

Karla Kovalova (ed.)

Black Feminist Literary Criticism

Past and Present

With an Introduction
by Cheryl A. Wall



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EDITION

Preface

Karla Kovalova

In her recent poetry collection *The New Black* (2011), Evie Shockley crafts a poem in memory of Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Sherley Anne Williams, Barbara Christian, Claudia Tate, June Jordan, and Nellie Y. McKay to pay homage to women who, despite having lost their battle with cancer, left a tremendous legacy.¹ As artists and scholars, they channeled into their work love, courage, and beauty, insisting on the transforming potential of literature. Each of these women holds a special place among the founding mothers of black feminist criticism.

This volume has grown out of respect for the scholarship of these women as well as those whose writing continues in line with their legacy. Its genesis can be loosely linked to three events. Event One: In 2006, within its section on “Theories and Methodologies,” *PMLA*, the journal of the Modern Language Association of America, published ten essays by prominent feminist scholars addressing the issue of the relevance of feminist criticism in the twenty-first century. Titled “Symposium: Feminist Criticism Today: In Memory of Nellie McKay,” the selection of essays paradoxically failed to include a black feminist scholar’s perspective on the issue under examination.² Instead, it featured an interview with McKay, the late pioneering black feminist critic, recording her memories about the *past* life of black feminist literary criticism: the emergence of black literature in the academy, and the establishment of black women’s literature in the canon. This oversight left an unanswered question: what is a black feminist response to the issue of the relevance of feminist literary criticism in the twenty-first century?

Event Two: The following year, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* published Farah Jasmine Griffin’s essay “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism.” In this essay, Griffin reviews the production of black feminist literary criticism, noting that by the mid-1990s it had become “one of the most intellectually exciting and fruitful developments in American literary criticism.”³

1 Shockley, Evie: *The New Black*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 2011, p. 12. The title of the poem is “good night women (or, defying the carcinogenic pen).”

2 “Symposium: Feminist Criticism Today: In Memory of Nellie McKay.” *PMLA* 121(5) 2006, pp. 1678–1741.

3 Griffin, Farah Jasmine: “That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32(2) 2007, p. 484.

Although she admits that it has experienced a backlash, she argues that black feminist criticism in the twenty-first century continues to offer a useful mode of analysis and strategy of reading, and that many scholars are continuing to expand the field. Her words resonate in Event Three. In 2010, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* published Ann DuCille's essay "The Short Happy Life of Black Feminist Theory," which returned to the question of black feminist literary criticism in the new millennium.⁴ Arguing that its "short happy life" in academia may have ended in the latter part of the 1990s, the essay demonstrates that as a mode of analysis and a strategy of reading, black feminist criticism has lost none of its strength and potential, and that there are still new paths to take, new trajectories to chart.

This volume attempts to trace the trajectories in black feminist criticism that have emerged in *American* scholarship since the late 1990s, focusing on the field's theoretical contributions to American and English literary production and their impact on other disciplines. Its aim is not to present an exhaustive, comprehensive list of all the trajectories in or theoretical contributions of black feminist literary criticism; clearly, this would be beyond the scope of a project such as this.⁵ Instead, the volume aims to provide space for exploring, in a more coherent and compact way, scholarship that deserves to be treated as a subject of inquiry in the form of a book-length publication.

Since its inception, black feminist criticism has produced a number of sophisticated theoretical works that have challenged traditional approaches to (black) literature as well as assumptions about the canon, the concept of tradition, narrative conventions, and more. Scholars have taken note of these works, yet their writing about black feminist literary-theoretical production has been limited to individual essays, reviews, summary chapters/entries in encyclopedic volumes of African American literature, introductory pages in collections of essays, readers and anthologies related to American literary criticism, and summary chapters/entries in volumes about black feminism, black literary theory or feminist literary theory. While this scholarship is significant and provides an excellent overview of the field's theoretical production, it needs to be expanded. This project hopes to do just that.

4 DuCille, Ann: "The Short Happy Life of Black Feminist Theory." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21(1) 2010, pp. 32–47.

5 The volume is an outcome of a research grant awarded to the editor who had to comply with the rules of the grant-awarding foundation (hence the format of the volume and the greater number of essays written by the editor).

On this note, several clarifications should be made. As is evident from DuCille's essay and the scholarship on black feminist criticism, the boundaries between black feminist criticism and theory are very porous; often the terms are used interchangeably. The contributions in this volume testify to this fact. However, they also make clear that their focus is on black feminist *theorizing*, i.e. on theoretical models/paradigms that can be applied to literature (and, by extension, to extra-literary genres). Also, the editor is aware that black feminist production cannot be limited to scholarship produced solely by black women. However, to make the project manageable, the present volume had to be limited to the theoretical production of U.S. black (i.e. African American) women only.

In order to understand the present, one has to know the past. The volume opens with an introduction by Cheryl A. Wall, "The Writer as Critic in the Emergence of Black Feminism," which explains how black women writers have been fusing the role of artist and critic in their work, while raising important theoretical issues. As Wall contends, this fusion is "a defining element in the development of black feminist criticism," a field that, from its inception, took four paths: 1) recuperation of lost and forgotten artists and texts, 2) textual analysis of black women's writing, 3) cultural analysis focusing on the contexts in which art, both literary and non-literary, was produced by black women, and 4) a turn to diaspora.

Wall also highlights how the theory and praxis of black feminist criticism is premised on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class as interrelated factors in black women's experience. This intersectionality was first theorized in the writing of Barbara Smith, a black lesbian feminist critic who, together with Audre Lorde, changed the face of black women's literary criticism. This is the argument of Chapter I, "*Home Girls and Sister Outsider: The Roots of Black Feminist Literary Criticism*," in which Nagueyalti Warren examines the roots of black feminist criticism and argues that the works of radical lesbian feminists have enabled others to confront openly and honestly the diverse experiences of black women and to critique in writing what marginalized women have said and have written. As Warren notes, black feminist literary criticism might have developed in an entirely different direction had it not been for the lesbian voices calling for an end to silence and challenging black women critics to embrace a new way of seeing/reading.

In Chapter II, "To Use or Not to Use 'the Master's Tools': Black Literary Criticism as a 'Locus of Contradictions' Then and Now," Karla Kovalova returns to Lorde's proverbial statement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" by exploring black feminists' attempts at negotiating the political and ethical implications of the use of Western theory. Using Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory," Joyce A. Joyce's "The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black

American Literary Criticism,” and Hortense J. Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” as a springboard for her discussion, she exposes black feminist literary criticism as “a locus of contradictions,” a site of two seemingly opposing trajectories: one requiring the promotion of African-centered concepts and thus the utter rejection of the “master’s tools,” the other insisting that the enemy must be beaten “at his own game,” thus promoting a subversive use of Western theories. Kovalova identifies the subversive use of psychoanalysis as a particularly productive recent site of discussion about black subjectivity and racial melancholia.

Chapter III, “Black Aesthetics and Literary Tradition: Black Feminist Theorizing in the Twenty-First Century,” examines how the claim of the centrality of the vernacular tradition in black literature has shaped black feminist critics’ approaches to black literature and their theories about the African American literary tradition. Examining a number of recent theoretical productions by Cheryl Wall, Emily Lordi, Evie Shockley, Madhu Dubey and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Kovalova demonstrates how these scholars revise prevailing paradigms of black aesthetics and redefine the boundaries of the black literary canon. While they may have moved away from the original narrow focus on black women’s fiction to discuss black literature written by both men and women, they retain their gender focus as well as their belief that they should take their cues from writers. Attending to the diversity of their voices, they are able to theorize aspects of new black aesthetics that speak to the contemporary moment of the so-called post-racial world.

Chapter IV, “From White Gaze to Black Female Resistance: Street Lit and Popular Cultural Productions in Black Feminist Theorizing” by Heike Raphael-Hernandez, discusses black feminist critics’ theoretical responses to urban fiction or street lit, a highly controversial African American literary genre that has emerged since the 1990s. As Raphael-Hernandez notes, this genre poses a challenge for black feminist critics because, being interested in the discourse on gender identity and race, the writers seem “to allow a possible positioning into earlier, well-established Black feminist literary theories.” On the other hand, however, the positioning does not seem possible due to the specific ways in which the writers focus on class and generation. Chapter IV explores the connections between the new hip-hop generation’s black feminist theorizing and street lit produced by black women writers, and shows how the concept of the gaze can be “utilized as an *affective* tool and strategy for interventions in cultural and social controversies.”

Last but not least, in Chapter V, “Blackness and Whiteness Within and Without the U.S. Context: Pushing the (National) Boundaries of Black Feminist Literary Criticism,” Kovalova argues that the publication of Toni Morrison’s seminal book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination* (1992) helped push black

feminist literary criticism's boundaries beyond the realm of black U.S. literature to encompass productive explorations of other textual territories. Discussing the scholarship of Valerie Babb, Kim F. Hall, Jennifer DeVere Brody, Ann DuCille and Karla FC Holloway, she demonstrates how these explorations contributed not only to a growing body of scholarship on the construction of whiteness in both U.S. and U.K. contexts, clarifying the historical connections between the two countries in terms of racial ideologies/formations and white hegemony, but also to new studies of blackness/race and racial subjectivity/identity in these contexts.

The volume ends with a brief Afterword which summarizes the discussion on trajectories in black feminist criticism that have emerged in American scholarship since the late 1990s, and points to further trajectories and scholarship that deserve critical examination.

Note on terminology

Unless stated otherwise, throughout this collection of essays the terms African American and black are used interchangeably. I have respected the contributors' preferences for the spelling of the word black as either "Black" or "black."

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Czech Science Foundation (GAČR) for the grant that allowed me to pursue the idea of this book and financially supported it. I am equally grateful to my Dean, Ales Zaricky, and my Chair, Andrea Holesova, who granted me a sabbatical semester despite a temporary shortage of staff in our department. It was during the six months in Spring/Summer 2015 that I did most of my research and writing. I thank all my colleagues who suffered the consequences of my absence.

I am also greatly indebted to my esteemed international colleagues Cheryl A. Wall, Nagueyalti Warren, and Heike Raphael-Hernandez, whom I have met over the years on various occasions at CAAR (Collegium for African American Research) conferences, for their willingness to contribute to the project. My special thank-you goes to Professor Cheryl A. Wall, for her invaluable advice on sources during our meeting at Rutgers; to Professor Nagueyalti Warren, for all the email exchanges and the depth she brought to our CAAR 2013 panel on Black Feminist Literary Criticism; and to Professor Heike Raphael-Hernandez for all the wonderful ideas about what the volume could be like (had it not been for the limitations imposed by the grant).

I am deeply grateful to Lisa Groger, Professor Emerita of Gerontology at Miami University, for her idea that I consider doing research at Miami University

Library, and to Jerome Conley, Dean of Miami University Libraries, for allowing me to do that. I am equally grateful to Linda F. Marchant, former Director of the Honors Program at Miami University, who kindly provided me with office space and the most positive working environment I could think of. A big part of the environment were the wonderful members of the Honors Program team—Pam, Annie, Zeb, Dave and Elise—it is to Elise in particular that I extend my thanks. A special thank-you also goes to Tammy Kernodle, Professor of Musicology at Miami University, for all her valuable insights about the special relationship between black music and literature.

During the time that I worked on my chapters, I had the great fortune to discuss some of my ideas with many people. I thank all who listened, read drafts, and offered valuable comments. In particular, I thank Geraldine Smith-Wright, Professor Emerita of English at Drew University, for her wisdom, support and trust.

I also wish to express my deep gratitude to Ute Winkelkoetter from Peter Lang for her enthusiasm about the project and her kind co-operation and patience, making sure the project sees the light of day. I am equally grateful to all the people from my home university who helped solve administrative problems, and to my colleague, Chris Hopkinson, for his meticulous proofreading.

Finally, my biggest thanks go to my family, especially to my husband and my daughter. For everything.