

Courtney Thorsson
The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing
February 2018

1. Narrative

Significance and contribution

"The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing" is an interpretive cultural history of African American women writers who met in New York from 1977-1978. A photo of some of these women labeled "The Sisterhood" appears frequently online and occasionally in academic books as a source of excitement and inspiration, rarely with any context. Through archival research, I have confirmed that the group was more formal than references to it suggest: they met once a month, kept minutes, and collected dues. Writers Alice Walker and June Jordan founded the group. Members included journalists Margo Jefferson and Phyl Garland; culinary writers Vertamae Grosvenor and Jessica Harris; poets Ntozake Shange and Audre Lorde; and novelist Toni Morrison, who would go on to become the most prominent former member. I use members' published writings, meeting minutes, correspondence, biographies, and interviews to tell the story of the everyday work of The Sisterhood to secure publication and publicity for black women writers.

In narrating work of The Sisterhood as a model of and for black feminist collaboration, I offer deep context and demonstrate that this group both laid the foundation for what we now know as a canon of African American women's literature and that they discussed what would become major debates in African American literary study over the next two decades. Their minutes, for example, reflect complex discussions over differences in political and literary strategies between writers on the east and west coasts of the United States. They discussed what African American poetry after the Black Arts Movement should look like and where it should be published. They are deeply attentive to the complexity of publishing and publicizing Black women's writing in a capitalist marketplace that has historically marginalized those writings.

Like all of my scholarship, "The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing" uses the study of African American literature in its cultural, political, and historical contexts to make women's work visible. Members of The Sisterhood and many other black women writers and intellectuals have passed on since the late 1970s. Recording the history of the group, the broader network around it, and the results of their labors is a way not only to honor the work of those women, but also to record less visible aspects of that work. The move to electronic and online communication in the late twentieth century means that The Sisterhood and their contemporaries are among the last contemporary writers to have ample but dispersed paper archives that reflect a complex network of literary, political, and academic work. For example, expense reports recording countless meetings with Black authors during Morrison's time as an editor at Random House in the 1960s and 70s, correspondence among Sisterhood members about their lives and writings, flyers for events that Black women writers organized, and even some Black periodicals exist only in hardcopy, many of them unlikely to be digitized. "The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing" brings together these materials to tell a story of Black women's organizing work in political, literary, and academic spheres.

This attention to literary labors is especially important for editors and journalists who, through their work in The Sisterhood, helped create a period of dramatically increased visibility for African American women writers. There is a substantial body of academic writing on the more prominent members of The Sisterhood, such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. There is, however, little or no scholarship on less well-known members of the group such as dance journalist Zita Allen or music journalist and first black

tenured professor at the Columbia School of Journalism Phyl Garland. Margo Jefferson is now the most prominent of the journalists who were in the group. However, no scholarly work addresses the importance of Jefferson's 1970s reviews of many books by African American women writers for a variety of magazines and newspapers. This labor, like that Sisterhood members who were among the first to teach these texts at universities, was essential to the increased visibility of African American women's writings in the academy and the literary marketplace. The role of *Essence* magazine in this literary history is another gap my book will fill. Sisterhood members Audrey Edwards, Audreen Ballard, Vertamae Grosvenor, Jessica Harris, and others wrote for the magazine in the 1970s under the editorship of Cheryll Y. Greene.

Chapter One introduces The Sisterhood and narrates the foundation of the group Black Feminist political organizing, early inroads of Black Feminist literary scholarship into the academy, and personal and professional relationships among writers and artists who would become members of the group. I devote Chapters Two and Three to close analysis of records of the 1977 and 1978 meetings of The Sisterhood. The attached writing sample includes excerpts from Chapters One, Two, and Three.

In order to understand the reach and eventual impact of The Sisterhood, Chapter Four "Sisterhood Satellites" includes sections on *Essence* editor and literary agent Cheryll Y. Greene, whose work has not been addressed in any scholarly writing with the exception of one obituary in *Souls* journal in 2016, scholar and cultural critic Michele Wallace, and writer and activist Toni Cade Bambara. These three women were not official members of The Sisterhood, but collaborated with the group in ways that extended The Sisterhood's geographic, intellectual, and temporal reach. Chapter Five "After Sisterhood" examines the dissolution of the group and the lasting effects that their collaborative work in the 1970s had long after that time on one another's writing and on African American literary studies. The most dramatic of these effects is the singular position that Toni Morrison has come to occupy in popular and academic understandings of American, African American, and Black Women's literatures. Chapter Six "The Ascent of Toni Morrison" charts the rise, benefits, and costs of Morrison's prominence as a direct outgrowth of the collaborative labor of The Sisterhood and other groups of Black writers.

"The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing" begins and ends with broad analyses of Black Feminist labor in the 1970s and 80s in three distinct but intersecting spheres: political organizations, literature, and the academy. This means I bring together and supplement works such as Kimberly Springer's history of 1970s Black Feminist political organizations *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* (2005), literary scholarship including my own *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels* (2013), and the canon of African American women's literature studied in universities across the country as perhaps best represented by syllabi and the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature, third edition* (2014).

My book makes three contributions. First, I narrate The Sisterhood as a model of and for black feminist collaboration. Second, I argue that their collaborative labor in the 1970s made possible the dramatic period of increased visibility for African American women writers, especially novelists, in the 1980s. Third, I chart a history of shifting relationships among three important spheres of Black Feminist labor in the 1970s and 80s: political organizations, literature, and the academy.

Work plan

I have completed most of research for this project and written ninety pages of the manuscript. I estimate this to be about half of the final manuscript length. A National Endowment for the Humanities Public Scholar Award would allow me to work full time on this book from September 2018 through August 2019.

In the spring of 2018, I will interview Sisterhood member Margo Jefferson in person on the University of Oregon campus and then, in the summer and fall of 2018, interview two other living members of The Sisterhood. During the fellowship term I will transcribe those interviews and finish closely reading archival materials I have collected from the papers of members of The Sisterhood, their contemporaries, their editors, and their employers at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Columbia University, Princeton University, Spellman College, Harvard's Schlesinger Library, and Emory University.

I will finish my draft manuscript using these materials and begin proposing my book to academic presses by the end of the fellowship period in the summer of 2019.

Chapter Outline

1. Introduction: The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing
 2. 1977 Meetings of The Sisterhood
 3. 1978 Meetings of The Sisterhood
 4. Sisterhood Satellites: Cheryll Y. Greene, Toni Cade Bambara, and Michele Wallace
 5. After Sisterhood
 6. The Ascent of Toni Morrison
 7. Conclusion
- Appendix A: Members of The Sisterhood
 Appendix B: Meetings of The Sisterhood
 Works Cited

Competencies, skills, and access

I am a specialist in African American literature from its beginnings to the present with particular expertise in contemporary African American women's writing. "The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing" historicizes and contextualizes the publication, popular readership, and academic study of Black women's writing, including the novels of the 1980s and 1990s that I consider in my first book *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women's Novels* (University of Virginia Press, 2013). My role as co-editor of *African American Literature in Transition, 1980-1990* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press) further demonstrates my expertise in contemporary African American literature.

The research materials for this manuscript include works of fiction, poetry, drama, and journalism by members of The Sisterhood; meeting minutes; personal and business correspondence; biographies; and interviews. During the fellowship period, I will complete my close reading of the many materials I have gathered in order to tell a thorough interpretive cultural history of The Sisterhood in the context of Black Feminist organizing in literary, political, and academic spheres.

"The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing" will be useful for a broad audience of general readers and scholars ranging from college freshman to tenured professors. My past experience conveying scholarship to a broad audience includes the essay "Black Women's Food Work as Critical Space," which I co-authored with an interdisciplinary group of scholars, a chef, and a food activist for the Winter 2015 issue of *Gastronomica*; interviews about my first book for a Philadelphia radio show, a feminist web series, and a local television program (see media.uoregon.edu/channel/category/uo-today/); and a 2013 talk about African American Foodways for local retirees at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.

My experience conveying scholarly research to a broad audience also includes organizing at least one large, public, African American Studies event on the University of Oregon of campus each year. These

events have included readings by writers such as novelist Mat Johnson and poet Evie Shockley, film screenings, and talks by public intellectuals such as Jeff Chang and Tanisha Ford on subjects ranging from the politics of Black style to hip hop and racial justice to Black women in the Civil Rights Movement.

Final product and dissemination

The result of this work will be a book, "The Sisterhood and Black Women's Literary Organizing" that makes significant contributions to Literary Studies, African American Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies. This book is for all interested readers. That readership includes fans of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker looking for context for those writers' works, undergraduates writing papers about any of the many Black women writers who were members of The Sisterhood, activists looking for models and cautionary tales in Black Feminist organizing, and scholars who, like me, are working to articulate the formal and thematic characteristics that continue to define African American literature in the post-Civil Rights era.