stays with Josie for a time. After marrying Josie's niece Mem, Brownfield returns to Baker County, where his descent into poverty and jealousy of white landowners like Mr. J. L. fills him with bitterness. His abusiveness, like Grange's, is visited upon his wife and children. The nadir of Brownfield's bitterness is when he shoots Mem in the face with a shotgun; Grange's degradation leads him to abandon his **family**, but Brownfield actively destroys his own.

When Brownfield is sent to prison for Mem's murder, his youngest daughter Ruth moves in with Grange. For both Grange and the reader, Ruth represents what Grange and Brownfield might have been, had they escaped their oppressive poverty and racial subjugation. Grange teaches Ruth self-respect and self-reliance through trickster **folklore**, dance, and the story of Moses. At the end of the text, when Ruth is a teenager interested in joining the civil rights movement, Grange sacrifices himself to save her from Brownfield, redeeming at least partially his previous two lives.

Redemption is at the heart of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The endless abuse visited upon all of the female characters represents an interesting take on **black masculinity**—that black men, so degraded by racial oppression, must hurt black women in order to assert their own humanity. Most feminist critics focus on that abusiveness, as well as on Ruth's status as Walker's first **womanist** character. But Grange's transformation in his "third life" redeems not only himself but also Ruth, whose spiritual survival he esteems more than his own life.

*See also* Womanism

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*Kate Cochran*

### THOMAS, JOYCE CAROL (1938– )

Joyce Carol Thomas is the author of adolescent novels, books of **poetry**, and plays. She was born on May 25, 1938, in Ponca City, Oklahoma. Her father, Floyd David, was a bricklayer, and her mother, Leona, was a hair stylist. The **family** lived in Oklahoma until Thomas turned ten, when she moved to Tracy,

California. Thomas grew up in a large family, as she was the fifth of nine children. They all worked hard picking cotton, grapes, and tomatoes alongside migrant workers, even missing the first few months of school during the harvest time. To alleviate the hard **work**, they told stories to each other. Working as a telephone operator, Thomas put herself through college while raising four children. She began her career teaching public high school and then went on to teach at several universities, including California State University, Purdue University, and the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

Thomas' body of work includes both adolescent and adult **literature**. She began her writing career primarily as a playwright in the San Francisco Bay area during the 1970s. At that time, she also had several collections of poetry published. Her first novel, *Marked by Fire*, was published in 1981 and earned her critical recognition that elevated her status as a professional writer. A sequel, *Bright Shadow*, was published in 1983 and has since been followed by many other novels, as well as several new plays and collections of poetry.

The hard work, large family, multicultural experience, and rural upbringing can all be noted as influences that found their way into the themes of Thomas's writing. Food is always a focus in her novels, due to her mother's ability to feed so many on a limited budget. Rural images, such as insects, are common in Thomas's novels as well. Thomas incorporates a childhood experience of finding a nest of black widows under her bed into the novel *Journey* (1990). The power of nature is also a recurring theme in her writing, particularly the power of storms. In *Marked by Fire*, Abby is born in a field while a tornado rages; in *Water Girl* (1986), earthquakes haunt Amber; and in *When the Nightingale Sings* (1986), Marigold experiences a hurricane.

Feminist themes are prominent in Thomas's work. In her novels, the main character is often female and is usually portrayed with strength, courage, and tenacity. *Marked by Fire*, *Bright Shadow*, and *House of Light* (2001) all trace the life of Abyssinia, who is raped at the age of ten but goes on to complete college and become a physician. *Water Girl* tells the story of Abyssinia's teenage daughter, Amber, who was given up for adoption. *When the Nightingale Sings* is a Cinderella-inspired story about a young woman named Marigold. Thomas's poetry contains feminist themes, as well. Poems like "Ambrosia," which is dedicated to black women, exemplify her concern with women's experiences. *A Mother's Heart, a Daughter's Love* (2001) honors the mother-daughter bond. Writing mostly about young women's experiences and the struggle for **identity**, Thomas also emphasizes the role of **community** and the role older women play in the lives of the younger women. For her work she has received the National Book Award, three Coretta Scott King awards, and three American Library Association awards, among others. Thomas currently resides in Berkeley, California.

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Kyla Hefflin

### THOMAS AND BEULAH

Known by many as **Rita Dove**'s definitive collection of **poetry**, the publication of *Thomas and Beulah* by Carnegie-Mellon University Press in 1986 earned Rita Dove the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. She became the second African American poet besides **Gwendolyn Brooks** to win the Pulitzer Prize. The poems are organized in sequence and chart the lives of Dove's maternal grandparents in the context of larger **history** that encompassed the migration of blacks from the **South** to the North, several wars, and the **civil rights movement**, among other social events that would affect blacks. Though *Thomas and Beulah* is not about a specific place, Dove asserts that the grandmother and grandfather function as one unit that is "defined" and "confined" to a particular place, Akron, Ohio. The theme of **home** and personal understanding and growth recur in many of her works. For Dove, the poems took charge of themselves, and each fell into place within the collection.

When Dove was in Germany in 1981, she wrote five or six poems about her grandfather's youth and thought that these would work well by themselves. While she was a writer-in-residence at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama for the summer, she wrote several more poems about her grandfather. Later on, as a creative writing professor at Arizona State University, she revised these and sent them to the *Ohio Review*, where they were published as the chapbook "Mandolin." The poems about her grandfather would expand, especially after Dove was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for the 1983–1984 academic

year, allowing her the **freedom** to focus on her writing. One night, while Dove looked over a poem from *Museum* (1983) titled “Dusting,” she recognized that the solarium in the poem was her grandmother’s, and the woman who was trying to remember her lover’s name was, in fact, her grandmother. Dove felt that her grandmother spoke to her through the poem, asking to have her story told. At that moment, the poetry collection *Thomas and Beulah* was born.

The creation of *Thomas and Beulah* would span many years, and the idea of the collection was generated from some of Dove’s earlier experiences. Many of Dove’s poems derive from single words. In this sense, for Dove building poetry is similar to constructing a house. She met someone with the name “Maurice,” and thought the name would be interesting to use for a future poem. Later, while in Berlin, she heard a story about a goldfish that became frozen in its fishbowl because its owners left the window open in winter while they were away. When they returned, the fish was frozen, so they warmed it up slowly on the stove, and it came back to life. Dove wrote this story down as well. She also remembered the name “Beulah” and looked up its biblical connotations. The name means “desert in peace.” During that time, she was reading Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* (1964), and he notes that when people dust, the dusting is an act of restoring or excavating something. Dove decided to write a poem about Beulah dusting and include the fish story as well as her first **love**, Maurice. The poem is about restoring **memory**. Beulah’s act would become “Dusting,” the first of many poems that would later become *Thomas and Beulah*.

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*Earl F. Yarrington*

### TILLMAN, KATHERINE DAVIS CHAPMAN (1870–?)

Katherine Chapman was born in 1870 into a poor **family** in Mound City, Illinois. She had no formal education until the family moved to South Dakota, and she first enrolled in school at the age of twelve. She graduated from high school and soon began publishing her poems, essays, and short stories in papers such as the *Christian Recorder* and the *Indianapolis Freeman*. Her first poem, titled “Memory,” was published in 1888. She attended college at the

State University of Louisville in Kentucky and at Wilberforce University in Ohio. Sometime before 1893, Chapman met and married George M. Tillman, a minister with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church.

Tillman led an active life as the wife of a minister. She engaged in a variety of activities that especially reflected her talents and interests as a woman and as a writer. She served as editor of the *Women's Missionary Recorder* and held official roles in women's missionary societies. Tillman continued to write after her marriage and published many pieces in various publications of the AME church. Her longest works were two novellas serialized in the *AME Church Review*: *Beryl Weston's Ambition: The Story of an Afro-American Girl's Life* (1893) and *Clancy Street* (1898–1899). Her two other major pieces of **fiction** were the short stories “Miles the Conqueror” (1894) and “The Preacher at Hill Station” (1903). In addition to these works, Tillman is perhaps best known as a dramatist. Her play *Fifty Years of Freedom, or From Cabin to Congress* (1910) is a celebration of the fifty-year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The *AME Church Review* was also the forum for many of Tillman's most important essays. A theme she particularly engaged was the subject of racial uplift and opportunities for African American women and, specifically, the role of the African American writer, in articles such as “Some Girls That I Know” (1893), “Afro-American Women and Their Work” (1895), “Afro-American Poets and Their Verse” (1898), “The Negro among Angle-Saxon Poets” (1898), and “Paying Professions for Colored Girls” (1907). As a middle-class black woman writer, Tillman must be considered as part of the larger social reform movements for racial progress that characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She participated in the women's club movement and was a member of some of the most significant **race** reform organizations of the era, such as the National Colored Women's League, the National Federation of Afro-American Women, and the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC). She served as an officer of the NACWC at one time.

As a writer and reformer, Tillman worked to secure and prove the abilities of African Americans, and women in particular, in a post-Reconstruction era characterized by racial politics and the **violence** of white supremacy.

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*Tiffany K. Wayne*

### TOOMER, JEAN (1894–1967)

Jean Toomer is best known as the author of *Cane* (1923), a collage of short **fiction**, **poetry**, and **drama** credited with being the first **work** of the **Harlem Renaissance** as well as a landmark of literary **modernism**. But Toomer was not to repeat this literary success. He was a spiritual seeker, and the pursuit of insight and truth mattered more to him than literary achievement. Although he wrote prolifically throughout the 1920s and 1930s, publishers repeatedly rejected his book-length manuscripts, and only a few of his poems and essays, and one of his plays, found their way into print. It is the verbal portraits of rural southern women in *Cane* that have earned Toomer a place in a feminist encyclopedia of African American **literature**. **Alice Walker** has called them “essential” to her own development as a writer. Toomer was among the first writers to choose rural southern African American women as complex subjects for fiction, exploring sympathetically their consciousness as well as their symbolic value.

Born in December 1894 to Nina Pinchback and Nathan Toomer, Nathan Eugene Toomer grew up in the household of his maternal grandparents in Washington, D.C. After his father deserted him and his mother when Eugene was only a few months old, his maternal grandfather P.B.S. Pinchback insisted that his grandson be called Eugene Pinchback and forbid the mention

of Nathan Toomer in his presence. P.B.S. Pinchback, famous as the African American lieutenant governor of Louisiana during Reconstruction, was a highly successful light-skinned man who could have passed for white but chose instead to identify with his African American heritage. After leaving New Orleans for Washington, D.C., in the early 1890s, he built a new house in an almost all-white section of the city. It was in this house and neighborhood that Eugene spent his first decade of life. When his mother remarried a white man, Eugene moved with them to mostly white neighborhoods in Brooklyn and New Rochelle, New York, but returned to his grandparents' home in Washington after his mother's **death** in 1909. His grandparents, meanwhile, had moved to a black section of the city where Toomer attended M Street High School, a public secondary school for Negroes, his first experience living and studying in an African American environment. During his high school years Eugene rejected his grandfather's surname and shortened his given name Eugene to Jean, thus renaming himself Jean Toomer. Both Toomer and his grandfather could have passed for white. While his grandfather P.B.S. Pinchback had chosen to identify with African Americans, Toomer—with the crisscrossing of black and white contexts in his own life—called himself “American” by the end of his high school years and spent much of his adult life attempting to articulate the concept of a new American who was not racially defined.

Toomer entered college at the University of Wisconsin to study agriculture but quickly realized he had little talent or interest in the field and left before the year was finished. He repeated this pattern at five other educational institutions without ever taking a degree. In 1919 he moved to Greenwich Village, where he came into contact with modernist writers such as Waldo Frank and Lola Ridge and embarked on an intensive study of American and European literature. In 1920 he encountered idealist philosophy and devoted the better part of a year to reading Eastern classics. When he returned to writing after this immersion, he was attracted to imagist and symbolist aesthetics. He completed his first poem, “The First American,” in 1921 but was not satisfied with his literary voice, although this poem articulated a theme that would become a primary one in his later writings.

In the fall of 1921, Toomer traveled to Sparta, Georgia, accepting the position of substitute head teacher in a small rural school. This was Toomer's first trip to the **South**, and it proved a memorable one. His first personal contact with the lives of African Americans in rural Georgia, and the opportunity to hear their stories, folksongs, and **spirituals**, inspired him to begin writing *Cane* on the train ride back to New York. Toomer called *Cane* a “swansong,” meaning that it was a tribute to what he perceived as disappearing cultural riches—the songs, stories, and lives of rural black southerners. Even as he captured the pathos and spiritual **beauty** of this cultural heritage in *Cane's* portraits of women, and his own ambivalence toward his southern cultural heritage in the character of Kabnis, he also meant to say “good-bye” to notions of racial **identity** and heritage in this volume in order to begin the project of articulating his concept of the new American who transcended **race**.

From his adolescent immersion in tales of chivalry to an absorbed study of the French symbolists and of Eastern religious texts in his young adulthood, Toomer was an avid and prodigious reader. *Cane* reflects not only Toomer's experiences and observations in rural Georgia but also his reading of Baudelaire's *Petits poems en prose* and the imagist theories of Ezra Pound, his love of Robert Frost's New England poems, and his admiration for Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Thus *Cane* merges both American regionalism and a modernist aesthetic with African American subject matter. Many of Toomer's acquaintances at the time of the publication of *Cane* were also leading American modernists: Hart Crane, Waldo Frank, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alfred Stieglitz, Allen Tate. Leading African American literary figures also encouraged and praised Toomer's efforts. **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, editor of the *Crisis*, wrote frequently to encourage him during the composition of *Cane*. W.E.B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, Alain Locke, **Countee Cullen**, and **Claude McKay** wrote to congratulate Toomer upon its publication, which was lauded as the first sign of a new artistic era in African American letters. According to critic Robert B. Jones, *Cane* deserves a place as one of the great African American literary achievements of the twentieth century, alongside **Richard Wright's** *Native Son* (1940) and **Ralph Ellison's** *Invisible Man* (1952). However, Toomer resisted efforts on the part of his publisher to market him as a New Negro writer.

*Cane* is composed of three sections. The first, set in rural Georgia, consists of six sketches interspersed with ten poems. The sketches and stories of this section focus on female characters and, with the exception of the final story, "Blood-Burning Moon," are titled after the central female character: Karantha, Becky, Carma, Fern, and Esther. The second section, set in Washington, D.C., provides an urban contrast to the rural setting and lyricism of the first. The second section consists of seven sketches and stories interspersed with five poems. The third and final section of the book is a single work, "Kabnis," titled after its central male character, modeled on Toomer himself. "Kabnis" combines the rural and urban settings of parts one and two in an uneasy dialectic through the central character, an urban northerner who returns to the South. His story, written in the style of a play, with stage directions and dialogue tags, incorporates fragments of five Negro spirituals. It dramatizes the spiritual nadir of the cycle of *Cane*, balancing the spiritual zenith in the mythical dimensions of the first section. It has been suggested that, in fact, Kabnis is a Cain figure, punning on the volume's title, *Cane*, named for the crop whose growing, processing, and marketing drives the economic lives of so many of the book's characters.

The first and third sections of *Cane* were written in response to Toomer's visit to Georgia, but the second section was actually written earlier and added to make the manuscript large enough for a book. This middle section reflects the struggle for identity and wholeness of characters whose lives are marked by city life. Many of the episodes are based on Toomer's experiences from his fragmented college years.

*Cane's* first section will be of greatest interest to students of feminist approaches to African American literature. The female characters are portrayed as human beings on a journey of self-realization, struggling with the economic, social, and gender restrictions of their societies. Each of the women constitutes a different part of the racial/cultural spectrum. Karintha is a young black woman whose essence attracts the desires of men young and old; her inevitable pregnancy results in infanticide. Toomer sympathetically portrays the effects of the projections of men onto Karintha—they stunt her identity. Becky is a white woman who was two black sons; she is a pariah in the **community**, an unredeemed Hester Prynne. Carma is as strong as a man and her powers of attraction compared to those of a goddess. Fern's sensual attractions are accompanied by the imagery of a Jewish cantor. Esther is a pasty white girl attracted to the blackness of an itinerant man named Barlo. Toomer portrays their spiritual and sexual longings, refusing to impose conventions. Instead he explores how these women find themselves trapped by desire—their own and others'—as well as by larger cultural expectations. Furthermore, he examines the ways in which the characters' identities are shaped by these expectations. In portraying such diversity among the women of *Cane*, Toomer also challenges essentialist notions of race by showing complexity in the lives and complexions of his characters. He moves beyond personal psychology to the social construction of reality by symbolizing the ways in which what Charles Scruggs and Lee Vandemarr call the “terrors of American **history**” impinge on the lives of his fictional subjects. Louisa of “Blood-Burning Moon” is trapped between her love of a black man and a white man's desire for her; the love triangle results in a lynching. Scruggs and Vandemarr point out how Toomer's “Blood-Burning Moon” was a response to Waldo Frank's *Holiday*, written at about the same time. Both works end in a lynching and the madness of the black woman who is bereaved of her love. But Frank's work essentializes race, reinforcing binary notions of black and white, while Toomer's work complicates it.

By the time *Cane* was published, Toomer was already pursuing another interest, the work of Georges I. Gurdjieff, which also attracted his friend Waldo Frank and such literary types as Katherine Mansfield. Toomer trained at Gurdjieff's “Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man” near Fontainebleau, France, then returned to the United States to become an advocate and teacher for Gurdjieff's ideas, leading several Gurdjieff groups in Harlem and Chicago. In Portage, Wisconsin, at a six-month experimental living community inspired by Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, he met Marjery Latimer, a writer, and married her in 1932. The couple had a daughter, also named Marjery, but unfortunately Marjery Latimer died from complications of childbirth. In 1934 Toomer married again, this time to Marjorie Content, daughter of a wealthy New York Stock Exchange broker. The couple settled in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, on a farm given to them by Content's wealthy father, where they spent the rest of their lives. Both of Toomer's marriages were highly publicized because

they were considered interracial. Once again Toomer was caught in the trap of racialized American thinking.

Although Toomer split with Gurdjieff during the mid-1930s, he continued to espouse the Gurdjieff philosophy. Between 1936 and 1939, the Toomers attempted to run another experimental living community, modeled after the Portage, Wisconsin, attempt, on their farm. And in 1939 the Toomer **family** spent nine months in India. After their return Toomer began suffering from health problems that forced him to dissolve the community living experiment. Toomer's search for spiritual growth and fulfillment included explorations of the teachings of Edgar Cayce, Jungian psychoanalysis, and scientology. He continued to write prolifically throughout his life, publishing very little. He joined the Society of Friends and became a spokesman for Quakerism in the 1940s and 1950s. His last published work was a series of essays on Quaker **spirituality**.

In 1967, the year of Toomer's death, *Cane* was reissued by New York University Press, a few years after Toomer's wife, Marjorie Latimer, had given his manuscripts to the Fisk University Library, where Arna Bontemps was curator. (Toomer's papers and manuscripts are now housed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.) A paperback edition of *Cane*, with an introduction by Bontemps, was published in 1970. The republication of *Cane* was greeted with the same enthusiasm that followed its original publication, and scholars discovered the cache of unpublished work by Toomer. Subsequently, several volumes of Toomer's unpublished work have appeared in print. Darwin T. Turner's *The Wayward and the Seeking* made accessible to the reading public for the first time many of Toomer's experimental plays, stories, and writings about race; however, some of Toomer's African American critics chastised him for "abandoning the race" by denying his African American identity when they read his work that sought to articulate a theory of the fully realized human being that transcends race. More recent work on Toomer, however, acknowledges the greater complexity of his vision as one that challenged the binary, essentialist understanding of race in America. Toomer identified seven strands of ethnicity in his own bloodlines—French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian—and sought to "fuse" them imaginatively and spiritually in his thinking about race at a time when America saw race in only black or white.

Although it is generally agreed that Toomer's unpublished manuscripts are didactic and dogmatic and lack the literary qualities of *Cane*, his spiritual journey is more resonant at the turn of the twenty-first century than it was with literary critics and publishers at the heart of modernism. His spiritual and philosophical journey became the subject of several studies in the 1990s, and he has been named as a literary mentor by contemporary African American writers such as **Charles Johnson** and Alice Walker, who also embrace a spiritual view of life. Evidence of his influence is also present in the work of **Ernest Gaines**, Michael S. Harper, and **Gloria Naylor**. Clearly Toomer was at his strongest as an artist when his artistic eye was responding to the material manifestations of African American culture rooted in place and lived

experience, and his ear was attuned to the “lower frequencies” that his intellect did not always fully comprehend.

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*Ann Hostetler*

### TOPDOG/UNDERDOG

In *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), on the surface it appears as if **Suzan-Lori Parks** creates a typical sibling rivalry in this work of **drama**, but as the brothers confront their abandonment by their parents and their feelings toward each other, it becomes clear that the playwright has embedded a deeper meaning. No longer making a living by street hustling, Lincoln works in whiteface in an arcade, clothed in a false beard, stovepipe hat, and frock coat; for paying patrons he reenacts Abraham Lincoln’s assassination. After a day’s **work**, Lincoln comes **home** to eat and drink and think about his childhood. Booth, the younger brother, makes his living off of his brother’s pay and by stealing

whatever else is necessary to make ends meet. He is determined to make his future by learning the three-card monte, a con that his brother made legendary. However, his brother will not teach it to him. Booth is not successful at convincing Lincoln, who vowed not to return to the streets after the murder of his partner, to reenter a life of hustling.

The play ends when an enraged Booth kills his brother after losing the **family** legacy, \$500 rolled in a stocking left to each son when their parents abandoned them. Although Lincoln's **death** is foreshadowed by his job and by the historical significance of both of their names, where Parks recreates **history** so that the Emancipator and murderer are black, there is a deeper layer to Parks's play: The play is her exploration of the paradox between inevitability and the chance for change. Each brother has an opportunity to change the historical narrative of his fate. Lincoln considers his new line of work honest, but in fact he is only staged as the Emancipator; he has no real power. Booth remains the perennial underdog and resorts to **violence** instead of creating a different meaning or ending for himself. What remains is Parks's implicit question: What would happen if black men refuse to step into the role of "underdog," hustler, killer, masquerader behind the whiteface that symbolizes what is expected?

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Brandon L. A. Hutchinson

### TRUTH, SOJOURNER (c. 1797–1883)

Originally born Isabella Baumfree, Sojourner Truth was the child of James and Elizabeth Baumfree, slaves in Ulster County, New York. Truth was shuffled among several owners—most notably John Dumont—during the first three decades of her life. She married another of Dumont's slaves, Thomas, around 1815, and the couple had five children: Diana (c. 1815), an unknown second child (perhaps named Jane), Peter (1821), Elizabeth (1825), and Sophia (1826). We know little of Truth's **family** life, though in 1826–1827, as New York's emancipation grew closer, she left her husband and all of her children, save Sophia, with Dumont. (Her later interactions with her children varied throughout the rest of her life. In 1828, she would sue for custody of Peter, though he had left her life by 1841. Her daughters lived with or near her intermittently after 1840.)

Feeling she had heard the voice of God, she immersed herself in evangelical Methodism and moved to New York City. Her experiences with Methodist Perfectionists there eventually led her to the commune headed by

Robert Matthews (known as the Prophet Matthias), where she lived from 1833 to 1835. In 1835, when the commune was disbanded in the midst of a spectacular scandal (involving murder, **violence**, and sex), Truth returned to **domestic work** but did not set aside the combination of evangelical **Christianity** and millennialism that shaped much of her early life. On June 1, 1843, she changed her name to Sojourner Truth and began preaching throughout the New York City/Connecticut area. Eventually, Truth settled at the utopian Northampton Association in Massachusetts, where antislavery and nascent feminism, as well as spiritualism, became linked to her faith.

The Association folded in 1846, the year Truth began dictating her **autobiography** to Olive Gilbert (a white member of the Association; Truth was illiterate) and one year after her first major antislavery speech. By 1850, when *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was published, Truth had already gained fame in the movement, in part for answering **Frederick Douglass's** 1847 call for slave insurrection by calling out from the audience, "Frederick, is God dead?" The weaving together of abolition and Christianity that marked her comment also mark the book, which, while certainly a narrative of **slavery**, is also, in many ways, a spiritual autobiography. She lectured extensively after 1850, and in May 1851, she gave the speech that critics later dubbed (making her Afro-Dutch sound much more southern) "Ain't I a Woman?" and that led twentieth-century feminists to mark her as an important **ancestor**.

Her 1856 move to Michigan (she settled in Battle Creek, though she spent time at the utopian community of Harmonia) did nothing to stop her activism. When the Civil War came, she met with Abraham Lincoln, composed a battle song (to the tune of "John Brown's Body") for the First Michigan Colored Infantry, was immortalized by Harriet Beecher Stowe in an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* that christened her "the Libyan Sibyl," and worked to aid newly freed slaves. It was her work in this last role that shaped her sense that the West might hold the greatest hope for freed slaves and her later support for the Exodusters who migrated to Kansas in 1879.

In 1875, with the aid of friend Frances Titus, she prepared a new, enlarged version of her *Narrative*, including a scrapbook-style update titled the "Book of Life." Truth's last years were spent in Michigan, where she was cared for by three of her daughters.

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*Eric Gardner*



## **UGLY WAYS**

**Tina McElroy Ansa's** second novel, *Ugly Ways* (1993), focuses on the Lovejoy women, the recently deceased Esther and her three daughters, Betty, Emily, and Annie Ruth. The story, set in Ansa's fictional Mulberry, Georgia, covers several days following the **death** of Esther, called "Mudear" by her daughters. The Lovejoy sisters are all successful career women, but they share an essential unhappiness caused by their resentment toward Mudear and their feeling that they have not been properly nurtured. By allowing each sister to tell her own story as well as allowing us to hear from the father, Ernest, and from the deceased Esther, Ansa gives us all sides in this story of **family** expectations, misunderstandings, and **love**.

The family expectations are seen in the early years of Esther and Ernest Lovejoy's marriage when Esther waited on Ernest and gave all her time to him and her three small daughters. When her obedience begets the expectation on Ernest's part that he can boss her around and abuse her, Esther goes through what her family calls The Change and retreats to her bedroom. The Lovejoy sisters had expected her to be a nurturing mother, and when she refuses to even prepare food for them, they have to turn to one another for nurturing. Even though Mudear has abandoned her traditional roles, the family still expects her to perform them, leading to all the family misunderstandings. The sisters gather to bury Mudear, but in reality they are trying to come to terms with her living **memory** in their lives and with their current realities.

Sections told by Mudear's spirit as she watches the girls prepare for her funeral balance the sisters' condemnation of their mother. Mudear asserts that she has taught them how to survive in a hostile world, and in a way she has. She condemns what she calls the girls' ugly ways of disrespecting her, but we see that by abandoning her maternal role, she has also exhibited some ugly ways. By novel's end, the girls are reconciled to what Mudear was and are united in their support for one another, especially for the pregnant Annie Ruth.

By turns grim and comic, the story is, on the whole, hopeful. The catharsis comes near the novel's end. In a wildly comic scene set at Parkinson's funeral home, the sisters manage to tip Mudear's coffin and wind up on the floor with Mudear across their laps, thus literally uniting the Lovejoy women. Mudear has the novel's last word as she declares that she will continue watching the girls, especially Annie Ruth and her future granddaughter, since she now has nothing else to do.

In *Ugly Ways*, Ansa explores sisters' relationships with one another and with their absent mother. Ansa's belief in the spirit world comes through in Mudear's vibrant voice from the dead that allows us to hear Mudear's side of the story. Ansa reaffirms her themes of the primacy of love and forgiveness in this story of the struggles and reconciliations of the Lovejoy women.

*See also* Motherhood

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Harriette C. Buchanan

### UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad is defined as an occasionally organized, frequently serendipitous, network of assistance that enabled individuals to escape from **slavery**, most often traveling from the American **South** to the North. Though there have long been mythologized interpretations of the

Underground Railroad as an example of benevolent white people helping the downtrodden enslaved blacks, recent research has revealed that, more often than not, it was a situation of African Americans helping each other and helping themselves to escape from the hell of slavery. Certainly, some white abolitionists, such as Levi Coffin and John Rankin, did participate vigorously, but it was more commonly the unsung free and enslaved African Americans who put their lives on the line to help others. Often, the fugitives simply traveled alone and with no systematic assistance.

Due to the tremendous risks inherent to working with the Underground Railroad, most dangerously after 1850 with the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, scant records remain. Nevertheless, a few brave souls managed to write of their experiences escaping themselves and assisting others, resulting in what now is considered Underground Railroad **literature**. Consisting of **slave narratives**, historical documents, and works of **fiction**, this body of writing reveals the profound dangers undertaken by such remarkable nineteenth-century authors as Harriet Tubman, **Frederick Douglass**, John Parker, **William Wells Brown**, **Ellen and William Craft**, **Hannah Crafts**, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and **Harriet Jacobs**. A significant early source, William Still's 1872 volume *The Underground Railroad* provides a wealth of historical material about the many refugees from slavery Still and others helped to escape. Later writers—including **Toni Morrison**, **Sherley Anne Williams**, and **Octavia Butler**—sought to capture this powerful time in **history** through fictional accounts, often in the unique genre of **neo-slave narrative**.

No matter the category of writing, several themes pervade Underground Railroad works, with particular attention to matters of feminism. In describing the circumstances of escape, these works regularly refer to slavery's forces of oppression and mistreatment that cause enslaved people to flee. Though the works depict men who seek **freedom** for a variety of reasons, enslaved women experience uniquely gender-specific humiliation. This oppression, often of a sexual nature, results in enslaved women subject to unbearable abuse from white men. For these women, the systematic degradation of slavery often prevents them from keeping a **family** together, assaults their **identity** as women, denies them the agency of **motherhood**, and results in their often innovative attempts at resistance.

One of the earliest Underground Railroad texts is Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. In this slave narrative, Douglass explores issues of identity through his trials in learning to read and in his rebellion with the slave breaker Edward Covey, as well as his later failed and then successful attempts at escape. Douglass reveals his feminist concerns in several ways in this text. Early on, he recounts a horrific experience watching his Aunt Hester being severely beaten by an overseer, and he alludes to the probable sexual exploitation she undergoes at the hands of this man. In addition, when Douglass writes about Sophia Auld, the white Baltimore mistress who initially begins teaching him to read, he shows that slavery corrupts her nature too, causing it

to devolve from relatively kind to thoroughly evil. Following the time of the narrative, throughout Douglass's long life, he worked for equality for all, remaining committed to women's suffrage long after slavery ended.

Hannah Crafts's autobiographical novel *The Bondswoman's Narrative* was written in the 1850s, though not published until 2002 in an edition edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Now considered to be the earliest novel written by an African American woman, and the only novel written by an enslaved black woman, this text relates the ordeals that its protagonist undergoes in slavery as well as her eventual escape. Interestingly, in its feminist perspective, the novel also reveals the shared plight of sexual abuse between enslaved woman and slave mistress, particularly considering the fluid definitions of **race**. And in describing Hannah's escape from North Carolina to New Jersey, the novel fits well into the Underground Railroad tradition.

In 1861, Harriet Jacobs published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* under the pseudonym Linda Brent. One of the earliest slave narratives published by a woman, *Incidents* breaks many taboos through its representation of the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. Jacobs is particularly revolutionary in using her own **sexuality** as resistance, when she becomes pregnant by an unmarried white man of her own choosing, in order to fend off the unwanted advances of her married white master. Through her descriptions of the excruciating circumstances and confused identity of at once being an enslaved woman and a mother, Jacobs reveals the depths of this unique torment. Although she eventually flees northward in a classic Underground Railroad escape, this is preceded by her unprecedented experience hiding for seven years in her grandmother's attic, managing to watch over her two children, however distantly.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the Underground Railroad influenced many works of fiction, ranging from Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) to Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). While many of these works employ the approach of the neo-slave narrative, others, such as Reed's *Flight* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), defy genre, at once incorporating the slave narrative, along with speculative fiction, fantasy, and science fiction.

In *Kindred*, Butler weaves an intricate story of life in 1970s California, time travel, and slavery in the early nineteenth century in Maryland. The experiences of the novel's protagonist, Dana, redefine the Underground Railroad to include a journey of time as well as space. Suddenly ripped from her 1976 home, Dana finds herself forced to interact with, and compelled to protect, a sometimes repellant white slave owner, Rufus Weylin, who will eventually become her great-grandfather. In part because of Dana's biracial contemporary marriage, complex relationships abound in *Kindred*, with poignant revelations about both contemporary and antebellum issues of racial and gender interaction. Butler's novel is especially noteworthy for its commentary on the inadequacies of twentieth-century teaching on slavery, particularly regarding the plight of enslaved women.

Sherley Anne Williams's 1986 neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* delivers an important message about the complexities of gender dynamics in ante- and

postbellum American society. Though centered on the perspectives of an enslaved African American woman, the eponymous Dessa, the novel also emphasizes the growing sense of female solidarity possible for white and black women suffering gender and race oppression. Through her interaction with the mostly sympathetic white character Ruth (“Rufel”), Dessa learns that there is a diversity of white viewpoints on the humanity of African Americans. By novel’s end, Ruth, Dessa, Nathan, Harker, and the other refugees from slavery **work** together in a scheme to thwart the slaveholding system. With Ruth pretending to sell the African Americans, the group raises enough money for the blacks to take a less typical Underground Railroad journey: They strike out for the American West.

Perhaps the most acclaimed Underground Railroad text of the twentieth century, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was certainly a key ingredient in the decision to award Morrison the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. A neo-slave narrative inspired, like *Dessa Rose*, by historical events, *Beloved* focuses intensely on the protagonist Sethe’s efforts to be a mother. Morrison has said in many interviews that when she learned of the historical Margaret Garner’s decision in 1856 to kill her child rather than allowing her to be reenslaved, she was struck with what it must have taken to make such a decision. Daring to decide what would happen to her children, Garner took a revolutionary stand to assert her right to do so. As the fictionalized Sethe makes the same harsh choice, Morrison reveals the poignancy and repercussions of such a decision. Parallel to Douglass fighting back with Covey and Jacobs choosing to have an affair with a man not her master, Sethe chooses an innovative approach to resisting slavery, here through infanticide. Yet before this development, Sethe and others from Sweet Home also plan to escape northward, from northern Kentucky to Cincinnati, participating in an organized plan of Underground Railroad intent.

Morrison is not the only African American woman author inspired by Margaret Garner’s radical action. In 1857, **Frances E. W. Harper** published her powerful poem “The Slave Mother: A Tale of the Ohio” that also recounts this mother’s painful decision. Revealing the fact that a “slave mother” is, by definition, an oxymoron, Harper’s poem evokes the emotional torment attendant on Garner’s decision, while simultaneously imploring that her readers take action to end slavery. While she laments that Ohio can no longer provide a refuge for an enslaved woman fleeing hell, Harper sympathizes with the desperation Garner faced and reveals the ripple effect of this mother’s decision, far beyond her own time and place. Once her cousin’s house in Cincinnati was surrounded, there was no Underground Railroad refuge possible for Margaret Garner and her family.

Throughout African American literature, the Underground Railroad is a powerful vehicle for revealing much about slavery, particularly what might cause an enslaved woman to believe she could strike out for freedom and take the terrible risks inherent in an escape attempt.

*See also* Historical Fiction; Quilting

## 868 Underground Railroad

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*Kristine Yohe*



## **VENUS**

**Suzan-Lori Parks**'s 1996 play *Venus* is loosely based on the story of a South African woman, Saartjie Baartman, who was taken to London in the early nineteenth century, encaged, and exhibited in a traveling sideshow due to her unconventional physiognomy. Parks combines retelling with reimagining as she brings to the forefront how Baartman was an image of both fascination and revulsion for the white audience who came to see her nude public display in London and Paris in the early nineteenth century. The popularity of the exhibit sparked a debate as to whether the "Hottentot Venus" display constituted **slavery**; ultimately, a court heard a case to determine whether the exhibitioner should be sentenced under England's antislavery laws.

Parks uses Baartman's **history** as the backdrop of the play but does not focus solely on the familiar objectification of the black woman's **body** but instead reaches back to reconfigure and make tangible the woman, not just the image of desire who became known for her sexual organs and posterior. In fact, after her death, Baartman's body was dissected and her sexual organs and buttocks were preserved and housed in the Musee de l'Homme in Paris until the late twentieth century. Parks, however, places her focus on imagining Baartman as a sexual woman, not one who was just "sexualized." While we see her through a typical lens—being labeled by whites as lascivious—underneath she surfaces as a woman who uses her body to her advantage. It is true that



one could argue that Venus does come to perpetuate her own exploitation, but it is also possible that she is aware of how she could change her situation somewhat, even on a miniscule level. She is aware that the scientist is fascinated by her, and may even **love** her, and therefore has a willing sexual relationship with him that wins her towering wigs, perfume, and being taken care of, to some degree.

Although she is eventually abandoned and dissected by the scientist who both loves and loathes her simultaneously, Parks reconfigures her as more than the sideshow freak—as a woman, who like other black women characters in her writing, uses her situation as an opportunity to move, as best as possible, from a position of victimhood. In her retelling of Baartman's story, Parks not only interrogates the enslaved woman's coping mechanisms, but she also exposes one of the world's most abhorrent stories of racism, objectification, envy, and oppression.

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Brandon L. A. Hutchinson

### VIOLENCE

"Violence" exceeds the boundaries of a single narrative, character, voice, historical viewpoint, cultural context, place, or event because its effects often cannot be separated from its causes. For those who experience violence and its effects, it is also a traumatic reality that overwhelms and exceeds the affected individual's cognitive comprehension, ordinary **memory**, and speech capacity. Because violence is both a painful or traumatic historical reality and

a symptom of ideological oppression such as racism, the African American women writers who seek to interrogate and represent the effects of violence voice their struggle with the discursive or linguistic constraints that simultaneously expose and conceal these effects.

**Toni Morrison**, in her afterword to *The Bluest Eye* (1970), discusses her choice to use the image of marigold seeds that do not, and indeed cannot, grow in the ground because of the land's hostile conditions. It is, however, the case that flowers of evil have grown in the land, that incest, **rape**, **family** violence, emotional abuse, physical and spiritual scarification, which are the direct effects of racism, provide a toxic "ground" for growing victims, which the **community** at large will later say "had no right to live" (206). By foregrounding the infertility of the land and of the marigold seeds planted that tragic autumn by Pecola's two friends, Frieda and Claudia, Morrison feels that she was best able to access the background of "illicit, traumatic, incomprehensible sex coming to its dreaded fruition" (213). Reflecting on her authorial ability to capture the horrors of self-hatred and misrecognition caused by endemic racism, Morrison expresses her satisfaction at how, in the novel's opening, she was able to capture the insidious dynamics of community secrecy and intergenerational trauma. But she also laments her own inability to adequately represent the silence. That Pecola wants blue eyes and will go to any length to get them, even if they are blue marbles implanted by a colored, xenophobic, male pedophile who disavows his own African heritage, means that the "bluest eye" will come to symbolize a number of things in the novel in relation to different scenes and types of violence. For instance, the "bluest eye" symbolizes the violence inherent in the complicity of various members of the society with respect to rape, incest, and **domestic** violence. It also symbolizes the violence that is inherent in internalized racism and self-hatred; and as such, it becomes coextensive with externalized racism, sexism, and social abjection. Also symbolizing forms of ideological "blindness" that manifest themselves symptomatically in and through intergenerational trauma, human **sexuality**, **myths**, and perceptions of childhood or, especially in this case, girlhood, "the bluest eye" indexes invisible as well as visible forms of social insanity. As important and very poignantly, Pecola's blue eyes represent the gender-specific insanity women can experience as a result of sexual violence, social abjection, emotional abuse, and psychological trauma.

There are many more things that the black girl's blue eyes may symbolize in this novel. However, as Morrison has observed, there are limits to what a literary symbol or figure can achieve with respect to probing the depths of suffering experienced by rape survivors or victims of violence, or with respect to representing the complex dynamics of individual, community, and audience witnessing. Morrison adamantly refuses to accept that rape and domestic abuse associated with racial violence constitute a social enigma, nor is she willing to accept the fact that African American writers, such as herself, cannot find new or better ways of addressing and representing the nature of the victims' or community's silence on the matter of women's sexual torture and emotional torment. In her afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison finds, in

retrospect, that the “silence” and “void” corresponding to Pecola’s traumatic experiences “should have had a shape—like the emptiness left by a boom or a cry. It required a sophistication unavailable to me, and some deft manipulation of the voices around her [Pecola]” (215). Though she confesses her perceived failure to capture this void, by having Pecola’s incestuous rape experience with her father turn into an unwanted, teenage pregnancy, and by having her girlfriends indirectly testify to their limited knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Pecola’s sexual abuse, Morrison delves into the matter of what is known by whom, at what time, under what circumstances, and at whose expense.

In taking this approach, this author crucially considers what the violated, black female **body** bears witness to, consciously or not. The body’s silent affects or corporeal markers of emotional, physical, psychic, and spiritual distress can bear witness to the loss of voice and ability to articulate, let alone conceive of, the wrongs that were suffered as a result of various assaults or violences to being; it can bear witness to the loss of memory, sanity, sense of self, belonging, or being through various means, tears and crying being only two of the more obvious physical signs. Pecola develops unsightly twitches and erratic body movements; however, in other African American women’s writings on the subject of rape and violence, the body may be screened by language, only partially imaginable as that which bears witness to specific or generalized violence against African American individuals, or utterly detached and dissociated from other aspects of being, such as psychic or spiritual integrity. For example, **Maya Angelou**’s narrator, in “The Detached,” enunciates self-**death** as being “internal.” Some biographical **slave narratives**, such as the one written by **Octavia V. Rogers Albert** in *The House of Bondage or Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (1890), document accounts of the emotional and physical torments of slave mothers. In Albert’s interview with Charlotte Brooks later in the text, Brooks attributes the deaths of all her children, one of whom was her first master’s son, to a lack of motherly attention. Using the interview style as a more direct form of testimony and witnessing, Albert illustrates how **slavery**’s destruction of emotional and physical bonds between a mother and her children constitutes a form of violence that produces “milk tears” in addition to lacrimal tears, that produces children’s death as a result of imposed, maternal neglect.

What the different literary approaches, styles, and forms adopted by these African American women writers testify to is the importance of witnessing in survivors’ and victims’ lives. While such witnessing may be a way of acting out or working through the various obstacles to comprehension, memory, desire, mourning, and **love**, or as a means of negotiating new ways of overcoming traumatic memories and stress disorders (being thought of by the present generation of trauma scholars as a pathology of **history** rather than self), it can also expose the ways in which violence manifests itself in various love relationships. **Literature** thus plays a vital role with respect to witnessing traumatic events and mediating forms of violence, since, as Holocaust historian Dominick LaCapra argues, “violence in unmediated form may be

more likely when there are no accepted or legitimated modes of symbolizing difference and conflict in an effective manner that enables them to be addressed and to some extent dealt with" (60). The question that African American women writers struggle with when representing violence and its effects is the question of how to re-present violence without perpetuating its traumatic effects and sustaining its pathological, historical legacy. LaCapra's larger point about the mediation of violence through socially or politically legitimated avenues of resistance and recovery is that anyone can suffer from "structural trauma," which he defines as the speaking subject's alienated relation to language, to nature, to "species-being," and to "tranhistorical absence" (77). Not everyone, however, suffers from "historical trauma," which entails a subject position that is incommensurable with the subjective, witnessing positions occupied by perpetrators and other witnesses.

In *Fires in the Mirror*, **Anna Deavere Smith** experiments with voice in ways that place the female body—her own body—at the center of performance consisting of a series of witness interviews about a traumatic car accident involving two black children and the ensuing racial violence that erupted between blacks and Hasidic Jews in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York, on August 19, 1991. Smith's theory about ways of presenting as well as negotiating racial and ethnic difference involves experimenting with the "travel" from other to the self, which is a departure from acting techniques based on "psychological realism." Desiring an acting technique that did not rely on experience based on a performer's "real life," Smith set to prove her hypothesis, namely, that "[i]f we were to inhabit the speech pattern of another, and walk in the speech of another, we could find the individuality of the other and experience that individuality viscerally" (xxvii). In other words, she was proposing that performing the other could be a useful way of learning about the other, that instead of using the self as a frame of reference as in conventional acting methods, the feat of enacting difference would require that "the frame of reference for the other would *be* the other" (xxvii). What Smith believed was that if we are resistant to acting like another human being, we also may have strong inhibitions about hearing, seeing, and empathizing with the other. These inhibitions further would prevent us from comprehending the violent actions or histories of other persons considered to be unlike ourselves. In the course of her vocal and bodily performance of various witnesses or characters associated in some way with the Crown Heights eruption of violence, Smith enacts or takes on the otherness of the Reverend Al Sharpton (a well-known New York activist and minister), Rivkah Siegal (a Lubavitcher woman), Norman Rosenbaum (the brother of the man who was mobbed and killed after the accident), Michael S. Miller (executive director at the Jewish Community Relations Council), Monique "Big Mo" Matthews (a Los Angeles rapper), and various other Crown Heights residents of different gender, **race**, religious affiliation, educational level, and **class**. Smith's female body undergoes startling and surprising transformations during the course of her performance, and even without the benefit of seeing this performance live, it is possible for readers of her text to bear witness to the other's uncanny presence

that is given to be seen in her still photographs and the written script. What Smith wishes to impress upon her audiences is that “[t]he mirrors of society do not mirror society” (xxviii). This recognition affords the reader or spectator (or indeed, tertiary witness) an opportunity to examine the ways in which literary devices, such as the symbol, figure of speech, or image, operate as partial mirrors that do not mirror society but rather imperfectly mirror a given society’s dominant belief systems or worldview.

When African American women writers such as Smith, Angelou, Albert, and Morrison deploy literary devices or adopt narrative strategies so as to expose the blind spots within the oppressive ideologies and representational systems they wish to contest, different issues will emerge in their writings as to how to represent the invisible, the ineffable, the unknown, or the unspeakable dimensions of violence and its wide-ranging effects. Traumatic, corporeal affects such as numbing, partial paralysis, irregular breathing or menstrual bleeding, and other “silent” markers of violence’s indelible effects, are sometimes represented in African American women’s writing through the use of sensory cues such as smells, sounds, colors, rhythms, sensations, or emotions. An author’s strategic use of such sensory cues effectively may index different forms of sensory conversion or synaesthesia, different registers of emotional shock or psychic disturbance, different levels of consciousness or perception, and different orders of traumatic representation and visceral response. For example, by using color to signify volatile and mutable emotional states that correspond indirectly with the experience of violence, women writers find novel ways to express the psychic, emotional, corporeal, and spiritual changes in a human being that result from violence.

The blue color of indigo-stained hands, in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), for instance, symbolizes slavery and rape as well as spiritual legacy and continuity. Despite having historically accurate information about the impermanence of the poisonous indigo dye used in the indigo processing plants on Florida’s Sea Islands from Dr. Margaret Washington Creel, an expert on the Gullah, Dash decides to deploy the image of Nana Peasant’s blue-stained hands in an anachronistic manner to “create a new kind of icon [and symbol] around slavery rather than the traditional showing of the whip marks or the chains” (Dash 31). This is one of the ways that African American women writers, playwrights, and filmmakers readjust the “mirrors of society” to interrogate the intergenerational legacy of violence and to discover new ways of averting the effects of a potentially violent gaze or demeaning approach. That is to say, Dash employs an entire spectrum of adjectival meanings for the word *violent* instead of adopting the obsolete verb form, “to violence,” or the noun form, “violence,” as a means of achieving her vision of the Ibo tribe’s American acculturation and assimilation. To artistically play with the adjectival senses of the word *violent*, as many of these writers do, is to expand the lexicon for what qualifies as violence in modern society, while simultaneously pointing out the deficiencies of these English terms and meanings for African Americans who are the descendants and heirs of racial, ethnic, class, gender, and religious violence.

In her interview with Julie Dash, feminist critic bell hooks applauds this filmmaker's use of creative anachronism, avowing that it is crucial for black female writers and filmmakers to depart from dominant culture's dependence on "reality," "accuracy," "authenticity" by taking flight into the imaginative realms of utopia, fantasy, folly, and even nonsense. It is precisely because, in the process of documenting, representing, and rearticulating violent histories, truth claims cannot be verified as a result of the often fragmented, incomplete, and inaccurate accounts of primary eyewitnesses, victims, and bystanders, it can be liberating and **healing** for artists such as Dash to avert the cinematic "white gaze" by resituating the audience's vision and perceptions of African American slavery. Dash does this by taking aesthetic liberties with historical accounts of slavery and sexual violence, thereby transforming such forms of violence into a cinematic experience that is sensual but not pornographic in its display of beautiful black women. By directing the cinematic gaze to the black female body but refusing to eroticize the suffering and **beauty** of that body, this black feminist filmmaker intervenes in historical debates about pornography and visual culture.

Carolyn J. Dean proposes that the numbness many trauma scholars and others exposed to violence, or images and thoughts of violence on a regular basis, experience can result in "empathy" or "compassion" fatigue. The pervasive perception of a "numb" public, held by humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty International and the French Doctors without Borders, informs our daily consumption of violent images in the media, to the point where "pornography allegorizes the causes and effects of our numbness and thereby of threats to empathic identification in a wide variety of Holocaust discussions" (93). Some black historians calculate that the lives lost to the black slave trade far outnumber those lost to the Holocaust by hundreds of millions, and a number of African American women writers (such as Angelou and Smith) judiciously use the word *holocaust* to describe black suffering; however, the point is not that these two things are comparable or in any way coextensive with one another in terms of their historical specificity but that the insights gained from these and other historical traumas can, and do, affect twentieth-century black female authors' and playwrights' representations of women's suffering. What Dash, **Toni Cade Bambara**, and bell hooks think is important, in terms of how black female sexuality is portrayed in literature, **film**, the theater, and academic criticism, is an ethics and aesthetics that allow numbed or traumatized audiences, whatever their particular histories might be, to revisualize how black women have lived their legacies of violence as mothers, lovers, prostitutes, lesbians, daughters, and unwitting matriarchs. Dash, Bambara, and hooks believe that it can be an affirmative artistic exercise not to mirror and thus not to replicate the violence(s) experienced by members of a given society. The production of fantastic or utopian images of black societies, such as the kind witnessed in Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* or **Zora Neale Hurston's** *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), may be a valuable way of shortcircuiting violence as an overt or subliminal means of communication, such that an ethics of responsibility can emerge as a

supplement to, or in place of, nonetheless prevalent, artistic spectacles of pain, trauma, and suffering.

One of Dash's solutions to the issue of pornographic representation and sexual violence is the figure of The Unborn Child, who represents ancestral spirits and continuity in the form of a wise, prepubescent girl. Wearing an indigo-colored ribbon in her hair to symbolize her **ancestors'** slavery, The Unborn Child narrates the Peazant family's history on Ibo island. Her spiritual roots in Africa and her future place on the U.S. mainland allow this figure to symbolize aspects of intergenerational **spirituality**, violence, and memory. In Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, the audience becomes aware of how powerful the use of color can be as a means of evoking different emotional, sensory, mnemonic, and corporeal registers and multifarious dimensions of cultural and historical meaning. By acknowledging that violence, whether as a historical event and traumatic cause or as an experienced symptom, can function in multifarious ways to blur the conceptual boundaries between the human and nonhuman, community and personhood, victim and perpetrator, good and evil, voice and silence, slavery and **freedom**, right and wrong, childhood and adulthood, the present and the past (or future), this African American filmmaker and writer seeks to address the corporeal, spiritual, psychic, as well as abstract, dimensions of violence but does so through the use of visual tropes that index metaphysical, abstract, ephemeral, and otherwise invisible links between family members and their individual histories. In the course of the film, the color blue comes to represent different kinds of metamorphoses or conversions; that is, it concretizes the conversion of one sensory affect (i.e., joy or pain) into another (i.e., sadness or anger), marks the transformation of one sensory experience or bodily memory for another (Nana's for The Unborn Child), and helps to chart the evolution of women's experiences of rape or abuse into childbirth, nonheterosexual sexuality, and corporeal memory.

Thus when Morrison and other African American women writers, such as Angelou, Dash, Smith, and Hurston, address the relation between voice and silence so as to interrogate the shape of violence and its effects upon African American communities and the individuals that comprise them, these writers act as cartographers that map out both the known and unknown dimensions of racial, ethnic, sexual, class, and religious violence. For these and other women writers, such cartography is as much a question of how not to make history repeat itself as a question of how to differentiate between different witnessing positions and modes of traumatic representation and how to make these things matter differently in the lives of those (still) affected by violence.

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Lorelee Kippen

## VOICE FROM THE SOUTH, A

Anna Julia Cooper's first published—and most celebrated—work, *A Voice from the South* (1892) represents one of the first African American feminist texts. Boldly attacking the problems afflicting African Americans, particularly black women, in the wake of Emancipation and Reconstruction, she compellingly reveals the racial, gender, and **class** prejudices responsible for their ongoing oppression. Yet throughout this collection of speeches and essays, Cooper consistently elevates the invaluable yet unacknowledged contributions black women make to **family**, **community**, and American society.

Structurally, the text is divided into two parts: "Soprano Obligato," signifying the individual voice of one black woman from the **South**, and "Tutti ad Libitum," suggesting the collective **identity** of the larger African American community. Whereas the four essays in the second half more broadly consider questions impacting all African Americans such as widespread national racism or theories of racial uplift, part one, also composed of four essays, examines the special case of the African American woman, opening with an arresting metaphor of her hitherto muted, silenced voice.

In her short prologue "Our Raison d'Être," Cooper first introduces her peerless narrator, the Black Woman from the South. Here she also delineates the need for such a text, for this Black Woman, embodying a formerly voiceless constituency of American society, must speak and be heard. Charged with communicating her own experiences as well as those of "her people," she adopts a peculiarly grand, authoritative tone, which has led a number of critics to analyze the seeming irreconcilability of the competing voices within *A Voice from the South*. Certainly those moments where Cooper endeavors to speak for a black female majority that remained largely uneducated reveal her own vexed position. (As a highly educated African American woman, she was uniquely accomplished; her engagement with ancient and contemporary writers throughout these essays demonstrates her intelligence and proficiency as an academic.) And periodically, Cooper invokes rather traditional constructions of womanhood, appearing torn between lingering **domestic** ideals and an evolving feminist consciousness.

Despite such tensions, *A Voice from the South* emerges as unequivocally feminist and humanist in its outlook and agenda. Promoting black women's status through education, Cooper extends her argument to other people of color in "Woman versus the Indian," her direct response to white suffragist



Anna Shaw's address at the 1891 National Woman's Council. In the midst of her universalism, she condemns white feminists' exclusionary practices—their overt racism. Thus at the peculiar juncture of racial and sexual politics (the woman's movement), Cooper remains uncompromising in her frankness. She appears equally prepared to criticize black men's sexism through biting sarcasm and the use of personal anecdotes. In place of these flawed visions, she champions the black woman, whose unique voice and moral vision renew hope for the nation's future. Such is the abiding hope—glimpsed through her intellectual alacrity, relentless drive, and passionate appeals on behalf of all African American women—Cooper herself so clearly exemplified.

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Mary Alice Kirkpatrick

### VROMAN, MARY ELIZABETH (192?–1967)

Born in Buffalo, New York, in the 1920s and raised in the West Indies, short **fiction** writer, novelist, and screenwriter Mary Elizabeth Vroman was the first African American woman invited to join the Screen Actors Guild. A graduate of the Alabama State Teacher's college, Vroman's **literature** demonstrates her commitment to the realistic yet optimistic portrayal of black life in the segregated **South** as well as her interest in preserving the legacy of early black women's organizations.

Best known for the short story “See How They Run,” Vroman’s other published works include *Esther* (1963), a novel about a black woman’s quest to become a nurse; *Shaped to Its Purpose* (1965), a **history** of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated (of which Vroman was a member); and *Harlem Summer* (1967), a story about an Alabama boy’s summer trip to Harlem. “See How They Run” chronicles the experiences of Miss Richards, a black teacher who presides over forty-three students in a one-room, segregated school. This story exposes how basic needs—housing, sustenance, and health care—precede learning. Vroman’s tale anticipates **Alice Walker’s** *Meridian* (1976) in its discussion of the humanist prerequisites for activism.

The story focuses on the recalcitrant C. T., an unlikely achiever who, through Miss Richard’s care and encouragement, comes to realize his full potential as a student and a person. Like **Toni Cade Bambara’s** “The Lesson,” “See How They Run” demonstrates the commitment of black women to **community** uplift. First published in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, “See How They Run” was adapted into the **film** *Bright Road* (1953) and featured Dorothy Dandridge and Harry Belafonte in starring roles.

Of Vroman’s other works, *Shaped to Its Purpose* stands alone in its importance to black women’s feminist history. Written to record the history of Delta Sigma Theta, the second black Greek-lettered organization founded by college-educated women, this text documents an important outgrowth of the nineteenth century’s black women’s club movement. Founded in January 1913 at Howard University, Delta Sigma Theta made service and activism a priority, participating in the Women’s Suffrage March in Washington, D.C., in March of that same year. *Shaped to Its Purpose* paved the way for Paula Giddings’s *In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta and the Challenge of the Black Sorority Movement* (1994) and documents the importance of black sororities in the ever-expanding feminist movement. Vroman died in April 1967 of surgical complications.

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*Shanna Greene Benjamin*





## ***WAITING TO EXHALE***

Criticized by some black scholars for its poor representation of black male and female relationships coupled with the “in search of a good black man” motif, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), a *New York Times* bestseller, is **Terry McMillan’s** third novel about the challenges of coming of age as a black female. The four protagonists, Savannah, Gloria, Robin, and Bernadette, take a journey toward self-**love** and self-acceptance. It can be argued that each woman individually quests for a resolution to the one aspect of her life that she feels could solve all of her problems. However, when viewed collectively, these women make up a composite of a self-assured, self-loving black woman.

The Rapunzel-like Bernadette’s quest focuses on redefining her **identity** into a more self-constructed sense of herself. Gloria, on the other hand, quests for self-acceptance. An overweight single mother of a teenager, Gloria goes on one diet after another in order to possess a quality, thinness, that she feels will bring her the things that she thinks she lacks in life: a loving husband, more respect from her son, and physical **beauty**. Robin, along with Gloria, suffers from self-devaluation. Ironically, however, her extreme dedication to her appearance and the belief that she can get any man she wants do not replace the fact that she values herself so little that she ends up being used and abandoned by the very men she gets. The fourth woman in the novel is the single and childless Savannah. Although beautiful, smart, and professionally successful, thirty-six year-old Savannah sees her life as empty because it lacks

emotional attachments that she believes can only be gotten from an intimate relationship with a man. Thus, Savannah gets involved in an affair with a married man and ends up spending most of her time alone.

Through close examination, readers can recognize McMillan's purpose for writing this third novel. The characters in the novel represent the bad decisions that many women unknowingly make that stifle their personal growth. The testimony of each character helps readers challenge socially constructed notions of romantic narratives. Moreover, although *Exhale* has universal appeal, McMillan, at times, through the use of call-and-response narrative, speaks directly to black women readers not only about the challenges of fighting the master narrative of romance but also about the implications of **race**, **class**, and gender. Through these characters, readers learn about the downfalls that come with buying into the Eurocentric construct of love relationships.

Thus, McMillan returns to her discussion about self-empowerment through personal reflection and reaffirms female identity in general and black female identity in particular. *Waiting to Exhale* was made into a film in 1995.

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Catherine Ross-Stroud

### WALKER, ALICE (1944– )

Alice Walker is the author of numerous novels, collections of **fiction**, **poetry**, essays, and children's books. There have been several collections of academic essays published about her and her **work**, countless reviews of her writing, and most recently, a biography in 2004, Evelyn White's *Alice Walker: A Life*. Though highly published in several genres before writing the acclaimed Book Award-, Townsend Prize-, and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, this 1982 text brought her to the forefront of the literary world. Central to her works is her idea of **womanism**, which she defines in the beginning of her collection of nonfiction *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Other important themes she fully develops in her work are the relationships between black men and women, **family** members, and their **community**, southern culture, **folklore**, and the **civil rights movement**.

Walker was born on February 9, 1944, the eighth and final child to Willie Lee and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, sharecroppers in the small and poor town of Eatonton, Georgia. The Walkers made between \$200 and \$300 a year in the cotton fields to support and raise their children. In 1952, when Alice was eight, she was disfigured and partially blinded when she was accidentally shot in the eye by pellets from her brother's BB gun. Until the scar tissue was removed six years later in Boston, Walker fantasized about suicide because she considered herself ugly and disfigured. However, this incident allowed her to observe more closely the relationships between people. After the minor operation she became class valedictorian and high school prom queen, graduating from Butler-Baker High School in 1961.

This injury made her eligible for a scholarship to Spelman College, a black women's school in Atlanta. Her mother gave her three parting gifts: a suitcase for independence, a typewriter for creativity, and a sewing machine for self-sufficiency. At Spelman faculty members such as Howard Zinn and Staughton Lynn influenced her as well as the civil rights activities in Atlanta in which she was involved. However, Spelman's training for proper young women did not bode well with Walker.

She accepted a scholarship to Sarah Lawrence College in 1964, a predominantly white women's school in Bronxville, New York, where she began her writing career. In her education she discovered nineteenth-century Russian writers, Ovid, Chopin, the Brontës, Doris Lessing, and Simone de Beauvoir. She was lucky enough to travel to Africa in 1965. However, during the winter of her senior year she found herself pregnant in a world where reproductive health care was hard to come by and abortion was illegal, particularly inaccessible to people of color and those of low income. She felt her only choices were to kill herself or get an abortion but almost was unable to secure one until a friend gave her a phone number and her life back. After, she wrote poems incessantly and gave them to Muriel Ruykeyser, a teacher and well-known poet on campus. The professor helped the collection reach the publisher Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich. Walker graduated from Sarah Lawrence in 1966 with a B.A.

After graduation, she worked in the welfare department in New York City. She received a writing fellowship from Spelman to collect biographies and autobiographies of black women and spent the summer working in civil rights programs in Mississippi. There she met Melvyn Rosenman Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer. They lived together in New York for a year, where she published a short story "To Hell with Dying," and an essay, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" which won a \$300 prize from the American Scholar. On March 17, 1967, Walker and Leventhal married, becoming the first legally married interracial couple in Mississippi where previously an interracial couple could not live together, legally married or not. During those seven years in Mississippi, Walker worked with Head Start programs and served as writer-in-residence at Jackson State University and Tougaloo College.

Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich published her first book of poems, titled *Once*, in 1968. The poems focus on Africa, the **South, love**, and suicide and

are almost in haiku form. The African poems describe the realities of African people and nature. The pieces on the South discuss the civil rights movement and are ironical even as they express sympathy. The verses on love examine complications, desire, loneliness, uncertainties, and forgiveness. This collection received little attention from critics, but the notice it did receive was positive.

During 1968 and 1969, the couple tried desperately to get pregnant and endured one miscarriage to avoid the draft. On November 17, 1969, Rebecca Grant, Walker's daughter, was born. In several essays Walker describes her fears that **motherhood** might disallow her career as a writer. At the time there were no models of successful black women who were mothers and writers. Fortunately, she was able to overcome her anxiety and continued to publish extensively over the years. Walker explains that much of her earlier writing was her method to maintain health, to avoid crises, and to survive.

In 1970 Walker was awarded the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, and Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich published her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. This story examines three generations of a black sharecropping family whose experiences lead to abandonment, promiscuity, self-hatred, abuse, and murder via a southern landscape of harsh working conditions, racism, economic oppression, frustration, and little hope for the characters. Hope is given through African American folk culture and the civil rights movement. The novel's central character Grange Copeland and then Brownfield believe that sharecropping will cultivate success; however, this shortsightedness leads to frustration, rage, self-hatred, **domestic** abuse, and infidelity. The novel utilizes the themes of moral responsibility, hope through love, secular redemption, and black characters finding a way out on their own. Though the novel showcases the relationships of fathers and sons, how they treat black women becomes a theme that Walker continued to explore in her future works.

In 1972 Walker accepted temporary teaching positions while her husband remained in Mississippi. She taught at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and Wellesley College, where she instructed one of the first classes in the nation on gender focusing on African American women's **literature**. In her classes at Wellesley she taught black women writers like **Phillis Wheatley** alongside Virginia Woolf.

She published *Revolutionary Petunias*, a book of poems in 1973, and *Langston Hughes: American Poet*, a children's biography of the famous poet in 1974. *Revolutionary Petunias* further develops some of her earlier themes: valuing the past, the difficulties of the present, and the hope for the future. Her book of short stories *In Love & Trouble* (1973) won the Rosenthal Award of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. "Everyday Use" and "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" of that collection were published in *Best American Short Stories*. The former story first gave her access to anthropologist and writer **Zora Neale Hurston**. Though some of the stories were published previously in periodicals, many of them were new and told narratives of black women experiencing **violence**, injustice, oppression, false ideals, **death**, and dignity.

In 1974 the family of three moved to New York. In the following year Walker became a contributing editor to the feminist magazine *Ms*. In 1976 Walker and Leventhal divorced on good terms, and she returned to her maiden name, reclaiming the **history** of her **ancestors** walking to escape **slavery**. She later changed her name to Alice Tallulah-Kate Walker. That same year, her second novel, *Meridan*, was published. *Meridian*, in one sense, is a continuation of the story of Grange Copeland. In this novel womanhood is depicted as problematic via tales of women who come to violent ends through their actions. Meridan Hill marries her high school friend, who never matures or understands her. She loves and wants to kill her own child. Through the civil rights movement, Meridan feels possibility for liberation and purpose in her life. This book has been described as a study of women and the inner dynamics of the civil rights movement. It addresses the morality of racism and asks in the novel: Would you kill for the revolution?

In 1977 Walker became associate professor at Yale University. She reunited with Robert Allen, editor of *Black Scholar*, whom she had known at Spelman. In 1978 she received the Guggenheim Fellowship. The following year brought two publications, an anthology of writings by Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I'm Laughing . . . and Then Again When I'm Mean and Impressive*, and her third book of poems, *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*. The collection of **poetry** deals with themes of her earlier works of poetry but diverges more fully into feminist ideals. The book is divided into five sections that examine love, history, disappointments in relationships, life as an artist, strong men like Martin Luther King, Jr., and **Malcolm X**, and women's connection to male power. Walker left New York for San Francisco to give her time to fully develop her next novel. In 1981 her second collection of stories, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, was published by Harcourt.

*The Color Purple*, published in 1982, remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than a year and was made into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, and Oprah Winfrey in 1985. The **film** was nominated for several Academy Awards, though it did not win any. In 1983 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the book and was the first African American woman ever to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary novel of ninety letters telling the story of Celie, an abused woman living in the Deep South. It covers some of the themes of her earlier work including women's relationship to men, domestic abuse, **rape**, and desire. It is told entirely in black folk English or vernacular. This book, similar to her story of Copeland Grange, exposed a particular type of black male behavior toward women and initiated a dialogue on what this abuse means for black women. Some critics felt her depictions revealed too much and called the characterization of Mr. — harsh, but this particular reading fails to see, as Walker points out, the necessity of this discussion as well as the evolution of the male characters as they begin to find their place in the world. In 2000 this novel went into its forty-second printing, and in 2004 it became a Broadway musical production premiering in Atlanta. She later published a collection of essays, unseen letters, and screenplay



excerpts, *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult: A Meditation of Life, Spirit, Art, and the Making of the Film, The Color Purple, Ten Years Later* (1996).

In 1983 she published her first nonfiction collection of essays on herself, the civil rights movement, literature, and black women, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. The title essay suggests looking low to reclaim our foremothers' art because creativity is in many types of work, including gardening, storytelling, and **quilting**. She believes that all writers are important and necessary, contributing to the full picture of humanity. This collection of thirty-six pieces also explores her **womanist** perspective, antinuclear activism, the need for black women literary models, Zora Neale Hurston, the women's movement, **Langston Hughes**, Cuba, and other topics. In the following year, she started her own publishing company with Robert Allen, Wild Tree Press, which closed in 1988. Soon after, Walker and Robert Allen ended their relationship, and she eventually announced her bisexuality.

During her involvement with the film *The Color Purple*, Walker became interested in female genital mutilation, an initiation rite that removes various parts of the female genitalia and is performed on an estimated 100 million girls and women in the Middle East, the Far East, and Africa. On this topic, she coproduced the Pratibha Parmar film *Warrior Marks* (1993) and wrote her fifth novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). In this novel several characters from *The Color Purple* tell their story.

Walker continues to write in a variety of venues. Her nonfiction collections include *Living by the Word* (1988) and *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997). Her poetry includes *Horses Make the Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1984), *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965–1990* (1991), *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit After the Bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon* (2001), *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems* (2003), and *A Poem Traveled Down My Arm* (2003). Her fiction includes *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998), *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000), and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2004). Her children's books include *To Hell with Dying* (1988) and *Finding the Green Stone* (1991). Walker currently lives in northern California.

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*Laura Madeline Wiseman*

### WALKER, MARGARET (1915–1998)

Margaret Abigail Walker Alexander was born in Birmingham, Alabama, on July 7, 1915. Encouraged at an early age by her parents Reverend Sigismund and Marion Dozier Walker to read, she immersed her life in **poetry** and philosophy. Though Walker read widely, the Holy Bible and the Bhagavad-Gita were chief among the texts that influenced her thinking and subsequent development as a writer.

A graduate of Northwestern University in 1935, she received her Bachelor of Arts degree and in 1936 began to **work** for the Federal Writers' Project. She met and worked with such writers as **Gwendolyn Brooks**, Frank Yerby, and **Richard Wright**. The two collaborated on Wright's endeavors; Walker provided significant research and seminal ideas on Wright's *Black Boy* (1945).

No single day in Walker's young life was ordinary, as she became an astute observer of life and **history**. Her **love** for languages, words, and ideas helped to determine and shape her literary activism. Her father's strong and proactive oratories against racial repression and oppression of American blacks in the **South** and across the nation as well influenced her perspective and outlook.

From the journey across the South with her parents and sister to relocate to New Orleans, Louisiana, and the harrowing experience she remembered it to

be, Walker never forgot what the threats to personal safety felt like to her and to her **family**. As they traveled that distance on American highways without being able to use public facilities, this was only one remarkable impression of history upon her life.

Subsequently, she used her writing, and acquaintance with the power of words, the highest treasure of her life, and helped repeal the social, spiritual, and economic devastation of **race** hatred. As a writer, as a person, as a woman, she saw in herself an important and reasonable agent of social change to which she prolifically responded.

Her very first literary missive was the award-winning collection of poetry she titled *For My People* (1942). And that is how Walker saw the struggle for equal liberty in America—as beyond herself, beyond her interests, even beyond the borders of the South—and for the people of her color, deep into the total African diaspora of the Western Hemisphere.

Despite her formal training and education, and as part of the elite social structure of higher education in Mississippi, Walker retained a close cultural connection to the life and ethos of the struggle of black people, to be epitomized throughout her life in *For My People*. She utilized every aspect of black folk culture to contest social alienation that ranged from **drama** to ballad folk poetry to “badman” songs that told stories originating from African Americans in the South.

Also the author of the historical novel *Jubilee* (1966), Walker died on November 30, 1998, at the age of eighty-three.

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*Elisabeth S. James*

## WALTER, MILDRED PITTS (1922– )

Experience has been the inspiration for Mildred Pitts Walter's writing. Born in Sweetville, Louisiana, the seventh of seven children to Paul, a log cutter, and Mary, a midwife and beautician, Walter had a childhood that was characterized by the challenges of poverty and the joys of **community**. Her **family** lived in two small houses owned by a lumber company, and the yard between the houses served as a community meeting place. Neighbors would congregate there on Saturday nights for food, dancing, and storytelling. These experiences had a powerful influence on Walter's later writing.

Walter's long, varied career has also had an impact on her books. At times a shipwright helper, dye salesperson, teacher, and lecturer, Mildred Walter—with her husband, Earl Walter—was also an activist for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) during the **civil rights movement**. Her activism was the embodiment of her beliefs that differences between people are not wrong and that all people are entitled to the same rights from the moment of birth. These core beliefs surely influenced her writing career. Walter was inspired to write when, as a teacher in southern California, she noticed a lack of African American characters in **children's and young adult literature**. She decided to write, and Lillie, the birthday girl character of her first book, was born.

*Lillie of Watts: A Birthday Discovery* (1969) is about a girl facing hardship on her eleventh birthday who is sustained by the strength of her family's **love**. Lillie returns in Walter's second book, *Lillie of Watts Takes a Giant Step* (1971), in which Lillie joins a campaign to celebrate the birthday of **Malcolm X** at her school.

Walter's award-winning writing celebrates the positive aspects of African American life. Families are important in her writing, as are friends and community members. In her writing, Walter often addresses themes of poverty, prejudice, courage, community, change, and strength. Heritage is also important, as her African American characters often develop and recognize their **identity**.

Walter has received many awards for her work. In 1984, *Because We Are* was named a Coretta Scott King honorable mention book; two years later, *Trouble's Child* received the same honor. In 1987, *Justin and the Best Biscuits in the World* was a Coretta Scott King winner. Walter missed the award ceremony. Ever an activist with a cause, Walter was marching in the Soviet Union for world peace.

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*Heidi Hauser Green*

### WEDDING, THE

*The Wedding* (1995) by **Harlem Renaissance** author **Dorothy West** first began life as the manuscript "Where the Wild Grapes Grow." While publishers Houghton Mifflin felt that it was well written, they were equally concerned that a novel about middle-class blacks would not sell. West abandoned the project and in the 1960s incorporated the background into *The*

*Wedding*. She received a Mary Roberts Rinehart grant for the novel and a contract from Harper and Row. Yet this time it was West who would lay it aside, convinced that the era was not right for a novel about the concerns of light-skinned upper-class African Americans. West's concerns had less to do with salability and more to do with politics and reception; she feared that the prevalent mood of black militancy would generate hostile reviews from black and white reviewers alike. Over twenty years later, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, fellow Martha's Vineyard vacationer, convinced West that the time was right to resume **work** on the novel. Their literary partnership is memorialized in *The Wedding's* dedication.

*The Wedding* is set on Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard, at the end of the 1950s. Its characters are light-skinned black professionals who populate "The Oval," a carefully guarded geographic and social circle. The penetration of that circle by the darker-skinned, socially inferior Lute forms the primary conflict of the novel. Shelby Coles, engaged daughter of one of the prominent families, must decide between marriage to a white man whose profession as a **jazz** musician invites her **family's** disdain and her attraction to the intruder who tries to convince her that she is fleeing her racial heritage by marrying white. Lute's argument holds sway temporarily as Shelby is forced to evaluate her family's social snobbery and articulated preference for those who can pass for white.

West maps the origins of the Coleses' preferences through flashbacks to earlier generations, demonstrating that the family has a long-standing anxiety about **race**, **class**, skin color, and sexual desire. In order to maintain the border around their world, they struggle against their ever-erupting attractions to those who do not meet their standards. Yet the very fact that this border requires such policing suggests its fraught and tenuous nature. West presents the threats to their world throughout, embodied in a cast of characters whose longings draw attention to the limitations of a world that defines itself in differing degrees as both "not black" and "not white," while simultaneously expressing longings for elements of what they attribute to each.

West's novel was well received by critics; Susan Kenney noted its "range of scope of language and imagery as well as the [novel's] broadness of vision," comparing her favorably to William Faulkner. In 1998, a less-successful television version appeared, produced by Oprah Winfrey, which replaced *The Wedding's* light-skinned subjects with visibly black actors, suggesting that, once again, some were not yet ready for West's story.

*See also* Passing

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*Jennifer Harris*

### **WELLS-BARNETT, IDA B. (1862–1931)**

Like **Frances E. W. Harper** and **Anna Julia Cooper**, Ida B. Wells-Barnett devoted much of her energy in the decades between Reconstruction and the turn into the twentieth century to causes of vital importance to the women of her **race**. Accounts of Wells's extended campaign against lynching often stress the tendency of white opponents (and even some African Americans) of her own day to view her as a radical political figure who regularly violated norms for ladylike behavior. However, such characterizations can obscure more gendered aspects of her activist social agenda, such as her lifelong involvement with women's groups (especially African American clubwomen) and her sustained commitment to nurturing children (particularly after her 1895 marriage to Chicago attorney Ferdinand Barnett).

Among the many allies who supported Wells's antilynching campaign, African American and British women played a particularly crucial role. In the early 1890s, Wells came to the attention of women leaders such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and **Gertrude Bostell Mossell** through writing published in the *New York Age*. Wells had earlier established herself as a journalist in Memphis, Tennessee. She had originally moved there from her Mississippi birthplace to seek improved pay for the schoolteaching she had been doing since the **death** of both parents made her the major breadwinner for herself and her younger siblings. Biographers understandably tend to emphasize one event from her 1880s time in Memphis as pivotal in forging her dedication to racial justice: the unsuccessful lawsuit Wells brought against the Chesapeake and Ohio and Southwestern Railroad for removing her from a coach reserved for whites. But Wells's own **autobiography** also highlights another important dimension of this period, one that shows her clear understanding of writing as an avenue to support racial uplift. In that vein, she first published articles in the *Evening Star*, a local paper linked to a lyceum she had joined, and then for a column in the *Living Way*, a religious weekly that was soon syndicating the essays she signed as "Iola." By the early 1890s, Wells had gone on to become editor, co-owner, and major writer for a Memphis newspaper, the *Free Speech*. When several local Memphis men whom Wells knew to be of good character were lynched because their People's Grocery Store was undermining one run by local whites, Wells published an account in the *Free Speech* that raised such ire among whites that she had to abandon Memphis and the newspaper for her own safety. But a *New York*

*Age* feature story she wrote about her enforced exile prompted **Victoria Earle Matthews** and other prominent clubwomen to organize a gala dinner raising funds to support Wells's **work** against lynching. Wells's autobiography credits this occasion with promoting the founding of the Boston Woman's Era Club, whose *Woman's Era* publication regularly printed writings by leaders such as **Mary Church Terrell** and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin. Wells also linked this event with the start of her public speaking career, which in turn led to an invitation from women activists in the British Isles to visit and share her anti-lynching message.

Wells would remain proactively connected with the clubwomen's movement, even after her marriage to Ferdinand Barnett, when she repeatedly took on leadership roles through local club work in Chicago. As her autobiography emphasizes, Wells-Barnett reveled in **motherhood**, while seeking at the same time to balance those responsibilities with public duties associated with her membership in an influential social **class** and her reputation as a well-known figure supporting causes such as recognition of African American achievements at the 1893 Columbian Exposition, continued integration of Chicago schools, and collaborations between black women and local white activists like Jane Addams, Celia Parker Wooley, and Mrs. George Plummer.

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*Sarah R. Robbins*



**WEST, DOROTHY (1907–1998)**

It is appropriate that Dorothy West's novels concern familial relations: While West was the only child of transplanted southerners Rachel Benson and Isaac West, she was raised in a household populated by maternal aunts and their children. With the exception of West's mother, all were in **domestic** service, the two others who had children leaving them behind to be educated by a governess. It is therefore not surprising that by her teen years the money West earned through writing helped support the **family**.

In 1926 West entered *Opportunity's* literary contest, tying with **Zora Neale Hurston** in the short-story category. She and **Helene Johnson**, a cousin whose **poetry** had received honorable mention, traveled to New York for the ceremony. Hurston was one of many luminaries of the **Harlem Renaissance** who welcomed the cousins, establishing a long-lasting friendship with them. West was less influenced by the movement's other female writers, **Nella Larsen** and **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, though she knew the latter. Instead, she was a favorite of the male writers; Wallace Thurman represented West kindly in his satirical novel *Infants of the Spring* (1932), while **Claude McKay** mentored her as a writer. Indeed, McKay, **Countee Cullen**, and **Langston Hughes**—among others—proposed marriage. That West received multiple marriage proposals from gay men is interesting; her reservation appeared to provoke a protective impulse in others, including A'Lelia Walker, who chastised Carl Van Vechten for his advances to West. Certainly, friends of West's mother cared for her in New York, making sure she was fed and employed. One even helped her to secure a part in the original production of DuBose Heyward's *Porgy*, which traveled to London. Three years later West was again overseas, this time as part of a group of twenty-two African Americans who journeyed to Russia—including Hughes, Henry Lee Moon, Ted Poston, and Louise Thompson—to make a never-completed **film** about American racism.

Returning to America upon the **death** of her father, West continued to live in New York, working for the Public Welfare Department and, in 1934, launching the magazine *Challenge*, an attempt to counter the impact of the depression upon black artists. Her supporters included Cullen, Hughes, Hurston, McKay, Van Vechten, and others, while her detractors claimed that the magazine did not reflect the socialism with which many artists were then enamored. *Challenge* was revised accordingly, becoming *New Challenge* in 1937, with West as editor and Marian Minus and **Richard Wright** as associate editors. But West's opposition to communism and status as proprietor and primary backer meant that the magazine did not survive.

West continued to write throughout these years; her employment with the Works Progress Administration produced some of her most powerful writings of the period. In 1940 she secured an arrangement to provide the *New York Daily News* with two stories a month, initiating a relationship with the paper that lasted almost twenty years. However, within six years the author would permanently retire from New York, to Oak Bluffs, Martha's Vineyard.

It was there her grandfather had bought a **home** after following his daughters North, it was there that the family had summered, and it was there that she finished her first novel, *The Living Is Easy* (1948). While its proposed serialization by the *Ladies' Home Journal* was canceled when editors feared a backlash from southern subscribers, the story of a selfish matron and her family was reviewed favorably in the North.

The novel was loosely based on West's own family and domineering mother and included a thinly veiled portrait of Monroe Trotter, West having been a pupil of his sister Bessie and a goddaughter of his sister Maude. Some relatives were outraged by what they saw as West's betrayal of family and friends. From there she became a columnist for the *Vineyard Gazette*. By 1968 she was regularly reporting on the activities of vacationing elite African Americans; by 1973 her scope extended to all residents of the Island, regardless of color.

It was not until 1995 that West published her second novel, *The Wedding*, begun in the 1960s, an era West felt was unsympathetic to the lives of those light-skinned upper-class blacks who were its subjects. Another local vacationer and editor for Doubleday, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, had convinced West to resume work on the novel, and the two formed a meaningful literary partnership. The publication was timely; the renewed interest in West, as the last surviving writer of the Harlem Renaissance, meant that her final literary production was received as she wished, by those who were attuned to the nuances of **race**, gender, **class**, and their impact upon families. The last remaining years of West's life were busy; in 1997 the residents of Martha's Vineyard threw her a birthday party attended by Hilary Clinton, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Anita Hill, and Jessye Norman and renamed a street in her honor. The event was televised by Cable News Network; a year later a film version of *The Wedding* also aired, produced by Oprah Winfrey and starring Halle Berry. While West lived her middle years in obscurity, she died in 1998 better known than she had ever anticipated.

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*Jennifer Harris*

### **WHAT YOU OWE ME**

**Bebe Moore Campbell's** most recent work *What You Owe Me* (2001), winner of *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of the New Year, tells the story of friendship, betrayal, and recognition that occurs between two women, Hosanna Dark, who is African American, and Gilda Rosenstein, a Jewish immigrant. The two women meet while working as maids in Los Angeles' oldest white-owned hotel, the Braddock, and quickly and quietly form a fast friendship. In post-World War II California, each recognizes within the other the narrative not only of a survivor but an unfolding story of ambition and the desire to succeed—to **work** for themselves rather than labor for others.

Gilda's father, prewar, was a cosmetic factory owner, and Hosanna and Gilda borrow on and perfect his recipe for making lotion, which they then market to women of color, to launch their careers in the **beauty** industry. Until discovered and subsequently fired, they use the hotel's tubs as a laboratory to mix and bottle cosmetics. What the women learn from each other is the power of innovation and collaboration—the ability of like-minded women, regardless of **race**, to form a partnership forged in an entrepreneurial spirit.

It is men who betray this partnership and the sting of racism that poisons female friendship. Shortly after their firing from the Braddock, Hosanna and Gilda lose contact with one another. Gilda's husband, an older, domineering,

and racist man of Jewish descent, learns of his young wife's business partnership with an African American woman and abruptly puts an end to it by having Gilda turn all bank accounts over to him. Because as a black woman Hosanna's name was never on the company's account, when she attempts to withdraw her share of their savings, she cannot. Unknown to Gilda, whose husband has secretly closed the account, he has her write a bad check to Hosanna for funds that are rightfully hers. Hosanna must start anew, and she does so by marketing her own line of cosmetics to African American women. However, she carries her anger and bitterness at Gilda with her to the grave. It is up to Hosanna's daughter, Matriece, to right a mother's assumed betrayal by a woman she once called not just business partner but friend.

Reconciliation is at the heart of *What You Owe Me*. Gilda has amassed a fortune, and Matriece, who works for another cosmetic company, becomes the head of Gilda's cosmetics division, which caters to women of color. Initially, Matriece keeps the secret that she is Hosanna's daughter from Gilda. Expecting to loathe Gilda, when Matriece meets her she begins to understand the narrowness of Hosanna's narrative and the gulf of Gilda's grief, which is borne out of an inability to explain circumstance to the friend she was never able to locate after their rift occurred. Once Matriece's **identity** is revealed and her mother's past made known, Gilda acknowledges the debt she owes Hosanna and secedes the part of her business that caters to cosmetics for African American women to Matriece. In this act, amends are made.

What the women in this narrative realize is that human beings are essentially flawed and that they must recognize the flaws in one another not so much to seek retribution but to reconcile themselves with past and current hurt. Gilda has survived the Holocaust, and Hosanna, regardless of her bitterness, survived a hostile world that indicated to her that an African American woman must always be someone else's maid. Hosanna is a minor success in her own right, and her legacy lives on in a daughter who has corrected the wrongs of the past through the diligence, hard work, and courage that she inherits from her mother. Forgiveness and reconciliation are central to a novel that celebrates women's tenacity to survive with dignity and integrity despite the burden of racism, xenophobia, and men's suspicion of strong women.

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*Jennifer Driscoll*

### WHEATLEY, PHILLIS (1752–1784)

Phillis Wheatley was probably born in the Senegal/Gambia area in Africa. Because she was enslaved at a young age, Wheatley had few memories of her

life in Africa. In a letter to her close friend, Obour Tanner, she recalled seeing her mother pouring libations to the sun and then prostrating herself on the ground. Whether her mother was engaged in sun worship or praying to Mecca is difficult to determine; what is clear, however, is the importance that **religion** would continue to play in Wheatley's life and **work**.

At the age of seven, Wheatley was captured and taken to the United States to be sold as a slave. She was purchased in Boston in 1761 by John Wheatley as a servant for his wife Susannah. The Wheatleys decided to name her Phillis, after the slave ship that brought her from Africa. As a relatively well off **family** and because primary educational opportunities had been extended to middle-class young women, the Wheatley daughters were well educated. The daughters of the Wheatley family used the skills they had learned to teach Phillis English. Within four years, Wheatley accumulated a swift and sure command of the language. An unusually quick and apt pupil, Phillis would go on to study Latin and **literature**.

She began writing poems soon after she began studying literature. Her first piece of published writing, a poem about the miraculous survival of two men during a hurricane off Cape Cod, "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin," appeared in 1767 in the *Newport Mercury*. Although she would continue to occasionally publish, most of her published poems were frequently preceded by mention of her **race** and sex.

She would go on to publish others, including the immensely popular "On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield" (1770). By 1772 she had written enough poems to fill a volume. For a variety of reasons including racism and the stagnation of the American economy at the run-up to the Revolutionary War, which hit Boston pretty hard, Wheatley was unable to get enough subscribers to warrant publication in Boston. Whitefield had been the valued chaplain to the countess of Huntington, Selina Hastings. Phillis sent her a copy of the poems along with her letter of condolence. The countess was impressed and invited Wheatley to London, in order to facilitate publication of the volume.

In 1773, she went to London with Nathaniel Wheatley. While there she met Lady Huntington, who helped bring her book of **poetry**, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, into publication. Wheatley spent six weeks in London and met many British intellectuals and writers including Granville Sharpe, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Gibbon. Her book was extremely popular. She tried to get the book published in the United States when she returned. It was only published after she had proved to a group of white men in a tribunal that she had actually written the poems.

She continued writing poetry. In 1773, Mrs. Wheatley died, and Wheatley was manumitted a year later. She continued to live with the Wheatleys and to write poetry. She also wrote many letters, including one to George Washington in 1775. Washington was so impressed with the poem that he invited Wheatley to his Cambridge, Massachusetts, headquarters.

In 1778, much to the chagrin of Obour Tanner and other friends, Wheatley married a black freeman, John Peters. She still continued to write poetry

but would frequently use her married name, Phillis Peters. She was unable to be published again, but this did not stop her from continuing to try to earn a living from her writing.

Most of her poetry is concerned with religious and moral themes. As a result, she is often castigated for not appearing feminist enough. She does not talk about feminist or female-centered topics. However, if we consider that at the time she was writing, religious writing was deemed particularly suited to women, it is difficult to find fault with her.

Wheatley did address issues of **slavery** in several of her poems and letters, most famously in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773). Although Wheatley does seem to accept much of the prevailing ideology about blacks and Africa as uncivilized, she frequently asserts that blacks are just as worthy of **Christianity** as whites. Indeed in her poem “To the University of Cambridge in New England” (1773), Wheatley, a black enslaved woman, appropriates the power of the muses and uses it to offer advice to the young white male collegians.

Recent criticism has caused scholars to look anew at Wheatley and consider her feminism in a new light. The mere fact that she, as a **domestic** female servant, felt comfortable adding her voice to popular discussion on a variety of political and religious topics should not be underestimated. She also wrote many praise poems and commentaries on topics of the day. It was quite unusual for a woman of her time to publicly comment on issues other than religion and private domestic matters. As a result, one can interpret the assertion of her voice into the public venue as an expression of a type of feminism. Additionally, one can also catch a glimpse of what might be considered latent feminism in her poetry through hidden messages within her texts. Because she could not write explicitly about her experience as a black woman, it is possible that Wheatley felt compelled to encode it in her poems.

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*Nicole N. Aljoe*

**WHITE, PAULETTE CHILDRESS (1948– )**

Paulette Childress White, writer of **poetry** and prose, was born in Detroit, Michigan, on December 1, 1948. White's **fiction** is often set in Detroit, where she grew up. Initially, White longed to be an artist, but a number of circumstances, including financial problems, prevented her from being able to realize her dream. After years of marriage to an artist and giving birth to several children, White began writing poetry. In 1972 her first published poem was included in *Deep Rivers*. With the help of her mentor, Naomi Long Madgett, she published *Love Poem to a Black Junkie* in 1975. Two years later her first published short story, "Alice," appeared in *Essence* magazine. In "Alice," White poetically describes the necessity of female friendships. In 1978, "The Bird Cage" was published in *Redbook*. "The Bird Cage" and "Alice" were included in Mary Helen Washington's *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds: Stories by and about Black Women*, published in 1990.

"The Bird Cage," in addition to repeating the caged bird motif that can be found in the works of **Paul Laurence Dunbar**, **Maya Angelou**, and others, explores the thwarted artist motif. This motif seems to run through White's oeuvre and is somewhat autobiographical, as she, a mother of five children, has written about the strain the roles wife and mother have on her as a budding artist. White also discontinued her art education when she became pregnant with her first child. White says she writes about personal experiences in an attempt to reflect upon her life. The protagonist in "The Bird Cage" is unable to finish her **work**. She is a housewife who can only find a few moments to write late at night after her four sons are asleep. She says, "Even as [my children] sleep, I sense the cling of their eyes, hear their voices circling round me, 'Momma, Momma!' I am theirs." To make matters worse, while the housewife-artist tries to "distill a line or two of poetry," a crowd in front of the Bird Cage, a nightclub, distracts her. Thus, her roles—wife and mother—restrict her internally, while externally her creativity is hampered by the noise coming from the Bird Cage.

Artistic expression, sisterhood, marriage, domesticity, **community**, **motherhood**, **identity**, and self-actualization are recurring ideas explored in her poetry and short stories. Other work by White includes two short stories, "Paper Man," published in 1986 in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and "Dear Akua," also published in 1986 in *Harbor Review*, and a narrative poem titled *The Watermelon Dress: Portrait of a Woman: Poems and Illustrations*, published in 1984. Her work has also appeared in books—*Consonance and Continuity in Poetry: Detroit Black Writers* (1988); *Sturdy Black Bridges* (1979); *Growing Up Female: Stories by Women Writers from the American Mosaic* (1993); *Rites of Passage* (1994); *Mending the World: Stories of Family by Contemporary Black Writers* (2003)—and a number of periodicals including *Essence*, *Redbook*, and *Callaloo*.

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KaaVonnia Hinton-Johnson

## WHITENESS

In the past decade, the study of whiteness has become a focus of mainstream scholarship and the popular press. The central emphasis of recent scholarship is making visible the signs of white **identity**: the constructions and operations of a category that has tended to be marked as "natural" in the United States. From this perspective, the alleged universalism of the term *American* is revealed as an *unmarked* sign of whiteness. **James Baldwin**'s essays of the 1980s, such as "On Being 'White' . . . And Other Lies" and others collected in *The Price of the Ticket* (1985), and **Toni Morrison**'s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) have suggested some of the parameters of recent studies seeking to emphasize whiteness as a historical, political, and moral problem. Baldwin argues that whites are "impaled" on the lies of their **history**, a situation that "hideously menaces this country" (Roediger, *Black on White* 321). Morrison describes, through analyses of American literary texts, the "parasitical nature of white freedom" (57). Subsequent studies, such as Ruth Frankenberg's *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Race* (1994) and David R. Roediger's *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (2002) have continued to specify how white identity is inextricably related to the exercise of power and the maintenance of privilege.

However, this new scholarship on whiteness has had the effect of suggesting that whiteness is just one more "ethnic" identity to be added to multicultural studies, as the title of a popular press article, "Getting Credit for Being White" (Talbot), illustrates. The popularization of what whites say about their racial identities can dilute issues of racism in social practices and obscure the serious parameters of the study of whiteness as it has been historically practiced. Moreover, to characterize whiteness studies as a project of white scholars is to perpetuate the tendency to place whites at the front and center of the discourse. The inability to imagine or acknowledge that black people can see—and have seen—them (i.e., identify their "whiteness") constitutes a powerful illusion that is connected to the exigencies of racial dominance.

African Americans' expertise in identifying the various operations of whiteness have frequently been unacknowledged or misinterpreted in mainstream



scholarship. W.E.B. Du Bois's famous articulation "the problem of the color line" has largely been characterized as a statement about African Americans and their problems due to racism rather than as the broader problem of a "color-line" drawn by whiteness. White identities and behaviors have been observed and analyzed by African Americans for several centuries, not only academically but practically as well. From before David Walker's "Whites as Heathens and Christians" (1830) to beyond bell hooks's "Representations of Whiteness in the Black Imagination" (1992) stretches a substantial and unsurpassed discourse on whiteness by African Americans. In the fifty-one texts collected in Roediger's *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White* (1998), writers delineate whiteness variously: as a form of property, a site of **violence** and terror, a corrupting and corrosive ideology of privilege, a psychological bulwark, and a coercive delusion. The title of an article published in 1860 by "Ethiop" (William J. Wilson)—"What Shall We Do With the White People?"—is a question that still reverberates in current letters.

Feminist approaches to the study of whiteness have also developed in the past decades. Women of color have been calling on white women to acknowledge and critique their own participation in maintaining racism and dominance. Recent work on **literature** by white women is attempting to identify frameworks of whiteness in their writing, frameworks about which the writers themselves reveal little understanding or awareness. One such work is Renee Curry's *White Women Writing White* (2000), a study of poets H. D., Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath. Furthermore, the whiteness of much feminist scholarship has been identified as another area in need of rigorous and honest re-vision.

Hopefully, whiteness studies will continue to underscore the racist implications of ignoring the insidious power of, in the words of **Malcolm X**, "white-ism."

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Sharon Jessee

## WIDEMAN, JOHN EDGAR (1941– )

John Edgar Wideman was born on June 14, 1941, in Washington, D.C. Wideman was a Rhodes Scholar and in 1966 married Judith Ann Goldman and fathered two children, Daniel Jerome and Jacob Edgar. Wideman founded the University of Pennsylvania's African American Studies program and became the first writer to win the PEN/Faulkner Award twice: first, for *Sent for You Yesterday* in 1984 and again in 1991 for *Philadelphia Fire*. A former basketball player, Wideman's seeming disassociation of inner-city life through his own existence is discarded in his **fiction**, where he has long been recognized for his understanding of the inner-city African American experience.

Wideman's primary works include *A Glance Away* (1967); *Hurry Home* (1970); *The Lynchers* (1973); *Damballah* (1981); *Hiding Place* (1981); *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983); *Brothers and Keepers* (1984); *Reuben* (1987); *Fever* (1989); *Philadelphia Fire* (1990); *All Stories Are True* (1993); *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society* (1994); *The Cattle Killing* (1996); *Two Cities* (1998); and *The Stories of John Edgar Wideman* (1992).

The world of Wideman's fiction functions through its critique and association with contemporary black existence. Since his brother's arrest and conviction for murder in 1976 and his son's arrest in 1986, Wideman's fiction has focused on dealing with the turmoil that these two incidents created in his **family**. Wideman's work draws on the experiences of his individual familial **history** and also the cultural life of African Americans. His fragmented, postmodern prose delves into the contradictions and hopelessness often associated with the modern black inner-city experience—oftentimes not offering any solution or help in the end. He especially understands how different that experience is for women. The female characters in Wideman's fiction occupy a peculiar role within the complex world of the inner city, becoming the keepers

of cultural, familial, and societal **memory**. His fiction draws on cultural experiences as the backdrop, and characters, male and female, in his multilayered, multinarrated works, search for a place of hope and existence in the turmoil of modern life.

In his earlier fiction, Wideman uses female characters to save or teach his often distraught male characters something about their past. Bess in *Hiding Place* (1981) and Freeda from *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983) both act as keepers of memory. They help their male counterparts emotionally and physically recover from the trauma of urban black life. These earlier characters give way to two characters in Wideman's later fiction that serve the same roles. Margaret Jones in *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) and Kassima in *Two Cities* (1998) are both the full realization of Wideman's characterization of women as keepers of memory. Wideman has long struggled with the role women in the inner city play. He has noted that women are witness to the horrors of the inner-city life and are left to clean up the mess after the **violence** created by men is over. This role of viewer provides them with a powerful understanding, and their role as keeper of memory is one that is the hope for the future.

*Philadelphia Fire* (1990) is a novel that recounts ex-Philadelphia native Cudjoe's return to the city in search of the lone survivor from the MOVE bombing. In *Philadelphia Fire* readers see Wideman's ties to realism within his multiple narrator form, and Cudjoe, one of three narrators in the text, is the cohesive force among all three. The novel's treatment of women is interestingly personal. The narrators provide insight into Wideman's thoughts on interracial marriage, memory, and trauma.

The first narrator, Cudjoe, is widely considered to embody the voice of Wideman. His return to Philadelphia after a ten-year sabbatical away from the city begins the action of the novel. He has come to research the MOVE bombing, and his motivations for doing so are transparent. Cudjoe is haunted by the loss of his wife and children, the loss of his boyhood friends, and the loss of the city of his past. The loss of his wife and children is interesting because the reader is not given her voice in the text. She occupies a space that is only objectified through Cudjoe's eyes. Cudjoe, like Wideman, married a white woman and fathered half-white children. The wife is the haunting memory of what Cudjoe became once he left the city. For Cudjoe she comes to represent his point of departure from the city of his youth. She becomes for him the link between his present state and the past, but he has failed her and his children and cannot reclaim what he once attained. Wideman's voice here explicitly comes through, and readers are left to contemplate what the white wife is thinking.

The interracial marriage has many cultural implications. Cudjoe is aware of those implications, and part of the issue is that he has not given the white wife a voice. She is left out of the narrative other than third-person mention because she is never named or given an **identity**. Nameless and depthless, she is nothing more than an idea—a cultural marker left out of the discussion.

Another narrative voice in *Philadelphia Fire* is Margaret Jones, a former member of MOVE. She is the keeper of memory, and her retelling of the

events surrounding the MOVE bombing help Cudjoe recover an understanding of the past. When Cudjoe first meets Jones, he is nervous that she knows he has been gone and she does. She shares with Cudjoe the loss and trauma of a past. Jones has lost two families—the family she left to join the MOVE and the family of MOVE—and mourns not only the loss of them but also the loss of Philadelphia. She is the voice of the cultural memory. She is the voice through which Wideman tells the story of the MOVE bombing, and her retelling accomplishes two things. First, the reader gains an understanding of the events that led to and followed the bombing in Philadelphia; furthermore, she details the demise of the city. The wreckage left behind after the bombing becomes the metaphor for what Philadelphia has become. Jones cannot reconcile the fact that the city of her past is lost.

Jones awakens in Cudjoe the memories of his past—the way things used to be, especially the park where he used to play basketball. Through their interaction Wideman can critique the causes of and show his concerns for what Philadelphia has become. Through her story Wideman can show the remorse that many have over the dilapidation of Philadelphia. If, in fact, Cudjoe is Wideman, then Wideman is releasing into the text the pivotal role that women play in the inner city. Margaret is the witness to the bombing and the relayer of cultural information. Her roles as cultural and familial memory keeper are a voice of pain and trauma for the specific historical and personal memory, but it also becomes a metaphor for the loss of the past and an inability to reclaim it.

Margaret Jones shares characteristics with other female characters in Wideman's fiction. He often casts a woman in the role of storyteller, either as the narrator within his multilayered texts or as a speaker within someone else's sections. In either case, Jones is given a voice in this section, and she exhibits the power of memory and voice through her narration of the story for which Cudjoe is looking.

In *Two Cities* (1998) the initial narrator shares many characteristics with Margaret Jones and other female characters that Wideman has portrayed. Wideman again enlists a woman to portray and relate memory to the reader and other characters. Through her relationships with the men in her life, Kassima is the embodiment of all inner-city women that Wideman characterizes in his fiction. Her loss, **love**, and care taking are coupled with and troubled by her memories of the past trauma.

Wideman creates a narrator in Kassima that thrusts into the foreground the horrors of the inner city. Wideman even says that she and other women are forced into the role of observers of violence. Kassima lost her two sons and her husband in ten months; one son died playing Russian roulette and the other in a botched drug deal, and their father is in jail with AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). As a mother and a wife, Kassima must reconstruct her life following the tragedies of her past and relearn how to live. Prior to her losses, Kassima had devoted her life to the three men, and now, upon their absence, she must learn how to live life for herself. She knows that there is no way to forget the past, and so she balances the memories of trauma and the hope for the future.

At the novel's opening, the reader sees Kassima taking control of her loneliness. She is on her way out of the house for the first time since the tragedies and finds her eventual love interest, Robert. Kassima explicitly wants sex and is not interested in a relationship but ends up in a relationship with Robert. In this section of the text, Kassima becomes both healer and healed. Her relationship with Robert helps her put the past memories of trauma behind and participate in loving again, but she specifically notes that she does not want to give herself up like she did before. And when Robert is nearly killed on the basketball courts by a young gang member, she ends the relationship because she is unable to endure more traumatic experience in her life. She has known tragedy, and the relationship cannot release her from the memories of the loss of her son and her husband. The rain that follows the near **death** of Robert does not purify or cleanse her; it serves as a metaphor for her entrapped life.

Kassima's voice disappears from the narrative after the breakup with Robert but reappears suddenly after the death of Mr. Mallory. Her relationship with Mallory helps to assert that she can get beyond the memories of the deaths of her sons and husband. She realizes that she cannot occupy the ghostlike state she has since their deaths because of the silent stepping of Mr. Mallory. He has walked through life with his camera without participating, and she is not willing to do that anymore. His pictures show her the existence of hope in the inner city, and upon Mallory's death, she calls Robert to come help her. She has taken a step toward recapturing love in her life, but it is not until Mallory's funeral that she is able to fully recognize the need for getting beyond the traumatic memories of her past.

Like Margaret Jones, Kassima is witness to trauma and comes to serve as a metaphor for the female inner-city African American experience. Kassima has hope for the future but is still wary of the past. Mr. Mallory's funeral, the last scene of the novel, provides a cathartic release for Kassima. Mallory's **body** is caught between rival gangs and is mistakenly taken to the street and desecrated. Before Mallory's death, Kassima promised to burn his photos, but in the end she cannot destroy them. With Mallory's casket in the street and broken, she grabs the box of pictures and dumps them on the ground. They float like snow, and the violence breaks for a moment. Kassima is healed to continue loving, and she makes the violent city pause and take notice of the present suffering.

Although Wideman's narratives take a fragmented approach to storytelling, often he recruits women as central storytellers and providers of memory that provide cohesion in the text. His female characters sometimes embody the stereotypical trapped female, but when Wideman is at his best, the women in his fiction are not objectified or subjugated because of their womanhood. They are in fact given central power in the texts by exercising their ability to transfer cultural memory and trauma. They are the hope of the inner city of Wideman's fiction.

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*John D. Miles*

### WILKINSON, BRENDA (1946– )

Brenda Wilkinson's childhood as an African American girl in Georgia provided her with ample material when she turned her attention to writing for children and young adults. The daughter of construction worker Malcolm and nurse Ethel, Brenda gained an understanding of rural black life during her childhood in Moultrie.

Wilkinson's first book, *Ludell* (1975), begins a trilogy about a poor African American girl growing up in Waycross, Georgia, during the 1905s and 1960s.

Other books in the series are *Ludell and Willie* (1976) and *Ludell's New York Time* (1980). Over the course of the series, Ludell, a talented young girl at the beginning, matures. She moves from Georgia to Harlem, New York, and faces decisions about school, **love**, marriage, and career. Some critics have suggested that the trilogy is an extension of the **Harlem Renaissance** stories that characterized African Americans migrating from the South to the North and the challenges they faced in the process. *Ludell* was nominated for the National Book Award (1976); *Ludell and Willie* was recognized as an outstanding children's book of the year by the *New York Times* and as a best book for young adults by the American Library Association (1977).

Brenda Wilkinson's fictional writing is characterized by a controversial use of dialect. While some critics praise her use of dialect, jive talk, and rap, others find it objectionable, feeling that it is inconsistent and makes her books more difficult to read. Wilkinson's writing is sensitive and compassionate. She focuses on the comforting importance of **family** and **community** while addressing weighty issues of integration and social justice.

Brenda Wilkinson also has a keen interest in **history**, particularly African American history, and this reveals itself in her writing. Critics have suggested that her stories have a universal quality and that Wilkinson is able to write about past events from a contemporary perspective. She integrates history into her fictional writing, and recently has focused here attention on a series of nonfiction books about African Americans in American history, including *Black Stars of Colonial and Revolutionary Times* (2002), *Black Stars of the Harlem Renaissance* (2003), and *Black Stars of the Civil Rights Movement* (2003).

After twenty-seven years, Wilkinson retired from her position as staff writer with the United Methodist Church's Board of Global Ministries in 2003. Separated from her husband, Wilkinson has two daughters, Lori and Kim, and lives in New York City.

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Heidi Hauser Green

**WILLIAMS, PAULETTE.** See Shange, Ntozake

**WILLIAMS, SHERLEY ANNE (1944–1999)**

Poet, novelist, short-story writer, dramatist, and critic, Sherley Anne Williams's artistic project is rooted in the African American **blues** tradition. Her work seeks to establish a continuity between the expression of the collective historical experience found in successive generations of blues music and the representation of black life in **literature**. Williams sees in the blues the missing links from a disrupted and distorted historical record. She recognizes that the patterns of blues music are a highly effective means of representing the black self to the black self and in turn incorporates this ritualized means of expression and passing on of **history** into her writing. In her work, Williams features black vernacular and folk culture along with Western literary conventions in order to rework African American literary tradition.

Williams was born on August 25, 1944, in Bakersfield, California, to Lena-Leila Marie Siler and Jessee Winson Williams. The third of four daughters, Williams grew up in a Fresno housing project and spent her youth picking fruit and cotton alongside her parents and sisters in the San Joaquin Valley. This experience was one that she would revisit in her literary work. Williams lost both her parents early in life. Her father died when she seven and her mother when she was sixteen. After her mother's **death** Williams was reared by her older sister, whom Williams would later cite as an inspirational figure in her life.

While an academic and literary career was by no means a foregone conclusion, Williams, nevertheless, entered Fresno State College (now California State University, Fresno) and was awarded her B.A. in 1966. A period of graduate study followed at Howard University before she completed her M.A. at Brown University in 1972. In the following year she became the first African American literature professor at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD), La Jolla, and began a distinguished teaching career. During this period Williams's career advanced considerably with the publication of her first book, *Give Birth to Brightness: A Thematic Study in Neo-Black Literature* (1972), an examination of the heroic tradition in



contemporary African American literature, focusing on **Amiri Baraka's** *Dutchman* (1964) and *The Slave* (1964), **James Baldwin's** *Blues for Mr. Charlie* (1964), and **Ernest Gaines's** *Of Love and Dust* (1967). In this work Williams traces the history of the black hero from the rebel leaders who revolted against **slavery**, to the contemporary revolutionaries who oppose hegemonic society, to the tricksters and game runners who draw their inspiration from black **folklore**.

Williams chaired the UCSD Department of Literature from 1977 to 1980. Subsequently she was invited to teach at several universities, and in 1984, under the aegis of a Fulbright scholarship, she traveled to Africa, where she taught at the University of Ghana. She was also an advisory editor of *Callaloo* and *Langston Hughes Review*. At the time of her death in 1999 she was head of the writing section of the UCSD Department of Literature.

Both as a writer and an academic, Williams received several awards and nominations. In 1976, her first book of **poetry**, *The Peacock Poems* (1975), was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. Williams's performance of poems from her second book of poetry, *Some One Sweet Angel Chile* (1982), won an Emmy Award for television in 1982. This book also received a National Book Award nomination. In 1987 Williams was named Distinguished Professor of the Year by the UCSD Alumni Association. *Working Cotton*, Williams's first children's book, published in 1992, won an American Library Association Caldecott Award and a Coretta Scott King Book Award. A considerable honor was bestowed upon Williams in 1998 when the city of San Diego declared May 15 "Sherley Anne Williams' Day." In the same year Williams won the Stephen Henderson Award for Outstanding Achievement in Literature and Poetry granted by the AALCS.

Williams published her first short story, "Tell Martha Not to Moan," in the *Massachusetts Review* in 1967. The themes and the narrative patterns of this composition, such as a low-income black woman's perspective on male/female relationships and **motherhood**, and Williams's keen sense of black vernacular are features of her later works. In this short story, Williams uses a first-person narrative as a medium through which to represent the voice of the silenced female. While the domain of the utterance belongs to the characters that attempt to assert their control over the protagonist's life and **identity** (her lover, mother, and roommate), the expression of her thoughts, unfiltered by the intrusion of a third-person narrator, allows Martha to reclaim control over her narrative and her life.

In *The Peacock Poems*, Williams continues to use the first-person female perspective. Significantly here, the blues provides the idiom through which the personal narrative finds meaning and echoes in the shared African American experience. In this compilation, the blues functions both as a ritualized means of expression and as a channel of self-discovery. In the first of the three primary sections of *The Peacock Poems*, the journey to the self, marked by blues rhythms and rhymes, parallels the physical journey from west to east; from the dry heat of California and the comfort of the familiar to the blistering cold of Rhode Island and the facing of the unknown. In this section, the form

reflects the feelings of uncertainty of the poetic persona. The more conventional poetic forms alternate with autobiographical sketches and dictionary entries, emphasizing the improvisational and experimental mode of this section and denoting the speaker's struggle to make order out of chaos. This effort of coming to terms with past experiences and working through contradictory feelings unveils a journey of self-awareness that is circular rather than linear. This circularity is mirrored in the patterns of repetition and variation within the text. Titles of poems are repeated, or presented with small variations. The first line of one composition, for example, becomes the title of another, introducing a notion of time that is ruled by imagination and emotion rather than chronology. This circular structure is also indicative of the tradition of call-and-response that informs the text. The poet's points of departure vary from blues songs to an anonymous poem found between the pages of a library book, or memories of conversations held with her **family** and lover, or a dedication of the writer Michael S. Harper to Williams, illustrating a continuous dialogue between artist and **community**.

Exploring history, motherhood, family, intimate relationships between women and men, individual and community, particularly the communities formed by women in support of each other, *The Peacock Poems* map out the themes and concerns of Williams's subsequent work. In this collection, the blues language forms a creative synthesis where misunderstanding, hurt, and **love** are expressed and reveal a self that like the peacock is burdened with heavy feathers but is able to keep its tail from dragging.

In *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*, the poetic personae are also female. In this collection, the woman's voice establishes a line of continuity between African American women of different historical periods. In "Letters from a New England Negro," the epistolary form of the poems, presented with dates and arranged in chronological order, serves to illustrate the speaker's evolving historical and cultural awareness, while she establishes her identity. In her letters to her northern friends, Hannah, a young African American working as a teacher in the **South** during the Reconstruction period, contrasts her experience as a freeborn northerner with that of the newly emancipated women and men, cautioning the reader against the homogeneity of black life in antebellum America. In this section, Williams considers W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, describing the tensions between Hannah's formative years in the North, her exposure to black southern life, and the pressures imposed upon her by white society. The white southern females lift her skirts as she passes, the white northern women attempt to control her identity by keeping her away from the Quarters with its music, tales, prayers, and shared memories, while the ex-slaves, in an effort to reclaim her, rename her. Negotiating racial and social-cultural boundaries, Hannah resists the fixed identities that others try to enforce upon her. In "Letters from a New England Negro," which was later adapted into a one-woman **drama**, Williams presents the autobiographical chronicle as the unwritten collective history of African Americans.

In the second section of this compilation titled "Regular Reefer," the usage of blues language and forms further develops the notion that the artist's

personal testimony mirrors the communal experience of her audience. These poems alternate between the biographical and the autobiographical, between the reimagined songs of the blues singer Bessie Smith and the voices of the women whose lives she touched. In this dialogue based on call-and-response patterns, the stories of physical abuse, lost love, betrayal, and abandonment, or in other words, the silenced female narrative, become utterance in the singer's throat. In choosing Bessie Smith to sing the song of the shared African American experience, an artist whose work reflects the hostility and hurdles of the black urban experience in the early twentieth century, Williams moves away from middle-class concerns. The emphasis on underprivileged African Americans suggests that Williams's work is more indebted to **Zora Neale Hurston** than to **Nella Larsen**.

In "The Songs of the Grown," the third and final part of *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*, Williams goes back to her own past. In this section the writer uses her childhood recollections but does not construct a linear narrative. Instead she recreates her past through a series of images, those seemingly disconnected visual and sound imprints from which the thread of the life story is interlaced. The poems evoke the rhythms of the housing project with the voices of the adults mingled with the music of Ray Charles or Thelonious Monk—the oral and musical traditions that constitute the fabric of Williams's work. In addition, the landscape of the San Joaquin Valley, where the cultivated fields are bisected by the freeway and the engine of a solitary car is echoed by a crying coyote, is also featured. However, there is no sense of sentimentality in the poet's treatment of the natural environment. The bus route, which links the projects to the cotton fields and the vineyards, ends in the line of the County Hospital or the County Welfare. The fertility of the land contrasts with the deprivation of the people who **work** it. In this section, the speaker, like the blues singer, assumes the voice of her community, singing both her song and that of her parents' generation, recreating her mother's accent and reimagining her father's lost tale.

*Working Cotton*, Williams's first children's book, also evokes the life of the migrant fieldworkers. This text, based on an earlier composition from her first volume of poetry, "The Peacock Poems:1," signals not only the writer's return to her childhood but also her continuous effort to establish a literary account of the life of low-income African Americans. The "Author's Note," drawing attention to a society where minimum wages and education translate into a near absence of opportunity for children, shows Williams's commitment to a literature infused with social responsibility. In this book, significantly dedicated to her grandchildren and the children of the Valley, the writer bears witness to her familiar past to pass it on to future generations as representative of their history. The untold narrative of the cotton pickers is emphasized by the anonymity of their faces, which are covered by the darkness of dawn and dusk. In this text, consistent with Williams's previous work, the voice of the silenced is validated through a first-person narrative as Shelan describes an ordinary day in the life of her family. The harshness of the work under the burning sun is interrupted by work songs, the children's

laughter, and a late cotton flower, a sign of luck. In this text, the rhythms of the black vernacular evoke the endurance of the human spirit, celebrating the roughness and the poetry of life.

In her second picture book, *Girls Together* (1999), Williams recreates a Saturday morning in the Fresno projects. The girls get up early in order to avoid house chores and errands. If in *Working Cotton* Williams evokes a child's perspective on family life, here she creates a children's world, where the adults are near but astutely excluded. In the streets of the project, stories are acted out, new dances tried, and lyrics of songs are reinvented. However, the girls are not indifferent to the desolation of the urban landscape around the projects with its vacant lots and derelict buildings. Walking away from their neighborhood, the four friends see the detached houses with their green lawns and trees. They are attracted to a magnolia tree, a symbol of the rural American South. Climbing the branches of the tree and picking flowers to adorn their hair, the girls do not forget their absent friend, Lois, who was not allowed out to play. The small present of a white creamy flower attests to and celebrates childhood friendships.

In 1986 Williams published her novel *Dessa Rose*. Many critics identify the short story "Meditations on History" (1980) as the genesis of this work. In fact, in the poem "I Sing This Song for Our Mothers" (1975), the writer already traces the story line that she will later develop in her novel. In the "Author's Note" to *Dessa Rose*, Williams explains that her story is based on two historical episodes. From **Angela Davis's** article published in the *Black Scholar* in 1971, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Williams learned about an 1829 uprising on a coffee in Kentucky led by a pregnant woman. Reading Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Revolts* (1947), she came across the second incident: In North Carolina in 1830, a white woman living in a remote area offered refuge to runaway slaves. In reality these two women never met, but their encounter in Williams's imaginative world provides a space where they are forced to confront their preconceived notions of **race** and gender by questioning the validity of socially assigned roles.

In *Dessa Rose*, the writer exposes the cultural constructs involved in the production of the historical record and the distortion of the history of the voiceless. Nevertheless, in Williams's work, the slave's silence becomes an act of resistance. In keeping with Williams's overall artistic project, the black vernacular and call-and-response patterns of the slaves' songs provide the necessary means not only to escape slavery but also to liberate the self. In the final of the three main sections of the novel, Dessa assumes control over her narrative, and the third-person narrator fades away. In her account Dessa remains a speaker, a storyteller, validating African American oral tradition as both a literary and historical record.

By the time of her death Williams was working on a sequel to *Dessa Rose* and had begun a work set in the Central Valley of California in the late 1960s.

*See also* Historical Fiction; Neo-Slave Narrative

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*Ana Nunes*

**WILSON, AUGUST (1945–2005)**

Playwright August Wilson is renowned as one of America’s most important dramatists, having achieved both popular and critical acclaim for his cycle of plays focusing on African American life in each decade of the twentieth century. Not only have his plays been commercial hits on Broadway, but he has won the New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, Drama Desk Awards, Tony Awards, and two Pulitzer Prizes for his **drama**.

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to an African American mother and a German immigrant father, Wilson's original name was Frederick August Kittel. Later, he changed his name to Wilson to honor his mother, Daisy Wilson, and reject his father, who abandoned the **family** when August was a baby. Wilson dropped out of school in the tenth grade, ending his formal schooling at age fifteen. He studied widely on his own, however, using the public library and the streets of Pittsburgh as his school. Although many critics have compared Wilson to canonical playwrights such as Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill, Wilson claims unfamiliarity with their work. The Black Nationalist movement of the 1960s has been integral to his philosophy, however. Wilson also cites painter Romare Bearden, poet and activist **Amiri Baraka**, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, and most important, the **blues** tradition in music as the major influences on his work. Wilson's earliest creative forays were in **poetry**, but eventually he switched to writing plays, where he found his voice by capturing the poetry of everyday black speech.

Wilson's plays seek to chronicle the realities faced by African Americans throughout the twentieth century. His dramas fuse social realism with supernatural elements rooted in African **spirituality** and oral traditions. His Afrocentric perspective reminds his audience of the unique culture that people of African heritage have forged in this country. A cultural contribution of particular importance to Wilson is the blues aesthetic, which permeates all of his works. The blues philosophy, he believes, captures the essence of African American culture—both its tragedy and its strength.

The struggle African Americans face forging a strong **identity** as both individuals and as part of a tradition provides a common thread throughout Wilson's oeuvre. Many of his characters are lost because they have denied, or been denied, their African roots. Wilson's work suggests that only when African Americans find their authentic identity firmly rooted in their own traditions—what he metaphorically terms their “song”—are they able to lead rich, satisfying lives.

Wilson's body of work unquestionably focuses on African American men, not on women. However, his cycle of twentieth-century plays does include a significant number of female characters. Although some of Wilson's women function mainly as appendages to the more interesting male characters, he has created several complex women characters whose words and actions provide a sharp critique of gender inequities within African American culture. While it is beyond the scope here to discuss all of Wilson's female characters, it is nonetheless possible to categorize these females into three types who recur throughout his oeuvre: the nurturers/sustainers, the artists, and the rebels.

Bertha Holly of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) and Rose Maxson of *Fences* (1987) exemplify the female sustainers in Wilson's work. These women provide warmth, support, and nourishment not only for their own families but often for other members of the **community** as well. In *Joe Turner*, for example, Seth and Bertha Holly's boardinghouse serves as a **home** for the many displaced blacks who have come up north from the **South**. Bertha's

generous spirit helps to make the boardinghouse seem like a home. In particular, Bertha feeds people as a way of building community and nourishing both **body** and soul; most of the stage directions depict Bertha cooking, serving food, or cleaning up after meals. In addition to feeding people, Bertha also defends and comforts them. Overall, she is a warmhearted, level-headed woman whose spirit helps to heal these troubled souls.

However, Bertha Holly, like most other female characters in Wilson's oeuvre, is not the major focus of the work. She is only a supporting player, not only in the play but also in her own life. Indeed, some feminist scholars have criticized Wilson for his tendency to relegate his female characters to the margins rather than the center of his plays. Such a critique is justified; Wilson's major characters are almost all male. However, to Wilson's credit, he has created a number of plays that highlight specifically female struggles.

With Rose Maxson of *Fences*, for example, we see the drawbacks of being a female sustainer. Rose is a responsible, nurturing woman who sacrifices her own desires in order to keep peace in the family. Married to domineering Troy Maxson, Rose has cared for Troy and their son Cory for seventeen years, putting up with Troy's flaws with little complaint. Like Bertha, Rose also spends much of her time on stage serving food and trying to create peace between squabbling characters.

Unlike Bertha, however, Rose questions her decision to devote herself entirely to her family after discovering that Troy has been having an affair and that his mistress is about to give birth to their child. Troy is not only unapologetic about his affair, but he even asks Rose to raise the illegitimate child when its mother dies in childbirth. When Rose reflects upon her marriage, she realizes that she went overboard in her desire to nurture Troy. In the end she is left with neither a full identity nor a husband. *Fences* emphasizes that devoting oneself to family at the expense of the self is not a good choice for women because they may well be left with nothing in the end.

Not all of Wilson's female characters can be classified as nurturers, however. Wilson has also created characters such as Ma Rainey of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985) and Berniece of *The Piano Lesson* (1990). These women are artist figures who need to do more than nurture others; they need to play music in order to be whole. *Ma Rainey* is loosely based on the historical figure of Ma Rainey, known as "the Mother of the Blues." This play, which is set in the 1920s, explores the historical exploitation of black musicians by white producers. Even though Ma Rainey is a successful artist, she knows that the white publishers control and manipulate her career for their own benefit. In fact, she compares the relationship of black musician–white publisher to that of a prostitute and pimp.

But though the publishers may have the ultimate power, Wilson's Ma Rainey is no submissive doormat. On the contrary, Wilson portrays her as a confident artist who knows her own worth. She is also brash, independent, sexually adventurous, and domineering. Although Ma is a flawed character whose bossiness is so extreme it is almost comical, she is one of the few Wilson female characters whose identity does not come from her relationship

to the male characters of the play. Her identity, rather, comes from her integrity as a blues artist. She is a woman who has already found her song. Because her identity is so firmly rooted in African American traditions, she is one of Wilson's strongest and most vibrant characters.

Like Ma Rainey, piano player Berniece of Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* exemplifies another of Wilson's female artists. Unlike Ma, however, Berniece's artistic impulses are frustrated. The major conflict of this play revolves around a piano that Berniece and her brother Boy Willie inherited from their parents. The piano is much more than a musical instrument to Berniece; it is a precious family legacy gained through her **ancestors'** long struggles with the slaveholding Sutter family. Berniece cherishes the piano as a way to honor the **memory** of her ancestors and the horrors they experienced because of **slavery** and its aftermath. In a sense, this piano represents her soul, one thing that cannot be bought or sold. So when her brother Boy Willie wants to sell the piano in order to buy a farm, Berniece categorically refuses. She is so adamant in her refusal that she is willing to shoot her brother if he tries to take it by force.

Wilson is sympathetic to Berniece's desire to retain her family legacy. However, the play reveals that honoring one's past involves more than holding on to a piece of furniture, no matter how precious it is. Berniece is missing part of the picture, however; although she keeps the piano, she never plays it because she does not want to wake the spirits of her family's ghosts. Not only does Berniece refuse to play the piano; she also refuses to "play" the game of life. Still mourning the **death** of her husband three years earlier, Berniece has stopped living fully; she goes out very little and pushes away any attempts at intimacy.

By holding on to the piano without playing it, Berniece demonstrates that she is afraid of the family ghosts, afraid of the past. This fear paralyzes her for the present and the future, keeping her frozen and unable to live fully. In order to both honor the past and live in the present, Wilson suggests, she must play the piano, to keep the song of the family alive. Berniece finally recognizes this truth at the end of the play. When Berniece sits down to the piano to play and sing, asking her ancestors to help her, the ghost of Sutter finally disappears, and there is peace in the home. Berniece has finally reclaimed her song by conquering her fear and facing her legacy head-on. In so doing, the play suggests that she is on the road to living a fuller life as an artist.

In addition to sustainers and artists, Wilson also portrays another recurring type of female: the rebel. Characters such as Molly Cunningham of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and Risa of *Two Trains Running* (1993) rebel against culturally imposed standards of proper femininity. Like most Wilson characters, these women have emotional scars and are in need of **love** and **healing**. However, unlike submissive characters such as Mattie Campbell who roams the countryside looking for the husband who abandoned her, Molly and Risa choose to fight their demons in ways that defy proper female codes of behavior.



Molly is a beautiful woman to whom many men are attracted. She has learned through observation and experience, however, that sexual relationships can be a trap to women, and she consciously tries not to fall into that trap. She refuses to perform conventional female behavior such as ironing other people's clothes, having children, or even searching for a committed relationship because she sees how other women have been hurt or worn out before their time by looking after men and children. Although Molly enjoys male company, she makes sure to maintain her independence within a sexual relationship by being the one to set the rules.

Like Molly, Risa of *Two Trains Running* is also a woman who attracts a great deal of male attention. Risa, however, tries to keep male advances at bay through an unusual technique, deliberately scarring her legs in order to make herself unattractive. As the stage directions note, Risa has done this in order to carve out an identity that does not depend on her sexual organs. She wants men to consider her personality, not just her body. By scarring herself, she forces men to think about her in ways that they otherwise would not have.

To be sure, Wilson is not suggesting that either Molly's or Risa's fear of intimacy is something to be emulated. Both of these characters are wounded and, the plays suggest, in need of love. However, Wilson does demonstrate through his creation of these characters an implicit critique of gender relations—specifically the emotional dangers women confront when they are treated like sexual game by men.

In conclusion, while Wilson's work focuses more deeply on African American men's issues than on female issues, he has succeeded in creating a number of complex portraits of women who challenge the prevailing norms of proper female behavior.

*See also* Black Nationalism

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Debra Beilke

### WILSON, HARRIET E. (1828?-1863?)

Since the 1983 republication of *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two Story White House, North, Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*, Harriet E. Wilson has been considered the first black person known to have published a novel in the United States. Despite her historical significance, Wilson's text and her life story lingered on the brink of obscurity until fairly recently. Scholars' attempts to locate biographical information about Wilson and to map her text's literary legacy reveal the specific challenges of researching nineteenth-century African American women writers. Every biographical or critical writing published about Wilson laments the paucity of detail about her life, and this entry is no different.

Wilson is known to us through her only literary work, *Our Nig*, which was published for the author in 1859 in Boston by George C. Rand and Avery. Wilson was all but ignored for most of the years following the publication of *Our Nig*. Moreover, for much of the twentieth century, critics and rare booksellers believed H. Wilson to be male and, quite likely, a white male. It was not until the 1983 reprinting of *Our Nig* (edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr.) that Wilson's gender and **race** were confirmed through careful scrutiny of federal and state census data, birth and **death** records, city directories, newspapers, and a range of other documents by Gates and David A. Curtis. More recently, Barbara A. White builds on the work of Gates and Curtis and locates Wilson in the (June 1) 1840 census for Milford, New Hampshire. From this information, White ascertains that Wilson lived with the Nehemiah Hayward **family**, not the Samuel Boyleses, as originally believed. In this census, Wilson is listed as being a free colored person between ten and twenty-four years of age. Gates's first record of Wilson is the 1850 federal census of New Hampshire, which lists Harriet Adams living in Milford, New Hampshire. Her age is stated as twenty-two and her race as black. Gates

contends that if this information is accurate, Wilson was a free black, born as Harriet Adams in 1827 or 1828. In the 1860 Boston federal census, a Mrs. Harriet E. Wilson is listed with a birthdate of 1807 or 1808 and a birthplace of Fredericksburg, Virginia. These absences and inconsistencies highlight several of the obstacles facing scholars investigating the lives of nineteenth-century African American women. Inconsistencies or errors within early censuses are not unusual, nor is the absence of records about African American women. As Barbara A. White observes, it is not surprising that the birth of a poor black female went unrecorded. White further notes that the absence of records regarding Wilson stands in sharp contrast to the plentiful property records of white men in the **community**.

*Our Nig*, which makes claims at being an **autobiography**, has also helped to provide leads and context for many of these archival findings. White's research into the Hayward family verifies that many of the stories in *Our Nig* are true, including the ill treatment she received at the hands of Rebecca Hayward, who was, in all likelihood, the inspiration for the "she-devil" Mrs. Bellmont. White's important research also confirms the social and economic difficulties Wilson confronted. In the 1850 "Report of the Overseers of the Poor for the Town of Milford, for the Year ending February 15, 1850," Wilson is listed as "Poor not on the farm"; White suggests at this time Wilson avoided the town pauper farm and was living with a family who was reimbursed by the town for keeping her. Reports for 1851–1854 are missing, so little evidence exists about this period of Wilson's life. Records at the Milford Town Clerk's office reveal that Harriet Adams married Thomas Wilson on October 6, 1851. Their only child, George Mason Wilson, was born approximately nine months later. In a document appended to the text, "Allida" alludes to Wilson's husband leaving her, returning once, and then disappearing for good; ill health and single **motherhood** would have compounded the economic hardships facing a free African American woman at this time.

White found documentation to confirm Wilson's struggles with poverty and failing health. Wilson appears to have worked as a straw sewer and to have sold hair dye or tonic but was plagued by ill health. Records of the Hillsborough County farm show that Wilson's son, age three, was admitted to this farm for four weeks. White's research into this county farm reveals horrific conditions. There is little doubt that Wilson would have worried about her son's emotional and physical well-being at such a place. Records also suggest that Wilson left George with a foster family while she went to Boston to find **work**. Gates located a widow named Harriet Wilson living in Boston between 1856 and 1863 in the Boston city directories. This Boston connection is important since *Our Nig* was printed in Boston and was registered with the Clerk's office of the District Court of the District of Massachusetts in 1859. It is uncertain when Wilson left Massachusetts; however, White asserts that Wilson was back in New Hampshire in 1863. All traces of Harriet E. Wilson end there.

Despite her aspirations, *Our Nig* seems to have offered Wilson little, if any, critical notice or remunerative success. To date, scholars have not been able

to find published notices or reviews of the novel upon its publication nor references to Wilson as an author. Six months after the novel's publication, Wilson's son died of fever. In a sad twist of fate, the discovery of George's death certificate was what unequivocally established Wilson's race and gender and what finally brought Wilson the readership she desired, albeit 125 years later.

Although the details of her life remain, in Gates's words, "frustratingly sparse," Wilson is, unfortunately, not an isolated case. Many African American women's significant achievements have also hovered on the brink of obscurity or have been lost over the years. There is hope that scholars may yet, as did Barbara A. White, discover missing pieces of Wilson's life to help flesh out her role in the vibrant narrative of African American women's **history**.

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*Heidi L. M. Jacobs*

**WOFFORD, CHLOE ANTHONY.** See Morrison, Toni

### WOMANISM

Womanism is a concept that defines the desire for wholeness of self, a celebration of black women's **identity**, and an appreciation and **love** for all things woman, including the roles of mother and wife. Womanism separates itself from white feminism in that white female feminist ideology espouses significant differences from the issues affecting black women.

White feminists focus on issues related to power disparities within gender relationships and are most concerned with attaining social equality with white

males. White feminism concentrates on achieving a socially valid individual selfhood outside the dominant socially constructed patriarchal expectations of subordination by white men. White feminists believe the oppression of white males and social patriarchal structure to be the biggest threat to women's lives, an idea rooted in the white woman's past subjugation as property owned by white males. White women's feminism encourages the struggle to achieve self-empowerment through feminist dialogue and an emphasis on female inclusion in areas formally the sole realm of white males, most particularly in employment and political structures and opportunities. White female feminist ideology also attempts to decommodify women's bodies, particularly within male-dominated visual media. White feminists support reproductive rights and equal educational opportunities as a way to combat what they see as the tyranny of white males. For white female feminists, women's struggle for equality is reduced to a simple dualism: All males are the oppressor. White females also promote their feminist ideology on a global scale, often without a clear understanding of the very significant cultural differences within non-Western countries. White feminism approaches what most consider important women's issues through the lens of Western privilege, rather than from a broader scope that encompasses issues more vital to the majority of the world's women.

In contrast, womanism encompasses issues that are important to African American women beyond those that concern white feminism. Black women's issues differ significantly from white feminist ideology in part because the core ideals of womanism are significantly different from the egotistically based power struggle that undergirds white feminism.

The term *womanism* was coined by **Alice Walker** in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Womanism referred to black women whose focus is black women's culture, the **family**, and combating racism together with men. An important distinction between white feminism and womanism is the attitude toward men. White feminists view all males as the enemy, the oppressive force of patriarchy that must be overcome. Womanists do not view black men as oppressors but rather as partners in the fight against white racism and domination. Womanists celebrate women's issues but embrace black men within the context of their common cultural traditions. In traditional African culture, black women and men are equal; there is no passive female role in African society, which is reflected in African American culture. Black women do not feel the patriarchal oppression from black men but rather from white society as a whole: both men *and* woman. For the womanist, the fight against white racism is the core from which womanism springs. White feminists are centered on the self and establishing an individual female autonomy separate from their male oppressors. Black women already hold a position of autonomy within black gender relationships, so the womanist struggle against men is transformed to a struggle against the oppression of whites against all genders of African Americans and people of color.

Womanists privilege the family and **work** to advocate the family and family empowerment. While the majority of white feminists view the role of mother and wife as subordinate and unfulfilling, a patriarchal suppression of the woman's ability to become a whole person (a wholeness most often defined by the economic value of her labor), womanists believe that **motherhood** should be embraced as an integral part of a woman's wholeness. For womanists, motherhood is not reduced to its economic profitability but is viewed as a key element in the health and well-being of future African Americans. Womanism promotes communal issues of **race**, gender, and identity and the unity that comes from furthering pluralistic social ideologies, rather than individual self-realization. Womanists espouse social justice issues as a means to improve the economic and social disparities that affect people of color all over the world. Womanism is a unique ideal that unites African Americans by their common **history** of suffering under **slavery** and as a connection to and preservation of traditional African heritage.

*See also* Black Feminism; Black Feminist Criticism; Womanist Conjure

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### WOMANIST CONJURE

Womanist conjure is a black aesthetic grounded in the religious symbols, rituals, **myth**, and **folklore** of voodoo and hoodoo. Black women writers

who use as their creative models the mythologies of African **religion** to articulate issues related to black female life and appropriate the character of the conjure woman as a strong symbol of black female creative and spiritual agency are engaging in the literary act of womanist conjure.

The texts of womanist conjure carry as their essence the idea of wholeness and **healing**. Books such as *Beloved* (1987) by **Toni Morrison**, *Mama Day* by **Gloria Naylor** (1988), and *The Salt Eaters* (1980) by **Toni Cade Bambara** explore various journeys of healing for black people, but they also place black women who act as healers at the center of that journey.

In its traditional context, *conjure* is both verb and noun; therefore, *conjure* refers to the creative process of black women and the product of that creativity. Within this framework, themes of mother-daughter creativity and cultural inheritance are evident. Examples include Mayse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1992) and Jewel Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams: A Novel of Marie Leveau* (1993), both works that attempt to reclaim the lives of legendary conjure woman as creative foremothers. These novels affirm the lives of real-life conjurers to tell the stories of women whose voices have been historically silenced.

The role and influence of the conjure woman in black communities worldwide are vast. The conjure woman may be a priestess or spiritual guide in the religion of voodoo or Santería, a midwife, and/or healer. Black women who represent these variations of the conjure woman in their art are engaging in womanist conjure.

In the African American literary tradition, conjure and conjurers both male and female can be traced back to the **slave narratives** of **Frederick Douglass** and **Harriet Jacobs**, but it is not until **Charles Waddell Chesnutt's** *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* (1899) that conjure comes into its own as a literary device. Although Chesnutt utilizes the conjure woman as a powerful woman who uses magic or conjure as a way to empower her **community**, his conjure woman, Aunt Peggy, is not a layered, complex character, as she becomes in womanist conjure narratives.

**Zora Neale Hurston's** work is the first to truly employ womanist conjure. In *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston goes in search of conjure and studies under a descendant of Marie Leveau, the famous nineteenth-century voodoo queen of New Orleans. Hurston, a voodoo priestess in her own right, frequently employed the imagery and mythology of voodoo and conjure in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). In her own **autobiography** *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) she makes reference to herself as a "seer," which in the world of conjure is another term for a two-headed doctor or conjurer. Womanist conjure preserves the ethnic and cultural elements of the conjure woman in black communities while reaffirming black female agency.

*See also* Ancestor, Use of; *Baby of the Family*; Conjuring; *Hand I Fan With, The*; *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*; *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*; *Meridian*; *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*; *Song of Solomon*; Womanism

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Kelly Norman Ellis

### WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE, THE

A hint of *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) first appeared in *Essence Magazine* in 1979 as "A Life on Beekman Place." The *Essence* story expanded into the collection of seven stories that became **Gloria Naylor's** first novel. The novel tackles the various stories that lead black women to a bleak place like Brewster Place. The stories and issues that entangle them are many and diverse.

The most pronounced character in the novel is Mattie Michael. She emerges from Tennessee after her relationship with her father, once an inseparable bond, becomes intractable. Mattie is not sent away to live with relatives when her parents learn of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, as was a common custom of the rural **South** of the past. Her father accepts the pregnancy but cannot bear his daughter's refusal to divulge the name of the baby's father. His rage immediately manifests as physical brutality. Only the blast from Mrs. Michael's shotgun interrupts the beating and pulls Mr. Michael from his trance. From this house in Tennessee to Brewster Place is still a long distance and many years in between, but his story is just one of several that reveals the vicissitudes of life that lead the characters of the novel to the dead-end street of Brewster Place.

Brewster Place is separated from the rest of the city by a brick wall. It has been the residence of other people of color before blacks, mostly black women, settle on Brewster Place. The reader is introduced to the street in Mattie Michael's story. Her son has skipped bail after she puts up her house to ensure that he will appear at his court date just two weeks from the bail posting. On Brewster Place, Mattie becomes the mother figure. Her nurturing spirit is even a place of solace for her childhood friend Etta Mae Johnson.

Etta Mae has rejected the strictures placed on a black woman of her time. She fled her native Rock Vale, Tennessee, after an undisclosed matter with a white man. The reader is left to fill in the blanks that Etta Mae had refused the sexual advances of a white man, a rejection felt so deeply and widely



among the whites of Rock Vale that her father's barn was burned down. Etta Mae has never felt the need to apologize for her **race** or her gender, but this stalwart confidence leads her on a search for herself that loops throughout the United States—St. Louis, Chicago, San Francisco, Harlem, Florida, and to the primary setting of Naylor's first novel. Finding no place to blossom as an individual, she resolves that her only success will come from ties with a man. However, she is left emotionally wounded from her one-night tryst with Rev. Moreland T. Woods. When she saw him, she had dreamed of a respectable life as his wife.

Kiswana Browne is an idealist from black upper-class Linden Hills who rejects her bourgeois background, what she deems a sell-out lifestyle. She, with her college classmates, fought for political and social revolution. Her first declaration of revolution might have been changing her name from Melanie to Kiswana. She dropped out of college to fight authentically among the people, not as her classmates had done by graduating and taking traditional jobs with corporations and law firms. She lives on Brewster Place to fight the revolution that she views as continuing.

She begins her fight against the slumlord who owns the buildings on Brewster Place by organizing a tenant association. In this process she meets Cora Lee, a woman with seven children, and immediately Cora becomes a situation to revolutionize. Kiswana invites Cora Lee and her children to an all-black production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While the production exposes Cora Lee to an expanded worldview, it cannot be and is not enough to magically transform her into an attentive mother. And despite Mattie Michael's admonishment for her to stop having children, she continues. By the novel's end, she is pregnant with her eighth.

Part of Naylor's message in *The Women of Brewster Place* is that stories exist beneath the assumptions that are made about people who live on a street like Brewster Place. For instance, Cora Lee is a mother of seven on welfare, but her current state has developed from a childhood fascination with dolls that was ignored even when she mutilated the dolls that were not baby dolls. Her father's alarm was always quieted by her mother.

Whereas Mattie places her son before all else, including any interest in a romantic relationship, Luciela (Ciel) Louise Turner invests herself in a man to the detriment of her children. Only after she aborts her child to preserve her romantic relationship and just as her daughter Serena is being electrocuted does she realize that her **love** for Eugene is not worth holding. She is finally ready to let him go when she hears Serena's screams of **death**. Ciel spirals into a pit of despondence and despair that Mattie pulls her from by nurturing her back to reality.

Toward the end of the novel, Naylor broaches the subject of homosexuality in the black **community** with the chapter "The Two." Lorraine and Theresa have been skirted to Brewster Place because of Lorraine's discomfort with the questioning eyes of neighbors. They began in Linden Hills, and Brewster Place is the end of the line for them. Lorraine, the more friendly of the two, has noticed that the greetings of neighbors have waned. She suspects

that the neighbors know that they are lesbians. Although she claims that she fears rumors reaching the principal on the other side of town where she teaches, she is actually dealing with her need to be an accepted member of her community. Theresa is so self-contained that she feels she does not need her community to survive. Lorraine finds in Ben, the perpetually intoxicated handyman, a surrogate father, but she bludgeons him to death after she confuses him for one of the gang of men who raped her in the alley.

The action of the novel ebbs as Mattie dreams of the women of Brewster Place banding together to tear down the brick wall, an act of solidarity that pulls Theresa, Cora Lee, Etta Mae, and the other women from the fringes to express their rebellion against the kind of life that is lived on a dead-end street. While this is Mattie's dream, it probably portends what is to come.

*See also* Lesbianism; *Men of Brewster Place, The*

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*Sharese Terrell Willis*

### WOODSON, JACQUELINE (1964– )

Jacqueline Woodson was born on February 12, 1964, in Columbus, Ohio, though she grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, and Brooklyn, New York. She received a B.A. degree in English at Adelphi University in 1985 and studied creative writing at the New School for Social Research. In addition to being a writer, Woodson is also a teacher and editor. She has contributed to a number of short-story collections (e.g., *Queer 13: Lesbian and Gay Writers Recall Seventh Grade*) and journals (e.g., *Essence* and *Horn Book*).

She writes for multiple audiences, but she has received critical acclaim for her picture books and **children's and young adult literature**. With over fifteen books to her credit, she began publishing for young people in the early 1990s.

Her first publication, *Last Summer with Maizon* (1990) (first book in a trilogy), introduces the friendship that exists between the title character Maizon and her neighbor Margaret. Within the story, the girls' bond is strengthened as they help each other cope with serious issues such as **death** and loneliness. Woodson's works are consistent in that they focus on realistic and oftentimes controversial issues such as **sexuality**, **lesbianism**, teen pregnancy, molestation, and imprisonment. The majority of her young adult books feature female characters that face issues pertinent to female adolescent **identity** development. The characters often confront racism, discrimination, and abandonment, among other contemporary social issues. Serious social issues are not confined to her books for teenagers; they appear in her books for younger readers as well.

In one of her recent picture books, *Our Gracie Aunt* (2002), siblings, Beebee and Johnson, are in need of an "othermother" because their own mother, who is accustomed to leaving them **home** alone, has left and may not return. When their mother's sister, Aunt Gracie, agrees to take care of them, the children have to grow to trust and **love** her, though they fear she will also abandon them. Another picture book, *Visiting Day* (2002), is about a girl who, along with her grandmother, prepares to visit her father in prison. When asked about the topics she chooses to address in her work, Woodson said,

I write about what's important to me. . . . It's interesting to me when people say I write about "tough" issues or that the issues are "edgy" because, for me, they are things we talk about in my community everyday. It's the things that are important to us that pretty much change the course of our lives. The issue of the high number of Black men in prison is a big issue and not only because the numbers are so imbalanced in terms of how many people of color are incarcerated, but also because in families it doesn't get talked about. So there is a lot of shame around that, and I think the issue of shame is a big issue for me because I don't think anyone should feel it for any reason." (Hinton 27)

**Womanist** concerns around **community**, women friends, and love of self are prevalent throughout her work.

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*KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson*

## WORK

From the earliest origins of the United States, African American women workers have faced challenges based on their marginalization in the realms of **race**, **class**, and gender status. During **slavery**, they were treated as property, taken away from their children and families, and forced into backbreaking work. They were sexually objectified, abused, and mistreated, all the while working long, hard hours in devastatingly harsh working conditions. Dating back to the days of slavery, African American women held the majority of work positions within the **domestic** sphere. In their stations as domestics, African American women workers would often have to suppress their own needs and those of their loved ones in order to care for the families of their owners. Whether working in the **home** or in the fields, it appears that work was a constant reminder for female slaves of their race, class, and gender status. Works such as **Frances E. W. Harper's** "The Slave Mother" (1854), **Harriet E. Wilson's** *Our Nig* (1859), and **Harriet Jacobs's** *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) make clear how difficult the lives of slave women were. These texts tell of the pain and suffering many women slaves had to endure because their lives were not their own. Whether told in the form of autobiographical narrative, poem, or **fiction**, these women make clear that the conditions in which they had to work were physically and emotionally devastating.

However, at the same time, these works are rich in their representation of the empowerment African American women could gain through the written word and in the way these narratives demonstrate how many of these workers eventually found means of escape. Though these women often had to write in between work and **family** obligations, they still found ways to make known their lived experience. Furthermore, in works such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs describes her own struggles with physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her owner and her eventual retreat from his abuse. Jacobs's **slave narrative** is merely one example of the empowerment many of these women gained through their writing and the strength they possessed to finally escape from such harsh conditions.

Aside from these narratives and poems, there were other, more universally known works at the time that greatly affected the lives of women slaves. While writing their memoirs and poems offered at least a temporary escape from the reality of their lives, so too did work songs and **spirituals** offer these women opportunities to concentrate on issues other than their work. The spirituals, particularly, demonstrate the religiosity and faith present in so many African American workers before and during the Civil War, and many of these songs, such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Go Down, Moses,” have made their way into our cultural **memory** and psyche throughout **history**. The work songs also served many of the same purposes, offering slaves opportunities to unite as a community and express themselves creatively while working in the fields or as domestics. Many of these songs offer rich examples of the promise of **freedom** and the hope for a better future.

The period of Reconstruction also presented specific challenges to African American workers, and most particularly women. In a period that was known for vast changes in historical, political, and socioeconomic realms, former slaves had to work hard to determine their roles in an ever-changing economic atmosphere. Though now officially “freed,” African American workers often found themselves in the same jobs they had held as slaves, simply because it was difficult to find the economic means to make major life changes. Despite governmental initiatives like the Freedman’s Bureau, which was established by Congress in 1866 to help in educating and finding jobs for former slaves, many African American workers found it difficult, if not impossible, to make changes in their socioeconomic positions. Furthermore, their freed status was often ignored by society, especially former owners. As such, the period after the Civil War brought little change for many African American workers.

Yet, at the same time, writings by such women as **Sojourner Truth** and **Maria Stewart** demonstrate that the period during and after the Civil War brought about a body of **literature** that was no longer focused only on chronicling the lived experience of slaves. Now, there was also a sense that writers had the opportunities to write of moral, religious, political, and gender issues. Truth’s speech to the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention—“Ain’t I a Woman?”—demonstrates how African American women now focused their attentions on changing society for the better in the realms of both race and gender. Furthermore, the nineteenth century was a particularly influential time in the development of African American women’s writing and history. As **literacy** rates increased among former slaves in the United States, African American women from all walks of life began to write about their experiences in memoirs, letters, diaries, and **autobiography**, and creative, imaginative literature also began to take shape in new and meaningful ways. However, while these women were writing, little was being done with their literary accomplishments. It was not until much later, during the 1960s, that publishers and scholars began to take interest in these women’s writings.

Yet despite their new status as “freed” and their increasing literacy rates, African American women have had to contend with many of the same issues of race, class, and gender marginalization within various work environments throughout history. It is true that African American women began to gain greater opportunities in some realms, particularly in terms of garnering positions outside of the domestic sphere. However, as Fannie Barrier Williams pointed out in her 1893 speech, “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women of the United States since the Emancipation Proclamation,” black women were still struggling to find work outside of teaching in African American schools and the domestic sphere. It seems these women were isolated to jobs in traditionally “pink-collar” realms—as domestic workers, teachers, and caregivers. Yet even within these spheres, African American women themselves were marginalized not just due to their class and gender status but also due to their race. As a result, they were given the most menial jobs available.

As the twentieth century dawned, it seemed black women had more far-reaching job opportunities, though these possibilities often depended on geographic location. For instance, during the **Harlem Renaissance**, African American women had creative and artistic opportunities that had before been virtually absent. Living in such a rich and empowering **community** as Harlem allowed many women occasions to collaborate, create, and commune with fellow writers, artists, musicians, and intellectuals. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Harlem Renaissance offers a view of the “Golden Age” of African American creative expression and, most particularly, numerous examples of women authors, such as **Nella Larsen**, **Zora Neale Hurston**, **Jessie Redmon Fauset**, and **Marita Bonner** seeking to make known their intellectual and artistic passions. What is perhaps complicated about the Harlem Renaissance, however, is that many argue that this period represents only particular segments of African American society: those of the middle and upper classes. It is true that many of these women had to struggle to make ends meet so that they could provide themselves with the time and opportunity to write; yet these women, for the most part, are decidedly middle and upper class. Through works such as Marita Bonner’s “On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored” (1925), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), and Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1929), we learn what a difficult position it was to be young, African American, female, and intellectual during this period. At the same time, these works represent concerns very different than those of working-class women.

However, Zora Neale Hurston, both a writer of the Harlem Renaissance and an outspoken opponent of the era’s elitism, made attempts, along with other writers, to make heard the voices of African American working-class women. Through her participation in the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), for instance, Hurston chronicled the lives of women domestics, laundry workers, dancing girls, and others who were not members of the Harlem intelligentsia. Instead, Hurston and her FWP colleagues sought to tell the stories of

working-class women of color in an attempt to show the multivariant and diverse aspects of African American, particularly Harlem, life. Hurston also writes of black working-class experience in her fictional works. In texts such as *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston chronicles the lives of the African American working class, and many of the stories in these texts draw from her experiences in the FWP.

Throughout the World War II era, as well, many African American women workers had greater opportunities as women from all walks of life moved into the factories to replace male workers sent overseas. However, even working in the factories that so needed workers did not come without struggle. It seems that many defense industry factories tolerated both implicit and explicit racial discrimination, and it was not until President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 was passed, which forbade racial discrimination in the defense industry, that African American women were given equal opportunities. In the military, too, black women served important roles in nursing, the Women's Army Corps, and even as pilots in the air force. What is challenging, however, is finding stories of these African American women from the World War II era. It seems that most of the writings and narratives that reflect the work and struggles that African American women faced during the World War II era are present mainly in periodicals of the times such as *Negro Digest* and *Crisis*. These popular magazines are important in giving readers a sense of the work and lives of black women during this period.

During the 1950s and 1960s, when African American women were making their voices heard in the **civil rights movement** and the feminist movement, women workers still struggled to contend with oppression both in the workplace and in society. In the famous bus boycotts of the 1950s and 1960s, African American women, particularly domestic workers, sought alternative means of transportation to their jobs as a form of protest against racial discrimination. Though standing up for their rights and making a stand on principle, this move made it even more difficult for many women to find and maintain employment. It was during the 1950s and 1960s that many African American writers were telling of working-class experience through their works, while also pointing out the great disparities in American social class status. **Lorraine Hansberry's** famous *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), for instance, deals with issues of upward mobility and social class struggle among an African American family during the post-World War II era.

Despite all these struggles, it is important not to generalize the type of jobs African American women workers pursued throughout history. While it is true that many were subjugated to low-paying, menial work on their basis of their race, class, and gender, this is not the whole story. On the contrary, there is also a rich and powerful history of black professional women in the United States. Even during the Jim Crow era, African American women worked in positions as teachers, librarians, social workers, and nurses. Furthermore, many African American women, particularly in more recent history, have made names for themselves in white-collar professions such as

medicine, law, and the sciences. And while African American women were making strides in a variety of professions, there was also renewed interest in their legacy. It was during the 1960s, with the Black Power and feminist movements specifically, that scholars began to take notice of the writings of past African American women. While most of the works published during this time period were of African American male writers, authors like **Phillis Wheatley**, **Ann Plato**, and Harriet Wilson also began to garner interest. In many ways, these women, who often wrote of the everyday lives of black women, made clear to more contemporary scholars the rich and diverse legacy of African American women's literature.

The 1970s made evident the multitude of African American feminist writers acutely interested in class issues. It seems there was a renaissance of sorts during this period with such important works as **Alice Walker's** *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and **Toni Morrison's** *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Walker and Morrison have continued to look at the intersections of race, class, and gender in their more contemporary writings and theoretical works as well. Other women writers, too, have found opportunities to discuss class and work implications for African American women, particularly in theory and scholarly works. **June Jordan**, bell hooks, and Rebecca Walker are just a few of the contemporary African American women writers and scholars who have also found outlets through which to chronicle their class histories. In works such as hooks's *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000), one gains perspective on the working lives of black women and theoretical constructs by which to better understand their lives.

Work is an all-encompassing entity in the lives of many African American women, and many of the struggles and complexities of such a relationship with work are represented in a variety of social, historical, and literary documents. African American women workers have had to contend with a multitude of oppressions stemming from their status as workers marginalized in many realms. Whether working as slaves, domestic workers, or professionals or in "pink-collar" jobs, African American women workers' lives represent the complicated intersections of race, class, and gender. Work, therefore, becomes a part of African American feminine and feminist existence that makes clear the numerous sites of marginalization in which these women must struggle.

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Lisa A. Kirby



**WRIGHT, RICHARD (1908–1960)**

Richard Wright is one of the most well known and highly acclaimed black American writers. He produced various genres of writings: novels, poems, short stories, **drama**, essays, autobiographies, and haikus. His most acknowledged works are *Native Son* (1940), a novel, and his **autobiography**, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945). Although some traditional critics dismiss these works as simple social statements, many critics highly regard them as masterpieces of American **literature**. His works present the complexities and problems of dehumanizing society through the vivid portrayal of the brutality of racism. He was influenced by a wide range of political and literary theories including communism, naturalism, realism, existentialism, and Pan-Africanism.

Wright had a harsh life as a child. He was born to Nathaniel and Ella on September 4, 1908. When he was born, his **family** lived on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, where his father Nathaniel worked as a sharecropper. His mother was a well-educated woman who had been a schoolteacher. His father was illiterate and an alcoholic. His family was extremely poor and lived often without food. When Richard was six years old, to get out of their extreme poverty, his family moved to Memphis. However, soon after they moved, his father abandoned the family to live with another woman, and his mother had to support the family with low-paying menial jobs. Richard and his brother Leon suffered from the economic hardship early on. They were always hungry and psychologically insecure. Richard even had to stay in an orphanage once. Before he turned ten years old, he experienced extreme racial hatred. When he was staying with his uncle, white men murdered his uncle so that they could take his property. His family ran away to Arkansas to save their lives but came back to Tennessee later on.

Wright first received his formal education in 1916, but after his mother fell ill, he dropped out of school to take care of her. His family moved to his maternal grandmother's **home** in Jackson, Mississippi. Because his grandmother was a fervent Seventh-Day Adventist, she sent Wright to the Seventh-Day Adventist school in Huntsville and forced him to go to her fundamental Christian church. He grew to loathe **religion** and developed a critical view of the function of the black church in the black **community** in the Deep **South**. Wright explains in his autobiography that he was bright and sensible but misunderstood as mischievous by adults during his adolescence. He constantly revolted against his grandmother and his aunt who lived with them.

From 1921 to 1925, he attended Jim Hill Public School and Smith-Robinson Public School, which was the longest formal education he ever received. Since his family was too poor and unstable, his schooling was often interrupted. However, he enjoyed reading. Reading provided him an escape from hardship and racial **violence** in the South. In 1924, his short story "The Voodoo of Hell's Half Acre" was published in *Southern Register*, a local black newspaper. After he graduated and moved to Memphis in 1925, he became self-educated by reading. He avidly read books by H. L. Mencken, Theodore Dreiser, Fedor Dostoevski, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson while he was working

menial jobs in Memphis and Chicago. He lived in Chicago after 1927 for a decade, where he had various odd jobs and learned about the urban life of black people. For example, one of his jobs was at an insurance company that took advantage of black clients, and he became quickly disillusioned by the urban life. These experiences appeared in many of his stories. Working during the nightshift at the post office, a job he lost during the Great Depression, he could spend his daytime reading and writing. In 1931, he published a short story "Superstition," his second publication, in *Abbott's Monthly Magazine*.

During the Great Depression, Wright started to get involved with the Communist Party. He became a member of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Writers' Project and participated at the John Reed Club, a communist literary organization. The John Reed Club inspired and encouraged him to be a writer and supported his writing. The club also influenced his mode of writing greatly as well as stimulating his racial and **class** consciousness. He found a sympathetic white readership among communists. He published stories and poems in *Daily Worker*, *New Masses*, and *International Literature*, which are communist journals. He also worked as an editor for communist-affiliated journals in New York for a while. In 1944, after several years of serious commitment to communism, he left the Communist Party. He felt that his fellow communists were too narrow-minded to understand more progressive ideas, and he felt their views were suffocating to creative writers like him. Wright also had relationships with two white women, Dhimah Rose Meadman and Ellen Poplar, in 1938. The next year, he married Dhimah, a dancer, but divorced shortly thereafter. He married Ellen, a Communist Party member, in 1941 and had two daughters with her.

In 1938, Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas* (1938), a collection of four long stories, won a contest offered by *Story* magazine. Another story was added in the second edition. Stories in this collection were inspired by a black communist in Chicago, and each story describes the racism and violence black people experience in the South. Some critics criticized Wright, claiming that these stories were sentimental and ideological, but this collection was largely accepted as successful. Many white readers, especially Marxist critics, gave positive reviews. On the other hand, **Zora Neale Hurston**, who valued the black folk tradition, disagreed often with Wright and gave negative criticism on this collection. Even Wright felt troubled by his readership's upbeat response to this book. He thought that these stories were received as adorable touchy stories to mass readers. What he wanted to achieve was to reveal the cruel reality of society, which would make people feel uncomfortable and question society. Therefore, in his next book, he aimed to create characters without empathy and avoided sentimentalism.

Wright received the Guggenheim fellowship in 1939, which helped him finish *Native Son*. *Native Son* is regarded as one of the best black novels. This novel narrates the story of Bigger Thomas, a common, ignorant young black man from a ghetto. He describes the character without emotional involvement to reveal the dehumanization and alienation of the social system. The character of the communist lawyer eloquently gives a long speech, in the later

part of the novel, on how society creates a murderer and how the murderer is also a victim of society. The story of Bigger Thomas presents straightforwardly the horrors of urban black life. Wright tries diverse stylistic experiments in *Native Son*. It incorporates a **detective** story quality as well as elements from the gothic romance tradition of horror and mystery in order to uncover the **race** issue more fully. It is also a naturalistic novel influenced by Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925). Many white critics praised it for exposing the ruthless reality of racism in America. Some black reviewers, although they highly acclaimed his book, were concerned about the **stereotypes** of black people in it. **James Baldwin** criticized Wright, charging that he failed to present blacks' sense of collective reality. Baldwin points out that because Bigger Thomas does not have the psychological depth to go beyond the stereotypical level, black people do not relate to the character or to his experiences. Despite such criticism, *Native Son* quickly became a bestseller. For the general readership as well as the academy, *Native Son* is the most powerful and well received book Wright authored.

Wright published the censored version of his autobiography *Black Boy* in 1943. *Black Boy* is a story of himself as a willful, bright, and sensitive black boy growing up in the Deep South. The young black protagonist overcomes many obstacles and finally achieves **freedom** and individual success. Wright avows in this book that he is a self-made man and writing is the means of self-realization for him. Like *Native Son*, this novel was a bestseller and was well reviewed. In spite of its commercial success, the autobiography was controversial. Some black readers were unhappy at being reminded about the truth of many blacks' condition in the Deep South, while other critics were uneasy with his narrative style. *Black Boy* is claimed to be an autobiography; however, it is, in fact, more than a faithful record of facts. As an imaginative and sensitive man, Wright created a fictionalized version of his life story in this book. In addition to these critics' concerns, communist critics, who had been supportive of him since he started his career as a writer, turned against him after he left the Communist Party and negatively reviewed *Black Boy*.

After World War II, Wright visited France with an invitation from the French government. While there, he was hailed as a great American author and became friends with leading French intellectuals, including Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. He found a new intellectual world of existentialism and worried about the racism his daughters would experience in America; he moved his family residence to Paris in 1946. Some critics argue that Wright lost touch with black people's reality when he moved to France. He seemed unable to produce such powerful works like he had before. His second novel, *The Outsider* (1953), is one of the first American existentialist novels, but many did not see *The Outsider* as a successful work. His next novels, *Savage Holiday* (1954) and *The Long Dream* (1958), did not receive good reviews from critics or readers. Many critics evaluate Wright's later novels as inferior to *Native Son* and *Black Boy*.

The most important **fiction** Wright produced in the 1950s is "The Man Who Lived Underground," which is a selection from *Eight Men* (1961), a

collection of short stories published posthumously. The story is similar to Dostoyevski's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) and **Ralph Ellison**'s later publication, *Invisible Man* (1952). There are two other posthumously published books, *Lawd Today!* (1963) and *American Hunger* (1977). *Lawd Today!* was not very well received, but *American Hunger* drew attention to Wright again. *American Hunger* is his memoir that notes his relationship with communism and his development as a writer.

In addition to Wright's stylistic achievement and prominent vision on the issues of black people, the presentation of masculinity and femininity in his works has been a central topic among critics. Many readers argue that women characters in Wright's works are stereotypical. **Black feminist** critics point out the hate and fear against women in his works. They argue that in his novels mothers are threatening and oppressive to young protagonist men, and young women are hysterical, whorish lovers. Many of his female characters are presented as senseless and suffocating, and the male characters take women as obstacles holding them back from achieving their **black masculinity** and their freedom. Feminist critics claim that women characters in his major works are either asexual, oppressive mothers or loveless sex objects. The presentation of women and masculinity in Wright's works remains a volatile issue in black literary criticism.

In addition to novels and autobiographies, Wright tried writing in various genres and created diverse works. After his works were translated into many languages, and he gained international fame in the 1950s, he traveled throughout many countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Based on his experience during these trips, he produced many nonfictional works such as *Black Power* (1954), *Pagan Spain* (1957), and *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (1956). In these books, he observed and discussed race and **class** issues in Ghana, Spain, and Asia, extending his concerns about race internationally. Besides nonfiction, he also produced radio plays, a drama and a **film** script for *Native Son*, and haikus. He wrote a total of 4,000 haikus, but most of them were unpublished until recently.

Wright died from a heart attack on November 29, 1960, in France. He suffered from illness and financial difficulties in his last years. He was a seminal figure for the next generation of black writers, such as James Baldwin, who was his protégé, and Ralph Ellison. He influenced Baldwin and Ellison greatly, and they wrote several brilliant criticisms on Wright's works in their attempt to move beyond him. In black literary history, Wright remains one of the most acknowledged black writers. His works, especially *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, were highly acclaimed by most critics and well read for years. Wright's writing technique, philosophy, and insight on society make his works an important contribution to American literary history.

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Youngsook Jeong

### WRIGHT, SARAH ELIZABETH (1928– )

Born and reared in Wetipquin, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland on December 9, 1928, Wright knows how politics, **history**, and culture govern gender issues. As a novelist, poet, essayist, and activist, she also is aware of the treatment of women of color, in particular, and “anti-woman” laws nationally. With the support of her public school teachers in Wetipquin, Wright attended Howard University from 1945 to 1949 and received further training at such schools as Cheney State College (now University), the University of Pennsylvania (where she attended writers’ workshops), New York State University, and Regents College in Albany, New York, where she received her B.A. degree in 1979. Wright’s education, which she has used to **work** as a **poetry** therapist and **fiction** writing instructor, matches her multilayered literary output. Her first work was a collection of poems, *Give Me a Child* (1955), coauthored with Lucy Smith. She is a contributor to such poetry collections as *Poetry of the Negro* (1970) and *Poetry of Black America* (1973). She has published a children’s biography, *A. Philip Randolph: Integration in the Workplace* (1990), and has provided the forward for Rashidah Ismaili’s collection of poems *Missing in Action and Presumed Dead* (1992).

It is no accident that the Feminist Press rekindled Wright’s novel *This Child’s Gonna Live* (1969) in 1986, for it celebrates and critiques the range of a black woman’s experiences as she struggles in a world created by whites and supported by black men and their older black women enablers. Although the title of the novel suggests a singular theme of a mother’s determination to leave and, thereby, save her children from the physical, economic, and racial degradation of “the Neck” (Tangierneck, a small, fictional **community** on Maryland’s Eastern Shore) during the depression, Wright blends slave history, black folk culture, the unique world of black Eastern Shore oyster pickers, and migration and miscegenation with the depiction of Mariah Upshur, a vital, central character through whom the reader sees the virtues and pitfalls of black women’s communal relationships; the oppression and power of black women in marriage; **sexuality** and sexual transgression; the resilience of a black woman’s self-image against economic, racial, communal, and familial belittlement; and the resolve to live, even in relentless, abject poverty, for familial survival.

The details of Eastern Shore poverty may overwhelm the reader, but they enhance Wright's portrait of Mariah's spiritual resilience. Because work in oyster fishing was sporadic, Mariah helps to support her husband Jacob and three children by digging potatoes, trying to raise crops in poor soil and collecting ferns for wreaths to send to Baltimore. There is little food, and the weight of **domestic** work falls on the pregnant Mariah's shoulders. With an occasional stewed muskrat for meat, Mariah and her **family** are perpetually ill with bronchiallike colds. It is Mariah's spiritual vitality against great odds that offers the reader a reverse ending from that in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). This is not a male-bashing novel. One is left with the implication that black men have scars—but so do black women.

Wright has managed to meld her activism with a **love** of writing. While in Philadelphia in the 1950s, she helped found a writer's workshop. She was a member and officer in the Harlem Writer's Guild from 1957 to 1972 and helped plan and initiate two black writers' conferences. In her introductory speech to the 1965 conference panel, "The Negro Woman in American Literature," Wright advocates a strong belief in the writer's responsibility to depict multiple and complex images of black women characters.

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*Australia Tarver*



## **XENOGENESIS TRILOGY**

**Octavia Butler's** Xenogenesis trilogy consists of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989). In some ways this trilogy is traditional science fiction, with aliens, a postapocalyptic setting, and a first contact plot. However, Butler's use of these motifs is original and provocative, infused with a feminist perspective and grounded in a theory about the human race as troubling as it is convincing. In 1989 the trilogy was republished as a single volume titled *Lilith's Brood*.

Butler's protagonist is Lilith, an allusion, of course, to Adam's first mate. In legend, Lilith was created Adam's equal, but Adam wanted a subordinate—some say especially in his sexual life. Finally God banished Lilith and created Eve, Adam's new mate, using one of Adam's ribs to make clear woman's intended subservience to man. Here, Butler's Lilith helps rid the Earth of its hierarchical **history**.

Lilith awakens in a spaceship where she has been kept in stasis by aliens who have rescued survivors of a nuclear war that made Earth uninhabitable. During her 250-year sleep the Oankali have healed Earth; now Lilith is given a chance to return, but only if she agrees to mate with an Oankali. From now on, she hears, no all-human child shall be born. The Oankalis' survival depends on dramatically transforming their genetic structure every few generations; they plan to effect this through interbreeding with human beings.



The Oankali are benevolent beings who have healed the human survivors of cancers and made their bodies able to live much longer lives. But they are adamant that the human race must cease to exist except as a genetic component of a new Oankali-human hybrid species. Lilith is repulsed by the offer. Not only are the Oankali a three-sexed alien species, but they are only vaguely humanoid, with bodies covered in tentacles that make them look, she thinks, like sea-slugs.

The Oankalis refuse to let all-human children be conceived because two dominant but incompatible genetic traits are wired into human consciousness: Human beings are by nature both intelligent and hierarchical. Intelligence, though, is a much newer trait and thus is subservient to the more entrenched impulse for hierarchy. Human history, therefore, will always be conflict ridden; over time, these conflicts will inevitably escalate to self-destruction. Mixing Oankali DNA with human genes, however, should mitigate the urge for hierarchy, so genetic sharing could save not just one but both species. The Oankali ask Lilith to lead the way, an example for her fellow survivors.

The trilogy examines the deep psychological hold that prejudice against those unlike us has on the human psyche. Despite the loving natures of the Oankali, many human beings choose sterility over having a child with mixed genetic “blood,” even at the cost of seeing the human race last only one more generation. To the Oankali this decision defies logic, but even human beings who feel drawn to the Oankalis find it psychologically difficult to think of bearing offspring only partly human. Readers are likely to feel ambivalent over which is the admirable route—to overcome repulsion and genetically merge with the gentle Oankali or to let the human race die out rather than participate in forced genetic sharing. The dilemma invites readers to think about the power of prejudice, resistance to interracial or same-sex marriages, and historic attempts to achieve genetic “purity.” To have an African American author write such a story is a powerful statement. To have Lilith be the novel’s focal character places woman at the center of social history instead of on its periphery.

*Adulthood Rites* focuses on Lilith’s toddler Akin, the first male allowed to be born to a female human. All Earth children are now genetic constructs, products of families made up of a male and female human, a male and female Oankali, and an ooloi, the third-sexed Oankali. Before Akin, all males had Oankali birth mothers for fear that human-born males would carry the innate compulsion for hierarchy. Now, however, the Oankali feel confident of their ability to genetically engineer a human-born male child who will not endanger others; Lilith’s Akin will be the test of their success.

Akin’s superior sensory perceptions and his rapid intellectual growth reflect his Oankali genes, but he looks surprisingly human (as long as he hides his Oankali sensory probe tongue and until he reaches metamorphosis age, when he will grow an array of sensory tentacles). The young Akin is kidnapped and sold to a **community** of sterile human “resistors” who refuse to mate with aliens; he is the closest they have seen to a human-looking baby in years. The story follows Akin’s attempts to stay safe among these people and his quest to

understand their emotional needs and psychological drives. Readers already know the Oankali grasp of human psychology is weak. Their attempts to acculturate humans into a new social order have suffered from misreadings and faulty assumptions, sometimes resulting in murders, suicides, or accidental deaths. Much as they would like to, the Oankali cannot understand needs basic for human contentment. Now Akin has a chance to learn more about human psychology than any Oankali has ever known. Then he will have to decide what to do with his knowledge.

The third book, *Imago*, follows a later child of Lilith, Jadahs. Although all had assumed this child would become male, once metamorphosis begins, they realize Jadahs is ooloi, the powerful third-sexed healers and genetic engineers of the Oankali. Jadahs is an accident: No child born to a human female has been allowed the genetic construction to become ooloi, for no one knows the ramifications of this most risky of birth possibilities. Like the books preceding it, *Imago* is about experiencing frightening difference and the isolation attendant to breaking new cultural ground. In Butler's world, being different is a lonely place to be, but it is also an opportunity to make a real contribution in life.

Butler's first book in this trilogy will most interest feminist readers because it features Lilith, one of Butler's strong female protagonists. Her central role in *Dawn* suggests that women have the capacity to effect significant change on the course of civilization. If this should happen, Butler speculates, our social history might take a new—and more tolerant—turn.

*See also Bloodchild and Other Stories; Kindred; Parable Series; Patternist Series*

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*Grace McEntee*





## **YARBROUGH, CAMILLE (1935– )**

She might have made a living as a dancer or actress, but Camille Yarbrough uses her cultural talent and imagination to forge an independent life. The author of the widely touted and inspirational children's book *Cornrows* (1979) and novel *The Shimmershine Queens* (1989), never sought the easy road to success. She follows her passion for a commitment she made early in her twenties to foster African American pride and dignity. So the dancer, actress, singer, poet, and self-dubbed griot or storyteller creates art to meet what she sees as a dire need for hope and self-love in black youth culture. Yarbrough said she wants to help young people gain a sense of self and heal broken spirits. Her writings counter the cash-obsessed mantra in U.S. society that preaches a person is nothing without money as the kind of thought that fosters black self-hatred and alienation. Today, through her New York City-based organization, the African American Traditions Workshop, Yarbrough performs songs and stories at schools and on campuses to inspire cultural pride, hope, and unity.

The author's strength and direction come from cultural **ancestors**, particularly her father, who always urged, "Do better." Others role models include the late international dancer and civil rights advocate **Josephine Baker**, whom she met in 1958; the late playwright and children's author **Alice Childress**; playwright and friend **Lorraine Hansberry**; and the late **blues** singer Nina Simone, to whose voice and style music critics compared Yarbrough's

acclaimed 1975 spoken-word album *The Iron Pot Cooker*, reissued in 2000 by Vanguard Records.

At 6214 Champlain Avenue on Chicago's south end, Camille grew up as the seventh of eight children born to Anna May and Ernest Yarbrough, a precinct captain for more than thirty years. Dance became her fascination long before she graduated from Englewood High School in 1953. After a couple of false starts as a dancer in Montreal and New York, she returned to Chicago. In 1955, Yarbrough auditioned and was accepted into the Hollywood-based troupe of her idol Katherine Dunham. Until the company broke up in 1961, Yarbrough was steeped in an exploration of black diaspora culture through dances inspired by Dunham's research on African, Caribbean, and Latin American forms. In the early 1970s Yarbrough's reputation as a performer and poet landed her a spot in New York City's Jazz Mobile, a **drama** and **poetry** program in the city schools.

Yarbrough was outraged by the unruliness of many black students and the way they ripped each other apart psychologically with slurs and putdowns about their hair, skin color, and facial features. She responded with "Cornrows," a poem about the heritage and **beauty** of African Americans' braided hair. Through an introduction to a publisher arranged by Hansberry's husband, Robert Nemiroff, the sentiments were transformed into a 1979 children's book, illustrated by Carol Bayard, which won the prestigious American Library Association Coretta Scott King Award (1980). Yarbrough's tales, as staples in **children's and young adult literature**, highlight the wisdom of elders, women's dignity and beauty, self-love, and the importance of **community**, heritage, and education.

*The Shimmershine Queens* (1989) tells of Angie, who learns from Cousin Seatta, an elder, to value herself, her classmates, and the chance for schooling. Like Yarbrough's later works, *Tamika and the Wisdom Rings* (1994) and *The Little Tree Growing in the Shade* (1996), the novel encourages youths to shun fighting and name calling as acts of racism. *Watch Hour*, aimed at four- to eight-year-olds, was published in 2005.

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Vincent F. A. Golphin

### **YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD WOMAN DOWN**

*You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* is the second published collection of short stories by **Alice Walker**. Published in 1981, the collection consists of fourteen stories, some of which were previously published in a variety of magazines including *Ms.*, *Mother Jones*, and *Essence*.

As with her previous collection of stories, *In Love & Trouble* (1973), Walker's second collection is also centered on the lives of black women. Walker not only gives voice to a seldom-heard group, but she also takes a critical look at the oppressive society that makes being heard so difficult. She engages major issues such as **rape** and pornography, perhaps influenced by the Second Wave feminist movement of the 1970s.

The book is dedicated in part to the women **blues** singers who have influenced her work: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Mamie Smith. The blues is significant to this collection in a number of ways. The title plays off of the blues songs "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down," recorded by Mamie Smith in 1920, and "You Just Can't Keep a Good Woman Down," recorded by Lillian Miller in 1928. Walker thanks this generation of singers for defining themselves and finding value in what they did, a tradition that Walker sees herself carrying on.

In addition to sharing a title with these songs, Walker incorporates the blues woman as a character in the opening story, "Nineteen Fifty-Five." The story is based on Elvis Presley's rise to stardom and the borrowing of music from black singers who received little or no compensation for their songs. Gracie Mae Still is the blues singer who sells her song to a young white singer named Traynor, who then goes on to become the Emperor of Rock and Roll.

The collection also shares a common blues theme of being resilient in times of trouble. Walker's stories show black women who resist **stereotypes** and conventions, refuse to sacrifice their dignity, and like the blues women mentioned in the dedication, define themselves as valuable human beings. Despite the prevalence of racist and sexist stereotypes that attempt to circumscribe their role in society, these women define fulfillment for themselves and, significantly, act in accordance with their definitions.

The capacity for self-fulfillment shows a development in Walker's characters. Earlier works featured women who were able to define fulfillment for themselves but were not always able to act accordingly because they felt limited by societal conventions. In this collection Walker celebrates the strength and resilience of black women who stay true to themselves and attempt self-fulfillment regardless of the limited choices they face.

However, critics have found fault with some of the stories, claiming that characters were now empowered to an extent that they were not credible. In general, a major critique of *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* was that it lacked the cohesiveness of Walker's first collection of stories. Some stories, particularly "Porn," "Coming Apart," and "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells," were criticized for being dogmatic and obvious in making a point at the expense of the development of characters and narrative.

*See also In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose; Womanism*

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*Raquel Rodriguez*

### **YOU KNOW BETTER**

**Tina McElroy Ansa's** fourth novel is *You Know Better* (2002), a ghost story in which three generations of women in the Pines **family** are visited by three spirits on one momentous day in their lives. The Pines women are on a downward spiral, with the youngest, LaShawndra, about to run away from **home** to escape her mistakes and to seek a career as a dancer in music videos. With help from the spirit world, each woman faces her shortcomings and accepts her and her family members' failures as learning experiences from which they can move to mutual support and **love**.

*You Know Better*, like Ansa's other novels, is set in Mulberry, Georgia. The novel opens at midnight as Lily Paine Pines sets out to drive around Mulberry, looking for her granddaughter LaShawndra. She picks up a passenger, Miss Grace Moses, who mostly listens as Lily talks through her worries about LaShawndra, LaShawndra's mother, her daughter Sandra, and her ex-husband Charles. At 6:00 AM the scene shifts to Sandra, who arrives at her

real estate office to drive Nurse Joanna Bloom around Mulberry to look at property. At noon, we shift again to LaShawndra, who is hitchhiking out of Mulberry to attend Freaknik in Atlanta. LaShawndra is picked up by Miss Liza Jane Dryer, who tells LaShawndra that she lives with Miss Moses and Nurse Bloom. We realize that all three of the women with whom the Pines women drive around are spirits whose purpose is to listen to the Pines women and, by asking questions or making comments, to lead the Pines women from self-absorption to genuine attention to one another's needs.

Lily has been overly focused on her career as a teacher and school administrator and on her reputation in the **community**. Sandra has been overly hurt by rejection from LaShawndra's father and his family and has buried herself in her real estate career. LaShawndra has been overly concerned with her "coochie" girl image and her dreams of a music video career and has taken advantage of her grandmother, her mother, and her friend and housemate Crystal. During their conversations with the spirit guides, each of the Pines women comes to the recognition that being absorbed by her own desires and demons has led her to neglect truly loving and meaningful relationships with the others. The novel's epilogue, told by LaShawndra one year after their momentous rides, shows the three women in Lily's kitchen coming to terms with one another. Lily has reconciled with Charles, and Sandra is trying to be openly affectionate with LaShawndra. LaShawndra ends the novel by remembering Miss Liza Jane's admonition that people can change, and the Pines women have each changed for the better by reaching out to one another in love and forgiveness.

In *You Know Better* Ansa depicts how LaShawndra's generation has gotten lost and holds out hope for their and their parents' and grandparents' redemption through love, understanding, and forgiveness.

*See also Baby of the Family; Motherhood; Spirituality*

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*Harriette C. Buchanan*







### **ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME**

Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) is an experimental text of feminist life writing. Although she relates many events of her depression-era girlhood and her young womanhood in the 1950s, Lorde describes the book not as **autobiography** or memoir but as "biomythography." Interviewed by Karen Nölle-Fischer for Germany's *Virginia* magazine, she explained that *Zami* encompasses many genres, including **history**, **myth**, and psychology. Nölle-Fischer translated the book into German for Orlanda in Berlin, a leading feminist press whose editor, Dagmar Schultz, was instrumental in introducing Lorde to many European women's communities. Lorde told Nölle-Fischer that *Zami* explores the crucial role of women's **love** in her life, from her mother's love during Lorde's rebellious childhood to the lesbian love scenes that underscore an erotic life force. Lorde's 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," reprinted in her *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), develops the concept of eroticism as a female, spiritual source of energy and creativity that threatens patriarchy and rejects the pornographic.

The word *Zami*, as Lorde defines it in the epilogue, is a Carriacou term for Caribbean women bound by ties of love and friendship as they plant, tend goats, build, harvest, and raise children together during their men's long absences at sea. Such love, she adds, lasts after the return of the seafarers. Because her parents, Linda Belmar Lorde and Frederic Byron Lorde, were

immigrants who always hoped to go back to the Caribbean, Lorde grew up in Harlem with a sense of dislocation from her true **home**. In titling her biomythography *Zami*, she views intense female relationships as a crucial inheritance, both from the islands and from the even more distant Africa, home of the great mother MawuLisa and her trickster daughter Afrekete.

A female bildungsroman, *Zami* traces Lorde's growth and development from a silent little girl to an articulate woman. One important early influence was Augusta Baker, a children's librarian who inspired the pre-school-aged Audre not only to read but also to speak up. Until she was four, Lorde explains, she rarely said a word, but soon she was communicating with her **family** by reciting **poetry**. Later, at the all-girls' Hunter High School, she was part of an outsider group that called themselves The Branded and "raised the ghosts of Byron and Keats." She also developed an early political consciousness, envying Jewish classmates who planned to **work** on a kibbutz in post-World War II Israel.

As a teenager, Lorde's closest friends were girls, especially the dance student Gennie, the first person she was "conscious of loving." After Gennie's suicide and an affair with a white boy that resulted in a "homemade abortion," Lorde found that writing poetry about "death, destruction, and deep despair" was the only activity that made her feel alive. Bored at Hunter College, she worked at blue-collar jobs in Stamford, Connecticut, and as a clinic clerk in New York to earn the money to travel to Cuernavaca, Mexico, where she had her first lesbian affair. Back in New York, she became part of the 1950s "gay girl" scene.

Lesbians, she says, were probably the only African American and white women in the city at that time who made "any real attempt to communicate with one another," predating by several years the coalitions she would join during the 1960s **civil rights movement**. Female connection was "our power," adds Lorde, who credits each black woman she met in Greenwich Village with "some part in my survival" in a hostile world. Cassie Premo Steele emphasizes that the sensuous lover Afrekete in the final chapter of *Zami* is a "sexual/spiritual mother" who links the author to the African motherland. Thus, says Steele, Lorde "fits her narrative into the traditions of American women's writing, black women's autobiography, and lesbian narratives" (120).

*See also* Black Feminism; *Cancer Journals, The*; Lesbianism

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*Joan Wylie Hall*



## Timeline

Boldfaced items are “firsts” for an African American.

- 1746 **Lucy Terry writes “Bars Fight” (published 1855). First known poem by an African American.**
- 1773 **Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in London. First book published by an African American; second book published by an American woman.**
- 1841 **Ann Plato, *Essays*. First African American to publish a book of essays.**
- 1848 Frederick Douglass addresses the first Women’s Rights Convention, Seneca Falls, New York.
- 1849 Harriet Tubman escapes from slavery and begins working on the Underground Railroad.
- 1851 Sojourner Truth delivers her “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” address at the Women’s Rights Convention, Akron, Ohio.
- 1854 Frances E. W. Harper, *Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects*.
- 1859 **Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig*. First African American to publish a novel in America.**
- 1861 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.  
**Frances E. W. Harper, “The Two Offers.” First short story published by an African American woman.**

## 956 Timeline

- 1865 **Julia C. Collins, *The Curse of Caste*. First serialized novel by an African American woman.**
- 1892 Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*.  
Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola Leroy*.
- 1900 Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces*.
- 1916 **Angelina Grimké, *Rachel*. First successful full-length play written, produced, and performed by African Americans.**
- 1928 Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*.
- 1929 Nella Larsen, *Passing*.  
Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun*.
- 1937 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- 1942 Margaret Walker, *For My People*.
- 1946 Ann Petry, *The Street*.
- 1949 Gwendolyn Brooks, *Annie Allen*.
- 1950 **Gwendolyn Brooks wins the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for *Annie Allen*. First African American to win a Pulitzer in any category.**
- 1953 Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha*.
- 1959 **Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*. First Broadway play by an African American.**
- 1968 Alice Walker, *Once*.
- 1970 Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.  
Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*.  
Toni Cade, *The Black Woman* (editor).
- 1974 Mary Helen Washington, "Black Women Image Makers."
- 1975 Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*.  
Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*.
- 1977 Barbara Smith, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism."
- 1980 Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*.  
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- 1994 Rita Dove named U.S. Poet Laureate.
- 1995 Film version of *Waiting to Exhale*.
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