Against Their Will

Black Women Novelists Fictionalizing Narratives of Womanhood, Trauma, and Legacies

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction
Writing Fictionalized Narratives Against Her Will

The Black woman's novelic tradition one may argue began in Africa with the *griot* or oral story telling traditions in which specially trained storytellers recited narratives, chanted, sung, and/or performed requiems in their communities. Their participation in such ceremonial and communal events were accompanied by music, drumming, and dancing before concluding with folkloric recitations. These orally based narrative traditions were transformed during the transatlantic slave trade (16th-19th centuries) as millions of African-born human beings were enslaved, transported, and dispersed in the New World. On plantations in the Caribbean, South America, and the United States, these African-born human beings' syncretized their native storytelling traditions in ways that remained oral but imbrued with new meanings. The African *griots* or storytellers had been tasked with preserving and transmitting these cultural artifacts in their communities, had their roles modified, in the New World, by enslaved African-born women. In time, these women began transmitting ancestral knowledge to succeeding generations with each adding their own lived experiences and social realities to their retellings.

By the nineteenth century, the oral stories that had once been transmitted by such women began finding their home in written accounts such as Hannah Crafts' (b. 1830s) *The Bondwoman's*

Narrative which became the first autobiography written in novelic form by a Black woman in the United States. Authenticated by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Crafts' memoir was published in 2002, however, the year Crafts' manuscript was actually penned remains a point of contention among scholars such as Julie Bosman, Rebecca Soares, and Jean Fagan Yellin. Even though Crafts' work origination date is being disputed in current academic circles, its nineteenth century circulation laid a foundation for the Black women's novelic tradition in the United States. Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was followed by notable works such as Harriet E. Wilson's (1825-1900) *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), an autobiographical novel, and Harriet Jacobs' (1813-1897) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, an autobiographical novel written under the pseudonym Linda Brent. Both Wilson's and Jacobs' books feature their personal narratives blended with fiction which they use to make their stories amendable to diverse audiences. These works demonstrate early Black women novelist endeavors to include Black women voices in larger social narratives regarding womanhood, trauma, and legacies. This practice was elevated by Frances Ellen Watkin Harper (1825-1911), who blended autobiographical accounts with fictionalized narratives in *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), the first fictional novel published by a Black American woman in the United States. While Wilson's and Jacobs' texts blended their autobiographical information with historical accounts, Harper's included fictionalized narrations that emphasized the ways in which Black women endured trauma, navigated womanhood, and how these dynamics interplayed in their daily lives.

According to Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980), "*Iola Leroy* is an

important novel, not because it is a "first" or because it is a good novel, but because it so clearly designates the relationship between the images of black women held at large in society and the novelist struggle to refute these images."[1] In *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*, for instance, Harper chronicles the lived experiences and social realities of Iola Leroy, a mixed raced woman sold into slavery by her white paternal uncle, and concludes with Iola's character embracing her womanhood, reconciling her trauma, and creating her legacies. Using the tragic mulatta trope, Harper introduced Iola's character as an *octoroon* or a Black woman with one-sixteenth African ancestry. Unlike the enslaved persons living and working on her parents' estate, Iola had been educated in the best schools, and she held very strong racist views about slavery. Described as a fair skinned, blue-eyed woman with long-dark hair, and European features, Iola was reared believing that she was a white American female until her father's death when her mixed-race ancestry was revealed. Upon her father's death, a paternal uncle aware of Iola's African ancestry, seized her father's property, enslaved Iola, her mother, and her siblings whom he sold into slavery. Iola was purchased by Master Tom, an abusive man who frequently physically abused and sexually objectified her. Iola manages to escape her circumstances with assistance from Tom Anderson, a Union soldier. Once freed, Iola, passing as a white woman, remained with the Union Army using her lay nursing skills to care for wounded or injured service persons. Soon, Iola gains the affection of Dr. Greshman, a white physician, who wishes to marry her while encouraging her to deny her African ancestry. The relationship ends with Iola choosing to embrace her identity

[1] Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*, (Westport: Praeger, 1980): 5.

as a Black woman and choosing to live her life in-service to her ethnic and gender groups. This unconventional decision, places Iola at odds with many Black Americans who chose to pass for and live as white Americans.

Conversely, Harper uses Iola's character to illustrate the arbitrary limitations placed on and the traumas endured by Black women, regardless of their physical appearance. A trope that Black American novelists who succeeded Harper's work use in their fictionalized narratives to present composite characterization regarding Black women lived experiences and social realities. Harper's *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* incorporates Black American enslavement history which she reveals through Iola's journey towards racial acceptance and ancestral healing. *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* concludes with Iola embracing her womanhood, reconciling her traumas, and creating her own legacies. Black women novelists, like Harper, possess an uncanny ability to incorporate Black women's lived experiences and social realities into their fictionalized accounts. Black women novelists use their texts to "transgress racial, gender, and sexual boundaries" through critiques of "black heteronormative" practices while challenging "paradigms of black womanhood and female sexuality" in their narratives.[2] Tracing Black women novelists literary history, Deborah McDowell in *The Changing Same: Black Woman's Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995) found that such works have undergone limited canonicalization (e.g., anthologies). Using Feminist Criticism as her conceptual framework, McDowell excavates novels by Alice Walker, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Jesse

[2] Trimiko Melancon, *Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014): 2.

Redmon Fauset (1882-1961), Nella Larsen (1891-1964), and Toni Morrison (1931-2019). McDowell found that their novels broke away from established Western literary traditions. She concluded that such authors infused their narratives with semiautobiographical accounts and composite intergenerational narrations.

With McDowell's research fresh in my mind, I read and then reread Crafts', Wilson's, Jacobs', and Harper's, literary offerings in preparation for drafting this book. I viewed their texts as fictionalized narratives anchored in womanhood, trauma, and legacies. I began viewing their characters, setting(s), and plot-points as intertextually related discourses reimagined by authors for specific audiences. Joanne M. Braxton's and Andree Nicola McLaughlin's edited anthology *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra American Cultural and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (1990), suggest in their introduction that scholars explore works by Black women writers intertextually. They argue that such texts are influenced by history, intergenerational stories, and the author's lived experiences which are entrenched in their language use, word choices, accepted meanings, and reappropriated meanings. Such authors intricately connect their narratives with those that predated their works while laying a foundation for those that follow their lead. In this book, the following guiding questions are used: What does against their will infer in the novels selected for this book? How does chosen Black women novelists use this ideation to construct their fictionalized narratives? In what ways to each explore womanhood, trauma, and legacies through their protagonist(s) lived experiences and social realities?

New Generations Testifying and Bearing Witness

The Black woman's novelic tradition, in the United States, is traceable to the 1850s with notable works by Frances Harper and Harriet E. Wilson continuing with autobiographical offerings by Harriet Jacobs and Hannah Crafts. Such works dealt with taboo topics such as sexual assault/harassment, and Black female subjectivity discourses first occurring during American slavery. This writing style splintered from the slave narrative tradition evolving during the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the years of Radical Republican Reconstruction (1865-1877) as evidenced in works by Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907), Charlotte Forten Grimké (1837-1914), Lucy A. Delaney (1830-1891), and Haillie Quinn Brown (1845-1949). During America's post-Reconstruction years which was marked by the passage of Jim Crow segregation laws (1877-1968) that were strictly enforced in the American South. Dissatisfied with their unfair treatment Black Americans began exiting the South, in search of better economic opportunities and social mobility, with many settling in the Northern and Midwestern United States. These laws and the Great Migration (1910s-1970s), a mass exodus of Black Americans from the South changed the lives of Black Americans living in the United States, especially Black women, who endured dual oppression and marginalization.

Although the Black women novelic tradition began experiencing limited productivity during World War I, this literary practice was reignited during the Great Migration, and became a catalyst for later Black American Movements. The 1910s ushered in Black Americans literary, cultural, intellectual, and political renaissance a charge led first by Black men with Black women slowly entering

into these areas. One such movement was the New Negro Movement (1910s-early-1920s) under the leadership of Hubert Henry Harrison (1883-1927), a Saint-Croix-born, political leader who began addressing issues germane to Black Americans in Harlem.

The New Negro Movement was followed by the Harlem Renaissance (late-1910s-mid1920s), a flowering of racial pride and cultural expression in literature, intellectualism, and the arts. The Harlem Renaissance was a youth led movement in which its members created works (e.g., poems, novels, visual art) that "looked to the future" while demonstrating a reverence for Black Americans' ancestral past.[3] The Harlem Renaissance, developed on the cusp of the United States entrance into World War I, in 1917, the return of Black American soldiers, in 1919, and the countries movement away from the Cult of True Womanhood ideals (nineteenth century) and Victorian Era (1837-1901) standards. This transitional period is reflected in notable works such as Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) as well as Zora Neale Hurston's (1891-1960) *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (1928) which introduced succeeding generations to the struggles Black women faced based on their ancestry, skin-color, and physical features. Harlem Renaissance writers regardless of their gender used their texts to separate themselves from Harrison's New Negro Movement's activism by removing politics from the Black American experience in their narratives. Their collective decision to focus on the cultural and literary aspects of Black diasporic storytelling traditions which were continued during Harlem's

[3] Gregory Singleton, "Birth, Rebirth, and the "New Negro" of the 1920s," *Phylon* 43, no. 1 (1982): 31.

Literati (mid-1920s-1930s) under Wallace Thurman's (1904-1934) leadership. Like Crafts', Wilson, Jacobs, and Harper, Thurman used autobiographical information in his novel *The Blacker the Berry: A Novel* (1929) which he blended with fiction to create a narrative centered on Emma Lou, the book's protagonist, experiences as a dark complexioned, young woman in a society that failed to see her as human. Such political, cultural, and literary movements (e.g., New Negro Movement, Harlem Renaissance, Harlem's Literati) coincided with or emerged on the cusp of various historical moments in the United States. These events coupled with the Great Depression (1929-1939), witnessed Black American women authors (e.g., Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston) writing and publishing novels that incorporated social critiques blended with fictionalized accounts detailing Black women's lived experiences and social realities.

The mid-twentieth century witnessed Black Americans increased discontentment with racism, inequality, and other systemic oppressive marginalization as evidenced by the American Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) and the Black Arts Movement (1965-1975). Such political unrest among Black Americans became a catalyst for Black women novelists such as Jamaica Kincaid, Maya Angelou (1928-2014), Paule Marshall (1929-2019) and Ntozake Shange (1948-2018) publishing texts exploring womanhood, trauma, and legacies through their Black female protagonists. In *Unbought and Unbossed: Transgressive Black Women, Sexuality, and Representation* (2014), Trimiko Melancon analyzes how Black women authors use their texts to "transgress racial/gender/sexual boundaries" through critiques of heteronormativity and sexuality paradigms. Using relevant excerpts from novels by Toni Morrison, Ann Allen Shockley, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Gloria Naylor,

Melancon found that their works negotiate while problematizing popular literary tropes centering on Black women's womanhood, traumas, and legacies discourses. Melancon concluded that Black women novelists produce narratives with Black female characters that "participate in various transgressive acts (e.g., promiscuity, adultery, lesbianism, un-mothering)."[4] During this time, Black women novelists produced texts that incorporated social critique into their fictionalized narratives. Novels such as Ann Petry's (1908-1997) *The Street* (1946) and Dorothy West (1908-1998) *The Living is Easy* (1948) used composite female characters to chronicle the harsh realities (e.g., economic stagnation, sexism, classism) facing Black women in the post-World War II (1939-1945) United States. These themes were revisited in novels produced during the Black Arts Movement in works such as Rosa Guy's (1922-2012) *Bird at My Window* (1966) and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). By the end of the 1960s, the American Civil Rights Movement and the Black Arts Movement were becoming distant memories in the Black American political and literary landscapes, respectively.

Black women, like their white counterparts, found themselves in a cultural revolutions in which they sought to have their voices heard and narratives included in large conversations surrounding womanhood, trauma, and legacies. These dynamics laid a literary foundation in which the Black novelist tradition was reimagined and revitalized by a new generation of writers in the 1970s and 1980s with a third revival occurring in the 1990s. Studying works by Black women writers and poets, in **"**The Beauty of Burden: Cultural Aesthetics of Black Women Writers and Poets" (2017), I

[4] Melancon, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 2.

analyze how these women explore womanhood, trauma, and legacies in their texts across "language, spatial relations, and history."[5] I determined that such texts contain an "evolving consciousness" in which oral storytelling was interwoven into these printed narratives.[6] Such "grandma tales" depict womanhood and sexuality through intertextual discourses thematized as exploitation, objectification, and patriarchy.[7]For this reason, the Black women novelists I selected for this book works bear witness to the lived experiences and social realities of other Black women; hence, making their narratives "less discreet and more viable" for their readers.[8] These writers create Black female protagonists whose narratives provide testimonials while reconstructing the challenges faced by Black women in their daily lives past and present. Using the sociopolitical climate of the larger society as a literary foundation, Black women novelists reappropriate Western literary expectations in ways that reaffirm their against their will writing style which like "their history, is an amalgam, a mixture of elements, some carefully and purposefully created and some a matter of coincidence or convenience."[9]

I have selected Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Octavia E. Butler, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, and Edwidge Danticat

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[5] Henry A. Giroux, "Public Pedagogy as Cultural Politics: Stuart Hall and the 'Crisis' of Culture," *Cultural Studies* 14, no. 2 (2000): 354.
[6] Joanne Braxton & Andree Nicola McLaughlin, *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra American Cultural and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990): xxii.
[7] Trinh Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989): 119.
[8] Roxie L. Foster, "Addressing Epistemological and Practical Issues in Multimethod Research: A Procedure for Conceptual Triangulation," *Advances in Nursing Science* 20, no. 2 (1997): 6.
[9] Foster, "Addressing Epistemological and Practical Issues," 6.

because their works embodies a writing style that enables them to incorporate their lived experiences and social realities into their fictionalized narratives. This method enabled Morrison, Jones, Walker, Butler, Naylor, Shange, and Danticat to create alternative pathways for adding Black women's voices to discourses regarding womanhood, trauma, and legacies while gaining social positioning in the public sphere. A contention made by Susan Willis in *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (1987) states that "the black woman's relationship to history is first of all a relationship to mother and grandmother" which Black women novelists engage their foremothers' narratives when creating stories using their present-day lens.[10] Additionally, Willis asserts that Black women novelists bonds are inspired by their interactions with other Black women and are fostered by a shared history and commonalities across lived experiences and social realities. Such authors use their works to speak these unspoken dialogues against prevailing discourses regarding womanhood, trauma, and legacies in their narratives. Their literary history began in the seventeenth century and continues in the present-day with Black women novelists reframing these larger discourses in their fictionalized narratives.

Revitalizing a Writing Tradition

Black women novelist works published in the 1970s have been classified in scholarship as a "second renaissance" with authors such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison breaking down literary barriers across intersections of race, gender, class, and

[10] Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987): 5.

geography.[11] Following the "black cultural nationalist movement" in the United States the Black women novelists tradition was revitalized by its participants' desire to bring a "Black Aesthetic" to their fictionalized narratives.[12] Their novels shifted from including autobiographical information towards "race centered" narratives that included cultural, political, and intergenerational discourses regarding womanhood, trauma, and legacies. Using Black Feminist Criticism and Black Aesthetic Theory, Madhu Dubey in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994) investigates how Black women novelic texts published in "the wake of the Black Aesthetic Movement" interrogated larger social narratives surrounding Black women's lived experiences and social realities.[13] Analyzing Morrison's *Sula* (1973), Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man* (1976), and Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Dubey determined that Morrison, Jones, and Walker incorporated stereotypical representations and oral folk culture into their fictionalized narratives. Dubey maintains that in literature published by white authors Black womanhood and sexuality are represented as cojoined paradigms that Black women novelists explore as distinctly separate discourses in their texts.

For instance, Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*, centers around Eva Medina Canada, the novel's protagonist and anti-hero lived experiences and social realities from girlhood into womanhood. Published in

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[11] Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994): 1. Black Aesthetic: catalyzed the remarkable formal experimentation of black literature during the 1960s and 1970s (Dubey 1)

[12] Dubey, *Black Women Novelists*, 1.

[13] Dubey, *Black Women Novelists*, 1; Black Aesthetic Movement: catalyzed the remarkable formal experimentation of Black literature during the 1960s and 1970s. Dubey, *Black Women Novelists*, 1.

1976, *Eva's Man* chronicles the sexual exploitation, molestations, sexual assaults, endured by Eva. The novel opens with Eva incarcerated in a prison for the criminal insane following her murder and mutilation of Davis Carter, her tormentor and paramour. Written as a cyclic narrative, *Eva's Man* contains repetitive storytelling told through flashbacks and flashforwards with fragmented characters inserting their trauma stories (e.g., naming, loss, victimization) into Eva's narrations. Eva begins her storytelling by describing how "the men she encountered regarded her as sexual property and reacted with violence if she rejected their approaches."[14] When Eva meets Davis, he quickly becomes her lover, and he imprisons Eva (e.g., physically, sexually, and mentally) in a one room apartment. Davis regularly visits Eva and prepares her his favorite meal, but he is only interested in using her for his own personal and sexual gratification. However, when Eva requests her freedom, Davis ignores her, with few alternatives available Eva ends their relationship by murdering and dismembering Davis. Eva's character embodies the prevailing stereotypical representations (e.g., Jezebel, Sapphire) used in larger social narratives to define Black women as whores and bitches. Using Eva, Jones creates a composite character exhibiting Black women's lived experiences, social realities, and traumas. By retelling the same story from multiple points of view, Eva exhibits mental instability which Jones uses to linguistically illustrate "the pain between African American women and men" through Eva's complicated intimate relationship with Davis.[15] This motif is reinforced as Eva's narratives progresses and her "memory

[14] Abdul Quadir, "Slavery and Africanism in Gayl Jones' Novels, *LELLH International Journal of English Language, Literature, in Humanities* V, no. V (2017): 76.
[15] Quadir, "Slavery and Africanism," 76.

disintegrates" which contributes to her being viewed as an unreliable narrative over the course of the novel.[16] The novel concludes with Eva experiencing a liberatory praxis as embraces her womanhood, she releases her past traumas, and rewrites her legacies through receiving cunnilingus from another woman.

Primarily, Black women novelists endeavored to create positive representations of Black women by addressing discourses of womanhood, trauma, and legacies in their fictionalized narratives. These writers blended historical accounts, semiautobiographical information, and situated knowledge in their stories to create narratives that engage in intergenerational conversations with one another and with their readers. In *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*, an anthology edited by Mary Helen Washington contain essays that analyzed eight monographs (e. g, novels, short stories) written by Black women over a one-hundred-year period. Washington found that although these women incorporated encoded messages in their texts and avoided explicit discussions of sex and sexuality, they still encountered difficulty establishing themselves as writers. Their voices remained silenced with the exception of Hariett Jacobs, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston who used their texts to challenge larger societal expectations for Black women. Such novelists use their fictionalized narratives to explore womanhood, trauma, and legacies rooted in their lived experiences and social realities in their fictionalized narratives. Over the years, their words have become instrumental in challenging Black women with questions regarding the what it means to be a woman and to have womanhood. Questions Hazel Carby endeavors to answer in

[16] Quadir, "Slavery and Africanism," 76.

Reconsidering Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (1987) by analyzing the ideological foundations inherent in Black women novelist texts. Using novels published during the nineteenth century, Carby determined that Black women novelists used their fictionalized narratives in ways that situated and inserted Black womanhood into larger womanhood discourses. Carby concluded that this approach enabled Black women novelists to empower their readers while opening spaces for them to "exert a political presence" in the larger society.[17]

With the rising popularity of novels written and published by Black women in the 1970s and 1980s, Black women novelists began "to gain a public voice" by confronting "dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood" in the larger society.[18] Notable works such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster's Place* (1989), and Terry MacMillian's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) have worked to celebrate "the uniqueness of the African American female's situation in that she stands at the crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologies in America, that regarding women and that regarding [Black]."[19] The women authors I selected for this book, works interconnects with one another in ways that create a relationship among their characters and narratives anchored in discourses of womanhood, trauma, and legacies.

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[17] Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989): 4.
[18] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 6.
[19] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999): 27.

Opening Spaces to Stake My Claim

The idea for this book emerged during my dissertation process when I was reviewing old class papers endeavoring to decide on a final research topic. Initially, I wanted to explore Black womanhood and sexuality through popular cultural artifacts such as music videos, song lyrics, movies, books, and visual arts. Such an undertaking would have possibly taken more years than I had remaining in my field of study, nonetheless, I outlined this broad topic and presented it during the proposal stage to my dissertation committee. These individuals asked questions and made suggestions that contributed to my decision to scale this topic down and reframe it into a smaller more realistic project. I returned before my committee members a few months later, having pick one video, song, movie, book, and image, with what I thought was a more refined topic and presented it as my research proposal. After an exhaustive debate, I was instructed to choose one work that stood out from the others and make that my primary focus with the sources from the other areas serving as examples at various points in my research. Needless to say, I was disappointed, but I was undeterred, I retained my initial broad topic Black womanhood and decided to conduct a case study using a spoken word poem. I chose to use "Project Princess" by Dr. Tracie Morris as an exercise in how Black women artists perceived and presented womanhood in their narratives.

While conducting research on this narrowed topic, I read semiautobiographical novels such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, as well as Frances Watkins Harper's fictional novel *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted,* among others. Returning to my

original vision for my dissertation, I decided to expand this idea to Black women novelists and limit the number to seven while including earlier texts from other Black women novelists as examples. I revisited "Black Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two Women's Autobiographies" (1991), in which Beth Maclay Doriani analyzes works by two Black women writers as autobiographies in dialogue with one another. Using the idea of a "black female autobiographical self," Doriani juxtapositioned the dialogue contained in each novel, and she found that their works possessed an oratorical and rhetorical style rooted in themes of self-determinism and identity. These works laid a foundation for the present research because they provided me with womanhood narratives embedded with trauma and legacies. This realization led me to reread Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980), in which Christian excavates novels by contemporary Black women writers that considered extensions of an undocumented history. Christian found that such texts, revealed a Black woman's consciousness and their narratives redefined the Black female body devoid of stereotypical representations.

After reviewing Christian's book, I returned to ideas surrounding against their will while writing "Reading, Singing, and Viewing Rape: Uncovering Hidden Messages of Manhood and Womanhood in Popular Culture" (2020), an article exploring rape culture in the larger society. I reviewed song lyrics, a cinematic offering, and a novel which revealed to me themes anchored in womanhood, trauma, and legacies. I used this research discovery as a foundation for this book, but I limited my scope to how against their appears in Black women novelists fictional narratives. I then

dissected this larger topic into smaller segments using works by Morrison, Jones, Walker, Butler, Shange, Naylor, and Danticat to explore how Black women novelists construct womanhood, trauma, and legacies in their texts. I remembered that scholars such as Hazel Carby and Erlene Stetson edited anthologies that introduced works by Black women novelists like Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, and Ann Petry to contemporary readers. Carby and Stetson selected works that ventured to insert Black women's unspoken dialogues into larger conversations of womanhood, specifically Black womanhood, through each author's fictional narratives. Such authors used their texts to insert their voices into womanhood discourse that previously had excluded or marginalized Black women and their experiences. Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought: African American, Gender, and the New Racism* (1990) contends that race, gender, and class are interrelated intersections where oppression restricts Black women being viewed positively in the larger society. Collins maintains that Black women have created texts (e.g., fiction, poetry) to combat these dynamics and challenge their systematic subjugation in large societal womanhood discourses. Eurocentric standards for womanhood, specifically white womanhood, were popularized in the nineteenth century by the *Cult of Domesticity* which provided expectations for middle-class white women with regards to purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity.

Reference in scholarship as the *Cult of True Womanhood*, these gendered social norms were derived from Victorian era beliefs about the virtues that white middle-class women were required to exhibit privately and publicly. These European values also excluded lower-class white women as well as Black women, despite their class designation (e.g., enslaved, free woman of

color). *The Cult of True Womanhood* laid a foundation for beauty ideas that placed white women on a pedestal while Black women were ascribed stereotypical representations such as Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, or "exotic" with their womanhood signifiers monetized. Tracing Black women literary offerings through coupling themes (e.g., marriage, heteronormativity) contained in their narratives Ann duCille's "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies" (1993) asserts that each Black women's novelic offerings contained historical specificity. du Cille concluded that these texts retold the same narratives using a mixture of orality and textual structures reminiscent of African oral storytelling traditions. Dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, Black women novelists began redefining womanhood, by creating works that "probed literary possibilities for changing their circumstances and for support of their endeavors" with their narratives.[20] These women historically recontextualize larger social narratives regarding womanhood and recast them with trauma stories and unpinned legacies discourses. This writing approach enable Black women novelists to break social imposed silences placed on their race and gender while enabling them to bear witness and testify about their experiences in the public domain. Such writers use "the word as a tool and a weapon to correct, to create, and to confirm their visions of life as it was and as it could become.[21]

Retelling the same stories from multiple points of view is a powerful textual format employed by Black women novelists. This technique enable these writers to reach beyond the written page

[20] Foster, "Addressing Epistemological and Practical Issues," 7.
[21] Foster, "Addressing Epistemological and Practical Issues," 2.

and tap into their readers prior knowledge. The ability that Black women novelists such as Morrison, Jones, Walker, Butler, Shange, Naylor, and Danticat to recreate the lived experiences of Black women and situate them in their fictional narratives displays a depth understanding of this group's past realities. Their written words provide readers with a symbolic "laying on of hands" a common physical practice in African traditions and in Black American cultural practices. In "A Laying on of Hands: Black Women Writers Exploring the Roots of Their Folk and Cultural Tradition" (1990), Joanne V. Gabbin describes texts produced by Black women writers as aesthetic forms of self-expression giving voice and agency to Black women. Gabbin concluded that such narratives enable Black women writers to ground womanhood discourses in their lived experiences, social realties, and cultural traditions. Black women novelists use their female characters to create stories that challenge stereotypical representations such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire. The fictionalized narratives contained in the novels chosen for this book restructures each character's journey toward womanhood while highlighting their ability to meaningfully resolve their trauma(s), and develop their legacies.

By using their texts to bridge their folk and cultural traditions, Black women novelists texts inherently frame, refashion, and incorporates their ancestral and "historical experiences" for succeeding generations. [22] In *African American Women's Rhetoric:*

[22] Joanne V. Gabbin, "A Laying on of Hands: Black Women Writers Exploring the Roots of Their Folk and Cultural Tradition," in Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, (Eds.), *Wild Women In the Whirlwind: Afra American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990): 252.

The Search for Dignity, Personhood, and Honor (2009), Deborah F. Atwater investigates African American women's rhetorical practices over a one-hundred-year period. Beginning with Sarah Baartman (alias The Hottentot Venus), Atwood analyzes how African descended women were victimized by Eurocentric views of womanhood, beauty, and female sexuality. Atwood, then, transitions her investigation into how these narratives were recontextualized during slavery in ways that traumatized generations of Black American women through sexual assaults, systemic marginalization, and patriarchal subjugation. She concludes this exploration in the twentieth century reflection upon how such Eurocentric ideations and the traumas inflicted during American slavery permeates contemporary discourses regarding dignity, personhood, and honor which Black women novelist address via their fictionalized narratives.

The nineteenth century ushered in a new consciousness renaissance that challenging the meaning behind Black and woman. Meanwhile, Black women writers began using their texts to establish a platform for inserting their voices into these larger conversations across intersections of race, gender, class, and geography. Early works sought to reclaim the Black female body, deconstruct stereotypes, and present positive narratives regarding Black women. In "The Dialectics of Black Womanhood" (1979), Bonnie Thornton Dill argues that the standards shaping Black womanhood are anchored in negative stereotypes and social policies. Dill declared that Black women needed to create counternarratives challenging larger social views surrounding Black womanhood. Through their written texts, Black women novelists contest and reimagine the stereotypical representations that have been used to define Black womanhood, manufacture

Black women's trauma(s), and disrupt their legacies. Modernized in the 1970s and 1980s, the Black woman's literary tradition enabled Black women novelists such as Morrison, Jones, Walker, Butler, Shange, Naylor, Danticat to use their texts to expand their novelic stories in ways that include semiautobiographical accounts blended with fiction. This approach enable such novelist to provide alternative explanations for an experience, event, or phenomenon through their female characters lived experiences and fictionalized realities.

Finding Order in Chaos

Black women novelists have been using their shared historical experiences (e.g., slavery, dual oppression) to create fictionalized narratives that challenge larger societal discourses surrounding womanhood, trauma, and legacies. Their texts have gained momentum in the public sphere as succeeding generations of Black women novelists such as Tomi Adeyemi (*Children of Blood and Bone*), Sadeqa Johnson (*Yellow Wife: A Novel*), and Yaa Gyasi (*Homegoing*) continuing to use their texts to expand these literary perimeters across intersections of race, gender, class, and geography. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Black women novelists participated in a literary tradition that enable them to bear witness and testify to the atrocities that Black women have endured and continue to withstand. Their fictionalized narratives relay "an evolving consciousness" that reimagine these discourses while transforming these narratives across time and space.[23] Viewing Black women novelists as storytellers, I situate their works on a literary continuum in which womanhood, trauma, and

[23] Braxton & McLaughlin, *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*, xxii.

legacies are explored through their fictionalized narratives. While scholarship has begun exploring Black women novelists contributions to literature, they have failed to investigate how their works are part of an ongoing intergenerational conversation. Recalling the argument that Erlene Stetson made in *Black Sisters: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980* (1981) in which she examine poems produced by Black women over a one hundred-and thirty-four-year span. Stetson found that Black women poets texts were intertextually related discourses connected by themes (e.g., womanhood, trauma, legacies) that transcended time and space.

For the purposes of this book, I expanded Stetson's assertion regarding intertextuality among works by Black women poets to include Black women novelists which contributed to my decision to use Intertextuality Theory as this book's conceptual framework. A literary theory examining how one text constructs an individual's understanding of another text, Intertextuality Theory enabled me to deliberate on how the novels selected for this book engage in conversation with one another and the larger society. In "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community" (1986), James E. Porter describes intertextuality as "the bits and pieces of text that writers or speakers borrow and sew together to create new discourses" a description that provided me with a strong conceptual foundation in which to situate my current research undertaking.[24] Using Porter's study as a guide, I began considering texts produced by Black women novelists as "grandma tales" drawn from their lived experiences and blended

[24] James E. Porter, "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," *Rhetoric Review* 5, no. 1 (1986): 34.

with the meaning that they wish to convey to their readers.[25] Such narrations have in many cases been passed down from one generation to the next with each succeeding generation adding their interpretation and inferred meanings to their narratives. Black women novelists such as those selected for this book create stories that deconstruct larger social narratives into smaller texts situated in present-day context.

With roots in semiotics and linguistics, Intertextuality Theory enabled me to prioritize these writers language use, word choices, accepted meanings, and inferred meanings through a comparative analysis of their texts. In this book, intertextuality references "a system of interdependent codes" in which language and meaning "evolve and change across texts, but remain in conversation with those texts while engaging in dialogues with other works."[26] Viewing Black women novelists works as fictionalized narratives regarding womanhood, trauma, and legacies, I began searching for a qualitative research methodology that would enable me to analyze their texts as data.

Realizing that "we understand a text only insofar as we understand its precursors," I began considering the relationship between the novels selected for this book by connecting theme to one another based on their overarching themes and their unspoken underpinnings.[27] This approach led me to consider Case Study, Phenomenology, and Ethnography before deciding to employ Narrative Inquiry. This qualitative research method blends

[25] Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, 119.
[26] Tammie Jenkins, "A Case Study of Tracie Morris' Project Princess," Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, Diss., (2014): 13.
[27] Porter, "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," 13.

linguistics, psychology, sociology, and philosophy in ways that enabled me to explore "existing structural understandings of the world" by analyzing the relationship between language and meaning in these discourses.[28] Narrative Inquiry enable researchers to collect, analyze, and interpret data from a variety of sources (e.g., stories, visual arts, pictures) and draw meaning based on alternative factors (e.g., prior knowledge, lived experiences).

For instance, Kenneth Fasching-Varner in "Pedagogy of Respect: The Inter-Generational Influence of Black Women" (2006) uses vignettes and his personal memories to compares the pedagogical approaches employed by Black women educators and their non-Black women counterparts. Fasching-Varner determined that Black women educators displayed a respect for their students rooted in their lived experiences which they reflected through their instructional styles. I extend Fasching-Varner's assertion to include Black women novelists who like Black women educators transmit knowledge to others through their chosen medium. The Black women novelists selected for this book possess an ability to bring marginalized discourses regarding womanhood, trauma, and legacies to the forefront of the American literary consciousness. These individuals embody a pedagogical awareness that transcends the intersections of race, gender, class, and geography which enable them to articulate culturally informed ways of knowing and understanding the world to their readers.

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[28] Deborah Youdell, "Diversity, Inequality, and a Post-Structural Politics for Education," *Discourse* 27, no. 1 (2006): 35.

Black women novelists use their texts to connect readers to a recent past and encouraging them to reimagine the present while working to improve their future. Their texts contain an interactive narrative style that convey to readers an aura of realism reflected through their fictionalized narratives. Remembering that Catherine Kohler Reissman in *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (2008) contends that "narratives are composed for particular audiences at moments in history, and they draw on taken-for-granted discourses and values circulating in a particular culture."[29] A complex approach for deriving and interpreting data obtained from stories, Narrative Inquiry enable researchers to present their findings in ways that allow for multiple conclusions and alternative explanations to emerge simultaneously. Black women novelists employ rhetorical skills in their texts that enable them to position themselves and their narratives in ways that engage readers while maintaining their connection to previous texts. Such reciprocal relationships enable these novelist to redirect these conversations from the present into the recent past and back again. This enable readers to pay strict attention to these novelists language use, word choices, accepted meanings, and inferred meanings in a given text across multiple readings. The works selected for this book offer readers a broad fictionalized narrative literary lens for excavating the treatment that Black women endure in the larger society particularly in conversations surrounding womanhood, trauma, and legacies.

[29] Catherin Kohler Reissman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008): 3.

Parentage and Birthing Order

The Black women novelists chosen for this book unapologetically dispel stereotypical representations such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire while endeavoring to "normalize black womanhood" and "black identity" construction in their narratives.[30] A gap in knowledge that this book attempts fill explores the contributions that Black women novelists have made in fictionalizing narratives relating to womanhood, traumas, and legacies. Using singular monolithic texts by Morrison, Jones, Walker, Butler, Shange, Naylor, and Danticat present readers with strong female characters whose lived experiences, social realities, and storytelling navigate their womanhood, heal their traumas, and create their legacies. The introductory chapter provides a discussion of the book's topic, sets its perimeters, outlines its conceptual framework and qualitative research methodology, as well as its scope and sequence for remaining chapters. Chapter one begins with Toni Morrison's life in Lorrain, Ohio and discusses her extensive literary career. Then, shifts into an extensive analytical exploration and synoptical discussion of *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In chapter two, Gayl Jones' biographical sketch and novelic synopsis is presented. This discussion then, segways into the sociopolitical climate that influenced Jones' female characters' development in *Corregidora* (1975).

Meanwhile, chapter three opens with an overview of Alice Walker's life and literary contributions. This chapter then transitions into the construction of Walker's strong female character in *Meridian* set against America's changing sociopolitical

[30] Melancon, *Unbought and Unbossed*, 3.