

Whitewashing Womanhood: The Politics of Race in Writing Women's History

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In 1982, three black feminists edited a collection on black women's studies entitled *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull et al.). This milestone volume raised questions about the politics of race for women's studies and of gender for black studies. More than two decades of feminist scholarship by and about women of colour has raised new expectations about what constitutes the study of women — about who the "women" are in women's studies (Moraga and Anzaldúa, Smith, Asian Women United of California, Anzaldúa).

This essay assesses the impact of the politics of race on feminist scholarship through examination of the writing of women's history. Three themes emerge in this discussion: first, the ways in which the unacknowledged racialized subject of much white feminist scholarship has been the white woman; second, the failure to treat black women as gendered subjects; and third, the trend toward a new comparative framework for the study of women. Ultimately, an analysis of all women as complex racialized and gendered subjects is needed to transform the way women's history, indeed history itself, is conceptualized.

Certainly some historians of women have struggled to come to terms with the politics of race in a gendered understanding of the past (Lerner 1972, Giddings, Jones, Armitage and Jameson, Amott and Matthaei). Yet too often scholars have engaged in "whitewashing" womanhood, both in the sense of "to whiten" and "to exonerate." In response, black feminist theory has exposed the white feminist definition of womanhood as race-specific. Historical and contemporary challenges by black women have demonstrated where white women have been unaware of their own assumptions in creating a theory of women's oppression. Black feminists argued that the white feminist discourse marginalized black women and all women of color as Other (White 1984, Lorde 1984, hooks 1984, Collins).

One result of the equation of "women" with white women only within much feminist scholarship has been the sole focus on analyses of gender and sexism, as if these explained the whole of women's oppression. Black feminist theorists have repeatedly emphasized the importance of understanding the simultaneous, interlocking, inseparable effects of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism (Smith). Furthermore, academics have been more comfortable with questions of race than racism and with exploring a politics of difference rather than

domination. Yet difference is not simply about diversity but also hierarchies and inequalities of power, even among women (hooks 1990, Gordon).

Multicultural women's history represents a way to address the politics of race, as witnessed by such North American best-sellers as DuBois's and Ruiz's *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* and Iacovetta's and Valverde's *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* on Canada. The significance of *Unequal Sisters* and *Gender Conflicts* is that they strip away facile assumptions about united sisterhood and shared female exploitation. They reveal the field of women's history as a contested terrain where the tensions among women, as seen between the histories of women of color and the oppressive actions of white women, dismantle generalizations about female unity and the female experience.

Since at least the early nineteenth century, black women have challenged their exclusion from much of white feminist theory. Black women, such as the nineteenth century abolitionist and woman's rights advocate Sojourner Truth, publicly proclaimed their right to inclusion in the category of American womanhood. Truth, formerly a slave named Isabella Van Wagner, was an itinerant preacher whose most famous speech took place at a woman's rights convention in 1851, where she posed the ironic question, "Ain't I A Woman?" Truth presented a critique of how racism had constructed the category of woman to exclude her, even as she insisted on her right to inclusion. Indeed, Truth helped to construct a specific mythical image of herself in order to represent the truths she felt needed to be known (Painter).

Although Sojourner Truth succeeded in constructing a public presence and historical legacy, most African-American women remained "hidden in plain sight" (Richardson xv). For example, historians of feminism long overlooked one of the first American feminists, Maria W. Stewart, a free black woman of the northern United States. In 1832 Stewart became the first American-born woman, white or black, to lecture in public on political themes, including abolition and woman's rights. At a time when it was considered indecent for women to speak to "promiscuous" audiences of men and women together, Stewart spoke out and challenged racism in white society and sexism in black communities. She argued that black women had to play a pivotal role in awakening the moral conscience of America to the plight of enslaved African Americans. Stewart risked ridicule and censure in order to press her vision of an egalitarian society (Lerner 1972, Richardson).

The cultural productions of black women in the past demonstrate that even when no one else listened, black women spoke. Stewart, for example, paid to publish several of her speeches later in life in order to spread her message. From 1810 to 1860, a time when most black women were enslaved, they penned over a hundred works of autobiography, and political and religious tracts (Andrews). The existence of these autobiographical novels and slave narratives, such as

Brent's *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl*, attest to black women's desire to assert their presence in the face of symbolic, even literal, erasure. In *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), the first novel published by a black woman in English, Harriet E. Wilson dared to tell the story of racism in the North at the hands of white women, during a time when abolitionists eagerly sought northern allies against the slaveholding South.

As producers of culture, black women confronted conventional stereotypes about black female sexuality in novels and songs. Black women struggled to reconstruct themselves as subjects within the sexual arena, a realm historically rife with black female victimization. The legacy of slavery produced stereotypes of black women as sexually promiscuous, which whites in turn used to justify the rape of black women at the hands of white men. Middle-class and working-class black women developed distinct responses to racist mythology and respectability within the sexual arena.

By the turn of the twentieth century, black middle-class women chose to project the image of a super-moral sexuality, even denying sensuality, in order to attack notions of the "bad" black woman (Lerner 1972, Carby 1987, Hine 1989). In the 1890s, the journalist Ida B. Wells launched an antilynching crusade that challenged the racialized sexual abuse of black women at the same time as it exposed the economic motivations underlying the myth that black men were lynched for raping white women. This campaign succeeded in making southern mob rule and lynching an issue for public debate when it united with black club women's efforts to defend the sexual and moral reputation of black women (Aptheker, Giddings).

One of the ways black working-class women asserted their entitlement to sexual desire, even in the face of sexual danger, was through music, especially the blues. Blues songs centered on personal experiences and were a blend of despair, pain, renewal, and hope. Female blues singers of the 1920s, when black women dominated the field, recorded black women's history and filled their songs with rich sexual imagery. Blues singers asserted women's sexual independence and "reclaimed female sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire," noted Hazel Carby (1990a, 247). Women's blues provide a window into the gendered power struggle between black men and women.

Throughout the 1980s black feminist scholars pointed out that when scholars treated black women as if they were only racialized subjects with no gendered interests, black women were excluded from white feminist scholarship. Black feminists critiqued the failure of scholarship, including feminism, to accept the "woman" in black womanhood. "It is, apparently, inconvenient," exclaimed Alice Walker, "if not downright mind straining, for white women scholars to think of black women as women" (376). Paralleling this sentiment, Hortense Spillers

asserted, "black women do not live out their destiny on the borders of femaleness, but in the heart of its terrain" (95).

The operative assumption of much scholarship has been that black women either act on behalf of race issues or women's issues without recognizing how their efforts are always both (E.B. Brown). For example, a pathbreaking work on women's role in the United States federal government, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal*, did not even examine the work of the major black educator Mary McLeod Bethune on the erroneous conclusion that Bethune represented African Americans and not women (Ware 12). Ironically, Bethune, who headed the Office of Minority Affairs of the National Youth Administration from 1936 to 1944, worked explicitly on behalf of black women through her leadership of the National Council of Negro Women, a coalition of numerous national black women's organizations founded in 1935 (Holt).

In contrast to depictions of black women, white women usually are presented as if they only have gendered interests and are not also racialized subjects. We need to question the exclusive application of "race" to black women (and "ethnicity" to other minority groups); all people have racial identities, even if some remain unspoken. Race must become a central governing concept and category of analysis for all women and men.

The concept of race is loaded with ambiguities, yet most people seem to think they know what it is. When we look at racial differences, what are we measuring? Race is not a biological fact — it exists only as an ideological and historical construction. Separate human races do not exist even if human variation does (Cooper, Higginbotham). Instead race is something created in our language, laws, and science. For example, there is "the well-known anomaly of American racial convention that considers a white woman capable of giving birth to a black child but denies that a black woman can give birth to a white child" (Fields 149). Erroneously, race is treated as a thing existing outside of history and therefore removed from scholarly inquiry.

A strong undercurrent of scholarship has pushed away from the traps of essentialist thinking about race to argue for its social construction. Marilyn Frye explored the meaning of whiteness itself by pointing out that:

Many people whose skin is white, by which of course we don't really mean *white*, are Black or Mexican or Puerto Rican or Mohawk. And some people who are dark-skinned are white. Natives of India and Pakistan are generally counted as white in this country though perhaps to the average white American they look dark. (113-14)

In other words, the very definition of whiteness is contingent on social meaning not biology; race is not so much about color but rather politics and power (Frye 118).

In this sense, not only race but also racism requires rethinking. We need a history of racisms, instead of treating racism as a transhistorical concept with

identical indicators at all times (Fields; Carby 1987, 1990b). The Delta Chinese in Mississippi, for example, provide an interesting illustration of the ways in which people have challenged racism. The arrival of the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta after the Civil War raised troubling questions about the existing biracial markers. Southern whites initially classified the Delta Chinese as "colored," but the Chinese contested this racial categorization knowing full well it implied racial inferiority. The Delta Chinese insisted that they were neither black nor white.

Comparative studies of Asian Americans and African Americans can bring new theoretical insights into the various ways that racism operated. After leaving the cotton fields, many Delta Chinese achieved a degree of economic success as the owners of grocery stores that served local black people, yet they still faced racial segregation. In the mid-1920s Gong Lum, a grocer whose daughter was excluded from a local white school, challenged Mississippi's school segregation all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The high court ultimately upheld the Mississippi Supreme Court decision to keep white schools for whites only to ensure white racial purity. Delta Chinese attended black schools and later a few Chinese schools but were excluded from white public schools until well into the 1940s, while integration for black students did not take place until the 1970s (Quan, Loewen, McCunn).

One way to understand the multiple constructions of racial identity and black experiences is to explore the lives of mixed-race women, such as the black Delta Chinese. Arlee Hen, born in 1893, was the daughter of a Chinese father and a black mother. Black Chinese women and men faced prejudice from whites, blacks, and the Chinese, who at various times appeared equally unaccepting of their multiple identity claims (Quan, Loewen, McCunn). Hen found black disapproval of her marriage to a Chinese man, and upon her death the Chinese cemetery rejected her request for burial beside her husband because she was not "pure-blooded" Chinese (McCunn).

Scholarship on black women must explore the multiplicity and non-homogeneity within the category of black womanhood itself. Analysis of such influences as class, culture, and sexuality are important tools for dismantling notions of a monolithic black community. Indeed, the insistence on class differences within black communities was one of the most clearly articulated messages of the rising black middle class at the turn of the twentieth century, as it attempted to differentiate itself from the black masses. At the same time, as the published diary of teacher and journalist Alice Dunbar-Nelson showed, members of the black middle class had to struggle to remain there (Hull). Furthermore, black communities have not escaped ruptures due to persistent homophobia and outbreaks of anti-gay / lesbian violence (Lorde 1988, hooks 1989). As black feminist E. Frances White noted, "the site of counter discourse is itself contested terrain" (1990, 82; see also Higginbotham).

Critiques of essentialism have led feminist scholars to be wary of terms like race, women, and the black community. It seems evident that every category we choose will mask some differences but these terms can also enhance our conceptual frameworks; we must invoke as well as problematize such terms. "Race has constituted a discursive tool for both oppression and liberation," maintained Elizabeth Brooks Higginbotham (252; see also hooks 1990). In a similar vein, Denise Riley argued "that it is compatible to suggest that 'women' don't exist — while maintaining a politics of 'as if they existed' — since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did" (112). The point is that terms like race and women are embraced for multiple political purposes.

Scholars face the methodological dilemma of how to avoid both false generalizations and false differences. One danger of the project to deconstruct false unity within social categories, such as women or African Americans, is the risk that analysis will degenerate into only a question of difference (Martin 631). Even as one beneficial response to the politics of race has been a drive to document differences, we do ourselves a disservice if we abandon comparative studies that are also open to assessing commonalities and connections. Surely understanding the bigger picture requires knowledge of the cultural encounters and multiple interactions among women (DuBois and Ruiz, K.M. Brown).

A comparative framework for the study of women's history does not mean abandoning the study of black women's history, for example, but requires it. In order to document cross-cultural conflict and cooperation we must turn to primary sources. Today the range of available material on African-American women is staggering. More than twenty years ago Gerda Lerner published a collection of primary documents, *Black Women in White America*, in order to demonstrate the rich and overlooked material about black women. Since then additional documentary collections have been compiled by Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin in *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* and Dorothy Sterling in *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Darlene Clark Hine edited a sixteen-volume series on U.S. black women's history from the colonial period to the present and a massive two-volume historical encyclopedia (Hine 1990, 1993). Finally, bibliographies such as *Black Lesbians* provide clues to the untapped resources for research on black women (Roberts).

There is also a growing body of primary and secondary sources on black women's history in Canada. "*We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up*": *Essays in African Canadian Women's History* by Bristow et al. and *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s* by Brand suggest that the field is growing. The collection of narratives grew out of an oral history project on the working lives of about fifty black women, sponsored by the Immigrant Women's Job Placement Centre in Ontario. The stories of women like Viola Desmond, who was arrested, jailed and fined in

1946 for sitting in the white section of a movie theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, attest to part of Canada's untold legacy.

More than 4000 black newspapers and journals, which existed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in North America, constitute another valuable resource for the study of black women. For example, Mary Ann Shadd Cary became the first woman to edit a newspaper in Canada and the first black newspaperwoman in North America for her work on the *Provincial Freeman*. She was one of the 50,000 African Americans who left the U.S. for Canada during the 1850s (Sterling). Among the most comprehensive journals by and about black Americans are *Southern Workman* (1872-1939) from Hampton Institute in Virginia, *Crisis* (1910-present) by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *Opportunity* (1923-49) by the National Urban League, and the *African American Woman's Journal* (1940-49) by the National Council of Negro Women.

Manuscript collections housed in libraries and archives are also important resources for historical material on black women. There are two major guides to archival material on black women in the U.S., *Women's History Sources* edited by Andrea Hinding and the *Directory of Afro-American Resources* edited by Walter Schatz. The usual difficulties abound for finding material on black women because the Hinding guide focuses mostly on white women and the Schatz guide mostly on black men. Records of the federal government at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. are a particularly rich, underutilized resource. I found a great deal of archival material for my research on black women's health activism within the records of the U.S. Children's Bureau, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Public Health Service. For example, agricultural extension service records provide narrative and statistical reports on rural life in most American states from 1908 through World War II. Debra Newman published a guide that enumerated the federal records that contain material on the lives of African Americans.

Finally, scholars have found a wide range of manuscript sources at historically black colleges, such as Tuskegee University in Alabama and Howard University in Washington, D.C. At Tuskegee University, black sociologist Monroe Work and his assistant and successor Jessie Guzman created the Department of Records and Research which collected newspaper clippings and other documentary evidence on black America since 1910. Much of the collection is available on microfilm as *The Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File*.

Unfortunately, the lack of adequate financial resources and the undervalued historical role of black women has meant that at times manuscript material can be difficult to locate. Catalogued manuscript collections available to researchers are only the tip of the iceberg because most manuscript collections are unprocessed and sitting in warehouses, whether at black institutions or at the U.S. Library of Congress. For example, much primary source material at Tuskegee

University is deteriorating in file cabinets in storage, while collections at other archives remain unprocessed due to lack of funds and because sources on black women are still not a priority.

History is a discipline of cultural memory, yet for too long scholars and archivists have contributed to a historic amnesia with regard to the lives of marginalized cultural groups. A more complex understanding of history necessitates the study of black women because their presence has been central, not peripheral, to the construction of womanhood itself in North America. Yet women's history has failed to treat black women satisfactorily as complex historical figures and not just as stock characters who serve as examples of the most victimized or most enduring of women (Carby 1990b). All women have been subordinated but none have been powerless (Lerner 1979, Gordon).

Ultimately, the study of women will benefit from rigorous analysis of the changing historical constructions of both race and gender. Our task is to think and write of racial formations not of distinct races and gender frontiers; we should also think and write of gender formations not of immutable sexual differences (Carby 1987, K.M. Brown). The study of gendered intercultural relationships may well be the next frontier in women's history.¹

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