FOREWORD TO THE 1989 EDITION

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the exciting rediscovery of figures like Countée Cullen, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright (to name a few of the most well known), many young black women writers and scholars wondered aloud, at first mostly among themselves, and then to the larger world: "Where were the women who put pen to paper and gave voice to their creative impulses?" Of course, almost everyone knew of Gwendolyn Brooks, the first black poet to receive a Pulitzer prize, and radical contemporaries like June Jordan, Carolyn Rodgers, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, who made impolite and even outrageous claims for blackness, on paper, on street corners, in local bars, and in demonstrations on college campuses and elsewhere, and they called themselves poets. But for most of us then, if there was an identifiable tradition in Afro-American literature, it was a man's world. Some of us, even as we ventured out to search for black female literary models, consoled ourselves with the idea that the women had been too busy keeping the "race" alive over its three-hundred-year-old American history to have found the time to write. Now we know that was not so.

Given such an inauspicious beginning to the search for black women writers, however, the pioneers who excavated the rich mine of which we are now aware—the tradition of black women writing in America—richly deserve all the credit we can give them. And as the thirty-one volumes (with one more to come) of the recent Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers reveal, in spite of how difficult it must have been, black women wrote prolifically in all of the most popular forms—poetry, novels, short fiction, and autobiography. The first task was discovering the tradition; the second, and equally challenging, has been making the materials available to students and teachers.

Maureen Honey's fine volume, *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*, makes a strong response to that second challenge. Although scholarship on the Renaissance has burgeoned in recent years, work on women remains to be done. At the same time, most of what has already been published on women writers,

including on those who wrote during the Renaissance, has been on the novelists. Work in other fields lags behind. Consequently, *Shadowed Dreams* will occupy a significant place in the body of recovered Afro-American women's poetry, one equal to that of Erlene Stetson's 1980 landmark anthology, *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746–1980*. In addition, *Shadowed Dreams* comes at a most propitious time, following on the heels of Gloria Hull's *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), a text that focuses close attention on the lives and writings of a select group of women poets of that era. Both Stetson's and Hull's works set the stage for Honey's book, which gives a comprehensive view of the poetic achievements of the most important women poets of the period. This is the first time that anyone has attempted to do such a study of Harlem Renaissance women writers. Because of its timeliness, the text will be of immense interest to everyone interested in the Renaissance, offering a splendid resource for both general readers and those doing research on women in the Renaissance and black women poets in general.

Shadowed Dreams contains the work of a number of poets, many of whose names are familiar to scholars of the Renaissance, and, just as importantly, many who are obscure even among the informed. Honey divides the poems into four groups [in the 1989 edition]: Protest, Heritage, Love and Passion, and Nature, revealing the wide individual and collective interests of the writers. The majority of the women are included in more than one section. Honey claims that poetry was the preferred form of creative expression for the women writers of the 1920s, and from her text we see that these women made the widest possible use of the form. Scholars already familiar with some of these writers, and who are aware of their other writings, will observe that in specific instances, such as in the poetry of Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson, the themes and motifs they employ here are also present in their plays. In choosing to include several selections from each writer and, for the better-known writers, to print examples of their lesser-known work, Honey's collection gives us an expanded appreciation of the intellectual concerns of black women in the 1920s. This has been especially important among those of us who have interests in black women's lives from the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century.

While nature is a common motif in much of this poetry, more interestingly, Honey identifies the ease with which some women, even those who were heterosexual, wrote about their love of female beauty. In this she suggests that the writers identified strongly with women as a whole and “affirmed that bond in their work,” although not many were willing to explore erotic love for women in this public way. In the more recent work on the Harlem Renaissance we have come to realize that gay culture was part of the artistic circles of the time. This perhaps made it easier for the subject to appear, at least in a limited way, in women’s poetry.

With limited opportunities to have their work appear in traditional (white) anthologies of American poetry, or to publish single volumes of their own, much of what Harlem Renaissance women wrote appeared in the leading black journals of their day, especially in *The Crisis* (the journal of the NAACP) and *Opportunity* (the journal of the National Urban League). Since these were the most widely circulated and read of black media, these women, and the men whose work was published in the same places, were the most visible and widely read of the literary figures of their day. That these women appeared as often as they did in these journals indicates how well respected their work was by their peers, and how popular they must have been with readers.

The introduction to *Shadowed Dreams* will be particularly useful for students and those less familiar with the writings of women of the period. There is much here to learn about the Renaissance in general. Honey sets the tone for a largely historical understanding of her writers, and her brief survey of the social events and important literary and artistic figures of the time will serve the uninitiated well. One striking similarity among the women poets is their membership in the educated black middle class of the time. As a result, many wrote what appears only as conventional, genteel verse. At the same time, Honey makes it clear that they were imaginative artists, and among them, there were a few who entertained ideological agendas and produced striking metaphors and poems of high aesthetic quality. Unquestionably, all believed in art, and this group of women took advantage of the temper of the times to participate in the cultural life of their group.

Black women poets of the Harlem Renaissance fully deserve the

attention that Maureen Honey gives them in her book. Given the male domination of the New Negro Movement, these were women who overcame many barriers in order to participate in the literary life of their time. With the high interest in all areas of women's lives at this time, this book is not only useful, it is vital to our understanding of a major area of Afro-American cultural history. And equally important, no longer will anyone be able to claim that the only major poets of the Renaissance were the men whose names have become the signatures for that movement over the past three decades. The women were there, too!

—Nellie Y. McKay
University of Wisconsin, Madison
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