

Acts of Resistance in the Literature of Black Women Writers

By Dr. Brenda M. Greene

In her poem, *What Will Your Legacy Be*, artist, poet, and co-founder of the DuSable Museum of African American History, Dr. Margaret Burroughs reminds us of the importance and value of our personal responsibility for ensuring that we leave a legacy. The speaker in Burroughs' poem asks:

What will your legacy be?

When have you finally cast off these mortal coils?

When you have crossed the great divide?

What will your legacy be?

When you can no longer run life's race.

When you no longer have a place; when you have at last completed the circle round, and when an escape is no longer to be found.

What will your legacy be? (2007, People's World)

Black women writers over the last four centuries have left a body of work that constitutes a legacy built on resistance and persistence. They are our truth tellers, and as artists have committed themselves to the power of language. When discussing American and/or African American literature, the voices of these women have often been marginalized or omitted from the discussion. The legacy embodied in the work of Phillis Wheatley Peters, Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Ida B. Wells, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Margaret Walker, Maya Angelou, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Nikole Hannah-Jones represents the voices of Black women writers who have resisted and persisted. I highlight these voices below.

Phillis Wheatley Peters, the first African American woman to publish a book of poems, is often referred to as the first Black Poet Laureate. In 1773, she published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Her poem in the collection “On Being Brought from Africa to America” on the surface, may be viewed as her praise at being brought to America, but it really exposes hypocrisy in Christianity that was practiced by the enslavers and presents the moral dilemma of slavery. Wheatley confronts those enslaving her and defines what Christian faith really means. The last four lines underscore this.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Phillis, the speaker in the program, engages in an act of resistance.

Harriet Jacobs is now recognized as the author of *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), the first powerful slave narrative written by an African American woman. Originally, this critical narrative documenting the 21 years that Harriet survived slavery and sexual assault before escaping and gaining freedom for herself and for her children, was thought to be written by a white woman. Harriet Jacobs wrote this critical narrative as a form of resistance. She states in her preface that, “I earnestly desire[s] to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage . . . “it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history.”

Known as the Anti-Lynching Activist, **Ida B. Wells** was born into slavery. When she came of age, she began fighting discrimination in the legal system and eventually in the press. At twenty-one years old, she had a transformative racial discrimination experience that shaped her life as an activist.

On September 15, 1883, in Memphis, Tennessee, Wells purchased a train ticket for her commute to her rural teaching job. The conductor refused to collect the ticket and informed

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her that she had to transfer to the other train car because she had purchased a first-class ticket. Wells refused to leave her seat. The conductor subsequently got help from others and removed her from the train. Wells sued but eventually lost the case. She then began to use the press to expose lynching and discrimination, thus earning her the name of the Anti-Lynching Activist. Her words, *"The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them,"* are what people must do in the face of injustice.

Spirited and soulful writer, anthropologist, and folklorist **Zora Neale Hurston** created a legacy of novels, short stories, plays, folklore, and essays. Refusing to succumb to the traditional mores of society, she charted new directions for her life and her life's work. Zora Neale Hurston is one of my favorite writers. Her book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, spoke to me as a woman.

- "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some, they come in with the tide. For others, they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.
- Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly." — Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Hurston died in obscurity in Fort Pierce, Florida in 1960. Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" was a defining moment in lifting Hurston from obscurity and reviving interest in a writer who has since become part of the canon of literature. In *Zora Neale Hurston's Final Decade* (U. Press of Florida, 2007), Deborah Moylan's convincingly writes of the complexities and paradoxes of the last ten years of Hurston's life. Her research recounts how this proud independent Black woman who emerged during the Harlem Renaissance defied all obstacles in her determination to succeed, no matter the malignment and misrepresentation of her work and intentions, and the financial, emotional, and health challenges she faced. Moylan reveals that during her final decade, Hurston continued to write, teach, and work, and was

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surrounded by friends and people who respected and loved her. In conducting her research, Moylan's goal is to "set the record straight."

Gwendolyn Brooks, an influential and widely read 20th-century American poet, is the author of more than 20 books. She was highly regarded during her lifetime and had the distinction of being the first Black poet to win the Pulitzer Prize for her second book of poetry, *Annie Allen* (1949). *Annie Allen* focused on the life and experiences of a young Black girl growing into womanhood in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago. Brooks' poems are known for bringing attention to racial injustices that extend beyond America and into Africa. In her 1972 autobiography, *Report from Part One*, Brooks writes of her dedication to bringing the lives of Black people to the page: "If you wanted a poem, you only had to look out of your window."

I had an opportunity to meet Gwendolyn Brooks when she attended the National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College, the vision of John O. Killens. She was a gentle spirit, and I am honored to have met such a renowned literary legend in my lifetime. Her legacy is sustained in the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing founded in 1990 at Chicago State University by poet, publisher, and activist Dr. Haki Madhubuti.

Poet and novelist **Margaret Walker's** first collection of poetry, *For My People* (1942) won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. Walker was the first Black woman to ever receive the prestigious award. Her first novel, *Jubilee* (1966), is regarded as "the first truly historical black American novel," according to Washington Post contributor Crispin Y. Campbell. It was also the first work by a Black writer to speak out for the liberation of the black woman. Associate Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson recounts in her memoir, *Lovely One* (Random House, 2024) how her mother recommended that she recite the poem for a literary reading when she was in primary school. The poem highlights the strengths and struggles of Black people from the time of enslavement. "For My People" closes with these lines:

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs
be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now
rise and take control.

In Mari Evans's collection of essays, *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, (Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 1984), Eugenia Collier notes, "Using ... the language of the grass-roots people, Walker spins yarns of folk heroes and heroines: those who, faced with the terrible obstacles which haunt Black people's very existence, not only survive but prevail—with style."

The House Where My Soul Lives: The Life of Margaret Walker by scholar Maryemma Graham, founder of the History of Black Writing Research Center, illuminates Walker's life in full detail.

Dr. Maya Angelou, renowned poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist, played a pivotal role in the fight for racial equality and social change in the United States. I had the opportunity to meet Maya Angelou on several occasions. She was the keynote speaker at the first National Black Writers Conference held at Medgar Evers College in 1986.

Dr. Angelou is best known for her groundbreaking autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969; her powerful poem "Still I Rise" read at President Clinton's inauguration; and her work as a civil rights activist and influential voice for Black women and humanity's resilience. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* stands as a powerful testament to her early life experiences and the struggles faced by African Americans during the Jim Crow era. Her reading of "Still I Rise" marked her as the first Black woman and only the second poet in history to deliver an inaugural poem.

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Beyond her literary contributions, Dr. Angelou actively participated in the civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s. Her speeches resonated deeply, inspiring audiences to unite and work towards dismantling racial barriers.

Dr. Angelou's statement: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel," from her poem "Phenomenal Woman" and her quotation, "The truth is, no one of us can be free until everybody is free" are powerful messages for how we move forward in caring and impactful ways.

Toni Cade Bambara was a writer, civil rights activist, teacher, documentary filmmaker, and cultural worker. Toni believed that the artist's job is always determined by the community that she serves. She was concerned with fighting injustice and oppression in general and for Black people in particular. And she was also hugely influential in the Black liberation and feminist movements.

The theme of the First National Black Writers Conference in 1986 at Medgar Evers College was *The Social Responsibility of the Black Writer*. Toni asserted that "Writers are responsible for reminding people what they pretend not to know."

Toni's anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), included poetry, short stories, and essays by Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall and herself, as well as work by her students from the SEEK program at City College, CUNY. It was the first collection to focus on African American women. Her 1972 book, *Gorilla, My Love*, contains 15 of her short stories, written between 1960 and 1970. Most of these stories are told from a first-person point of view and are "written in rhythmic urban black English".

Nikki Giovanni's work as a poet and activist has touched the hearts of audiences and creatives alike. She debuted on the literary scene in the late 1960s. Her early poetry books, such as *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* (1968), and *Black Judgment* (1969), celebrated Black pride and called for resistance against racial injustice, thus earning her the nickname "The Princess of Black Poetry."

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In addition to politics, Nikki explored themes of love, family, and personal growth. By using everyday language and vivid imagery, she made poetry accessible and believed that art has the power to heal and unite communities. Nikki was also a strong supporter of social justice and used her platform to talk about racial inequality, gender issues, and LGBTQ+ rights. I met and interviewed Nikki Giovanni on two occasions and was really inspired by her album, *Truth is On Its Way*, a combination of beat poetry fused with a range of music from jazz to gospel.

Literary giant and Nobel laureate **Toni Morrison** was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature and is most known for her powerful novels like *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon*. These novels, through lyrical and poetic language, deeply explore the African American experience and particularly Black women's lives.

Morrison won the Pulitzer for her novel *Beloved*, which explores the traumatic effects of slavery. Using a black lens on American literature, she portrayed her Black characters as complex, vibrant, and flawed people.

In June 1972, Morrison flew to California to meet with Angela Davis, the Black Power activist, philosopher, and Communist Party member, who had been released from prison only weeks earlier. Davis had been indicted in connection with Jonathan Jackson's armed attempt to free his older brother George Jackson from San Quentin State Prison, but all charges against her were dropped. Morrison became the senior editor of *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (Random House, 1974).

In a 2019 interview with the *New York Times*, Angela Davis and Farah Jasmine Griffin reflect on the work of Angela Davis. They note that, "Her political vision — using language to combat the devastating effects of white supremacy, sexism and all dehumanizing ideologies — remains a profound and underexplored aspect of her identity and impact."

For Morrison, “The work had to be “both political and beautiful” (Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation (1984). I had the opportunity to meet Toni Morrison when she was Honorary Chair of the Tenth National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College.

My interview with **Louise Meriwether** left a lasting impression. She laughed intermittently throughout the interview, a dynamic woman, novelist, journalist, children’s author, historian, activist, and educator. “You know I don’t remember much,” she said, but halfway through the interview she shared with me a fourteen-page autobiographical statement that she had written to chronicle the collection of her papers, which were stored at Emory University. This 95-year-old woman was awesome, and I felt privileged and honored to interview her. I knew that I was in for an unforgettable interview with a writer who had found her passion and committed to embracing it.

I conducted the interview with her in 2018, shortly before the Center for Black Literature awarded her a lifetime achievement award at the 14th National Black Writers Conference. Although she is known by most of the general public for her coming of age novel *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, (a novel that presents a very true reality for young girls and that sadly informs aspects of female adolescence for thousands of girls globally,) Louise Meriwether was deeply committed to using writing and activism to advocate for social justice and to inform the public and young people about truths and historical facts that could help to influence their present and shape their future.

The Black Anti-Defamation Association (BADA), co-founded by John Henry Clarke and Louise Meriwether, was formed in response to the publication of the novel *Confessions of Nat Turner* by William Styron and the potential development of a screenplay based on the book. The novel received excellent reviews, appeared on the best-seller list, was a book of the month selection, won a Pulitzer Prize, and was sold to 20th Century Fox. Meriwether was one of a group of Black public intellectuals, writers, and artists who vehemently opposed the positive praise and reception of this book and formed a coalition whose primary purpose was to ensure that the content of the book was accurate. BADA contended that Styron had portrayed Nat

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Turner as a man who hated Black people, who loved white women, and who was homosexual. They wrote a five-page letter to producers, went through the book, and identified all the discrepancies related to the life of Nat Turner and told producers that they could not make the movie with these discrepancies. The film was not produced.

Dr. Sonia Sanchez, poet, activist, educator, and advocate for human rights, peace, and racial justice, is a woman whose words have inspired, excited, and motivated writers, students, poets, playwrights, scholars, and the literary community for decades. In the tradition of the griot, she is a storyteller and musician, a transmitter of cultural legacies and history, and a preserver of our oral traditions. She has been a sister friend, a mentor to me and my family, and a Queen Mother and teacher to her sons and the many sons and daughters who make up our community and villages.

An award-winning writer and Philadelphia's inaugural poet laureate, **Sonia Sanchez** is a prolific writer of more than 20 volumes of poetry, plays, and essays, is an icon and one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). *Sonia Sanchez Collected Poems* (Beacon Press, 2021) draws from five decades and provides a trajectory of her professional journey and evolution as a poet. The collection includes survival poems, love poems, freedom poems, tributes to writers, civil rights leaders, and movements, calls to action, and over 80 haiku poems. The documentary *BaddDDD Sonia Sanchez* (a 2017 Emmy nominee) directed and produced by Barbara Attie, Janet Goldwater, and Sabrina Schmidt Gordon, provides a portrait of her life as a committed artist and features excerpts from her performances and interviews with writers, scholars, musicians, filmmakers, artists, and poets.

Sonia reminds educators that they have a responsibility in teaching and truth-telling. Her poem, "Catch the Fire," inspires people to catch the fire of knowledge and to pass it on. The speaker in the poem asks: "Where is your fire . . . the fire of sit-ins and marches that made us jump barriers and boundaries?"

bell hooks was a groundbreaking feminist theorist, cultural critic, and writer who motivated her readers and the public to have critical conversations about the intersection of race, gender, class, and love. What I wrote upon her transition in 2021 speaks to her impact.

You have influenced and inspired so many, and there is a deep loss among those who have long embraced your work, your philosophy, and your activism. Your books on feminism, education, politics, spirituality, and love have given us a roadmap for interrogating how we live our lives and have left us with many ideas to ponder. Your book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice to Freedom* epitomized my approach to teaching. Your book, *All About Love* spoke to me in a different way. The act of love in our collective struggle for liberation from oppressive practices, racism, and sexism is an ideal but important concept. You recounted how Black people in America have been traumatized and subjected to hopelessness, powerlessness, and despair. You noted that the movement forward in the struggle for liberation requires a radical vision of social change rooted in a love ethic that will convert, as it did with the Civil Rights movement, masses of people, Black and non-Black.

Poet, playwright, and novelist **Ntozake Shange's** work delved deeply into the intersections of race, gender, and identity for Black women. Before she transitioned, I had an opportunity to interview Ntozake Shange in her Brooklyn home. She was warm, humble, and regal, exhibited an inner peace, and reflected on the process that she used to write her award-winning play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1997) and on the ways in which race, gender, and ethnicity impact her writing. On the subject of race, Shange said the following:

I encounter various kinds of racism and sexism on a daily basis, like any other woman of color. And I have to transfer that into something interesting and delightful for my readers. It is not easy to make racism delightful. So that's what the hard part of my job is, finally, making people laugh or making them cry,

without turning myself into a batting ball. But I'm pushed to do something that happened in the world (82).

Ntozake Shange's Obie Award-winning choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, first produced in 1974, boldly defines what it meant to be a Black woman in the 20th century.

Edwidge Danticat is the award-winning author of 18 books. She was awarded the NBWC Toni Morrison Award at the 13th National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College, CUNY. Her collection of essays in *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* highlights the role of an artist for a country in crisis and provides a space for us to understand and empathize with people in crisis and with those who risk their lives despite the obstacles and horror that they face.

I have interviewed Edwidge several times. In reflecting on her craft, Edwidge states:

We all have one tool to work with as artists, drawing from a general well of things that exist in the world, but that's processed through the personal. Before we're able to write about things for others, it's a process of internalization of how we see the world that inevitably comes out in the writing. All writing is personal, and all writing is political because we view things through our own eyes and prisms.

For several decades, Danticat has brought to readers worldwide, the many facets of being Haitian in United States and in Haiti.

Dr. Imani Perry is the author of nine books, including the *New York Times* bestseller *South to America: A Journey Below the Mason Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation* (Ecco, 2022), a memoir of her exploration of the South: its paradoxes, its landscape, its history of violence and criminalization of Black people, and the intricate and complicated relationships between Black and Whites. Perry contends that paying attention to the South, its past, present, and “threatening future,” allows us to understand our nation and to determine what we must do to address the “national sins” and entrenched racism in our communities, cities, and states.

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In 2026, she was honored at the 18th National Black Writers Conference (NBWC), underscoring her influence in both academic and literary circles, as well as her role in shaping contemporary conversations on race, justice, and cultural identity.

Investigative journalist **Nikole Hannah-Jones** is the inaugural Knight Chair in Race and Journalism at the Howard University School of Communications and founder of the Howard University Center for Journalism and Democracy. She is the writer of the *New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project*, an in-depth analysis of the legacy of slavery. Nikole argues that slavery cannot be left in the past because its effects still linger today. She states: "...you can look all across about modern American life, and almost nothing culturally, politically, socially, economically has been left untouched by our decision to engage in racialized chattel slavery." The 1619 Project emerged from Hannah-Jones's desire to reframe America's origin story. She offers a complex and expanded narrative of American History and views 1619, not 1776, as marking the true beginning of the United States. Contributors to the project include journalists, historians, and poets who explore how slavery has shaped various aspects of American society, from economics to healthcare.

In closing, the writers cited above shed light on what resistance looks like. Writer and activist Alice Walker reminds us in her book, *We are the Ones We've Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (The New Press, 2021). These writers and activists embody Walker's message. They examine what they can do from their personal and public spaces to fight injustice, discrimination, and racism.