Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History
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Since the early to mid-1980s, interest in women writers of color has become increasingly strong, and the publication of critical texts examining women writers from Africa and the African diaspora has not adequately met the demand from scholars in feminist studies, African studies, African American studies, diaspora studies, American literature, American studies, and postcolonial studies. With the inclusion in this volume of scholarship on works by black women from England, Canada, and the Caribbean, the dialogue surrounding migration and identity formation extends beyond the already existing corpus of scholarship that has tended to focus largely on black women writers in the United States and, occasionally, in Africa. One of my motivations for making this collection available was to attempt to fill a void, one that begs for critical texts that explore the burgeoning field of black women writers from Africa and the African diaspora.

This volume grew out of interest expressed by academics in the United States and abroad. Key leadership in the South Central Modern Language Association (SCMLA), the Modern Language Association (MLA), and the College Language Association (CLA) has encouraged me over the years to organize panels around the works of black women writers. The SCMLA special sessions on women writers of color were a hugely successful draw, opening the dialogue to capacity crowds consistently for six years. In 1993, SCMLA approved the “Women of Color” session as a permanent offering of the organization. “Women of Color” continues to serve as a popular session, particularly among junior faculty in the academy who are eager for scholarship that brings together an array of critical approaches to explore race, class, and gender issues impacting identity formation in texts by black writers in various parts of the world. Since the mid-1990s MLA and CLA, both national associations committed to inclusiveness, have taken the lead in encouraging panel proposals on women writers of color for annual conventions. Since
2002, I have organized several MLA and CLA sessions around migration and black women’s identity formation, a topic that drew a respectable number of scholars competing for slots on the panels. It became clear to me that there was sufficient interest and need for a volume that might extend the existing excellent critical studies on migration and black female identity.

This volume engages several single-authored texts that treat migration and black women’s identity formation: Moorings and Metaphors (1991) by Karla F. C. Holloway, who established cultural moorings as the motivation for migration; Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject (1994) by Carole Boyce Davies, who concentrated on migration and opened the discussion as a major field of study; The Difference Place Makes (2003) by Angeletta K. M. Gourdine, who offers a plausible definition of diaspora consciousness and explores the importance of place in black women’s identity; and Black Subjects (2004) by Arlene Keizer, who reexamines slavery as a vehicle for interpreting identity crises in recent black literature. Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History is unique in that the essays in the collection offer new insights and approaches to the topic of migration and the politics of black women’s identity as well as uncover and engage broader research agendas within the field of black women’s writings across the African diaspora. Of particular significance is that this volume—in addition to coalescing these writers’ migratory narratives—introduces lesser-known writers and recontextualizes established writers. No other collection, to my knowledge, brings together a multiplicity of critical approaches to literature, including fiction and drama, to as diverse a group of women writers as represented in this volume. In term of depth and breadth, Martin Japtok’s volume Postcolonial Perspectives on Women Writers from Africa, the Caribbean, and the U.S. (Africa World Press, 2003) comes closest to the objective of this project; however, his volume does not embrace black women writers from England and Canada, nor does it include several emerging writers from a variety of African countries.

I became increasingly aware of the need for a more inclusive volume on black women writers when I traveled to the Sorbonne in Paris in 2000, the University of Bristol in England in 2002, the University of Toronto in 2004, and the Freie Universität Berlin in 2006. In each of these locations, I met with graduate students and faculty alike who complained about the dearth of research available on so vital a group of writers living within their respective countries. On one occasion, someone in a session at a conference where I was making a presentation on black women playwrights asked quite blatantly, “Why haven’t you included black women writers from London in your research?” The passion with which she spoke served as an impetus
for me to begin the journey of excavating texts by black British women playwrights. My research at the University of Bristol introduced me to nearly twenty black women playwrights currently writing in Great Britain. Additionally, discussions I had with academics in Beijing, China, in 2001 circled back to a need for scholarship on black women writers. Shortly after my research in Asia, Professor Hongeal Sohn of Taegu University in South Korea secured permission to translate and reissue my book, *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America*. These engagements with academic and nonacademic readers of black women’s texts ultimately served as the driving force for initiating my journey to bring this project to fruition. During the 2003 annual meeting of CLA in Washington, D.C., I announced a national call for papers for a volume on migration and identity in black women’s literature.

Several unifying threads weave their way through the essays in this volume, the most important of which is the theme of “women on their way to becoming whole.” In nearly every essay, the female characters struggle against multiple yokes of oppression, giving voice to what it means to be black, female, poor, old, and alone. Despite debilitating barriers, these women triumph as they migrate to physical, emotional, spiritual, and social spaces of survivability. The movement away from home engenders ambivalence and fuels feelings of alienation, loss, and separation. Characters in several of the studies experience a longing for the mother(land), which leaves them conflicted; there is no possibility of returning “home” without reconciling that the reclamation of self depends upon an acceptance of competing identities. Hybridity—the mutability of identity—echoes loudly as one resolution in these narratives of separation and loss. Healing rituals also serve as a unifying link in the works of black women writers; these rituals empower women to resist the systems of oppression that are both internal and external to the community. The rituals generally involve water and motion and are intricately connected to reenactments of the Middle Passage and subsequent voluntary and involuntary migrations. The women often race to bodies of water where they bear up each other, riding the waves of disappointment, disenfranchisement, dislocation, and disconnection. The bonds that the women develop become the bridge that allows them to survive destabilized terrain. This volume attempts to answer the questions that emerge from these themes of migration and black women’s identity formation: Who are these women? How do they self-identify? What critical methodology allows for such a grouping of women writers from seemingly disparate cultures? Ultimately, the volume coalesces around black women’s identity formation and the role that displacement—the common denominator—continues to
play in the lives of black women in various parts of the world. The essays examine the journeys taken by women who refuse to accept fragmentation as their inheritance.

While considering an organizational structure for the volume, I discovered that certain topics, which are an outgrowth of the unifying themes, surfaced in connection with specific locales and seemingly provided a sense of the organic whole. These tentative topics—“Black Atlantic Writers: Transgressing Boundaries,” “African Writers: Tradition versus Modernity,” “African American Writers: Passages and Explorations,” and “Caribbean Writers: Longing for Motherland”—invariably proved to be reductive to the essay groupings. I came to recognize that to signal distinction in this collection I needed more critical rubrics that would allow the essays to be grouped relatively free of artificial constraints. In a collection designed to explore border crossings, it seemed counterproductive to try to harness these essays in rubrics that did not coherently and cohesively illuminate this volume’s unique contributions. The writers included in the studies have themselves participated in sometimes multiple border crossing, and their narratives replicate the displacement engendered by their own experiences. For example, Buchi Emecheta, born in Nigeria, now lives in England. Tess Onwueme, also born in Nigeria, now lives in the United States. Djanet Sears was born in England but lives in Canada. Paule Marshall, whose roots are in the Caribbean, is recognized as a U.S. writer. Does one define a writer by her current locale or by her place of origin? One point is certain: both the past and the present—like the theme of tradition versus modernity—merge in the selected writers’ migration narratives. Also adding to the conundrum was the fact of spillage—themes that applied to one or more groups of writers often applied just as much to other writers listed under a different subtitle. The process of determining rubrics crystallized for me the justification for bringing these groups of women together in one volume: they are sisters, spiritually and emotionally, and in that undeniable relationship it is almost impossible to divide them into separate groups. The ties that bind them outweigh the specific cultural and/or geographical differences. Once I reached that epiphany, I finally understood why I really wanted to publish this volume. I wanted a book that validated what I feel about black women around the world: we acknowledge that we share a common ground, we are not easily divided, and we stand upon each other’s shoulders dispensing healing balms. While some critics might point a wagging finger and hurl the dirty word “essentialism,” I believe that our history and herstory commingle; the trauma that ensued when Africans were loaded onto ships in chains continues to haunt black women, and men too, wherever they find themselves in this present moment in the diaspora. If in black women’s texts reenactments
of the Middle Passage are the call, then the healing rituals are the response. I resolved then to abandon artificial groupings and organize the volume around one essential rubric: *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History*. All of the nine essays coalesce around this one telling rubric.

The women writers that were selected for this volume were chosen because their texts stage displacement and healing—two of the most important issues in the larger research agendas within the field of black women’s writings in Africa and the African diaspora. The individual essays congeal around culturally specific experiences of blacks in select African countries, England, the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada. I decided to arrange the essays in a pattern that is reminiscent of the triangular slave trade, which suggests the international and interactive character of American commerce more than describes a specific route. Given the writers’ preoccupations with displacement narratives with displacement narratives, it seems only fitting that the organizational structure of the volume perform its own reenactment of the Middle Passage and the concomitant sense of loss. While it was impossible for the slave ships to make stops in all of the dispersal sites in the Americas during each voyage, our imaginary ship crosses multiple borders—sometimes making reverse migrations—in this volume. As we journey through the collection of essays, the first stop is Africa, the site of the original rupture, with a study of identity dilemmas by Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo. Departing West Africa, we sail to England, where we read narratives of loss and reclamation by Winsome Pinnock, who has roots in the Caribbean, and Nigerian-born Buchi Emecheta. The voyage continues from England to the United States, where Gloria Naylor’s displacement narrative includes cultural metaphors of Africa. The border crossings continue to the Caribbean, where herstories by Paule Marshall, Jamaica Kincaid, and Merle Hodge delineate the struggles for freedom during a postcolonial era. The narratives’ movements back and forth among the United States, the Caribbean, England, and France underscore the destabilization associated with postcolonialism. The ship, picking up steam, then sails into Canada, where playwright Djanet Sears tells of displaced blacks who fled the United States searching for the haven that, in many cases, never materialized. Finally, the voyage concludes back in Africa, where Nigerian playwright Tess Onwueme writes about the missing faces of blacks who were kidnapped from Africa and the ultimate journey to return to the African continent to heal the wounds—the chasm—initiated by the Middle Passage. *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women’s Literature* is a voyage, in a symbolic sense, that acknowledges the Middle Passage as the tropological site of identity disintegration and attempts to illuminate the various types of struggles black women have encountered on their personal journeys to becoming whole.
The contributors included in this volume represent both established and emerging scholars, most of whom have presented versions of their papers at SCMLA, MLA, CLA, and other national and international conferences. Because I want this book to be accessible to diverse intellectual, ethnic, and economic groups, I have taken care to discourage esoteric scholarship. The scholarship within the essays is both substantial—the essayists have done their research well—and highly readable. I am hopeful that this volume—with its coverage of multiple authors and texts—will be especially useful in introductory courses on black women’s literature, of which there is a proliferation in the past two decades, as well as in graduate courses that focus on black women’s writings as an evolving genre. The contributors apply an array of theories, including Africanism, postmodernism, modernism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, feminism, womanism, negofeminism, and historicism. I offer the following brief summaries of the essays to provide a sense of the breadth of this volume but, more importantly, to entice readers to join the voyage, to participate in the reenactments of the Middle Passage, and to remain on board to witness the healing that reverberates in black women’s texts.

Violet Harrington Bryan’s “Conflicting Identities in the Women of Ama Ata Aidoo’s Drama and Fiction” is an exploration of the lives of women seeking to define themselves on their own terms, both in Ghana and in their migrations abroad. Ghanaian author Ama Ata Aidoo chronicles the dilemmas facing women during neocolonial Ghana—ruled by President Kwame Nkrumah immediately after establishing its independence from England in 1957. Bryan argues that Aidoo, a product of the matrilineal Fanti people of Ghana, constructs complex representations of women in indigenous and modern African societies. She cites critic Maggi Phillips’s research on psychic schisms and sites of ritual healing in modern African literature, applying this critique to Aidoo’s writing. Aidoo’s reliance upon the dilemma tale convention facilitates her probing of maternal subjectivity, one of the central themes not only in Aidoo’s work but also in African women’s literature in general.

Bryan argues adroitly that Ghanaian women negotiate spaces for themselves in a myriad of roles in Aidoo’s drama and fiction, including The Dilemma of a Ghost; Anowa; No Sweetness Here; Our Sister Killjoy: Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint; and Changes: A Love Story. Her work explores the longing for home and the painful recognition of the impossibility of returning. The heroines often migrate from rural to urban areas, from Africa to Europe or America, and back again—attempting to reconstitute themselves and to renegotiate space that will accommodate their hybridized identities. The space that Aidoo illumines is one in which multiple, competing identities collide as they experience the ever-changing, fluctuating dynamics
associated with displacement and gender restrictions. Bryan offers a much-needed close reading of the texts, revealing Aidoo’s emphasis on transition and movement and the many roles that self-exile plays in the formation of Ghanaian women’s identities.

DeLinda Marzette’s “Coming to Voice: Navigating the Interstices in Plays by Winsome Pinnock” explores the negotiation that takes place within the fragmented interior space of ruptured identity. She argues that the works of Winsome Pinnock, a black British female playwright who has roots in the Caribbean, function as a performance of diaspora. Marzette illustrates a parallel between Pinnock’s own ritualistic return home via the creative process and the migrations of her fictional characters. She returns home metaphorically through the creation of characters, embracing the ideology that home is not an empirical impossibility. Pinnock foregrounds movements of exile and return to homeland in Talking in Tongues, A Hero’s Welcome, and Leave Taking. She structures her plays around the coordinates of homeland, displacement, and metaphorical return. Her plays—with dual settings that move physically and/or metaphorically between London and the Caribbean—investigate the global dilemma of black identity erosion as manifested by characters suffering from alienation, fragmentation, displacement, and disconnectedness.

Marzette’s essay aptly situates black women within Britain’s hegemonic codes, particularly when migration continually subverts and reconfigures fixed notions of black identity. Citing postcolonial critics Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and James Procter, Marzette adroitly explains that Pinnock’s primary characters attempt to embrace hybridity, to reconcile home with their place of exile. Marzette argues cogently that Pinnock’s drama functions as ritual migration, with each performance serving as a mode of journeying home and satisfying a need to belong. Pinnock’s women transgress boundaries to claim sanctuary, passage, and nurturance in the interstitial spaces characterized by conflict and ambivalence. Successful navigation of hybridity in Pinnock’s plays necessarily involves black women creating and maintaining transformative bonds that traverse generations, geographies, histories, class, and culture.

Romanus Muoneke’s “Migration, Transformation, and Identity Formation in Buchi Emecheta’s In the Ditch and Kehinde” examines issues of separation and loss among migrants who traverse foreign lands to flee outmoded, indigenous customs or the hardships engendered by ruthless colonial rule. Buchi Emecheta, a prominent African novelist living in London, fictionalizes her personal experiences to explore the various ways in which migration impacts individual identity in Kehinde and In the Ditch. Muoneke’s essay explores the migrant’s disorientation as a result of movements,
transformations, and self-reconstruction that must occur during the quest for a useable identity. The transformation generally involves the migrant accepting life-giving elements from both tradition and modernity, which results in a hybridized identity.

Muoneke aptly cites Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon in the development of his thesis—the struggle to overcome obstacles in the country of destination leads to a transformation of the individual and ultimately to a search for a new identity that involves multiple forms of negotiation. He argues deftly that Emecheta besets Ada, the central character of *In the Ditch*, with numerous trials in London—abandonment by her husband, threats of eviction from her greedy and unsympathetic landlord, and many other ordeals in a welfare complex—to illustrate the trauma associated with displacement and the determination with which the heroine seeks to redefine herself. Likewise, Emecheta portrays Kehinde, in the novel of the same title, as a woman who, after migrating to London with her husband, is later compelled to return to Nigeria, where she struggles against the demands of patriarchal norms. Kehinde returns eventually to London where she reinvents herself. The essay includes a full discussion of liberation strategies employed by women committed to self-rehabilitation.

Kathryn M. Paterson’s “Gloria Naylor’s North/South Dichotomy and the Reversal of the Middle Passage: Juxtaposed Migrations within *Mama Day*” explores the connections among history, genealogy, and African American identity. The essay examines the juxtaposition of the migrations and subsequent displacement of Cocoa Day and George Andrews in *Mama Day*. Paterson argues skillfully that in Cocoa’s journeys back and forth between North and South, Naylor destabilizes the myth of the free and cosmopolitan North, as represented by Manhattan Island and New York City. Cocoa longs for home when she is in New York, but recognizes the impossibility of returning permanently; as a resolution to Cocoa’s conflicted self, Naylor offers hybridity. Paterson presents an intriguing treatment of George’s migration to the South from New York, arguing that Naylor metaphorically reverses the journey of the Middle Passage. When George relinquishes his dependence on the dominant American culture, he aligns himself with the African roots of Willow Springs and reclaims his own heritage, as he is physically and spiritually grafted into the genealogy of the island.

Paterson theorizes that Cocoa’s and George’s various migrations stimulate marginalization within each other, and instead of paralyzing that subaltern within the self and inhibiting integration, Naylor enables full integration by imbuing spirituality into their relationship and allowing the two characters to participate in a dialogue that transcends not only time and space but also death. Paterson approaches *Mama Day* as a text that
highlights conflicting modernities; both Cocoa and George are challenged to negotiate spaces of inbetweenness—their African American ancestry and the dominant American culture. Paterson argues that in developing Cocoa and George as fractured, splintered characters, Naylor replicates the initial rupture caused by the Middle Passage. She offers a careful examination of the text to illustrate the various ways in which healing is possible, including reintegration of fragmented selves into a collective, authentic whole. Characteristic of the texts examined in this volume, women take center stage as healers, and in *Mama Day*, Naylor empowers Cocoa’s living and dead female relatives with the gift of healing.

Marie Foster Gnage’s “Reconfiguring Self: A Matter of Place in Selected Novels by Paule Marshall” is an examination of place—setting, social status, and psychological point in life—and its role in the transformation of women’s lives in Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People; Praise-song for the Widow; Daughters; and The Fisher King*. In each work, “place” is a crucial factor in women’s transformation. Gnage examines closely the transformative nature of movement as Marshall’s female characters migrate between the Caribbean islands and the United States, England, or France. Products of brutish imperialism, the women in Marshall’s novels traffic to new sites, searching for better opportunities and attempting escape from racism and sexism. The characters cross waters in somewhat of a formulaic pattern on their way to becoming whole. Marshall’s displaced characters endure tumultuous unrest—experiencing a sense of dislocation as they attempt to embrace their pasts and associated demons—while adjusting to new environs that are, in some cases, as oppressive as those left behind. In all four novels, Marshall’s characters experience identity crises because they discount their painful childhood memories rather than seek to integrate their old and new worlds, past and present. Marshall also suggests that the women are fragmented because of a disconnection to their spiritual source: Africa. They must return to Africa, literally or figuratively, as part of their journey to selfhood. Gnage’s essay delves into what is lost and what is retained as Marshall’s characters attempt to create a space for shifting identities.

Arguing that migration leads to self-discovery, cultural discovery, and historical reference, Gnage cites Carol Boyce Davies and Abena Busia in her study of place and displacement in Marshall’s novels. The psychological “place” that each character enters as she journeys toward reconfiguration necessitates a mentor, a spiritual guide, opiates, memories, rituals, and rites of passage—a process generally overseen by a community of women. Marshall presents these characters reaching out to help other women find a safe space—physically and psychologically—one that is conducive to reconfiguration.
Julia De Foor Jay’s “‘What a History You Have’: Ancestral Memory, Cultural History, Migration Patterns, and the Quest for Autonomy in the Fiction of Jamaica Kincaid” examines the plight of Dominican and Antiguan women in colonial and postcolonial societies, as well as their brave struggles to rise above the past and create new, sovereign selves. Kincaid’s stories reflect her own heritage and journey for self-determination and a creative, more independent lifestyle. Jay argues capably that the distant past—grounded in the annihilation of the Carib Indians, the involuntary migration of African slaves, the colonization by Spanish, French, and British aristocracy, and the ensuing tradition of abuse, disease, poverty, and corruption—engenders in the women either intense anger or profound despair. Kincaid pays close attention to ancestors who articulate stories that heal; grandmothers function as transmitters of cultural knowledge and are initiators of ritual and ceremony. The women who are in the process of evolving into wholeness, Annie John in *Annie John*, Lucy in *Lucy*, and Xuela in *The Autobiography of My Mother*, in particular, are nearly incapacitated by a history of powerlessness attributable to imperial greed, racism, and sexism. Each heroine, armed with rage and self-determination, challenges old memories and present realities.

Jay’s central thesis is that each of Kincaid’s heroines despairs of realizing her ambitions—dreams of freedom from place, family, ancestral memories, and powerlessness. For the women, independence from place, Dominica and Antigua, is crucial, for these island dreamlands represent tyranny. Freedom from family, particularly the mother, represents a movement toward a keener, more independent, hybrid identity. Jay concludes that in attempting to counter ancestral memories of colonial marginalization, the women participate in healing rituals that allow them to transgress boundaries and move into a space that offers renewal. A community of women, including Obeahs and surrogate mothers, employ transformative and curative powers to facilitate regeneration in young females suffering from displacement. Jay proffers that the women in most of Kincaid’s stories prosper, precisely because of their ties to a community of women.

Joyce Zonana’s “‘Tee,’ ‘Cyn-Cyn,’ ‘Cynthia,’ ‘Dou-dou’: Remembering and Forgetting the ‘True-True Name’ in Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey*” examines Trinidadian writer Merle Hodge’s 1970 novel, *Crick Crack, Monkey*, which concludes with her young heroine’s movement to the “Mother Country.” Zonana insightfully explores the internal turmoil that besieges the narrator, who is torn between the dreams and ambitions of her working-class, dark-skinned “Tantie” and her middle-class, light-skinned “Aunt.” Caught between worlds, the narrator eventually longs to be transported to England. Zonana argues that the plot offers no real resolution to the
narrator’s struggle for a stable identity, but instead tenders ambivalence as a way of life. The adult narrator moves back and forth between her Caribbean motherland with its African oral traditions and values originating before the Middle Passage and her European-inflected, literate modernity. When Tee lives among her “poor relations,” she experiences unselfconscious selfhood, which morphs into self-loathing during her stay with Aunt Beatrice, who demands imitation of colonial standards.

Zonana’s essay interrogates the novel’s evocations of the European “Mother Country,” the African motherland, and the Caribbean mother(’s) land. She argues that the novel demonstrates the impossibility of a return to the African past—what Edouard Glissant calls “reversion.” Yet, because imitation of the white colonial masters inflicts what Glissant calls “insidious violence,” the narrator must fashion a hybrid identity, grounded in the present-day realities of the Caribbean. Tee learns that knowledge equals white colonial power equals black marginalization. To survive self-division and self-contempt, the heroine has to accept the shifting nature of black female identity. Through its focus on language and naming, Hodge’s novel enacts what such an identity might be; “Tee” is never at ease with her proper name, and “Cynthia” seems finally to accept “Cyntie” as a functional hybrid that will hopefully unite her conflicted self.

My contribution to the volume, “Place and Displacement in Djanet Sears’s Harlem Duet and The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God,” examines African Canadian women’s identity formation as linked to physical, psychological, or social movement. I argue that the plays reveal the nuances of the struggle that black Canadian women endure as they attempt to negotiate destabilizing terrain. Sears’s plays reenact the rupture or fissure caused by European colonization of African countries, the Middle Passage, slavery, and urbanization, all of which served to disenfranchise and dislocate blacks. I attempt to underscore the history and cultural practices in Sears’s plays that inhibit or advance the transformation of women’s lives in Canada.

“Place and Displacement . . . ” explores the ways in which Sears’s female characters resist negative aspects of both the old and new worlds and struggle to embrace life-giving elements of both. Sears’s heroines live amidst contradictions; they navigate in a society that views them simultaneously as valuable and valueless. This study explores strategies for survival among black Canadian women; these characters are able to reconcile contradictions, adapt to ambivalence, and become community builders in an increasingly individualistic, modern society. Sears’s plays disrupt assumptions about the Canadian black experience and the idealized experiences of blacks fleeing oppressive conditions of slavery and the Reconstruction era. Citing Leslie
Catherine Sanders, George Elliott Clarke, Renaldo Walcott, and Joseph Mensah, I interrogate erasure and acts of reclamation in Sears’s plays. One of the key points of this study is that it offers insights about the connections among race, place, and identity. In Sears’s plays—one set in Harlem and another set near Toronto—the heroines resist racist and sexist constraints and form deep, meaningful relationships with women as they struggle to heal old family wounds.

Juliette Bartlett-Pack’s “Recovering the Past: Transatlantic Migration, Hybrid Identities, and Healing in Tess Onwueme’s The Missing Face” argues that Nigerian playwright Tess Onwueme dramatizes late-twentieth-century voluntary crossings and migrations between Africa and America, foregrounding issues of place and displacement. A transplant in America, Onwueme critiques present-day African and African American values, which continue to be influenced by the overwhelming sense of displacement inflicted upon blacks by colonial rule and the Atlantic slave trade. Onwueme portrays the effects of alienation and disenfranchisement on a modern African American woman who immigrates to Nigeria in search of family roots and lost identity, a journey she undertakes after a Nigerian man who had come to America for education and better opportunity abandons her. Bartlett-Pack applies an Africana feminist critique—one that privileges home, family, and community over Western feminism that tends to valorize individual choice to the detriment of imagined community traditions and values—to Onwueme’s plays. As a postcolonial writer who interrogates the ramifications of the colonial experience on her characters, Onwueme portrays the clash between Africans and African Americans and demonstrates that continuing conflicts between the two groups are inextricably linked to the initial forced migration. Citing Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, Bartlett-Pack examines conflicts that are manifested in feelings of alienation, instability, and assumed superiority. She concludes the essay with an assessment of Onwueme’s view that an engagement with one’s distant past is not only possible but also necessary for a usable identity in the present.

I view this volume as a recovery project, an act of reclamation, because the contributors participated in rescuing several of these texts and/or the writers from [near] obscurity. This book needed to be written now because the intellectual constituency of several disciplines are earnestly seeking texts that will support teaching and enhance their research. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, this collection is timely because it underscores the changes, the renegotiations, taking place in world politics and, consequently, literary and cultural productions. Emerging voices are insisting on being heard. The once-rigid literary canon is shifting increasingly toward inclusiveness, a fact suggesting that the global village has arrived, bringing
difference. This volume not only recognizes the proliferation of difference in our contemporary world, but it also directs us to study, understand, and embrace it. Without this collection, we can continue to assume that there is an inconsequential body of literature and critical theory regarding black women writers across the globe. However, this collection invites artists, scholars, and the general public to open their ears, eyes, and hearts to texts—specifically by black women writers—that offer healing strategies for the world community.

Should there be a second volume, one may expect essays on texts by black women from Central and South America, particularly Brazil, whose black population is exceeded only by Nigeria, West Africa. Before Britain’s trafficking in slaves began, Portugal had transported approximately 4.5 million Africans to Brazil between 1440 and 1640. Space must be made for critical studies of the works of Brazilians of African descent. Several scholars are now working on translating from Portuguese to English a number of novels and plays by black women from Brazil. When these texts become available, I suspect that a study of these works will enhance our understanding of the African diaspora and its relation to and impact upon world communities. There are millions of blacks in South and Central America who share similar experiences—namely, psychic distress associated with displacement—with their counterparts in different parts of the world. If we can read black women’s literature as healing balm, we can begin to transform our individual and collective circumstances. Like the displaced and dispossessed black women in the texts selected for this volume, we can and must cast aside shackles on our way to becoming whole.