"Artistic Expression was Flowing Everywhere": Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, Black Bohemian Feminists in the 1970s

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"Artistic Expression was Flowing Everywhere"

Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, Black Bohemian Feminists in the 1970s

Claiming their place as a significant force in U.S. literature in the 1970s, African-American women writers faced difficult choices involving contradictory values within a shifting terrain of political, cultural, and aesthetic movements. A critical examination of two unconventional novels of this decade underscores the complex interaction of conflicting affiliations in the life and work of two African-American women writers: one prolific and well-known; the other a rather obscure author of one published book who is writing her second novel after a thirty-year hiatus. Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) and Alison Mills' *Francisco* (1974) share as context and content the emergence of black and feminist consciousness within communities of bohemian artists in the 1970s. As black nationalists clashed with feminists and bohemians—over issues of sexuality and reproduction, as well as the role of artists in relation to the community—these authors created characters that articulated the political and cultural discord in which black women strove to define themselves as artists. Their characters, passionate lovers of black men, criticize sexist black male artists; yet they also reject elements of feminism. While they desire personal freedom, they also view themselves as part of a collective struggle for equality. These authors examine the heart of the Black Arts movement as participant observers, showing that African- American women were committed yet critical partners in the conception of black aesthetics.

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Their work exemplifies innovative practices rather than prescriptive theories of this movement to make art relevant to the experience of black people. Emerging at the peak of the Black Arts movement (1965–76), Mills and Shange followed in the wake of older writers such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, its founders and theorists, as well as Ishmael Reed and David Henderson, whose activity in the Umbra Writers Workshop helped to launch the literary movement. Umbra Writers participated in the Black Arts movement while remaining open to diversity rather than strict nationalism. Reed, Baraka, and Henderson were key influences on Shange and Mills, who also benefited when older women writers such as Sonia Sanchez, Toni Cade Bambara, Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Kennedy, and Audre Lorde addressed feminist issues overlooked by male writers.

While Shange is best known as a dramatist and poet, she has also published three novels, of which *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is her first and most innovative in form, combining a variety of genres including narrative, poetry, drama, letters, recipes, folklore, and magical spells. Mills and her only published novel, *Francisco*, are unknown to most readers and literary scholars, despite the auspicious debut of this ephemeral yet memorable work.

Both texts are remarkable for their spirited representation of black bohemian experience constituted through contentious influences of jazz musicians, Beat generation writers, black nationalists, black aestheticians, multiculturalists, and feminists. Mills and Shange, immersed in the gender politics and black cultural consciousness of the 1970s, offer critical insight into the social networks in which they emerged as authors.

Although at least three well-known black male poets, Bob Kaufman, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Ted Joans, are counted among writers of the Beat generation, no prominent black woman writer (possibly excepting poet Gloria Oden) has been acknowledged as an associate of the Beats. Oden might be considered along with Beat generation poets, given her relationship with Kenneth Rexroth, although her work is more in the tradition of Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Marilyn Nelson, and Michael Harper.[2] Jack Kerouac's model for the fictional Mardou Fox in *The Subterraneans* and Irene May in *Book of Dreams*, Alene Lee died without leaving a memoir of her bohemian life or her brief affair with Kerouac.[3] Typically, given their peripheral relationship to the Beat legacy, neither Lee nor Oden is a subject of histories or critical writing about Beat authors, such as the recent collection of essays edited by Ronna Johnson and Nancy

Grace, *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation*. In literary histories of bohemian/Beat culture, one may encounter "girls who wore black," but rarely a mention of girls who *were* black. Bohemian black women scarcely appear even in works by African-American writers, although in reality such women have existed on the margins of mainstream and black cultures.

Beat generation writers might have influenced Toni Cade Bambara's first story, "Sweet Town," published the year after Kerouac's *The Subterraneans.* Bambara's Kit is an imaginative teenaged girl, steeped in jazzy prose seasoned with classical allusions. Her romantic dream of going "on the road" with her boyfriend is thwarted when he takes off without her. Caught in the classic dilemma of Beat generation women, the opposition of masculine road versus feminine home, this adventurous young heroine is a literary sister of Mills' and Shange's characters. Kit finds expression in "mad," "crazy," and "wild" language, writing "mad cryptic notes on the kitchen sink with charred matches" (Bambara 1972,121). Bambara's expressive urban vernacular has been an irresistible influence on African-American writers ever since the publication of *Gorilla, My Love*. She was also one of the first black women writers of the 1970s to articulate a comprehensive liberation struggle against racism, sexism, and economic exploitation.

The lives and works of black bohemian feminists Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange, along with the complex choices facing other African-American women writers, can be illuminated by considering their connection to and parallel influences from such original and later Beat writers as LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman, Ted Joans, Allen Ginsberg, and Anne Waldman; feminist writers Shulamith Firestone, Gloria Steinem, and Alta; as well as writers of the Black Arts movement including David Henderson, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, and Ishmael Reed.[3] When Baraka abandoned Greenwich Village for Harlem and Newark, turning his back on his past as a "Schwartze Bohemian" he was painfully aware that the bohemian lifestyle had originated in Europe. Although he determined in the 1960s that his Beat persona was incompatible with his new commitment to black political struggle, his prior association with the Beats continued to influence other writers and artists who combined elements of bohemianism with their participation in black political and cultural movements. Even as Baraka left the Beat scene, Kaufman and Joans continued to identify themselves as bohemian artists, while also publishing in Black

Arts anthologies, though neither was as prominent or influential as Baraka. Similarly, Ishmael Reed's disagreement with Baraka over Black Arts theory did not necessarily prevent others from associating with both Reed and Baraka.

As emerging artists, Shange and Mills maintained ties to artists, writers, and performers across ideological boundaries that otherwise might separate Beats from black aestheticians or black aestheticians from feminists and multiculturalists. The eclecticism of their work suggests the extent of their diverse interests and affiliations. The divergent vision of these eclectic works, with their specific focus on the lives of black bohemian artists, is a possible reason why *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* is one of Shange's less known works and why Mills' *Francisco* remains out of print. Nevertheless, these novels offer compelling portraits of African-American women as they struggled in the 1970s to combine their feminism and black nationalism with their creative and domestic impulses.

I. Alison Mills and *Francisco*: Part One in the Life of a Born-Again Novelist

After a hiatus of thirty years, Alison Mills, author of *Francisco* (1974) is completing her second novel, *Maggie 3*. In the interim between her first and second books, Mills has married, raised five children, appeared in independent films and gospel music videos, and directed community plays. She has also become a born-again Christian and a Pentecostal preacher, hosting a weekly religious radio broadcast, while collaborating in creative projects with her late husband, Francisco Newman[4] Newman also served as a preacher, mainly through video and films including *Healing the Hood* (1984), a discussion of urban youth problems such as gangs, drugs, and violence, and *Virgin Again* (2000), a retelling of New Testament gospel stories set in multicultural Los Angeles, with an African-American Christ and a Latina Mary Magdalene. This film offers a feminist spin on the gospel, featuring a contemporary black woman, played by Mills, who finds herself drawn to Jesus and becomes the pastor of a mostly female congregation after her husband leaves her for a younger woman and she is fired from her job. *Virgin Again* is notable for its multicultural cast with black leading characters, its glimpses of humor, its critique of media hype and hypocritical religious leaders, and for its setting, which includes back-

grounds of local storefront churches, mom and pop businesses, community murals, and cultural venues associated with the city's latest "black renaissance" such as Leimert Park, KAOS Network, and jazz club Fifth Street Dick's. The film has been screened at the Cannes Film Festival as well as the Los Angeles Pan-African Film Festival.

Mills began her career as a child actor on television programs in the 1960s. At age eleven, she began to study with Frank Silvera at the American Theater of Being in Los Angeles. At thirteen, she had a small role in James Baldwin's first play, *The Amen Corner*, which premiered in Los Angeles in 1964 with Silvera as producer, director, and star.[5] From 1968–69 Mills played Carol Deering, the babysitter for Julia Baker's son Corey, on the domestic comedy *Julia*, starring Diahann Carroll. The show was created by Hal Kanter, who proposed it to NBC after attending a luncheon with the officials of the NAACP. A Hollywood liberal, Kanter had also worked as a writer on the 1940s radio show *Beulah* and would go on to be a writer and executive producer for Norman Lear's *All in the Family* on CBS. Although *Julia* ran for three years (1969–71), Mills, deemed a "troublemaker," was fired after the first season.[6] According to Mills, producers Hal Kanter and Harold Stone fired her because she objected to wearing a wig that she felt created an unrealistic image for her character, a black teenager.

In an era when African Americans with afro hair styles were asserting that "black is beautiful," the characters on Julia (though certainly beautiful) seemed not only middle-class and assimilated, but also socially isolated and comfortably insulated from issues that most concerned the black community of the late 1960s. Although it was set in Los Angeles, the show excluded references to the racial turbulence that had shaken Watts three years before Julia's debut. At age eighteen, Mills went on to play Oletha, the "hippie sister," in the "Sugar Hill" segment of *The Leslie Uggams Show*. Uggams was the second African-American star of a television variety show. The first was Nat "King" Cole in the 1950s. His show ultimately was cancelled due to lack of support from sponsors. *The Leslie Uggams Show* aired on CBS from September to December of 1969. After its cancellation, Mills continued to work in Hollywood until she decided to take a different path in theater and in collaboration with black directors.

Francisco was written when the twenty-one year old Mills was making her transition from Hollywood to a world of bohemian and black artists. Described in *Publishers Weekly* as "a novel in the form of a diary (or possibly

a diary published as a novel)," *Francisco* is based on her own creative evolution.[7] It is an autobiographical novel about a young black woman's disillusionment with her early success as an actor in Hollywood, her emerging interest in the 1970s Black Arts movement, and her love affair with an independent black filmmaker. Despite her extraordinary success as a young actor, Mills found herself increasingly alienated and repelled by the materialistic values of Hollywood, the bland whiteness of mainstream media, the vulgar representation of African Americans in the era of "Blaxploitation," and the unsavory behavior of sexual predators in the entertainment industry. At the same time, artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers, engaged in the 1970s Black Arts movement, drew her toward the creative expression of black consciousness. A talented singer and songwriter as well as an actor, Mills created a new role for herself within an artistic community that included performing in a play at Amiri Baraka's Spirit House in Newark, New Jersey; discussing art and literature with painter Joe Overstreet and novelist Ishmael Reed; touring the college circuit with poet David Henderson; opening for jazz musicians Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry at the Five Spot in New York; and appearing in productions of independent filmmaker Francisco Newman. As Mills stated in a recent interview, "Artistic expression was flowing everywhere, and I was right there, taking it all in."[8]

When David Henderson introduced them, Mills had quit Hollywood to explore alternative artistic projects in collaboration with black poets, musicians, and playwrights, and Newman had left his position as a journalist at KQED Public Television in San Francisco and had begun to work on an independent film project. Both Mills and Newman had come of age in the 1960s and their consciousness had been shaped by such political events as the Watts uprising in Los Angeles, the Berkeley student movement, and the emergence of radical organizations such as the Black Panther Party, founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in Oakland, California. In addition, Newman, a graduate of Berkeley High School and Stanford University who majored in political science, had spent a summer working in the Peace Corps, building schools in Botswana. Newman's career as an independent filmmaker began shortly after he was fired from KQED, a casualty of the reactionary political environment in which Richard Nixon was twice elected President with a promise to restore "law and order" to a divided nation.

Not long after meeting, Mills and Newman were romantically and professionally involved. They had come from different social backgrounds: Newman had grown up in the Bay Area of northern California in a working-class Pentecostal family that shunned popular culture, believing that Hollywood movies were "of the devil"; Mills had been deeply influenced by movies and television as a child and was brought up as a Methodist in a comfortably middle-class family in Los Angeles. Newman was a college graduate who worked off and on as a blue-collar laborer, while Mills had gone from high school to Hollywood, where she was treated as a celebrity. Mills' attraction to film originated in romantic childhood dreams inspired by classic Hollywood movies, while as a college student Newman was inspired by the political potential of filmmaking as practiced by Jean-Luc Godard and other "New Wave" French filmmakers. Both had begun their professional careers working in television; but Mills had been a teenage co-star of a top Neilsen-rated comedy on a commercial network, while Newman had been an idealistic and politically engaged journalist for public television. When Mills was arguing with television producers about her on-screen persona, Newman was laying bricks in Africa. When Mills was dodging the seductions of lecherous movie producers, Newman was documenting student rebellions at San Francisco State and interviewing the Black Panthers.

Nevertheless, Mills could identify in some respects with Newman's experience. She understood that her first break in Hollywood, like Newman's apprenticeship at KQED, had come as a result of black activism; and she had begin to consider alternatives to Hollywood after being cut from the cast of *Julia* for her implicit critique of the producers' determination to represent blackness in a manner that would not disturb the white audience or question the hegemony of the dominant culture. Through organized protest, a significant number of African Americans of their generation had found unprecedented opportunities to work in film and television; yet Mills and Newman, in challenging the conventions and representations of their respective media, had both been summarily dismissed and thus compelled to find alternative means of expressing themselves and earning a living. In each of their lives, getting fired was the catalyst for a major transformation. By the time they met, Mills and Newman shared a critical perspective on the dominant culture and an antagonism toward mainstream media. Both had been influenced by

African-American mentors with a strong commitment toward black people; Allen Willis, who trained Newman during his apprenticeship at KQED; and Mills' drama teacher, Frank Silvera, a respected Hollywood actor who founded a theater school in Los Angeles dedicated to training predominantly black actors. Newman's film, *Staggerlee: A Conversation with Bobby Seale, Leader of the Black Panther Party* (1970), had been broadcast nationally on the PBS network and he was working on a new independent film, *Ain't Nobody Slick* (1972), a "neo-documentary"[9] featuring Angela Davis, incarcerated at Marin County Jail for her involvement with the Black Panthers. Mills also had a small role in this film, and her novel Francisco is structured around her love affair with Newman and his struggle to fund, shoot, edit, and find a distributor for *Ain't Nobody Slick.*

Through his own connections to Bay Area artists and writers, Newman had met Ishmael Reed, with whom he had collaborated on a film treatment and screenplay for Reed's comic novel about a black cowboy, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969). According to legend, their ideas for a film (written with Richard Pryor in mind) were incorporated into the movie *Blazing Saddles* (1974), starring Cleavon Little with Gene Wilder and directed by Mel Brooks, who unfortunately neglected to compensate or to credit either Reed or Newman for their work. Newman introduced Mills to Ishmael Reed, who eventually read her manuscript and offered to publish it with his press Reed, Cannon, and Johnson.[10] *Francisco* was the first novel published by the new press. Also a co-founder of the *East Village Other* (the predecessor of today's *Village Voice*), Reed was familiar with the east coast publishing establishment, and managed to secure a review of Francisco in *Publishers Weekly*, as well as praise from William Demby and Toni Morrison. The anonymous reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* observed that the narrator is "a sexy, high-spirited, highly intelligent woman [who] adores Francisco." Demby, the distinguished author of *Beetlecreek* and *The Catacombs*, wrote:

> Alison Mills' exquisitely distilled novel, "Francisco," is the song one would expect Love to be singing these troubled days of the 1970s—a song you cannot have heard before, off-key and haunting. Disturbing even in its unfamiliarity. Hurting and ecstatic, religious and personal as each virgin's loss . . . (back cover)

Morrison, who had authored *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, was then working as an editor at Random House. She wrote, "Alison Mills has done the rare thing; written with beauty, power and purity about a woman" (front cover).

II. *Francisco* and *Sassafrass*: Parallel Influences

Thematically and stylistically, Francisco resembles the work of Ntozake Shange, whose hybrid genre "choreopoem" *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* opened as a co-production of the New Federal Theatre and the Public Theatre in New York and later debuted on Broadway in 1975–76, and whose innovative first novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, was published by St. Martin's Press in 1982.[11] In particular, the unnamed narrator of *Francisco* resembles Shange's character Sassafrass, a weaver and poet who tries to balance creativity and domesticity while living with a struggling jazz musician in Los Angeles:

> Nothing but tenor sax solos ever came out of that house. Sometimes you could hear a man and a woman arguing, but almost always some kind of music . . . The long walls of the fallen-down, almost Victorian house were totally covered with murals of African exploits . . . Sassafrass and Mitch had worked on [their rented flat] to be a permanent monument to the indelibility of black creative innovation. She glanced up from her sixty-sixth stitch to see if there was anything else to do to the house to make it the most perfect place for her and Mitch to stay until the black revolution, or until they moved to the black artists' and craftsmen's commune starting up just outside New Orleans, and pretty near a black nationalist settlement. Sassafrass believed it was absolutely necessary to take black arts out of the white man's hands, to take black people out of the white man's hands. (Shange 1982, 76–77)

Contesting the designation of African-American tradition as a marginal subculture, the Black Arts movement asserted blackness as a counter-cultural force in opposition to the Eurocentric ideology of white supremacy. Often envisioning the movement for black self-determination as a struggle between oppressed black men and oppressive white men, militant revolutionaries of the 1960s tended to conflate their affirmation of blackness with a celebration of black masculinity. A similar attitude was adopted by poets of the Black Arts movement, including women such as Nikki Giovanni who wrote in praise of "Beautiful Black Men," describing them as "the same ol danger/but a brand new pleasure."[12] Her poem extols the erotic and aesthetic pleasure embodied in black men while suggesting the complexity of relations between black men and black women as the black liberation movement catalyzed and intersected with the feminist

movement. Considering the "danger" as well as the "pleasure" of black men observed in visible public roles, Giovanni's poem includes flamboyantly dressed pimps and street hustlers as well as performers and musicians.

For Mills and Shange the essence of black creative innovation is found in the improvisational brilliance of black musicians, especially the jazz soloist, the figure most highly regarded as a model of virtuosity by writers of the Black Arts movement.[13] In the work of these women writers, a romance with a man who embodies this archetypal inspiration also represents a love of blackness and a passionate involvement with black art; and in these texts the creation of art that expresses the humanity of African peoples is considered to be a spiritual calling.[14] Even an artist with obvious imperfections partakes of the divine: "Sassafrass felt the doors open and there he was— the cosmic lover and wonder of wonders to her: Mitch (78)". The fertile imagination of the jazz artist makes him a seminal figure, a resilient hero of legendary stature: "Mitch is so good—he created himself; he made up somebody to be" (105). In *Francisco*, Mills employs a synaesthetic jazz metaphor to describe a visual medium, beginning her novel with a lyrical passage comparing Francisco's improvisational style to the song of a "jazzman" whose "music's in his eyes/and he plays what he sees/with a funky saxophone sheen/ on the silver screen" (1). Even Francisco's story of how he learned the craft and art of filmmaking is reminiscent of the self-taught black musician:

> "i've always believed that if you want to do something you don't ask a person if you can do it—you just start doin' and learn that way" (67).

The black male artist's self-authorization provides an empowering model for his female counterpart while his determined resolution affirms the importance of his art. In order to succeed, Shange's jazz musician and Mills' filmmaker must overcome the dominant society's indifference or outright hostility to their aesthetic sensibilities and innovative ideas. Mills' filmmaker exerts himself to find patrons willing to support the completion of his project:

> "francisco worked awfully hard to do this film. i mean he must have wanted to do it awful bad to go though all he went to do it. but he's incredible . . . everything else may fall by the wayside, but francisco goes on" (86).

Shange's jazz musician tries to make the best of his limited opportunities to perform:

> Mamselle, the paid artiste has no worries. Mamselle, you are bein' supported—and I say this with modesty—you are bein' upheld by the only horn player in the only combo in the only club in Compton, California that hires non-Texas blues bands. Now that's not the Village Vanguard or the East, or the Afro-American Livin' Theatre, but we got soul . . . an' we get paid. Below a union scale, but we get paid. An' we can't play free, but we can play funky (Shange 1977, 124–25).

In both books, black women artists face the challenge of supporting the creative aspirations of their male companions while not losing sight of their own artistic vision.

> i always wanted to . . . make a demo of my music to send to someone to someone to hear, so that maybe they will produce it, but you know sometimes i just like being with francisco. i forget my music—i forget myself sometimes. i know that's not good but it happens sometimes. i'm gonna change. i'll have to cause my music haunts me and i'll have to get it out (Mills 1974, 39).

Sassafrass caught herself focusing in on Mitch again instead of herself, because she did want to be perfected for him, like he was perfected and creating all the time . . . . She needed Mitch because Mitch was all she loved in herself (Shange 1977, 80, 98).

As the above passages indicate, these characters are aware of a discrepancy between their feminist impulses and their devotion to their partners. Desire for domestic harmony at times conflicts with their wish to fulfill their aspirations as artists. The women remain deeply committed to their relationships until their lovers compel them to move on, and the texts appear most feminist as these character face the end of their domestic dreams. Mills' and Shange's texts can be read as feminist critiques of the male-centered Black Arts movement; yet, they also suggest that even the most free-spirited black bohemians embraced feminism with reservations. For the most part, these female artists act on the belief that affirming and sustaining the creativity of their partners enhances their own commitment to making art and living the life of the artist.

Their meticulous observation reveals that such an existence often involves, among other matters, a daily struggle to live creatively and con-

scientiously within a bohemian poverty that distinguishes itself from either the affluent materialism of the middle class or the abject destitution of the underclass. This distinction entails different patterns of consumption and production, requiring not only the intention of making significant art works, and at times the necessity of choosing between art supplies or groceries; but also the eccentric décor that distinguishes an artist's low-rent pad from the tenement apartment of a working-class family, and the careful thrift shop purchases and handmade items that separate the struggling artist's wardrobe from the cheap or threadbare clothing of other poor people.

> That particular day Mitch was wearing his blue homespun shirt Sassafrass had made with laced cuffs, an orange coral medallion and some copper corduroy pants that sat on his thighs like he was the hottest thing in town (Shange 1977, 78).

> i found my lovely blue 1940 long dress that has four pearl buttons down the front. it is one of the best dresses i have, i mean, i didn't have no holes in it yet. cause most of my clothes are old and fallin apart. rags. that's my style. francisco says I make rags look expensive and i'd probably make something expensive look like a rag. (Mills 1994, 15)

Mills' chiasmic summary of her narrators' personal style indicates the ambiguous self-presentation of the bohemian and the social mobility of the artist who is able to cross back and forth from upper- to lower-class environments.[15] In both novels, characters are aware of their own contribution to the creation and expression of black bohemian aesthetics and style. Inspired by traditional garments of pre-industrial cultures, hippies as well as black bohemians dressed more colorfully than the "bohemian black" of earlier Beat culture. For the emerging woman artist, the influence of cultural feminism and the success of feminist artists including Faith Ringgold and Judy Chicago (not to mention today's' entrepreneurs of domesticity such as B. Smith and Martha Stewart) suggest that sewing, weaving, quilting, or other "women's work" can be a creative endeavor as worthy of celebration as the exalted practice of painting, sculpture, musical composition, literature, or filmmaking dominated by white male artists. Like their bohemian sartorial style of mixing vintage elegance with folksy, ethnic and handmade garments, the literary style of these two authors mixes the improvisational fluency of jazz with the earthy, soulful expressiveness of funk.

The female artist characters of these novelists reject their parents' bourgeois class identification or aspiration. Instead, they engage in a life of sexual freedom and creative experimentation unimaginable for their mothers' generation. The mothers in both novels are models of bourgeois respectability whose sober advice to their daughters, distilled from their family history of striving for material comfort and social advancement, serves as a counterpoint to the younger women's intoxicating love affairs, artistic exploration, and other heady adventures. A fluently funky mix of standard and nonstandard English is a hallmark of both works, signaling the characters' embrace of black vernacular culture and relaxation of the "proper" speech and decorum of the previous generation, for whom standard English was a necessary sign of education and an instrument of upward mobility. Their colloquial style reveals the nappy edges of American English, and both authors are happy to be nappy.[16] Unlike the generation of their parents, who were segregated, Sassafrass and Mills' narrator were integrated with the white elite. An expensive education at private schools and other privileges may have separated them from the majority of black people, but their response is to claim as their own the expressive demotic language of the folk and to relish the African-American culture that inspires their creativity. Mills' narrator recalls:

> once when i went to private school in n.y., the white folks made me out to be everythin else otha than black. some of them would ask if i was greek, indian, anything-but black . . . [I was] the girl who use to sit in a.p. [advance placement] english and write poetry instead of takin motes on how to write a correct essay . . . the one who use to make mud pies in long island, n.y. with her ballet shoes on. (9, 73)

Shange's Sassafrass explains to her family:

> I am going to a school where culture is never mentioned, per se, because all those white folks up there is "culture," or so they'd like us to believe . . . Sassafrass wanted to go [to a black party]. Some Negroes. Three hours of solid Negro conversation. Not having to explain to anybody what it was she actually meant. A dance. A dance with somebody who knew the rhythm of the song. A hand that was not afraid to touch hers (59).

In their texts vernacular and avant-garde influences flow together in a stream of casually hip poetic language suited to each author's interest in

examining and honoring the lives of black artists. In both narratives black male artist companions, whatever their flaws, serve as models of commitment to the struggle to be conscious and creative in a society that offers few rewards for their efforts. Their persistent dedication to the practice of their art attracts and inspires their female counterparts who increasingly see themselves as working artists capable of making "something besides a baby" (Shange 1982, 91). Mitch admonishes Sassafrass for watching television when he thinks she ought to be writing, but also expects her to perform domestic "women's work" such as having dinner ready when he comes home:

> 'Now Sassafrass, get into yourself and find out what's holding you back. You can create whole worlds, girl. I don't wanna come and see you like this any more, listening to some white man make it easy for you to stop thinking, telling you all the white folks' news . . . ' Mitch didn't have to say all that even if it was true; it was ridiculous for some man to tell her she had to create . . . All he did was play that old horn, and look for the nearest bar that could use an 'avant-garde-free-music'sax man. 'Humph.' . . . Mitch had convinced Sassafrass that everything was art, so nothing in life could be approached lightly. Creation was inherent in everything that anybody ever did right; that was one of the mottos of the house. Sassafrass had made an appliquéd banner saying just that, and hung it over the stove; CREATION IS/ EVERYTHING YOU DO/ MAKE SOMETHING. She sat on her personal chair to concentrate on what to make for dinner (79–80, 83).

The narrator of *Francisco* gladly agrees to appear in her lover's new film, eager for a part in meaningful project:

> francisco said actors needed a challenge and that was for true, who doesn't? . . . but it sure was funny bein called an actor, cause it wasn't that i didn't like t.v., but i didn't like what i did on t.v. too tough. there were a few experiences i had, and very few they were—where i got the chance to create and do something—those shows were usually cancelled . . . francisco is the only nigga i know who defies bein typecast (12, 19).

As Francisco devotes long hours to his independent film, the narrator marvels at his single-minded preoccupation, and she respects his commit-

ment to his art, even when it interferes with her own desires (2–3, 8, 21, 32, 80). Their partnership alters her relation to the means of cultural production, reviving her artistic aspirations and offering her fulfilling work. Her love affair with Francisco is also an intimate engagement with blackness, providing new opportunities to express her emergent black consciousness:

> i existed before the media pretended to discover me. black people existed before black people discovered themselves (53).

Living with Francisco, she sees the resourcefulness, improvisational skill, and sacrifice required to complete his film. She becomes more involved in the technical and financial aspects of film production and distribution (32, 51–52, 61–62, 80). She even learns from his example to appreciate the funky sound of James Brown's music: "i got in tune with francisco's pace . . . i felt francisco's rhythm" (19–20, 29, 40, 41). Her attempt to "qualify the relationship" (1) inspires her diary writing: "the kids asked me what i was writin. a letter? to whom? i don't know yet" (36).

Both novels are products of the intersection of black nationalism with feminism and the bohemian, anti-materialist influence of Beat generation/hippie culture as the political upheaval of the 1960s stimulated artists to explore alternative forms of cultural production in the 1970s. Black women artists, particularly those living in New York and California, were conspicuously active in this decade that saw the emergence of several prominent African-American women writers, including Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and Shange herself. All of these women were criticized at one time or another for writing negative portrayals of black men. Several critics accused black feminists of undermining black unity. While Shange's character Sassafrass is involved with an artistically gifted man who becomes abusive as he succumbs to drug addiction, the diarist-narrator of *Francisco* has a more wholesome partnership with a creative intellectual whose worst vice is possibly his "workaholism," his goal-directed drive to finish his independent film:

> he doesn't make love when he works, and since i've known him he's been working on this film of his . . . i mean, i get highly frustrated flyin back and forth from l.a. to s.f. and not gettin none from this fine black specimen ceptin every now and then. (2–3).

The narrator also notes Francisco's self control in a different context, during a heated argument:

> he's trying to be cool after gettin almost angry enough to slap me around a couple of times . . . (22–23).

While Sassafrass' lover Mitch lies to her about quitting heroin (99–100, 106), Francisco is painfully honest about his dealings with women:

> a woman is a luxury, somethin i don't need. i mean personal relationships usually end up in tragedy and i usually shy away from gettin involved. in the past, i've given as little as possible—the bare minimum. that was always enough (38).

Observing Francisco's heroic effort to complete his film and sustain his vision fortifies her own resolve to resist Hollywood's seduction, as she sees ever more clearly its complicity in reinforcing the status quo:

> francisco's a nigga walkin around in this crazy fucked-up beautiful world tryin to do somthin about it . . . working hard to put his film out there and will do everythin in my powa to help him . . . at least i know i have somethin to believe in that means somthin to me, even if it don' t mean nothing to you all there in control—whose only powa is your mediocrity threatened by us who bring, offa the gift of art for the survivial of the human heart. we should all kick ass and get this mess cleaned up. till it's free and open and clear to breathe and eat and enjoy the earth again (88–89).

Although the narrator focuses intently on his work and her contribution to the partnership, the ongoing stress of trying to make a film without sufficient funding strains their relationship. They argue and eventually break up, leaving her alone at the end of the novel, wondering what went wrong. Yet she never completely loses her sense of self, even as her strong attraction to Francisco pulls her into the drama of his struggle to make a new kind of black film. Francisco's film Ain't Nobody Slick is a "neo-documentary" featuring an interview with the incarcerated radical Angela Davis, along with scenes of everyday people "talking about politics and life"; thus placing the revolutionary theory and rhetoric of the black political avant-garde in dialogue with the vernacular discourse of the community.[17]

Shange's characters as well as the narrator of *Francisco* frequently reflect

on the black working-class people with whom they feel an affinity, despite their different ways of life. Both Sassafrass and Mills' protagonist have chosen lovers of working-class origin. With their black male partners these female characters feel free to explore a bohemian lifestyle that is at odds with the bourgeois values of their parents, whose lives were devoted to protecting their families from the negative signification of "Beat" life: the poverty and chaos associated with the lives of poor black people as well as bohemian artists. In their struggles with and against their male counterparts, whose work involves them in black cultural and political movements, the women artists also find their own spiritual and material connections to the black working class.

For Mills, in particular, working-class characters are associated with soulfulness. They represent spiritual values that her narrator finds lacking in decadent Hollywood. Although her narrator, as well as Shange's Sassafrass, might romanticize poor black people, perhaps viewing them as icons of black authenticity, Mills herself has strengthened her ties to the black working class by living "in the hood" and working in Pentecostal churches. While Mills' parents were members of an upper middle-class black Methodist congregation, many of her Hollywood friends were irreligious, and her artist friends often practiced a New Age or African-based spirituality, the author found spiritual grounding in sharing the religion that her husband, Francisco Newman, had practiced as a child growing up in Oakland. Religion was crucial in bringing Mills and Newman back together after the breakup of their love affair, allowing their story to continue beyond the ending of her novel, when Francisco and the unnamed narrator have parted. The couple viewed their religion as a stabilizing force in their marriage.[18]

Though Shange is the better known and certainly more accomplished and prolific writer, the question of influence is an interesting one, since *Francisco* predates the publication of both *For Colored Girls* and *Sassafrass*. The two authors were briefly acquainted although, according to Mills, they were never close[19] Both Mills and Shange were multidisciplinary "bi-coastal" artists, experimenting with intermedia works that disregard generic boundaries of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, drama, music and dance. Both women had connections to creative communities in New York and California. Both were influenced by the feminist and Black Arts movements, and were among the group of multicultural artists whose work was

published by Ishmael Reed's independent press or in one or more of the various journals he edited. Shange had grown up in Trenton and Lawrenceville, New Jersey, and St. Louis, Missouri, and graduated with honors from Barnard College, arriving in Los Angeles in 1970 for graduate study at University of Southern California around the time Mills was leaving her Los Angeles home to work in Broadway, off-Broadway, and Black Arts theater in New York and Newark.

By 1973, when Shange had earned a Masters degree in American Studies and moved to northern California to teach at Bay Area and Sonoma County schools, Mills and Newman had temporarily separated following their collaborative work on *Ain't Nobody Slick* (1972) as Mills continued to work with other performers under the influence of the Black Arts movement. Through Umbra/Black Arts writers, particularly Reed and Henderson, as well as through writers of a later Beat generation, such as Anne Waldman (who is also associated with the second generation of New York School poets), Mills and Shange were aware of original Beat poets including Kaufman and Ginsberg, whose lives and works also influenced emergent hippie culture. Both women associated with overlapping circles of New York and Bay Area writers, artists, and musicians.[20] Thus, rather than arguing that one individual influenced or emulated the other, it seems more accurate to acknowledge that both women benefited from the interactive influence of the various aesthetic, cultural, and political movements that stimulated and informed their writing. If Mills had been more active as a writer, she might be as well known today as Shange.

Other resemblances are striking as well. Both Mills and Shange came from affluent middle-class families who supported their artistic development. The parents of both women were two-career couples. Shange's father was a surgeon and her mother a psychiatric social worker. Mills' father was a research chemist at McDonnell Douglas, and her mother was an educator who earned a doctorate degree. Both writers created black bohemian feminist characters based on their own lives as women artists engaged in romantic relationships and creative collaborations with black male writers, artists, and musicians. Mills' *Francisco* is a barely fictionalized diary of her life with Francisco Newman during the time when he was making the film *Ain't Nobody Slick*. Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, although it is more thoroughly conceived, extensively developed, and explicitly imagined as a fictional work, apparently draws to some extent on

her own relationships, possibly including her marriage in 1977 to jazz musician David Murray.[21] Murray could be a model for the fictional Leroy McCullough, a successful jazz musician who courts the two sister artists by turns and eventually marries Sassafrass' sister Cypress.[22]

Drawing on their own atypical experience, both authors created remarkable black female characters. While their female artist figures are focused on their lovers, they also have a feminist attitude that they strive to reconcile with their domestic and/or maternal inclinations. They are creative, free-spirited, and full of life. While these characters live what might be called a hippie or "blippie" (black hippie) lifestyle within an integrated, multicultural, and cosmopolitan world of artists, writers, and performers, they are not at all conflicted about their racial or cultural identity. They are emphatically black women, passionately attracted to black men and soulfully immersed in African American culture. They live bohemian lives, and they also share a quality of spiritual yearning. They have rejected bourgeois materialism to seek a risky but meaningful life as artists. Both authors offer a fresh vision of the contemporary black woman, with intimate details of lives of African American artists and creative people. Often African-American artists have been so intent on creating representative characters that we do not get to know their stories. As a result, until the 1970s, we have seen few depictions of the black artist's life, particularly the lives of black women artists.

III. Alison Mills and Ntozake Shange: Feminism and its Discontents

Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* ends with Sassafrass, moved by spiritual forces of African deities Shango and Oshun, leaving her abusive lover and giving birth to "a free child" with the assistance and support of her mother and sisters (216–218; 225). Mills' *Francisco* ends with the break-up of the narrator's love affair with Francisco and her realization that she is her own best friend (92). If their work is any indication, both Mills and Shange grappled with the conflicting agendas of feminism and black nationalism. Throughout much of the 1970s, the discourse of black feminism to a considerable extent focused on the question of whether or not it was acceptable for a politically conscious black woman to participate in the women's movement or to call herself a feminist, although as editor

of the anthology, *The Black Woman* (1972), Toni Cade Bambara was among the earliest black women writers to affirm the necessity of second-wave feminism. One of the few white feminists of the time to offer a strong critique of the gender relations implicit in the most essentialist manifestations of black nationalism, Shulamith Firestone also proposed in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) that biological pregnancy, motherhood, and the nuclear family be abolished and replaced by artificial reproduction and communal child care (Firestone 1970, 103–20, 183–224). Black women writers in the 1970s, Morrison, Walker, Bambara, Jones, and Shange, clearly were aware of feminist theory and in their writing they implicitly or explicitly responded to the provocative proposals of Firestone and other radical white feminists, ultimately affirming the significance of black women's fertility and their ability to bear children.

Combining feminism, black cultural consciousness, and artistic production with domesticity and motherhood was particularly challenging for black women artists of the 1970s. Alice Walker's widely read essay, "One Child of One's Own" called attention to the dilemma of the feminist artist, yet her coinage of a new word, "womanist," indicates a need to distinguish the black woman's struggle for liberation from that of the white feminist.[23] Walker also articulated sharp conflicts of black and feminist consciousness in short stores such as "Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells" and novels such as *Meridian*.[24] While Mills' diarist-narrator argues spiritedly with a "sophisticated nigga" who tells her "that women were put here to be controlled by men" (22), and she refuses to be silenced when told to "shut up" (13), she also "can't stand" birth control pills and insists "no woman needed to take" them (2, 38). Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* includes a pointed critique of radical feminism (202–206) as well as unflattering portrayals of sexist black male artists (85–90). Although the performance of Azure Bosom dance troupe at Ovary Studios celebrates the physical and cultural experience of women (141–45), it is followed by "Cypress' Dream,": a feminist utopia turned into a dystopian science fiction nightmare for people of color. Their reproductive power is exploited in a society dominated by white "mothers" who are too busy ruling to give birth. This bleak prophecy is apparently Shange's skeptical response to Shulamith Firestone's radical feminist manifesto, *The Dialectic of Sex*. On one hand, wise elders of both sexes initiate Sassafrass into a spiritually empowering Santeria circle during her sojourn at a commune of cultural

nationalists (213–18); on the other hand, Shange's raucous parody of sexist black nationalist poetry masquerading as praise of black women might have been inspired by a poem Ted Joans dedicated "to laymates" titled "Cuntinent." Joans also dedicated a playfully sexual poem to Shange herself, "Commonplace Bulues," dated 1974.[25]

The collective affirmation that "black is beautiful," and the decision of many black artists to choose black lovers and spouses, distinguished the Black Arts movement from the previous bohemian/ Beat culture that fostered or at least tolerated interracial couplings, particularly of black men with white women, a pattern also common among jazz musicians. Yet despite declarations of black unity and feminist sisterhood, black women and white women remained potential rivals for the affections of black men. The sexist brothers who insult Sassafrass offend her further because they are married to white wives. In an interview, Mills recalls taking to heart the words of a black woman she met between 1969–70, who had observed her interactions with white artists and performers, and had told her "you need to get your soul together and get with some black people."[26] At the center of *Francisco* is a withering argument between the narrator and a black "refugee from the beatnik generation –been around the world photographer, poet, screenwriter" (50) who prefers white women and "dislikes black women," claiming that "black men have to leave their women if they're black so they can go out in the world and pursue their dreams . . . a white woman knows how to love." The narrator replies:

> is the world the way it is because of the white man alone? is wealth uneven just because the white man is greedy? the white woman is greedy with him. a woman who knows how to love knows something about anotha woman's love for her man and child . . . (52–53)

In this confrontation, the narrator reacts to a straightforward attack, rather than veiled insults disguised as praise when Mitch and his artist friends subject Shange's Sassafrass to a reading of "Ebony Cunt." Although Mills' narrator vehemently defends herself against this man's unfair comparison of idealized white women and stigmatized black women, the accusation that the black woman is a deficient mate puts her in a vexing position. His attack humiliates her, undermining her self-confidence and challenging her to defend the worth of all black women. While his insult expresses internalized racism, her response indicates a conflict between the

narrator's nascent feminism and her solidarity with black men. In this case, a black man's antagonism toward the black woman provokes her to declare her commitment to black men at the expense of any possible sisterhood with white women. Because she never resolves this conflict between race and gender solidarity, it is problematic to identify the narrator as a feminist. Her nascent feminism is most perceptible in her wavering attention to her career, rather than through organized feminist activity, or consciousness-raising experiences with other women. Her political and cultural involvement with the black community is mediated through her relationship with her lover right up until his departure at the end of the novel. In Mills' text there is no equivalent to Azure Bosom, the multicultural feminist group that Cypress joins in New York before she becomes engaged to wealthy jazz musician Leroy McCullough. It is worth noting that in both novels the critique of feminism focuses on black women's fertility and reproduction. At stake in both works is the black woman's articulation and demonstration of loyalty and support for her black male artist companion, as well as her ability to fulfill her own aesthetic and spiritual promise. In both novels the black woman's material and spiritual connection to the black community is figured in her relationship with her black male partner as well as her potential fertility and motherhood, her ability to bear and raise "a free child."

Throughout the 1970s a handful of Black women artists including Shange, Walker, Morrison, Bambara, and Jones created fictional black women artists (or potential artists) whose bodies and psyches were injured in destructive relationships with black men.[27] Mills and Shange, however, offered even more unusual protagonists, who not only were productive black feminist artists involved in romantic relationships with creative black men, but who also had left behind the material comfort of their families and rejected the respectable bourgeois values of their parents in a wholehearted embrace of alternative lifestyles that mixed elements of jazz, Beat, bohemian or hippie ("blippie") sensibility with a politically conscious black cultural nationalism and an aesthetic of artistic innovation and multicultural hybridity.

Mills and Shange have the further distinction of creating characters more strengthened than harmed in their relationships with black male artists. Although Shange's Sassafrass ends up as a single mother, having escaped the violence of her drug-addicted lover, her sister Cypress, a

dancer, develops a supportive and loving relationship with another black male jazz musician after she recovers from a heartbreaking affair with a lesbian dance partner. At the end of Mills' novel, the unnamed narrator is alone, missing Francisco, yet realizing that she remains in full possession of herself. The narrator initially writes to herself in an attempt to understand her relationship with her lover, but Francisco's departure is the narrative climax that gives this episode of her life the shape of a fictional story, thus transforming Alison Mills from diarist to published author. Like Shange's Sassafrass, Mills' narrator begins by defining herself in relation to black male artists, who represent creative and destructive elements of the Black Arts movement, and ends by defining herself through her experience as a woman.

Only ninety-two pages, *Francisco* is admittedly a minor work published in a limited edition from a small independent press. The author had begun writing it as a diary, not a novel. She had never intended for it to be published, but with Reed's encouragement, she allowed it to appear as the first of a roster of multicultural works of fiction, poetry, and drama from the fledging publisher. The slender volume largely escaped critical notice, beyond the positive blurbs from Demby and Morrison, and the one-paragraph review in *Publishers Weekly* orchestrated by Ishmael Reed. Yet Shange's *Sassafrass*, in its early incarnation as a chapbook, was also a minor work: thirty-eight pages selected from an unfinished novel, a text some critics have read as a short story or novella.[28] Excerpts of the work-in-progress also appeared in various periodicals, including *Yardbird Reader* and *Ms.* It was nearly rejected by its small, west coast publisher, Shameless Hussy Press, and at the author's insistence it was published only after the press had accepted and published the early version of *For Colored Girls* as a poetry chapbook, the form in which it existed before its incarnation as a dramatic work developed at Woodie King's New Federal Theater and Joseph Papp's Public Theater. *For Colored Girls* went on to success and acclaim at the Booth Theater on Broadway and on a national television broadcast of *American Playhouse*. Numerous regional productions throughout the country brought the play to diverse audiences. Shange's choreopoem remains in print and has also been included in several anthologies of American, African-American, and feminist drama.

Compared to *Francisco*, Shange's *Sassafrass* had a much higher literary and critical profile, appearing concurrently with the overwhelming success of

For Colored Girls. Launched by Alta's feminist press, as well as having the support of Ishmael Reed (who edited *Yardbird Reader*) and the eventual backing of commercial New York dramatists and publishers, Shange's work found a larger audience than the limited readership available for Mills' *Francisco*. Indeed, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* remains in print, as well as the play script of *For Colored Girls*, while *Francisco* went out of print after one edition, and was never picked up by a commercial publisher. Even the chapbook editions of *Sassafrass* can be found in more library collections than *Francisco*, which seems to have been distributed mainly on the west coast.[29] Although both authors were introduced as fiction writers by small independent California presses, perhaps it is significant that Mills' idiosyncratic novel was published by Reed's multicultural press without a clear sense of who might be its readers, while Shange's more overtly feminist work could be launched by a feminist press with a more easily targeted audience.

Striking differences between these two authors lie in the different reception for their work, as well as their unequal commitment to writing, and divergent personal choices affecting the life and career of each woman. Mills married Francisco Newman a few years after the publication of her book, when both of them had joined the Pentecostal Church. Until his death in 2003, they remained happily married, collaborating on film and video projects and raising five children together. As partners they were devoted to creating films that are not "demonic," but offer instead some vision of redemption; and it appears that much of Mills' creative energy has gone into this collaborative work with Francisco Newman, rather than sustaining a literary career.[30] Shange had two brief marriages: with Murray and an earlier marriage to a law student. She has raised her only child alone while producing a significant body of work in a variety of genres including poetry, drama, fiction, essays, children's books, and even a cookbook, possibly inspired by the recipes exchanged by mother and daughters in her first novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. In contrast to the goal of "having it all" once proposed by bourgeois feminists, these women apparently were compelled to choose between domestic and professional priorities. It would appear that Shange has more or less chosen her art over marital stability, or perhaps the art has chosen her, while Mills deferred pursuing some of her artistic goals in order to devote herself to family life and collaborative projects with her filmmaker husband. Mills' obscurity is

due in part to her retreat from the literary arena, just as Shange's prominence is due in part to her ongoing commitment to writing and her prolific output as a writer of several genres. Nevertheless, it is heartening to learn that Alison Mills has secured a literary agent who is interested in her second novel, *Maggie 3*.

As African-American women writing in the political and cultural crossroads of the 1970s, Mills and Shange allow rare and illuminating glimpses into the personal as well as political lives of the bohemian artists of the Black Arts movement. They are notable for their exploration of domestic relations between male and female artists who share a black aesthetic while contesting matters of sex and gender. Their innovative novels, alternately progressive and regressive as feminist works, articulate the desire of black women to express their creativity and affirm African-American culture while embracing sexual and domestic roles in relations with their black male counterparts. Their characters passionately aspire to merge their feminism with support for their male partners, to practice domesticity and black unity while pursuing their own spiritual and artistic inclinations, and to protect their fertility while deferring motherhood in sexual relationships they wish were more stable as well as more equal. These works suggest how difficult it was for black women writers of the 1970s to mesh conflicting roles as artists, comrades, lovers, and sisters of the men and women with whom they struggled for liberation.

NOTES

1. Rexroth formed ambivalent alliances with first generation male Beat writers, whom he also regarded as younger rivals. In 1960–61 he and Oden began a romantic liaison that evolved into a mutually respectful friendship according to Hamalian (300–301, 304, 305, 307–308, 360).
2. Although Alene Lee never published a book of her own, she might be considered Kerouac's uncredited collaborator as well as one of his muses. According to Ann Charters, Lee was angered to learn only after the novel was published that Kerouac had inserted into his text autobiographical passages that she had written. See Foley 2000.
3. Through Reed and Henderson, Mills and Shange were also connected to Umbra, a group that preceded and encouraged the innovative spirit of the Black Arts movement.
4. Francisco Newman died May 22, 2003.
5. Owen Dodson, Maria Cole, and Silvera were primarily responsible for introducing Baldwin's work to the stage in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San

Francisco, and New York. Silvera was a Jamaican-born African-American actor whose appearance allowed him to play a variety of ethnicities. Inspired by the Civil Rights movement, he protested Hollywood's stereotypical casting of African Americans and founded a drama school and theater to develop the careers of black actors, financing these organizations with earnings from his work in more than twenty films including *Viva Zapata*, *Hombre*, *Toys in the Attic*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *The St. Valentines Day Massacre*, *Killer's Kiss*, and numerous appearances in television programs such as *The Untouchables*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *High Chaparral*. See Bogle, who also mentions Mills, but confuses her with the character she played on *Julia*. See also "Who Was Frank Silvera?" by Garland Lee Thompson, a co-founder of the Frank Silvera Writers' Workshop in New York [http://www.fsww.org/whois.html].

6. "Reader, I Married Him." Also see Mills (12–13).
7. See *Publishers Weekly* anonymous review (June 10, 1974).
8. "Reader, I Married Him." Musicians and writers had collaborated at the Five Spot Café, in New York's Lower East Side, since artist Larry Rivers organized jazz-poetry readings featuring New York School and Beat poets in the 1950s. In response to a draft of this essay, Alan Gilbert noted similarities in the lives of careers of Alison Mills and Lauryn Hill: "childhood TV star becomes increasingly disenchanted with mainstream media" and evolves into a multidimensional artist. His remarks reminded me of a discussion with Mills in which we amused ourselves by imagining which young women actors we might cast to play her novel's protagonist in a movie. Among the names proposed, Mills mentioned Lauryn Hill as perhaps the most appealing.
9. "Cinema of the Oppressed: An Interview with Francisco Newman."
10. Originally co-founded with fellow African-American writers Steve Cannon and Joe Johnson, the publisher is now known as I. Reed Books. While it is questionable whether Francisco would have been published without Reed's influence, it is probable that Newman's interview with Angela Davis in *Ain't Nobody Slick* was a source for Reed's parody of Davis as "Minnie the Moocher" in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974). Published the same year as *Francisco*, this novel satirizes Black Power politics and the Black Arts movement. See Ishmael Reed papers, University of Delaware, F38–40; F48–49; F116. See also Mills (18–19, 23–24).
11. An earlier chapbook, *Sassafrass*, was published by Shameless Hussy Press in 1976–77. The chapbook edition acknowledges previous publication of parts of the work in *Yardbird Reader*, a Berkeley, California, journal edited by Ishmael Reed. Shameless Hussy, founded in San Lorenzo and Berkeley by the feminist writer Alta, also published a chapbook version of *For Colored Girls* in 1975. Originally, Alta had solicited a manuscript from Thulani Davis after hearing her read her own work. Davis recommended her friend Shange to the feminist publisher. See *Alta and the History of Shameless Hussy Press, 1969–1989*. Irene Reti and Randall Jarrell, eds. Santa Cruz, Calif., 2001. On-line Archive of California. [http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/alta.html].
12. Giovanni, *Black Feeling, Black Talk, 1968*.

13. The presence of African Americans in both the Beat and Black Arts movements contributed to the enhanced reputation of the jazz artist. Early jazz players were regarded as lowbrow entertainers, but writers of the Beat and Black Arts movements respected jazz musicians as fellow artists and intellectuals. Then as now, the inner world of jazz has been a predominantly male subculture of musicians and male critics.
14. In the recent film *Brown Sugar* (2002), visual scenes combined with the voice-over of the female narrator, a music critic, conflate "falling in love with hip-hop" and loving a man whose business is producing hip-hop music. For these characters, hip-hop is both an alternative to white mainstream culture and a means of attaining upper-middle class status through their careers as gatekeepers in the music industry. The success of this popular black romantic film promises comparable rewards for its creators. According to Michael Elliot, who developed the story and co-wrote the screenplay, "I had the desire to create a love story inside a world that I loved." The director, Rick Famuyiwa, was attracted to the project for similar reasons: "I thought that it would be interesting to make a film where the characters' love for the music spoke to the love they had for each other." However, aside from documentary-style footage of well-known rap artists appearing as themselves in the film's prologue, the rapper-actors and rapper characters in the film serve as sidekicks to the romantic leads and/or to provide comic relief. See Love in the Time of Hip-Hop." http://www.foxsearchlight.com/brownsugar/story.html.
15. Karl Marx originally listed "literati" among the ragtag declassed people who compose the "lumpenproletariat." The ambiguous class position of bohemians is underscored by the inclusion in both novels of black artists with trust funds-wealth inherited from prosperous parents (Shange 1982, 178–89), or income earned as a child actor in Hollywood (Mills 1974, 30–31). Shange's Leroy McCullough is born into the black elite while Sassafrass and Cypress are sent to private schools by white patrons whose ancestors held their family as slaves. For a discussion of how today's technology-based and media-driven economy has profoundly altered if not eliminated bohemian life, see Brooks on "bourgeois bohemians" in *Bobos in Paradise*. For a personal account of the "bobo's" dilemma, see Loh's *A Year in Van Nuys*. Another artist from southern California, Kenny Scharf, explores "the increasingly fuzzy boundary between art and commerce, and entertainment" with the animated characters of "The Groovenians . . . about a parallel universe where two frustrated star-struck artists living on a boring planet named Jeepers (the San Fernando Valley) dream of escaping to a place where their artistic dreams can come true. Where they can 'do art and have fun, like all the time.' The place is called Groovenia (Manhattan, circa 1978)." Quoted from announcement of "Artists on Art: Series, LACMA Institute for Art and Cultures, Los Angles County Museum of Art. 2002. See also Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*.
16. Shange's original language in the Shameless Hussy publication of *Sassafrass* has become more standardized through the editorial process of St. Martin's Press

in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. While the flavor of Shange's poetic vernacular remains, the book has been copyedited to conform to conventions of grammar, spelling and punctuation. Alison Mills Newman, the evangelical Christian and mother of five children, now regrets the occasionally profane language of the characters she created in her youth. (Conversation with author, September 10, 2002)

17. "Cinema of the Oppressed."
18. "Reader, I Married Him" and "Cinema of the Oppressed." Even in the 1970s, before they began their media ministry, Newman and Mills shared a reverence for poor black people that Newman traced back to the Pentecostal churches he attended as a child. In *Francisco*, the narrator's chance encounter with a workingclass black man prompts her departure from Hollywood in search of a more fulfilling life. In interviews, Mills subsequently referred to this encounter with a humble tow truck driver as a "vision" from God, while Newman spoke of an occasion when God sent him to preach the gospel to Soul Brother Number One, James Brown. The transformation of Mills and Newman from black bohemians to fundamentalists is no more astounding than the re-emergence of Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver as a born-again Christian with his 1978 book, *Soul on Fire*, although Cleaver's conversion seemed more opportunistic than sincere.
19. Conversation with author.
20. "Reader, I Married Him," and "Cinema of the Oppressed." Mills' husband, Francisco Newman also mentioned in conversation his Bay Area uncle whom he described as a "Beatnik."
21. Coincidentally, David Murray was a musician in Mills' band when she performed in New York jazz clubs (conversation with author). As Houston Baker notes, "The figures whom we encounter in Shange's narrative are less novelistic characters than actors in a mosaic of living tableaus" (174).
22. A third sister, Indigo, remains celibate, dedicating herself to her spiritual calling as midwife and healer in the southern Gullah/Geechee tradition. Baker contrasts the "magical" and "spiritual" qualities of Indigo, the youngest sister, with more predominant "satirical" and "dystopian" elements in the stories of Sassafrass and Cypress. In my own reading of this text, magic and spirituality signify these women's awareness of their connection to a resilient black female ancestral heritage, while elements of satire and dystopia indicate their struggle, particularly in mainstream or multicultural settings, to reconcile conflicting values of feminism and black nationalism with their creative, domestic, sexual, and maternal impulses.
23. See Walker 1973.
24. See Valerie Smith, "Split Affinities," *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender* (1–32).
25. Joans, *Teducation* (142–43, 146–52). Joans (1928–2003), who appeared nude on the cover of his book, *Afrodisia*, frequently adopted a sexually aggressive persona that foregrounded his heterosexuality, as if to distinguish himself from prominent homosexual poets with whom he associated.

26. "Reader, I Married Him."
27. See Walker (1973), Morrison (1970), and Bambara (1972).
28. Shameless Hussy published a book of thirty-eight pages in 1976, followed by a sixty-page book in 1977.
29. A recent Internet search turned up a rare copy of *Francisco* inscribed by the author to poet Anne Waldman, whose apartment Mills had borrowed while living in New York in the 1970s.
30. "Cinema of the Oppressed" and "Reader, I Married Him." Having reunited in marriage after their respective embrace of religion, Mills and Newman viewed their collaborative film and video projects as both political work and religious witness.

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