Margins Speaking to Margins

Multinational Perspectives on African-American Literature

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Foreword

Janell Hobson
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There is a powerful image that has circulated across the Internet: a digitized photo, circa 1977, from the June Jordan papers housed at the Radcliffe Schlessinger Library.[1] In the photo is a group of eight African American women in their prime, posing in what appears to be someone's living room as they stand or sit next to a portrait of blues legend Bessie Smith that hangs on the wall. Their comradery is evident as is their commitment to Black women's cultural legacies (if the wall portrait is any indication). They were quite ready to take on the world and influence the literary and academic scenes, as the most prominent among them – including the writers Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, June Jordan, and Ntozake Shange – did just that in the years to come. They called themselves "The Sisterhood."

I raise the specter of the "Sisterhood" because it haunts this volume, which has done tremendous work in documenting the international impact of Black women's literature. The writings of these sisters have been read, taught, and archived across the world, as this collection attests. Ironically, Toni Morrison – the greatest among the "sister" writers who was also instrumental in editing and publishing the works of radical activist Angela Y. Davis and novelist Gayle Jones, the latter whose first novel *Corregidora* is compared to Dalit women's literature in a chapter by Amrita Basu Roy Chowdhury – endured the patronizing tone of critics who felt her talent was too extraordinary to only concern herself with the "Black experience."

What the Sisterhood accomplished – emboldened as they were by both the contemporary Black and women's liberation movements that created space for their own emergent voices – was the centering of Black women's cultures, languages, and knowledge productions and the disruption of notions of

[1] The digitized photograph includes members of the Sisterhood, 1977. (front row from left) Nana Maynard, Ntozake Shange, Louise Meriwether (back row from left) Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, Alice Walker, Audrey Edwards, Toni Morrison and June Jordan. From the June Jordan Papers, 1936-2002; MC 513. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

"universality" as the primary domain of whiteness and manhood. They could write from their specific positions as Black women and still find an international audience that related quite intimately to their experience.

That the "Black experience" is still considered more "marginal" than "universal" to some is an indication of the lingering effects of race, empire, and patriarchy, which have shaped literary productions and other gatekeeping aspects of the arts. As Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie notes in her widely viewed TED Talk video from 2009, the "danger of a single story" would reduce an entire African continent to one culture, an entire race of Black people to one political view. The Sisterhood refuted this single story as they brought all their complexities and varied lives to bear in the simple gift of telling their stories and committing them to pen and paper.

The literary world is but one sphere to challenge this "single story." As African American actresses would tell it – from Taraji P. Henson to Viola Davis – they have been routinely discouraged by Hollywood studio executives who often hesitate to green light stories centered on their lives since there was a widely held belief that they had no potential overseas box-office draw. Not until the phenomenal success of *Black Panther,* courtesy of Disney and Marvel Universe, did this narrative slowly change. Black popular music, on the other hand, has flowed through the global airwaves with more relative ease than cinema or literature, embraced as it is by so many across the globe.

Interestingly, Black music has long been heralded as the one art form that African Americans have elevated for global appeal with no need for translations or code-switching, even as recognized musical geniuses like jazz composer Duke Ellington were convinced his music still had not achieved the heights of Harlem Renaissance poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. It is more than ironic that the Black arts movement critics of the 1960s and 1970s begged to differ, bewailing as Amiri Baraka once did that "there has never been an equivalent to Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong in Negro writing"(165). However, Brent Hayes Edwards challenges that we eschew any hierarchies between these aesthetic traditions and reconsider "the relations among aesthetic media in [Black] culture," (Edwards 87)) which is to value the literature in the music and the music in the literature.

Beyond these assertions from Black male scholars, Black feminist critic Barbara Christian proposes in her much-cited "The Race for Theory" that the real aim for Black women writing "is done in order to save my own life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense" (Christian 357).

The chapters included in this volume have genuinely engaged this project of feeling and knowing the sensuality of Black women's language. From the humor found in Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale,* to the "confessional autobiography" represented by Harriet Jacobs's nineteenth-century slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* From the Dantesque existential dramas found in Toni Morrison's love trilogy to her rewriting of French feminists' "écriture feminine" philosophy through *The Bluest Eye.* Expanding different genres (including Octavia Butler's science fiction) and different geographies within the African Diaspora (with analyses of Kenyan Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai's memoir and Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*), the parameters around Black women's literary traditions are redefined and reframed for an international readership.

Within the wider circles of Black arts and expressions, Black creatives across the genres of music, cinema, art and literature have articulated a Black humanity that was not always taken as a given. However, Black women specifically created artistic and literary spaces to build community and to nurture and foster connections for Black women writers. From Alice Walker's resurrection of Renaissance writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston to Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and others of the sisterhood founding the Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, to Black feminist and womanist scholars forging ahead with academic programs in women's studies and Black Studies. Because of these spaces, their literature survived and thrived. Because of the critics who interpreted their works, these writers achieved critical acclaim and are now in many esteemed literary canons.

This volume continues in this lauded tradition of elevating Black women's writings toward the "universal" as each author engages the intimacies and intricacies of a literature that speaks cross-culturally and intertextually. The Sisterhood has certainly expanded into an international family of readers, one they may not have seen on the horizon when they first gathered but who nevertheless had always been there, potentially belonging to their imagined community in love and in solidarity.

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Preface: Margins Speaking to Margins

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Women's works have made a special contribution to world literature by focusing on subjects that are essential for the human spirit, self-confidence, and fulfillment as a whole. History shows that ever since women began writing, all of those issues in literature and criticism that are critical to human life have come to the fore. Women's writings have reached all over the world who were some time ago considered to be backward due to their social status in their parts of the world.

All too often, African-American literary studies remain in the purview of African-American scholars working either in the United States or in Western Europe. The boom in publishing in the Caribbean, with its focus on the intersection of Afro-Caribbean and African-American populations, has proven that there is an academic public that is piqued by the study of African-American narrative, as well as other intellectual productions, from places other than the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. This centralization of the black experience and, in turn, black narrative, has somewhat omitted other visions that look at these books and films and dramatic pieces from a slightly different perspective.

Narrative, primarily, has been a means to document the writer's thoughts in various modes. Starting with the oral literature, the narrative has formed an indispensable part of the human society across the ages. Changes in form, style and mode of narration were massive; however, the narrative always had an appeal over the decades. Historical, philosophical, sociological, anthropological and literary narratives, to cite a few, have paved the way for various theoretical engagements as well. The foci of the narratives, too underwent a paradigm shift with the introduction of various discourses, which led the literati to engage in discussions in and out of the box. The norms of the society were strictly patriarchal in essence initially constructed narratives which were primarily

patriarchal. The earlier tradition of literary history stands itself as a witness to testify how the narratives were monolithic in nature.

No societal structure can be confined to an established framework for a longer period, given the fact that the world was moving towards an era of enlightenment, with rationality becoming the order of the day. The world had been familiar with the angels in the houses and the virtuous wives in the bedrooms. Hegemony and the categorization of the other sex, coupled with the enforcement of patriarchal values, have forced the group of women to be nomenclature as the second sex. However, against the status quo, the world witnessed the feminist wave, which ultimately heralded the rise of the voice of historically silenced women.

Speaking of women and their issues in a male-centered society, under the aegis of feminist movements, did have its own echoes, with many women writers coming to the front and breaking the walls of their confinement. Critiques bordering on the selective exclusiveness of women of other identities by the white feminist discourses signaled the rise of alternate feminist movements in the world, foremost among them being the Black Feminist Discourse. Literary engagement is what gives birth to a serious critique. To engage with a writer having no historical significance is entirely different from what an established author has to contribute to the reading fraternity. Keeping the socio-political aspect aside in any literary engagement would robe the essence of the whole endeavour. All of these American women have shed light not only on women's issues, but also on various aspects of society. While the Indian women shed light on the various aspects of society that affected her, the American women's apartheid sheds light on other related aspects.

While these movements were leaving a significant impact on the social structure and its ideological constructions, the changing dimensions of the socio-cultural and political realities also created a new fervor in the academic field to make its space available for academic inclusion, deliberations and serious interventions. Syllabi in various Universities across the world saw the inclusion of studies on women writers as well as marginal literature during the span of the last two decades. Centres on Women's Studies in Universities and Research Centres, without any doubt, paved the way for the academia to offer perspectives on women writers of other identities, supported amply by the contributions of women writers of the same identity to work.

The focus in universities on reading texts authored by the non-whites, primarily those by the African American women writers, followed by including women writers of other origins too, resulted in producing scholarships on such narratives. Women-centered narratives, began to move forward in its visibility, from silence to articulation, from absence to presence. However, the arena was not ripe enough to dedicate a whole course focusing on women writers of

other identities. The University Study Centers and other Open Research Centers have undertaken a lot of research work on the writing of American women. In the midst of all this, it becomes very important to understand which books American women have contributed to global literature.

It made perfect sense for institutions and scholars to be interested in Black Studies with these concepts in mind. Courses were created to introduce famous writers, poets, dramatists, essayists, philosophers, and politicians to students around the world. The great variety of ideas, subjects, styles, and voices present in the works reviewed in class marked the change and transition from "victim" to "citizen." This is the context in which the problem of blackness is introduced as it has been incorporated into the broader cultural discourse through a variety of protest tactics and a variety of perspectives, including the feminist voice. The question of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and non-belonging, and visibility and invisibility has taken on new significance as a result of how one positions oneself and others in relation to racial, class, and gender paradigms. Numerous debated works by significant black American women who made significant contributions to the broader conversation on the black self-express the project of critically examining the politics and poetics of the black self. Using the perspectives of feminism, postcolonialism, gender, race, and ethnicity.

With enormous academic research and scholarship being carried out on women writers of African American descent (solely due to the fact that women writers from other parts of the world were still behind the kitchen doors inside their houses), the minimal representation of African American women writers in the syllabus offered as part of Literature Studies is a matter of serious concern. Even a perfunctory evaluation of the syllabi would lead us to locate a few names of women writers of African American identity, who in the long run of their struggle to make themselves announced have been successful in carving out their name to be counted as one among the established literary tradition (the academic field has been made familiar to the names and works of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Terry McMillan, Harriet Jacobs, Jamaica Kincaids, Octavia Butler, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gayl Jones, Angela Davis, Barbara Christian and Rita Dove). Though, this condition may be holistic in approach, the time has come to rethink the possibilities of not confining the women writers of other origin under the terminologies of Women's Writings and Marginal Literature. With the hope that a change for the better is always in store, this volume would make an earnest attempt to offer serious re-readings of the works of African American Women Writers.

This collection gathers some of the most distinguished writers from India, Tunisia, Romania, Morocco, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, South Africa and other

underrepresented countries, at least in terms of African-American narrative, and offers them a space to discuss their own perspectives on said narratives. The collection is especially rich in terms of pedagogical vibrancy since many of the academics involved teach courses in African-American literature within their respective universities to a largely national student body. It makes one ponder so many questions. How does an Indian professor teach Indian students the historical complexity of Toni Morrison or the localized cultural tropes of Alice Walker? How exactly does Invisible Man play out in a Kerala classroom?

These and many more are the questions that this collection unpacks in the manners and approaches of these non-American contributors. What we are on the verge of creating is not simply another unread academic tome. We are desirous of opening up the spaces of African-America study to a global audience that may have never travelled outside of the borders of its own nation. This is a ferocious act of imagination that attempts to understand a culture with which they have next to no contact and to help academics envision what it means to teach narratives outside of their comfortability.

Last but not least, we would like to sincerely thank Janell Hobson, Prof. of Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies, University at Albany, State University of New York, the USA, for generously writing the foreword for this book. Her astute and perceptive words have not only enhanced the initial sections but have also established a tone of mastery and profundity that resonates throughout the entire piece. Similarly, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to Faye V. Harrison, Professor of African American Studies & Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA, for providing a thorough introduction that skillfully captures the core of the research. Her unwavering commitment to establishing a comprehensive introduction has played a crucial role in leading this project. These academics not only thoroughly read all the articles but also provided suggestions for improvements.

The appearance of acclaimed author Rita Dove in an interview with Dr Ajit Kumar greatly enhanced the significance of this venture. We appreciate having the opportunity to interview Rita Dove on her many literary works, endeavours in literature, teaching poetry, and other aspects of the region as a whole. We applaud the writer for her generosity in graciously giving her precious time and thoughtful views. We are thankful for her significant intellectual contributions, which have greatly enriched the interview and made it a very worthwhile experience. We would also like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the contributors for their exceptional patience and meticulous pieces, which enhance the overall quality and coherence of this collective effort.

The experienced managerial and editorial staff of Vernon Press deserves a particular commendation. Their steadfast dedication and proficiency have been crucial in successfully completing this book. Their collective endeavors

have been of immeasurable worth, and we express our utmost admiration for their expertise and commitment towards authors.

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Introduction: Reflections on the Meanings and Contexts of Black Women's Writing

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Literature, whether the genres and styles that make up the conventional literary arts or the most imaginative articulations of prose found in journalism, the humanities and also, the social sciences, represents a significant outpouring of socially situated, creative cultural production. Writers who make important contributions to literature—as artists, social critics, healers of societal wounds, and architects of new life-worlds—are worthy of being engaged by an expanded audience of scholarly and lay readers. This is especially true for cosmopolitan readers with the curiosity to venture beyond traditional boundaries that too often confine us to more narrow mappings of space and place. These locations are culturally salient sites where human identities and experiences are formed, embodied, and lived through relations of interdependence and mutuality. In societies where injustices prevail, other aspects of human experience and identity formation are configured through dissonant, power-mediated relations that induce disparity and conflict. In these contexts, wider structures and patterned practices of exploitation and dispossession are deeply implicated.

When conflicts and contradictions are left unresolved, they impose conditions that may inflict social suffering and collective trauma. However, those bearing the brunt of injustices are never reduced to victimhood and left to be understood through a lens of victimology. Among the afflicted are protagonists in the many dramas of history within contexts where the past and the cultural struggles to define or redefine its meanings are inscribed on the landscapes of the present and future possibilities.

Black Women at the Crossroads of World Literatures

Writers are among those who help to reimagine and reenvision the possibilities of the future world. The late 1993 Nobel Laureate for Literature Toni Morrison, born Chloe Ardelia Wofford, once wrote that writers "go to work," they "speak… write… [and] do language," especially during "times of dread," when civilizations need to be healed (Morrison). In her view, writers and other

artists play a central role in the healing process. That is clearly how she saw her own work, the remarkable *oeuvre* that she contributed to African American, American, and world literature (Bodistean and Fradj contribute chapters on Morrison in this book). Morrison is the first Black woman writer (not only as an African American but as a Black female writer from anywhere in the world) to have been honored by the international literati, notably the prestigious Swedish Academy. This accomplishment indicates the interest of a global community of readers and critics in the "visionary force and poetic import [of literary work that] gives life to an essential aspect of the American reality" (The Nobel Prize website). That essential yet historically underestimated and nearly silenced aspect is the African American experience, including the voices and creatively insightful writings of generations of African American women. This edited volume provides invaluable analyses of some of this remarkable literature from an international set of perspectives flowing from scholarly streams that are underrepresented in the hegemonic canon of literary criticism.

As an important source of cultural capital, Morrison's Nobel Prize set an important precedent in valorizing Black American women's literature for representing more than a provincial or narrow interest. The earliest reviewers of her books, mainly white men, were troubled that she did not directly take white people into account. In other words, her work was seen as less mature, less meaningful, and less universal with respect to the human condition, because it is liberated from the white masculine gaze and narrates the lives of ordinary Black people as full human beings, in a sovereign voice (*Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*). Morrison's elevation to a global audience revealed that the stories she tells in her fiction are of pluriversal significance, appreciated by a diverse worldwide readership and deserving of the interpretive scrutiny of literary scholars and theorists in many parts of the world. By situating her work within the context of world literature, we can appreciate the extent to which Morrison's work, along with that of many other African American writers, resonates with themes found in literary traditions in other parts of the world. These include other settings in the African diaspora (such as those of the Caribbean and Brazil) as well as in other societies organized around stark disparities and logics of ethnicity, race, caste, religion, class, and citizenship/immigration status—all of which have significant gendered dimensions. These issues are particularly relevant now, at a historical juncture when migrations, the militarization of border regimes, and heightened tensions around racism, ethnic conflict, and xenophobia exist in many different parts of the world (Harrison, 88-89).

Diasporic Resemblances and Disidentifications

Extended family resemblances across boundaries of culture, language, geography, and generational time are evoked in the writings of novelist Gayl Jones, whose novel *Corregidora* is discussed in this volume (see Chowdhury's chapter). Her depictions articulate or link the United States, often considered paradigmatic in terms of representing an explicit variant of racial and racialized gendered oppression during slavery and in later eras, and Brazil. Jones extends her diasporic imagination to link the United States to Brazil, which shares with the former country a heritage and legacy of being a plantation society based on slavery, sexual abuse, and the myth that Black women—stereotyped as hypersexual nymphomaniacs—cannot be raped. Although not a mirror image of their northern counterparts, slavery and post-emancipation constraints on African descendants' freedom and equality were not as mild as the Brazilian myth of racial democracy has claimed (Vargas).

It is through the matrilineal genealogy of the novel's protagonist that the trauma of an Afro-Brazilian foremother and the sins of a Portuguese great-grandfather have had lasting effects over time. They set the stage for the racialized gendered conditions of exploitation and abuse that later generations of Black women continue to confront. Jones places Ursa in a Kentucky family whose history transcends the boundaries of a single nation-state in the Americas. Ursa's life history only makes sense in a broader hemispheric context, one that the late Black and Indigenous scholar-activist Lélia Gonzalez mapped as *Améfrica Ladina*. Gonzalez coined this term to emphasize the contributions of African people and their heritage in Latin America's past and present, which she analyzed in terms of *Amefricanidade* (Rios, 75), American Africanness or African Americanness. Indeed, Gonzalez underscored both African and Indigenous agencies in the development of the Americas. This was necessary to offset the overrepresentation of Europeanness and to decenter Eurocentric heteropatriarchy, whose dominance has produced the conditions for marginalizing Indigenous people and African descendants, especially women and sexual non-conformists whose historicity and important aspects of their contemporary reality have been silenced (Trouillot).

In Jones' characterization, Ursa is a 1940s blues singer who transmits her ancestral story, her oral tradition of sexual abuse and incest, through the vernacular, the folk music of the blues. According to Angela Y. Davis, during the first decades of the twentieth century, blues women (e.g., Bessie Smith) played a significant part in influencing and inspiring the musicality of jazz singers like Billie Holiday and others (Davis 144). Their music, the lyrics and the style of performance, also expressed a feminist or proto-feminist consciousness about aspects of working-class women's lives, intimate relationships, domestic violence, and sexual desires, which were not considered

appropriate for public discourse according to the values and rules of Black middle-class respectability.

African American and other Afro-diasporic musical genres (e.g., Afro-Cuban *son* in Nicolás Guillén) are commonly motifs, symbols, or templates for using vernacular rhythms, lyrical structures, and cadences in poetry. The blues and jazz figure prominently in the classic writing of Langston Hughes (Hughes), some of whose poems approximate the syncopation and repetition of blues songs as well as the improvisation of jazz. Hughes encouraged Guillén to bring Afro-Cuban aesthetic impulses into his poetry.

Beyond Jones, music is also integral to some of the other writers featured in this book: Terry McMillan (Falfoul), Toni Morrison (Bodistean), Alice Walker (Rafseena M, Gaikwad), and the poet (and to a lesser extent short story writer and novelist) Rita Dove (Kumar). In 1993-1995, she was the first African American Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the U.S. Library of Congress. Dove is admired for her "lyrical musicality." In a review of her poetry collection, *Sonata Mulattica,* Jillian Wriston points out that Dove's musicality "works even more fluidly *because* of the form and content [of the book on a little-known Black British classical violinist]. Not only does her style have music, but her lyrical meditations on music itself encompass musical qualities—sometimes without even having to rely on sound at all. Still, the musicality she employs never overwhelms…" (Wristen).

We can also make an observation of a different sort of extended family resemblance when considering the memoir of Wangari Maathai (Pokharel), a Kenyan author whose remarkable environmental activism won her the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. She was the first African woman to win that award. Maathai spent some of her formative years as a student in the United States before returning home, where she made her indelible mark. Her memoir signals to us how Blackness and Black womanhood in the United States (and in Kenyan society as well) have been diversified and complicated by the experiences of contemporary transnational influences and migrations whose postcolonial character distinguishes them from the earlier forced migrations constituting the colossal "Middle Passage," the transatlantic trade in abducted Africans, now recognized as a crime against humanity.

Although the transatlantic certainly deserves our attention, it is also important that we acknowledge that both forced and voluntary migrations of Sub-Saharan Africans have also taken place across other seascapes and landscapes over considerable spans of time, dating back to pre-colonial periods. East Africa has a long history related to the circuits of trade linking that region to the Middle East, South Asia, and island societies across the Indian Ocean. The African diaspora—including its agentive histories of resistance and creative expressive

cultures, from music to literary expressions—is a truly global phenomenon marked by some resemblances as well as by significant disjunctures.

The divergent diasporic identities, experiences, and practices of non-immigrant and immigrant Black communities in the United States mean that we cannot assume that a unitary life-world exists among the various people who are racialized as Black. Moreover, there are also cultural, linguistic, and geographical differences and disidentifications within the population of non-immigrant, once diasporized people of African descent, the descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the colonies and postcolonial territories that came to constitute the United States of America. Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American immigrants have been twice or even thrice diasporized (Hall). Especially in the most cosmopolitan settings, such as global and globalizing cities like New York, the Black population is noticeably multi-ethnic, multi-national, and multi-lingual in the origins, routes, and temporalities of migration and diasporization.

The co-existence, overlap, and divergence among the plural identities, lived experiences, and situations of Blackness in gendered and culturally inflected ways are, to some extent, reflected in the authors and texts examined in this book. The inclusion of Jamaica Kincaid (Madongonda and Gudhlanga), a Caribbean American originally from the island nation of Antigua, and, as already pointed out, Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan woman whose coming of age was, in part, shaped by her U.S. sojourn, permit us to consider matters of cross-cultural and ethno-national diversity among Black people in American society. Issues of "overlapping diasporas" (Lewis 789) can be illuminated if racial identity is not essentialized or treated in monolithic terms.

Kincaid's novel *Lucy*, which draws on her own experience as an immigrant, is a contribution to the robust tradition of immigration literature. Until recently, that canon was dominated by narratives featuring European immigrants' challenges and successes in becoming American and being accepted as such. This was particularly so for immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, who bore the brunt of xenophobia and even sub-racial racism based on an Anglo-dominant notion of what constituted whiteness. More recently, the literature on immigrants and refugees from the global south and east has grown. The iconic diasporic Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's award-winning *Americanah* is a fairly recent notable example (Adichie). However, long before this early twenty-first-century moment, there were writers like Paule Marshall, whose classic *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (Marshall) addressed intra-racial ethnic diversity and the socialization and agency of girls and women in global cities like New York with its many host communities for migrants and immigrants.

Resisting Environmental Injustice and Degradation

This volume also allows readers to connect other dots linking Maathai's social philosophy, praxis, and writing to those of other authors examined herein. Her writing and politics resonate with the ecological consciousness and eco-feminist concerns (Sinha) inscribed in the non-fiction environmental writings of Dianne Glave, Lauret Savoy, Michael Twitty, and the Native American author Dina Gilio-Whitaker. These texts, along with Maathai's memoir, shed light on concerns that exist within the environmental justice movement in the United States and elsewhere in the world. The current movement has arisen from a complex of conditions whose origins have been shaped by the *longue durée* of colonialism, slavery, and their afterlives in the present-day coloniality of power, knowledge, and being (Quijano; Wynter). In light of these historical processes, Indigenous people, African descendants of enslaved captives, and others have been made vulnerable to the structural violence and social suffering of environmental inequities. Eco-feminists and other ecologically cognizant writers make us aware that agents of environmental justice have brought the intersections of environment, race, and gender into local and global struggles for civil and human rights—and the ways they might be rethought and remade for more effective outcomes. Human rights violations related to ecological conditions disproportionately affect populations subjected to the forces of white supremacy, colonialism, and neocolonialism, whether in the Global South or the most vulnerable and dispossessed zones within the Global North. In the U.S. context, Indigenous people, African Americans, and the most vilified categories of immigrants and refugees inhabit such spaces, which are, at once, devalued margins and fertile grounds for innovative forms of survivance and literary cultural production.

Traveling across Literary Geography

Black women writers have long expressed an interest in internationalism and have built networks of cosmopolitan solidarity based on the perceived parallels and similarities that situate them well beyond the boundaries of individual nation-states. This literary geography invites new conversations and a flow of new streams of analysis and criticism of the texts of African and African-descended writers from locations and positionalities outside and beyond the historically established spaces of canonical knowledge. This book is a refreshing contribution to a significant shift in the geography of reason from universities in the United States and other settings associated with Northern epistemologies and the cognitive empire (Santos). Transnational and cross-cultural conversations on race, caste, and their intersections with gender and sexuality are just one example of the growing interest in situating

African and African American women's literary writings on wider landscapes of creativity and knowledge-making.

Perhaps related to this are the transnational and intercultural dialogues that have stimulated interest in adapting or reworking elements of Black feminist and womanist thought (Phillips; Maparyan) for interpreting other subjected women. For example, precedents have already been set for examining parallels or similarities with Dalit women's experiences, such as those recounted in the short stories (translated into English from vernacular Telugu, a Dravidian language in South India) that D. Jyothirmai and K. Sree Ramesh examine in their article, "African American Womanism Speaks to Dalit Feminism: Special Reference to Telugu Dalit Women's Literature." According to these scholars, Dalit feminists' alienation from mainstream Indian feminism, which has erased their concerns and priorities from the dominant feminist platform, has prompted them to search for alternate frameworks that resonate more strongly with Dalit women's predicaments and consciousness (Jyothirmai and Ramesh). African American womanist and feminist perspectives, often embedded in literary writings such as those of the poet, short story writer, and novelist Alice Walker's first collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, have been found to be a significant source of insight and inspiration (Walker). This speaks to the cosmopolitan reach, traveling routes, and mobility of African American women's social and political thought, because it has been shown to be a useful tool with which to think, not to apply uncritically in ways that erase or silence significant differences (Guy-Sheftall; Maparyan; Phillips; Paik).

Crossing Boundaries of Time and Genre

This book brings together an engaging set of contributions from an international group of writers and literary scholars who all share an interest in the critical imagination and creative writing of African American/Black/Africana women (situated within the global African and African diasporic world). These women's identities, positionalities, and negotiated lived experiences are integral elements of the intricately interwoven sociocultural fabric. The writers and bodies of work that this book examines represent a remarkable sampling of creative subjectivities and writings that range across a broad historical and literary chronology that dates back to the nineteenth century (Goodhead) and brings us to concerns marking the contemporary moment. The book does not intend to offer a literary history. However, on the whole, the volume provides just enough historical depth for situating African-descended women's literature and literary praxis within meaningful and shifting temporal contexts.

The chapters of this book reveal how Black women have used their critically creative literary sensibilities—informed by feminine (Fradj) and, in many instances, feminist consciousness (Guy-Sheftall)—to respond to the multiple

"times of dread" (Morrison) that people of African descent have confronted in American society as well as in other parts of the Americas and the Atlantic –or, in the case of Kenya and East Africa, the Indian Ocean—world. The cumulative timeline the contributors address moves us from slavery, abolition, and post-emancipation discrimination to the promises and possibilities of the civil rights era and then further into the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century varieties of dehumanizing unfreedoms. These thwarted or eroded freedoms include police brutality, mass incarceration, and right-wing political backlash and pushback to advances in multiracial democracy and the upward social mobility of some portions of the populace that have been historically underprivileged. From 1619, when the first African captives from Angola were forcibly brought to the North American English settler colony in Jamestown, Virginia, to the present-day moment when proponents of social justice are calling for a national reckoning on matters related to race, the saga of Black people's resilience in the face of anti-Blackness has stimulated Black women to make significant interventions in their cultural and literary contributions. And toward this end, we are indebted to Black feminists for shedding light on the extent to which race intermeshes with other salient dimensions of difference and inequality, key among them gender, sexuality, and class.

The contributors to this collection offer significant insights into the creative ways the writers under consideration inscribe vital meanings into the multiple genres of autobiography (Goodhead), poetry (Kumar), fiction (most of the contributors), science fiction (Nicoera), and creative non-fiction (Sinha), including the essays of an impressive array of race and gender cognizant male writers. So many of these literary works are worthy of the scrutiny that book-length analyses provide. Much of this writing blurs or defies conventional genres. Alice Walker, some of whose poetry and fiction are examined in this book (both Gailkwad and Rafseena M), crafted an important epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, which has been characterized as an exemplar of womanist fiction. Womanism acknowledges and emphasizes the consciousness and practices arising from the everyday, culturally specific experiences of Black women (Walker; Maparyan). The positive reception to this novel resulted in her receiving both the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award in 1983. Beyond her many poetry collections, novels and short stories, and collaborative film, *Warrior Marks* (Parmar), Walker has also published non-fiction books, several of them collections of her essays (Harrison). She edited a book in which a collection of the famous Harlem Renaissance, New Negro Movement writer, folklorist, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston's writings or excerpts of longer works are reprinted (Walker). Walker played a major role in the resurgence of interest in Hurston, whose books had gone out of print and been erased from the literary canon. Today Hurston's many books and even her previously unpublished manuscripts are now available.

Another phenomenal writer on whom this book sheds important light is the peerless Octavia Butler, a MacArthur "genius" award-winning novelist, who blurred the boundaries between science fiction, fantasy, and spiritualism (Nicoara). The multi-talented, blurred-genre practices of Black women as cultural producers are evident in the records of many other writers, including Rita Dove, whose 240-page *Sonata Mulattica* poetry collection is described as having "the sweep and vivid characters of a novel" (Doty).

Precedents for these innovative and bold genre-blurring trends were set in the nineteenth century. For example, the nineteenth-century abolitionist Frances Harper was a poet, novelist, essayist, and abolitionist activist (Guy-Sheftall). With contemporaneous writers such as Harriet Jacobs (Goodhead) and, in Brazil, Maria Firmina dos Reis (Duke), Harper contributed racially gendered nuances to the anti-slavery discourse, imagining a future in which Black freedom and equality would prevail.

Combining the art of writing with other expressions and tasks of public intellectualism is a common feature of African American and other Black modes of social and political thought and practice. Recent historical research on the eighteenth-century Senegambian-born poet Phillis Wheatley reframes her as a public intellectual whose poetry and letters had a significant impact on the regime of truth concerning the intellectual capacity and, therefore, the very humanity, of enslaved Africans and African descendants (Frund). Despite the many gaps in documenting Black women's past lives (Hartman), the uneven archival record on the literate and prolific Wheatley convinces Arlette Frund that "she was more than an enslaved woman who wrote poems, who was then discovered by Bostonians. She had a place in the public sphere" (Frund 39). In light of her fame in England and France, that public sphere was transatlantic in scope. This case of the first African American woman to publish a book demonstrates how an expanded contextualization and a multifocal lens can enhance our reading and interpretation of African American and Afro-Atlantic women's literature in refreshingly new ways. We are much better able now to situate these gifted writers in Black women's cultural history and intellectual traditions (Waters and Conaway; Bay, Griffin, Jones, and Savage).

Final Reflection

Let us close with remarks on Toni Morrison, who inspired the perspective I expressed at the beginning of this essay. Two of this book's contributors (Bodistean and Fradj) address the content, context, and implications of four of Toni Morrison's novels—from her first, *The Bluest Eye,* to later works, among them *Jazz* and *Paradise*. In her prodigious creations, which even include insightful literary criticism and a libretto, the text for an opera, "Margaret

Garner" (the historical figure whose act of infanticide is fictionalized in *Beloved*), the "Queen Mother" of African American literature sets the tone for appreciating the balm that artists can apply to social, cultural, and spiritual wounds. These sites of pain and suffering, interlocking inequalities and oppressions, can be healed if we take to heart the ways in which our most visionary writers re-imagine the possibilities for building a humane future. The contributors to this volume are to be commended for shedding light on what is an important body of literature.

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