The Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature provides concise yet in-depth coverage of African American women’s literature from the nineteenth century to the present. This Cambridge Companion is one in a series of companions on topics such as the African American novel and the Harlem Renaissance. This Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature follows a similar format to other works in the series, providing a chronology, a section on historical context and a section on genres. Each of the two main sections covers several broad areas of the literature. The first section is entitled, “History, Contexts, and Criticism” with chapters on four historical periods of the literature: early years of African American women’s literature, primarily the nineteenth century; the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement of the 1960sn and 70s; and two chapters on the contemporary period, one on contemporary writers and the other on African American feminist theories and literary criticism.

The second section of the book, “Genre, Gender, and Race” discusses specific genres including the “slave” or “emancipatory” narrative, autobiography, novels, poetry, performing arts, children’s and young adult literature, essays, the short story and finally popular fiction. The several chapters on genre explore the characteristics of each genre and the relevance of black
women’s writings in each of the genres to the ongoing struggles of resistance to and liberation from racial and gender oppressions. Some authors, such as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Ntozake Shange, to mention just a few, are discussed in both historical and genre chapters.

Editors Angelyn Mitchell, associate professor of English and African American Studies at Georgetown University and founder of their African American Studies Program, and Danille K. Taylor, dean of humanities and professor of English at Dillard University, state that *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature* “chronicles, interprets, and maps the African American woman’s literary tradition and its critical tradition” (p. 6). The editors did not intend this resource to be a comprehensive history of African American women’s literature but “rather, it is designed to offer guidance in reading and studying African American women’s writing. . .and [to] reveal the plurality and multiplicity of this writing” (p. 7). Despite this disclaimer however, the comprehensiveness of this resource is impressive. The fifteen contributors were obviously selected because of their expertise and breadth of knowledge. For example Madhu Dubey, who wrote the chapter on novels, is the author of *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* and Cheryl Wall, who wrote the chapter on the Harlem Renaissance, is the author of *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*.

The historical chapters in this resource carefully probe the social, political and cultural contexts of various historical periods and the challenges the authors faced by being positioned at the intersection of race and gender discrimination. These historical chapters also provide detailed coverage of lesser known authors as well as better known authors of each period. Similarly the chapters about literary genres discuss the complex cultural and political factors which influenced women to write in a particular genre or challenged their access to the genre. The authors of
specific chapters frequently mention the project of recovering works by less known or forgotten African American women authors.

In their introduction, the editors acknowledge the recovery work of *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and *Afro-American Women Writers 1746-1933* edited by Ann Allen Shockley. They also reference the groundbreaking work of early critical studies such as Barbara Christian’s *Black Women Novelists: The Development of Tradition 1892-1976* and *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Schott and Barbara Smith. Their mention of these foundational resources grants credibility to the thoroughness of this *Cambridge Companion* resource.

In the section on historical periods, the chapter on early literature by Frances Smith Foster and Larose Davis identifies the “earliest known work by an identifiable woman of African descent” as “‘Bars Fight’, a ballad that chronicles the people and events of a 1746 battle between settlers and Native Americans” (p. 15-16). The chapter continues with a discussion of Phillis Wheatley, a slave who was not only able to write poetry but who managed to find a publisher. This was so unusual in the eighteenth century, that her owner provided a biographical preface and eighteen “prominent men” signed a statement attesting that indeed the poems were written by “a young Negro Girl” (p. 17). This chapter addresses the challenges posed to these early African American women of being denied literacy, agency, and access to publication as well as the ongoing efforts of recovering lost or contested narratives such as *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson, discovered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and *Behind the Scenes; Or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, Elizabeth Keckley’s contested memoir.
As would be expected, Cheryl Wall’s chapter on the Harlem Renaissance discusses well-known women authors of this period like Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston, mentioning Fauset’s connection with Du Bois and *The Crisis*, Larsen’s literary focus on biracialism and ‘passing’ and Hurston’s grounding in folk lore and the “linguistic richness of black culture” which was considered “heretical” in that era (p. 44). Several lesser known authors of the Harlem Renaissance such as poets Anne Spencer and Helene Johnson are also briefly mentioned.

The chapter on the Black Arts Movement by Eleanor Traylor describes the influences of James Baldwin, Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka, “foremost theorist of the Black Arts movement” (p. 60), and Stokeley Carmichael leader of SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) on this period of Black political and cultural activism from the 1960s to the 1970s. Traylor then proceeds to discuss the women involved in this movement, including Barbara Ann Teer, founder of the National Black Theatre, Ntozake Shange, “poet, linguist and novelist” (p. 61) singer Nina Simone and poets Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, and Alice Walker.

In Dana Williams’ chapter on contemporary women writers, we see the development of black women writers who still identify with black culture and community but have begun to critique black communities from within “for their perpetuation of western beliefs and ideals which stunted the development of black people in general and black women in particular” (p. 72) Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is mentioned as possibly the best example of this “critical celebratory dichotomy” (p. 72). The chapter also discusses Maya Angelou’s awareness of the tension between community bonds and a Black woman’s freedom to develop. Dana Williams, author of this chapter, describes novels like *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones, *Kindred* by Octavia
Butler, *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams and *Beloved* by Morrison, which “invoke the slave past and interrogate its role in the construction of the female self” (p. 75). On the other hand, she also mentions novels like Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, which “explore strategies for healing” (p. 76) without explicitly invoking the wounds of slavery.

Robert J. Patterson’s chapter on African American feminist theories and literary criticism provides a coverage as extraordinarily complex as in the other chapters of this resource since he strives to consider the “relationship black feminist literary criticism has to black feminist political theory, how black feminist literary theory has redefined its foci and responsibilities. . . and finally what tasks continue to lie ahead for black feminist political and literary theory” (p. 89). Patterson provides an overview of how black feminism predated the 1970s with authors such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Wilson, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks and others. He points to novels by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker that begin to critique the Black Nationalist movement’s “masculinist norms” (p. 92) which maintained Black women’s oppression. Patterson cites some of the key black feminist theorists such as Basrbara Smith, Deborah McDowell, Gloria Hull, Hazel Carby, Hortense Spiller and Sherley Anne Williams whose political and literary theories explored the intersections of racism and sexism.

Jocelyn Moody’s chapter on the slave, or emancipator, narrative mentions the earliest work by an African American woman in this genre, which is a 1782 “petition to the state of Massachusetts for reparations for her compulsory, unpaid labor” (p.112) and describes notable examples of these narratives, such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Moody identifies special characteristics of this genre, which was intended to both describe the evils of slavery and proclaim the ability of slaves to persevere and assert their
human dignity through the vehicle of their narratives. In particular for female slaves, the genre “enabled the inscription of a distinct black female self: the slave narrative by enslaved and ex-slave women differs from its counterpart by enslaved or ex-slave men in that it emphasizes gender differences in the experiences and treatment of men and women slaves” (p. 118). Since female slaves were often sexually violated, as well as treated brutally in other ways, the narrative was an essential opportunity to vindicate the virtue and moral reputation of African American female slaves. These slave narratives also intended to demonstrate female slaves’ methods of resistance by practicing contraception and abortion and through using verbal methods of retort, identified as “sass” (p. 123).

Joanne Braxton’s chapter on autobiography references these slave narratives as the foundation for subsequent autobiographies by African American women. Early examples of this genre were often spiritual in tone or hybrids of history and spiritual memoir, which described the progression from slavery to freedom as being guided by religious inspiration. More contemporary notable autobiographies by accomplished Black women from a variety of professions are discussed in the chapter, including Ida B. Wells’ Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells, Ethel Waters’s His Eye Is on the Sparrow, Nina Simone’s I Put a Spell On You, Katherine Dunham’s A Touch of Innocence and Maya Angelou’s popular, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

“Even Some Fiction Might Be Useful,” the chapter on African American women novelists by Madhu Dubey emphasizes the “live-saving power of fiction. . .as a recurrent motif in African American women’s novels published from the mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century” (p. 150). Early novelists often focused on romance or on racial struggle and uplift. Some later authors wrote novels about “passing” or about the failure of upward mobility due to
ongoing segregation and racist discrimination. The African American women’s novel evolved as
cultural and historical progress toward increased civil rights and upward mobility provided
increased freedom or opportunity for African American women. Yet novels by authors like Toni
Morrison, Gayl Jones or Octavia Butler have continued to explore the haunting presence of slave
ancestry and a complex quest for identity that interrogates the relationship of the modern black
woman with “ancestral tradition” (p.163). Recent novelists are exploring a variety of new
directions including contemporary “slave narratives” that represent welfare mothers or illegal
immigrants as the enslaved.

The chapters on the genres of poetry, performing arts/theater, essays and the short story
provide similar historical overviews of the African American women authors in each genre with
background on the impact of changing cultural and political contexts on these authors. The
significance of each genre is highlighted. For example, Keith Leonard proposes that poetry is an
important genre for African American women both because of its empowering association with
the aspects of the personality like emotions and intuition that patriarchal societies have devalued
and because “this act of speaking, of naming one’s own reality, has been an act of self assertion
as important as protests, lawsuits, and marches” (p. 169).

African American women who were involved in anti-lynching and anti-racist movements
are considered foremothers to the women who later participated in performing arts, which
chapter author Olga Barrios considers the genre most suited to highlighting “elements of the
African American oral tradition” (p.190). According to Marilyn Sanders Mobley, author of the
chapter on the essay, this genre allows authors to express themselves without the necessary of
using language and structure required of more formal genres such as poetry or the novel.
Similarly Crystal Lucky describes the short story genre as more accessible to some authors
simply because a story is shorter than a novel and because it provides more opportunity to innovate and experiment with form and language.

The author of the chapter on children’s and young adult literature, Dianne Johnson, quotes the manifesto of Black Creators for Children to emphasize the importance of this literature for African American children and adolescents since it can help an African American child “establish a positive sense of self as an individual who participates responsibly in the building and maintaining of his immediate family and community and of [the] African American community as a whole” (p. 211-12). Johnston discusses significant contributions to the genre and identifies resources, such as the Coretta Scott King Award, which can be useful in identifying the best African American literature for children or young adults.

The concluding chapter in this Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature proclaims the advantages of popular fiction in blurring the boundaries of the canon, thus encouraging a more complete process of revising the canon. The chapter author, Herman Beavers, suggests that popular fiction can serve a transgressive purpose by combing realism and fantasy in speculations on the “shape the future will assume” (p. 274). He concludes by suggesting that there is no certainty when and whether popular fiction may be eventually considered a classic.

Useful features of this resource include a very comprehensive chronology of African American culture and literature beginning with 1526, the date the first Africans were brought to North America and ending with 2006 the deaths of Octavia Butler and Coretta Scott King and the publication of Alice Walker’s We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For. The chronology includes historical events in the emancipation, civil rights and Black Power movements; dates for
the first African American woman to receive a college degree; dates for slave rebellions and legislation; and dates relating to African American female authors’ lives, and their publications. The extensive twenty-three page bibliography lists numerous fiction and non-fiction works by African American women; anthologies of their works; and books and articles on the history and criticism of African American women’s literature. The index primarily lists authors, topics and the titles of some works.

Overall The Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature is an incredibly comprehensive and in-depth discussion of African American Women’s literature which can serve to provide background on women authors in particular periods and genres for professors and students in colleges and universities through the graduate level. The contributors do not pretend to appear neutral in their historical discussions of African American women’s oppression and the resistance to this oppression as expressed in the literature written by African American women who have long been positioned at the intersection of racism and sexism.

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