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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zv0701p>

Journal

Journal of Women's History, 19(2)

ISSN

1042-7961

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Publication Date

2007

DOI

10.1353/jowh.2007.0042

Peer reviewed



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More History Than Myth: African American Women's History Since the Publication of Ar'n't I a Woman?

Jessica Millward

"History is supposed to give people a sense of identity, a feeling for who they are, and how far they have come. It should act as a springboard for the future. One hopes that it will do this for Black women, who have been given more myth than history."

—Deborah Gray White¹

At the time of its initial publication in 1985, *Ar'n't I a Woman?* was among a small, though significant, number of works focusing on the experiences of slave women in the United States.² Calling critical attention to the world of female slaves, White interrogated stereotypes and historical inaccuracies about bondwomen by highlighting their experiences from childhood to adulthood. At the heart of White's study was the argument that life under bondage fostered an alternative definition of womanhood for African American women.³ Chattel slavery produced life conditions fundamentally separating White and African American women in the United States, prior to and after the Civil War. While White and Black women may have lived under a paternal, patriarchal structure, race-based experiences nonetheless divided them. As the first book focusing entirely on slave women, it is not surprising that *Ar'n't I a Woman?* continues to be one of the most important books ever produced on the subject.

In the two decades since the publication of *Ar'n't I a Woman?* the study of African American women's history has gained considerable prominence in the American historical canon. African American women's intellectual work, historical contributions, social circumstances, and political participation are noted in countless articles, manuscripts, and dissertations.⁴ Discussions of African American women's nearly four-hundred-year existence in what became the United States reach back into the colonial era and rush forward into the twenty-first century. Much of this turn in the literature owes a great intellectual debt to questions raised and synthesized in *Ar'n't I a Woman?*

Although White's work centered on slavery, the scholarly questions articulated by White continue to guide the writing of Black women's history in general. In particular, scholars focus their attention on three broad categories: the first being the long-standing debate on race and feminism; the second articulating the relationship between resistance, activism, and power; and the third centering on violence, sexuality, and the body. These topics respond to particular social and historical circumstances such as

slavery, emancipation, and welfare reform; however, they are not historically specific. Rather, they are salient currents in the dialogue between the myths surrounding African American women and their actual lived histories in the United States. Pervasive stereotypes about African American womanhood permeate social, political, and economic realities in the twenty-first century and inspire scholars to aggressively dismantle the notion that all Black women fit into one of three categories presented by White: the asexual mammy, the hot-tempered sapphire, and the wonton jezebel. In doing so, the canon of studies produced in the generations after *Ar'n't I a Woman?* highlights the multiplicity of African American women's identities in the United States.

Race and Feminism

Feminism(s), like the writing of Black women's history, is multilayered. Just as scholars realize that a taxonomy of differences based on class, educational attainment, and political orientation orders relationships between African American and White women, they also produce differences among Black women. Thus for historians of African American women, articulating the relationship between feminism and the writing of Black women's history is as challenging now as it was for White in 1985. White found that Black women came to their profeminist consciousness through lived experiences in bondage. Slave women did not have access to such formal institutional frameworks as the church and educational settings. Rather they fashioned a distinct worldview that aided them as they negotiated their new lives after the Civil War. Thus while White women endured their own "race-determined sexism," writing African American women's history forces scholars to investigate how race determines their feminist consciousness.⁵

The African American community also factors into feminist agendas. Leslie Alexander has suggested that "it impossible to remove Black women (or the study of Black women) from the context of the entire Black community."⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that emerging studies of Black women and feminism highlight the role of the community in such varied studies as those on slavery, church participation, and welfare reform. Moreover, scholars face the analytic challenge of not only interrogating issues of race, gender, and feminism in local contexts but at the global, national, and transnational levels as well.⁷ That said, scholars are cognizant that multiple definitions of Black feminisms exist.⁸

Resistance, Power, and Activism

The second set of debates challenging scholars in the generations after *Ar'n't I a Woman?* lies in explaining the relationship between resistance, power, and activism. Resistance, as a subset of power, is a standard theme in studies of African American women's history. White was aware of Black women's perilous position on the plantation when she wrote that "Black women held the least formal power, and were perhaps the most vulnerable group in America."⁹ Historians of enslaved women are ever mindful of the contributions and questions posed by White, and continue to explore the relationship between social circumstances and conditions that produced resistant acts.¹⁰ Brenda Stevenson, for example, has provided the excellent example of Sukie, who, tired of having her teeth, skin, and body examined on the auction block, lifted her skirt, pointed to her genitals, and asked if the speculator "saw any teeth down there."¹¹

African American women's responses to power structures is a theme that transcends time and space. Such historical antecedents as "perceived" powerlessness during slavery blends into interrogations of the power system in freedom. The recent work on African American women as wage earners, activists, and participants in the civic process proves that Black women confronted the power structure with the tools available to them and did so with both measured and phenomenal successes.¹² Scholars are also turning an even more critical eye to, among other things, the formation of the Black Women's club movement and Black women and the communist party, as well as the formation of the welfare state, in attempts to understand the overlap between resistance, activism, and power.¹³

Violence, Sexualities, and the Body

Perhaps the "newest" set of questions produced in the generations after *Ar'n't I a Woman?* center on issues of violence, sexualities, and the body. Nell Painter's pioneering work, "Soul Murder," called for a "full cost accounting" of the havoc bondage wreaked on the Black psyche.¹⁴ Scholars on lynchings detail how the trauma of this racial violence galvanized African American women to participate in antilynching campaigns. Although small in number, lynchings and other forms of interracial violence remain prevalent.¹⁵ Domestic violence against African Americans is also receiving more attention in both the scholarly and public sectors. Jacqueline Jones, writing at the same time as White, was not silent in her suggestion that slave women endured domestic abuse by White and Black men.¹⁶ *Vibe* magazine recently published an article on domestic abuse among hip-hop artists.¹⁷ In addition, critical scholarly attention is focusing on the fact that Black

women are the largest group contracting the HIV/AIDS virus worldwide.¹⁸ The continuing existence of violence against Black women in a variety of forms, combined with the emotional terror endured in each of these situations, motivates scholars to understand how violence in various forms shaped and continues to shape African American women's lives, histories, and historiographies.

For the writers of African American women's history, the themes of violence, sexuality, and reproduction are intertwined and, therefore, often permeate other historical discussions.¹⁹ During slavery their bodies were used to reproduce the slave population, often through violent means. In contrast, scholars of the birth control movement are careful to point out that birth control options for Black women, particularly poor Black women, often include sterilization and are limited when compared to their White counterparts.²⁰

Discussions of African American women's sexuality have also benefited from lines of interrogation challenging the static definition of heterosexuality. The range of African American women's sexual experiences and identities have benefited from interventions by Gay, Lesbian, and Queer theorists.²¹ Moreover, nuanced treatments of African American masculinity vis-à-vis the developments in gender studies and African American women's history are beginning to emerge.

It is not surprising that studies of the body are producing narratives that further complicate Black women's identities over time. For African American women, history has always been graphed upon the body. Bodies are racially marked. They embody class differences, spiritual worldviews, and social norms.²² In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there were progressive political movements to claim and elevate Black womanhood, specifically in the covering of the body. Sharla Fett has brilliantly detailed the "working cures" produced by African American midwives and nurses during slavery and into the twentieth century as they attempted to heal their own bodies.²³ Despite these achievements in showing how African American women seized control of their repeated sexual victimization and even produced their own medical cures, scholars of the body, regardless of their chronological focus, contend with contemporary arguments surrounding media representations of the Black women's body in hip-hop culture and in syndicated television.²⁴

Conclusion

In the decades since the publication of *Ar'n't I a Woman?* African American women's history has moved from an understudied topic to one that informs scholarship on gender, race, and class in the United States.

Scholars continue to engage questions first posed by White on issues of race and feminism, activism, resistance and power, as well as violence, sexuality, and the body. For African American women's history, all these factors push previously marginalized and isolated discourses to the center. African American women's history pivots on the notion that categories for understanding their experiences build upon one another and, at the same time, are as mutually reinforcing as they are unique.²⁵ This epistemology, though particular to the United States, also has implications for understanding new directions in gender and women's history in global contexts.

It is clear that African American women's history is no longer read as a topic that is distinctly Southern or even "American." However, as much as we stretch beyond the plantation South into the twenty-first century, some scholars are not content to allow the progress of "Black" in women's history to be defined as studies of *modern* Black women's history. Scholars are just as interested in African American women's history during the colonial period as they are in the postmodern period.²⁶ While we are beyond the model that African American women were "there," we are not, however, beyond writing, teaching, and thinking about some of the questions raised by Deborah Gray White in the first and second editions of *Ar'n't I a Woman?*²⁷ In doing so, we can continue to respond to White's call to produce more history of African American women than myth.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Daina Ramey Berry, Antoinette Burton, Dana Rabin, and Fanon Che Wilkins for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. Portions of this study were presented at the 2005 meeting of the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women in Claremont, California, and the International Federation of Women's History in Sydney, Australia.

¹Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2nd ed. (1985; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 5.

²See Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (1938; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1972); Angela Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 3–14; Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Darlene Clark Hine and Kate Wittenstein, "Female Slave Resistance: The Economics of Sex," in *Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomina Chioma Steady (Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing, 1981), 289–99; Victoria Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

³White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 167.

⁴This statement is based on an overview of bibliographies available via the *Journal of American History* at <http://www.oah.org>. See also White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 4. White writes, "Today, we take the writing of Black women's history for granted."

⁵White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 5; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's classic article, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 183–209.

⁶Leslie Alexander, "The Challenge of Race: Rethinking the Position of Black Women in the Field of Women's History," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 4 (2004): 53. See also Ella Shohat, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

⁷Filomina Chioma Steady, *Black Women, Globalization and Economic Justice: Studies from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, 2001); Channa Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Ula Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁸Ula Taylor, "Feminism," in *Black Women in America*, 2nd ed., ed. Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 435–43.

⁹White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 15.

¹⁰Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Daina Ramey Berry, *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹¹Brenda Stevenson, "Gender Convention, Ideals and Identity among Antebellum Virginia Slave Women," in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 169–70.

¹²Leslie Alexander provides a very detailed bibliography of these authors. See Alexander, "The Challenge of Race," especially 59 n. 16.

¹³Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Rhonda Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Erik McDuffie, "Long Journeys: Four Black Women and the Communist Party, USA, 1930–1956" (PhD diss., New York University, 2003).

¹⁴Nell Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Towards a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda Kerber,

Alice Kessler-Harris, and Katherine Sklar (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995): 125–46.

¹⁵See Brenda Stevenson, “Latasha Harlins, Soon Ja Du, and Joyce Karlin: A Case Study of Multicultural Female Violence and Justice on the Urban Frontier,” *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 2 (2004): 152–76.

¹⁶See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

¹⁷Elizabeth Berry, “Love Hurts: Rap’s Black Eye,” *VIBE*, March 2005. http://www.vibe.com/news/magazine_features/2005/02/vibe_magazine_love_hurts_raps_black_eye/.

¹⁸Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁹Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Shohat, *Talking Visions*, 23; and Dawn Rae Flood, “‘They Didn’t Treat Me Good’: African American Rape Victims and Chicago Courtroom Strategies During the 1950s,” *Journal of Women’s History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 38–61.

²⁰Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 200–307.

²¹Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

²²Eileen Boris, “From Gender to Racialized Gender: Laboring Bodies that Matter,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 63 (Spring 2003): 9–13.

²³Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²⁴See Berretta Smith-Shomade, “I Got Your Bitch: Colored Women, Music Videos and Punnany Commodity,” in *Shaded Lives: African American Women and Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 69–109.

²⁵Jessica Millward, “Mapping the Margins: US History as African American Women’s History” (paper presented at the “Women’s History Revisited: Historiographical Reflections on Women and Gender in a Global Context” conference, Sydney, Australia, 8 July 2005).

²⁶Jessica Millward, “‘A Choice Parcel of Country Born’: African Americans and the Transition to Freedom in Maryland, 1770–1840” (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2003).

²⁷Alexander, “The Challenge of Race,” 50–51. Alexander outlines the stages of development in Black women’s history.
