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On canons: anxious history and the rise of black feminist literary studies

“Twice in the history of the United States the struggle for racial equality has been midwife to a feminist movement. In the abolition movement of the 1830s and 1840s, and again in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, women experiencing the contradictory expectations and stresses of changing roles began to move from individual discontents to social movement in their own behalf. Working for racial justice, they gained experience in organizing and in collective action, an ideology that described and condemned oppression analogous to their own, and a belief in human “rights” that could justify them in claiming equality for themselves.”

– Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (1980)

Black feminist literary studies, like black women themselves, has had a troubled relationship to the larger rubric “feminist.” The trouble stems in part from the history of elitism and exclusion that attends the development of feminism as a social and intellectual movement in the United States and as a politics of reading in the academy. In the nineteenth century, decades before the term feminist came into popular usage, the mainstream woman’s rights movement spoke and wrote of itself in the singular to reinforce a sense of sisterhood in female body, mind, and spirit. In actuality, however, the use of the singular woman reflected a shortsightedness that bordered on tunnel vision, a sense of self and sisterhood that was – well – selfish. The universal “woman” this early movement embraced was generally white, middle to upper class, and based in the eastern portions of the United States. It did not include the pioneer women pushing their way west or the native women displaced in the name of Manifest Destiny. Nor did it include poor white women or immigrant women from the working classes. And it most certainly did not include the female slaves whose inhuman condition was so inspirational for the white proto-feminists who saw in the captives’ oppression a metaphor for their own domestic slavery.

That the plight of black slaves served the kind of instructive and inspirational functions for white women that Sara Evans describes in *Personal Politics* is, however, not the sole or even the primary paradox inherent in the abolitionist origins of mainstream, first-wave feminism in the United States.¹ Also ironic is the fact that black women, who were often relegated to the margins of the woman’s movement, and at times completely excluded

from it, arguably had a keener sense of gender, as well as racial, inequality; a more nuanced, sun-up-to-sun-down, fieldhand and household experience of the sexual division of labor; and a longer and more complex history of what could be called feminist activism. Our continuing failure fully to acknowledge this lengthy history of black feminist agitation and writing has real consequences for all of contemporary feminist thought and activism, and for mainstream feminist discourses, as well as for black feminist criticism and theory.

Coming as they did from matrilineal and patriarchal African societies where the sexes often maintained separate, though by no means equal, systems of power, property ownership, labor, and wage earning, black women did not have the same tradition of dependence on men or submission to male authority that white women had. What they had instead, in many instances, was a tradition of self-reliance, sisterhood, women's networks, and female entrepreneurship that was not completely eradicated by the conditions of slavery in the New World. Nor was the slave cabin a patriarchal realm in which husband ruled over wife and child as provider and protector. Women were the more likely heads of slave households, though this labor-intensive role was defined by responsibilities, not power.²

Like black slaves, white women in the United States in the nineteenth century, regardless of their social standing, did not enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship. This was particularly true of married women for whom holy wedlock represented a kind of "civil death" that denied them independent legal status and gave their husbands dominion over their lives, their labor, their property, and even the children born into their marriages. Given this lack of political entitlement, it is not surprising that white women were attracted to the cause of equal rights, but even as they appropriated slavery as a metaphor for their own oppression, the priorities of their campaign against male domination were fundamentally different from those of black women. Whereas white female activists were concerned with the right of married women to own property, for example, black women were concerned with the basic human right not to be literally owned as chattel. As white women lobbied to change divorce laws, black women lobbied to change the laws that prohibited slaves from marrying. While white women sought definition outside the roles of wife and mother, black women sought the freedom to live within traditional gender roles, to claim the luxury of loving their own men and mothering their own children: "to get to a place where you could love anything you chose," Toni Morrison wrote in *Beloved* (1987), "not to need permission for desire."³

The publicly articulated campaigns of black women to own their own bodies, their own labor, their own land, their own desire can be traced back

at least to the eighteenth century, if we include such figures as the pioneering poet, orator, and former slave Lucy Terry Prince (c. 1724–1821). Best known for her one poem that has survived, “Bars Fight” (1746), an eyewitness account of an Indian raid in Deerfield, Massachusetts, Prince lived a long and remarkable life that included many public challenges to the prevailing patriarchal order. Her frontier home in Guilford, Vermont, is said to have been a center for civil rights and literary activity in the years following her marriage in 1756 to Bijah Prince, a much older freed black man of means who purchased her freedom. In 1785, at a time when white women generally did not speak at meetings and other public forums or openly challenge male authority, Prince successfully appealed to no less than the governor of Vermont and his council for help in ending the harassment of her family by John Noyes, a wealthy, influential neighbor who went on to become a state legislator.

What persuaded the governor and his lieutenant and councilors to side with a black woman over a powerful white statesman or even to hear the black woman’s case? The former slave’s lack of standing within the category “woman” (and certainly within what would later be designated the “Cult of True Womanhood”) may have afforded Mrs. Prince access to the public sphere, including the right to speak for her husband, which most white women would not have been allowed to claim. It is also true that, although by no means egalitarian, the colonial frontier was in some ways less gender and racially stratified in the eighteenth century than more “civil society” would become in the nineteenth. Relaxed gender conventions and racial codes aside, Lucy Prince’s legendary oratorical gifts no doubt helped her to win the day with the Governor’s Council, but the case also may have turned on the particularly cunning representation that the petitioner made to His Excellency on behalf of her husband and children. Apparently, Mrs. Prince argued that unless the governor ordered the Guilford selectmen to protect her and her family from the further destruction of their property and disruption of their livelihood, the Princes would be unable to sustain themselves and would therefore become dependent on the charity of the town. In other words, Mrs. Prince may have prevailed, at least in part, by playing the welfare card, by appealing not to the state’s fair mind but to its pocketbook.

Prince also has been widely credited with at least two other remarkable feats of feminist insurrection and public oratory: successfully arguing her own land dispute case before the US Supreme Court and addressing the Trustees of Williams College in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade them to admit her son regardless of his race. Legend even insists that when her suit against another white male neighbor, Colonel Eli Bronson, reached the Supreme Court, the presiding justice, Samuel Chase, praised Prince for

delivering a better oral argument than he had heard from any Vermont lawyer. There are numerous secondary accounts of these last two exploits but little or no primary documentation to support them. Prince may have petitioned some august white male body in pursuit of higher education for one of her three sons, and she may have argued before some court – even a high court. It is unclear, however, that either audience was the Trustees of Williams College or the Justices of the US Supreme Court, as legend would have it. In fact, by the time Williams was incorporated as a college in 1893, Prince's oldest sons, Caesar and Festus, who are alternately cited as the subjects of her plea, would have been thirty-six and thirty, respectively. Even her youngest son Abijah, who is not named in any of the Prince stories, would have been twenty-four. One recent source suggests that the institution in question may have been the Williamstown Free School, which later became Williams College, and that the judicial body before which Prince appeared may have been the US Circuit Court over which Justice Samuel Chase presided during its May 1796 session in Bennington, Vermont.⁴

Lucy Terry Prince was a remarkable figure by any reckoning, but she was by no means as anomalous as the valorized historical record would suggest. Rather, she represents a determination and an independence of spirit that were not uncommon among black women, even slave and indentured women, long before either the woman's rights campaign of the 1830s and 1840s or the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of their names and deeds have been lost to recorded history, but countless black women devoted themselves to the causes of abolition, woman's rights, suffrage, and temperance in the fight for gender as well as racial equality.

Speaking to a mixed audience in Boston in September of 1832, Maria Stewart, a free black woman and a tireless advocate for equal rights, became the first American woman of any race to deliver a public address. Her subject on that occasion was the Colonization Movement, which proposed to send blacks back to Africa, but Stewart has also been identified as one of, if not the, first American-born women, again of any race, to lecture publicly on the subject of woman's rights.⁵ Indeed, many of Stewart's essays and speeches are veritable feminist manifestos that draw on strong female biblical and historical figures in imploring women to recognize and realize their full social, intellectual, and political potential.

Not only did black women like Stewart voice their protests in public forums, they also wrote out their resistance in fiction as well as exposition. Their literary offerings focused on subjects such as female education; the oppression, habitual rape, and sexual exploitation of women; the proscribed sexual relations between the races; and even, in the case of Harriet Wilson's 1859 novel *Our Nig*, the taboo topic of interracial marriage between white

women and black men. As its full title suggests, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story House, North, Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* also tackled the similarly taboo topic of northern racism.

Despite prohibitions against them, sexual relations and in some cases marriages between white women and black men were more common than civilized society was willing to acknowledge. As early as 1663, a Maryland statute forbidding such liaisons noted that “divers freeborn *English* women, forgetful of their free condition, and to the disgrace of our nation, do intermarry with negro slaves.”⁶ Sexual relations between white men and non-white women appear in early American fiction to be sure. Harriet Wilson, however, was not only the first African American to publish a novel in the United States,⁷ she was also the first American writer to base a novel on the subject of intermarriage between a black man and a white woman. But while it opens with the story of a white woman forced by poverty to accept the marital protection and financial support of an African man after her white lover abandoned her, *Our Nig* goes on to indict the pervasive master mentality that made even free-born black women articles of trade. Both employing and subverting the conventions of the “woman’s novel,” Wilson dares to tell the autobiographical tale of the white woman’s thrown-away mulatta daughter and the abuse she suffers as an indentured servant, not Down South but Up North, and not at the hands of a southern planter but at those of a New England lady. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests in his introduction to the 1983 reprint of *Our Nig*, the theme of white racism in the North could not have been popular with white or black abolitionists and may account for the novel’s disappearance for more than a hundred years.⁸

Like *Our Nig*, Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 autobiographical narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, boldly indicts the value system, as well as the sexual preoccupations and predilections, of the civilized society that put white women on a pedestal and black women on the auction block. Using the pseudonym Linda Brent, Jacobs recounts her life story and “the wrongs inflicted by Slavery,” including the seven years she spent hiding from her lascivious master in an attic that was little more than a crawl space. But like Harriet Wilson, Jacobs also addresses the extent to which the jealous mistress conspired to make the plantation household a perilous place for black women. Ultimately, however, as the black feminist scholar Frances Smith Foster has pointed out, although it, like other antislavery texts, confirms the prevalence of rape and concubinage, Jacobs’s narrative of resistance and escape is “a story of a slave woman who refused to be victimized.”⁹

When it was reclaimed and authenticated by Jean Fagan Yellin and reissued by Harvard University Press in the late 1980s, *Incidents* quickly

became the most sacred black woman's text of the nineteenth century. As such, this single autobiography easily eclipsed the body of work produced by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. One of the better-known, though much-maligned, names from the nineteenth century, Harper actively participated in the antislavery, equal rights, and temperance movements of the day. She left behind a written record that includes volumes of poetry, essays, and speeches, as well as four novels and what is believed to be the first short story by an African American, "The Two Offers," published in 1859, the same year as *Our Nig*. "The Two Offers" is particularly interesting for the way it juxtaposes the marriage relation and antislavery activism as options for women. A tale of two cousins, the "Two Offers" is a parable of sorts whose title refers both to the two marriage proposals that one cousin receives and the different offerings that the two women – one wife, the other activist – make to society.

Harper does not mince words in critiquing marriage as a potentially self-limiting institution for women. "Intense love is often akin to intense suffering," she writes, "and to trust the whole wealth of a woman's nature on the frail bark of human love may often be like trusting a cargo of gold and precious gems to a bark that has never battled with the storm or buffeted the wave."¹⁰ One could argue that Harper's equal rights activism and her consistently subversive critique of both racial ideology and gender conventions anticipated by a hundred years the rise of a radical black feminism. Yet, something I will address later in this essay, Harper was more often read and rejected as a mimetic, sentimental moralist in the early days of black feminist literary studies, which has yet to claim her fully.

Like Harper, Mary Ann Shadd Cary was a major player in many of the political, social, and intellectual initiatives of her day: abolition, woman's rights, temperance, public education, the black emigration movement, and a woman-centered black nationalism. A journalist, activist, teacher, and reformer, she was the first African American woman to publish and edit a newspaper, the long-running Canada-based *Provincial Freeman*, and the second to become a lawyer. Although she is by no means a household name, even among feminist historians, Shadd Cary is a more accessible subject than most nineteenth-century African American women, according to her biographer Jane Rhodes, because, like Harper, her story has been preserved through her own writings. "As a journalist, lawyer, and activist [Shadd Cary] left behind a collection of writing that provides a window on her life, her political ideas, and the world around her," Rhodes explains in her 1998 biography. "Few nineteenth-century African American women produced a written record that has survived the passage of time. This lack

of documentary sources has been a key obstacle in the writing of black women's history."¹¹

Rhodes is right, of course: the historical record is thin. But it is also true that women's historiography and literary studies have not always been about the business of ferreting out and claiming African American women as pioneering exemplars of feminist art and activism. More often, such studies, including some of those by black feminist scholars and critics, assume that African American women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily concerned with "what they [saw] as their strongest oppression – racism."¹² Although carrying the burdens of both race and gender difference, these early writers and activists, in the words of one black feminist scholar, made a "clear and forced choice" to fight racism first and sexism later.¹³ In her intercultural study of American women writing between 1890 and 1930, Elizabeth Ammons, a white feminist scholar, similarly insists that the paramount issue for black women was race. "While they suffered because they were women," she argues, "they suffered more and primarily because they were black: If one or the other of the two issues had to take priority, it had to be race."¹⁴

Frances Harper is often invoked to substantiate these claims about black women's priorities. Of the heated, at times vitriolic, debate over black manhood rights versus female suffrage following the Civil War, Harper reportedly remarked: "When it was a question of race, she let the lesser question go. But the white women all go for sex, letting race occupy a minor position . . . If the nation could handle only one question, she would not have the black women put a single straw in the way, if only the men of the race could obtain what they wanted."¹⁵ In a close, contextualized reading, however, Harper's remarks are less a blanket advocacy of racial over gender politics than a commentary on the historical blindness and overt bigotry of white feminists whose vehement opposition to black men's gaining the right to vote before them was often cast in racist terms. Like many black women activists of her day, Harper realized that the abolition of slavery had little altered the social and economic conditions of the majority of black people. What she endorsed was the political empowerment of the Negro race, which for her and others like her was a *feminist* as well as an antiracist imperative.

Historically, only black women and other women of color have been called upon to sort their suffering and divide and prioritize their racial and gender identities, as if such a splitting of the self were possible. This notion of separable gender and racial identities has been a thorny issue in black feminist studies almost from the beginning. In 1988 Elizabeth

Spelman, a white feminist philosopher, lent her voice to the critique, identifying the assumption of a divisible self as one of the major problematics of mainstream feminism. “Western feminist theory,” she wrote in *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, “has implicitly demanded that Afro-American, Asian-American, or Latin American women separate their ‘woman’s voice’ from their racial or ethnic voice without requiring white women to distinguish being a ‘woman’ from being white.”¹⁶ As I will argue in a moment, this “problematic” – that is, this divide-and-conquer way of thinking about race and gender – had serious consequences for the development of both black and white feminist studies in the 1970s and 1980s. However inadvertently, it treated abolition in the nineteenth century and black liberation in the twentieth as feminist issues only when advocated by white women.

Under slavery black women were bred like chattel to increase the master’s labor force. Rape, concubinage, and forced impregnation were part of what made the peculiar institution thrive. Black men, women, and children were all victimized in the process, but women were exploited in gender-specific ways that took advantage of their female bodies and their childbearing, rearing, and wet-nursing capacities. Subjugated, then, in ways as particular to their gender as determined by their race, nineteenth-century black women writers, activists, and intellectuals were finely concerned with the rights, roles, and responsibilities of women, as well as with the emancipation and betterment of the race. For them, however, “woman” was necessarily a complex and inclusive category, as well as a double consciousness that cut across (rather than between) their racial and gender identities. For the more elite black female thinkers and writers and for the masses of uneducated, impoverished, enslaved black women they represented, the race question did not exist separate and distinct from the woman question and vice versa. Their commitment to uplifting the race was inextricably linked to a commitment to improving the social, cultural, moral, and material conditions of women.

The best-known, although by no means the earliest, example of this double-edged political consciousness is Sojourner Truth’s impromptu address at the Akron Woman’s Rights Convention in 1851. Unaccustomed to speaking at meetings, the white women present were effectively silenced by the fire and brimstone of the Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Universalist ministers who came to the convention to remind the equal rights agitators of man’s superior intellect and woman’s proper place in the home. In rising to rebut the ministers’ claims, Sojourner Truth, who as an itinerant preacher and antislavery activist was no stranger to public speaking, drew on her own embodied experiences as a slave forced to plow the

fields and bear the lash like a man, without any of the protections conventionally accorded the so-called weaker sex. Her words, mediated and some say mutilated through the recollection of Matilda Joslyn Gage, who presided over the meeting, read in part:

Dat man ober dar say dat womin needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arms! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear de lash as welt! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen 'em mos all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?¹⁷

Despite the civil rights origins of the movement, many of the conference participants did not welcome Truth's presence and did not want her to be allowed to speak, lest the cause of woman's rights be mixed up with the cause of "abolition and niggers." Nevertheless, Truth prevailed, and the speech she delivered that day, with its "Ain't I a woman?" refrain, went on to become a kind of feminist battle cry used to proclaim the power and entitlement of white women, rather than to explain the particular predicament of black women. As Phyllis Marynick Palmer pointed out in the early 1980s: "White feminists who may know almost nothing about black women's history are moved by Truth's famous query . . . They take her portrait of herself . . . as compelling proof of the falsity of the notion that women are frail, dependent, and parasitic. They do not, we may notice, use Sojourner Truth's battle cry to show that *black* women are not feeble."¹⁸

But of course, the point wasn't simply that black women were not feeble. However readily they later slipped from the lips of white women, Truth's words were actually a scathing indictment of the racist ideology that positioned black females outside the category of woman and human while at the same time exploiting their "femaleness." Her words also commented ironically, and pointedly, on the failed sisterhood that sought to silence her within and exclude her from the very movement that women like her inspired, enabled, and initiated. But Truth's words and the sentiment behind them were not hers alone. They were part of a shared discourse among black women who were or had been slaves and others who joined them in the suit for freedom and equality. In asking "Ain't I a woman?," Truth offered a more potent, embodied recasting of what was actually a popular abolitionist motto – "Am I not a Woman and a Sister?" – derived from antislavery emblems that date back to the late eighteenth century.

In her 1989 study of these emblems, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture*, Jean Fagan Yellin offers an insightful critique of the failed sisterhood between black and white women activists. She argues that by conflating the oppression of black and white women, nineteenth-century white feminists obscured the crucial material differences between the two groups. Black women, especially those who had been slaves, experienced no such confusion. "For them," Yellin writes, "the discourse of antislavery feminism became not liberating but confining when it colored the self-liberated Woman and Sister white and reassigned the role of the passive victim, which patriarchy traditionally had reserved for white women, to women who were black."¹⁹ In other words, even as they attempted to assert their own subjectivity, white antislavery and woman's rights activists often reduced slave women to objects, emblems, and figures of speech. But black women remained determined to assert their own womanhood, their own identities, and their own humanity. On another occasion when her gender identity was questioned, Truth physically embodied her "Ain't I a woman?" response. When a member of the audience at an antislavery meeting in Indiana suggested that she was actually a man, she opened her blouse, exposed her sagging breasts, and invited the Doubting Thomas to nurse from the nipples that had suckled many white infants.

Black women like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet Wilson insisted upon telling their own stories. In so doing, they not only revised and expanded the concept of womanhood; they also took back the particularity of slavery, embodying with their own lived experience what white feminists had reduced to a metaphor.

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The story I have been telling would be merely old news, hardly worth rehearsing here, were it not for two factors. The first is the regularity with which this ancient history has repeated itself through successive waves of feminist discourse. The second is the extent to which this ancient and *anxious* history worked to define black feminist literary studies as a defensive, reactionary discourse, rather than as a visionary one in which African American women are the initiators of feminist activism, intervention, and aesthetics, rather than merely the inspiration for them.

Growing out of the civil rights and black liberation movements of the previous decades, the 1970s gave rise to a burgeoning body of black feminist writers and critics who became actively engaged in reclaiming lost, dismissed, and otherwise disparaged texts by African American women. This cultural

reconnaissance mission was entirely in keeping with the revisionary agenda of mainstream US feminist criticism, which in its early years, according to Elaine Showalter, “concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or ‘textual harassment’ of women in classic and popular fiction, and the exclusion of women from literary history.”²⁰ But black feminist literary studies had other marching orders as well. It not only had to correct the omissions and distortions of male-dominated literary and critical traditions, it also had to contend with the myopia of white feminist scholars who, like their nineteenth-century precursors, took “woman” to mean “white woman” and, in Deborah McDowell’s words, “proceeded blindly to exclude the work of Black women from literary anthologies and critical studies.”²¹ Much like their nineteenth-century ancestors, black women artists, activists, and intellectuals of the 1970s and early 1980s found themselves and their literature doubly disparaged. They were, on the one hand, marginalized within a male-centered African American literary tradition because of their allegedly “feminist” preoccupation with women’s issues; and on the other hand, they were excluded from the developing mainstream feminist literary canon because of their assumed preoccupation with the politics of race.

Black women had begun entering the professoriate in small but unprecedented numbers in the late 1960s. The antidote to the out-of-print texts and the critical vacuums they encountered in attempting to teach African American women’s literature was for them to produce their own art and criticism, along with recovering “lost” volumes by black female authors. It is worth noting, however, that the canon construction to which black feminist studies devoted itself in its infancy began less with reclaiming its past than with celebrating its present. That is to say, the earliest black female-centered anthologies and critical studies (the term “feminist” was rarely used initially) focus less on reclaiming the lost works of nineteenth-century foremothers than on showcasing the work of contemporary, living black women writers and on recasting recent historical periods like the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s in women-centered terms.

In fiery 1960s rhetoric, the preface to the first of these anthologies, Toni Cade’s *The Black Woman* (1970), announces a break with the past and with male cultural constructs. It also voices its impatience with and distrust of white feminism:

We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of “mainstream” culture, from

the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within (creation). What characterizes the current movement of the 60's is a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other. Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism . . . depending on your viewpoint or your terror.²²

A fiction writer herself, Toni Cade (later Toni Cade Bambara) gathered together poems, short stories, and essays by twenty-six contributors – not all of whom were professional writers – whose work seemed “best to reflect the preoccupations of the contemporary Black woman” in the United States: racism, sexism, education, gender relations (p. 11). In addition to Cade, the most recognizable literary names among the eclectic list of contributors are those of Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Shirley [Sherley Anne] Williams. Their work is presented without critique, but the preface and several of the essays articulate the politics, rather than the aesthetics, that govern the volume and the sense of alienation and exclusion that inspired it.

“For the most part, the work grew out of impatience,” Cade declares. “It grew out of an impatience with the half-hearted go-along attempts of Black women caught up in the white women’s liberation groups around the country . . . And out of an impatience with the fact that in the whole bibliography of feminist literature, literature immediately and directly relevant to us wouldn’t fill a page” (pp. 10–11). Cade also wonders out loud – or, rather, in print – whether “the canon of literature fondly referred to as ‘feminist literature’ – Anaïs Nin, Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Betty Friedan, etc.” – holds much relevance for black women.

She was hardly alone in associating the term “feminist” with what was increasingly characterized as the white women’s liberation movement, despite its origins in the civil rights and black power initiatives of the 1960s in which “black women struck the first blow for female equality.”²³ Cade also had plenty of company in insisting that black women could not depend on “this new field of experts (white, female)” to represent their truths and experiences (p. 9). Rather, they had to look to themselves and to each other for definition, and they had to create their own vehicles for cultural and intellectual expression.

The Black Woman: An Anthology was envisioned as “a beginning.” Numerous other anthologies and critical studies of black women’s writing followed, including two important collections edited by the pioneering black feminist scholar Mary Helen Washington, *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (1975) and *Midnight Birds: Stories of*

Contemporary Black Women Writers (1980). At the same time, black women writers were furiously producing remarkable fiction. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker both published their first novels in 1970: *The Bluest Eye* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, respectively. Morrison followed up her stunning debut with such master works as *Sula* in 1973, *Song of Solomon* in 1977, and *Tar Baby* in 1981. In 1973 Walker published an important collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble*; her second novel, *Meridian*, appeared in 1976, followed by a second collection of short stories, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, in 1981, and her third novel, *The Color Purple*, in 1982. She also published three volumes of poetry during the decade and several influential essays – many of them in *Ms. Magazine* – including “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1974), which would become the title of her 1983 essay collection, and “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston” (1975), which recounts her pilgrimage to Fort Pierce, Florida, two years earlier to find and honor Hurston’s unmarked grave.

As an editor at Random House in the 1970s, Toni Morrison fostered the careers of several young black women writers, including Gayl Jones, who published her first two novels, *Corregidora* and *Eva’s Man*, in 1975 and 1976, and a collection of short stories, *White Rat*, in 1977. In addition to *The Black Woman* in 1970, Toni Cade Bambara published three other books during the decade – two collections of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1974), and a novel, *The Salt Eaters*, in (1980) – the last two also with Random House under Morrison’s editorship.

Black women scholars such as Mary Helen Washington, Nellie McKay, Barbara Christian, Trudier Harris, Frances Smith Foster, Claudia Tate, Hortense Spillers, Mae Henderson, Cheryl Wall, Deborah McDowell, and bell hooks – many of them new assistant professors in colleges and universities that had never before had black women on their faculties – scrambled to keep pace with the creative contributions of their black female contemporaries. Beginning in 1979 with *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, edited by Roseanne P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, and Barbara Christian’s literary history, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (1980), dozens of anthologies and critical studies swelled the shelves of libraries and bookstores.

Among the most influential of these texts was an interdisciplinary collection of essays provocatively titled *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, which appeared in 1982. In keeping with its

stated aim of defining and institutionalizing black women's studies as an academic discipline, the book includes bibliographical essays and course syllabi, along with sections on black feminism, racism, black women and the social sciences, and black women's literature. As the black feminist critic Hazel Carby later pointed out, the idea of black feminist studies as an independent field of inquiry was ambitious, if not dangerous, in the early 1980s, given the already marginal status of women's studies within the university. "On the periphery of the already marginalized" was a precarious position from which to assert the autonomy of black feminist studies, Carby argued. Moreover, as the editors themselves acknowledge, pioneering work on African American women had been undertaken by white scholars such as Yellin, who was a contributor to the anthology, as well as by black women scholars. Building on the cautionary undercurrents of Mary Frances Berry's foreword to the volume, Carby suggested that a more practical course for black feminist inquiry might be to join forces and resources with women's studies and African American Studies in interrogating gender and racial oppression.²⁴

Today, more than twenty years after the publication of *But Some of Us Are Brave*, the extent to which women's studies and African American Studies have been transformed by black feminist inquiry remains unclear. Women's studies majors still complain that the literature and history of black and other women of color are ancillary rather than central to the field's core curriculum. African American studies – sometimes now called Africana Studies or African Diaspora Studies – is still divided by gender hierarchies and dubious battles of the sexes, though the public discussion of these rifts and faultlines is generally less heated than it was at various points in the 1980s. What is clear is that by the end of the decade, black women writers and black feminist critics and scholars had produced complementary bodies of work that had opened a new line of inquiry, if not an autonomous field, and shaken up, if not transformed, the study of gender and race in the academy.

In some ways, however, the furious intellectual labor necessitated by a history of exclusion and neglect made the new field of black feminist criticism a reactionary discourse as much at war with itself as with competing methodologies. That is to say, black feminist literary studies emerged on some level as a politics of reading without a particular politics, a discourse diverted from the essential task of defining its own interpretative strategies by the need to jockey for position within American, African American, and women's literary traditions. In fact, Toni Morrison charged in 1986 that "most criticism by blacks only respond[ed] to the impetus of the criticism we were all taught in college." She urged black scholars to go "into the

work on its own terms” – that is, to avoid the critical fallacy of bypassing the book at hand for criticism that merely inserts the text “into an already established literary tradition.”²⁵

“Tradition. Now there’s a word that nags the feminist critic,” Mary Helen Washington declared a year later. For Washington, the devil of the term lay in the way it had been used to expunge black women from the historical record. “Why is the fugitive slave, the fiery orator, the political activist, the abolitionist always represented as a black *man*?” she asked. In her view, the answer resided in the fact that men held the power to write history and to define traditions.²⁶

What would eventually come back to haunt black feminist critical studies, however, was its early insistence on claiming a single organic black women’s literary tradition glued together by shared experience and common language. The idea of such a tradition received its first and most powerful articulation in Barbara Smith’s pivotal essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” which originally appeared in the lesbian feminist literary magazine *Conditions: Two* in 1977. Writing from what she identified as a black lesbian feminist perspective, Smith argues for a critical practice that assumes the interrelatedness of racial and sexual ideology and the existence of an identifiable tradition of black women writers. What defines this tradition, in Smith’s view, is the authors’ common approaches to writing, their shared political, social, and economic experiences, and their use of specifically black female language. Along with calling attention to the heterosexism of black literary studies, Smith also argues that the black feminist critic should “think and write out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male thought upon the precious materials of Black women’s art.”²⁷

One of the most important – and ultimately most controversial – moves of Smith’s essay is its suggestion that black feminist criticism should, by definition, read against the dominant heterosexist grain, allowing for, if not insisting on, alternative interpretations, most specifically the lesbian reading. She then proceeds to offer such a reading of *Sula*, which she argues works as a “lesbian novel” both because of the “passionate friendship” between the central female characters and because of Morrison’s implicit critique of male-female relationships and the heterosexual institutions of marriage and the family. So saying, Smith seems to imply that any positive fictive portrayal of “women in pivotal relationships with each other” amounts to “innately lesbian literature,” even if/when the characters are not actually “lovers” (p. 11). Although provocative and enabling, in the absence of a clear definition of either “feminist” or “lesbian,” Smith’s interpretative strategy seems to conflate the two; it also blurs the line

between the text and its reading(s), between authorial intent and reader response. That is, in asserting that *Sula* works as a lesbian novel – that “consciously or not,” Morrison poses “both lesbian and feminist questions” – instead of merely demonstrating how a lesbian reading works for *Sula*, Smith leaves the door open for the author to say that the critic is seeing something that is not there (p. 3).

As Cheryl Wall points out in the introduction to her 1989 anthology of essays, *Changing Our Own Words*, Smith’s landmark explication of black feminist criticism gave name and shape to the perspective from which many black women artists and intellectuals were writing and thinking in the 1970s. Other black feminist critics – most notably McDowell and Carby²⁸ – would later point out and attempt to plug up some of the holes in the critical methodology Smith proposed. Carby, for example, was among those who identified the reliance on a shared identity and a common black female experience as an incestuous, self-limiting interpretative strategy. Black feminist criticism, she warns, “cannot afford to be essentialist and ahistorical, reducing the experiences of all black women to a common denominator” (pp. 9–10). In addition to the restrictions it places on the discourse itself, such a methodology too closely resembles the inherently exclusionary politics of experience that makes it possible for mainstream feminist criticism to ignore the different experiences of women of color.

But there was something else about the critical practice that began to call itself “feminist” in the 1970s. While it took back, blackened, and politicized the term, it did not historicize it by connecting it to the pioneering black feminists of the nineteenth century, with the possible exception of Sojourner Truth. Still in the revolutionary mode of the 1960s, black feminist literary studies shot from the hip-huggers in the beginning. When it did become anxious enough about its origins to go back in search of its mothers’ gardens – to use Alice Walker’s metaphor – it too often stopped at the front porch of Zora Neale Hurston, the self-proclaimed queen of the Harlem Renaissance, who had died in 1960 out of print and out of favor. Replicating the great author/great book model of mainstream canon construction, the new black feminist criticism resurrected Hurston as its literary foremother and her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as its classic text in much the same way that white feminist criticism had reclaimed Kate Chopin and *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. And like its white counterpart, it often reconstructed its picked-to-click precursor in a cultural and intellectual vacuum that treated her as if she gave birth to herself, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and the entire identifiable tradition of black women writers.

What was often lost or at least overshadowed in the translation was the work of Hurston's precursors and contemporaries such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Nella Larsen, Dorothy West, Marita Bonner, and Jessie Fauset, and of other black women writers whose settings are urban or whose characters are middle class. (There are striking similarities between Dunbar-Nelson's unpublished novella, "A Modern Undine," and Hurston's fourth novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* [1948], suggesting an anxiety of influence that, to my knowledge, no one has yet explored.) Also largely missing in action in this emerging discourse in the early 1970s was the fiction of a number of nineteenth-century black women writers. There is considerable irony in this last elision in particular because these early writers had already fought some of the same battles over sexism and racism, over failed sisterhood and the double jeopardy of race and gender difference, and over the exclusionary practices of the black male and white female communities that should have been allies. Not only had their black feminist ancestors traversed similar ground, they had also come to similar conclusions about the need for self-expression, self-representation, and, in a manner of speaking, self-publication. And they, too, had undertaken their own efforts to combat stereotypical representations of black womanhood by publishing their own counter-narratives.

In particular, the 1890s (what Harper dubbed the "Woman's Era") was the site of furious literary activity on the part of African American women similar to the productivity of the 1970s, but, if anything, written against an even stiffer grain and published against even greater odds. In the 1970s and 1980s black women were a commodity on the cusp of becoming in vogue, though by no means in power, in the academy and the publishing industry. In the 1890s black women were not in favor with anyone anywhere, except perhaps within the separate women's clubs, political organizations, and educational networks they built to continue the fight for both racial and gender justice. Their crusades intensified and solidified at the turn of the century in the wake of the failures of Reconstruction, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the proliferation of lynch law and Jim Crow, and the increasingly patriarchal character of their own black communities.

Challenging the white male authority and racist characterizations of plantation tradition writers like Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, Pauline Hopkins, writer, political activist, and literary editor of the *Colored American Magazine*, urged black women and men to use literature as an instrument of liberation. "No one will do this for us," she wrote in the introduction to her first novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900); "we must ourselves develop

the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history, and, as yet unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race."²⁹

In attempting to help "raise the stigma of degradation" from the race, Hopkins's "little romance" tackles all the major political and social crises of the day: the systematic rape and sexual exploitation of black women, lynching and other mob violence, women's rights, job discrimination, and black disenfranchisement. Much the same is true for the fiction, prose, and poetry of Frances Harper, whose body of work consistently addresses the interplay of racial and sexual ideology. Published in 1892, the same year as Ida B. Wells's antilynching manifesto *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law and All Its Phases* and Anna Julia Cooper's feminist manifesto *A Voice from the South*, Harper's political novel *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* was long believed to be the first novel published by an African American woman. But even before it was dislodged from its premier position by the recovery of *Our Nig* and other earlier novels (Amelia Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne* [1890] and Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* [1891]), and eventually three other earlier novels by Harper herself, *Iola Leroy* garnered little cultural capital from the designation "first."³⁰

There are, of course, exceptions to the tendency to ignore the black feminist past – the work of Frances Smith Foster, for one, and later Claudia Tate and Carby. More often, however, early black feminist criticism either ignores nineteenth-century writers like Harper and Hopkins or dismisses them for writing sentimental fiction in the Anglo-American mode – "courtesy book[s] intended for white reading and black instruction," Houston Baker calls them, even though the stated audience for many of these works is the black community.³¹ Unlike Hurston's colorful prose (whose misogyny was overlooked or explained away), their fiction was condemned for not being authentically black or feminist enough, despite its consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of racism, rape, sexual blackmail, lynching, and, in some instances, marriage itself.

In 1988 the Schomburg Library, in conjunction with Oxford University Press, reissued dozens of previously lost and out-of-print texts by nineteenth-century African American women. Gates, the general editor of the collection, noted in his foreword that black women published more fiction between 1890 and 1910 than black men had published in the preceding half-century. He questioned why this "great achievement" had been ignored. "For reasons unclear to me even today," he wrote, "few of these marvelous renderings of the Afro-American woman's consciousness were reprinted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when so many other texts of the Afro-American literary tradition were resurrected from the dark and

silent graveyards of the out-of-print and were reissued in facsimile editions aimed at the hungry readership for canonical texts in the nascent field of black studies.”³²

Gates may not know why so few of these renderings were taken up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but there are some obvious possible answers. It is not just that many of these texts were accessible only in rare book rooms, as Gates acknowledges. It is also – perhaps even more so – that these books were known only through their *misreadings* and through the bad rap that the “women’s fiction” of the period had received historically, mostly at the hands of male critics – white and black. But an even fuller answer to Gates’s conundrum may lie in that nagging word “tradition.” None of this nineteenth-century fiction easily fits within the 1970s model of an identifiable black feminist literary tradition, a tradition that, by definition, privileges the “authentic” voices and experiences of black women of the rural South such as Hurston’s heroine Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Articulating the sentiments of many black feminist critics, Sherley Anne Williams invokes this privilege in her preface to the 1978 reprint of *Their Eyes*, where she describes her discovery of the novel in graduate school as a close textual encounter that made her Hurston’s for life. “In the speech of her characters I heard my own country voice and saw in the heroine something of my own country self. And this last was most wonderful because it was most rare.”³³

Self-expression as a cultural imperative is one thing, but however wonderful, however rare, self-recognition as a critical prescription is inherently limiting and exclusionary. Written in an intellectual rather than a vernacular tradition – in the master’s tongue rather than the folk’s – nineteenth-century narratives contain neither the specifically black female language nor the valorized black female activities that Barbara Smith identified as emblems of authentic black womanhood. In other words, within the 1970s black feminist dream of a common language, this early writing was judged grammatically incorrect, out of step with the established tempo of the literary tradition. Ironically, however, this canon construction of the close encounter kind also excluded some of the work by the very same writer it had claimed as its founding mother, Zora Neale Hurston. While Hurston’s second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was heralded as the quintessential black feminist text, her fourth novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, was panned along with nineteenth-century narratives like *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* because of its move away from folklore and its focus on white characters instead of black.³⁴ Inexplicably, by the logic of 1970s and 1980s canon construction, Hurston was a card-carrying black feminist writer when she published *Their Eyes* in 1937 but not when she published *Seraph* in 1948.

With the wisdom of hindsight, it is easy to look back three decades and wonder how black feminist literary studies managed to trip over its own roots in the process of becoming – how a discourse that evolved, at least in part, in response to tunnel vision and exclusion managed to become prescriptive and exclusionary itself. But that may be the very nature of becoming, of making something new, particularly in a highly politicized moment when black women’s art stood for so much more than its own sake. Reflecting on her own pace-setting critical manifesto of 1977, Barbara Smith has said recently that her perspective was influenced by “the bold new ideas of 1970s lesbian feminism” (“Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” 3).

At the dawn of not only a new century but also a new millennium, black feminist criticism is in need of bold new ideas like those that called it into being thirty years ago. The discourse has weathered many storms: protracted debates about who may do it (black women, white women, black men), accusations of racial heresy from the brotherhood (feminism = antimanism), a resistance to the rise of theory in the academy (what Barbara Christian called the race for theory³⁵), and charges that its “racialized identity politics” and unrelenting critiques of white universalism hindered dialogue, divided white women from black, and derailed the common feminist enterprise.³⁶

But if black feminist criticism has weathered these and other storms, it may also at this moment be beached on the grounds of its own unresolved questions and contradictions. Third-wave black feminism, a young colleague of mine insists, is more organic than its predecessors. It is much less reactionary, far less anxious about the rejection and exclusion of brother and sister traditions. It looks to itself for definition with all the bright sparkling confidence of youth and is largely unconcerned about foremothers, precursors, and pioneers of the past. This introspective self-assurance is a good thing, perhaps even a coming of age, of sorts, of a discourse that now has the luxury of generations. As they say, however, those who ignore the past are destined to reinvent the wheel. And many of us who have weathered storms ourselves are wondering just what is new in twenty-first-century black feminist literary studies.

Further reading

Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen, eds., *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Kum-Kum Bhavnani, ed., *Feminism and Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

- Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985).
- Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).
- Deborah E. McDowell, "*The Changing Same*": *Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
- Winston Napier, ed., *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
- Morag Shiach, ed., *Feminism and Cultural Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Valerie Smith, *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

NOTES

1. See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1980), pp. 24-5.
2. On this subject, see, for example, Christie Farnham, "Sapphire? The Issue of Dominance in the Slave Family, 1830-1865," in Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton, eds., "*To Toil the Livelong Day*": *American Women at Work, 1780-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 68-83; Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* (November-December 1981), pp. 3-15 (reprinted from 3:4, December 1971).
3. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: New American Library, 1987), p. 162.
4. See, among other sources, Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944; reprinted with an introduction by Benjamin Quarles, New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 314-15. The historical record is thin, but David Roper's biographical pamphlet does a creditable job of separating documented fact from circulating fiction. See David R. Roper, *Lucy Terry Prince: Singer of History* (Deerfield, MA: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 1997).
5. Marilyn Richardson, ed., *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
6. Quoted in Kenneth M. Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Knopf, 1956), p. 352.
7. William Wells Brown's 1853 novel *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* predates *Our Nig* by six years, but it was published in London. However, *Our Nig's* status as the first published novel by an African American woman has been challenged recently by the recovery and authentication, also by Gates, of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, believed to have been written during the 1850s by a black woman named Hannah Crafts.
8. Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, edited and with an introduction and notes by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1983), p. xii.

9. Frances Smith Foster, "Resisting *Incidents*," in Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Safar, eds., *Harriet Jacobs and "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 61–2.
10. Frances E. W. Harper, "The Two Offers," anthologized in Ann Allen Shockley, ed., *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746–1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide* (New York: New American Library, 1989), p. 65. "The Two Offers" was originally serialized in *The Anglo-African* in 1859.
11. Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. xiv–xv.
12. Ann Allen Shockley, "The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview," in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table-Women of Color Press, 1983), p. 83.
13. Carolyn Sylvander, *Jessie Redmond Fauset, Black American Writer* (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1981), p. 5.
14. Elizabeth Ammons, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 23.
15. See Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States*, rev. edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 147.
16. Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 13.
17. See Matilda Joslyn Gage's account in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and M. J. Gage, eds., *History of Women's Suffrage*, 6 vols. (Rochester, NY: Fowles and Wells, 1881), I, p. 116. See also Bert James Lowenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), pp. 235–6; and Jacqueline Bernard, *Journey Toward Freedom: The Story of Sojourner Truth* (New York: Norton, 1976; reprinted with an introduction by Nell Painter, New York: The Feminist Press, 1990), pp. 163–7.
18. Phyllis Marynick Palmer, "White Women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female Identity and Experience in the United States," *Feminist Studies* 9:1 (Spring 1983), p. 152.
19. Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 79–80.
20. Elaine Showalter, "The Feminist Critical Revolution," introduction to Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 5.
21. Deborah E. McDowell, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," in Showalter, *New Feminist Criticism*, p. 186.
22. Toni Cade [Bambara], ed., *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970), p. 7.
23. Evans, *Personal Politics*, p. 83. In her chapter on gender discrimination within the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Evans calls Black Power a "Catalyst for Feminism" and credits strong black women with being the first to challenge the sexism within the movement – challenges to male authority that served as role models for white women.

24. Hazel Carby, "'Woman' Era: Rethinking Black Feminist Theory," chapter 1 in her book *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 9–10.
25. Claudia Tate, ed., *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1986), p. 121.
26. Mary Helen Washington, ed., *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860–1960* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1987), pp. xvii–xviii.
27. Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," reprinted in Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), pp. 10–11.
28. See in particular McDowell's essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" and Hazel Carby's opening chapter in *Reconstructing Black Womanhood*, pp. 3–19.
29. Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Boston: Colored Co-operative Publishing House, 1900), pp. 13–14; reprinted with an introduction by Richard Yarborough (New York: Oxford University Press in conjunction with the Schomburg Library, 1988). Emphasis in the original.
30. In the early 1990s, more than a hundred years after *Iola Leroy* first appeared, Frances Smith Foster recovered and brought back into print three long-lost novels by Frances Harper, all of which were originally serialized in the *Christian Recorder*, the journal of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Through years of painstaking research and detective work, Foster managed to piece together most of the texts of each of the lost novels: *Minnie's Sacrifice*, which was serialized in twenty installments between March 20 and September 25, 1869; *Sowing and Reaping*, which ran from August 1876 to February 1877; and *Trial and Triumph*, which appeared between October of 1888 and February of 1889. See Frances Smith Foster, ed., *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994). Recent evidence suggests that Kelley may not have been black.
31. Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 32.
32. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., foreword to *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xix.
33. Sherley Anne Williams, foreword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. vii.
34. For example, Alice Walker, who was so instrumental in reclaiming *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from obscurity, condemned Hurston's later work as "reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid." This is particularly true of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Walker maintains, "which is not even about black people, which is no crime, but *is* about white people for whom it is impossible to care, which is." In his definitive literary history, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernard Bell asserts that Hurston's focus on white characters places *Seraph* outside the scope of his study, suggesting that black writers can focus only on black characters. See Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston:

- A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View,” in Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984); and Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).
35. See Barbara Christian's essay "The Race for Theory" and Michael Awkward's rebuttal "Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism," both in Linda Kauffman, ed., *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 225-46.
 36. On this last point, see in particular Susan Gubar, "What Ails Feminist Criticism?," in Gubar, *Critical Condition: Feminism at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).