
Lifting the Veil, Shattering the Silence: Black Women's
History in Slavery and Freedom

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Present and future investigations of Afro-American women's past should increase our understanding of the complex interrelationships of gender, class, and race. For three and a half centuries Afro-American women have carried special burdens. They have responded in dichotomous ways: by protesting racial and sexual discrimination or by somehow avoiding it; by rationalizing the psychological impact of racism and sexism or by transcending their victimization. These multiple dichotomies are most graphically revealed through an examination of black women's institutional and organizational lives and their work, and also in their cultural contributions and aesthetic expressions. Black women's history is just beginning to emerge as a vital area within women's and Afro-American history, and much work remains to be done. In this essay I will trace the contours of the field and assess its prospects by synthesizing much of the current literature. Specifically, I will examine the following themes: sex roles and female networks, the black family, work, religion, social reform, and creative expressions.

Before the Civil War the vast majority of black women were slaves. Emancipation required finding ways to give meaning to freedom within a society devoted to circumscribing all attempts of black people to, in fact, be free. Subsequently, industrialization and urbanization not only altered the location but influenced the transformation of the lives and work experiences of the majority of black women. Even more profound were the so-

cial upheavals and proliferation of racial and sexual stereotypes of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries which affected how black women defined themselves in relationship to each other and to the larger society. Whether slave or free, black women occupied key familial roles as mothers, daughters, wives, and sisters. Although recent works in Afro-American history have devoted a great deal of attention to the structure, function, and stability of black families under slavery, with few exceptions these works, in attempting to establish the vital importance of the male figure, have tended to deemphasize the role of black women within the family.¹ It is, of course, important and necessary to provide a more balanced portrayal of the actual male/female roles in the black family in slavery and freedom in order to obliterate the myth of the ubiquitous black matriarch. Nevertheless, it is critical that the black woman remain visible in the family. Scholarly revisions must not obscure the indisputable fact that the black woman bore primary responsibility for reproducing the slave labor force and for ensuring the continuation of the black race during and after the demise of the Peculiar Institution.

As wives and mothers, black women nurtured the sick, performed all of the domestic chores, provided primary socialization of slave children, wet nursed white children, fulfilled the conjugal needs of their men, and all too often endured the forced passion of slave masters and the vengeful brutality of plantation mistresses. Perhaps the most challenging task confronting black women under slavery was how to maintain a relatively healthy opinion of themselves as sexual beings. To the slave masters they were remunerative slave breeders and vulnerable sexual objects. Although instances abound in the literature about black male slaves who fought and died, the men were, on the whole, unable to offer much protection for the sexual integrity of their wives, daughters, and sisters. Indeed, the abused

black woman often had to convince her mate that the test of his masculinity was self-restraint, not some action that would deprive her of a husband or her children of a father. White plantation mistresses were equally powerless and often displayed considerable hostility toward the abused slave woman. In fact, they frequently blamed the victim for the sexual transgressions of their husbands and sons. As a result, black women, beginning in slavery, were compelled to construct a sexual self, based on the foundation of self-reliance.² Given the fact that many slave marriages possessed virtually no legal sanction and were seldom recognized in the larger society, future scholars would do well to explore how black women, in fact, viewed marriage. How did their view of marriage differ from or resemble those views held by men and white women?

Gender relationships between black slaves were problematic even without the sexual intrusions of white men. Although scholars have devoted scant attention to the social relationship between husband and wife, some writers have suggested that black women shared a greater degree of equality with black male slaves than was the case between white men and women. If such was the case, this equality of status certainly derived, in part, from the fact that black women performed many of the same tasks on slave plantations as did the men. They engaged in hard physical labor, chopped and picked cotton, felled trees, mended fences, cared for livestock, and cultivated food crops. Yet it must be pointed out that similar economic or employment responsibilities do not necessarily reflect equal social relations. There was still a sexual division of labor on the plantations. Black women also had to perform socially and biologically determined sex-role stereotyped work. In reality, then, the division of labor on most plantations was decidedly unequal. While all slaves worked hard, the black women slaves were burdened with extra jobs performed only by members of their sex. In the absence of further research, one can only

1. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1976); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974); Robert William Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, 1974); Suzanne Lebsock, "Free Black Women and the Question of Matriarchy: Petersburg, Virginia, 1784-1820," *Feminist Studies*, VIII (Summer, 1982), 271-92; Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York, 1984); Shepard Krech III, "Black Family Organizations in the Nineteenth Century: An Ethnological Perspective," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XIX (1982), 429-52.

2. Rennie Simson, "The Afro-American Female: The Historical Context of the Construction of Sexual Identity," in Ann Smitow, Sharon Thompson, and Christine Stausall (eds.), *The Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York, 1983), 229-35; Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston, 1861); Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes: Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868; rpt. New York, 1968); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 485, 501; Gerda Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York, 1973); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York, 1982), 188.

speculate about the tensions this inequitable distribution of work assignments must have engendered in many of the slave cabins.³

Performing sex-differentiated work did, however, afford black women the opportunity to develop a separate world of informal female networks that reinforced intrasexual reliance. These networks usually evolved through organized group activities such as spinning, weaving, quilting, cooking, and attending each other in childbirth and providing health care. These female slave networks allowed the women to forge a common consciousness concerning their oppression as women while devising strategies for survival. Through their women networks they were able to communicate their feelings, share experiences and world views, and assist each other in the development of positive self-images and self-esteem in spite of the slave-owning society's best efforts to define them to the contrary.⁴ Consequently, their interactions engendered an even stronger sense of community among slaves.

In addition to midwifing, doctoring, and other domestic chores, group activities such as quilting facilitated woman bonding and cooperation between female slaves and contained significantly larger social implications. Black women, as slaves and freedwomen, converted quilt making into a social and community affair. Former slave Mary Wright, of Kentucky, reminiscing about quilting offered, "Den wemns [women] quilt awhile, den a big dinner war spread out, den after dinner we'd quilt in de evening, den supper and a big dance dat night, wid de banjie a humming 'n us niggers a dancing."⁵ Deserving added emphasis is the fact that the quilt, thus

3. Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar*, 111 (1971), 2-15; Deborah G. White, "Ain't I a Woman? Female Slaves, Sex Roles, and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, Chicago, 1979); Jacqueline Jones, "'My Mother Was Much of a Woman': Black Women, Work, and Family Under Slavery, 1830-1860," *Feminist Studies*, VIII (Summer, 1982), 235-69; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985); Debra Newman, "Black Women in the Era of the American Revolution in Pennsylvania," *Journal of Negro History*, LXI (July, 1976), 276-89.

4. Deborah G. White, "Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South," *Journal of Family History*, VIII (Fall, 1983), 248-61; Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," *Western Journal of Black Studies*, III (Summer, 1979), 123-27; Jessie Parkhurst, "The Role of the Black Mammy in the Plantation Household," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIII (July, 1938), 349-69.

5. Quoted in Irene V. Jackson, "Black Women and Music: From Africa to the New

created, represented the individual and collective expression of the voice, vision, structure, and substance of the creators' personal and spiritual lives. One of the most famous black women quilters was former slave Harriet Powers (1837-1911) of Athens, Georgia. One of her two "Bible Quilts" (1898) now adorns the walls of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The quilt is divided into rectangular panels, each devoted to a particular biblical scene. The panels are filled with appliquéd silhouettes of human figures, geometric motifs, and other design combinations that resemble the styles found among the people of ancient Dahomey in West Africa.⁶ In much the same way that we can examine the quilts, scholars of the black female experience must analyze other cultural contributions and expressions including hymns, spirituals, blues, lullabies, poems, novels, sermons, household implements, toys, folktales, and slave narratives.⁷

To be sure, families and female networks were important institutions shaping black women's lives and experiences. Yet, any discussion of the institutional history of black women would be seriously flawed without a simultaneous examination of their involvement in and relationship to the black church and black religion. By the first half of the nineteenth century, religion had become the center of the spiritual and community lives of most women, and of black women in particular. Women, regardless of race and status, played a prominent role within the congregations, organizing voluntary missionary societies, teaching Sunday schools, and raising funds. Representative black women such as Sarah Woodson Early, born on November 15, 1825, in Chillicothe, Ohio, offer illuminating testimony of their

World," in Filomina Chioma Steady (ed.), *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 393.

6. John Michael Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Design* (Cleveland, 1978), 67; Gladys-Marie Fry, "Harriet Powers: Portrait of a Black Quilter," in *Missing Pieces: Georgia Folk Art, 1770-1976* (Atlanta, 1976), 16-23; Robert Farris Thompson, "African Influence on the Art of the United States," *Journal of African Civilization*, III (November, 1978), 44; Gladys-Marie Fry, "Slave Quilting on Ante-Bellum Plantations," in *Something to Keep You Warm* (Roland Freeman Collection of Black American Quilts from the Mississippi Heartland Exhibit Catalog), 4-5.

7. Gloria T. Hull, "Black Women Poets from Wheatley to Walker," in Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (eds.), *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* (New York, 1979); Arna Alexander Bontemps (ed.), *Forever Free: Art by African American Women, 1862-1980* (Alexandria, Va., 1980); Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York, 1971); Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977).

work in the church. Woodson married A.M.E. minister Jordon Winston Early in 1868 and shared with him the tasks of religious leadership. She described her work and that of other black church women: "We assisted in superintending the Sabbath-schools when near enough to reach them; always attending and often leading in prayer meetings; and [we] took an active part in visiting the sick and administering to the wants of the poor and needy, and in raising money to defray the expenses of the Church and served most heartily in its educational work."⁸

At some fundamental level all black churches espoused a theology of liberation, self-determination, and black autonomy. Northern black churches were especially active in and supportive of the abolition movement. The promises embodied in Christian scriptures permeated all of Afro-American culture and possessed special meaning for black women's psychic survival and transcendence. The black church became the training arena that enabled free black women prior to the Civil War to acquire leadership and organizing skills and an increased commitment to winning freedom for the slaves and more control over their own lives. For black slave women religious faith nourished hope for release from their earthly oppression and degradation. The body could be tortured and abused while the soul remained pure and untouched. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century black women enlarged their already considerable influence within the church and extended its sacred horizons to encompass pressing secular concerns. In short, the black church ultimately served as an institutional base giving moral sanction to black women's quest for freedom and the advancement of the race.

One important aspect of black religious life remained unchanged after the Civil War. The hierarchy, ministers, and theologians of most religions and congregations remained male. Not all black women were satisfied with their significant but nevertheless subordinate and relatively invisible roles within black churches. Denied official positions of leadership, a few extraordinary free black women found religious audiences of their own. One such woman was Jarena Lee, born free at Cape May, New Jersey, in

8. Ellen N. Lawson, "Sarah Woodson Early: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalist 'Sister,'" *Umoja: A Scholarly Journal of Black Studies*, V (Summer, 1981), 21; Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Women and the Church," in Gloria E. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (eds.), *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York, 1982), 141-52.

1783. She was a protégée of the Reverend Richard Allen, founder and leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen was not averse to Lee's leading prayer meetings, but he at first drew the conservative theological line against female preaching. Later, Allen relented and endorsed her desire to preach. In the single year 1827 Lee traveled 2,325 miles, alone, and delivered 178 sermons, a remarkable feat for any woman during this period in American history. In her autobiography, Lee defended her right to preach: "O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemingly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? Seeing the Savior died for the woman as well as for the man."⁹

Perhaps the best-known itinerant preacher in the antebellum period was the legendary Sojourner Truth, who combined her mission of serving her people and espousing the right of women with a mission to spread the news of a God of love. For Sojourner Truth the abolitionist and women's rights movements were but the secular counterparts of spiritual salvation. At one gathering she declared, "Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him."¹⁰

Like Lee and Truth, Rebecca Cox Jackson was also an itinerant preacher and religious visionary. Born a free black in 1795 near Philadelphia, Jackson experienced a profound spiritual awakening at age thirty-five and felt compelled to preach. Unable to overcome the strong opposition of her family and friends, Jackson severed relations with the Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia and joined the Watervliet Shaker Community near Albany.

9. "The Life and Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee: A Colored Lady Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," in Dorothy Porter (ed.), *Early Negro Writings, 1760-1837* (Boston, 1971), 494-514; Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin (eds.), *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park, 1976), 135.

10. Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, 236; See also Arthur Huff Fauset, *Sojourner Truth: God's Faithful Pilgrim* (Durham, 1938); Olivia Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave* (1850; rpt. Boston, 1884); Hertha Pauli, *Her Name Was Sojourner Truth* (New York, 1962).

Four years later, in 1857, she left the community and was granted the right to found a predominantly black Shaker sisterhood in Philadelphia. In 1878 eight black women, three black children, and three white women lived in the Shaker commune, members of Jackson's spiritual family. She died in 1881.¹¹

Amanda Berry Smith, born at Long Gree, Maryland, in 1837, like her A.M.E. predecessors, grew disillusioned by the restrictions on women and ventured forth to become an itinerant preacher (without ordination) and a missionary. She traveled extensively in foreign lands: England in 1878, India in 1880–1881, and Liberia for eight years. Throughout her traveling Smith observed and commented on the common universal exploitation and oppression of women.¹²

Religion, though significant, was not the sole outlet for the talented, intelligent, and spirited free black woman. Many free black women played instrumental and catalytic roles in the reform and humanitarian movements of the early nineteenth century. They were active in founding mutual aid societies and antislavery, suffrage, and temperance organizations. As we shall see, black women were the ones to raise the question of women's rights within the black organizations and issues of racism within white women's organizations. Maria Stewart, born free in 1803 and raised in Hartford, Connecticut, is heralded as the first woman to break with convention and speak in public to a mixed audience of men and women on behalf of black rights and advancement. In an 1832 address before the newly formed Afric-American Female Intelligence Society in Boston, she declared: "Me thinks I heard a spiritual interrogation—'Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?' And my heart made this reply—'If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!'" Stewart cursed the institution of slavery and urged black women to "awake, arise: no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves."¹³

11. Jean McMahon Humez, *The Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Boston, 1981). Also see "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson," in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York, 1983), 71–82.

12. Amanda Berry Smith, "An Autobiography of Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist," in Loewenberg and Bogin (eds.), *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, 171; Marshall W. Taylor, *Amanda Smith, or the Life and Mission of a Slave Girl* (Cincinnati, 1886).

13. Maria Stewart's speech included in Loewenberg and Bogin (eds.), *Black Women*

For free black women the line between involvement in religious institutions and in the women's suffrage movement was a permeable one. Because their religious orientation was toward spiritual liberation and personal autonomy, suffrage for black women became the political expression of their persistent yearnings to be free. Prominent antebellum free black women such as Sarah Mapps Douglass, a teacher in the Institute for Colored Youth, and the three Forten sisters of Philadelphia—Sarah, Margaretta, and Harriet—attended, in 1833, the opening meetings of the Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia. Margaretta Forten later became the recording secretary of the society. Likewise, Susan Paul was present at the organizational meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and later served as one of its vice-presidents and as treasurer.¹⁴ Here as in other aspects of their lives, black antislavery activists contributed to the abolitionist cause in spite of the racial discrimination and prejudice of their white female colleagues.

The experiences of Sarah Mapps Douglass are a revealing commentary on the racism that existed among white women in the antislavery movement. When Douglass attempted to attend the national meeting of the Female Anti-Slavery Convention in New York City in 1837, she learned that "colored members were unwelcome." An astonished white activist from South Carolina, Angelina Grimké, noted that, in the New York society, "no colored sister has ever been on the Board and they have hardly any colored members even and will not admit any to the working S[ociety]." Only the timely intercession and persuasive powers of Grimké reversed the bar against black women delegates' attending the convention. When Douglass at one point wavered in her resolve to attend the convention, Grimké implored her to reconsider:

in *Nineteenth-Century American Life*, 192; Maria W. Stewart, *Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart, Negro* (Washington, D.C., 1879); Maria W. Stewart, "What If I Am a Woman," in Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America*, 562–66. Also see Rosalyn Cleagle, "The Colored Temperance Movement: 1830–1860" (M.A. thesis, Howard University, Washington, D.C., 1969).

14. Ira V. Brown, "Cradle of Feminism: The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1833–1840," in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, CII (April, 1978), 143–66; Janice Sumler-Lewis, "The Forten-Purvis Women of Philadelphia and the American Anti-Slavery Crusade," *Journal of Negro History*, LXVI (Winter, 1981–1982), 281–88. Also see Sumler-Lewis, "The Fortens of Philadelphia: An Afro-American Family and Nineteenth-Century Reform" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., 1976); Willie Mae Coleman, "Keeping the Faith and Dis-

You my dear Sisters have a work to do in rooting out this wicked feeling as well as we. You must be willing to come in among us tho' it may be your feelings may be wounded by "the putting forth of the finger," the avoidance of a seat by you, or the glancing of the eye. . . . I earnestly desire that you may be willing to bear these mortifications. . . . They will tend to your growth in grace, and will help your sisters more than anything else to overcome their own sinful feelings. Come, then, I would say, for we need your help.¹⁵

At Grimké's insistence Sarah Douglass and Sarah Forten attended the meeting. Across the ocean another black woman abolitionist, Sarah Parker Remond, appealed to English women to fight against the enslavement of darker members of their sex. When lecturing in London in 1859, Remond focused on the exploitation of black women slaves. She declared, "If English women and English wives knew the unspeakable horrors to which their sex were exposed on southern plantations, they would freight every westward gale with the voices of moral indignation and demand for the black woman the protection and rights enjoyed by the white."¹⁶

From the 1830s to the turn of the century black women encountered similar white hostility when endeavoring to attend suffrage and women's rights meetings. Even Sojourner Truth, that ardent defender of blacks' and women's rights, was subjected to repeated indignities when attending early women's rights conventions. One male heckler, at the 1851 Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, challenged her to prove that she was a woman and some white women activists objected to her being allowed to speak, fearing that too close an association "with abolition and niggers" would damage their cause. It was amidst this climate of racial and sexual hostility that Truth delivered her often repeated, "Ain't I a Woman" speech:

Well, children, war dar is so much racket dar must be someting out o'kilter. I think dar 'twixt de niggers of de Souf and de women at the Norf all a talkin 'bout rights de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But

turbing the Peace, *Black Women: From Anti-slavery to Women's Suffrage* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1982).

15. Katharine DuPre Lumpkin, *The Emancipation of Angelina Grimké* (Chapel Hill, 1974), 104–105.

16. Ruth Bogin, "Sarah Parker Remond: Black Abolitionist from Salem," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, C. April, 1974, 120–30; Dorothy Porter, "Sarah Parker Remond, Abolitionist and Physician," *Journal of Negro History*, XX (July, 1935), 287–293; Coleman, "Keeping the Faith," 15–16.

what's all diss here talkin' bout? Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches and to have da best places . . . and ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! . . . I have plowed, and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could eat as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and I seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain't I a woman?¹⁷

Sojourner Truth was a paradigm to women's rights advocates because her personal experiences proved that women could raise children, do heavy labor, survive persecution, endure physical and sexual abuse, and still emerge triumphant and transcendent. At an 1867 Equal Rights Association convention the indomitable Sojourner Truth warned, "There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before."¹⁸

In the wake of the death of slavery, black women continued their struggle for race advancement and sexual elevation. Blacks, for the most part, entered freedom with little more than the rags on their backs. Merely staying alive became a struggle. Witnessing the suffering and deprivation, black women like Elizabeth Keckley, a personal servant of Mary Todd Lincoln, swung into action. In 1862 Keckley organized the Contraband Relief Association, composed of approximately forty members. The association collected money, clothing, and food to distribute to the thousands of freedmen and freedwomen who flocked to the nation's capital.¹⁹

17. Pauli, *Her Name Was Sojourner Truth*, 176–77; Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, 235; Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, 1981), 160; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman's Movement, 1830–1920," in Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Sharon Harley (eds.), *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (New York, 1978), 17–27. Also see Terborg-Penn, "Afro-Americans in the Struggle for Woman Suffrage" (Ph.D. dissertation, Howard University, Washington, D.C., 1976), and her "Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Postscript to the Passage of the 19th Amendment," in Lois Schraf and Joan M. Jensen (eds.), *Decades of Discontent: The Woman's Movement, 1920–1940* (Westport, Conn., 1983), 261–78; Adele Logan Alexander, "How I Discovered My Grandmother . . . and the Truth About Black Women and the Suffrage Movement," MS (November, 1983), 29–37.

18. Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 569–70.

19. Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 113–16; Coleman, "Keeping the Faith," 59–61.

The tradition of slave female networks and the free black woman's improvement associations and their work in antislavery organizations and voluntary associations provided the foundation upon which black women forged powerful national organizations. Characterized by a special brand of black female militancy, national women's networks flourished in the late 1890s and the early twentieth century. In 1892 Fannie Barrier Williams, a prominent member of Chicago's black elite, lamented that "Afro-American women of the United States have never had the benefit of a discriminating judgment concerning their worth as women." Williams, a native of Brockport, New York, attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston and the School of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., and taught school in the South before moving to Chicago. During the 1890s Williams gained international fame for her outspoken defense of black women. Responding to repeated allegations of the immorality of black women and the inferiority of the black race, the embattled Williams declared, "I think it but just to say that we must look at American slavery as the source of every imperfection that mars the character of the colored American."²⁰

In the late nineteenth century, America moved inexorably toward a society best characterized as "biracial dualism." While white Americans, north and south, accepted black subordination as representing the Darwinian natural order, black leaders of the race focused almost completely on winning educational, political, and economic rights. Black women, on the other hand, focused on eradicating negative images of their sexuality. Thus, by the late 1890s there developed a major division of emphasis within the black protest tradition. Black men attacked racial discrimination as it operated in the public corridors of power. Black women, whose center of influence had always existed primarily in the family, in the church, and in their female associations, believed that part of the overall struggle for true racial advancement depended upon the extent to which they obliterated all negative sexual images of themselves. In an 1893 speech Williams proclaimed, "This moral regeneration of a whole race of women is no idle sentiment—it is a serious business; and everywhere there is witnessed a feverish anxiety to be free from the mean suspicions that have so long underestimated the character strength of our women."²¹ His-

20. "Fannie Barrier Williams," in Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*, 236–79; "A Northern Negro's Autobiography," in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 164–66.

21. Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*,

torian Linda Perkins has perceptively observed that "throughout the nineteenth century, the threads that held together the organizational as well as the individual pursuits of black women were those of 'duty' and 'obligation' to the race. The concept of racial obligation was intimately linked with the concept of racial 'uplift' and 'elevation.'"²²

Black women leaders such as Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin of Boston, Mary Church Terrell of Washington, D.C., and Mary Margaret Washington of Tuskegee, Alabama, heeding Williams' exhortations, launched, in the mid-1890s, a movement to mobilize black women from all walks of life and to engage them in the battle for racial and sexual equality. Ruffin, born in Boston in 1842 and educated in Salem's public schools, founded, in 1894, the Woman's Era Club and edited its newspaper, the *Woman's Era*. She was a founder of the Association for the Promotion of Child Training in the South and the League of Women for Community Service. Mary Church Terrell was the third black woman college graduate in the country (Oberlin College, 1884) and the first black woman appointed to the board of education in the District of Columbia. Mary Margaret Washington, an 1889 graduate of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, served as director of girls' industries and dean of women at Tuskegee Institute.²³

In 1895 this national mobilization movement of black women received increased impetus from an unexpected source when James W. Jack, then president of the Missouri Press Association, wrote a letter to Florence Belgarnie, secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society in England, declaring that "the Negroes of this country are wholly devoid of morality" and that "the women were prostitutes and all were natural thieves and liars." Ruffin, upon learning of the comment, immediately transformed it into a weapon to persuade black women of the critical need for organization. She wrote to hundreds of black women insisting that "the letter of Mr. Jack's . . . is

263–79. Also see Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, Ohio, 1892).

22. Linda Perkins, "Black Women and Racial 'Uplift' Prior to Emancipation," in Steady (ed.), *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, 317–34; Sylvia Evans Render, "Afro-American Women: The Outstanding and the Obscure," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, XXXII (October, 1975), 206–21.

23. Bettye C. Thomas, *Twenty-Nineteenth-Century Black Women* (Washington, D.C., 1979), 31; Hallie Quinn Brown, *Homespun Heroines and Other Women in Distinction* (Xenia, Ohio, 1926); Sadie Iola Daniel, *Women Builders* (Washington, D.C., 1970); Sylvania G. L. Dannett, *Profiles of Negro Womanhood*, Vol. 1, 1619–1900 (Chicago, 1964); Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (New York, 1940).

only used to show how pressing is the need of our banning together if only for our protection." Ruffin, in subsequent correspondence, stressed the broad ramifications of negative sexual images. Even white southern women, she pointed out, objected to the formation of interracial women's organizations because of the alleged immorality of black women. She declared, "Too long have we been silent under unjust and unholy charges." Ruffin aroused black women and informed them that it was their "'bounded duty' to stand forth and declare ourselves and principles [and] to reach an ignorant and suspicious world that our aims and interests are identical with those of all good aspiring women."²⁴

Ruffin and the black women whom she contacted had just cause to be alarmed by Jack's characterization of all black women as prostitutes. Arrest statistics of black women on charges of illegal solicitation in Nashville and Atlanta underscore the broader social ramifications of this stereotype. In a typical one-year period in Nashville ending October, 1881, there were 136 arrests of white females on charges of streetwalking as compared with 791 arrests of black women. In 1890 Atlanta listed 380 females among its 5,601 arrested whites as compared with 1,715 of the 7,236 arrested blacks. Clearly, the actions of law enforcement officials reflected a shared belief in the stereotype that depicted all black women as natural prostitutes. It is highly unlikely that women became prostitutes because they were immoral. Certainly more work on this matter is needed, especially on economic factors.²⁵

By 1896 black women leaders had mobilized sufficiently to create the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). The NACW merged the resources and energies of scores of local and regional clubs into one strong organization in order to attack the prevailing negative image of black womanhood. Throughout the following decades the NACW grew at a phenomenal rate. By 1914 it had a membership of 50,000 and had become the strong, unwavering voice championing the defense of black women in a society that viewed them with contempt. Terrell was elected

24. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin's speech is included in Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (Washington, D.C., 1933), 13-15. Also see Gerda Lerner, "From Benevolent Societies to National Club Movements," in Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 435-36.

25. Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (Urbana, 1980), 46; Bettina Aptheker, *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History* (Amherst, 1982), 62-63.

first president of the NACW and occupied the position until 1901. In her initial presidential address she declared that there were objectives of the black women's struggle that could only be accomplished "by the mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters of this race." She proclaimed, "We wish to set in motion influences that shall stop the ravages made by practices that sap our strength, and preclude the possibility of advancement." Elaborating, Terrell noted that while blacks, in general, and women, in particular, were subordinate in this society, neither the efforts of the black males nor the concerns of white women would lead them to address the twin ills of racism and sexism endured solely by black women. Terrell then went to the heart of the black woman's dilemma. Like Williams and Ruffin before her, she spoke out of a Victorian world view that insisted on measuring a race's progress by the status of its women. She boldly announced, "We proclaim to the world that the women of our race have become partners in the great firm of progress and reform. . . . We refer to the fact that this is an association of colored women, because our peculiar status in this country . . . seems to demand that we stand by ourselves."²⁶ Her speech again underscored the importance of black women's self-reliance. Under slavery they had to protect their own sexual being and during freedom they had to defend their sexual image.

Although considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to the club women's movement, there still remains a great deal to be done in the area of black women's involvement in voluntary and self-help associations. In virtually every city and rural community in twentieth-century America

26. Mary Church Terrell, "First Presidential Address to the National Association of Colored Women," Nashville, Tennessee, September 15, 1897, in Mary Church Terrell Papers, Box 102-5, Folder 127, Library of Congress; Gloria M. White, "The Early Mary Church Terrell, 1863-1910," in *Integrated Education*, XII (November-December, 1975), 40ff; Dorothy Sterling, *Black Foremothers: Three Lives* (Old Westbury, N.Y., 1979), 118-58; Beverly Jones, "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896-1901," *Journal of Negro History*, LXVII (Spring, 1982), 20-33. Also see Ruby M. Kendrick, "They Also Serve: The National Association of Colored Women, Inc., 1895-1954," *Negro History Bulletin*, XVII (March, 1954), 171-75; Gerda Lerner, "Early Community of Black Club Women," *Journal of Negro History*, LIX (April, 1974), 158-67; Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, "The Black Woman's Struggle for Equality in the South," in Terborg-Penn and Harley eds., *The Afro-American Woman*, 43-57; Lawrence B. de Graff, "Race, Sex, and Region: Black Women in the American West, 1850-1920," in *Pacific Historical Review*, XLIX (May, 1980), 285-313; Linda Faye Dickson, "The Early Club Movement Among Black Women in Denver, 1890-1925" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado, Boulder, 1982).

there existed an organized grouping of black women, often led by a cadre of elite educated black middle-class matrons. These clubs and organizations gradually added to their primary concern of upgrading sexual images a concern for women's suffrage and progressive social reform. Almost every black women's club, regardless of who founded it or the ostensible reason for its establishment, focused to some extent on alleviating one or more of the many social problems afflicting an increasingly urban, impoverished, politically powerless, and segregated black population. Before the emergence of the modern welfare state, blacks had to rely on their own initiative in order to provide adequate educational institutions, suitable health care programs, and settlement houses. They slowly and unrelentingly erected a nationwide network of institutions and organizations welding together the entire black population. Ida Wells Barnett of Chicago, Jane Edna Hunter of Cleveland, and Sallie Wyatt Stewart of Evansville, Indiana, are but three examples of midwestern black women who established black settlement or community houses during the era of progressive reform. Moreover, throughout the twenties black women mobilized support for the establishment of black branches of the Young Women's Christian Association, and their institution-building activities reflect the same spirit of volunteerism seen among white women in American society during the Progressive era.

No accurate social or cultural history of black America is possible without a detailed examination of the institutions crafted by still unrecognized local black women. The creation of educational, health care, and recreational institutions spearheaded by diverse black women's clubs and voluntary associations followed no standard pattern. Rather, women launched new projects or worked to transform existing institutions into structures more adequately designed to address the needs of their respective constituencies. Recurring concerns were for education for the young, food, shelter, and clothing for the aged, medical and nursing care for the sick. While considerably more work needs to be done in the area, two examples will illustrate this all too frequently ignored dimension of black institution building and internal cultural development. In the South, the black women of New Orleans organized and founded in 1896 the Phillis Wheatley Sanitarium and Nursing Training School, which eventually became, in the 1930s, the Flint-Goodridge Hospital and School of Nursing of Dillard University. Counterparts in the midwest, the black women in Indianapolis,

Indiana, founded in the 1870s and continue to the present to support the Alpha Home for Colored Aged.²⁷

The pressing need of blacks, and black women in particular, for education motivated several black women, most notably Mary McLeod Bethune, to launch new institutions for their sex. Bethune, born on July 10, 1875, in Mayesville, South Carolina, graduated from Scotia Seminary in 1894 and entered the Mission Training School of the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago. After teaching in a number of mission schools, she settled in Daytona, Florida, where she founded the Daytona Literary and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls. Reflecting on her work years later, Bethune recalled, "The school expanded fast. In less than two years I had 250 pupils. . . . I concentrated more and more on girls, as I felt that they especially were hampered by lack of educational opportunities." Eventually, however, she agreed to merge with Cookman Institute, an educational facility for Negro boys under the auspices of the Methodist Church. Thus, in 1923 the now co-ed institution was renamed the Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune was an active participant in the black women's club movement, serving as president of the National Association of Colored Women (1926-1928). She helped to create the women's section of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. Most importantly, in 1935 she founded the National Council of Negro Women. Throughout her later years she played a major role in the nation's political affairs, becoming the first black woman to hold a federal post as administrator of the Office of Minority Affairs within the National Youth Administration during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency.

Bethune is a pivotal figure in twentieth-century black women's history. Her life and work is inarguably one of the major links connecting the social reform efforts of post-Reconstruction black women to the political protest activities of the generation emerging after World War II. All of the various strands of black women's struggle for education, political rights, racial pride, sexual autonomy, and liberation are united in the writings,

27. For a case study in one state, see Darlene Clark Hine, *When the Truth Is Told: A History of Black Women's Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1950* (Indianapolis, 1981); Coleman, "Keeping the Faith," 77-88; Thomas C. Holt, "The Lonely Warrior: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Struggle for Black Leadership," in John Hope Franklin and August Meier (eds.), *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana, 1982), 39-62; Alfreda M. Duster (ed.), *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago, 1970); Sterling, *Black Foremothers*, 60-117.

speeches, and organizational work of Bethune. A good biography of this vital figure is sorely needed.²⁸

The turn of the century witnessed many black women engaged in creating educational and social welfare institutions within their communities. Yet, as involved as these women were in the work of institution building, they never lost sight of the major problem confronting black men in America. Indeed, for the young Ida B. Wells (1862–1931) overcoming racism and halting the violent murder of black men remained a central mission among her wide-ranging struggles for justice and human dignity. As a young woman, Wells co-founded in 1891 the militant newspaper *Free Speech* in Memphis, Tennessee. Her scathing editorials denouncing local whites for the lynching of black men on the pretext of protecting the sanctity of white womanhood provoked a mob to burn her press and threaten death should she show her face again in the city.²⁹

Exiled north, Wells, without pause, launched a veritable one-woman international crusade against lynching. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed in 1910, Wells insisted that the leadership take an unwavering stand against lynching.

28. B. Joyce Ross, "Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Youth Administration: A Case Study of Power Relationships in the Black Cabinet of Franklin D. Roosevelt," in Franklin and Meier (eds.), *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, 191–219; Florence Johnson Hicks (ed.), *Mary McLeod Bethune: Her Own Words of Inspiration* (Washington, D.C., 1975); Mary McLeod Bethune, "Faith That Moved a Dump Heap," *Who, the Magazine About People* (June, 1941), 51–55, 54; John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville, 1980), 111–21. For a good discussion of other black women educators, see: Daniels, *Women Builders*, 137–67; Charlotte H. Brown, *The Correct Thing to Do* (Boston, 1940); Lessie Lois Fowle, "Willia A. Strong: An Historical Study of Black Education in Southeastern Oklahoma" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1982); Evelyn Brooks Barnett, "Nannie Burroughs and the Education of Black Women," in Terborg-Penn and Harley (eds.), *The Afro-American Women*, 97–108. Burroughs founded the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C., on October 19, 1909. Linda M. Perkins, "The Black Female American Missionary Association: Teacher in the South, 1861–1870," in Jeffrey J. Crow and Flora J. Hatley (eds.), *Black Americans in North Carolina and the South* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 122–36.

29. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York, 1984), 19–31; Thomas C. Holt, "The Lonely Warrior: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the Struggle for Black Leadership," in Franklin and Meier (eds.), *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* 39–62; Alreda M. Duster, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago, 1970); David M. Tucker, "Miss Ida B. Wells and Memphis Lynching," *Phylon*, XXXII (Summer, 1971), 112–22.

Years later Wells withdrew from the NAACP when the organization's leaders failed to adopt the more militant race-conscious posture she advocated. Wells proved equally unsuccessful in persuading leaders in the women's suffrage movement to speak out against racism and to denounce the atrocity of lynching. The young white leaders of the National American Women's Suffrage Association early declared that the organization had only one objective—woman suffrage. These women, especially southern members, feared that too close an association with black issues would jeopardize their cause. It would not be until 1930, the year before Wells's death, that black and white women joined forces to launch the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching.³⁰

Neither the Great Migration to southern and northern cities nor the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution granting women the right to vote altered the political status and material conditions of the lives of the majority of black women. Like their male counterparts, hundreds of thousands of black women had quit the rural South before and during the World War I years and ventured to northern cities in search of the "promised land." Many single young black women trekked to cities seeking better jobs, decent housing, equal education, freedom from terrorism, adventure, and intellectual stimulation. They left behind, or so they dreamed, racial discrimination, grueling poverty, second-class citizenship, and sexual exploitation. While the war raged and the economy boomed, jobs in industries and factories appeared both abundant and accessible. When the war ended black women and men fortunate enough to have secured employment were quickly dismissed, as employers preferred to give their jobs to returning white veterans. For black women the migration experience only confirmed that the promised land was littered with all but identical racial and sexual ills as had plagued their southern odyssey.³¹

30. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Discontented Black Feminists: Prelude and Postscript to the Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment," in Schrat and Jensen (eds.), *Decades of Discontent*, 272–73.

31. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982), 237; William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (New York, 1982), 51–76. Also see Florette Henri, *Black Migration: Movement North, 1900–1920* (New York, 1976); Delores Elizabeth Janiewski, "From Field to Factory: Race, Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker in Durham, 1880–1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1979); Sharon Harley, "Black

Black women's work experiences were repeated during the Second World War. Traditionally, wartime crises led to improvement in the status of women, as many scholars have argued. The male labor shortage encouraged employers to seek women to work on assembly lines in defense plants and in other occupations that are normally closed to their sex when a full contingent of male workers is available. For black women, however, the status of being the last hired and the first fired remained true throughout the World War II years and after. As historian Karen Tucker Anderson has demonstrated, "both during and after the war, black women entered the urban female labor force in large numbers only to occupy its lowest rungs. Largely excluded from clerical and sales work, the growth sectors of the female work force, black women found work primarily in service jobs outside the household and in unskilled blue-collar categories." As late as 1950, 40 percent of the black female labor force remained mired in domestic service. The remaining numbers were involved in unskilled blue-collar labor and in agriculture. Only a small percentage of black women belonged to the white collar professions, concentrating in teaching, nursing, and social work. By 1974 women made up 46 percent of the total black professionals, yet they constituted only 7 percent of the engineers, 14 percent of the lawyers, 24 percent of the physicians and dentists, and 25 percent of the life and physical scientists. On the other hand, black women represented 97 percent of the black librarians, 97 percent of black nurses, and 78 percent of the noncollege black teachers. There is little evidence to suggest that these percentages have changed significantly in the past decade.³² Again, more work needs to be done comparing the economic development of black women with that of their white female counterparts.

In the face of continuing economic subordination, some black women

Women in a Southern City, 1890-1920," in Joanne V. Hawks and Sheila L. Skemp (eds.), *Sex, Race, and the Role of Women in the South: Essays*, (Jackson, Miss., 1983), 59-74.

32. Karen Tucker Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers During World War II," *Journal of American History*, LXIX (June, 1982), 96-97; Lois Rita Helmbold, "Making Choices, Making Do: Black and White Working Class Women's Lives During the Great Depression" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1982); Claudia Golden, "Female Labor Force Participation: The Origins of Black and White Differences," *Journal of Economic History*, XXXVII (March, 1977), 87-112. Also see Phyllis A. Wallace, *Black Women in the Labor Force* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980).

sought relief and escape, as well as symbolic empowerment, through involvement in radical protest movements. During the 1920s black women had formed a woman's arm of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Amy Jacques Garvey headed the division and edited the women's department of the UNIA's official organ, *Negro World*. In numerous speeches and essays Amy Garvey reminded Afro-American women that they were the "burden bearers of their race" and as such had the responsibility to assume leadership in the struggle for black liberation both at home and abroad.³³ Here, too, is an area in need of much work, for the role black women played in the UNIA has received scant scholarly attention.

Black women supported A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement, which was initiated in 1941 to end discrimination in defense industries with government contracts. They remained steadfast in their support of the NAACP and the National Urban League, the more traditional black civil rights organizations. During the course of the war black women did achieve one victory. From 1942 to the end of the war black women rallied behind the leadership of nurses Estelle Massey Riddle and Mabel K. Staupers and the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN) to win integration of black nurses into the United States Armed Forces Nurses Corps.³⁴

In addition to cooperating with male leaders of protest and black rights groups and supporting the efforts of women's professional societies in the ongoing quest for integration and first-class citizenship, black women created their own national political organization. In 1935, Mary Church Terrell joined Mary McLeod Bethune in signing the charter of the first council of organizations in the history of organized black womanhood—the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). The local leadership of

33. Terborg-Penn, "Discontented Black Feminist," in Schatz and Jensen (eds.), *Decades of Discontent*, 269; Mark D. Matthews, "'Our Women and What They Think' Amy Jacques Garvey and *The Negro World*," *Black Scholar*, X (May-June, 1970), 2-13.

34. Susan M. Hartman, "Women's Organizations During World War II: The Interaction of Class, Race, and Feminism," in Mary Kelley (ed.), *Woman's Being, Woman's Place: Female Identity and Vocation in American History* (Boston, 1979), 317; Darlene Clark Hine, "Mabel K. Staupers and the Integration of Black Nurses into the Armed Forces Nurses Corps," in Franklin and Meier (eds.), *Black Leaders in the Twentieth Century*, 241-57.

the NCNW represented a cross section of black women from all walks of life, though the national officers were all well-educated, middle-class professional women. The unity of women engaged in the struggle is demonstrated by the cooperation whereby Estelle Massey Riddle, president of the NACGN, was elected second vice-president of the NCNW, while Terrell served as first vice-president and Bethune became the president.³⁵

The NCNW declared as its purpose the collecting, interpreting, and disseminating of information concerning the activities of black women. Moreover, the NCNW leaders desired "to develop competent and courageous leadership among Negro women and effect their integration and that of all Negro people into the political, economic, educational, cultural and social life of their communities and the nation." To achieve these and other objectives, NCNW leaders founded an official organ, *The Aframerican Woman's Journal*, and dedicated it to achieving "the outlawing of the Poll Tax, the development of a Public Health Program, an Anti-lynching Bill, the end of discrimination in the Armed Forces, Defense Plants, Government Housing Plants and finally that Negro History be taught in the Public Schools of the country."³⁶

This increased organizing activity evidenced during the Great Depression and World War II era reflected black women's growing determination to overthrow a tripartite system of racial and sexual oppression, economic exploitation, and political powerlessness. Undoubtedly, millions of black women had acquired deeper understanding of their entrapment in the prison of white supremacy through membership in such clubs and organizations. Club membership and associations encouraged in black women the forging of a certain mental attitude and a readiness to work and die, if need be, for the liberation of their people. These organized and aware black women became one of the major, albeit invisible and unrecognized, foundations upon which was based the modern Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The as yet undiminished proliferation of studies of the Civil Rights Movement will remain incomplete as long as scant attention is paid the roles played by black women such as Rosa Parks, Ella

35. "Purposes of NCNW—1935," Press Release, November 11, 1948, The Papers of Mary Church Terrell, Container 23, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Also see Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington, 1940).

36. "Purpose of NCNW—1935," Press Release, November 11, 1948, in Terrell Papers.

Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer. What is now required is a full-scale, detailed treatment and scholarly analysis of the Civil Rights Movement written from the perspective of black women participants. Biographies and autobiographies of key female leaders and activists in the movement, similar to Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1967) or Daisy Bates' *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* (1962), will shed new light on the origins and evolution of the largest mass movement of black Americans for social change in the country's history.³⁷ Even a brief examination of the lives of Rosa Parks and Ella Baker suggests new directions to be taken in future scholarship. The recent work of sociologist Aldon D. Morris is a welcome contribution to civil rights studies in that the author takes pains to elaborate and interpret the roles of black women in the struggle.³⁸

Traditional accounts of the history of the Civil Rights Movement portray Rosa Parks as a quiet, dignified older lady who spontaneously refused to yield her bus seat to a white man because she was tired, her feet hurt, and she quite simply had had enough. Actually, Parks, a long-time member of black women's organizations and of the NAACP, was deeply rooted in the black protest tradition and had refused several times previously, as far back as the 1940s, to comply with segregation rules on buses. Morris has astutely observed that Parks's arrest triggered the Civil Rights Movement because "she was an integral member of those organizational forces capable of mobilizing a social movement." It is equally as important to note that Parks was firmly anchored in the church community in Montgomery, where she served as a stewardess in the St. Paul A.M.E. Church.³⁹

The difference between Parks's previous protests and arrests and the December 1, 1955, incident was that members of the Women's Political Council, organized by professional black women of Montgomery in 1949 for the purpose of registering black women to vote, swung into action. Since its inception, the WPC had been a major political force within Montgomery. The members consistently challenged the segregation practices and laws before meetings of the city commission. They had demanded the hiring of

37. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York, 1968). Also see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and New Left* (New York, 1980).

38. Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1985).

39. *Ibid.*, 51, 52, 53.

black policemen and protested the inadequacies of parks and playgrounds in the black community. Some of their demands were met, others ignored. The morning after Parks's arrest, however, leader Jo Ann Robinson, an English teacher at Alabama State College, announced to students and colleagues that the WPC would launch a bus boycott to end segregation forever. She wrote the leaflet describing the Parks incident and rallied the community for action.⁴⁰ The women of the WPC were not alone. Similar groups and individuals across the South were ready and eager to heed the call for social action. Black women had been organizing for over a hundred years and their infrastructure of secular clubs and sacred associations was already firmly in place.

Of the many black women participants in the Civil Rights Movement, Ella Baker deserves special recognition and study. Baker was the central figure in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) Atlanta office during the 1950s. Her determined opposition to assigning black women subservient roles in the hierarchical structure of social-change movements aroused the ire of her male colleagues. Baker was born in 1903, in Virginia, and raised in North Carolina. In 1927 she quit the South and migrated to New York, where she eventually worked in developing the Young Negro Cooperative League. From 1941 to 1942 Baker served as the national field secretary for the NAACP, a position requiring her to travel throughout the South conducting membership campaigns and developing NAACP branches. Baker, when promoted director of branches for the NAACP, attended 157 meetings and traveled 10,244 miles, all within a twelve-month period.⁴¹

By the time Baker joined SCLC as its first associate director, she had accumulated considerable organizational experience and had cultivated an invaluable network of community contacts throughout the South. Initially Baker performed the routine chores in the central office, her interpersonal and organizational skills ignored and untapped by the male ministerial leadership. Soon there was considerable friction within SCLC, occasioned in part because of Baker's belief in women's equality and her refusal automatically to defer to men. Moreover, Baker insisted that the effectiveness of a people's movement depended upon the careful cultivation of local leadership among the masses. In particular, she objected that the Civil Rights Movement was structured around Martin Luther King, Jr., to such

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, 102-104, 114.

a degree as to block the development of skills among women, young people, and other members of the black community. She advocated a "group-centered leadership" approach which would allow the movement to become more democratic and would minimize internal struggle for personal advantage. Baker and the older male leaders clashed over the types of organizational structure that should be established at SCLC headquarters. She emphasized that SCLC should have clearly defined personnel assignments and obligations. Not surprisingly, Baker's recommendations were seldom taken seriously and rarely implemented by the SCLC leadership. In his study on the origins of the Civil Rights Movement Morris concludes that "it appears that sexism and Baker's non-clergy status minimized her impact on the SCLC" in the late 1950s. Yet, of all the early civil rights leaders Baker was the one to grasp the significance of the student sit-ins begun in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960. She persuaded the SCLC to underwrite the conference, pulling together more than three hundred students from across the South. Out of this meeting emerged the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).⁴²

Another heroine of the Civil Rights Movement was Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977). Born in Montgomery County, Mississippi, Hamer spent most of her adult life working as a sharecropper and time keeper on a plantation four miles east of Ruleville, Mississippi. In 1962, she was fired for attempting to vote. Thereafter threats on her life and severe physical abuse plagued her existence. Undaunted, Hamer became involved in SNCC and from 1963 to 1967 served in the capacity of field secretary. On April 26, 1964, when the Democratic party refused to permit blacks to participate, Hamer and others founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). She became vice-chairman. Later in the summer of 1964 Hamer led a delegation of Mississippi citizens to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. There the MFDP challenged the seats of the regular Mississippi delegation. The result of the challenge was an unprecedented pledge from the national Democratic party not to seat delegations that excluded Negroes at the 1968 national convention. A full-scale scholarly biography of Fannie Lou Hamer is long overdue.⁴³

The voice and moral vision of black women in the Civil Rights Movement and later in the Women's Liberation Movement may have been muted and unheeded, but the silence was irrevocably shattered during the dec-

42. *Ibid.*

43. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 287-90, 293-94.

ades of the 1970s and 1980s. A new black woman emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. She was unveiled to the American public through the creative expression of over a dozen outstanding black women novelists, poets, artists, and musicians. Even today American society—black and white, male and female—knows not what to make of this new black woman so forcefully unleashed by a galaxy of creators, or indeed, what she portends for the future. Some would contend that the black woman holds the key to the country's future. Actually, the new black woman is not all that new. What is new is the fact that we are beginning to listen and to see her on her own terms and in her own right.

In 1859 Harriet Wilson, a domestic servant, wrote the first black novel, the semiautobiographical *Our Nig*. Frances Ellen Harper later in the century published her novel, *Iola Leroy*, in which she chronicled the struggle of a black woman to maintain her pride, dignity, and racial commitment during the years of slavery and Reconstruction. The 1920s witnessed the birth of the Harlem Renaissance. It was an era rich in black creativity. Although numerous black women writers, artists, musicians, and performers participated in and enhanced the cultural richness and ethos of the period, their work, until quite recently, remained neglected and unexamined.⁴⁴ Only since the recent appearance and critical acclaim accorded Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1983), Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1982), and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), among others, have Americans begun to recognize the literary achievements and contributions of black women.

Although twentieth-century black women's writing in its great diversity defies easy characterization, there are common threads. Harlem Renaissance novelists Jessie Redmond Fauset, Nella Larson, and Zora Neale Hurston and the post-World War II writers Margaret Walker, Ann Petry,

44. Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, Conn., 1986), 41-54; Carol Watson, "The Novels of Afro-American Women: Concerns and Themes, 1891-1965" (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., 1978); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, 1982), 125-23, 142ff; Erlene Stetson (ed.), *Black Sisters: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1983* (Bloomington, 1981); Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (eds.), *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*; Deborah E. McDowell, "The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmond Fauset," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, V (July, 1981), 33-49.

Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Childress, and Lorraine Hansberry, along with the more contemporary recent authors Gayle Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Ntozake Shange, and Paule Marshall, all reveal a strong sense of race and class consciousness and political engagement. There are important generational differences, to be sure. The more contemporary authors write increasingly and boldly of the sexual conflict between black women and men. Their tone is distinctively more feminist, or "womanist" as Alice Walker would describe it, and their works are much more stylistically unconventional. They stress women's oppression as well as black oppression under capitalism and often offer radical visions of family, sexual, and community relations in ways that repudiate repressive white cultural norms.⁴⁵ While recently published biographies of Zora Neale Hurston, blues singer Ma Rainey, and the diaries and letters of Alice Dunbar Nelson are a step in the right direction, we need similar studies of such cultural luminaries as blues singer Billie Holiday, playwright and pan-Africanist Lorraine Hansberry, painter Elizabeth Catlett, and gospel singer Mahalia Jackson.⁴⁶

No complete study and understanding of black women's history is possible without a simultaneous examination of the shape and contours of their creative outpourings. Scholars, historians, and literary critics have only recently begun to scale the rocky and complex terrain of the minds and works of creative black women. When the story of black women is told in all its complexity, pain, and beauty, then and only then will we be in a position to comprehend fully the meaning of black lives at the end of the rainbow and by extension the entire American experience. There is much work ahead of us.

45. Darlene Clark Hine, "To Be Gifted, Female, and Black," *Southwest Review* LXVII (Autumn, 1982), 357-69.

46. Sandra R. Lieb, *Mother of the Blues: A Story of Ma Rainey* (Amherst, 1981); Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana, 1978). The Elizabeth Catlett Papers are available at the Amstad Research Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. Gloria T. Hull (ed.), *Give Us Each Day: The Diary of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (New York, 1984); Mammie Garvin Fields with Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York, 1983).