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18 'Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something': African-American Women's Historical Novels

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The title of my essay is taken from a radio interview Ntozake Shange did with Toni Morrison in 1978, just after she had published *Song of Solomon*.[1] Morrison's comment referred to a generation of Afro-Americans of the post-World War II era who had seen the new possibilities that period seemed to promise for their children and who thought that knowledge of their history—one of enslavement, disenfranchisement, and racism—might deter the younger generation's hopes for the future. As Morrison put it, the older generation of that era sometimes X'd out the southern grandfather who had been a sharecropper and tried to forget the brutality of the African-American past. Margaret Walker tells a similar story of how her mother resented the stories about slavery her grandmother told the young Margaret . . .[2] Alice Walker tells us in a BBC documentary that her family spoke 'in whispers' about certain parts of their history, whispers which she said fascinated her.[3] These African-American writers, as well as many others, comment on the ambivalence their families felt toward the African-American past.

In the eighties, Morrison, Alice Walker, as well as Sherley Anne Williams, previously a poet and playwright, have written African-American historical novels, a sign of these writers' desire to re-vision African-American history from their imaginative and informed point of view. This trend, I think, indicates the fascination not only of novelists and scholars but also of many other women who share the experiences of African-American women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries . . .

This is not to say that as a group, contemporary African-American

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women writers had not previously recalled the past. However, generally speaking, they had reached back to the period of their mothers' lives, from the 1920s to the 1960s, to a past that often involved shifts of values in African-American communities, sometimes migration from the rural South or West Indies to the small-town or urban North. So, for example, Morrison's first three novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974), *Song of Solomon* (1977), much of Walker's short fiction as well as her novels, Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Gloria Naylor's 'Mattie Michaels' section of *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) explore the twenties, thirties and forties from the African-American women's perspective. [. . .] All were propelled by the stories their mothers told them about their lives.

During the last decade, these writers have also probed their own contemporary context. Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* (1971) and Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) ask pivotal questions about girls and women who were living in the decade of the intense 'black consciousness', the 1960s. Morrison, in *Tar Baby* (1981), Bambara in *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1974) and Shange in *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1982) explore the relationships of women and men as affected by the second wave of feminism, although from very different points of view. Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1982), Morrison in *Tar Baby*, Naylor in *Linden Hills* (1985) examine the effects of middle-class mobility among some blacks during the 1960s and 1970s, while in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), Naylor tells the story of underclass contemporary African-American women. African-American women have even extended the present into the future, as Susan Willis pointed out in her study, *Specifying* (1982), the most overt work being Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980). As a group then, contemporary African-American women have written about every decade of the twentieth century, and about every region of this country—the North, the Midwest, the South and the West, the country, small town and inner city—as well as the underclass and the middle class. And they have even traveled in their fiction beyond the geographical borders of this country to the Caribbean, to Europe and to Africa.

Yet, even as many of these writers have, in their earlier novels, focussed on the twentieth century, they have, in these same novels, taken us back in time [. . .] Even when major characters resist the past, as Macon and Milkman Dead do in *Song of Solomon*, or Avey Johnson does in *Praisesong for the Widow*, it intrudes itself upon their consciousness through dream and/or song and especially the sense of dis-ease they feel in the present. The use of history in the novels of

contemporary African-American women writers, then, is constant and consistent.

Although previous novels have used history within the context of the present and the future, however, most of them would not have been properly called historical novels. In the last few years, novels by African-American women have explored those very periods that some post-World-War II African-Americans had attempted to erase. So, *The Color Purple* (1982) is set in Reconstruction Georgia, *Beloved* (1987) in the post-slavery years and *Dessa Rose* (1986) in the 1840s at the height of American slavery. These three novels are historical in that they recall a life that no longer exists and recreate societies that are apparently past. In examining this trend in African-American women's writing, I am not only interested in the novels themselves but also in why they are appearing at this particular time.

In order to understand the ways these contemporary novels revision history, first it is necessary, I think, to emphasize that historical novels by African-American women have appeared before and that there are pieces written by African-American women during the periods about which these three contemporary novels are written.

There is a small but important body of female slave narratives in which successful runaway slaves record aspects of their experience. Perhaps the most notable of these is *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) written by Harriet Jacobs under the pseudonym, Linda Brent. [. . .] Jacobs codes her narrative and often tells the reader that because of modesty, a specifically female term, and her desire not to offend her audience, a specifically African-American consideration, she had to omit certain details of her life story.

In the introductory remarks to her reading of *Beloved* at the University of California at Berkeley in October 1987, Toni Morrison emphasized the consistency with which the slave narrators made such statements.[4] Morrison pointed out that their omissions were partly due to the fact that these ex-slaves addressed a white audience. Even more important, she suggested, they omitted events too horrible and too dangerous for them to recall. Morrison went on to state that these consistent comments made by nineteenth-century ex-slaves about the deliberate omissions in their narratives intrigued her and that this was the initial impulse for her writing the novel that would become *Beloved*. Clearly one of the major themes of this masterpiece is the paradox of 're-memory'. Morrison emphasizes this theme throughout the novel and reiterates it in the last words of *Beloved*: 'This was not a story to pass on.'[5] [. . .]

Not only were the slave narrators restrained by 'modesty' and by 'audience' from not passing on some stories, so were African-American nineteenth-century novelists. In *Clotel* (1851), the first novel published by an African-American writer in this country, William Wells Brown made palatable the experience of his quadroon slave heroine by fashioning her character according to the acceptable ideal image of woman at that time. Thus, Clotel is beautiful/fair, thoroughly Christian and European upper class in her demeanor and language. African-American women writers also used this construct, most notably Frances Harper in *Iola LeRoy* (1892) . . .

What is *not* focused on in these novels is as important as the images these writers emphasized. For in these novels, little light is shed on the experiences and cultures of 'ordinary' slaves like Sethe or on their relationships or communities. Clotel grows up with her mother who, because she is the 'natural wife' of her master, lives in a fairy-tale-like cottage completely apart from other slaves. Nor is she subjected to the hard labor usually exacted from other slaves. Iola LeRoy is a slave, but only for a short time and had, as a 'white' woman, been educated in fine schools. While Brown and Harper give us hints through some minor characters of the physically and psychologically harsh conditions under which most slaves lived, they reserved privileged positions for their heroines, thus exhibiting even more modesty than the slave narrators. For the sentimental romance form demanded not only a beautiful refined heroine but also that the story be entertaining and edifying.

An idea such as the one that generates *Beloved*, the existence of a 'haint', a visitor from the past in which the major characters naturally believe, though an important belief in African-American culture, could not possibly have been seriously considered by these nineteenth century novelists. They would have been fully cognizant of the detrimental effects that such a 'superstitious', or non-Christian concept would have had on their own people. Nor could nineteenth century audiences react favorably to a contrary slave like Dessa Rose who attacks her master and leads a slave rebellion that results in the death of many whites.[6] Such audiences would have been even more alarmed by the presentation of a 'crazy' slave like Sethe who would kill her own child rather than have her returned to slavery. Clearly Brown and Harper, leading activists of their day would have heard about such events—certainly, the story of Margaret Garner, on which *Beloved* is based, was sensational enough to be known by Harper.[7] But she, as well as other African-American writers, could not muddy the already

murky waters of sentiment toward the Negro by presenting characters who might terrify their readers.

That these nineteenth-century writers were constrained by the socio-political biases of their time is graphically demonstrated by the disappearance of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1858). Although Mrs Wilson wrote a fluent, strong-voiced novel which is obviously autobiographical, although she employed a form which fused elements of the slave narrative and sentimental romance that readers expected in works written by Blacks and by women, *Our Nig* did not cater to the accepted mores of the time. By emphasizing the racism of Mrs Bellmont, her northern white mistress, by exposing racism in the North, as well as by ending her story with her desertion by her fugitive-slave husband, Frado, the protagonist of *Our Nig*, questioned the progressive platform of her time—that white northern women were the natural allies of blacks, that the North was not racist, that all Black men were devoted to the women of their race.

Equally important, Frado herself is the result of an interracial marriage between a white woman and a Black man, a type of union that was simply not supposed to have existed. Readers could cope with Clotel and Iola's ancestry—that their father was white, their mother Black. But acknowledging that white women would willingly be sexually involved with Black men was opposed to white women's sacred position—that they were a treasure to be possessed only by white men. The reception of *Dessa Rose* in this decade illustrates the longevity of this taboo. For many readers, Black and white, are stunned, sometimes offended by the sexual relationship between Mis Rufel, a white mistress, and Nathan, a runaway slave, despite the historical evidence that such relationships existed.

The disappearance of *Our Nig* for some one hundred years was also due to doubts raised about its authorship. Like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Our Nig* was thought to have been written by a white woman because of its point of view and its excellent style. So, in his 1983 introduction to this newly discovered classic, Henry Louis Gates had to spend many pages establishing Mrs Wilson's existence, that she was a free Black woman, and that the incidents in *Our Nig* are based on her life. When nineteenth-century African-Americans wrote in a manner that did not correspond to deeply held opinions of their time, their very authorship was put in question. Such a restriction, the ultimate one for writers in that it obliterates their very existence, would certainly have affected the way they wrote about African-Americans.

One critical area in which these writers were restricted is their very medium, that of language. Since slaves were hardly conceived of as human beings who had a culture, their language was emphatically discredited. Such a devaluation is central to what experiences could be passed on, for language is the repository of anyone's point of view on experience, whether it is that of oppression, resistance to it, or a value system. Yet African-American language could not be seriously fashioned by nineteenth-century writers to dramatize their characters' essence; for that language was considered at best to be comic, at worst, a symbol of ignorance. Nineteenth-century writers like Brown and Harper imbued their heroines and heroes with a language that indicated their superiority, a language that was in no way distinguished from the language of well-bred white Americans. When these writers do use 'dialect', minor characters employ it for comic effect. If one compares Celie, Dessa Rose or Sethe's language to the language of Clotel or Iola, one immediately feels what is missing. For it is difficult to communicate the authenticity of a character without investing her language with value. If there is any one false sounding note in nineteenth-century novels about slavery and reconstruction it is the language of the characters, the way the imagination of the authors is constrained by the language their characters use.

Language is not only an expression of one's everyday experience but also of those deeper labyrinths of dream and memory, dimensions to which nineteenth-century slave characters had little access. If memory were central to Clotel or Iola, it would take them back to the past, beyond their personal history to stories their mothers told them, possibly back to the Middle Passage, so horrendous a memory that Morrison dedicated *Beloved* to those anonymous '60 million or more'. Memory might take them even further back to an African man, like the one who taught Kaine, in *Dessa Rose*, to play the banjo. To acknowledge that slaves had memory would threaten the very ground of slavery, for such memory would take them back to a culture in Africa where they existed, [. . .] 'in terms other than the ones' imposed upon them in America.[8] [. . .]

So, memory when it does exist in nineteenth-century African-American novels about slavery goes back but one generation, to one's mother, but certainly not much further back than that. Slave-owners were aware of the power of memory, for they disrupted generational lines of slaves in such a way that many slaves did not *know* even their own parents or children. Nineteenth-century writers like Brown and

Harper, too, were certainly aware of the power of memory, for their protagonists, above all else, cling to the memory of parent, child, loved one. In Brown's first version of *Clotel*, he has his heroine give up her freedom to search for her child, only to have her drown herself rather than be re-enslaved. Her story is the other side of Sethe's action in the shed, in that one mother kills herself for her child, while the other mother 'saves the best part of herself' by freeing her child through death. Brown does not linger long on the personal and emotional aspects of Clotel's suicide for his purpose is to illustrate the evils of the *institution* of slavery. Morrison, on the other hand, is riveted on the use of memory in all her characters' search for self-understanding. Nineteenth-century novelists could not be as much concerned with the individual slave as a subject as they were with the institution itself. They therefore had to sacrifice the subjectivity and, therefore, the memory of their characters to an emphasis on the slaveholders and their system.

Re-memory is a critical determinant in how we value the past, what we remember, what we select to emphasize, what we forget, as Morrison has so beautifully demonstrated in *Beloved*. But that concept could not be at the center of a narrative's revisioning of history until the obvious fact that African-Americans did have a history and culture was firmly established in American society, for writers would be constrained not only by their readers' points of view but also by the dearth of available information about the past that might give their work authenticity.

In her essay on how she wrote her historical novel, *Jubilee* (1966), Margaret Walker pointed to these difficulties. On the one hand, she made it clear that memory was the impetus for her novel, since it grew out of her promise to her grandmother to write *her* mother's story. On the other hand, as an African-American in the 1940s who wanted to write a historical novel about her past, she knew that few people, black or white, were informed about slavery and early Reconstruction, the contexts in which Vyry, her great-grandmother, lived. She tells us that she found in her research at least three historical versions of slavery: the southern white version in which the institution was benevolent, necessary and paternalistic; the northern white version, which often emphasized the horrors of slavery but was not particularly interested in the lives of the slaves; and the African-American version, of which there were few accounts, and which tended to focus on the lives of extraordinary slaves, almost always men.[9] In each version, the institution of slavery, meaning the slaveholders themselves, was pivotal, while

the slaves were reduced to a voiceless mass. How, then, was Walker to write a novel which gave sufficient information about slaves to the reader who was either ignorant about the period or believed in false myths such as the ones featured in *Gone With the Wind?* How was she to do that *and* focus on Vyry, an ordinary slave woman who knew little about the larger political struggles that determined her life—a woman who could not read or write, and who had not been more than twenty miles from the place where she was born?

Margaret Walker decided that her historical novel would take the form of a folk novel. It would emphasize the fact that African-American slaves had a culture and a community, even as it sketched the outline of more specifically historical data, like the Fugitive Slave Law, or the legal conditions that determined a free Black's status in early nineteenth-century Georgia. She would have to give readers history lessons; she would have to invest with meaning the apparently mundane everyday experiences of her protagonist; and she would have to convince her reader that a viable culture and community existed among slaves.

Confronted with needing to cover so much territory to render Vyry's story, Walker, not surprisingly, created characters, Black and white, who are not subjects so much as they are the means by which we learn about the culture of slaves and slave holders and the historical period. Vyry, for example, hardly speaks in the first half of the novel, although she becomes more vocal in the Reconstruction section. Despite the many historical details about which she informs her readers, her characters have little internal life, perhaps because Walker, who is writing her historical novel in the forties and fifties before the rise of the black culture movements of the sixties, could not give slaves the right to claim those events they do not want to remember—not only what was done to them but what they might have had to do, given their precarious context. So Vyry is not complex in the way that Sethe and Dessa Rose are, for we are seldom privy to her internal conflicts and to the doubts she might have about her relations to others. Interestingly, one of the few times when we do feel her ambivalence about what she should do is when she must choose between escape for herself and leaving her children behind in slavery. As in *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose*, motherhood is the context for the slave woman's most deeply felt conflicts.

What Walker accomplished so effectively in *Jubilee* is the establishment of an African-American culture which enabled the ordinary slave to survive. In building her novel around Vyry, a hard-working

mulatto slave, she revised the image of the beautiful, refined mulatto heroine of the nineteenth century, an image that her grandmother's stories refuted.

That image is further revised in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979), a fictional biography of the African-American woman reputed to be Jefferson's mistress for some forty years.[10] Brown's first version of *Clotel*, which was sensationally subtitled 'The President's Daughter' was based in part on the fact that Hemings was Jefferson's mistress. But Brown used this slave mulatta's existence to cast shadows on the great Jefferson who, at once, had a black mistress and children he would not free and who nonetheless championed freedom and democracy. In contrast to Brown, Chase-Riboud uses a romantic frame to dig into the myth of Sally Hemings and to reveal this complex woman's bond to her master both as a slave and as a lover. Because Chase-Riboud is interested not only in the contradiction between Jefferson's personal and political life, and in the institution of slavery, but also in the way the nineteenth-century definition of love is related to the definition of enslavement—she revisions Brown's sentimental romance. Still, Chase-Riboud has her protagonist tell her story to a white man who is trying to rationalize slavery so that at times Sally's narrative seems as censored as the slave narratives of the nineteenth century. [. . .]

Not so with Morrison's *Beloved* and Williams's *Dessa Rose*, both of which are based on historical notes yet are not controlled by them. Although *Beloved* is based on the sensational story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave woman who attempted to kill herself and her children rather than be returned to slavery, Morrison leaves the historical facts behind to probe a not easily resolvable paradox—how the natural and personal emotion, mother love, is traumatically affected by the political institution of slavery. Morrison has said that she did not inquire further into Garner's life other than to note the event for which this slave woman became famous.[11] And indeed Margaret Garner did not achieve freedom as Morrison's Sethe does. Instead she was tried, not for attempting to kill her child, but for the 'real crime', of attempting to escape, of stealing property, herself, from her master. For that crime, she was tried, convicted, and sent back to slavery, thus restoring his property. But Morrison takes us beyond the world of the slaveholders into the world of slaves as complex human beings. In creating Sethe, who must remember her killing of her own child and must reflect upon whether she had a right to commit so destructive an act against her child which also, paradoxically, is for her an expression

of her love for her child, Morrison raises disturbing questions about mother love. And in giving Sethe her legal freedom Morrison is able to explore the nature of freedom . . .

Sherley Anne Williams also based her novel on historical notes. As often happens in historical research, the discovery of one source leads us to another. *Dessa Rose* originates with two brief notes about a southern woman, one a Black slave, the other a free white woman who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. Williams discovered in Angela Davis's 'Reflections on a Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves', a pregnant slave woman who helped to lead an uprising and whose death sentence was delayed until after the birth of her child. That note led Williams to another source, Herbert Aptheker's *American Slave Revolts*, in which Williams learned about a white woman living on an isolated farm who was reported to have given sanctuary to runaway slaves. In response to these two women, whose actions appeared to refute what we have been told about both African-American and white southern women of the nineteenth century, Williams refined her point of view. Like *Beloved*, *Dessa Rose* is based on recorded historical facts but is not determined by them. 'How sad', Williams comments in her introduction to the novel 'that these two women never met' (*Dessa Rose*, p. 5).

[. . .] In *Beloved*, Morrison underlines the way that literary tradition is buttressed by an intellectual one. Schoolteacher not only exploits slaves, he is fascinated by the intellectual arguments he constructs to rationalize that exploitation. Throughout the nineteenth century, American intellectuals performed this function—that of providing intellectual arguments for a profitable legal *and* dehumanizing institution. Nehemiah and Schoolteacher's curiosity about the slave was indeed 'scientific'; their historical counterparts did measure the various parts of the slaves' bodies, did observe their 'characteristics', did interpret their behavior and did write serious treatises on them. Morrison stresses these activities—the apparently neutral ways in which intellectuals and 'scientists' were fascinated with slaves—by having the most terrible act done to Sethe, the milking of her body for Schoolteacher's scientific observation, be a bleeding wound in her memory.

Williams and Morrison then indict the American literary and intellectual tradition. And clearly, neither of their novels would be what they are if it were not for previous historical fiction by African-American women. Nor, paradoxically, would their novels be as vivid as they are if during the last decade there had not been an intense

interest, among scholars, in the history of African-American women from their point of view. [. . .]

In both these novels, such remembering, such re-imagining centers on motherhood, on mothering and being mothered. On the one hand for slave women, motherhood was denied, devalued, obliterated by slavery since it was considered to be breeding, while on the other hand, it was critical to the concept of self and to the very survival of one's self. It is through the memory of *their* mothers, their reflections on that precarious role, and whether they themselves were able to be mothered, that Sethe and Dessa Rosa delve into themselves as subjects. In *Beloved*, this is true of all the major women characters: Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver, Beloved, even Amy Denver the white girl, who helps Sethe give birth to Denver. Sethe knows 'what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to holler and fight for it'. (*Beloved*, p. 200) Denver knows what it is to see her mother in a terrible place, for she drinks her mother's milk with her sister's blood. Beloved yearns for complete union with her mother, the mother who kills her and saves her in one stroke. For her, her mother's face is her face and without her mother's face 'she has no face'. (*Beloved*, p. 216)

While Morrison moves us into the chaotic space of mother-love/mother-pain, daughter-love/daughter-pain, a space that can barely be sketched in terms of historical data, Williams takes us in another direction: she explores the concept of that double-edged term 'mammy,' which slaveowners used for African-American mothering. By reversing the usual image, that of the black mammy nursing the white baby, Williams creates a different context for that term. Rufel, the white mistress and the only nursing woman on her neglected farm feels obliged, because of her own womanhood, to nurse the baby of the ailing darky, Dessa Rose. But the white woman would not have felt she had permission to do such a thing if she were under her husband's control and not isolated from other whites. As she nurses that Black baby, she dreams aloud about what she considers to be the source of her own mother-love, her mammy, who is not her mother but her darky slave. In an exchange that emphasizes the way these two women interpret that love, Williams shows us how power relations affect mothering. When Rufel claims that *her* mammy loved her, Dessa Rose retorts, 'You ain't got no mammy . . . What her name then? . . . Child don't know its own mammy's name?' (*Dessa Rose*, p. 119)

In listing the names of *her* mammy's children, names she can remember, Dessa Rose also establishes the existence of a slave community with relationships that provided occasions for the heroism and

love that Williams reminds us about in her preface. Her novel opens up the spaces in which that heroism and love can be explored. So Dessa Rose attacks her master because he has killed her lover Kaine. She and the men on the coffle are able to plan an uprising together and that action binds them forever in friendship. Later they are able, in an adventure as exciting as any in American lore, to free themselves and go West. Nevertheless, when she tells her story, many years later to one of her grandchildren, the freed Dessa Rose recalls her mother braiding her hair and her love for Kaine, events that precede the escape adventure. Williams ends the novel with this focus on re-memory, for Dessa Rose insists on having her story written down: '"Oh," she says, "we have paid for our children's place in the world again, and again . . . "'. (*Dessa Rose*, p. 236)

But while Dessa Rose may remember her mother's name, Sethe, Paul D., and Baby Suggs cannot. For Sethe, her mother is a mark, since she knows her only by the circle with a cross branded into her skin, a sign Sethe cannot even find when her mother's rotting body is cut down from the hanging rope. Morrison's novel, then, moves us into those spaces that we do not want to remember, into the spaces where there are no names *but* Beloved—those forgotten ones of the past even to the sixty million anonymous ones of the Middle Passage, those terrible spaces, those existing spaces which for slave women, men, and children can divide them as much as they can bring them together. So in her novel, the adventure is not an exterior one, but the more dangerous internal one of the self-remembering and even understanding its past—of Paul D. who lives through the terror of a chain gang which almost distorts his manhood, of Sethe who kills her own child which almost distorts her womanhood. Of Baby Suggs who cannot remember her own children, of Denver who does not want to remember her mother's act, of Beloved who *is* that part of their past that they all attempt to forget.

In the last pages of the novel Morrison leaves us with that Beloved, 'a loneliness that roams' . . . 'that is alive on its own', but 'by and by is gone', for 'remembering seems unwise'. 'The story of Beloved, of all the beloveds, was not a story to pass on', or one that could be passed on in the records of historians or the slave narrators. And yet it remains in dream, in the 'folk tale', 'in the wind', in the imagination, in fiction. Paradoxically, only when history is explored and evaluated is memory free to flow. Then, although 'somebody forgot to tell somebody something', the past finds its way back into our memory lest, like Beloved, we risk erupting into separate parts. Perhaps that is

one reason why African-American women writers are now writing African-American historical novels. As we move into another century when Memory threatens to become abstract history. they remind us that if we want to be whole, we must recall the past, those parts that we want to remember, those parts that we want to forget.

Notes

1. Toni Morrison interviewed by Ntozake Shange on Steve Cannon's show 'It's Magic', WBAI, New York, 1978.
2. Margaret Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972).
3. 'Alice Walker and *The Color Purple*', BBC TV Documentary, 1986.
4. Toni Morrison, 'Distinguished University of California Regent's Lecture', University of California, Berkeley, 13 October 1987.
5. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987), 275. (All subsequent quotations from novel will be cited in the text.)
6. Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986).
7. See Gerda Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 60–3, for the Margaret Garner story.
8. See June Jordan, 'The Difficult Miracle of Black. Poetry in America or Something Like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley', in *On Call: Essays* (Boston: South End Press, 1985). Also reprinted in this volume.
9. Walker, *How I Wrote Jubilee.*
10. Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings* (New York: Avon Books, 1979).
11. Morrison, 'Regent's Lecture'.

19 The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies

Ann duCille*

The Black Woman; The Black Woman: An Anthology; The Black Woman in America; The Black Woman in American Society; The Black Woman Cross-Culturally; Black Women in America; Black Women in White America; Black Women in the Nineteenth Century; Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life; Black Women Writers; Black Women Writers at Work; Black Women Writing Autobiography; Black Women Writing the American Experience; Black Women Novelists; Black Women Novelists in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement; Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition; The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers; Ain't I a Woman?; Arn't I a Woman?

For reasons that may already be obvious, the books named above and numerous others like them have led me to think of myself as a kind of sacred text. Not me personally, of course, but me black woman object, Other. Within and around the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principal signifier. I am alternately pleased, puzzled, and perturbed—bewitched, bothered, and bewildered—by this, by the alterity that is perpetually thrust upon African-American women, by the production of black women as infinitely deconstructable 'othered' matter. Why are black women always already Other? I wonder. To myself, of course, I am not Other; to me it is the white women and men so intent on theorizing my difference who are the Other. Why are

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