

BOOK REVIEW

Frustration Over Sexual, Racial Oppression Unleashed in "Wild Women"

by Gaynelle Evans

Wild Women In The Whirlwind; Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance, Edited by Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin. Rutgers University Press, 441 pp., Cloth: \$40, Paper: \$14.95.

Out of the vortex of racial and sexual oppression, a chorus of writers is lifting one voice.

The nature of racism and sexism is the oppression of a people or group perceived as weaker and less worthy by the oppressors. The "isms" have aimed to change the tunes of and silence the voices of Black women writers. In that sense, say Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, editors of *Wild Women In The Whirlwind*, the "isms" have failed. Racism and sexism have only succeeded in slowing the inevitable. We of the twentieth century are blessed because what might have happened in the 1800s is happening now. And it is happening around the world.

Whirlwind is a collection of 25 scholarly essays by a group of 23 scholars including activist Angela Y. Davis; poetess June Jordan; professor of literature Henry Louis Gates, Jr.; associate professor of women's studies Chinosole; poet, novelist and essayist Calvin Hernton; and literature professor Nellie Y. McKay.

The essays in *Whirlwind* draw on such diverse concepts — all of them "isms," like lesbianism, sexism, racism, feminism and humanism; and they use the lives of people such as civil rights activist Sojourner Truth and blues singer Sippie Wallace to present a cogent discussion of the roots and direction of the renaissance. It's a big task.

In an attempt to map the burgeoning literary landscape being fashioned by women of color, the editors of *Whirlwind* include discussion of contemporary writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and Sonia Sanchez, and "foremothers" Phillis Wheatley, Charlotte Forten Grimké and Zora Neale Hurston with treatises about the importance of music, the search for the author of *Our Nig*, a novel written by Mrs. H.E. Wilson in 1859, and an overview of the historical novels written by Black women.

"Thus the current flowering of Black women's writing must be viewed as part of a cultural continuum and an evolving con-

sciousness, a consciousness that will continue to evolve and unfold," writes Braxton.

Whirlwind is an eclectic collection, described by Braxton, as a "sometimes difficult collaboration." For the reader, it is also a confusing one. This noble collection of passionately rendered works deals with subject matter too diverse for one volume.

The chapters stand on their own merit, but in combination with others, strike dissonant notes.

That is not the case with the women of color who are now lifting their voices. They are creating a symphony of literature, presenting a world view that is new. They are from the United States, the Caribbean, the Pacific Islands, including Australia and

Japan, the Americas, Europe and Africa.

While the historical experiences of the various peoples represented differ from continent to continent, the world's women of color speak a common language. It is the language of oppression but not of defeat. And, say the editors of and contributors to *Whirlwind*, women of color speak it with growing eloquence.

"The literary upsurge by Black women in the second half of the twentieth century unveils a renaissance of the spirit inspired by those who have refused to surrender," writes McLaughlin. "Those who have resisted their oppression. Those who have undertaken to remake the universe to own their future."

Fiction writers cited by McLaughlin include Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana), Bessie Head (South Africa), Alice Walker (U.S.A.), Jamaica Kincaid (Antigua) and Barbara Burford (U.K.). While the novel is one of the most common forms of expression, poetry is the most popular, perhaps because of the lyrical oral tradition of many oppressed peoples. McLaughlin includes in her survey the likes of Nancy Morejon (Cuba), Marlene Nourbese Philip (Trinidad and Tobago-Canada) and Sonia Sanchez (U.S.A.). These poetesses and others, she writes, follow in the footsteps of the griotes of West Africa.

The women authors write in their own diverse genres, dialects and indigenous tongues. As they do, they form a bond which knows no geographical borders. Through their works, we see the world as they see it,

in terms that intimately reflect the status of their peoples, and consequently, our own. For example, writes McLaughlin, Afro-Latin American women frequently describe hardship and invisibility. Afro-Caribbean writers tell of skin color and social transitions. Pacific Black women (with origins in India, Indonesia, Hawaii and Africa) describe the effects of Western rule on their societies, while those from South Africa pen the literature of rebellion.

"... [T]he theories expressed in Black women's writings have become a part of the general discourse regarding the major issues of our times—social justice and human freedom," writes McLaughlin. "As a result of increased literary endeavors, the correlative and comparative dimensions of Black women's lives and issues are perceptible in ways that previously they have not been."

Unfortunately, the struggle for equal rights and recognition for women of color has not always been against those of the majority culture. Prior to the 1970s, notes contributor Calvin Hernton, in *Whirlwind*, Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker were the only Black women accepted by the literary establishment. The reasons, Hernton writes, are racism and Black male chauvinism, a wall broken, in part, by *The Black Woman*, an anthology of 27 Black women writers, published in 1970 by Tony Cade Bambara.

But Ntozake Shange's "for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf," (1978) and Michele Wallace's "Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman," (1979) were the straws that broke the camel's back. Both were highly critical in print of Black men and their treatment of Black women. Reaction to these works was harsh.

"The mobilization against Wallace, and in the process Shange too, was quick and solid," writes Hernton. "It came from all sectors of the Black population; the press, the literary and scholarly journals and magazines; on Black and white college campuses and in the ghettos as well."

Hernton also notes that the voices of Black women writers are not flawless. One must judge each aspect of this proliferation of works by women of color for oneself. But a world that grows smaller each day can't help but become richer for each and every new voice it hears.

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