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Courtney Thorsson, *The Sisterhood: How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 280 pages.

Inspired by a black-and-white image, featuring eight women—Vertamae Grosvenor, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Nana Maynard, Ntozake Shange, Lori Sharpe, and Audreen Ballard—warmly gathered around a portrait of Bessie Smith, Courtney Thorsson’s *The Sisterhood: How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture* transports readers back to late 1970s New York City. Thorsson, a scholar of African American literature, attempts to break the confines of group biography and uses the sociocultural context of the time to craft a narrative that honors the labor of a group of women known as “The Sisterhood”. The group’s mission was to champion the work of Black women writers. Thorsson’s narrative considers the social movements that precede The Sisterhood, the members’ experiences within the publishing industry and ends with an account of the members’ roles as academics decades after the group’s dissolution. With a continuous focus on the group’s collective efforts, Thorsson navigates their triumphs, internal tensions, and external challenges. As a result, *The Sisterhood* efficiently captures each member’s transformation and the group’s legacy in American culture.

Thorsson’s extensive archival research merits recognition. She carefully draws on meeting minutes, interviews, close readings, correspondence and more, to piece together the stories of The Sisterhood’s members. She looks beyond the black-and-white photograph to investigate not only the group’s well-known figures but also the “members not in the now famous photo and whom few accounts name” (Thorsson 4). Her endeavor leads her to uncover details such as the common misidentification of Audreen Ballard with Audrey Edwards.

According to Thorsson, both were Sisterhood members and journalists but only Ballard was part of the photo. Thorsson also discovers information on younger members such as scholar Judith Wilson and poet Patricia Spears Jones, as well as details about the group's allies, including editor Cheryll Y. Greene, and authors Toni Cade Bambara and Michele Wallace. These findings underscore Thorsson's commitment to showcasing the significance of their collective work and demonstrating that *all* members, and their supporters, played vital roles in promoting Black women writers.

The years before the establishment of The Sisterhood (1977) were marked by social prejudice and civil unrest. After events like the Stonewall riots ('69), and the assassination of civil rights leaders ('65 and '68), Black women writers were yearning for a platform to showcase their voices. In the 1960s Audre Lorde bravely declared herself "as a Black lesbian mother in an interracial marriage" (Thorsson 11) to challenge homophobic prejudice within Black Power and civil rights groups. Meanwhile, the Women's Liberation movement, led to "the June 1972 passages of Title IX, which barred discrimination in education on the basis of sex, and the January 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*" (Thorsson 17). Despite these advancements, the Women's Liberation movement overlooked the specific challenges faced by women of color. By alluding to these events, Thorsson demonstrates the need for a group that truly understood the Black woman experience. The Sisterhood believed in Black feminist literature and its potential to understand social issues and generate change. Thorsson also uses this opportunity to establish the contemporary relevance of her work. She writes, "Then and today, Black feminist literary criticism is committed to the recovery of out-of-print and understudied works by Black women and asserts that poetry, fiction, and drama by Black women offers ways to understand identity, systems of power, and history" (Thorsson 27).

Due to the group's affinity towards Black women's literary work, Thorsson focuses most of her narrative on their experiences with trade publishing. Despite achievements in the publishing industry, Sisterhood members continued to endure societal prejudice. Thorsson notes how *Essence* published work by Black women writers and employed Sisterhood members like Vertamae Grosvenor. Paradoxically, they also published "advertisements prescribing ways Black women could conform to narrow ideas of beauty and femininity particularly to attract and support Black men" (Thorsson 133). Almost as a pattern, every Sisterhood milestone presented in the book is overshadowed by a setback. Thorsson uses this interplay to emphasize the group's resilience.

In discussing The Sisterhood's experiences with trade publishing, Thorsson's narrative gains momentum. Her archival prowess is revealed when she recounts the group's encounter with *Ebony*. Shortly after the group was formed (1977), they tried to publish Black women's poetry in *Ebony* with the help of Sisterhood member Phyl Garland. Unfortunately, the poetry publication was unsuccessful. Thorsson explains, "However, the magazine does not appear in subsequent meeting minutes and correspondence. This might be because *Ebony* was not receptive to their proposals or because, as it appears from the available records, Garland stopped attending Sisterhood meetings after April 1977. It might be because editor Hoyt Fuller had had a major falling out with *Ebony*'s publisher, Johnson Publications...and Sisterhood members had close ties with Fuller and were keen to support his new journal, *First World*" (Thorsson 66). Thorsson effectively compresses years of research to explain the setback with *Ebony*. Her range of explanations demonstrate her investigative skills and her commitment to the unknown stories of The Sisterhood.

Thorsson surpasses mere compilation and summarization of archival data. She often conducts close readings of select documents to understand each member at an individual level. For instance, she close reads June Jordan's poem "Letter to My Friend the Poet Ntozake Shange" not only as a portrayal of the demands of balancing domestic labor and travel but also as a public declaration of their identities as poets. Thorsson writes, "'Letter to My Friend the Poet Ntozake Shange' also declares in public that Black women writers are in demand" (Thorsson 88). This interpretation helps Thorsson shift focus into a discussion of Shange's contributions. She explains how Shange used her literary success to ask Black women writers to step away from institutions and promote themselves—a stance that confronts Sisterhood efforts to attain recognition *within* institutions. Following her discussion on Shange, Thorsson transitions into an analysis of Paule Marshall's "Reena". She close reads the short story to critique stereotypical careers paths imposed on Black women, Marshall's role as a mentor, and her preference for privacy. Through her analyses, Thorsson highlights the women's unique experiences and concerns. Thorsson's engaging approach, which shifts between members and external documents, allows her to create a narrative that captures the collective story of The Sisterhood without losing sight of the individual subjectivities of its members.

While Thorsson connects each member's individual stories she uncovers several internal conflicts within the group. According to Thorsson, an area of tension was the way members approached feminism. Some, like Audre Lorde, frequented feminist gatherings to seek allyship while conveying their Black feminist agenda. Others, like Morrison, rejected the term feminist due to its association with white women, instead she identified as a womanist. Members also disagreed when reviewing each other's work. For instance, Thorsson contrasts how Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls* received unanimous support from Sisterhood members while not all

agreed to praise Michele Wallace's *Black Macho* because it overlooked the collaboration of notable Black women. Regardless of their differences, all members continued to hold on to the same ideal.

The internal disagreements occurred due to the diversity within the group. Members had different careers—there were writers, journalists, playwrights, among others. They also came from different class backgrounds, according to Thorsson's interview with Margo Jefferson. In a recent reunion at Columbia University, Jefferson and Thorsson came together with Patricia Spear Jones and discussed the book. During their conversation Jones recalled "there were hierarchies and there was jealousy among us." However, Thorsson's uses those tensions to argue in favor of the group's success. She explains that as their careers flourished, members had different priorities and less time for meetings. This understanding of internal dynamics demonstrates Thorsson's analytical skills and her consistent attempt to present *The Sisterhood* in a positive manner. Still, their internal issues, along with continuous exposure to external pressures such as racism, sexism and homophobia, led to the group's dissolution.

The years following the group's dissolution were marked by the women's continuous battle against prejudice. Perhaps the most vivid description of sexism and racism is when Thorsson mentions a 1989 episode of *The Phil Donahue Show* where Shange, Wallace, Walker, Maya Angelou and Angela Davis were subjected to attacks from Phill Donahue and some members of the audience. Thorsson lets her research speak for itself, when she employs the women's remarks to address possible counterarguments to her thesis. For example, Davis responds to Donahue saying, "The government of this country felt very threatened by Black women. The fact that they would put me on the Ten Most Wanted list said something about their fear of what would happen in this country if that long-suppressed voice of Black women finally

became heard" (Thorsson 103). At this turning point in the narrative, the women utilized a moment of disrespect and a set up as a forum to communicate their Black feminist agenda. When she wrote her book, Thorsson was cognizant of how similar prejudices continue to exist in contemporary society. This awareness is why she chose to reference specific moments from the past that serve as a call to action in our present.

Thorsson's call to action extends into the members' experiences as academics. After the group's dissolution many Sisterhood members continued their work within universities. Once more, members faced obstacles due to their identities and research preferences. Thorsson critiques, "Black feminist academics... were (and are) taking on extra, uncompensated work to mentor students and junior faculty, organize talks and symposia, help apply for grants, or do other work to support Black studies and women's studies units, which (then and now) tend to be underfunded and understaffed" (Thorsson 183). With these lines, Thorsson calls attention to past issues and subtly uses parenthesis to guide readers into questioning current issues within the academy. Her commendable effort resembles Lorgia García Peña's accounts in *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color*.

The overworking of academics of color, particularly women, has been a longstanding issue. In "The Ethics of Pace," Moya Bailey introduces the term *karoshi* (overwork death) and examines how its occurrence is often influenced by a person's race, ability, gender, and sexuality. Similarly, Thorsson uses her anti-group biography to raise awareness on the matter. She observes, "Within a couple of decades, the toll of these working conditions was painfully clear: Black women scholars who made African American literature an established field of study were uncredited, being erased, and often suffering physically and emotionally as a result of outrageously demanding jobs" (Thorsson 200). Thorsson, like Bailey, refers to Lorde and other

Sisterhood members who passed away too early. Thorsson reflects, “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” (Thorsson 202). In this final section of her book, she no longer makes a subtle allusion to contemporary issues in academia. Instead, she shifts her tone to protest how many Black women sacrifice their lives if they choose to pursue advocacy work.

Thorsson’s intersectional focus makes *The Sisterhood* a valuable contribution to current American Cultural studies. Her commitment to African American scholarship and passion for research are palpable through the pages of her book. Her writing is accessible and could inform anyone interested in Black feminism, the history of 1970s-1980s New York, and African American culture.

Despite the praise Thorsson deserves, there are areas where her writing loses momentum. At first engagement with her book, readers may notice how she often repeats her main argument, emphasizing how members and allies contributed to American culture by promoting the work of Black women writers. Instead of constantly reiterating her thesis, she could’ve provided more details about the member’s personal lives. As an example, Thorsson notes how Sisterhood members faced antagonism from Black men writers such as Ishmael Reed. However, during their talk at Columbia, Patricia Spears Jones recalled how Shange was devastated after receiving backlash from friends and romantic partners. She also joked and reminisced about her own romantic partners. Such candid and even humorous stories would’ve been an interesting addition to Thorsson’s book, offering a break to her labor-oriented narrative.

Perhaps Thorsson chose not to delve deep into their personal lives as part of a larger scheme. Although her use of repetition could be distracting, it can be understandable given her

complex narrative. Repetition could be a strategy to maintain readers' focus amidst the multiple storylines that often disrupt the fluidity of her narration.

The Sisterhood is a noteworthy contribution to Black literary studies and a reflection of our current social landscape. This book urges us to reevaluate current Black feminist practices and challenge institutional power structures. With her cross-examination of racism, sexism, and homophobia, Thorsson invites us to engage in meaningful dialogue. Her work is more than a recollection of past histories, it's a guide to understand the present. Thorsson's recuperation of lost narratives emulates the mission of *The Sisterhood*. She asserts, "Sisterhood work is a collaborative advocacy for Black women's writing rooted in love" (Thorsson 203), and her book is undoubtedly a labor of love.

Works Cited

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