

## Book Reviews

# Review of *The Sisterhood, How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture*

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When beginning a study focusing on “labor” within African American literature, I encountered Courtney Thorsson’s *The Sisterhood, How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture*. Written in a non-chronological order, Thorsson structures her chapters to provide an overview of The Sisterhood, which was a Black women’s writing collective that existed from 1977-1979. Thorsson’s work offers a deep exploration into a myriad of complexities about how Black female writers supported one another in the 1970s to create space for their work within publishing and academic worlds. Through her expansive archival research, Thorsson sheds light on the often invisible, collaborative rhetorical labors that Black women undertook – labors which have significant impact on today’s publishing norms and academic discourse.

In her introduction, Thorsson outlines her three primary arguments. First, The Sisterhood should be used as both a model for Black feminist collaboration and a cautionary tale about the risk of membership burnout that can arise from the relentless pursuit of racial and social activism. Second, the group’s collaborative labor in the 1970s was instrumental in increasing the visibility of African American women writers in the 1980s. Third, Thorsson frames the story of The Sisterhood and Black feminism in the 1970s as a reflection of shifting relationships between political organizations, literature, and the academy. Thorsson’s tone throughout the introduction is reverential, acknowledging the debt many, like herself, owe to the unseen labor of Black women who laid the foundation for Black feminist literary and rhetorical scholarship. Her introduction firmly establishes the importance of her work: to give credence to collaborations

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inspired by The Sisterhood that evolved Black feminist thought in the 1970s.

Chapter One, “Revolution is Not a One-Time Event,” takes its title from an Audre Lorde quote, referencing the group’s ongoing commitment to liberating Black women’s identities and creative expressions from those who marginalized, misrepresented, and appropriated their stories and thoughts. Thorsson argues that this commitment helped shape the field of Black feminist literary and rhetorical criticism. She grounds the reader in the historical context of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) and explores the influences of critical organizations like the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and the Combahee River Collective. Initially, The Sisterhood—founded by Alice Walker and June Jordan—served as a space for Black women to collaborate and share their written work. However, the group soon expanded its mission to challenge the dominant white institutions, such as the publishing industry and academia, that marginalized their voices. Thorsson argues that through their collective efforts, The Sisterhood not only increased the recognition of Black women writers in the late 1970s but also worked to control the terms of that visibility by promoting, publishing, and reviewing their own writings, ensuring that future work by Black women would be protected from the critical backlash and harassment they had previously faced.

In Chapter Two: “An Association of Black Women Who are Writers/Poets/Artists,” Thorsson delves into the origins of The Sisterhood, which developed in response to the hostile reception of Ntozake Shange’s play *for colored girls* by Black male viewers, critics, and writers. Originally presenting the group as a collective response to the intersecting oppressions of sexism, racism, homophobia, and misogyny, both within their work environments and in reaction to their writings, Thorsson articulates how The Sisterhood came together to support one another to validate one another’s work. She writes, “The Sisterhood – mothers, writers, teachers, editors, [and] activists – came together knowing that advocating for Black women’s writing was an uphill battle,” especially when their targeted audience was Black women (59). Their labor enabled The Sisterhood to collectively advocate for greater recognition of Black women’s writing and to challenge the publishing world’s negative responses.

Recognizing that gathering together was only phase one of The Sisterhood, Thorsson writes in Chapter Three, “To Move the Needle in Black Women’s Lives,” about the group’s second phase: expanding their collaborative relationships and efforts. This expansion led many members to travel to the Southern United States and the West. In this chapter, Thorsson reinforces her primary argument and examines the repercussions of membership burnouts, internal conflicts, and societal pressures that strained the group’s efforts with this additional workload. She analyzes Jordan’s poem, “Letter to My Friend the Poet Ntozake Shange,” which provides insight into the emotional toll this labor took on the women involved with their already demanding domestic duties, travel, and professional careers. This chapter is significant due to its examination of the various factors that led to the group’s disbanding in 1979, and it invites the reader to consider how future collectives might learn from these challenges and explore strategies for a more sustainable balance between personal and organizational demands.

In Chapter Four: “A Community of Writers Even if They Only Slap Five Once a Month,” Thorsson focuses her content upon the contributions of Michele Wallace, Toni Cade Bambara, and Cheryl Y. Greene, who are essential figures in Black Feminist literature. Though they were not official members of The Sisterhood, Thorsson included these three women in her study to emphasize the importance of each of their works to the field and to demonstrate how The Sisterhood required a more extensive network outside of their membership to support its goal of uplifting Black female writers. Thorsson notes multiple times within her text the importance these women placed upon their relationships, noting how at the end of the day, it was the camaraderie and friendship that made The Sisterhood special to Black women in the 1970s.

Chapter Five: “A Regular Profusion of Certain/Unidentified Roses,” examines the impact of The Sisterhood and its successes in the 1980s. By addressing their Black feminist politics during the Reagan era, their resistance to limitations in academic curricula, and their growing impact on the publishing industry, Thorsson ensures these women’s contributions receive the recognition they deserve. However, while she celebrates the accomplishments of The Sisterhood, Thorsson remains critical of the “renaissance of Black women writers,” which she argues was co-opted into the rhetoric of multiculturalism and diversity in academia. This critique is sharp and challenges the reader to consider how institutions often commodify or dilute radical movements.

In Chapter Six, “The Function of Freedom is to Free Somebody Else,” Thorsson explores the legacy of Toni Morrison and her pivotal role within The Sisterhood. This chapter highlights Morrison’s sacrifices and achievements, especially by providing recognition to Black women writers through her role as an editor, mentor and writer. In addition, Thorsson discusses the role The Sisterhood played in January 1988, when members joined other Black intellectuals and helped sign a letter in the *New York Times* to advocate for Morrison’s nomination for the Pulitzer Prize. Thorsson’s deep respect for Morrison is evident, though the chapter also raises important questions about the costs of visibility and the personal toll it takes to be a public luminary.

Chapter Seven: “Making Use of Being Used” is Thorsson’s most contemporarily relevant chapter, which brings the book’s themes full circle by exploring the legacies of The Sisterhood within academia. Thorsson examines the shifts that occurred in the 1980s and the continued efforts of Black women to ensure Black Studies, Black Womanism, and Black Feminism maintained a place in academic institutions. The chapter is enlightening in the way that it explores how Black feminist thought has been institutionalized in universities. Thorsson does a notable job of ensuring that their work remains visible within history and has a place in scholarship. She writes, “To tell the story of The Sisterhood is to reckon with the costs Black women intellectuals paid, are paying, to make the world more just” (202).

In her “Conclusion,” Thorsson reaffirms the collaborative spirit of The Sisterhood, emphasizing her purpose in sharing these women’s stories. Thorsson urges her reader to look toward the 21st century, reminding us that racial and gendered justice remains unfinished. She concludes with a final call to action to her

readers, encouraging them to help make this world more just. Believing that change can be inspired through the written works of the Black women in the 1970s, Thorsson recounts how prominent Black studies is in today's cultural atmosphere and reinforces that the responsibility for progress should not fall to one group; instead, we must collectively continue to bring visibility to those who have been marginalized and forced to be unseen.

Thorsson's book is a rich, well-researched text that would engage any scholar in feminist rhetorical studies, as *The Sisterhood* is a collective of women dedicated to advocating for their voices in our academic and publishing world. They sought to elevate their marginalized positions and establish themselves as authoritative contributors to literary and scholarly discourse. In a time of ongoing societal shifts and uncertainties, Thorsson's work serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of supporting those who face discrimination, offering a model for collective action. While her unchronological chapters occasionally feel disorienting, her arguments are clear: *The Sisterhood's* collaboration and networking led to significant successes in the 1980s for Black women's writings, and their organization should be continually studied to inform future generations.