

The
**BLACK
FEMINIST
READER**



EDITED BY

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Preface

The Black Feminist Reader restricts itself to a select number of feminist writers. Space does not permit us to reproduce the extensive body of literature by the numerous scholars and activists who have influenced the growth and development of black feminism. Given their scope and length, in our estimation the following essays best reflect the literary, social, and political critiques that mark this area of feminism as singular, controversial, and transformative. The ten essays reprinted here were written during the last twenty-five years by intellectuals who address key themes within black feminisms: the intersections of sex, gender, and race, sometimes class and ideology. These analyses promote critical thinking about language, culture, democratic justice, and humanity. Hence the *Reader* is organized thematically and paradigmatically rather than historically and is divided into two sections: Part I, Literary Theory; and Part II, Social and Political Theory. These chapters coalesce around community and identity (especially Barbara Christian's and Sylvia Wynter's essays, which examine the erasure or marginalization of the community of African American *and* Caribbean women in literature and language). Each essay in its own way represents a theoretical paradigm for a trajectory or strand of black feminism.

The editors' introduction provides a brief historical overview of black feminism. That several of the contributors may not be readily recognized as black feminists reflects the restrictive perceptions surrounding this body of work. Nonetheless, the following authors have furthered critical theory while emphasizing key themes within black feminism. The reader will find that not all the writers are women, which reflects the evolving notions of who and what qualifies as "feminist" as well as the interest black feminism continues to generate among women *and* men. By incorporating the work of male feminists, Marxists, legal scholars, and

literary, cultural, and social theorists, we intend to convey the expansive range of black feminism while presenting *The Black Feminist Reader* as a volume that is organizationally and conceptually unique. We anticipate that this anthology will add to the growing body of work that introduces more and more readers and scholars to black feminism.

Part I of *The Black Feminist Reader* opens with Barbara Christian's influential article, "The Race for Theory." This essay explores the re-inscription of Western philosophical methods of inquiry in literary studies, postmodernism's exclusionary uses of language, and the erasure of "theorizing" by people of color, particularly women who, as Christian argues, have "continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world." Christian writes, "It is this language . . . that I find celebrated, refined, critiqued in the works of writers like Morrison . . ." As does Christian, Toni Morrison, in chapter 2, reflects on community and language. In "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," a lecture presented at the University of Michigan in 1988, she analyzes several of her novels to emphasize community and the individual's relationship to it, examining how language activates and is activated in African American culture.

Chapter 3, Hortense J. Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," describes an enslaved African American female who shares the conditions of all "captive flesh . . . as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory." For such women, Spillers argues, the theft and mutilation of the (black) body create a singular condition in which gender difference is lost, and the female body and the male body become "a territory of cultural and political maneuver" that is neither gender-related nor gender-specific.

Spillers's essay greatly influenced the chapter that follows, "A Black Man's Place in Black Feminist Criticism." In chapter 4, Michael Awkward presents a feminist manifesto in which he posits that the value of male black feminism lies in its anti-patriarchal stance and self-reflexivity in its relations to, rather than reproduction of, a feminism that focuses on black female subjectivity.

In chapter 5, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Unsilencing the 'Demonic Ground' of 'Caliban's Woman,'" Sylvia Wynter offers an explication of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Wynter's essay was originally published as the Afterword to *Out of the Kumbula*, an anthology on black women and Caribbean literature edited by Carole Boyce

Davies and Elaine Savory Fido. Undergirded by a reworking of Martiniquan poet Aimé Césaire's rereading of the Shakespeare play, Wynter's analysis discloses the erasure of the black female body/sexuality and the silencing of voice. The absence of Caliban's woman, the African American and Caribbean woman necessary to reproduce Caliban's "vile race," represents an ontological absence, a negation of an entire people.

Continuing the themes of absence and negation, Part II, Social and Political Theory, presents writings from the fields of cultural and legal studies, sociology, and political philosophy. bell hooks, a cultural studies feminist, theorizes the need for a "revolutionary feminism" in "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory," chapter 6. Discussing the limitations of bourgeois feminism, hooks's work seeks to repoliticize feminism as "a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires."¹

The pioneering essays on the intersections of race, class, and gender by Angela Y. Davis, the black feminist most associated with Marxism, first appeared during her incarceration as a political prisoner in the early 1970s.² In chapter 7, written while she was imprisoned and originally published for a symposium on dialectical materialism, Davis's "Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation" presents a Marxist analysis that incorporates gender and race as central components to her criticism of capitalism.

Building upon Alice Walker's definition of womanist as culturally specific to women of color, Patricia Hill Collins's "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," chapter 8, presents an Afrocentric womanism that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision and develop an emancipatory theory reflective of black female struggles.³ This essay provides the foundation for Collins's *Black Feminist Thought*, a widely read text in women's studies.

Chapter 9 provides a legal studies analysis of the binary opposition that constrains theory and practice in regard to women of color. Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" explores politics, law, and theory within the context of black women's lives. A leading proponent of feminist critical race theory, Crenshaw examines the inability or unwillingness of the law, and its practitioners, to conceptualize the convergence of gender and race within law.

In chapter 10, Joy James probes the negative impact of state practices and corporate institutions on gender, race, and culture. Arguing that black feminism is generally progressive but not inherently radical or transformative, James's "Radicalizing Feminism" examines liberal and radical politics within a multiplicity of black feminisms.

The Black Feminist Reader concludes with an appendix that contains three key writings and manifestoes by black women over the last quarter-century. The 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement illustrates the emergence of the contemporary wave of black feminism out of the civil rights and black liberation movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The African American Women in Defense of Ourselves manifesto, issued during the 1991 hearings for the confirmation of Clarence Thomas as Supreme Court Justice, in which Anita Hill raised charges of sexual harassment, challenges the continuing sexual objectification and abuse of black women in both media and government. Finally, the 1998 Open Letter from Assata Shakur highlights the critical juncture that black women face concerning political struggles, liberation, and state repression. A former US political prisoner currently in exile in Cuba, Shakur has produced literature and a memoir that have provided an avenue for revolutionary black feminism, a strand of feminism that is often not fully pursued but one that has nevertheless made an indelible mark on black feminist theorizing.⁴

Minor cosmetic editorial changes have been made to some of the readings in pursuit of consistency and ease of reading.

Notes

- 1 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 24.
- 2 For information on her case and political repression of black dissidents, see: Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974); Bettina Aptheker, *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Joy James, ed., *The Angela Y. Davis Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
- 3 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 32, 139–61.
- 4 See Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1987).

Editors' Introduction

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Since their forced migration to the Americas, women of African descent have struggled with the multiple realities of gender, racial, and economic or caste oppression shaped by the American experience. In the process, they have created both space for a more viable democracy and a body of extraordinary literature. Although struggles for power and equality as well as political analyses and artistic achievement exist wherever women of African descent exist, the best-known documentation of these endeavours is found in the historical and contemporary works of black women in the United States.

In the antebellum years there were a number of prominent black women abolitionists. Self-named and self-emancipated former slave Sojourner Truth is perhaps one of the best recognized, largely because of her symbolic use among white feminists dating from the mid-nineteenth century. A contemporary of abolitionist and women's rights advocate Frederick Douglass and white suffragettes, Truth had a profound impact on expanding notions of womanhood and delivered two significant speeches: the 1851 "Woman's Rights" and the 1867 "When Woman Gets Her Rights Man Will Be Right."¹ Her lesser-known contemporary Maria W. Stewart, a free Black Bostonian and associate of David Walker – the black abolitionist allegedly poisoned for his antislavery agitation – became one of the first American women to establish a reputation as a public, political speaker, merging the issues of women's rights with abolitionism. Stewart's fiery advocacy led her to the pulpit; she would later be ousted from the church and public speaking by African American male clergy who found her claims of direct communion with God as the inspiration for her activism heretical. During the Civil War, Stewart also served in the medical corps, tending wounded soldiers. Another contemporary, Harriet Tubman, who had

herself escaped slavery and led thousands of black people to freedom through the Underground Railroad before the war, fought as a soldier and officer during the conflict. As the first American woman to lead black and white troops in battle, Tubman headed the Intelligence Service in the Department of the South. Known as the "Black Moses" because of her leading black slaves from bondage to freedom in the North, her courage and skill as a military strategist during the Civil War garnered her another title: "General Tubman."

Amid the militant emancipation speeches and military campaigns of the nineteenth century, a black feminist literature was born. Fictionalized slave narratives, such as Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*, and autobiographies couched in the thematics of the sentimental novel, like Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*, emerged to challenge Victorian notions of true womanhood and rigid racial categories. Such works aroused sympathy for the slave who dared to love her children as any mother would, and exposed the sexual oppression unique to enslaved women.

Decades after the war and the aborted Reconstruction that followed, African American women became formidable chroniclers and commentators on society, politics, and equality. In 1892 educator Anna Julia Cooper published *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman from the South*. One of two black women delegates from the United States to attend the first Pan-African Congress held in 1900 in London, Cooper would two years later become principal of the celebrated M Street High School in Washington, DC. Her contemporaries, antilynching crusaders Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, chronicled their experiences and understandings of justice in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively in *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (published in 1970) and *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940). Active in the national black women's club movement where Terrell ascended to the presidency of the National Association of Colored Women, both women achieved international prominence through their antiracist and antilynching efforts, political speeches on the "Negro Question" in the United States, and writings that established them as critical intellectuals and activists for their era.

The Harlem Renaissance (1919–40) marked another milestone in black women's literary production. The works of Jessie Redmon Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston among others continued to deftly interrogate the intersections of race, sex, class, and color within the

United States as well as abroad. Bold articles edited by Amy Jacques Garvey on the "Woman's Page" of the United Negro Improvement Association's (UNIA) *Negro World* called for women's liberation and participation in public service, while denouncing imperialism and advocating pan-Africanism. The writings of Jacques Garvey, second wife of the orator and UNIA founder Marcus Garvey, and other lesser-known women, as well as the writings of the Harlem Renaissance, proved inspirational to the cultural nationalism and new race-conscious literature advocated by French-speaking black women like Jane and Paulette Nardal, Suzanne Césaire, and Suzanne Lacascade. Indeed, Paulette Nardal would go on to co-found the bilingual *Review of the Black World/Revue du monde noir* in Paris in the 1930s.

The era of the Second World War and the postwar boom – reflected variously in the new literary traditions of Realism and Modernism (1940–60) – revealed another important dimension of black feminist inquiry. The emergent feminism found expression in a number of works, including those by the short-story writer, novelist, and editor Dorothy West; poet Gwendolyn Brooks, whose *Annie Allen* won the Pulitzer in 1950; and playwright Lorraine Hansberry, whose 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* became the first play written by an African American woman to debut on Broadway. Such creative endeavors helped to bring the struggles of black people and black women before many Americans.

The literary inventions and interventions of the 1920s through the 1950s co-existed with civil rights activism, fostered by organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) headed by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. By the late 1960s, black women had played key roles in the NAACP, the SCLC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), and the Black Panther Party (BPP). Activism filtered through and focused their emergent feminism. Names such as Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, Kathleen Cleaver, and Assata Shakur have become, in black feminist scholarship, synonymous with the political leadership and commitments of these organizations.

In the 1960s and 1970s, black women as individuals and in collectives issued cogent calls for a transformative black feminism.² Even if the words "black feminism" were rarely used, questions and debates about black women's sexuality, the intersections of race and sex, and

the nature of black women's political, economic, and social roles were certainly not in short supply, as witnessed in the writings of Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and *The Black Woman: An Anthology* edited by Toni Cade. At times these writings, when issued by black Marxist and socialist feminists, held strong criticisms of capitalism. Indeed, Gloria Joseph's "Black Feminist Pedagogy and Schooling in Capitalist White America"³ and Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* set out critical analyses of capitalism's impact on democratic politics and culture.

As a result of the highly politicized activities of the civil rights and Black Power eras, the Black Arts Movement, and the wealth of African American literary achievements, black studies and women's studies programs exploded onto the university scene. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, a flurry of writings by black women sought to correct the racial bias of women's studies and communities and the gender bias of black studies and communities within and outside of the academy. Influential texts that initially were most strongly received by women's studies programs included: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which according to Morrison was reissued in the 1980s largely at the insistence of white, women's studies teachers; Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* and *The Color Purple*; Ntozake Shange's Broadway play *For Colored Girls*; Michele Wallace's polemical *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*; bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman?*; Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith's anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*; Barbara Smith's edited collection *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*; and Paula Giddings's historical narrative *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*.

The 1980s also saw male academics and writers promoting works by and about black women writers and feminists. For example, Henry Louis Gates's anthology *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* and his editing of the New York Public Library's Schomburg series on black women writers proved influential, introducing readers to relatively obscure women authors from the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries who embodied black feminist sensibilities and politics.

The interest generated by black women's writings sparked discussions of black feminist criticism. In effect, theories of reading and notions of tradition were created by significant black feminist works like Barbara

Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of Tradition, 1892-1976*, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues," Barbara Smith's "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," Deborah McDowell's follow-up to Smith entitled "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," and Sherley Anne Williams's "Some Implications of 'Womanist' Theory."

In the early 1980s, noted author Alice Walker contrasted black feminism with white or Eurocentric feminism, using the term "womanist" to render the adjective "black" superfluous for gender-progressive "women of color" and positing a culturally specific womanism that extends beyond women of African descent but is identifiably different from the dominant feminism of white (bourgeois) women.⁴ Walker's ideology influenced the Afrocentric womanism of black women theorists and black and latina female theologians. Partly in response to the dominance of male voices stemming from the late 1960s in fostering black theology as pioneered by James Cone, in the late 1980s black female theologians began to issue race *and* gender critiques of theology's overwhelming white and male hegemony. Katie G. Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics*, Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, and Delores S. Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* ushered black feminism into protestant theology.

Although works in literature, history, political and popular culture, and, to a lesser extent, theology are more widely read in black feminism, in the 1990s critical race feminism developed within legal studies to offer incisive analyses. Emphasizing the theoretical and practical concerns of women of color under the law, critical race feminism emerged out of critical race theory – itself an outgrowth of the critical theory movement in law that challenged the conservatism of hegemonic legal theory without addressing its racism. The most prominent writers in critical race theory who analyze gender include Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Cheryl Harris, and Kimberlé Crenshaw. In 1998 New York University Press published the first anthology of writings by black feminists and about gender or race in legal studies, Adrienne Wing's *Critical Race Feminism*. One impetus for the emergence of critical race feminism was the highly controversial and publicized 1991 Senate hearings for the confirmation of Clarence Thomas as a justice for the US Supreme Court. The hearings became an interrogation session for Anita Hill, who had raised charges of sexual harassment

against Thomas. Televised and drawing a large audience, the proceedings sparked a number of publications, such as Toni Morrison's anthology *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* and Robert Chrisman and Robert L. Allen's *Court of Appeal*, as well as widespread organizing among black women. African American Women in Defense of Ourselves, an ad hoc organization that formed during the Thomas confirmation hearings, issued a document criticizing the gender and racial biases of the hearings in a *New York Times* advertisement.

In the mid- to late 1990s it became evident that the varied ideological, cultural, and literary contributions by black women belie any attempt to formulate a monolithic or homogeneous black feminism. A diversity in outlook and writing, and a lack of ideological uniformity despite the shared concerns for racial and gender equality, give this school of thought its complexity. Nevertheless, the influence of historical women on black feminism has proved enduring. As the Combahee River Collective – a militant black feminist collective whose name is derived from Harriet Tubman's 1863 guerrilla foray into South Carolina's Port Royal or Combahee River region – maintain in their 1977 "Black Feminist Statement":

There have always been Black women activists – some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown – who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.⁵

Increasingly, new literature and activism explore black feminist contributions, creativity, and ideological debates. Growing amid diverse tendencies and tensions, which fuel its insights, the significance of black feminism as a tool for critical inquiry within American and global culture is undeniable.

Notes

- 1 Sojourner Truth's speeches are reprinted in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York:

- The New Press, 1995), 36–8. For a comprehensive biography that examines Frances D. Gages attributing the rhetorical question “Arn’t I a woman?” to Truth in the latter’s 1851 Akron, Ohio, Arn’t I A Woman? speech, see Nell Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).
- 2 For anthologies documenting the emergence of black feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, see: Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983); Toni Cade Bambara, ed., *The Black Woman* (New York: New American Library, 1970); and Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire*.
 - 3 See Mike Cole, ed., *Bowles and Gintis Revisited: Correspondence and Contradiction in Education Theory* (London and New York: Falmer, 1988).
 - 4 See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), xi. Walker notes that white women feel no need to preface “feminist” with “white,” understanding the term as stemming from their racial/ethnic culture. For a discussion of Afrocentricity, see E. Frances White, “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counterdiscourse, and African American Nationalism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 2 (Spring 1990), 73–97.
 - 5 Combahee River Collective, “Black Feminist Statement,” in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbar Smith, eds, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women Studies* (Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982), 273.