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## Book Review: Black Women Writers at Work Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?

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# Black Women Writers at Work.

Edited by Claudia Tate.  
The Continuum Publishing Company, New York, 1983.  
213 pp., \$14.95.

Reviewed by Jeanne-Marie A. Miller

**F**rom the earliest years of this nation, Blacks have been a popular subject for white American writers, particularly of fiction and poetry—James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Gilmore Simms, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Walt Whitman, to name a few.

In the theatrical arena, the minstrel show, which caricatured Black slaves in the entertainments that they provided on plantations, is considered to be the only indigenous form of American drama. From the mid- to the late 19th century, it was perhaps the favored theatrical entertainment of many Americans.

Since the 18th century, Black writers, too, have been publishing literary works, and when they write, they very often produce a fuller portraiture of themselves than has been the case with writers outside their race. Their artistic consciousness developed despite a troubled environment of racial segregation and oppression, and they expressed their inner feelings as well as their attitude toward social conditions.

Although Black women have long been among this coterie of writers, too often their work has been overlooked, or as Amiri Baraka has suggested in his introduction to *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, these women, unjustly, have had a "low profile in the world of literature." A study of their literary works, however, reveals that many of them have made a unique and significant contribution to the

American literary tradition, a contribution shaped by their experiences both as Blacks and as women.

Since the 18th century, literature written by Black women has been continuous. As early as 1746, in Deerfield, Massachusetts, Lucy Terry, a slave, wrote a poem entitled "Bars Fight," in which she gives a poetic account of an Indian raid. The history of Black women in poetry may have begun with this poem.

The best known Black female author of 18th-century America was Phillis Wheatley, an African-born slave, whose poetry was read and celebrated in this country and abroad. Educated and encouraged by her owners, the Wheatleys of Massachusetts, she wrote religious and lyric poetry in the style of her day. Her volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published in England in 1773.

In 19th-century America, almost a century after Wheatley, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a free Black woman born in Baltimore, Maryland, made her mark as a literary artist. In addition to writing poetry and fiction, she was a reformer who lectured on abolition, temperance, Black education, and suffrage. Her Christian humanism, social awareness, race loyalty, and empathy with the sufferings of women are reflected in her writings. Her novel, *Iola Leroy*, was published in 1892.

During the 20th century, the intellect, imagination, and energy that characterized the Black women writers of the previous centuries encouraged more gifted women to express themselves through literature. Even a partial list of these writers before the 1960s is impressive: Charlotte Forten Grimké, Angelina Weld Grimké, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Gwendolyn Bennett, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Anne Spencer, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Helene Johnson, May Miller, Ann Petry, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Despite this talented group, however, even during the two 20th century periods of great creativity on the part of Black writers—the New Negro Renaissance, which spanned the 1920s, and the Black Arts Movement, which reached its apex during the late 1960s and early 1970s—women writers remained on the periphery and only a scant few received attention.

Recent books are beginning to make strides in overcoming past neglect by

treating in full the works and biographies of some of these women. In 1977, for example, Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston* provided a lengthy study of the life and art of this effervescent woman of the New Negro Renaissance, and in 1981 Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, in *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer*, revealed Fauset as not only a literary artist who deserves attention but the literary editor at *The Crisis* who successfully encouraged and nurtured the talents of the young Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen.

Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work*, by providing material that gives valuable insight into the lives and works of 14 contemporary Black women literary artists, is in the category of publications that are helping to fill the gaps in American literary history. Tate, an associate professor of English at Howard University, accomplishes her task through a series of well planned and controlled interviews.

The process used by literary critics is akin to that of other interpreters of art; that is, they move from the exterior of a work to the interior. The movement of the creative writer is in the reverse direction. In *Black Women Writers at Work*, one of the intriguing attempts by Tate is to show the creative process at work or how these women go about their jobs of writing. The responses, which at times take into account the fine line between life and art, are always individualized.

"Art is not living," poet Audre Lorde insists. "It is the art of living. The artist has the ability to take the living and use it in a certain way and produce art." For Toni Morrison, the award-winning novelist, "Writing has to do with the imagination. It's being willing to open a door or think the unthinkable, no matter how silly it may appear."

In confirming the personal nature of some of her poetry, Ntozake Shange, who is also a playwright and a novelist, reveals something of how she creates:

"I see my self-consciousness in terms of battling with myself to let go of something. . . . I had fought through very difficult emotional tasks in order to allow myself to say: 'Okay, as weird as *this* is, *this* is truly how I feel. . . .' In other words, my self-consciousness has nothing really to do with other people. It has to do with whether or not I'm going to confront what I'm feeling."

A stockpile of literary material always

awaits fiction writer Kristin Hunter, and this material, the most urgent coming first, finds form as a novel or a short story. For Maya Angelou, poet and autobiographer, writing is an integral part of life:

"Writing is a part of my life; cooking is a part of my life. Making love is a part of my life; walking down the street is a part of it. Writing demands more time, but it takes from all of these other activities. They all feed into the writing."

Though these women writers articulate differently their responsibilities, most agree on these points: learning one's craft, becoming as good a writer as one can, and telling as much of the truth as one can. Shange adds another responsibility: that women writers, who do see the world in such a way that they "care more about people than military power," make important the powers to feel, nourish, and educate.

The audiences for whom these women write vary. Morrison's is not an external one but the people in the book she is writing at the time. Hunter writes for as many people as possible, whereas Alexis DeVeaux sees as her first duty "to write so that other black people have an understanding of what I'm trying to say about my black life and possibly what I'm saying about their black lives." Some are writing specifically for Black women.

Alice Walker, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*, discusses the focus of the writing of Black women. To her, these writers tend to be interested in the Black community, "in intimate relationships." This attitude differs somewhat from Black male writers. "We black women writers know very clearly that our survival depends on trust," she continues. "We will not or cannot have anything until we examine what we do to and with each other."

Sherley Anne Williams, who is both a critic and a poet, concludes that Black women writers are taking the will to survive outside the framework of encounters with the white world.

"They've refashioned this will into an instrument for understanding ourselves among ourselves. In each of their works there is the white world as backdrop, its oppression, but the focus is on understanding the self, the family, and the community. The strength originates here. I think that this has been generally true of black women writers over the years."

Tate has edited *Black Women Writers at Work* with such care that not only do the words of each author breathe with life but each voice has its particular coloring and through it all shines the distinct personality of the writer. The writers—Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alexis DeVeaux, Nikki Giovanni, Kristin Hunter, Gayle Jones, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Margaret Walker, and Sherley Anne Williams—speak out on issues that are close to their hearts. When they discuss the topics of gender and race, there are no real conflicts but rather an exploration of the differences among them.

These women write because they must; their lives and their art are inextricably bound. As Blacks and as women in America, they have been given a special place, and it is from this vantage point, as writers and as human beings, that they look at life and out of it create literature, the pains and joys, the struggles and survival, all manifesting in poetry, fiction, and drama. □

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## Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?

By Maya Angelou

Random House, New York, 1983

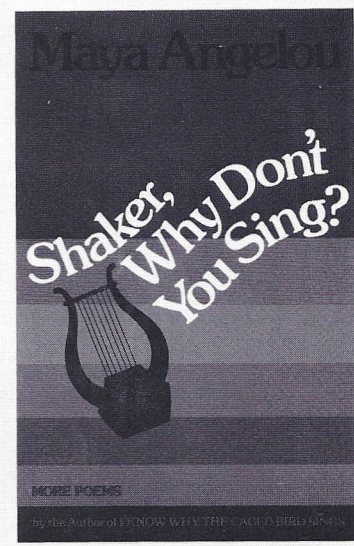
44 pp., \$7.95

Reviewed by Gregory S. Kears

This gutsy little book won't win any major literary awards. It was not written for that purpose. But this, the fourth collection of poetry by the author of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, will get the attention it deserves and more readers in an ever-growing camp of Angelou devotees.

As is reflected in much of the fiction and poetry in contemporary letters, *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* is clearly personal, though not quite autobiographical. The themes covered—love, longing, pain and fortune—are sufficiently universal to transcend mere biography. Typical of Angelou, however, the poems are lyrical, revealing, informative and playful. Almost chatty.

The title poem is powerful in its innocent sensuality. Its images are compact as is true for all good poetry, and evoke longings that we have all shared: "Evicted from sleep's mute palace, I wait in silence/for the bridal croon,/your legs rubbing insistent/rhythm against my thighs..." The last line nicely sums up the search in terms we can all understand: "Yet darkness brings no syncopated promise./I rest somewhere between the unsung notes of night./Shaker, why don't you sing?"



Less weighty but no less moving is the playful "Impeccable Conception."

*I met a Lady Poet  
who took for inspiration  
colored birds, and whispered words,  
a lover's hesitation.*

*A falling leaf could stir her.  
A wilting, dying rose  
would make her write, both day and  
night,  
the most rewarding prose.*

*She'd find a hidden meaning  
in every pair of pants,  
then hurry home to be alone  
and write about romance.*

This totem to the creative process of a woman poet is complex in its elegant simplicity, the *raison d'être* of rewarding poetry. But poetry in the tradition of Frost or Pound or Eliot reflects the informed and complex self in expression where even the punctuation serves to further the image.

Civil rights activist, composer, actress, director, filmmaker, poet, singer, producer—Maya Angelou has the background to provide the rich texture that her poetry demands. Hence, beneath the simplicity of the product lies the breadth of a multi-colored canvas, a canvas that

reveals a catholic depth hidden by the constraints of the poetic idiom.

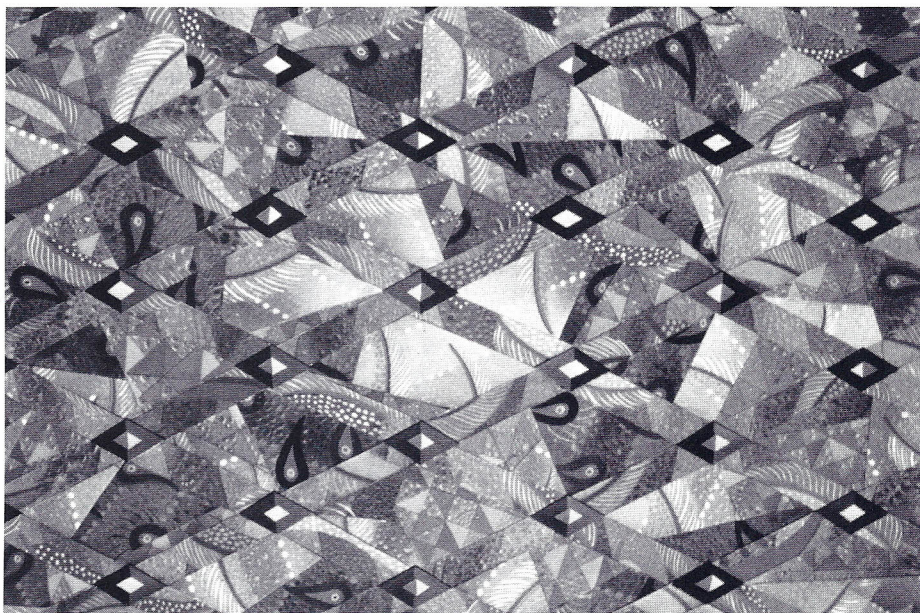
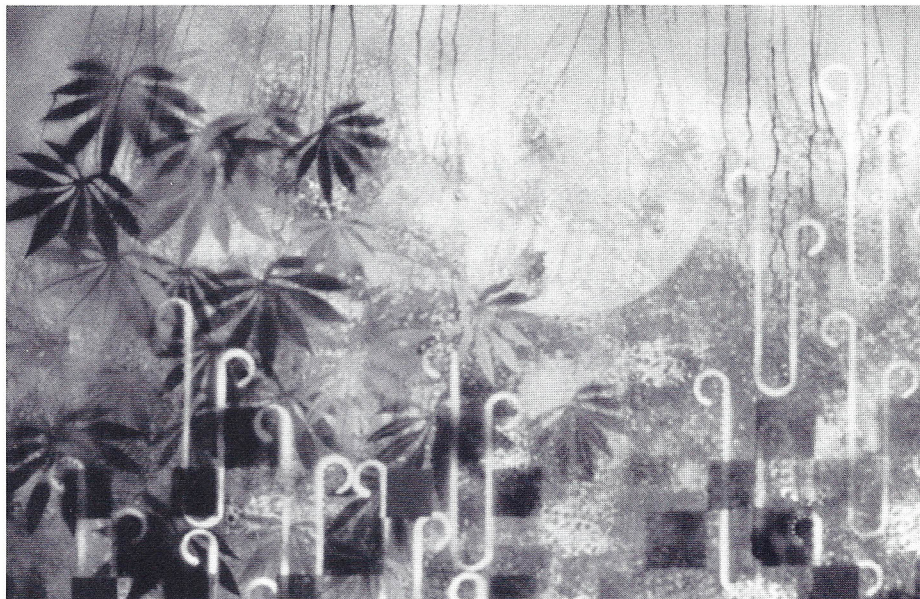
Those of us who have heard her read understand her magnificent and enterprising stage presence. Hers is an act of giving rather than receiving. And in each performance we get a little closer, a microscopic glimpse of all the elements that go into the "impeccable conception" of the poem.

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As the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from 1960-61 at the invitation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Angelou was politically active at a time when the alliance of art and politics was beginning to be nourished in Black America. It was during this time that she met and married a South African nationalist and went to live in Egypt and then Ghana. She returned to the United States in 1966 where she acted in Jean Anouilh's *Medea* in Hollywood. She also wrote and produced a 10-part PBS series on African traditions in American life. Angelou had never considered writing about herself until a dinner conversation with James Baldwin. Soon after, she found herself writing the story of her childhood, which was to become the award-winning, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. The rest is history.

After Random House published *Caged Bird* in 1970, three more volumes of autobiography followed: *Gather Together In My Name* (1974), *Singing' and Swinging' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976) and *The Heart of a Woman* (1981).

"I speak to the Black experience," she once explained, "but I am always talking about the human condition — about what we can endure, dream, fail at and still survive." Marguerite Johnson (Maya Angelou) will survive because her writing will. And that's the real prize. □



## Phyllis Cunningham: Rhythms of Vision

Using a basic visual vocabulary of circles, triangles and squares, Phyllis Cunningham creates rhythmic patterns on canvas.

The rhythmic feeling she communicates through her repetition of these geometric shapes has been inspired by the brilliant overlapping patterns found in the traditional clothing of Senegalese women, by the counterpoints of music and by the precision of mathematics.