many aspects of their experience as women. So their chroniclers are listening both to a narrative and to an unfinished political creative labour. They alert us to reading oral accounts with all our senses. Then we are able to 'hear the questioning, the wavering, even the outright rejection of explanations as we read against the grain of the volubility and listen for the gaps, the hesitations, the silences, the evasions'.

To record a life is an act of trust and power. 'You hold the pen, it all comes from my stomach', the paralysed Dudala Salamma tells the younger women. The narrator depends upon the chroniclers but knows all too well the differences between life and words. None the less, there is a certain recognition between women in different circumstances who refuse to accept the world as it is.

Dudala Salamma assumes they will know why she risked so much for the communists: 'You ask why did I feed them? Why have you come here to see me? Why do you roam about for

the Sangham (organization) or for women? I too wanted to do the same thing. At least you can read a few letters but me, I used to graze buffaloes.'

The dream of 'a good future' was abandoned by history in Telangana but, because the members of Stree Shakti Sanghatana searched with resolve for 'a lineage of resistance and growth', their experiences can be handed on to many other women who spend their lives roaming about questing for equality, freedom and happiness in the world. The memories of the women of Telangana defy the emergence of a future 'sealed off from change'. *We Were Making History* is thus both a moving record and a dramatic act of political intervention. The power of such testimonies is transmitted over time and circumstance. It is a book not only about women's heroic past but about the dilemmas of socialism and feminism today.

Sheila Rowbotham

Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance

Edited by Joanne M. Braxton and Andrée Nicola McLaughlin

Serpent's Tail: London 1990, £12.95 Pbk, ISBN 1 85242 180 0

Recently, I saw an excellent show detailing the life and work of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley, the first Black woman stand-up comedian, during the course of which 'Moms' related how she worked with all the greats of the time – Ma Rainey, Dinah Washington, Billie Holiday and others.

She also talked about the racism which affected them all and the downright difficulties of being a Black woman determined to make it

on her own terms in a racist, sexist and generally hostile environment.

The show made me remember 'Moms' Mabley, and appreciate her in a way that I did not when she was alive and performing in our midst: another Black heroine rightfully revived and revered.

In the same way, the women – performers, writers, poets, doers and thinkers – who are the lovingly portrayed subjects of *Wild Women in the Whirlwind* are themselves given new life by the substantive scholarship on their lives, which this book documents. *Wild Women* consciously sets out to ensure that these women and the history they represent are not lost to generations.

Likewise, the women (and men) who contribute to this latest anthology in what is now becoming a long list of exemplary publications setting out Black women's story are

conscious of their responsibilities for note-taking.

Wild Women is very much an American production – mainly North American, but with a smattering from the southern hemisphere. That said, however, it is apparent that its allegiance is within the diaspora. Andrée McLaughlin's essay on the quest by Black women then and now for humanhood and wholeness makes the important point that the fortunes of Black American women are inextricably intertwined with that of their sisters in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Pacific. 'To safeguard the future and move on closer to freedom necessitates healing the disjunction Western culture has exacted between Black people and their community, history and African ethos,' she writes.

It is important to continue to make those references and cross-references, repairing, as it were, the damage of the Middle Passage, when we could not speak each other's language nor fully establish the ties that bind.

Wild Women is also concerned with space and time and Black women's place within the continuum; and it argues for that place as a matter of urgency.

A number of essays stand out for me in this collection. Daphne Duval Harrison's evocation of Sippy Wallace, the 'Texas Nightingale', and Billie Jean Young on the civil rights activist Fanny Lou Hamer, are thorough and accessible and, for me, gave flesh to the names that I've heard for years but realized, in reading this text, that I knew almost nothing about.

Barbara Smith, as always, speaks with depth, clarity and quality in her essay on Black lesbians in 1980s fiction. A recurring theme throughout Smith's work is the gulf which divides Black lesbians and Black women who are not lesbians. I was reminded of a workshop which she ran at a Black women's conference in New York a few years ago.

The subject of Black feminists' responsibility to help bridge that gulf through a literary dialogue was raised. The discussion which ensued, though painful and exasperating, helped to provide an important baseline from which to continue the dialogue between Black feminists – both lesbian and heterosexual. It is one which springs from a mutual understanding of and respect for our diverse cultural starting points and which recognizes the value to be gained from them. In this essay, Smith rightly argues that, without this kind of interchange, the scope for heterosexual feminist critics to err through active homophobia characterized by a refusal to acknowledge and accept our lesbian sisters, or the passive homophobia of ignoring them, remains great.

I like to think, though, that we have moved on somewhat from the days when, a few years back, a lesbian member of a Black feminist women's group with which I was involved, stood up with great trepidation and came out to us, with no feeling of assurance (I later learned) that she would continue to be embraced by us.

All of us – Black lesbian and nonlesbian feminists – must grapple with this one. I am convinced that we do. But the process is a long one and the path not easily defined. The guideposts which Smith and others continue to erect, however, are vital for us all to get there in the end.

If there is a criticism of this anthology, it must be the fact that some (though by no means all) of its contributions are so steeped in the language of academia that it is hard to see who, outside of the contributors' own students, will relate to what they have to say, and more to the point, take it on board.

If feminists and feminist principles, in particular Black feminism, is to move beyond the fringe, then we must be careful not to leave people behind. Black feminist criticism and thought must ask the crucial ques-

tion of who it is we're trying to reach. My answer to this is that it must be those within our communities who regard us as an aberration; who judge that it is not necessary to listen to what we have to say about equality for women because we are not understood within those communities. Recently, a friend who is a polytechnic lecturer, and a feminist, related that she finds it impossible to use many of the 'Bibles' which we feminists regard as sacred, with her students. 'They just would not understand them,' she said.

If we are to be taken seriously, and it is to this that I and other Black feminists are pledged, then we must make ourselves accessible – to the trade-union activist, the idealistic young woman student and the community organizer alike.

Barbara Smith's definition of

feminism is a good one which should be borne in mind in this context. She writes: 'Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women – as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement.'

Finally, it was good to note the presence of men in the anthology. As Black feminists, we have long argued that we are not divorced from our communities. The dialogue between Black women and men cannot be allowed to lapse, for therein lies change.

Melba Wilson