ANGELYN MITCHELL AND DANILLE K. TAYLOR

Introduction

When I think of how essentially alone black women have been – alone because of our bodies, over which we have had so little control; alone because the damage done to our men has prevented their closeness and protection; and alone because we have had no one to tell us stories about ourselves; I realize that black women writers are an important and comforting presence in my life. Only they know my story. It is absolutely necessary that they be permitted to discover and interpret the entire range and spectrum of the experience of black women and not be stymied by preconceived conclusions. Because of these writers, there are more choices for black women to make, and there is a larger space in the universe for us.

– Mary Helen Washington

When Lucy Terry composed the first known poem by an African American in 1746, she inaugurated a vital and vibrant literary tradition – African American women’s literature. Throughout history, African American women writers have chronicled and critiqued the American experience as did Lucy Terry in the eighteenth century. Once marginalized, if not ignored, by mainstream America, African American women writers are now central, indeed essential, to American letters and culture. If, as Frances Smith Foster asserts, African American women writers have “used the Word as both a tool and a weapon to correct, to create, and to confirm their visions of life as it was and as it could become,” this volume bears witness to “their visions of life” as well as to their artistic goals and achievements.¹ *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature* offers critical commentaries on almost three centuries of African American women’s writing, spanning from the eighteenth century’s Lucy Terry to the twenty-first century’s Sapphire. Organized primarily around genres and their contexts, this volume foregrounds the artistry, complexity, and diversity of African American women writers. How this literary tradition grew and flourished is of particular interest to all of the contributors to this volume. In these essays, one reads, to use Hortense Spillers’s terms, the “cross-currents and discontinuities” within the tradition.² In much the same way that African American women writers seem to be in conversation with each other when one reads the
recurrent themes, topics, motifs, and concerns in their writings, the critics gathered here are in conversation with each other as they engage the many “cross-currents and discontinuities.”

While African American women writers have written since the eighteenth century, this distinct literary tradition and its importance went largely unnoticed and unacknowledged by literary critics until the emergence of African American women literary scholars and African American women writers in the 1970s. The few critical examinations of African American literature before 1975 that included African American women writers, e.g. Richard Wright’s 1937 review of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) or Arthur P. Davis’s *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers, 1900–1960* (1974), often minimized or ignored the artistic and literary contributions of African American women writers and often ignored feminist issues or concerns. Like Lucy Terry, who was inspired to create by the historical circumstances surrounding her in Massachusetts, African American women writers have been similarly inspired by their historical circumstances, be it colonial America, the Revolutionary War, slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, modernity, the Great Depression, World War II, Jim Crow America, or the civil rights movement.

The 1960s, for example, brought great change, not only politically but also educationally, and these changes gave visibility and accessibility to African American literature, in general, and African American women’s literature, specifically. Without the political changes of the 1960s, educational reform by way of canon reformation and expansion would not have taken place. With the dismantling of legal segregation and the political and social enfranchisement of African Americans as a result of the civil rights movement, historically white colleges and universities in the United States began diversifying not only their student bodies, but also their curricula. Thus, a number of Black Studies programs were created, providing intellectual spaces for the critical examination of African American life, culture, experiences, and contributions. Among these spaces, literature was one area of increased scholarly interest. Institutionalizing African American literature and literary studies helped to make literature by both African American men and women more accessible and visible to all of American society. Concomitantly, the women’s liberation movement, indebted to the progressive politics and reforms of the 1960s as well as to international influences, also changed United States colleges and universities, giving rise to Women’s Studies programs. Like Black Studies programs, Women’s Studies programs institutionalized the critical engagement with women’s experiences and contributions in American society. Accordingly, courses offered by departments
of English literary studies began to include literature by women writers. With these advances and expansions in literary studies, new critical tools were needed as the tools of the time, structuralism/formalism and New Criticism, did not allow for critical considerations of gender or race. In the 1970s, a number of literary critics of African American literature employed structuralist approaches, but post-structuralist approaches became more appealing as they afforded a critical space for the discussion of race; gender issues, however, continued to be largely ignored. Feminist literary theory, aided by French feminist theories born of post-structuralism, became a useful tool in literary analyses that sought to understand the role of gender as well as the roles of patriarchy and sexism in American society and culture; race, however, was not an integral part of these particular interrogations. Race and gender, however, intersected in the literary and cultural criticism of early African American women scholars, such as Barbara Christian, Mary Helen Washington, Nellie McKay, and Claudia Tate, who explored the nexus of race, gender, and power in African American lives as depicted by African American women writers.

In the 1970s, works by African American women writers were unavailable, and often they were xeroxed, as it was then known, for classroom use. Both writer Sherley Anne Williams and literary critic Ann duCille have written about reading in the 1970s Zora Neale Hurston’s then out-of-print Their Eyes Were Watching God in xeroxed form. Materials – literally books in print – were sorely needed to support the study of African American literature in general, and the study of African American women’s literature more specifically. A number of anthologies edited by black women in the 1970s helped to establish the study of African American women’s writing. Specifically, Toni Cade [Bambara]’s The Black Woman (1970), Mary Helen Washington’s Black-Eyed Susans (1975), and Roseann Bell, Bettye Jean Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s Sturdy Black Bridges (1979) all helped to institutionalize and to advance the study of African American women’s writing. Toni Cade’s ground-breaking anthology, The Black Woman, presented both creative and critical writings by African American women writers; this anthology became a valuable resource in the teaching of African American women writers. Outlining the political urgencies of African American women writers in her introduction, Cade proclaimed, “We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitative and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society, liberation from the constrictive norm of mainstream culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within (creation).” In Black-Eyed Susans, a compilation of short stories, Washington established the primary thematic
concerns of African American women writers and helped to begin the reclamation of many forgotten African American women writers. Washington theorized in the introduction that African American women writers sought to provide a mirror that more accurately reflected the lives of African American women, and in doing so, they created more possibilities for African American women. “Only [African American women writers] know my story. It is absolutely necessary,” Washington wrote, “that they be permitted to discover and interpret the entire range and spectrum of the experience of black women and not be stymied by preconceived conclusions. Because of these writers, there are more models of how it is possible for us to live, there are more choices for black women to make, and there is a larger space in the universe for us.”

Finally, Sturdy Black Bridges, an eclectic anthology, sought to establish the interdisciplinary and diasporic nature of the study of black women’s writing. One of its editors, Bettye Parker, challenged the critical community: “If Black criticism is to adequately function on a level proportionate to our literary experience, then the Black critic, both male and female, must move beyond the type of fragmented judgments historically practiced by white critics.” All of these early texts helped to establish the terms of engagement for both African American literary analyses and for black feminist criticism, highlighting the urgencies, issues, and concerns of African American women writers.

During the 1980s, a significant number of scholarly works and additional anthologies devoted to African American women writers were published. Barbara Christian’s Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976 (1980) was the first single-authored, critical study of the African American woman’s literary tradition. This seminal work explored the cultural and historical contexts of novels by African American writers. Additionally, Christian’s Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers (1985) presented critical insights into this then emerging field of study. Both The Third Woman (1980), edited by Dexter Fisher, and This Bridge Called My Back (1981), edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, signaled the emergence and importance of the expanding body of American women writers of color. The primary aim of The Third Woman was to introduce to its readers the growing body of American women writers of color. The goals of African American women writers, Dexter Fisher proffered, included “authenticat[ing] the experience of black women, establish[ing] a context for understanding the traditions of the past, and creat[ing] a sense of place and community, giving the community back to itself by elevating the commonplace to the artistic.”

Moving beyond Fisher’s anthology, This Bridge Called My Back posited a new feminism to meet the cultural and social needs in Asian American, Native American, Latino, and African
American communities and helped to lay the foundation for broader definitions of feminism and sexuality. The editors, Moraga and Anzaldua, explained their motivation as well as their goal: “What began as a reaction to the racism of white feminists soon became a positive affirmative of the commitment of women of color to our own feminism ... This Bridge Called My Back intends to reflect an uncompromised definition of feminism by women of color in the U.S.” All of these works made significant contributions in building the foundation of African American feminist criticism.

The overwhelming success of one collection signaled the status of African American women's writing in the academy. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982), edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, included historical and sociological essays as well as literary analyses, pedagogical essays, and bibliographies to assist the teaching of African American women's literature. One of its essays, Barbara Smith's “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” became indispensable to discussions of sexuality in African American women's literature. Calling for a more sophisticated feminist critique, Smith wrote, “A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean.”

*bell hooks*'s *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), the first single-authored volume of theory, further advanced the field of black feminist criticism, providing an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective to African American women's writings. The voices of critics, however, were not the only voices interpreting the works of African American women writers. African American women writers had much to say about their own creative enterprises. Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983) and Mari Evans's *Black Women Writers (1950–1980)* (1984), both collections of interviews and, in Evans’s case, critical essays, deepened the study of black women's writing. Tate and Evans both recognized the need to record and to explore the aesthetic views of contemporary African American women writers. These interviews revealed keen insights about the creative processes of African American women writers in their own words. As more scholars of literature engaged African American women’s writings, one of the first collections of critical essays published was *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (1985), edited by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers. This collection explored, theorized, contextualized, and contested the idea of tradition in relation to black women’s writing. A few years later, two collections of critical essays — Cheryl A. Wall’s *Changing Our Own
Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women (1989) and Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin’s Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance (1990) – made clear the rigorous scholarly work necessary in critical analyses of African American women’s writing.

While ground-breaking anthologies and critical studies of contemporary African American women writers were published in the 1970s and 1980s, it was essential to the development of the literary and critical traditions that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings by African American women be recovered, reissued, and critiqued. To this end, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (1988–) and its general editor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as well as Afro American Women Writers 1746–1933 (1988), edited by Ann Allen Shockley, encouraged interest and provided access to the literary productions of African American women of these earlier periods. In the foreword to his stellar multivolume set, Gates explained the necessity of recovering these earlier texts by black women: all of the black woman writer’s literary tradition “must be received, explicated, analyzed, and debated before we can understand more completely the formal shaping of this tradition within a tradition, a coded literary universe through which, regrettably, we are only just beginning to navigate.” Shockley’s single-volume anthology made accessible to students, scholars, and a general readership representative works from both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scholars, such as Hazel V. Carby in Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987), Frances Smith Foster in Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892 (1993), and Carla L. Peterson in “Doers of the Word”: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North 1830–1880 (1995), have enhanced and extended the study and understanding of the African American women’s literary tradition with their critical studies of this earlier period. Most recently, the recovery of lost texts continues with Henry Louis Gates’s publication of Hannah Crafts’s The Bondwoman’s Narrative (2002), perhaps the first novel written by an African American woman in the 1850s. Although the authenticity of Crafts’s novel is not yet conclusive, its existence highlights the complicated nature of recovering the writings of African American women and of constructing the African American woman’s literary tradition.

The Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature chronicles, interprets, and maps the African American woman’s literary tradition and its critical tradition. Divided into two parts, the first part – “History, contexts, and criticism” – offers readers an overview of key periods in and significant aspects of the literary tradition of African American women.
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writers. The second part – “Genre, gender, and race” – presents chapters devoted to specific genres in the tradition. Students and scholars who want to study a specific genre may read the more specialized chapter as well as the contextual chapter engaging their particular interest. For the student or scholar interested in a particular historical moment, such as the Black Arts movement, the corresponding contextual chapter, as well as the chapter devoted to the genre of interest, might be useful. In all, the fourteen chapters here provide readers with both coverage of significant moments in the literary tradition as well as the opportunity to examine specific areas of generic interest. This volume is not intended to be a comprehensive literary history of African American women’s writing; rather, it is designed to offer guidance in reading and studying African American women’s writing.

The essays in this volume reveal the plurality and multiplicity of African American women’s writing. For African American women writers, history has served as both text and context, beginning with Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley in the eighteenth century. Often ignored, early African American women writers wrote in a variety of genres, including poetry, autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, and journalism. As Foster and Davis explain in “Early African American women’s literature,” “Were it not for the scraps of manuscript, brief mentions in histories and diaries, a few books and pamphlets saved and later revealed, the absence of texts by African American women could lead the unimaginative and the ungenerous to believe that before the Civil War, African American culture was oral only.” Employing a number of genres, early African American women writers set the thematic concerns for many later writers, themes including citizenship, motherhood, religion, sexuality, and enfranchisement. Advancing civic, social, and political equality preoccupies much of the literature by African American women in the nineteenth century. The most canonized of these genres is the emancipatory narrative, or as it is traditionally known, the slave narrative. In her chapter on the slave narrative, Joycelyn Moody explains its cultural, political, social uses: “In addition to interiority and the humanity it evidences, slave narratives offered proof that in spite of the conditions bondage imposed on their lives, slave women nonetheless pursued and led meaningful, worthy lives, and they had the intelligence and skill to translate those lives into powerful rhetoric.” This powerful rhetoric was used in other genres of the time and continues throughout the nineteenth century.

The Harlem Renaissance, characterized by the growing diversity of African Americans and their interests, is considered one of the most vibrant of artistic movements in American history. Of its political climate, Cheryl A. Wall writes in her chapter “Women of the Harlem Renaissance,” “The vogue for African and African American art seemed to portend greater support for
black peoples’ political rights. It did not. But it did open a space for writers, who were able to make art of both the expanded opportunities and the persistent constraints.” Identity and class were two of the most provocative themes for African American women writers as they presented and represented African American experiences during this defining moment.

Another defining moment in the tradition is the Black Arts movement. The contributions of African American women writers to the Black Arts movement have largely been ignored. Community-based theater, as well as poetry, provided an effective medium for the writers to enact explorations of political issues and interests. In 1968, Larry Neal proclaimed that “Black art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.” This metaphor is particularly ironic as many of the men of the Black Arts movement seemed to ignore women’s issues and concerns while addressing issues of race and racism, so much so that blackness seemed synonymous with masculinity. Yet, as Eleanor W. Traylor reveals, a number of African American women writers, including Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Sarah Webster Fabio, Barbara Ann Teer, and Mari Evans, greatly contributed to the black aesthetic(s) of the Black Arts movement. Traylor writes: “The founding mothers [of the Black Arts movement], with other vanguard women writers, strengthen the revolutionary ferment of the movement to resonate its themes: a renegotiation of power relations between black and white America, a disturbance of ideological imperatives of identity, and a redirection of the sources for literary production.” During this period, African American women writers often conjoined women-centered issues with issues of nation building.

Moving beyond the Black Arts movement, contemporary African American women writers sought to understand the self in relation to society, historically and politically, as well as the interior self, often through personal experiences, like motherhood and marriage. Explorations into the interior self characterize the diverse works by contemporary African American women writers. “Building on the 1960s ideology that promoted cultural and racial self-discovery and self-awareness,” Dana Williams writes, “early 1970s literature by black women also stressed the necessity of loving oneself and one’s culture.” Self-definition continued to preoccupy the literary imaginations of African American women writers throughout the last decades of the twentieth century.

African American literary scholars in the latter part of the twentieth century have played a major role in recovering, shaping, and codifying the canon of African American women writers. Black feminist literary criticism helped to shape how African American women’s writing is read and interpreted. Mapping the political, social, and historical foundations of black feminist
literary criticism, Robert Patterson predicts, “As black feminist literary theory advances in the twenty-first century, it must continue to grapple with the ways in which the vectors of race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect, and also consider the ways in which other socializing institutions, such as religion, inflect … identity.”

The genre studies of part II reveal not only the recurrent themes and concerns of African American women writers, but also the cultural and political currency of the genres. In the mid and late nineteenth century, a number of genres, including drama, essay, novel and short story, also present, record, and critique African American experiences, particularly post-slavery. Through poetry, African American women writers have fused the imagination with social critique and responsibility. They have also, as Keith Leonard notes, demonstrated “their faith in the power of poetic language to assert their personal truths in defiance of exclusionary privileging of male thought and expression by claiming the power to name themselves against the silencing dynamics of a male-dominated society.”

The novel has been vital as a means of self-expression, artistic production, and cultural conservation. In the novels of African American women, the impact of race, class, and gender is portrayed and critiqued within a dynamic and fluid culture. Madhu Dubey observes in her chapter, “The life-saving power of fiction emerges as a recurrent motif in African American women’s novels published from the mid nineteenth to the early twenty-first century.” Through the novel, readers are invited to journey to impossible destinations and situations, revealing the possibilities within the reader and the text.

The short story, often overshadowed by the novel in critical examinations, is marked by its accessibility. That it was one of the earliest genres is noteworthy; the brevity of the genre encourages readers to read and writers to write because of its immediacy. Magazines, newspapers, and journals have been and continue to be primary publishing outlets for African American women fiction writers, and as such, short fiction enjoys a wide readership. Crystal Lucky posits, “Because of its accessibility, the short story invites innovation, an opportunity to experiment with style and form, voice and language.” A number of writers, such as Ann Petry, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker, excelled at both the short story and the novel.

Non-fiction prose has deep roots in African American women’s activism. The essay documents the cultural history of African American women’s social and political thought. Marilyn Sanders Mobley opines, “Free from having to embellish their ideas through language and structures particular to other genres, black women chose the essay to employ the power of the word in a more direct unencumbered way for their audiences.” African American women essayists have long advanced the ideology of black feminism, using
their prose writings to build and to heal community. African American women essayists engaged social justice issues such as lynching, labor, education, women’s rights, civil rights, sexuality, and spirituality. Today’s blogging on the internet might be considered an extension of this genre for black women writers.

The autobiographies of nineteenth-century African American women writers, both political and spiritual, provide unique perspectives about American culture and identity as well as African American life and culture. Autobiography remains one of the most popular genres, enjoying a wide readership. For example, Maya Angelou’s much-read autobiographical series is a defining example of contemporary African American women’s autobiography. Although popular, autobiography also serves political purposes. Joanne Braxton explains, “Defying every attempt to enslave or diminish them or their self-expression in any way, black women autobiographers liberate themselves from stereotyped views of black womanhood, and define their own experiences.” Additionally, constructing the self through memory for public consumption is complicated for the African American woman writer by preconceived notions of African American subjectivity.

African American women writers in the performing arts have been critical to the development of African American theater. Olga Barrios explains the sociocultural importance of African American drama in her chapter “African American women in the performing arts”: “African American women’s early plays have cast new light on North American life and culture by offering a new perspective and more integral picture of African Americans.” Performance studies now allow for considerations of race in and as performance, but African American women playwrights have long dramatized the performativity of race. Thus, shaping community and consciousness has been crucial to African American theater in its aim to counter distorted images or cultural erasures.

Concerned with image making and remaking, children’s and young adult literature by African American women writers exposes its youth readership to images of African Americans and the history of African Americans. Since early in the twentieth century, African American women writers understood that issues of representation and identification are integral to a child’s developing self-concept. Highlighting the artistry within children’s and young adult literature, Dianne Johnson observes, “While self-esteem is important, and outstanding children’s literature can enhance the self-esteem of young readers, building self-esteem should not be the reason that black children read black children’s literature. They should read it, as well, to enjoy outstanding art and what it has to offer – illumination, interpretation, inspiration, exploration, education.” Once again, the political and the aesthetic are