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Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African  
American Literature (review)

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**Harris, Trudier. 2001. *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. \$18.95sc. 272pp.**

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Trudier Harris has been one of the most prolific, if under-recognized, presences in African-American literary criticism for the last twenty years. The reasons for her relative anonymity for those outside of the orbit of the African-American critical community are, however, not hard to find. Her work, unlike that of her peers Houston Baker, Jr., Hortense Spillers, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Deborah McDowell, and Hazel Carby, has not engaged modernist or postmodernist concerns or recognizably “theoretical” feminist or postcolonial issues with any obviousness or consistency. Nor has her writing been peppered with the linguistic markers that signal a self-consciously up-to-date critical posture. Because of the manifestly straight-forward and jargon-free articulation of her insights that characterizes her writing, she has been, perhaps inevitably, relegated to the margins or simply absent from most of the high profile and influential debates on African-American fiction and culture. Despite its strengths, her latest book is not likely to change that situation. The highly concept driven and sociologically informed nature of what are still her two strongest books, *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* (1982) and *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (1984), has in her recent work, most notably *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991) and now in this book, devolved into an analytic posture that often seems simplistic when compared to both Harris’s earlier work and to more fully contextualized critical work on the topic by other scholars.

Even in as early a text as *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature*, Harris was especially attentive to those characters in Black fiction which “give the lie to the myth of the strength of black women” (44). In *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, she expands this interest into a sustained investigation of the textual representation of this myth. Over the course of a series of well-written but critically insular essays, Harris explores the image of “The Strong Black Woman” in selected works of African-American fiction and drama in terms and within conceptual parameters that should be easily accessible to advanced undergraduates, beginning graduate students, or general readers with an interest in

this issue. Still, despite the force of her considerations of particular texts, the most telling limitation of *Saints, Sinners, Saviors* is that the signal concept of “The Strong Black Woman” is not given the kind of definitional and conceptual clarity that would take her analysis beyond offering simply another, albeit well-argued, consideration of the received and stereotypical images of black women in African-American fiction.

According to Harris,

The appearance of these images in African American literature and their evolution over more than a century suggests that African American writers were just as complicitous as the white-created mythology surrounding black women in ensuring that strong, asexual representations of black female characters dominated the literature in the twentieth century and threaten to continue that domination in the twenty-first. (Harris 2001, 2)

Although this is a provocative and manifestly persuasive claim, Harris’s essentially new critical readings do not place these texts in the kinds of historical or sociological contexts that would ground so sweeping a claim. Nor do they specify her relation to the growing body of scholarship on these issues. For instance, beyond a list of titles in a short footnote, she fails to enter into the kind of sustained critical dialogue with the work of scholars like Lisa Anderson, M. M. Manring, Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, Diane Roberts, and Patricia A. Turner that is necessary in order to maintain or contribute to the continued dynamism of what is now a generation of black feminist and womanist criticism. In fact, the only such antecedent work with which Harris extensively engages is Barbara Christian’s *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976*. Although certainly a landmark text, Christian’s book was published over two decades ago in 1980, and its insights have been both problematized and supplemented by dozens of scholarly voices, whose absence from Harris’s book is troubling.

The weaknesses of *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* do not, however, fundamentally compromise the book’s status as a useful addition to the shelf of works specifically considering issues of gender in African-American literature. The book’s major strength is the extent to which Harris offers persuasive readings of works that are either not often read, read together, or subjected to serious critical attention at all. Most notable among these “minor” texts is Dorothy West’s *The Living is Easy* and Pearl Cleage’s play *Flyin’ West*. Although at times Harris succumbs to what may be an unavoidable hazard of critical analysis of lesser-known works, that of offering critically inflected plot summary rather than criticism proper, her readings effectively serve the purpose of widening, if only slightly, the still oppressively narrow confines of the canon of African-American literature. By critically pairing these works with texts by male writers such as Ishmael

Reed and Ernest Gaines, Harris also maintains her status as perhaps the African American critic most committed to resisting the tendency to separate male- and female-authored texts into critically autonomous and putatively opposing camps. In fact, it is the relational range of Harris's concerns that most distinguishes her work. This book, like her previous text *The Power of the Porch: The Storyteller's Craft in Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, and Randall Kenan* (1996), makes a strong case for the usefulness of recognizing the dialogically responsive relationship between the traditions of male and female African-American writing.

**Moddelmog, William E. 2000. *Reconstituting Authority: American Fiction in the Province of the Law, 1880-1920*. Iowa City. University of Iowa Press, 2000. \$32.95 hc. 276 pp.**

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Caught up as we are in the current “turn of the century,” it is not surprising that scholars are taking a hard look at the period (roughly 1880–1920) which previously enjoyed that label. It was a time, argues William E. Moddelmog, which witnessed “the rise of professionalism” (4) in both literature and the law, a phenomenon characterized by a conscious renegotiation of the relationships between such tangibles as codes and formal rules and such intangibles as experience, emotion, and creativity. That rethinking led Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., for example, to argue that we must “understand how to read the law. If we read it for its formal properties, it becomes ossified, nostalgic, unable to respond to change circumstances and standards. . . . If we read it as a ‘story,’ however, it possesses both a formal integrity and a responsiveness to change and revision” (9). Thus, Holmes’s decision “to practice law rather than follow in his father’s literary footsteps” was less “a rejection of literature” than “simply a way of doing a different kind of literary work” (9). Much of *Reconstituting Authority* is a meditation on this *fin de siècle* legal/lit-