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Black women’s feminist literary renaissance of the late twentieth century

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Although this chapter focuses on the African American women’s literary renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s, that flourishing of Black literature requires some historical context. The date of the arrival of Black people in what is now the United States is an issue of debate and contention, which was highlighted by the 400th anniversary in 2019 of the documentation noting the arrival at the Virginia coast in 1619 of 20 Africans, who were sold into slavery and/or indenture. Scholars have noted that this date ignores other historical evidence of the arrival of Blacks in what is now America.¹ Most notably, the arrival of Africans with Spanish colonists and explorers in the 1500s is a particular area of speculation regarding accurate dates. What is indisputable, however, is that the arrival of Blacks into what would become the United States also marked the beginning of Black female creativity in the new world. Unfortunately, much of this creative production was neither documented nor recoverable in the historical record. Nonetheless, Black women, from the time of their arrival in the still-to-be-formed United States, were the source of oral narratives, communal histories, and artistic production.

**Early Black women writers**

As this chapter focuses on print culture, in spite of the other iterations of creative and artistic expression, it is important to begin the discussion with the first African American women to publish works of literature. In 1746, Lucy Terry Prince wrote the first-known poem by a Black woman in what would soon become the United States. Prince’s poem “Bars Fight” is a chronicle of a raid by Abenakis upon the community in which Prince resided in Deerfield, Massachusetts. Prince’s poem borrows from the traditions of oral literatures in that it is a ballad-like recitation of the events of the raid and may mark a transition between oral creation by Black women and written texts that were validated by publication. Although composed and publicized in the 1740s, Prince’s poem was published in the text of a lecture in 1819.²

Subsequently, the controversy over recognition of the first publication is complex and no doubt, will remain so with future discoveries of previously unknown works. Most literary histories still note that Phillis Wheatley’s book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published first in England in 1773, remains the first-known publication by an African American woman. Wheatley’s struggle to become a published writer is emblematic of the erasure that...
Black women writers/artists have undergone to be recognized as contributors to the body of American literature. As scholars such as Henry Louis Gates have noted, Wheatley’s publication endeavors are not merely literary history but are metaphoric for the struggle of Black women and men for recognition as citizens and more fundamentally, as human beings in a country that from its founding, refused to acknowledge that reality.

When Wheatley presented her book of poetry for publication, she and her work were suspect. The community in which she lived did not believe that as a Black woman, she could have written her book; however, there was much more at stake. If Wheatley was capable of writing poetry, then her accomplishments would stand as evidence against the presumptions about Black people that provided justification for slavery and for their lack of citizenship and inclusion in the basic precepts of the new nation. From its inception, Black women’s writing has been held accountable not only for its literary and aesthetic qualities but for the standing and consideration of the race as a whole.³

Wheatley successfully completed her trial and substantiated to 18 white Bostonian men, who were held in regard by their community, that she had in fact written her collection. Not finding a publisher willing to publish her volume, her owner helped Wheatley to have it published in England in 1773. George Washington expressed admiration for Wheatley’s talents in a 1776 letter. In his praise of the young poet, Washington noted her “elegant Lines” and “her great poetical Talents.”⁴ Contrary to this, however, was Thomas Jefferson’s assessment of Wheatley as articulated in his profoundly influential Notes on the State of Virginia. In the book, Jefferson notes his opinion that “Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.”⁵ This condemnation by Jefferson held sway with a majority of Americans well into the current era and in part, accounts for the erasure and invisibility of Black women writers from the American literary canon, as well as the necessity and significance of the African American women’s literary renaissance of the late twentieth century. It is also significant to note that Wheatley’s work was criticized and rejected by many Black writers and critics during the 1960s and 1970s for the opposite reason – her work was frequently regarded as too apologetic regarding slavery and not critical enough of the abject oppressions that Blacks in the newly formed nation were subject to withstand.⁶

Of course, Black women did not stop writing or creating as a consequence of this lack of recognition and acknowledgment. One of the consequences of the African American women’s literary renaissance was the recovery of many Black women writers’ voices and narratives that had remained obscured and excluded from the literary record. One of the tremendous consequences of the renaissance was the birth of a vibrant and expansive field of African American women’s literary history and criticism.

Following Wheatley’s essential publication are the nineteenth-century works of writers such as Jarena Lee, whose 1831 publication, The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, was the first autobiography published in the United States by an African American woman. Lee was the first woman authorized by Richard Allen, leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to preach. Activist Maria Stewart was an important voice in this period, publishing two treatises in 1831 and 1832, Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build and Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria Stewart. Another significant publication during the period was one of the first African American novels published in the United States: Harriet E. Wilson’s 1859 text, Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There. By “Our Nig.” Wilson’s semi-autobiographical text reveals the complexities of Black female experience in the North. In 1868, Elizabeth Keckley published a memoir based on her work as a seamstress to First Lady Mary...
Todd Lincoln, *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. One of the most popular and important slave narratives written by a woman was Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs’s narrative was one of the few to focus on the sexually abusive and eviscerating realities of enslavement. Other major literary figures of the nineteenth century include Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Charlotte and Angelina Grimke, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Anna Julia Cooper.7

The turn of the century was a particularly difficult and dangerous time for African Americans. The early years of the twentieth century are often referred to as a nadir. Lynchings, riots, and economic and political discrimination spurred the Great Migration, the mass movement of African Americans out of the rural South to the urban North. Women writers were a potent source of expression during this time of travail and transition. During this time, the Harlem Renaissance produced several important Black women writers, including Georgia Douglass Johnson, Jessie Redmond Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Shirley Graham DuBois, Maria Bonner, Nella Larson, and Regina Anderson, among others. In spite of their significant and primary contributions to the Harlem Renaissance, these women were largely overlooked and neglected in the literary record and in the scholarship until the contemporary Black women’s literary renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s.8

In the years between the end of the Harlem Renaissance and the beginning of the contemporary African American women’s literary renaissance, African American literature began a slow ascendancy and recognition in the form of anthologies, critical attention, and establishment of professional organizations. Largely excluded from that project of recuperation were Black women writers. Some of the most important women writers of this period were Dorothy West, Lorraine Hansberry, Paule Marshall, and Ann Petry. An exception in terms of recognition is poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her collection *Annie Allen*. She became the first African American to win the prize.

The Black Arts Movement has its origins in the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X and reaction to that tragedy by writers and other artists. Most specifically, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) coined the movement and, along with other artists such as Larry Neal, Ishmael Reed, and others, defined the precepts of the movement as grounded in the production of art that was aesthetically linked to the uplift and progressive movement of Black people. The platform of the Black Arts Movement is closely aligned with the political goals of the Black Power movement. The role of women writers in the movement is complicated. In Black Arts Movement poetry, which was its predominant genre, Black women were often stereotyped on the virgin–whore spectrum. On the other hand, women writers involved in the movement were able to gain some agency by establishing publication entities that they were able to control and to make the decisions about what texts were to be published. An example of one of these presses is Naomi Madgett Long’s Detroit-based Lotus Press, which is still in operation.

Despite the often overtly sexist articulations of the movement, many women writers whose works mark significant milestones in the contemporary renaissance had their literary origins in the Black Arts Movement. Women writers such as Nikki Giovanni, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, Adrienne Kennedy, Jayne Cortez, Carolyn Rogers, June Jordan, Mari Evans, and Audre Lorde became well-known and acclaimed writers during the movement. The writings of these artists were a direct contradiction to the often masculinist stances of the movement, which, like Black Power, often made an equivalency between the rehabilitation of the Black man as head of the Black family and community with the aims of equal and civil rights. Out of some Black Arts Movement rhetoric comes an awareness of the necessity for a specific articulation of the subjective realities and needs of Black women. During this time, there was a concerted effort to organize by Black women and a particular articulation of a Black feminist consciousness.
Although, as demonstrated, Black women have been creating and writing since the constitution of the nation, the particular congruencies of the late 1960s – politically, socially, and artistically – set the stage for what would come to be called the contemporary Black women’s feminist literary renaissance.9

1970: milestone year

The year 1970 is most often noted as the beginning of the renaissance, and there is a plethora of evidence to support that the year marked a zeitgeist in African American women’s history. As previously stated, one of the critical roles of the renaissance was the recovery of texts by African American women writers whose works had been forgotten and obscured in the literary record. One essential text to both writers and literary critics, who were the major figures of the renaissance, was Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Originally published in 1937, Hurston’s novel was controversial from its introduction. Writers such as Richard Wright criticized the work as not political enough and felt that its use of Black vernacular would be indicative of a kind of racial blemish and inferiority. At the time of Hurston’s death in 1960, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was out of print. The novel was reissued in 1965, although it was again out of print by 1970. Its 1965 republication was important in that it provided access to the novel for a new generation of women, such as Alice Walker and Mary Helen Washington, for whom the novel would be a watershed. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the narrative of its protagonist Janie Crawford’s quest for selfhood, voice, and autonomy as a Black woman inhabiting various patriarchal communities. Whether Crawford achieves that autonomy or not is a matter of critical debate, but the novel was a unique and original take on the possibilities of Black female autonomy. The role that the novel played as a source of inspiration for contemporary Black women writers cannot be overstated.

The first republication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1965 was not only a textual counterpoint to the foundational articulations of the Black Arts Movement but also coincided with the emergence of Black Studies as an institution within the academy. The emergence of Black Studies as a formal academic entity in the 1960s is usually situated in relation to three events: the rise of the Black Power movement phase of the Civil Rights movement, the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968, and Black student activism, largely on predominately white campuses. The development of Black Studies as an academic enterprise, coupled with the demands of a new generation of students, made plain and urgent the need for African American women’s literature. Alice Walker taught Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in what has been noted as the first African American literature course in the United States in 1972. However, distressed that the novel had gone out of print in 1975, Walker was a major force in the novel’s 1978 second republication and in its centrality to the renaissance.

In addition to the imperatives created by the development of Black Studies, and central to the emergence of the renaissance, is the response of Black women writers and critics to both the Civil Rights/Black Power movements and the feminist movements of the 1950s and 1960s. In the articulation of the struggle for Black equality, Black women often found themselves subordinated by questions exclusive to race that did not consider issues of gender discrimination. Likewise, Black women’s specific experiences of gender discrimination were largely ignored and disregarded by white feminists. This dilemma was perfectly articulated by the title of the 1982 renaissance publication *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Important to note is the fact that Black lesbian women frequently articulated a kind of invisibility in both movements and also to cis-gender Black women.10
Due to the conflation of all these social and political currents, the exact date of the beginning of the renaissance may be impossible to pinpoint; however, 1970 remains a particularly salient moment for Black women’s publication history and for the origins of the renaissance. As one of the primary progenitors of the contemporary African American women’s renaissance in terms of her role as editor at a major publishing house, as a mentor, and, it goes without saying, as a writer, Toni Morrison articulated her perspective on some of the reasons why the subjective articulations of African American women writers were so essential in 1970, particularly as a counterpoint to the messages that were expressed by some of the artists and activists associated with the Black Arts Movement. In 2012, Morrison reflected on the necessity for her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in 1970.

All the books that were being published by African American guys were saying “screw whitey,” or some variation of that. Not the scholars but the pop books. And the other thing they said was, “You have to confront the oppressor.” I understand that. But you don’t have to look at the world through his eyes. I’m not a stereotype; I’m not somebody else’s version of who I am. And so when people said at that time black is beautiful – yeah? Of course. Who said it wasn’t? So I was trying to say, in *The Bluest Eye*, wait a minute. Guys. There was a time when black wasn’t beautiful. And you hurt.11

As I have written elsewhere, an important contextualization of the contemporary Black women’s literary renaissance can be found in American popular culture. Popular musical hits for 1970 included top 100 best-selling songs from Diana Ross, Freda Payne, Aretha Franklin, and Dionne Warwick. That same year, Cheryl Adrienne Brown won the Miss Iowa pageant and went on to become the first Black Miss America Beauty Pageant contestant. Jayne Kennedy, who would later become a well-known African American actress, won the Miss Ohio beauty pageant and became the first Black woman to compete in the Miss USA Beauty Pageant. In 1970, *Essence* magazine began publication with the slogan “for today’s black woman.” Actress Gail Fisher became the first Black woman to receive an Emmy Award for her portrayal of Peggy Fair, a character on the television show *Mannix*. Director Madeline Anderson’s short, *I Am Somebody*, cataloged the struggles of a strike by Black women workers and was among the first documentaries created by Black women.

In spite of their visibility and presence in popular culture, the 1970s began with African American men and women facing an unemployment rate nearly double that of their white counterparts. Rates of unemployment for Black women were at 8 percent compared with nearly 5 percent for white women.12 Stating economic inequity as one of its primary concerns, the New York Coalition, later called the National Coalition of 100 Black Women, was formed in 1970 in New York City.

In 1970, Angela Davis was fired from her position at the University of California, Los Angeles, for her involvement in the defense of the Soledad Brothers, including George Jackson. After being placed on the FBI’s most-wanted list and evading her pursuers for two months, Davis was captured. She was eventually acquitted and would later write an autobiography about her experience, edited by Toni Morrison. Also in 1970, Shirley Chisholm began her second year of service as the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress. Later, Chisholm would become the first Black person to become a candidate for the United States Presidency.

In addition to this new public and political visibility and arguably, viability for Black women, writings by African American women entered a period of astounding productivity. This proliferation, termed the “Afra-American renaissance” by literary critic Joanne Braxton, ushered in early publications by the major figures in contemporary American and African American
Black women’s literary renaissance


**Literary outpourings**

What may have been the common denominator for these Black women writers was the recognition that their accomplishments were made possible by their literary foremothers. The texts listed earlier, largely manifesting in 1970 and the early 1970s, can loosely be defined as representing a deliberate acknowledgment of that connection with the past, and with the women who lived and wrote earlier, through an articulation of a particular and specific Black woman’s experience. Although these texts are diverse and varied in their content, they share an imperative to translate into literature some of the multiple experiences and expressions of Black womanhood.

The primary publications of the renaissance that followed this early outpouring vary in genre and consist of novels, short stories, poetry, plays, autobiography, and literary criticism, including, but not limited to, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975); Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem* (1975); Lucille Clifton’s *Generations* (1976); Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection; Barbara Smith’s *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism* (1977); Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho & the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979); Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979); June Jordan’s *Passion: New Poems* (1980); Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* (1980); Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* (1980); bell hooks’s * Ain’t I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1981); Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and in 1985, was made into a hit film directed and produced by Steven Spielberg; and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), which was made into a television mini-series in 1989, produced by and starring popular television show host Oprah Winfrey. It is worth noting that Winfrey is a key figure in the promotion and popularization of several Black women writers of the renaissance, due not least to her acting debut in the film adaptation of *The Color Purple* and her subsequent adaptation of the novel into a hit Broadway musical in the twenty-first century.

As a consequence of this literary outpouring, the fields of Black women’s studies and Black feminist studies became a fixture in academic institutions and scholarship. Positions were established in colleges and universities across the country and the world in Black women’s literary and feminist studies. Black feminism flourished, not only as a field of study but as an activist endeavor related to and catalyzed by the work of the renaissance. As a tangible example, the 1970s and 1980s saw the birth of the organizations the National Black Feminist Organization (1973), Black Women Organized for Action (1973), the Combahee River Collective (1974), the National Alliance of Black Feminists (1976), and the Black Women’s Health Imperative, formerly the Black Women’s Health Project (1983).14

In addition to Black feminist critics such as Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Hazel Carby, and many others, renaissance luminary Alice Walker contributed to the conversations and
definitions of Black feminism with her 1979 articulation of the theoretical construct of women-
ism as an alternative to Black feminism in her short story “Coming Apart.” The renaissance also
occurred conterminously with an exponential increase in the number of Black women elected
to various public offices. Although a full-throated conversation about commercial fiction by
Black women is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that the renaissance
helped to impact the profound success of that genre. Beginning with the unprecedented suc-
cess of Terry McMillan’s Waiting to Exhale in 1992, Black commercial fiction written by both
women and men enjoyed newfound proliferation.

An additional, previously mentioned activity of the renaissance was the recovery of forgotten
African American women writers, resulting in the reformation of both the African American
and American literary canons. Alice Walker was pivotal in the reemergence of Zora Neale
Hurston as a major literary figure. Other important recovered writers were Lucy Terry, Harriet
Wilson, Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs, and Nella Larson, among many others. In addition to
Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell and others, Henry Louis Gates
and Nellie McKay edited and published the essential collection The Schomburg Library of 19th
Century Black Women Writers.

Of particular significance to the renaissance is the role of Toni Morrison, one of the most
acclaimed figures of the period, not only in her role as writer and critic but especially in her
role as editor. Just before her death in the summer of 2019, Toni Morrison’s life and career were
the subject of the documentary The Pieces I Am, directed by Timothy Greenfield Sanders. As
she recounts in the documentary, she applied for a job as an editor in Syracuse, New York, after
finding herself back at home, divorced, and the mother of two sons.

In the midst of a buyout by Random House of the Syracuse publishing house L. W. Singer,
Morrison was transferred to the scholastic division of Random House and later worked for the
company as a trade editor. In that capacity, she published one of the first critical studies of lesbi-
anism, as well as anthologies of African and Third World literatures. She also published works by
Muhammed Ali, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, Gayle Jones, Quincy Troupe, Barbara Chase
Riboud, Lucille Clifton, Jane McCloskey, Huey P. Newton, Soledad Brothers, Betty Wilson, and
many others. She was also responsible for the publication of the landmark The Black Book (1974).
Morrison’s influence was a major factor not only in the proliferation of the renaissance but in
Black literature in general.

Black women writers and their work received significant recognition by the literary estab-
ishment, which helped to fuel the renaissance. In 1989, Gwendolyn Brooks was awarded the
Robert Frost Medal. The year 1993 was especially a landmark year for public acknowledgment
of the achievements of Black women writers. Maya Angelou read her poem “On the Pulse of
Morning” at Bill Clinton’s presidential inauguration, Rita Dove was appointed Poet Laureate
of the United States, and Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for literature, the first African
American writer to do so. These illustrious triumphs were followed in 1995 by the selection of
science fiction writer Octavia Butler for the prestigious MacArthur Foundation Grant.

Conclusion

It is not possible to conclude this overview of the Black women’s feminist literary renaissance
without some conversation about the backlash that the renaissance received. The earliest pub-
lications of the renaissance were often negatively reviewed by white critics, whose evaluations
were often steeped in racism. Another form of disparagement came from some Black male
critics, who often voiced the criticism that Black women writers, particularly Ntozake Shange,
Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, articulated an unfair representation of Black men as abusive, violent, and destructive. This backlash was articulated publicly and became a source of much contention between Black men and women that manifested in many forms—the controversies over *for colored girls*, *The Color Purple* (novel and film), and Morrison's Nobel Prize are notable examples.\(^{17}\)

Although the assumed 1995 end date of the renaissance used here is somewhat arbitrary, the year marks a diffusion in the renaissance and a resurgence in publications by Black men. The proliferation of African American women's writings had reached a kind of apex, or perhaps pendulum swing, that would continue into the new century. By 2018, for example, the *New York Times* featured the article “Black Male Writers for Our Time.”\(^{18}\) Nonetheless, the renaissance was a major factor in the development of Black women's studies and Black feminist studies and changed the face of the academy as well as the conception of what great literature looks like. It is not the least bit insignificant, and speaks to the long-term resonance of the renaissance, that as of this writing, Toni Morrison is the only African American Nobel Laureate in Literature.

### Notes

Select bibliography of Black feminist renaissance creative and critical texts


Black women’s literary renaissance


