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On being a Black Woman Writer

"If admiration is not more sought for than improvement..."

—Mary Wollestonecraftⁱ

I am not the first woman writer to look around and attempt to make sense of the decade or century in which she has experienced an intellectual awakening. In the 1790s, Mary Wollestonecraft was disenchanted with the girl-women she encountered—even while championing them as men's equals. Their wasted, suppressed potential troubled her. Wollestonecraft was an intellectual activist in a major literary women's movement. She insisted that girls were being robbed of the chance to emotionally mature and intellectually flourish, for doing so would make them intractable wives.

Petty competitions between girls were encouraged by family and society as training to fight over good husband material. Introspection and analysis discouraged, the proper roles for women were non-examining, dutiful wives and mothers. The purest goal of feminism was pro-woman, to support and improve the lives of women.

Vituperative anti-male focal interests did not cloud Wollestonecraft's messages of sisterhood.

In the 1890s, Edith Wharton compared women workers to socialites in her fiction, demonstrating in *House of Mirth* that an intellectual being can be destroyed if forced into a non-intellectual lifestyle because of her gender and financial status. Lily Bart dreams of having her own apartment and pursuing scholarship as her guy friend does.

She is the definitive crushed female spirit of late-19th- and early-20th-Century literature. Wharton's nonfiction includes condemnation of an almanac for women that delineate proper ladylike activities.

Accepting the baton of woman writer at the end of the 1990s, I went back to the basics of observing, recording, and analyzing. Part of my chosen task as a Black woman writer of the 21st century and as a former educator now in her mid-40's, is to become part of an interracial as well as intra-racial sisterhood, constantly relearning how to demonstrate the

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tolerance of difference that was often discussed during the 1990s. Black women and White women are largely taught differently; we have to learn to nurture our differences as well as our similarities; for, nice to hear or not, the Black, White issue in this country has not been solved. Much ground has been lost in anti-racism because it is not popular to acknowledge this basic truth that affects all race and gender tensions in this country. I know this sounds obvious and simple, especially to those of us who are truly multicultural, not multiculturalists, regardless of our race, but the basic concepts of cross-racial and cross-cultural sisterhood have been failing for two decades. I observe, record, and analyze a lack of pro-woman spirit as often as acts of racism impede on my day. Women cannot fix this society's race issues alone; but we can and must re-define and expand our definitions of being a woman again and again and again, by any means necessary. I have a pen, and I'm not afraid to use it.

ⁱ Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998.