Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

______________________________ ________________
Brittney Cooper Date

Race Women: The Politics of Black Female Leadership in 19th and 20th Century America

By

Brittney Cooper
Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts

____
Rudolph Byrd
Advisor

____
Beverly Guy-Sheftall
Committee Member

____
Lawrence Jackson
Committee Member

____
Kimberly Wallace-Sanders
Committee Member

Accepted:

____
Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

____
Date

Race Women: The Politics of Black Female Leadership in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century America

By

Brittney Cooper
B.A., Howard University, 2002
M.A., Emory University, 2007

Advisor: Rudolph P. Byrd, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts
2009

Abstract

Race Women: The Politics of Black Female Leadership in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century America

By Brittney Cooper

In the late 19th century, a group of public Black female leaders began a range of racial uplift initiatives in the areas of education, social welfare, healthcare, journalism, and intellectualism. Known as race women, these leaders commandeered the public sphere with a missionary zeal to improve the plight of Black people. My dissertation *Race Women: The Politics of Black Female Leadership in 19th and 20th Century America* uses methods gleaned from history, Black feminist theory, and literary criticism to examine the lives, intellectual production and activist work of these race women, while simultaneously interrogating Black women's relationship to the term itself. Included in my study are a range of 19th and 20th century women including Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell and Pauli Murray. Coupled with my analysis of the speeches and autobiographies of race women is my examination of novels by Frances Harper and Alice Walker. The dissertation argues that race women turned to a range of genres including both fiction and autobiography to communicate their hopes for African Americans, to theorize the nature of racial identity and womanhood, and to construct their own notion of subjectivity. While grounded in the theoretical perspectives of Black feminist theory, my project is also attendant to race women's complicated relationship to the politics of feminism. Consequently, I both employ and challenge major Black feminist theoretical frameworks like intersectionality, standpoint theory, the politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance, considering both the advantages and limitations of using these paradigms.

Race Women: The Politics of Black Female Leadership in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century America

By

Brittney Cooper
B.A., Howard University, 2002
M.A., Emory University, 2007

Advisor: Rudolph P. Byrd, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts
2009

Acknowledgements

First, I thank God who has brought forth this project in and through me, not by my might or power, but by His Spirit. This dissertation is dedicated to the race women in my life, my mom Debbie Cooper Hicks, the coolest woman I know, who has, by her indomitable spirit, taught me how to enjoy life for the 'fantastic voyage' that it is and to my grandmother Louvenia Cooper, who passed away in May 2008. I also thank my late father Claude Edmonds and my stepfather Rev. Clarence Hicks. And I send shout outs to all my extended fam including my Aunts Colleen, Linda, and Geraldine, my Uncles Barry and Sterling and the entire Cooper family. Special thanks to Aunt Colleen, who purchased the computer upon which this dissertation was composed, and for her generous financial support throughout my educational career. I also send love to the Edmonds family.

To my community of faith, Elizabeth Baptist Church: I'd like to express my gratitude to my pastor Craig L. Oliver, Sr. and the EBC family. Special shouts to my prayer partners Erica Beverly (who has talked me down from the proverbial ledge more than a few times) and Sonya McGee, whose candor and honesty is a rare commodity these days. To my extended family in Discipleship Today Class, Adult #2, under the tutelage of Bro. Daryl Chavous and his wife Leslie and Bro. King Lance and his wife Rena. Special thanks for the mentorship and encouragement of Dr. Will Kratt and the EBC Assimilation team, especially Shakendra Toombs, Desiree' Moore, and all the ladies of the 3rd Friday Ladies Night In Crew. Thanks to each of you for graciously and lovingly hanging with me as I've struggled to integrate faith and learning.

Big shout outs to my Emory crew past and present, including Drs. Susana Morris (sag dance!), Robert Patterson (a big brother mentor without peer), Pellom McDaniels (21st century Renaissance Man), Folashade' Alao, Michelle Hite, Aida Hussen, Emma Delva, Kroshona Tabb, Melissa Sexton, and Denise James. A special acknowledgement to Keisha Haywood, the most tenacious person I know and to Yanci Mannery, for her encouragement and friendship. I also send special shouts to Brenda Tindal (a superstar in the making), Rhea Combs, Sheri Davis-Faulkner, AnnMarie Mingo and the Sister Scholars, Chante Baker, Kim Green, Danica Tisdale, Chanel Craft, Whitney Peoples, Moya Bailey, Michelle Purdy, Keisha Green, and the Ed Studies crew, and to Lerone Martin, Ivan Turnipseed, Dr. Adrian Taylor, and the whole NBGSA crew. To my play brother Kamili Hayes, who has been an invaluable source of encouragement and camaraderie. Also a very special thanks to Dr. Tommy J. Curry, one of my oldest friends, who re-emerged at just the right moment and refused to let me quit. To James Roland, a true friend of my mind. And to my homies who've held me down the longest, Alicia Bell, Elizabeth Thompson, Candice Frazier, Dr. Ifey Ifeanyi, Arabella Littlepage, and Crystal Faison. We got a serious braintrust just based upon the folk mentioned here!

Last but not least, completion of this project would not have been possible without the assistance and mentoring provided by my committee members, Rudolph Byrd, who has been a true guiding light throughout this process, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, and Lawrence Jackson. I especially thank Dr. Jackson, who has provided exemplary mentorship since my time at Howard and his wife Dr. Regine Jackson for her encouragement, advice, and collegiality. Special thanks also to Elizabeth Goodstein, Michael Moon and the Institute of Liberal Arts. This project would also have not been possible without the generous financial support of an Emory Minority Graduate Fellowship, the Brown Southern Studies Fellowship, a Schlesinger Library Dissertation Grant at Harvard University, and multiple summers of research funding from the Emory University Graduate School. Special thanks to Kharen Fulton for all she has done to make my time at Emory stellar. And special thanks to Tracy Blandon-Allen, who is so much more to all of us in the ILA than program coordinator. I am proud to call you friend.

There are so many more folks to thank, but for any that I've forgotten, charge it to my head and not my heart. Keep climbin'. The best is yet to come!

Table of Contents

Introduction
Race Women Confront All Phases of the Race Question 1

Chapter 1
The Race Woman's Agenda: Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South, the Textual Inauguration of a Black Female Leadership Tradition 22

Chapter 2
"The Story of Her People and Her Times": Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell in the African American Autobiographical Tradition 79

Chapter 3
Breaking the Rigid Molds of Respectability: Pauli Murray's Quest for an Unhyphenated American Identity 144

Chapter 4
Out of the Shadows: Race Women's Novels and the Inauguration of a Womanist Ethic in Black Feminist Thought 208

Epilogue
Leading Ladies: The Continuing Relevance of the Race Woman in the 21st Century 265

Works Cited 280

Introduction:
Race Women Confront All Phases of the Race Question

In 1902, Pauline Hopkins, an African American woman novelist and journalist, wrote "it is the duty of the true race-woman to study and discuss all phases of the race question." "The colored woman," asserted Hopkins,

> holds a unique position in the economy of the world's advancement in 1902. Beyond the common duties peculiar to woman's sphere, the colored woman must have an intimate knowledge of every question that agitates the councils of the world; she must understand the solution of problems that involve the alteration of the boundaries of countries, and which make and unmake governments.[1]

Hopkins was not the first to assert that Black women had a unique contribution to make in advancing both the race and the nation. Ten years earlier, Anna Julia Cooper, intrigued by the momentous changes taking place in the last decade of the 19th century, averred that "to be a woman of the Negro race in America, and to be able to grasp the deep significance of the possibilities of the crisis, is to have a heritage, it seems to me unique in all the ages."[2] That race women were going to constitute the center piece of both national and racial projects for advancement was an undeniable fact to both of these women. Because Black women's voices had often been silenced in larger discussions pertaining to both the race and the nation, they were "all the better qualified, perhaps, to weigh and judge and advise because [they were] not in the excitement of the race." The

---

[1] Pauline Hopkins, "Some Literary Workers," in *Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Nonfiction Works of Pauline Hopkin,* ed. Ira Dworkin. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 142.
[2] Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 144.

Black woman "is always sound and orthodox on questions affecting the well-being of her race," averred Cooper.[1]

As journalists, writers, educators, social workers, activists and institution-builders, Black women's race work was the hallmark of racial uplift efforts in both the 19th and 20th centuries. *Race Women: The Politics of Black Female Leadership in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century America* takes as a foundational premise the centrality of Black women's role in racial advancement efforts during this time period. More specifically, this project is concerned with understanding how race women themselves understood leadership, how they grappled with life in a public sphere that was hostile to their very presence, and how they theorized Black womanhood, in terms of race and gender. I highlight the quotations from Cooper and Hopkins because they both lay the intellectual foundation for a tradition of Black female leadership and also constitute a critical intervention in Black feminist thought. Both comments are early examples of what Patricia Hill Collins has come to refer to as a "Black woman's standpoint."

When Collins initially advanced her concept of a Black women's standpoint in her landmark text *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, she argued that "Black women's participation in constructing African-American culture in all-Black settings and the distinctive perspectives gained from their outsider-within placement in domestic work provide[d] the material backdrop for a unique Black women's standpoint," which allowed Black women to "construct and reconstruct oppositional knowledges" and to put forward their own self-defined

[1] Cooper 138-139.

perspectives.[2] Collins' Black feminist standpoint epistemology is useful but problematic to the extent that it assumes on the one hand, an organic and ahistoric Black women's knowledge community. The intentionality with which race women like Maria Stewart, Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells championed the creation of educational institutions and social networks through which Black women could share knowledge refutes any suggestion that such communities have been organically transferred.[3] Second, Collins located Black women's oppositional knowledge production within the context of post- World War II Black women's domestic work. This would historically exclude many of the women that she claims in her genealogy of Black feminist thought. Hazel Carby has cautioned that the "reliance" among Black feminist critics "on a common, or shared experience is essentialist and ahistorical."[4] My project heeds Carby's call by highlighting not only the similarities, but more importantly the differences which characterize the group of women known in this project as "race women." I use the lives of Ida B. Wells and Pauli Murray to problematize and complicate notions of solidarity among Black women and to expose the range of ways that public Black women have responded to the historical effects of racism and sexism on Black women as a class.

Collins, too, became aware of the problem of ahistoricism in her initial formulation and revised it in her second book *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice.* She argues: "Black women's domestic workers' placement in outsider-within locations certainly provides a useful starting point" for Black feminist thought as critical social theory, but "a better approach treats Black feminist thought as a

---

[2] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000 ed.), 10-11.
[3] By organic, I mean emerging naturally and from some essential place.
[4] Hazel Carby, "Woman's Era: Rethinking Black Feminist Theory" in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 16.

dynamic system of ideas reactive to actual social conditions."[5] One example of this "better approach" is the "reconceptualizing of Black women's intellectual work as engaging in dialogues across time." As Collins, along with scholars like Guy-Sheftall, remind us, "some of the most important ideas in Black women's intellectual history come from this sense of writing across time, of having dialogues with women who grapple with questions of injustice in unfamiliar social settings."[6]

Like Collins, I am well aware that the term "race woman" runs the risk of constituting an ahistorical category. I, therefore, use the term advisedly to refer to specific public Black women, namely Maria Stewart, Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, and Pauli Murray, who both relished and resisted this designation, who assist both in defining and challenging the tradition of Black female race leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And I do believe that these women constitute a *tradition* of Black female leadership, though Carby views this, too, as an essentialist and defensive posture on the part of the Black feminist critic. But I argue that a tradition of leadership can be constituted with attention to both similarities and differences; and for race women, each generation of Black female leaders has critically revised and appropriated the intellectual and political resources gained from prior generations of leaders. When race women painstakingly documented their public lives, they assumed exactly this: that future generations of women could benefit from the insights that they gained from their particular historical circumstances. This dialogue across generations is the hallmark of a tradition. It is their commitment to racial progress, their progressive ideas about female leadership, and their engagement with these ideas on

---

[5] Collins, *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 9.
[6] Ibid 75.

a public stage—rather than similarity of approach or political congruency-- that links these otherwise disparate women together as race women.

Collectively, race women have argued that women have a unique place in the struggle for racial progress, though their notions of Black womanhood shift over time from Victorian era conceptions to the more staunchly Black feminist conceptions of the 1970s. A race woman is not only a servant of the people through social uplift work, but she is also a theorist on various aspects of the "race problem" in areas of education, children and families, the legal system, social welfare, and national and international politics. Race women have traditionally situated their activist efforts within a particular community of influence, often based on place of residence, but the individual race woman has also viewed those local efforts as having national significance in the understanding of Black identity and American nationhood. Like Pauline Hopkins advised more than a century ago, these women, both unschooled and highly trained, have contributed significantly to our thinking and approach on every phase of the "race question."

In their groundbreaking 1945 study *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, attuned to long standing conversations about "advancing the race," queried African Americans in Chicago about their views on race men and race women. The Race Man, they argued, "is one type of Race Hero," a person who "'fights for the race,' and is 'all for The Race.'" Drake and Cayton found it noteworthy, however, that Race Men and Race Women were perceived very differently within the community: "It is interesting to note that Bronzeville is somewhat suspicious generally of its Race Men, but tends to be more trustful of the Race

Woman." She was viewed as being more "sincere." Community members alternately described this figure as " 'forceful, outspoken, and fearless, a great advocate of race pride,' 'devoted to the race,' and as one who 'studies the conditions of the people." "The Race is uppermost in her activities;" she is "known by the speeches she makes;" and finally, "she champions the rights of Negroes." Cayton and Drake observed that the Race Woman had been "idealized as a fighter" and that "her role as 'uplifter' seem[ed] to be accepted with less antagonism than in the case of the Race Man."[7] These rich descriptions of Black female leaders confirm that Black communities in the 20th century placed great value on the work of race women and that as a leader, she had a tall order to fill when it came to the vaunted project of racial uplift.

Querying the Contemporary Scholarship on Race Women

Since the 1970s, several studies of Black women have emerged which attempt to place these women, specifically Black women writers, within an African American female literary tradition. Mary Helen Washington and Frances Smith Foster have made an excellent case for an emergent African American literary tradition as far back as the late 18th century. However, these studies have been primarily literary histories and literary critical analysis. [8] Hazel Carby's classic text *Reconstructing Womanhood* established an African American feminist, intellectual, and activist tradition among women like Harper, Wells, Cooper, and Pauline Hopkins.[9] Carla Peterson's study *Doers of the Word* considers writings and speeches by race women in the North from 1830-

---

[7] St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1945: 394-395

[8] Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). Frances Smith Foster, *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

[9] Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

1880.[10] Historical studies by Darlene Clark Hine, Angela Davis, Deborah Gray White and Stephanie J. Shaw have also offered useful treatments of the historical contributions of race women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[11] In addition, Paula Giddings and Beverly Guy-Sheftall have written pioneering studies which consider Black women's intellectual and activist histories and shifting historical attitudes towards Black women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As such, works like Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* and Guy-Sheftall's *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920* provide a rich intellectual backdrop for my work, particularly in helping me to establish historical and generational connections among women and in helping me to identify the prevailing race and gender ideologies that have motivated Black women's activism and theorizing in the 19th and 20th centuries.[12] Despite these notable and laudable exceptions, studies which have dealt with race women, particularly those who worked in a Southern context, have

---

[10] Carla Peterson, *Doers of the Word: African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830-1880* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[11] Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994) See also Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981). Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women In Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999). Stephanie Shaw, *What A Woman Ought To Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.) Ula Y. Taylor, *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). Scholarly studies by these historians have sought to recapture and make visible Black women's participation in the first wave of the feminist movement via the Club Women's Movement (Giddings, White), Black women's impact on Black nationalist discourses of the 1920s (Taylor), and various forms of community socialization that made Black women's race work almost compulsory in many respects (Shaw and Hine).

[12] Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984). See also Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994). For further reference, see Guy-Sheftall's later very important anthology, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* as cited earlier. To date, it stands as the most comprehensive surveys of Black women's intellectual theorizing around Black feminist concerns.

primarily begun with the Civil Rights Movement or have been solely historical works which do not consider Black women's writings.[13]

Additionally, despite the onslaught of studies dealing with race women, none of these studies has actually interrogated the meaning of the term "race woman" in the lives of its subjects. Whereas Hazel Carby has considered the performance of the "race man" role in her book *Race Men,* at this time, no studies exist which have considered the historical origin of the race woman leadership figure in African American communities, or fully considered the complex relationships that existed between race men and race women. Beverly Guy-Sheftall's anthology *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* does constitute a critical intellectual intervention in this conversation. The anthological nature of this work and its larger critical investment in excavating and mapping the historical contours of Black feminist thought, however, place a sustained treatment of the race woman figure beyond its purview. While many of the above named studies have also argued for a tradition of activism, feminism, intellectual and literary production among African American women, they have not considered explicitly the tradition of leadership that emerged among African American women and the ways that these women understood and conceptualized leadership as a category and a tradition all its own.

One notable exception to this trend is Joy James' book *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals.*[14] Her text considers the relationship

---

[13] See Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991). See also Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

[14] Joy James, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

between race men like W.E.B. Du Bois and race women Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells. She notes that at best Du Bois can be characterized as having a conflicted stance on issues of gender, presenting at different turns a profeminist ideology that is often undercut by an erasure of Black women's specific intellectual and historical contributions in his written works.[15] James also provides an important discussion of elitist tendencies in Black leadership among both race men and race women, and argues that for instance, Anna Julia Cooper, while initially more progressive on issues of class than Du Bois would become later in his career, ultimately fails to escape elitist tendencies in her philosophy of racial leadership.[16]

Let me note, provisionally, that because I have chosen race women like Cooper and Wells who were well-known, and some of whom were well-to-do, some readers might brand this project as participating in the very types of elitism that it seeks to critique. However, Cayton and Drake's assessment of race women reveals that these leaders were very much invested in their communities, which constituted the wellspring of their activist pursuits. Moreover, the goal of this project is not to be exhaustive, but rather to point to a very important leadership figure within African American communities that has been continually overlooked or under-theorized in current scholarship. Race women are centrally important to reconfiguring the terrain of African American intellectual history, especially in a context, in which work by Black women is not viewed as worthy of mention, a fact which I will address in the Conclusion.

Several works have considered the historical achievements and contributions of these women, but significantly fewer works have understood race women as intellectuals,

---

[15] James, Chapter 2.
[16] James 45-46.

as theorists, as strategists for racial advancement. My project, however, approaches these women in just this way, arguing for the validity and importance of their intellectual production. And as the lives of women like Cooper and Wells remind us, the designation of "middle-class" has not been a fixed position for African American people, who because of historic economic vulnerability, have moved in and out of the middle-class based upon the economic circumstances that characterized their historical moment. Like many contemporary Black female academicians, the women of this study were often born into disadvantaged economic circumstances, gaining middle class status only as they obtained an education and launched careers. The commitments of women like Cooper and Wells to community-based activism challenge any reading of them as being uncritically elitist.

James also notes that Black female leaders like Ida B. Wells have made extremely important contributions, which have been marginalized by race men and contemporary intellectuals, in part because of her radical and combative approach to leadership. Wells, in particular, had contentious relationships with both W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, both of whom prevented her from receiving the level of recognition due her because of her anti-lynching activism.[17] Wells' feminist politics have been interpreted by writers like Alice Walker and Valerie Smith who characterized her anti-lynching activism to be anti-feminist, to the extent that it allegedly promoted racial concerns above the sexual violation portended by the crime of rape.[18]

---

[17] See Paula Giddings, *IDA: A Sword Among Lions* (New York: Amistad, 2008) and Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).
[18] James, 80. See all of Chapter 3. See Alice Walker, "Advancing Luna --And Ida B. Wells" in *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down* (New York: Harcourt, 1981).

The tendency to under-theorize or wrongly theorize strong racial consciousness in the lives of race women as evidence of decreased feminist commitments reflects a trend among current and past scholars who have done an excellent job of theorizing shifts and changes in notions of Black womanhood, but who have failed to fully consider Black women as intellectual theorists of racial identity. Contemporary Black feminist theorists have grappled with race, but they have been concerned with the ways in which racial oppression and racial *politics* position Black women differently in the social order. Racial identity—or the meaning of Blackness itself—is something altogether different. Both conversations are important to contemporary feminist thought. Those texts which have engaged discussions of race in Black women's lives, primarily frame notions of racial identity within a discussion of Black nationalism, a major limitation and oversight given the explicitly pro-American rhetorical stances of many race women writers.[19] Black feminism's formulation of intersectionality can only be enriched by a more sustained engagement with Black women as theorists of racial identity, rather than solely as theorists of racially gendered experience.

At the same time, however, it must be noted that all race women are not accurately described by the moniker *feminist.* Guy-Sheftall argues that there are five core tenets which constitute Black feminist thought. In short order, these are a belief that "Black women experience a special kind of oppression which is racist, sexist, and classist"; a belief that this oppression constitutes a kind of " 'triple jeopardy' that renders

---

[19] Kate Dossett, *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008). Kathy Glass, *Courting Communities: Black Female Nationalism and Syncre-Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century North* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007). Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Morgan's book is one exception to this rule because she does given some attention to what she calls "American civic nationalism" among Black women at the turn-of-the-century.

the "problems concerns, and needs of Black women" different from those of Black men and white women; a commitment among Black women to "struggle for Black liberation and gender equality simultaneously"; a belief that "there is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism" along with other isms; and finally, a commitment to the "liberation of Blacks and women [that] is profoundly rooted in their lived experience."[20] During the early years of the National Association of Colored Women, much debate ensued over the proper roles for women's leadership and some women have simply believed that race, not gender, is Black women's common and primary enemy. Many women like Margaret Murray Washington and Josephine Silone Yates believed that women's proper place was in the home, and that women had no right to usurp Black male leadership in the public sphere. Another marker of difference between race women was their support of suffrage. Although Washington was not ideologically opposed to it, she "felt that suffrage did not warrant the full attention of Black women."[21]

On the other hand, race women like Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Anna Julia Cooper wholeheartedly supported women's right to vote.[22] This notion that women's *only* proper place was in the home and that men were inherently suited to lead the race does not reflect the feminist impulses that drove the majority of race women's leadership. However, Washington's work as the founder of the International Council of Women of the Darker Races in 1922, a group which established community-based committees of seven to build early African-American studies curriculum and study

[20] Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire,* 2.
[21] Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 48.
[22] For an excellent discussion of these ideological conflicts, see White, 45-51.

Black women's issues from a Pan-African perspective, certainly marks her as a Black female leader committed to racial uplift. In addition to being viewed as an early prototype of Black or African American Studies, Washington's work is rightly viewed as an early model of Women's Studies.[23] Thus, these non-feminist race women like Washington and Yates, both of whom served as president of the NACW, were wholly committed to uplifting the race and empowering women through activities in the domestic sphere.

While contemporary Black feminist thought has been theoretically framed in intersectional terms, Black feminist scholars have given short shrift to understanding racial theorizing among Black women in favor of focusing on analyses of gender and class. For instance, the most extensive work that discusses Anna Julia Cooper's intellectual production in conversation with other philosophers and theorists, historical and contemporary is Vivian May's important text *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction.*[24] This work did not appear until 2007. On the other hand, African American Studies has been saturated with discussions of the racial theories and philosophies of Du Bois, Cooper's contemporary. Because Black feminist thought has had had to excavate the texts of many Black women from intellectual oblivion, critical consideration of these feminist foremothers' work in the area of racial theory has received less attention, but is important to understanding women who viewed themselves as leaders of their race.

Even discussions of class have been framed primarily as organizational struggles between upper/middle class Black women and working class Black women, obscuring

---

[23] See Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire,* 10. See also correspondence of Margaret Murray Washington in the Mary Church Terrell Papers, Howard University Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Washington, D.C.
[24] See Vivian May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

more nuanced perspectives from race women themselves about class conflict and its relationship to leadership practices. And because these conflicts were played out in organizational structures like the NACW and the NAACP, most works which have discussed Black female leadership have addressed it from the organizational perspective.[25] Moreover, those discussions frame tensions over leadership as battles over class, colorism, and elitism. Certainly these elements were present and influential in early women's clubs, and especially in the NACW.

As a result, existing scholarship has uncritically branded race women, especially club women, as elitist and has missed one critical and consistent intervention among race women that resists elitism. Race women from Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Harper, to Mary Church Terrell have all been critiqued for their championing of 19th century notions of domesticity among Black women, as a mode of racial uplift. These critiques—from Black and white feminist thinkers alike-- have viewed such behavior as evidence of the limitation of Black women's early feminist consciousness. I argue, however, that when figures like Cooper or Harper champion the virtues of homemaking among African American women, it is an example of refiguring the ideology of domesticity, not only for leadership, which both white and Black women did in the 19th century, but also in the case of Black women specifically, an evidence of anti-elitist ethic, which views working class Black women as having something to contribute to the work of racial uplift. And it is in the context of Black women's assertion of their right to engage in and spearhead racial uplift projects that we can locate their consciousness of gender politics.

---

[25] See Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999). See also Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, New York: Quill, 1984).

In this project then, I specifically shift our attention to the moniker "race woman," and ask what this role has meant in the lives of African American women who assumed leadership in Black communities. I consider the types of leadership undertaken by Black women in the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition to featuring and analyzing race women's voices on the subject of leadership, I consider the extent to which contemporary iterations of Black feminist thought have adequately theorized and situated Black female leadership, specifically in relation to a number of categories—race, class, gender, nation, and religion-- that have come to constitute the paradigm of intersectionality, which undergirds most Black feminist projects.

Unlike those treatments which have been primarily literary or historical in nature, I use literary analysis, archival findings and historical work to situate the women in my study within a tradition of race women's leadership. I make a critical paradigmatic shift from those texts which engage in singular discussions of literary contribution and/or historical significance to a focus on the theoretical importance of race women's constructions of selfhood, womanhood, Black identity, and leadership. Like other projects in Black feminist thought, I foreground intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm that is critical to understanding the complex positionality of particular race women and the category of "race woman." Originally introduced by Critical Race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw to address the limitations of the "single-axis framework" which approached oppressions based upon race, sex, and class as discrete entities, intersectionality illuminates the "multidimensionality of Black women's experience."[26]

---

[26] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2000), 208-209. See also "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in

Patricia Hill Collins, supplementing Crenshaw's work, asserts that "intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation." Further, "intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice."[27] Intersectionality has been invaluable to illuminating the ways that oppressions interact and multiply jeopardize[28] Black women in the social order. Simultaneously, however, intersectionality has come to be a kind of feminist pronoun for speaking of Black women's experience and identity in ways that are shaped by but not limited to the operation of oppression. Thus, unlike traditional Black feminist intellectual projects, I also position my subjects as theorists who can respond to the theories being used to read and interpret their works and lives. Repositioning my subjects as theorists illumines both the advantages and the limitations of using intersectionality to explain the lives of women who often had very different notions about what it meant to be Black, to be a woman, to be a leader.

Another major critical intervention of this project is its engagement with two hallmark theories which have guided the study of Black women's history for the last three decades. The importance of Evelyn Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* cannot be overstated. In that text, she provided a signal formulation of the politics of respectability, a set of practices and allegiances to middle-class values adopted by Black women in order to demonstrate their

---

Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), 357-383.

[27] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 18.

[28] Deborah King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology" in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought,* ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, (New York: The New Press, 1995).

moral acumen, and thereby to prove their fitness for citizenship, its rights and protections. Darlene Clark Hine, attuned to Black women's historical need for protection from rape and sexual assault, called attention to the paucity of information about Black women's personal lives and sexual selves in existing scholarship. We have historically remained in the dark about Black women as sexual beings because they had formed what Hine calls a "culture of dissemblance" which allowed them to navigate the dangerous spaces of white America, by giving an appearance of total openness, while actually managing to hide a critical part of their personhood. Both of these theories have been invaluable to the excavation of Black women from the annals of American history.

Unfortunately, as Collin's cautions us drawing upon the work of Manning Marable, "To be truly liberating, any social theory must reflect the actual problems of an historical conjuncture with a commitment to rigor and truth."[29] The allegiance of scholars of Black women's history and literature to the theories of respectability and dissemblance has led to a critical oversight of the ways in which Black women creatively engage with the corporeal within their texts. In fact, I argue that race women are well aware of the inability of respectability and dissemblance to offer protection against rape or to confer any notion of moral legitimacy on them. Thus, my examinations of autobiographies and texts by Terrell, Wells, Cooper, and Murray and the fiction of Frances Harper and Alice Walker reveal a textual strategy and employment of what I refer to as logos, or embodied discourse. Drawing upon Cooper's admonition to the Episcopal Church that its social activism should model every facet of Jesus Christ, who was the Word (translated "logos" in Biblical Greek) made flesh, I argue that Black women, who have always had a critical relationship with social discourses, attempt to redefine and then embody those discourses

---

[29] Marable, qtd in Collins *Fighting Words,* 10.

in the ways most beneficial for racial uplift and the vindication of Black womanhood. For most race women, who were predominantly Christian, their employment of embodied discourse reflects their spiritual and religious proclivities. However, I argue in the case of Alice Walker's *Meridian*, which explicitly rejects a Christian frame, that logos, while it functions differently in the lives of contemporary women, still offers insight into Black women's struggle to embody discourses in a way that promotes the health and wellness of the entire race.

Logos not only offers a resource for excavating the corporeal in Black women's texts in a way that augments rather than displaces the observations gleaned from Hine's and Higginbotham's formulations, but it also guards against the ahistorical tendencies of a Black women's standpoint. Because logos highlights Black women's embodied experiences, it necessarily situates and grounds them in the particularities of their respective historical moments, considering the ways in which the Black female body is positioned differently in racial discourses in differing periods of the 19th and 20th centuries. Logos, is thus, another feature of race women's leadership that re-emerges at different moments and that, in its malleability, offers Black women resources for negotiating the relationship between the corporeal and the discursive that can be contoured to their specific historical circumstances.

A Procession of Chapters

An interdisciplinary project, *Race Women* foregrounds texts and archives, placing them in dialogue with one another. I begin the project by considering the historical dialogue instantiated by the speeches and writings of Maria Stewart in the first half of the nineteenth century and Anna Julia Cooper's landmark Black feminist text *A Voice from*

the South, which is published in 1892. I argue that if Stewart's speeches are a call for Black women's intellectual engagement with the race question, then Cooper's text constitutes a critical response. It is also within this chapter that I draw upon Cooper's use of corporeal imagery to argue for the presence of logos, or embodied discourse within Black women's texts. Because embodied discourse can only express itself in community with other embodied persons, logos lays the ground work for my conception of rhetorical community, which I argue that Black women constitute through their both spoken and written work with other members of Black communities and which I develop more fully in chapter two.

Chapter two examines the work of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell, acquaintances and progenitors of the African American club women's movement, who held very different philosophies on racial leadership. The chapter is primarily concerned with the ways in which each woman's autobiography, Wells' *Crusade for Justice* and Terrell's *A Colored Woman in a White World* advance a conception of Black female leadership in relation to the category of race woman. Moreover, the chapter highlights the ways in which Wells' and Terrell's engagements with the corporeal and employment of logos challenge dissemblance and advance distinct conceptions of racial identity. Through an examination of Terrell and Wells public work as lecturers, writers, and activists, and I also argue that they used their speeches and writings to create a vast *rhetorical community* that could advance oppositional knowledge claims and challenge damaging racial discourses about Black people generally, and Black women specifically. Last this chapter highlights the volatile relationship between these two women and their relationships with Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

Pauli Murray takes center stage in chapter three, as the first solidly twentieth century figure within the dissertation. This chapter draws heavily upon my research in Murray's archives at the Schlesinger Library located at Harvard University. In particular, the chapter is interested in the complex negotiation that Murray effects within her two autobiographies which actively chronicle the rich history of her family with the U.S. since the 18th century and which documents her important public career, while managing to betray no hint of Murray's struggles with transgender identity. Murray deliberately left materials within her archive that would identify her as a queer figure, a fact which I think invites us to interrogate the role of her sexual preference in her life. I use these archival materials, Murray's two autobiographies and a host of Murray's published work in order to highlight the ways in which Murray challenges the category of race woman, even at the level of its constitutive elements. Moreover, this chapter investigates the politics of homophobia within Black communities and seeks to remedy the pervasive silencing of Black lesbian activists and thinkers in scholarship that deals with Black women's political contributions.

In chapter four, I turn to the fiction of Frances Harper and Alice Walker. I argue that the silences around sexuality, ambivalence about motherhood, and explicit critiques of sexism which are less evident in Black women's autobiography find a space for expression in Black women's fiction. Harper's *Iola Leroy* is one of the earliest novels written by a Black woman, and a signal text in the woman's era of the 1890s. Walker's *Meridian* grapples with the shifting gender and racial politics of the 1970s. These fictional treatments of race women work in tandem with autobiographies to create a rich historical dialogue about what it means to be a race woman. The conceptions of Black

womanhood advanced in both of these novels is radically divergent; yet, both betray an investment in presenting and questioning Black women's relationship to their communities and their race, to motherhood and marriage, and to male race leaders, and both constitute important formulations of Black feminist thought.

Finally, in the epilogue, I consider the continuing relevance of the race woman as figure, in light of the recent ascent of Michelle Obama to the status of First Lady of the United States. Sojourner Truth reminds us that the acceptance of Black women as "women" was a monumental battle; much more so, Anna Julia Cooper's memorable encounter in a train station with two signs marked "for colored" and "for ladies" reminds us that the battle to see Black women as "ladies" has been a more protracted struggle. Yet, these questions have been at the heart of the work of race women, who desired Black women to have the full benefits, protections, and opportunities, afforded by the status of citizen. Because there is now a Black woman at the center of our national life, Michelle Obama's presence raises the question of whether those issues which specifically and disproportionately affect Black women will assume a prominent place in the national political agenda.

Chapter 1
The Race Woman's Agenda: Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South,* and the Textual Inauguration of a Black Female Leadership Tradition

"Shall It Be a Woman?": The Battle for Female Leadership in the First Generation of Race Women[30]

In a speech delivered in 1832 in Boston, Maria Stewart asked rather solicitously of her Northern audience: "Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?"[31] This speech, possibly the first ever given by an African American woman, to a racially mixed audience of men and women, marked the emergence of a new figure in Black leadership—the race woman. In the last two decades, scholars have reclaimed Maria Stewart as the progenitor of an African American feminist tradition, referring to her as "America's first Black woman political writer."[32] Maria Stewart's words themselves, however, point us to the central question defining the leadership of African American women in the 19th century. Should African American women lead in the struggle for racial equality and justice? Given the Victorian gender conventions that had defined white women's lives through the cult of domesticity, they were generally hindered from pursuing leadership options.[33] And for Black people, racial leadership was generally viewed as the province of prominent race men like Frederick Douglass.

Because Maria Stewart lived in Boston, a hotbed of radical abolitionist activity, she had access to some of the most important intellectual conversations and figures of her

---

[30] Special thanks to Dr. Tommy J. Curry for his diligent and thoughtful attention to an earlier draft of this chapter and for reminding me of Maria Stewart's importance to this conversation.
[31] Maria Stewart, "Lecture delivered at the Franklin Hall," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 30.
[32] Marilyn Richardson, *Maria Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer, Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[33] The Cult of domesticity, also referred to as the cult of true womanhood, promoted a belief that women should be chaste, pious, private, home-makers and mothers who were overseers of the moral conscience of their families. See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood,"*American Quarterly* 18 no.2 (1966).

day. Even though she was technically free, she recognized that the condition of Blacks in the North, particularly women, was not all that different from the condition of enslaved Blacks in the South. In fact, Stewart called attention to the differing social context which shaped her activism by instructing her audience to "tell us no more of southern slavery." She suggested that although chattel slavery kept the body in bondage, there were "no chains so galling as those that bind the soul, and exclude it from the vast field of useful and scientific knowledge."[34] Given the proliferation of anti-slavery societies in the North in the 1830s, Maria Stewart recognized that the abolitionist cause was an intellectual battleground, as much as anything else. And she clearly believed that women were suited for doing intellectual warfare: "And my heart made this reply—'If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!'[35]"

Despite her dramatic departure from the public sphere because of continuing sexist backlash,[36] Stewart's brief presence had already laid the groundwork for and signaled the emergence of a new African American leadership agenda headed by women. These women—race women—chose to advocate for, uplift, and advance African American people through a specific focus on the needs of women and children. Education, healthy lifestyles, good morals and good manners were specific areas of socialization and skill taught in the domestic sphere that could be controlled and manipulated by Black women. At the same time, race women like Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary Church Terrell recognized the need for some Black women to take a more prominent public role in shaping the intellectual conversations happening around

[34] Stewart, 30.
[35] Ibid.
[36] See Stewart's biographer, Marilyn Richardson's discussion the public's censure of Stewart for defying gender norms in "Introduction" in *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches,* ed. Marilyn Richardson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 26.

racism, and in particular, the effect of racism on Black women. Understanding their power to control these areas and the far-reaching implications of the project of socializing productive citizens, race women viewed these areas as the most appropriate grounds upon which to advance a notion of African American female leadership. Viewing women as the most appropriate constituency for racial uplift initiatives and leadership training, race women frequently advocated that women be admitted to higher education with equal opportunities as men. Maria Stewart, for instance, charged her audiences to raise money to build a high school for girls so that "the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed."[37]

Stewart's arguments for the importance of a well-trained and well-rounded group of women who could share in the leadership of African American communities was not fully taken up and explored until the publication of Anna Julia Cooper's famed text *A Voice from the South* published in 1892. Certainly, Frances Harper's prolific career as a poet, novelist, and abolitionist lecturer cannot be overlooked here and will be considered more closely in the final chapter of this project. However, it is Cooper who most extensively responds to, advances, and refigures Stewart's arguments about the central issues of leadership facing Black people in the 19th century. Stewart felt that the first place of battle that Black women must engage was the intellectual and philosophical realm on which struggles over racial identity and the role of women were being debated. She challenged the philosophical basis of racial inferiority using her vast knowledge of the Bible, and she argued that if "American ladies have the honor conferred on them [of being ladies]" because of their "prudence and economy in domestic concerns" then

---

[37] Maria Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation On Which We Must Build" in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 28.

surely Black women could "do something to distinguish" themselves by, for instance, "laying the corner stone for the building of a High School, [so] that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us."[38] Though Stewart hoped that higher learning would equip Black women to be more effective in domestic arts, she was infinitely more interested in cultivating thinkers, women who no longer had to "bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles." She sought to redefine Black womanhood, not by Black women's success in the domestic sphere, but rather encouraging and fortifying Black women's nascent intellectual prowess.

As the first book-length, non-fiction, political treatise written by a Black woman, Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, should rightly be viewed as a response to Stewart's call for intellectual engagement by Black women with the major political issues affecting Black people. *A Voice from the South* is also representative of a newly emerging Black women's literary tradition which became "less discreet [and] more visible in 1892." Frances Smith Foster argues that texts which emerged during this time reflected a belief among Black women writers that "it was time to clearly affirm their womanhood, their Blackness, and their desire for full participation in American society."[39] In line with Black feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins, Mary Helen Washington, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, I argue that race women like Stewart, Cooper, Harper, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell constitute a Black feminist intellectual tradition.[40] Cooper was also

---

[38] Stewart, "Religion," 28.
[39] Frances Smith Foster, *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993): 6-7.
[40] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 2nd ed.* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000): 1-4. See also Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995), Introduction. See also Mary Helen Washington, "Introduction" in Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). And see Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing*

especially attentive to placing herself within a genealogy of other race women that included Frances Harper, Sojourner Truth, Amanda Smith, Sarah Early, Charlotte Grimke, Hallie Quinn Brown, and Fannie Jackson Coppin.[41] In particular, however, I am interested in mining that tradition for its insights on the theory and practice of leadership among race women. Examining *A Voice from the South* in relation to the central claims of Maria Stewart's extant speeches will provide an appropriate historical context for considering the relationship of Cooper's text to the work and ideologies of race women. It will also create space to extend contemporary conversations about Cooper's work by arguing that *A Voice from the South* is a defining text in the literary and activist tradition of race women, because it acts as a transitional text –and Cooper a transitional figure—between early 19th century and early 20th century race women and their concerns.

"What If I Am a Woman?": Black Female Leadership According to Maria Stewart

As the first known Black woman to write and speak about explicitly political issues, Maria Stewart can rightly be given credit for creating the blueprint for what would become race women's agenda in the 19th century and beyond. Her history of political writing, autobiographical writing, and speeches became paradigmatic of the types of race work and activism pursued by later race women like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

In her address delivered at Franklin Hall, Stewart addressed the major issues that would concern race women throughout the twentieth century. She lamented the discriminatory treatment experienced by young Black women, who might seek jobs in the urban North, and entreated her audience to recognize the ignobility of such treatment and

---

Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[41] Cooper 141-142.

the urgency of remedying this problem. She challenged stereotypes of Blacks as lazy and idle, responding that "considering how little we have to excite or stimulate us, I am almost astonished that there are so many industrious and ambitious ones to be found."[42] She championed the virtues of education for the masses, audaciously claimed her rights to freedom as "a true born American," and touted the importance of Christian ethics to guide America to a practice of freedom. These thematic concerns –about gender, racial stereotypes, national identity, and Christianity's incompatibility with racism—dominated the writings, speeches, and institution-building projects of all race women who succeeded Stewart.

Her arguments also anticipate, by more than half a century, the debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois over the roles of liberal arts and industrial training in the lives of Black people. She declares that "continual hard labor deadens the energies of the soul, and benumbs the faculties of the mind." She laments the fact that "many of our color have dragged out a miserable existence of servitude from the cradle to the grave." This existence has prevented them from "literary acquirement" and "useful knowledge derived, from either maps, books, or charts."[43] In her first published essay, she instructed the audience to begin saving money in order to open a "High School, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us."[44] Notably, the "us" in this passage refers specifically to women and girls. Lack of access to education made colored women vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation, at the hands of both white men and their wives. As Black women toiled in domestic labor, "bury[ing] their minds

---

[42] Ibid., 30.
[43] Ibid., 32.
[44] Maria Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation On Which We Must Build" in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: The New Press, 1995), 28.

beneath a load of iron pots and kettles," white families benefited materially. Stewart lamented, "How long shall a mean set of men flatter us with their smiles, and enrich themselves with our hard earnings, their wives' fingers sparkling with rings, and they themselves laughing at our folly."[45] In addition to advocating access to liberal arts education, Stewart also advocated that Black people build businesses and patronize them, creating a collective Black economic base. She also charged her audience of colored women to "strive to excel in good housewifery, knowing that prudence and economy are the road to wealth."[46] In this respect, her arguments presage the more conservative, Black nationalist economics and trade-based empowerment touted by Booker T. Washington.

Stewart betrays some social conservatism, placing a great level of social responsibility upon African Americans to uplift themselves from the position of being a "hissing and reproach among the nations of the earth." She argues that "the day on which we unite heart and soul and turn our attention to knowledge and improvement," then the "hissing and reproach" among the nations would cease.[47] Stewart's arguments about racial self-responsibility are a precursor to the racial uplift ideology that would come to dominate philosophies of Black leadership in the late 19th century. Racial uplift ideology as fully codified in the late 19th century pivoted around the role of class differentiation as evidence that African Americans were capable of progress. Unfortunately, according to Kevin Gaines, a pitfall of this ideology was that it placed the responsibility for the disenfranchised social condition of Black people squarely on their shoulders, rather than

---

[45] Ibid., 29.
[46] Ibid., 28.
[47] Ibid.

holding the state responsible for its role in systematically disfranchising African Americans over several centuries.[48]

Stewart's views of leadership arose directly from her understanding of the nature of Black Americans' social ills. She viewed leadership as a service-oriented, non-elitist, anti-sexist, theoretically and morally informed set of practices designed to lift Black people out of oppressive social circumstances. Since education and morality, or a lack there of, were central to their oppression, Black people needed training in these areas. Women were already the moral custodians of Black life, and with a bit of intellectual training, they could take up the mantle of education as well. Stewart reminded her audience that though she had been deprived of an education, she did possess "moral capability" and the "teachings of the Holy Spirit." Drawing on the Christian spiritual heritage of many Black women of her time, she argues in essence that moral leadership is the province of all women, who can be taught by and function under the power of the Holy Spirit, notwithstanding a lack of formal education. This means that all classes of women could lead, not just the elite and educated.

In her final speech, Stewart drew heavily upon the lives of Biblical women to justify her public leadership role. Having begun her career by asking "Shall it be a woman?," she ends it just as a provocatively by challenging her audience "What if I am a woman?" Clearly, the answer to the first question had been yes. But she goes on in the final speech to remind her listeners that God had "raised up" Biblical figures like Deborah and Esther to lead his people and Mary Magdalene as the first person to declare Christ's resurrection. And she specifically challenges Pauline theological standards that

---

[48] Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1996. See introduction.

were used by men to keep women from speaking publicly: "St. Paul declared that it was a shame for a woman to speak in public, yet our Great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offense than this."[49]

This strategy of using Biblical women to justify female leadership would become an accepted and commonly used practice among Stewart's race women successors like Ida B. Wells, Nannie Helen Burroughs and Anna Julia Cooper. It also points to an incipient womanist theology in the early 19th century.[50] Moreover, she charged the women in her audience, based upon her Christian ethical praxis to "Let us not say we know this, or we know that and practise [sic] nothing; but let us practise [sic] what we do know."[51] This statement signals the importance of not only knowing and doing-- of being in the Christian tradition both "hearers and doers of the word," but also the doing being a direct product of what one knows. It is an early iteration of Black women's understanding of the pragmatic nature of racial uplift. At the same time, however, this statement points us to the complex manner in which Black women understood and called for theory and practice to always inform the other.

Having laid out the central concerns on race women's agenda for at least the remainder of the 19th century, Stewart was ultimately unable to sustain a career as a lecturer and speaker because of sexism. This struggle points us directly to the later struggles over gender that race women would encounter as they were forced both

---

[49] Maria Stewart, "Mrs. Stewart's Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston," in Richardson, 68.

[50] For a longer discussion of early African American feminist theology based upon the examples of Biblical women, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920.* Chapter 6: Feminist Theology.

[51] Stewart, "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality," 29.

publicly and privately to engage the battle encapsulated in Stewart's two burning questions: "Shall it be a woman?" and "What if I am a woman?"

Enter Anna Julia Cooper: A Voice from the South

Almost as if in response to Stewart, in 1886, Anna Julia Cooper gave a speech before the Colored Episcopal Clergy in Washington, D.C. entitled "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race." This speech became the first published essay in her now famous collection *A Voice from the South.* Cooper had many other predecessors like Sojourner Truth, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Frances Harper, and the Grimké sisters, whom she greatly admired, who followed in Stewart's footsteps in the cause of abolition. But Cooper was trained in the art of argumentation, and her treatment of the "woman question" extended Stewart's query into a full-fledged argument that not only justified women's right to be public leaders, but also advocated the necessity of having them lead.

While most studies of Cooper's work laud her for being the first writer to fully lay out the concerns of early Black feminist thought,[52] Vivian May's recent work--*Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction*-- is the first text to consider all of Cooper's extant writings, including essays published in the twentieth century and both doctoral dissertations that Cooper wrote.[53] But even May is attentive to the continous critical oversights and short shrift treatment of Cooper in existing scholarship. In her book, May asks why "Cooper's astute ideas and methods have not

---

[52] Other works have considered the womanist theological implications of Cooper's writings and activism and may recent theorists have begun to focus on the importance of her educational philosophies. See Karen Baker-Fletcher, '*A Singing Something': Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper.* New York: Crossroads, 1994. See also Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower*

[53] Vivian May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007). Cooper wrote a dissertation for her Ph.D. program at Columbia, which she couldn't complete because she was unable to meet the residency requirement. When she transferred to the Sorbonne, they made her write another dissertation.

been given the attention they deserve, since, as an educator, scholar, and activist, Cooper implemented a major challenge to the disciplining of both ideas and bodies?"[54] Like many other Black female theorists—take for instance, Maria Stewart— May reminds us that "Cooper is too often treated as if she were simply a quaint historical figure whose voice and ideas deserve a continued hearing 'at the bar," and is "sometimes too quickly put aside aside as an elitist or accommodationist."[55] It is in light of these oversights and with a corrective bent that I enter into a discussion of Cooper in this chapter. Situating her in relationship to Maria Stewart establishes a clear intellectual tradition among race women, not by celebrating their historical achievements, but by engaging the intellectual and philosophical implications of their work in the lives of Black people. Moreover, I argue that Cooper leaves some critical intellectual legacies to her race women contemporaries and successors that can be found by mining her discussions of race, nation, gender, class, and religion.

While May takes up Cooper's entire body of work, I focus specifically on *A Voice from the South* because the manner in which Cooper shapes the project of racial uplift in this text, especially as it relates to Black women, becomes a set of blueprints for race work among Black women for at least the next three decades after its publication. Moreover, I think there are some specific insights about the nature of Black racial identity that have been continually overlooked by scholars. For instance, Cooper frequently speaks of the Black race in embodied or corporeal terms. She measures race progress by the number of "horny handed toiling men and women of the South" that have made a measurable degree of progress. "The race" Cooper says, is at "the age of ruddy

---

[54] May 2.
[55] May 4.

manhood."[56] She also describes the race in very embryonic imagery as being "full of the elasticity and hopefulness of youth" and as having a "quickening of its pulses and a glowing of its self-consciousness."[57] These references and others are not disembodied, intellectual representations of African Americans, but instead fecund images that cause us to picture human beings growing into a sense of the new possibilities engendered by the progress of history. I argue that these invocations of corporeality in Cooper's text challenge existing readings of Black female subjectivity that pivot upon theories based on the "myth of the muted body." These theories like the "culture of dissemblance" and the "politics of respectability" argue that Black women were greatly invested in reducing the amount of public access to their bodies by adopting Victorian standards of dress and behavior.[58]

While these behaviors were certainly adopted, scholars continue to miss the ways in which Black women's bodies and the bodies of other Black people appear in race women's texts. The problem is not that these theories are inaccurate, but rather that in the nearly two decades since they were both advanced, they have come to encompass the entirety of modes of talking about Black women's public self-representation, and have engendered a tendency to overlook obvious invocations of Black bodies within Black women's texts. Since texts are certainly implicated in the project of representation, invocations of body imagery within texts can rightly be viewed as resisting compulsory

---

[56] Cooper 25-26.
[57] Cooper 144.
[58] Darlene Clark Hine. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History.* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994). See also Higginbotham and the chapter on "The Politics of Respectability". More recently, Candice Jenkins has termed this " Black, largely female, generally middle-class desire [and] longing to protect or save Black women, and Black communities more generally, from narratives of sexual and familial pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity" as the *salvific wish.*

dissemblance in the public arena. Cooper and other Black women writers challenge these ideologies by unapologetically including rather than muting imagery of Black bodies as metonyms for Black people's lived experience. It is on the terrain of the visible Black body that Cooper advances her concept of Black racial identity—that while inchoate—is grounded in a grappling with the material reality of Black bodies, male and female, engaged in the struggle for freedom. Cooper's invocation of the Black body through the employment of what I refer to as logos or embodied discourse constitutes a form of Black activism and textual praxis--that demands the inclusion of the body, and in particular working class bodies and Black female bodies.

A Challenge and Charge to the Church: Cooper and Class

Significantly, it is within the framework of Christianity that Cooper advances her conception of appropriate racial leadership, again taking up where Stewart left off. As the introductory work in this collection, "Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race" serves as Cooper's attempt to understand the major discourses—Feudalism and Christianity-- which have shaped prevailing conceptions of female identity. Feudalism was responsible, in sum, for advancing a notion of chivalry, a concept which "magnified and elevated woman's position in society." However, Cooper is clear that however chivalric feudalism may have been, it did not escape the trappings of elitism. In fact, chivalry traditionally was only extended to an "elect few" among whom the elite would "expect to consort."[59] Not so subtly, Cooper suggests that notwithstanding the extent to which chivalry, an outgrowth of feudalism, may have shaped social intercourse among (white) men and women, it certainly offered no protections for Black women. In this regard, Cooper's arguments echo Sojourner Truth's

[59] Cooper 40.

earlier critique of chivalry and its exclusion of Black women in her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" address.

After a cursory discussion of feudalism, Cooper turns her attention to Christianity. Refusing to concede the legitimacy of the conservative gender politics often perpetuated in the name of Christianity, Cooper argues instead that the "idea of the radical amelioration of womankind, reverence for woman as woman regardless of rank, wealth, or culture, was to come from that rich and bounteous fountain from which flow all our liberal and universal ideas—the gospel of Jesus Christ."[60] Her religious assessment, which prefigures the tenets of womanist theology, reveals the importance of a Christian-centered worldview to the lives of African American women leaders. But it also reveals that much like earlier generations of Africans in America, Black women like Cooper did not accept popular interpretations of Christianity to be supreme. These women advanced their own early womanist/feminist theology which critically reinterpreted the life of Jesus Christ, Moses, and Biblical women like Mary (mother of Jesus), Deborah, and Esther in ways that justified women's work in the public sphere.[61] In fact, Cooper argued against absolutist interpretations of Biblical stories that were used to justify the oppressive treatment of women by informing her audience that "Christ gave ideals not formulae."[62]

Cooper viewed Jesus as a social equalizer who held the "same code of morality [and] the same standard of purity, as for man." Moreover, Cooper's Jesus "stooped in all the majesty of his own spotlessness to wipe away the filth and grime of her [the adulteress woman's] guilty past and bid her go in peace and sin no more." He pursued

---

[60] Cooper 14.
[61] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. See chapter entitled "Feminist Theology."
[62] Cooper 14.

friendships with sisters like Mary and Martha and in his dying moments made sure that his mother would receive care.[63] Womanist theologian Jacqueline Grant argues that for Black people and Black women in particular, Jesus "identifies with the little people," "affirms the basic humanity of the least of these," and "inspires active hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated existence".[64] Cooper's confrontation with and resistance to accepted Christian narratives about woman's place situates her within a larger tradition of Black and womanist liberation theologies, which were central to the theoretical work and social understandings of Black female leaders throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune and later women like Pauli Murray, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker were all devout Christian women who understood their activism to be in concert with their religious views of the world. [65]

In Cooper's estimation, the most impeccable defense for women as leaders was Christianity, and specifically the life of Jesus Christ. Since women were not violating any moral laws, by assuming leadership roles, then they should be allowed to lead. In fact the mark of a civilized society was having a progressive view toward women. Having advanced these lines of argument, Cooper concludes "that the position of woman in society determines the vital elements of its regeneration and progress."[66] Here Cooper deliberately resists an argument for gender essentialism, clarifying that "woman is [not] better or stronger or wiser than man." But socially women have the first formative

---

[63] Ibid., 14-18.
[64] Jacqueline Grant. *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus.* Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989: 217.
[65] Rosetta E. Ross. *Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Ross argues that "the most potent aspect of an African American religious worldview is the understanding that religious duty includes racial uplift and social responsibility" (2). Moreover, "religious duty includes responsibility for social structures, since social context significantly influences the meaning and experience of being human." (5).
[66] Cooper 21.

interactions with males as their mothers. Cooper directly addresses women, telling them, "Woman, Mother—your responsibility is one that might make angels tremble and fear to take hold! To trifle with it, to ignore or misuse it, is to treat lightly the most sacred and solemn trust ever confided by God to human kind."[67] Woman's influence on society is not really up for debate, and Cooper tells her audience so: "the vital agency of womanhood in the regeneration and progress of a race, as a general question, is conceded almost before it is fairly stated."[68]

Though women's role in engendering progress was already conceded, the limiting and exclusive politics of feudalism and its chivalric enactments created other problems for Black women, specifically. Cooper alerts her audience to her underlying critique of elitism in her opening discussion of feudalism, by asserting that one of the problems with the discourse of chivalry was its exclusivity: "respect for woman, the much lauded chivalry of the Middle Ages, meant what I fear it still means to some men in our own day—respect for the elect few among whom they expect to consort."[69] Now this critique primarily points to the exclusion of Black women from consideration as subjects worthy of chivalry. But the reference also points to a sustained critique by Cooper in this chapter of practices of exclusion and elitism based upon gender and class and justified by religion.

Cooper declares to her audience of Episcopal clergy that the primary area of concern for their coming together as interlocutors should be "the practical and effective handling of the crucial questions of the hour." And the most critical question of which there could be "no issue more vital and momentous" was "this of the womanhood of the

---

[67] Cooper 22.
[68] Cooper 24.
[69] Cooper 14.

race."[70] Driving right to the point, Cooper tells her audience that "the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the re-training of the race . . .must be the *Black woman.*"[71] In fact, "no other hand can move the lever." And the home is the base of training, and the source of leverage, largely because "a race is but a total of families," and a nation "the aggregate of its homes." And "the atmosphere of homes is no rarer, purer and sweeter than are the mothers in those homes."[72] Cooper sees Black women as vital agents of change and the homes of Black people as the training ground for building a race and a nation. In fact, the rhetoric of home as being critical to race and nation building was characteristic of race women's and race men's discourses about racial uplift in the nineteenth century. What is unique is that Cooper launches this argument as part of a larger discussion about gender and class exclusion and elitism among both Black men and white people.

In her much quoted reply to Martin Delany's statement that "when he entered the council of kings the Black race entered with him,"[73] Cooper wrote that "only the Black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood. . .then and there the whole Negro race enters with me."[74] Cooper, however, prefaces this statement, which critiques the gender assumptions of Delany's statement, with an example which critiques the feudal assumptions of his statement. Delany assumed that Black men's increased access to institutional power would be evidence of racial progress. Cooper, however, reminded him that for evidence of racial progress, "we must point to homes, average homes, homes of the rank and file of horny handed toiling

[70] Cooper 27.
[71] Cooper 28.
[72] Ibid., 29.
[73] Ibid., 30.
[74] Ibid., 31.

men and women of the South (where the masses are) . . .then and not till then will the whole plateau be lifted."[75] It is only after this that Cooper asserts that women would lead the race, precisely because they led the home.

Mary Helen Washington argues that such commitments from Cooper reflect her entanglement "in the ideological underbrush of true womanhood."[76] Concurrently, scholars have read her discussion of Black female leadership as being elitist precisely because it did not privilege the masses of women as leaders.[77] In this respect, the Black feminist critique of classism, which has pivoted around the problematic and limiting possibilities offered by the cult of domesticity and the politics of respectability, fails to consider alternate interpretations of domesticity in the lives of Black women. Because of its insistence upon reading domesticity according to a mainstream white feminist critique, which is committed to jettisoning any inherent connections between women and domesticity, contemporary Black feminist theorizing has missed the manner in which a discourse of domestic empowerment, one which equips Black women to manage effective homes and employ useful child-rearing techniques, acts as a critique of elitism by suggesting that the work that Black women did in the home was as useful to the nation-building project as intellectual work. If it is true that the politics of respectability emerged among Black women out of a desire to rescue Black womanhood from derogatory images of immorality, impurity, uncleanliness, and lasciviousness, then the argument that Black women were capable of effective homemaking and effective parenting becomes a direct rebuttal of such lines of argument. Cooper, then, is not the

---

[75] Ibid.

[76] See Mary Helen Washington, "Introduction," in Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988):xlvi.

[77] See Joy James. See also Mary Helen Washington, "Introduction," in Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

elitist as African American literary critic Mary Helen Washington asserts. In fact, it is contradictory to suggest that Cooper is elitist for touting educational opportunities for Black women, which she also advocated for the masses of Black people, and then concurrently to suggest that her view of domestic Black women as being good homemakers renders her elitist because she is submitting to the middle-class proclivities of the cult of true womanhood.

Since Cooper gives this speech in the decade following the end of Reconstruction, she is attentive to the lack of educational opportunity among Black people. In fact, one of her primary concerns in the speech is to encourage her audience to provide for educational opportunities for young Black women. And when she criticizes Martin Delany for elitism and sexism, the solution to his oversight is to turn one's attention to the state of home life among the Black masses. Encouraging Black women to recognize the importance of homemaking then is not evidence of condescension and elitism, but rather evidence of her awareness and appreciation of the important role the Black masses had to play in racial uplift. Her celebration of domestic progress is not an endorsement of domesticity as the only proper province of women, then, so much as a direct critique of elitism and sexism among existing Black leadership and an advocacy for a more inclusive, anti-elitist, and anti-sexist approach to racial uplift. She cautions her audience against the tendency to "mistake individuals' honor for race development," in effect "substitut[ing] pretty accomplishments for sound sense and earnest purpose."[78] Cooper and other race women certainly retained some elitist biases, but the uncritical allegiance of some feminist scholars to the elitist ramifications of respectability politics demands more nuance.

[78] Cooper 29.

Cooper's critique of classism is far-reaching rather than cursory. Not only does she identify and resist the cultural iterations of sexism in her critique of feudalism, but she also attacks another critical ideological and institutional site of sexism—the Church. Here her own class position does reflect a degree of conflict, given the laudatory manner in which she celebrates the high church worship style of the Episcopal Church. In fact, she refers to more charismatic styles of worship as being evidence of a "peculiar fault" among colored people, that being a love for "rank exuberance and often ludicrous demonstrativeness." Certainly, Cooper's elitism is inexcusable here.

However, her preference for worship style does not translate into a wholesale agreement with the Episcopal Church's distant engagement within Black communities. She actually tells her audience that the reason the Episcopal Church has been ineffective in ministering to Black communities is precisely because its worship style and laissez-faire attitude does not "calculat[e] for the Black man's personality; not having respect. . .to his manhood or deferring at all to his conceptions of the needs of his people."[79] Here she critiques the church for failing to include Black men in the leadership and decision making apparatuses of the church. In particular, Cooper is disturbed by the continual meeting of "a conference of earnest Christian men," white men, who had met "at regular intervals for some years past to discuss the best methods of promoting the welfare and development of the colored people of the country." Yet they had never invited any colored men to the proceedings. Thus, Cooper dismisses the validity—if not earnestness—of the work, characterizing their findings as "remedial contrivances [which were] purely theoretical or empirical," "and the whole machinery devoid of soul."[80] Here

[79] Cooper 37.
[80] Cooper 37.

Cooper uses the linguistic capital of the church, specifically in her invocation of notions of soul and personality, to expose the flaws in the manner and method of solving the race problem that had heretofore been undertaken by the church. The words soul and personality here act as synecdoche for the presence of Black bodies within the deliberative spaces convened by the church. The invocation of these words also acts as a rhetorical call to theorize the race problem on the basis of Black people's lived experience rather than empty theories or uncritical observations made through the flawed lens of the racially powerful. Inasmuch as these interventions seem to be primarily about racial exclusion, there is a recognizable class dimension to Cooper's critique.

Unapologetically, Cooper informs her Christian audience that Black people were not "drawn" to the church--as Christian theology often assumed people should be--precisely because they were unable to relate to the highly esteemed leadership of the church, "American caste and American Christianity both being facts," Cooper parenthetically quips. What is missing in Cooper's estimation is a sense of "human nature in" the church, the same impulse for human relationships that was manifested in " 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' that he might 'draw' us towards God." And Cooper reminds her audience that this disposition toward a notion of the "word made flesh" was critical because "men are not 'drawn' by abstractions. Only sympathy and love can draw." And this can occur only when clergy "can come in touch with our life and have a fellow feeling for our woes."[81] Karen Baker-Fletch argues that the "crux of Cooper's Christology" was that "Christ received the least of these. Likewise, the Church

---

[81] Cooper 41.

must receive the least of these."[82] The church had failed then, because its traditions were steeped in notions of class and respectability which prevented it and the people who were part of it from relating to the common man. And Cooper's own litmus test for theories of racial uplift and for the validity of church ministry, as it were, was the extent to which those theories respected, helped, and were based upon the experiences of common people. This view is slightly different than Gaines' critique of racial uplift which assumes that the elite felt that their higher social position gave them the prerogative to impose standards on the masses. While Gaines is right to critique what he refers to as Cooper's "southern, nativist apolog[etic] for anti-labor views," his assertion that Cooper "took for granted that Black elites. . .necessarily spoke for the majority," is not borne out by her extensive class critique within the text and her commitment to activism on behalf of the working-class throughout her life. While Gaines acknowledges the "multiplicity of voices" which emerge in Cooper's text, his identification of her as uncritically nativist and anti-labor fails to employ the level of nuance demanded in explicating Cooper's thought. Cooper rejects all theories which do not inherently involve the masses of people in their very formulation. It is in Cooper's critique of the church's silencing of women that she most directly extends the lines of argument advanced by Stewart. Her critique of the church's elitism provides an opportunity to go beyond Stewart's critique and concerns. And Cooper's critique of the church and its exclusionary theological and ministry practices gives rise to her own theory of activism and textual practice, conceptualized in her invocation of logos.

---

[82] Karen Baker-Fletcher, *A Singing Something: Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper* (New York:Crossroad, 1994): 77.

"What doest thou?": Education and the Dialogism of Theory and Praxis

In her now classic text, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins reflects upon the historical relationship between theory and praxis among African American women, arguing that theory and practice share a dialogic relationship. Cooper decried those religious leaders who came together regularly to engage in purely theoretical and empirical suppositions—what Cooper called "remedial contrivances"—about the social condition of Black people. Collins echoes Cooper's obvious disdain, reminding us that in Black feminist thought "knowledge for knowledge's sake is not enough—Black feminist thought must both be tied to Black women's lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion."[83] Cooper admonishes her audience yet again in her characteristic sarcasm: "this may sound presumptuous and ungrateful. It is mortifying, I know, to benevolent wisdom, after having spent itself in the execution of well conned theories for the ideal development of a particular work, to hear perhaps the weakest and humblest element of that work asking 'what doest thou?'"[84] Clearly, Cooper believes that if any action should be the humble action within this pairing, it should be theoretical work, especially since it can only be validated by the extent to which it makes life better for Black people.

Cooper is not the first race woman to point to the necessity of a dialogic relationship between theory and practice. Maria Stewart had also told her audiences to learn and then "practise what we do know." In 1891, Ida B. Wells gave a speech entitled "The Requisites of True Leadership" at the American Association of Educators of Colored Youth Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. One of the most succinct and

---

[83] Collins 31.
[84] Cooper 38.

powerful observations that Wells made as she considered the effectiveness of the Black educated elite was that "truly it is a condition tangible and real, and not a theory which confronts us."[85] Wells was greatly disturbed by the inability of newly educated Black young adults to make any effective inroads into the race problem. In her estimation, their inefficacy was, in part, a function of their inability to meld a theoretical understanding of the race problem with the real material effects of that problem on actual people. Thus, she instructs her audience of fellow educators that Black youth need "training which will meet existing and not imaginary conditions" and that they "should not only go out from these institutions with trained intellects, skilled hands, and refined tastes …
but they should be taught in some concrete systematic way" how to lead the masses of people.[86] Much like Stewart and Cooper, Wells anticipates here the Washington and Du Bois debates by several years.[87] Wells ultimately supports Du Bois' propositions in *The Souls of Black Folk*, evincing a commitment both to classical training and to instruction in the trades. And though she believes that the intellectual elite have a duty to the masses of people, unlike Du Bois, she does not think that intellect intrinsically makes one a better leader.

The debate over the purposes of education had been a long standing one in Black communities which had been denied access to basic educational opportunity for centuries. These debates took on a new urgency and salience in the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction periods because the nature of Black education and Black folks'

---

[85] Ida B. Wells, "The Requisites of True Leadership," in *Can I Get A Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women—An Anthology*, ed. Marcia Y. Riggs (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997): 63.
[86] Wells 64.
[87] Wells' contributions to these debates had until very recently been mired in historical silence. For contemporary correctives, see the work of Paula Giddings, *IDA: A Sword Among Lions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008) and Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).

access to educational opportunity were seen as inextricably bound with the ability of the race to make progress. In his 1903 essay "The Talented Tenth"—one of the seminal essays in the debate over race leadership and the importance of Black educational opportunity—Du Bois argued that "education and work are the levers to uplift a people."[88] However, Cooper had made this argument more than a decade earlier telling her Episcopal audience, that with regard to the "regeneration" and "the retraining of the race," "no other hand [could] move the lever" but that of the Black woman. Thus, she need to "be loosed from her bands and set to work."[89] As was his tendency, Du Bois failed often to place his work in explicit conversation with his race women predecessors and contemporaries.

Nevertheless, it is into these long-running conversations that Cooper enters with her essay "The Higher Education of Women." Whereas Stewart had called for the building of schools so that women could learn, it is Cooper who takes up Stewart's implicit argument about the value of educating women and responds extensively to the criticisms of such a move. And it is her and race women like Nannie Helen Burroughs, Lucy Craft Laney, Carrie Tuggle and Charlotte Hawkins Brown who actually heed Stewart's call to start schools for the education of young women.[90] With her characteristic sarcastic humor, Cooper comically dismisses those early critics of higher

---

[88] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth" in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings,* (New York: Library of America, 1986).

[89] Cooper 28.

[90] Not all of these schools were single-sex. Burroughs started the National Training School for Girls in Washington, D.C. in 1900. Laney started the Haines Normal and Industrial Institute in Augusta, Georgia in 1883. Carrie Tuggle started the Tuggle Institute which was a residential school for homeless boys in Birmingham, Alabama in 1903. It is now known as Carrie Tuggle Elementary School, and Angela Davis notes in her autobiography that she was educated there. Charlotte Hawkins Brown started the Palmer Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina in 1902. Cooper served as principal and teacher at the M Street School –now Dunbar High School—and also as president of Frelinghuysen University in the first half of the 20th century in Washington, D.C.

education of women who thought that this idea was a "rather dangerous experiment." Cooper facetiously characterizes these men as "the good fathers, who looked as if they had been caught secretly mixing explosive compounds and were guiltily expecting every moment to see the foundations under them shaken and rent and their fair superstructure shattered into fragments." Rather underwhelmingly, Cooper notes, "the girls came, and there was no upheaval."[91] Thus Cooper concludes that women have "a real and special influence." And this influence will only reach its full potential if it becomes "a common everyday affair for women to reason and think and express their thought." Higher education would provide "the training and stimulus to enable and encourage women to administer to the world the bread it needs and the sugar it cries for." And the far-reaching implication of the training is that it will "give symmetry and completeness to the world's agencies."[92]

Cooper emphatically claims the Enlightenment as the source of her ideas about the importance of education, suggesting that we should "demand from them for the twentieth century a higher type of civilization than any attained in the nineteenth." All the major and classic disciplines—"religion, science, art, and economics"—"have needed the feminine touch."[93] The reference to women's ability to offer a "feminine touch" reflected Cooper's own assertion "that there is a feminine as well as a masculine side to truth."[94] While Cooper's notions about the feminine and the masculine reflect a belief in complementarity as a gender role ideology, they are not a reflection of gender essentialism. Stephanie Evans argues that while Cooper "argued that men possessed

---

[91] Cooper 49.
[92] Cooper 57.
[93] Cooper 57.
[94] Cooper 60.

greater reason and women greater sympathy[,] she linked this to the pervasiveness of gender roles in socialization rather than to biological destiny."[95] In fact, Cooper provides explicit examples of women who do not fit the more genteel social role, but ultimately these women were "simply mimicking dominant sentiment."[96]

Cooper also addresses what she mockingly refers to "as the most serious argument ever used against higher education. If it interferes with marriage, classical training has a grave objection to weigh and answer."[97] Even before answering this objection, Cooper's position is patently clear. However, she indulges her audience for the sake of argument. And she concedes that "intellectual development, with the self-reliance and capacity for earning a livelihood it gives, renders woman less dependent on the marriage relation for physical support." Moreover, the woman is no longer "compelled to look to sexual love as the one sensation capable of giving tone and relish, movement and vim to the life she leads. Her horizon is extended. Her sympathies are broadened, deepened and multiplied."[98] Clearly, then, marriageability is a worthy concession for Cooper though it might seem costly to her audience. But ultimately what Cooper suggests is that higher education is threatening precisely because it inverts or at least equalizes the power dynamic in marriage relationships by shifting the interrogative force of qualification from the woman to the man: "The question is not now with the woman 'How shall I so cramp, stunt, simplify, and nullify myself as to make me eligible to the honor of being swallowed up into some little man?' but the problem, I trow[sic], now rests with the man as to how he can so develop his God-given powers as to reach the

---

[95] Evans 146.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Cooper 69.
[98] Ibid.

ideal of a generation of women who demand the noblest, grandest, and best achievements of which he is capable."[99] Cooper's arguments have special implications for race women, many of whom struggled with whether or not to be married. Both Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell were married late by the standards of their time, and Wells indicated throughout her twenties that she preferred the company of multiple gentlemen callers.[100]

Eventually, Cooper gets to the main point of her essay, which is a defense of the "higher education of colored women." Importantly, though, she builds the essay upon the premise that since education is necessary and prudent for women, it is therefore prudent for colored women. In other words, she argues for Black women's access to educational opportunity, not from the standpoint of their racial oppression but from the standpoint of their gender oppression. And she offers reasons for this late in the essay:

> it seems hardly a gracious thing to say, but it strikes me as true, that while our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into sixteenth century logic. . . they actually do not seem to have outgrown that old contemporary of chivalry – the idea that women may stand on pedestals or live in doll houses . . .but they must not furrow their brows with thought or attempt to help men tug at the great questions of the world. I fear the majority of colored men do not yet think it worth while that women aspire to higher education.[101]

But in response Cooper asserts that "we might as well expect to grow trees from leaves as hope to build up a civilization or a manhood without taking into consideration our women and the home life made by them, which must be the root and ground of the whole

---

[99] Ibid 70-71.
[100] See Miriam, DeCosta-Willis (ed.) *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
[101] Cooper 75.

matter." And thus she offers her charge to race men and women to offer "special encouragement for the education of women and special care for their training." The goal of such training is one of the most succinct statements of the role of race women to emerge in the nineteenth century: "teach them that there is a race with special needs which they and only they can help; that the world needs and is already asking for their trained, efficient forces." And much like her forebear Maria Stewart, Cooper asks not for lip service but that "money be raised and scholarships founded in our colleges and universities for self-supporting, worthy young women to offset and balance the aid that can always be found for boys who will take theology." In fact, Cooper declares, "the earnest well trained Christian young woman . . .is as potent a missionary agency . . .as is the theologian" and at that historical moment, "even more important and necessary."[102]

Cooper's arguments about the importance of education reflected a commitment to the training of a generation of race women who could meet the special needs of their race. Certainly, intellectual development was to be considered a source of personal pleasure, but even in all of their acquisition of education, Cooper insisted that young girls be trained with a sense of duty to use their education to aid their race. Stephanie Shaw has argued that Black women were socialized within an "ethic of socially responsible individualism" which demanded that they come back and assist their communities after they received educational training.[103] Here, however, Cooper does not call for these women to become part of a trained intellectual elite as scholars like Joy James have argued.[104] In fact, Cooper believes that it will take not only trained teachers but also homemakers, wives, and mothers to constitute an effective missionary agency in the post-

---

[102] Cooper 79.
[103] Shaw 2.
[104] James, Chapter 2.

Reconstruction South. Her later work with Frelinghuysen University, a night school extension that provided college work for working class Black people, reflects a continuing commitment to universal educational access.

And finally, Cooper understood education as training for racial uplift. She fully expected within the "ethic of socially responsible individualism" that training would translate directly into praxis. While Wells had alerted Black audiences in the early 1890s, that training had not been seamlessly translating to effective praxis for racial uplift, Cooper seemed to believe that increased access to education among women would guard against this disconnect because women were always in touch with and connected to their communities. Evans argued that for Cooper "earning an education was a form of service, and those who had the privilege of formal learning owed their gains to the community."[105]

What Does "Race" Mean to the Race Woman?: Refiguring Black Racial Identity Through Cooperian Logos, a Theory of Embodied Discourse

For almost three decades, Black feminist theorists have employed an intersectional framework that analyzes the interlocking meanings of race, class, and gender as organized categories of identity and oppression in Black women's lives. To be known or know oneself as a "race woman," necessarily demands a discussion of the categories of race and gender. Although Black feminist thought has done an excellent job of reorienting scholarship on women, and more recently men in the emerging field of masculinity studies, towards a critical consideration of gender and the modes and manners in which it interacts with, is shaped by, and reshapes race and class, these discussions have had a particular bent in discussing Black women's lives. A central

[105] Shaw 180.

conversation about race and gender in Black feminist thought has been the conflicting terrain of Black nationalist and Black feminist struggle, particularly as it manifested during the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. For obvious reasons, then, a discussion of race that is rooted in or based upon the Black power politics and paradigms of the 1970s provides an inappropriate and insufficient starting ground for considering conceptualizations of race among women who began their activism in the 1890s.[106]

It is accurate to say, however, that concerns about the nature and definition of Black racial identity were particularly salient in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction moments. Figures like Cooper and Du Bois viewed Emancipation as marking the birth of African American racial identity. Significantly, Du Bois has been credited for his groundbreaking contributions to the study of Black racial identity in America with essays like "Conservation of the Races," published in 1897 and the famous *The Souls of Black Folk* published in 1903. In one of his most famously cited observations, he argued that the Negro possessed a double-consciousness, which guided—and in many respects, overdetermined—the Black person's relationship to the world as a racialized being:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One

---

[106] Wilson Jeremiah Moses has argued that Black Nationalism certainly existed during the 1890s. In fact he originally characterized the period 1850-1925 as the Golden Age of Black Nationalism. More recently, he has revised the earlier work which appeared in 1988. While Black nationalism existed in the 19th century in a significant manner, it did not bear the same relationship to the shaping of 19th century Black feminist thought as it did to 20th century feminist thought. See *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1920,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and the more recent *Classic Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Garvey,* (New York: NYU Press, 1996).

> ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro--; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[107]

The Du Boisian notion of double-consciousness has been a critical starting place for engaging the discussion of Black racial and national identity in the 20th century. Here, though, I would point us to Du Bois' invocation of a Black corporeality in his portrait of a body warring against a set of competing ideals. This invocation of an embattled Black body struggling to relate to a world that views it as "a problem" has its prima facie significance in that Du Bois concedes that Black people are embodied human beings within the very language that he uses to describe their struggle against inhumane and racist treatment, often manifested as physical violence toward their actual bodies.

Several scholars have pointed to the tenuous relationship between Du Bois and Anna Julia Cooper at the turn-of-the-century. Most importantly, Washington, May, and James have pointed to Du Bois' failure to acknowledge the ways that Cooper contributed to his own intellectual positions, especially in his discussion of the race as a "problem".[108] Here, however, I am interested in considering the relationship between his early theorization of Black racial and national identity as iterated in *Souls* with Cooper's own theorization of Black racial and national identity as iterated in *Voice.*[109] Cooper offers some clue concerning her understanding of Black racial identity in the first essay in *Voice*. As part of her strident critique of racism and elitism within the Episcopal Church,

---

[107] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk (Vintage Books Edition),* (New York: Library of America, 1986): 8-9. This discussion appears in the first chapter of *Souls*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings."

[108] Joy James and Mary Helen Washington both discuss Du Bois' usage of Cooper's famous "when and where I enter" quotation in which he attributed the statement to "a woman of our race," when he well knew her name. It is also evident that Du Bois wrote his book *Black Reconstruction* at Cooper's prompting, though he never acknowledged her. See also May 143.

[109] Here I am specifically interested in Du Bois positions in *The Souls of Black Folk* as opposed to his later revisions of this and his more radical views on race that emerge in the mid 20th century.

she argues that one critical move the church must make is to identify itself with the masses of people. However, this identification takes place in a very specific and unique manner. Rather than simply theorizing from a supposedly objective position, Cooper tells the Church that it should be like Jesus, who was according to the Gospel of John "the Word made flesh" and who, more importantly, "dwelt among us."[110] We have already noted the extent to which religious practice and nascent womanist/feminist theology informed the practices of race women. In this representation of the historical Jesus, the Messiah made human, Cooper invokes a Johannine notion of humanity that is central to her ethical understanding of leadership and that is commensurate with her understanding of racial identity. The Gospel of John begins with this premise, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Later in this chapter, John tells us that the Word, who was made flesh, is none other than Jesus Christ. The use of the term "Word" is a translation from the Greek word "logos" or discourse. It is also sometimes translated as "reason." So John posits something new, different, and central about the nature of the historical Jesus, namely that he is logos, or discourse embodied.

Cooper would have been quite knowledgeable about this theological information both because of her background in Greek and Latin and also because of theological courses she took at both St. Augustine's and Oberlin in the 1870s and 1880s. In her demand, then, that discourse be absolutely congruent with the lives of the human beings that were its theoretical objects, she implied that discourse was irreducibly tied to a notion of lived and embodied experience. While Cooper's understanding of logos originated in her understanding of Jesus, she ultimately expanded this notion to a fuller

---

[110] See Gospel of St. John, Chapter 1.

conception of Black racial identity, Black womanhood, and an ethical notion of leadership.

The discourse of race in *Voice* then, is predicated upon a notion of embodiment just as much as it engages with the major philosophical tenets of the day. When we look more closely at Du Bois' rendering of a warring Black body, those representations of embodied experience are represented in the language of warring internal *ideals* or discourses about the nature of Black identity. In this same way, Cooper understands that their ontological implications for Black humanity and personhood in this war of discourses concerning the Black body. In "Woman vs. Indian," an essay in which she is primarily concerned to critique the racism of the white women's movement and to consider the dangerous implications of white women's adherence to America's nationalist and imperialist tendencies, Cooper argues that intellectual independence both prefigures and compels "the world-wide enfranchisement of [man's] body and all its activities."[111] While the discursive and the corporeal are distinctly different, one is inextricably bound to the other. For Cooper, the end goal of logos or embodied discourse is that humanity is "rationally free."[112] This goal is in line with an understanding of Jesus as the Great Liberator, not because he actually created a political revolution, but because He claimed to be and was for Cooper and other race women, the embodiment of freedom and the highest form of humanity to which man or woman could ascend.

If an embodied experience of freedom was the highest humanity that man could attain, then Cooper necessarily presented Black racial identity in embodied human form. For race women, whose primary concern was uplifting the race, determining the proper

---

[111] Cooper 120.
[112] Ibid.

grounds upon which to argue for a notion of Black people's humanity was critical. Moreover, race women always made these arguments with an eye toward vindicating race women as leaders of the race. In this respect Cooper was no exception. Although she was ultimately concerned with vindicating women as legitimate historical actors, a move that would make them indispensable to America's and Black people's pursuit of progress, Cooper begins this argument by theorizing the nature of Black racial identity. Explicitly drawing on the image of the Black body to make her arguments, Cooper constructs the Black race as a young, growing body, in need of a nurturing and guiding force. This intrinsically creates a leadership role for Black women as mothers, guiding a maturing race. Her strategic positioning of Black women vis-à-vis the whole Black race revises understandings of Black female identity which read it solely through the limited paradigms of what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls the "metalanguage of race," which refers to the "powerful, all encompassing effect [of racial discourse] on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class and sexuality." [113]

Race women, always attentive to the way in which racial discourses obscured their particular experience as women, rarely advanced a conceptualization of Black female identity that was not also a theory of Black racial identity, more generally. For instance, Cooper's argument for the importance of Black female leadership in the project of American progressivism also advances a conception about the nature of Black racial identity:

---

[113] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham,"African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" *Signs*, Winter 1992.

> In this last decade of our century, changes of such moment are in progress, such new and alluring vistas are opening out before us, such original and radical suggestions for the adjustment of labor and capital, of government and the governed, of the family, the church and the state, that to be a possible factor, though an infinitesimal [one] in such a movement is pregnant with hope and weighty with responsibility. To be a woman in such an age carries with it a privilege and an opportunity never implied before. But to be a woman of the Negro race in America , and to be able to grasp the deep significance of the possibilities of the crisis, is to have a heritage, it seems to me, unique in all the ages. [114]

Here Cooper argues that Black women's history of subjugation positions them to birth not only a new race, but a new vision of America. Her invocation of the imagery of an expectant body—and thus a female body-- subtly subverts the prior implications of Black women's reproductive capacity within the context of slavery by arguing that Black women's abject and peripheral subject position in slavery and during the advent and decline of Reconstruction has given them an objectivity that would make them central to American progressivism. It also acts as a direct challenge to the culture of dissemblance which often found Black women muting any evidence of reproductive capacity in order to gain respect and recognition. Cooper goes on to argue that the "race is young and full of the elasticity and hopefulness of youth. All its achievements are before it. . . . Everything to this race is new and strange and inspiring. There is a quickening of it is pulses and a glowing of its self-consciousness."[115] The picture is of a very young racial

---

[114] Cooper 143-144.
[115] Cooper 144.

body, just emerging from the womb and going through the early stages of human development. Here Cooper writes the Black body into the text, intrinsically ascribing the power and possibilities of human subjectivity to Black people, an achievement which is no small epistemological and ontological feat. This understanding of racial identity undergirds Cooper's conception of race work as it relates to race women: "a race in such a stage of growth is peculiarly sensitive to impressions . . . .What a responsibility then to have sole management of the primal lights and shadows! Such is the colored woman's office. She must stamp weal or woe on the coming history of this people."[116]

Cooper's philosophical project is significant because she argues for "Africans in America" to be considered as legitimate historical actors and subjects, not on solely metaphysical grounds but also with consequent and deliberate attention to the ways in which the Black body—conceived as a newly born race—knows the world sentiently through its body. She elevates this form of knowledge-getting to equal status within the life of the American body politic and then argues that Black women are capable of guiding the race in the right direction. The particularly violent treatment of Black bodies, male and female, within the American body politic has made Black bodies a very unique conduit for acquiring oppositional knowledge about race, gender, and nation, an observation that would also constitute the nucleus of Ida B. Well's racial theorizing and anti-lynching movement.[117] Cooper's "race is just twenty-one years removed from the conception and experience of chattel, just at the age of ruddy manhood," a growing,

---

[116] Cooper 145.
[117] For a discussion of the Black body and its relationship to national identity, see the work of Kimberly Wallace-Sanders and other contributors in her work *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

stretching, thinking, feeling, moving, impressionable body, that is just beginning to “flex” its muscles.[118]

Unlike Du Bois, the African and the American are not experiencing internal conflict, but rather an external conflict based upon the misconception that racialized beings are unable to participate in the progress of history. She uses this tactic to “demonstrate that one’s own lived experience is an important source of knowledge.”[119] Moreover, she subverts the social objectification of Black women by arguing that their position makes them spectators, who have a powerful gaze of their own: “There are those, however, who value the calm elevation of the thoughtful spectator who stands aloof from the heated scramble; and above the turmoil and din of corruption and selfishness can listen to the teachings of eternal truth and righteousness. . . .The colored woman, then, should not be ignored because her bark is resting in the silent waters of the sheltered cove. She is watching the movements of the contestants none the less and is all the better qualified, perhaps, to weigh and judge and advise because not herself in the excitement of the race.”[120]

The gendered identity of these corporeal images should also not escape our notice. At differing moments, Cooper’s representations of the Black body include a pregnant woman, a young man, an embryonic, gender neutral body, and even her own body, experiencing various modes of segregation. Perhaps her two most salient images are that of the pregnant woman, who expects to birth a new nation, and the young man of the race, “just at the age of ruddy manhood” who is poised to experience all of the new possibilities of maturity and humanity, having just been removed, Cooper notes, “from

---

[118] Cooper 26.
[119] May, Chapter 5, and pages 182-187.
[120] Cooper 138.

the experience of chattel." In picking these particular images of the pregnant woman and the strong, strapping, eager young man, Cooper is strategically responding to stages of Black people's maturity that had constituted the greatest threat from them during slavery and during Reconstruction. Black women's capacity to reproduce children who would become slaves had been the major determinant of their value throughout the history of the American republic, and this capacity had also made them especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Cooper, however, in her invocation of an expectant female body, offers new creative and procreative possibilities to Black women. At the most literal level, Black women are no longer producing children who will become slaves, but instead children who will be viewed as citizens. In another respect, the presence of an engaged and socially responsible Black citizenry will inherently transform the American body politic.

In this same vein, Cooper's imagery of a 21 year old, Black male, a legal adult, who is eager to make his way in the world, challenges several stereotypical notions of Blacks males as lazy, perpetually immature and childish, and unmotivated. She characterizes this state of maturity as a moment of profound possibility for both Black people and for America, and as a critical moment for "retrospection, introspection, and prospection."[121] But most importantly, this young man's youthful, healthy, sanguine complexion, exemplified in Cooper's use of the term "ruddy," situates him as a positive addition in American life. This young man is not a potential rapist or criminal, but instead a person who has been given the freedom to mature to adulthood and pursue life's possibilities. Black people's progress since slavery "proves that there is nothing irretrievably wrong in the shape of the Black man's skull, and that under given circumstances his development, downward or upward, will be similar to that of average

[121] Cooper 26-27.

human beings."[122] Moreover, Cooper's characterization of the race at this stage of "ruddy manhood" directly follows her disputation of prevailing ideology that Black people's skulls were smaller, rendering them less intellectually capable than their white counterparts. Cooper's use of the term "Black man," seems to be a universal, gender inclusive term, denoting all Black people. Nevertheless, her invocation of a young male body ready to encounter the transforming American body politic, is deliberate, in that it seeks to concede the inherency of Black manhood, in an ideological system bent upon denying such a status to Black males.

Cooper's arguments have major epistemological implications for Black people because she argues that the sensations gained as a growing and vibrant Black body moves through the world are as legitimate a form of knowledge production as that of the "learned theorizers" who pontificate about Black life without determining how their theories cohere with Black experience. Most importantly, race women, in Cooper's estimation, can be rightly esteemed as subjects and agents not only of history but also of knowledge production, and particularly of knowledge that has liberating implications for Black people. Cooper's discursive rendering of a Black body here as actively engaged in the process of knowledge production reinforces the importance of understanding embodied discourse as we read the texts of race women. The knowledge gained through their bodies becomes an important source of evidence for legitimating their knowledge claims with regard not only to life but also to leadership of Black people. Quoting scholar and poet Elizabeth Alexander, Vivian May reminds us that "Cooper posits an African American woman's lived experience as evidentiary."[123]

---

[122] Cooper 26.
[123] Alexander, qtd. in May 163.

Additionally, Cooper's invocation of embodied discourse moves us beyond the basic need for a congruency between theory and practice. While a dialogic relationship between theory and practice is essential to advancing Black people's access to freedom, in order for a full recognition of Black humanity, Black people must be able to both determine and then "live into" the discourses that will determine their lives. Anticipating Du Bois' question "How does it feel to be a problem?" Cooper responds in her essay "What Are We Worth?" that "our great 'problem' after all is to be solved not by brooding over it, but by *living into it.*"[124] Cooper means that the evidence of a man's or woman's contribution and worth to humanity will be determined by the quality of the life he/she lives. Accordingly, "the test for systems of belief, for schools of thought, and for theories of conduct"—Christianity included—"is also the ultimate and inevitable test of nations, of races, and of individuals. What sort of men do you turn out?"[125] In other words, the test for the legitimacy and truth of one's knowledge claims will be measured by the extent to which man or woman can effectively embody and live out those truth claims in the material world.

More importantly, though, Cooper's text itself becomes an example of the ways in which race women invoke embodied discourse as a textual practice. Cooper "daringly 'writes her body'" and the bodies of other Black women and men into her text. Her corporeal inscriptions and insertions directly refute the belief in America's achievement of democratic ideals and provides a gendered sense of the unique ways that Black women experience racism. For instance, in what is most assuredly an allusion to Ida B. Wells' violent encounter on a train in the late 1880s, Cooper writes, "I purposely forbear to

---

[124] Cooper 285.
[125] Cooper 284.

mention instances of personal violence to colored women traveling in less civilized sections of our country, where women have been forcibly ejected from cars, thrown out of seats, their garments rudely torn, their person wantonly and cruelly injured."[126] The Black female body experiences racism in a uniquely gendered manner, one that prefigures what Pauli Murray will come to describe as Jane Crow in the 20th century. Cooper uses this example to challenge white women's racism in the women's movement and their failure to acknowledge the manner in which Southern chivalry, while protecting them, endangered Black women by rendering their womanhood invisible or irrelevant. Moreover, this invocation of Black women's lived experience challenged white women's inability to view Black women as ladies, in much the same way that Sojourner Truth had challenged exclusive definitions of "woman." Ida B. Wells also understood that the pervasive violence against Black men and women's bodies through unchecked lynching and rape constituted an oppositional base of knowledge within the American body politic, since it highlighted the lived experiences of those whose bodies were not protected under the American rule of law.

In this same chapter, Cooper recounts an incident in which she searched for a ladies room at a train station. When she found the bathroom, one door was marked "for ladies" and the other "for colored people." This created a moment of cognitive and experiential dissonance for Cooper who was left "wondering under which head I come."[127] Elizabeth Alexander reads this as a moment of textual resistance for Cooper who is faced with a choice that will necessarily "eras[e] some crucial part of her identity." On the other hand, "to embrace both and act upon them render her a literally

---

[126] Cooper 91. Wells actually sued the rail line for segregating her, won, and was awarded damages. However, the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the case.
[127] Cooper 96.

impossible body in her time and space."[128] In this moment, "Cooper reminds her readers . . .that she lives and moves within a physical body with sensations and needs."[129] In addition to reinforcing the indispensability of lived experience to understanding Black female identity, Cooper's inclusion of this incident also exposes another reason that Black women must write their bodies into the text. The discursive technologies of race that operate in the signs "for ladies" and "for colored" inherently constitute discursive and textual acts of misrecognition for Black women. The only way to achieve any recognition is to insert a body into the text that challenges the identities signified in the labels.

Cooper's own insistence upon invoking her corporeality within the text makes it untenable for scholars to read Black women's literature solely through the lens of the culture of dissemblance or the cult of true womanhood. Cooper is clear here that the cult of true womanhood, by its very nature excludes Black women. Moreover, she recognizes that muting her body, or dissembling, does not offer her any safety or prospects for achieving respectability. In order for her audience to understand her dilemma, they must confront her body. Unlike Katherine Fishburn's claim that the Black body is absent from the text in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, after the decline of the slave narrative, Cooper, Terrell, Wells, and other race women successors are explicitly concerned with the treatment of Black bodies in public life and also with their own ability to engage their

---

[128] Elizabeth Alexander, "We Must Be About Our Father's Business,": Anna Julia Cooper and the In-Corporation of the Nineteenth Century African-American Female Intellectual," *Signs* 20, no.2 (1995): 344.
[129] Alexander 345.

bodies as sources of pleasure within the private sphere.[130] Their bodies are absolutely present in their texts as my discussions in later chapters will exemplify.

Embodied discourse has important implications for understanding race women's lives, writing, and activism. As activists, race women measured racial progress by examining the lived experiences of Black people, especially women and children. They understood much like Cooper that discourses were sufficient only to the extent that they could "alleviate the world's suffering and lighten and brighten its woe."[131] Cooper also understood that embodied representations of the Black subject are the most legitimate way to convey the immanence of Black humanity and personhood. Thus her text concedes the inherency of Black humanity from the first page forward and confronts those who would impede full expressions of Black humanity. Vivian May has argued that Cooper's invocation of embodiment intrinsically posited the validity of "situated forms of knowing"[132] and knowledge production as opposed to the supposedly "universal and objective" forms of knowing touted by enlightenment thinkers: "Cooper amply demonstrates that those who claim to rise above socio-political contexts or seek to purge all affect or embodiment from their observations cannot fully succeed." Moreover May, drawing on the work Linda Alcoff, reminds us that the body "is not 'always simply a drag on theory," although, "this is the general argument usually presented to counter claims derived from openly 'embodied' knowing." Instead, "Cooper stands by her

---

[130] Katherine Fishburn, *The Problem of Embodiment in Early African American Narrative* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997). See Epilogue, esp. pages 146-148. And certainly Wells' various exposes on lynching cannot be seen as texts which "speak the absent body." See Fishburn 38.

[131] Cooper 54.

[132] Situated knowledge is a hallmark concept in the feminist critique of objectivity. It suggests that everyone must situate themselves within a historical, social, political, racial and gender context and acknowledge the ways that these contexts inform the "knowledges" they produce and standpoints they have, i.e. feminist standpoint theory. See Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

situated knowing and suggests that other Black women do the same."[133] By forcing her audience to acknowledge the situated nature of her claims, Cooper inherently forces them to grapple with her and other Black women as thinking human beings, subjects of knowledge, and agents of knowledge production.

Cooper's text acts as a transition text, ushering in a new era of Black women's autobiographical writing. Elizabeth Alexander has argued that because Cooper locates her body in her text, "her words 'stand in a new space between the first-person confession of the slave narrative or spiritual autobiography and the third-person imperative of political [or philosophical] essays."[134] Moreover, "by writing her body into the texts as she does, Cooper forges textual space for the creation of the turn-of-the-century African American female intellectual."[135] By inaugurating a notion of Cooperian logos which refigures classic Western philosophical understandings by insisting upon connections between corporeality and discourse, Cooper engenders new possibilities for Black women's autobiographies that emerge at the beginning of the 20th century.

Here James Olney's discussion of Heraclitus' notion of logos is instructive. For Heraclitus, logos represented a "oneness of self, an integrity or internal harmony that holds together the multiplicity and continual transformations of being." Moreover, "in every individual to the degree that he is an individual, the whole principle and essence of the logos is wholly present. . . .What the logos demands of the individual is that he should realize his logos, which is also more than his own or private logos—it is the Logos." [136]

---

[133] May 163-164.
[134] Alexander 338.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Cooperian logos is distinct then from Aristotelian conceptions of logos. It is also to be distinguished from other invocations of logos that have been used to theorize autobiography. James Olney's discussion of Heraclitus' notion of logos is helpful here. In this respect, logos is "realized in the cosmos and in the self as

Cooper echoes these sentiments: "as individuals, we are constantly and inevitably, whether we are conscious of it or not, giving out our real selves into our several little worlds, inexorably adding our own true ray to the flood of starlight, quite independently of our professions and our masquerading."[137] In this respect, her comments reflect a desire for Logos to be "not an 'imitation' of the unity of the Logos, nor [an] individual's piece of the logos" but instead a fully realized, teleological shift within the self. Cooper, however, does not understand the Logos to be some independent cosmological entity, but the embodied historical person of Jesus Christ.

Additionally, she moves beyond traditional Western understandings, by grappling with the emergence of subjectivity within Black bodies that inherently signify disharmony within the racialized schemas of American society. When she reminds her audience that "American caste and American Christianity" are both facts, she points to the irreconcilable nature of Blackness with logos as it is currently propagated in American institutions. So she cannot simply invoke logos in its classic Western sense. She must invoke it as a project which is able to included people of African descent, which changes the grounds upon which logos can be realized. In this respect, Cooper revises the teleological end of logos, such that it is not solely a fully unified and coherent self capable of textual representation, but a logos which demands full *recognition* of Black humanity within the larger public sphere. Moreover, Cooperian logos has an ethical dimension which is invested in helping Black people to achieve the highest form of humanity and in demanding a commitment to human freedom from all who would purport to uplift Black people.

---

a teleological change." See James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972): 5-6

[137] Cooper 55.

Re-Constituting the American Body Politic through a Cooperian Invocation of the Body

When Maria Stewart delivered her fiery public address at Franklin Hall in 1832, she told her audience that she had high hopes and aspirations that her race could rise beyond lives of "continual drudgery and toil" because America instilled those hopes in her citizens. Stewart declared, "I am a true born American; your blood flows in my veins, and your spirit fires my breast."[138] Her American bloodline was a vivifying force in her quest for freedom and full humanity. Thus, she could not resign herself to the idea that she should "bury [her] talents in performing mean, servile labor," anymore than her white counterparts would be accepting of such an idea. Generally, when scholars have discussed Black women's relationship to nation, they have considered that discussion in terms of the extent to which Black women can be classified as Black nationalists. First and foremost, such definitive classifications are elusory. To the extent that race women built institutions to serve the needs of Black communities, they may be viewed as nationalists, but the character of the nationalism they espoused was shifting and contingent at best. And more often than not, race women's nationalism focused on ways to re-imagine a more inclusive and democratic American nation-space, rather than a wholesale focus on creating a sovereign Black nation.

Cooper extends Maria Stewart's invocation of American civic nationalism[139] in her chapter "Woman vs. The Indian." When Stewart wrote, she was very attentive to the struggles of Black women in the North, and she distinguished these struggles from those struggles that characterized Black life in the South, although Stewart was clear that the

---

[138] Stewart 31.

[139] Francesca J. Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005): 13. Morgan defined "American civic nationalism" as a form of nationalism, was not based on race in which Black women "instead embraced the Reconstruction-era definition of national belonging as birth on U.S. soil."

North was not nearly as liberal as it liked to claim. Stewart's skepticism about Northern liberalism was proven true during the Hayes-Tilden compromise of 1877 which left newly freed African Americans in the South to fend for themselves in a move that ended the radical possibilities engendered by Reconstruction. Cooper writes out of this specific historical moment, just four years before Plessy v. Ferguson would firmly entrench Jim Crow as accepted legal practice. As "a voice from the South," Cooper is very interested in the relationship between the North and the South.

"One of the most singular facts about the unwritten history of this country," writes Cooper "is the consummate ability with which Southern influence, Southern ideas and Southern ideals, have from the very beginning even up to the present day, dictated to and domineered over the brain and sinew of this nation."[140] Cooper characterizes the Southerner as a "magnificent manager of men," able both to manipulate and dehumanize "the Black man" and "hoodwink the white man" into believing the myth of slavery as a benevolent institution.[141] The relationship between the South and the North is likened to the relationship between a brother and sister in a supremely dysfunctional family. "Like a sullen younger sister, the South has pouted and sulked and cried: 'I won't play with you now; so there!' and the big brother at the North has coaxed and compromised and given in, and ended by letting her have her way."[142] The Civil War had been reduced by 1892 to a failed act of discipline, "a spanking," in which the Southern younger sister, "named Arabella" in this allegory, "sniffed and whimpered and pouted" until big brother gave in. In the interest of "being friends," big brother determined that Arabella "might just keep

[140] Cooper 101.
[141] Cooper 103.
[142] Cooper 104.

her pets, and manage her own affairs and nobody should interfere."[143] Unfortunately, Arabella's "pets" were Black people in an oppressed social condition. With much chagrin, Cooper refers to the undue influence of Southern thinking on the North, such that one of the major white proponents of the Civil War amendments had been duped into agreeing with the Southern myth of benevolence, after just one visit to the South.

Journalist and novelist Pauline Hopkins echoed these sentiments in an article published in Boston in 1902: "hateful feelings against the Negro are brought into the North by the influence of the South, no stone being left unturned to foist upon the Northern Negro the galling chains of the most bitter Southern caste prejudice which is widening the circle of its operations day by day."[144] While Hopkins understood the regional nature of battles in the body politic, her view here failed to hold the North accountable for its own commitments to racist ideology. In this respect, Hazel Carby argues that Hopkins often failed "to negotiate the contradiction between her belief in a tradition of Northern radicalism and the fact of Northern racism."[145] Clearly, Cooper had been optimistic about the ability of the Constitution to protect newly gained civic freedoms for Black people, but she recognizes that the law has little power in the face of larger goals for national unity, which are mediated through human relationships. Thus, she must render the both the race and nation in bodily, and therefore human terms, in order to create a space for her voice within these conversations about the nature of American national identity and progress. In the larger context of Cooper's argument in this chapter, which is a critique of racism within the Women's Movement, it is apparent

---

[143] Cooper 106.
[144] Pauline Hopkins, "Some Literary Workers," in *Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Nonfiction Works of Pauline E. Hopkins*, ed. Ira Dworkin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 140.
[145] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood,* 130.

that the South is gendered as female. In Cooper's estimation, the South really controls the tenor of the national relationship, primarily through the economic power of the cotton industry. However, Cooper's notion of a gendered South fits with her larger arguments about women's power to control the destiny of the nation, through the manner in which they mediate and negotiate relationships.

It is important, however, that Cooper renders the national imaginary in corporeal terms. Cooper understood "a race" to be "but a total of families" and a nation to be "an aggregate of its homes."[146] The picture she provides of America fits with her commitment to familial representation. But her rendering of the nation in human and bodily terms, as a family engaged in dialogue and conflict, opens up the possibility that other families can become a part of the conversation. Cooper understands that America is an "imagined community," as Benedict Anderson has argued.[147] As she vindicates Black subjectivity within her text and offers an optimistic vision for full Black participation in American life, she creates space for a larger vision of the American body politic that can imagine itself in relation to a variety of peoples including Blacks and Native Americans. By situating herself as a Black woman in the South, she also gains additional justification for arguing that the Southern Black woman will be critical to the project of American nation-building, precisely because women in the South, and the South itself, wielded so much power in determining America's destiny. Cooper articulates as much near the end of this chapter: "And this is why, as it appears to me, woman in her lately acquired vantage ground for speaking an earnest and helpful word, can do this country no deeper

---

[146] Cooper 29.
[147] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991):6-7.

and truer and more lasting good than by bending all her energies to thus broadening, humanizing and civilizing her native land."[148] Cooper's discourse here certainly invokes the idea of a civilizing mission in ways that are initially problematic. Ironically, though, the land that lacks civility is America, particularly because of whites' continued inhumane treatment of Black people and Native Americans.

To prove America's heritage of barabarism, Cooper invokes "blood imagery," much like Stewart, but she extends and refigures the lines of Stewart's argument to problematize the South's invocations of blood and lineage. Whereas Stewart was at pains to prove that American blood and heritage flowed through her veins, giving her a sense of entitlement to a better future, Cooper argues that this "blue blood" lineage of the South is the heart of the problem, implicating the nation in a host of inhumane and barbaric practices towards other human beings. To gain access to this heritage, one would have to prove that their "great great great grandfather's grandfather stole and pillaged and slew."[149] While the North had been initially unconcerned about such matters, Southerners "were at great pains to establish the relationship."[150] Because the South was ultimately more powerful, establishing an inheritance with these villainous forefathers became an American national ideal. Leigh Anne Duck argues that "late nineteenth century white southern elites mobilized a two-pronged temporal strategy, portraying Southern African-Americans as unprepared for full participation in U.S. political and economic life and also depicting southern society more generally as one shaped by traditional affiliative

[148] Cooper 116.
[149] Cooper 103.
[150] Ibid.

principles unassimilable to larger paradigms."[151] Cooper directly refute these lines of argument, first by demonstrating that African Americans are capable of national progress, and then by showing that the South's traditions are America's traditions. In other words, as the South goes, so goes America.

Cooper's discussion of American national identity offers an important revision to contemporary understandings of nationalism among Black women. Race women like Stewart, Cooper, Harper, Wells and Terrell used their texts to call America to account for her failure to uphold stated democratic ideals. In this regard, they believed in American notions of freedom and democracy and pursued those aims through a variety of racial uplift strategies. Rather than viewing Black people as constituting a distinct national body, Cooper argued that Black women had a critical role to play in advancing the American body politic, primarily by preparing Black people to be productive American citizens and by acting as a moral conscience in a nation insistent upon disenfranchising Black people. Ten years later, Pauline Hopkins would echo Cooper's sentiments wholeheartedly. Much like Cooper, Hopkins argued that

> the colored woman holds a unique position in the economy of the world's advancement in 1902. Beyond the common duties peculiar to woman's sphere, the colored woman must have an intimate knowledge of every question that agitates the councils of the world; she must understand the solution of problems that invoke the alteration of boundaries of countries, and which make and unmake governments.[152]

---

[151] Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism,* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 6.
[152] Hopkins 142.

Hopkins viewed race women as agents of national change and as having a "great responsibility" for "the broadening and deepening of her race, the teaching of youth to grasp present opportunities," and the important task of instilling Christian morals.[153] For Hopkins, much like her Bostonian forebear Stewart, the battle for racial and national progress could only go forward as Black women developed their intellectual talents. In a statement very reminiscent of Stewart, Hopkins argues that "from the time that the first importation of Africans began to add comfort and wealth to the existence of the New World community, the Negro woman has been constantly proving the intellectual character of her race in unexpected directions."[154]

Much like Cooper's arguments about Black women's unique standpoint, Hopkins argues that all of these experiences force the conclusion "that is the duty of the true race-woman to study and discuss all phases of the race question." But this duty was not solely for the purpose of advancing the race. Instead, Hopkins places the "duty of the true race-woman" in the context of her own American paean:

> we love this country, we adore the form of government under which we live, we want to feel that it will exist through ages yet to come. We know that it cannot stand if the vile passions which are convulsing the people at the present time are allowed to continue. Let the women then, without adverse criticism, continue to help raise the race by every means in their power, and at the same time raise our common country from the mire of barabarism.[155]

Hopkins' obvious American patriotism does not lend itself to reading her as primarily a Black nationalist figure. Like Cooper, Hopkins argues that Black women are critical not

---

[153] Ibid.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Hopkins 143.

only to the progress of the Black race but also to the progress of America, primarily because they will force America to come to terms with her own history of barbarism and colonialism. The similarities between Cooper's and Hopkins' arguments which emerge exactly one decade apart also illustrate the extent to which Cooper's text acts as a transitional text that links women like Maria Stewart in the early 19th century with women like Pauline Hopkins in the early 20th century. Hopkins argued that race women's role in American affairs was all the more critical in 1902, precisely because the "human striving for supremacy" through anti-colonial struggles, had "increase[d] the gravity of [the race's] situation in relation to the body politic."[156] Thus Hopkins' "race woman" becomes more of a global race woman. Moreover, Hopkins' commentary points us to a continuing tradition of Black women theorizing the role of race women in leadership and of Black women theorizing national identity, and Black people's relation to it, not within the paradigm of Black nationalism, but instead within a paradigm of American civic nationalism.

Interestingly, whereas Du Bois characterized the battle between race and national identity as a battle of warring ideals *within* a Black body, Cooper understood the battle between racial and national identity to be a larger battle of Southern ideals being negotiated within the American body politic. That war over ideals played out *on* and *around* the Black (female) body, for instance in battles over whether or not Black women were worthy of Southern chivalry. Hopkins, also invoking corporeal imagery, agreed that the battle was located within the "vile passions . . .convulsing the people" in the larger American body politic. For Du Bois, the "warring ideals" of American identity and African identity constitute a fundamental existential conflict for Black people, and

---

[156] Hopkins 140.

particularly Black men. For Cooper, who titled her preface "Our Raison d'Etre," signaling the legitimacy of Black existence as a foregone conclusion, the existential conflict was a question of national identity, of America's ability to accept her multiracial citizenry in a humane and productive manner. Black women were critical to resolving that conflict through the act of witness-- the necessary expression of embodied discourse—precisely when Black women's "standpoint" about questions of national import were "presented at the bar."[157] That act of witness or coming to voice is necessarily an embodied act, which has the ability to transform the American body politic, at the moment that the embodied Black female subject's testimony is granted legitimacy in American public life, figured in *Voice* as a courtroom. Cooper, thus, concludes the preface by asserting that if Black women's voice can promote national unity, then Black women's lives are not in vain. Thus Black people become essential components of the American body politic.

<u>Conclusion:</u> "An Important Witness"

Cooper tills arable ground upon which race women can grow a movement. Adopting embodied discourse as both textual practice and activism avails race women of a range of epistemological and ontological possibilities for doing the work of racial uplift. Their particular experiences of the world are seen as legitimate ground for understanding Black life and the social condition of Black people. At the same time, race women write texts that challenge prevailing racist discourses which deny Black humanity. In the space of these texts, primarily autobiographies, they not only re-write history in order to include themselves as historical agents but they also write their bodies into their texts in a manner which forces the audience to grapple in interesting ways with the challenges of Black

[157] Cooper II.

female subjectivity particularly as lived in the lives of women who led the charge of racial uplift. Moreover, human beings are social beings, designed to live their lives in community. To the extent that race women's autobiographical texts become simply an extension of the discourses which race women attempt to embody, those discourses are necessarily expressed through autobiography as an act of testimony and witness to a community that is listening. The power of Jesus, the Word, coming to earth as a human being was that he became a source of empowerment for others to be fully human. That humanity was expressed, however, in communion with others.

Ida B. Wells echoed these sentiments in her 1891 address in which she delineated the characteristics of good race leadership. She closes by telling her audience that "while devotion to principle or courage of conviction, perseverance and patience, and self-control are the predominating requisites of true leadership, over and above them all—embodying the truest leadership—is a deep abiding love for humanity." And much like her race women contemporaries, Wells reminds her audience that "the world has never witnessed a sublimer example of love for humanity than that of our blessed Savior whose life on earth was spent in doing good." While race leaders could not hope "to equal the infinite love" of Christ, they could "approximate it." And "only in proportion as we do so is our leadership true."[158] Like Cooper, Wells insists that her audience go beyond a focus on disembodied principles to a more mature understanding that serves humanity by embodying the principles of good leadership, at all times centering Christ as a paragon for this type of leadership.

---

[158] Wells in Riggs, 66.

At the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry in the Book of Acts, Jesus told his disciples that he would give them power to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.[159] In her preface, Cooper argued that "one important witness had not been heard from" in the "clash and clatter of American conflict"-- the Black woman. [160] For race women, the culmination of logos or embodied discourse was expressed, then, in the act of witnessing through the power of the Word. That act of witness could reconcile existential conflict, give ontological validity to Black subjectivity, and even promote national unity. Race women's autobiographies as acts of witness which unapologetically inscribe the body, are concerned, then, with rectifying the historical record, reconciling ontological and existential conflicts in Black subjectivity through the textual embodiment of the Black subject, and representing and theorizing Black female subjectivity and intellect through lived experiences of race women. As critical forms of witness and enactments of logos, race women's autobiographies also play a significant role in the constitution of what I call *rhetorical communities*, rich dialogic communities that race women create to posit their own forms of oppositional knowledge, to transmit history to younger generations, and to relay and share and critical political information about the plight of Black people and Black women.

---

[159] Acts 1:8
[160] Cooper, Preface, II.

Chapter 2:
"The Story of Her People and Her Times": Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell in the African American Autobiographical Tradition

Introduction: A Lynching in Memphis

In the spring of 1892, Tom Moss, a mutual friend of Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell, was lynched along with his two business partners in Memphis, Tennessee. Their crime was not rape, as was commonly assumed of all Black male lynch victims, but rather the fact that they owned a successful grocery enterprise, which effectively competed against a white counterpart. In light of the circumstances of her friend's lynching, the economic motives of which constituted a serious rebuttal to any assertions of Black male impropriety, Wells, an emerging and respected journalist, was forced to revisit her own prior belief that lynching was a response to heinous outrages perpetrated by Black men against White women. In the months that followed, Wells began to investigate the circumstances in lynchings throughout the South, conducting interviews and compiling statistics, through the newly emergent sociological techniques of the 1890s.[161] Most often, she found that rape was not the precipitating factor in lynching, and in cases where it was alleged, the evidence was dubious at best.

As Tom Moss was being led to his death, he urged Black Memphians to "go West" because "there was no justice for them" in Memphis.[162] Wells concurred and wrote a spate of encouraging editorials that supported Black migration to the Oklahoma Territory. She also encouraged Black residents to save up their nickels and dimes for the move, a piece of advice which led to an unintended boycott of the city's railway system,

---

[161] For a discussions of Wells' employment of sociological techniques see, Christopher Waldrep, *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), Chapter 3. See also Mia Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 211-212.

[162] Ida B. Wells. *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells,* ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 51.

on which fares cost a nickel. Wells' faithful readers heeded her advice, and within a matter of weeks, "thousands of Black Memphians readied themselves to leave Memphis for the newly opened Oklahoma Territory." According to historian Paula Giddings, "the nation's first anti-lynching movement had begun," spearheaded no less, by the pen of the young Wells, who was not yet 30 years of age.[163]

As the national spotlight was cast upon Memphis for its racial brutality, many prominent white journalists and writers argued in the press that lynching was an appropriate response to the increasing violence of Black men who had an insatiable sexual appetite which caused them to rape virtuous white women. This had certainly not been the case for Tom Moss or his fellow business men, and in her characteristic "take no prisoners" manner, Wells said so. In her *Free Speech*—a paper in which Wells was editor and one-third owner-- editorial, Wells wrote, "Nobody in this section believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women."[164] Wells was traveling in Philadelphia and New York by the time the editorial was published. White Memphians, livid at these audacious insinuations, threatened her life, and she was forced to remain in the North.

Tom Moss had been well liked and greatly respected in the Memphis community, and Mary Church Terrell, his friend and Wells' acquaintance, also greatly grieved his loss. Moss, who had been postmaster and president of the People's Grocery, had attended Mary Church's wedding to Robert Terrell in 1891, and presented the couple

---

[163] Paula Giddings. *IDA: A Sword Among Lions*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008), 189.
[164] Wells 65-66.

with "a half dozen silver oyster forks."[165] During the lynching, Terrell was pregnant with the first of three children that would die shortly after birth. Grieving the death of her son a few months after the lynching, Terrell suggested that perhaps it was best that he not live in such a violent world that could lynch with impunity such an upstanding citizen as Tom Moss: "As I was grieving over the loss of my baby boy one day, it occurred to me that under the circumstance it might be a blessed dispensation of Providence that his precious life was not spared. The horror and resentment felt by the mother, coupled with the bitterness which filled her soul, might have seriously affected the unborn child."[166]

The lynching of Tom Moss, while perhaps the most significant and memorable, would not be the only point of convergence in these two women's lives. While Wells was exiled in the North, she continued her participation in literary clubs and lyceums, as she had done in Memphis. Lyceums and literary clubs were important sites for training race women in activist work, particularly in the area of public speaking. Wells was no stranger to giving recitations and speeches in the lyceum setting, and she was asked early in her stay in New York to give a well-received speech on "Afro-American Literature" at the Concord Literary Circle.[167] She also participated in one of the formal debates sponsored by the Brooklyn Literary Union. One of her opponents in that debate was Maritcha Lyons, a Brooklyn school teacher who became a mentor to Wells.[168] In 1892, Lyons and Victoria Earle Matthews, a journalist, writer, and literary critic, organized a "testimonial" in which Wells gave her first formal anti-lynching address. Several hundred people attended and enough money was raised for Wells to publish her first pamphlet on

---

[165] Mary Church Terrell. *A Colored Woman in a White World.* 1940. repr. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005), 140.
[166] Terrell 143.
[167] Giddings 233.
[168] See Giddings discussion of this event in *IDA*, 234-239.

lynching, *Southern Horrors.* About this event, Wells wrote that "this testimonial was conceded by the oldest inhabitants to be the greatest demonstration ever attempted by race women for one of their number."[169] Although the use of the term "race woman," is generally more commensurate with the contemporary usage of the term "African American woman," in context, Well's usage of the term connotes leadership, and perhaps, social status. In addition to signifying her own identification with the role of race woman, her comment also marks her public act of testimony about lynching as the precipitating factor in her assent to race womanhood.

Two important things occurred as the result of her testimonial: "it was the real beginning of the club movement among the colored women in this country." In fact, the women of New York and Brooklyn, then two separate cities that also had been beset by mild class tensions, did indeed form a joint organization called the Women's Loyal Union. Wells was perhaps unaware that the previous June, Hallie Quinn Brown had spearheaded the formation of the Colored Women's League in Washington, D.C.; this organization, which formed in order to help Black women secure formal participation in larger white women's groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the National Council of Women, was headed by Terrell.[170] "Second," Ida notes, the "testimonial was the beginning of public speaking for me."[171] Now this was somewhat inaccurate because Wells had, as earlier noted, given speeches and presentations at conferences and lyceums throughout the late 1880s and early 1890s. The testimonial, did however, formally catapult her into public life.

---

[169] Wells 78.
[170] Giddings 244-245.
[171] Wells 81.

Her work in New York had also gotten the attention of the famed Frederick Douglass, with whom Wells built a long-standing friendship. He invited her "to give an address before his home church, Metropolitan AME, in Washington, D.C." in late October."[172] Metropolitan AME Church was the meeting place of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association. Earlier that year, it had elected its first female president, Mary Church Terrell. Like Wells, Terrell was no stranger to lyceums and public speaking, having been a celebrated public speaker during her tenure at Oberlin College.[173] Very few people showed up for Wells' address, which Giddings attributes to a number of unfavorable political and social factors. Wells was an agitator par excellence and no figure, Black or white, male or female was exempt from her fiery criticism. Many prominent figures like Senator Blanche K. Bruce, who had been in Wells' scope, and his wife Josephine, made their home in Washington. Furthermore, Giddings speculates that Terrell and her husband might not have supported this event because Douglass' new found appreciation for Wells may have undercut his previous mentoring relationship with Terrell, although Terrell makes no indications of this in her autobiography. In fact, Terrell visited with Douglass at his home on the day he died. Moreover, the Colored Women's League was "very protective about their claim [to] being the first Black women's club, and support for Ida could be construed as contrary to their own interests."[174] These internecine struggles among club women caused Wells to be disillusioned as she got older and rendered the NACW virtually ineffective by 1935.[175]

---

[172] Giddings 242.
[173] Terrell 76.
[174] Giddings 245.
[175] See Deborah Gray White for a discussion of the decline of the NACW.

These early tensions between Terrell and Wells prefigured a long-running battle between the two of them, which pivoted around differences in approach and leadership style, not to mention class biases. 1892, however, saw both of them rise to prominent positions of racial leadership, thus providing apt ground for considering the legacy of the race woman at the turn of the century. In the 1920s and 1930s, after several decades of activism and writing, both women penned autobiographies that attempted to document their public work. Ida B. Wells-Barnett's *Crusade for Justice* was edited and published posthumously by Wells' daughter in 1970, and Terrell published *A Colored Woman in a White World* in 1940. Wells died in 1931 before her text could be finished; Terrell struggled to find a publisher throughout the 1930s as she wrote and re-wrote several drafts of her book. As the first full-length political autobiographies written by public Black women figures, these texts signal a significant shift in the tradition of African American women's autobiographical writing from the concerns of the slave narratives and spiritual autobiographies of the 19th century to the concerns of the Reconstruction-era and the interim years between the World Wars. While Wells' text has only very recently begun to receive critical attention, Terrell's book continues to be critically overlooked in the study of Black women's autobiography.[176] Of the four major book-length treatments of African American women's autobiography, two focus on 19th century works, one on early 20th century narratives, and one on contemporary autobiographies.[177] If we are to

---

[176] For more on Wells' life and career, see Giddings and Bay. See also Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
[177] For 19th century, see William Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women Autobiographers of the Nineteenth Century*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). This work is actually an anthology. See also Johnnie M. Stover, *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003). The most comprehensive work to date on Black women's autobiography from the slave narratives until 1950 is Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989). For contemporary works, see Margo V.

understand 19th and 20th century traditions of Black female leadership, and in particular the ways that Black women constructed selves, theorized race and gender, and became activists, these texts must figure centrally in that project.

For Black women the "the personal narrative became a historical site on which aesthetics, self-confirmation of humanity, citizenship, and the significance of racial politics shaped African American literary expression."[178] But these narratives also served as a site of theorizing about racial and gender identity, in addition to providing space in which race women could set forth their public agenda for racial advancement, citizenship, the defense of Black humanity and personhood, and a historical knowledge of Black achievement. Of this theoretical impulse undertaken in Black autobiography, Kenneth Mostern avers that "*nearly all* African American political leaders (regardless of politics; self-designated or appointed by one's community) have chosen to write personal stories as a means of theorizing their political positions."[179] Henry Louis Gates further affirms the convergence between the theoretical and subjective projects of Black autobiographies generally, writing that "the narrated, descriptive 'eye' was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual 'I' of the Black author as well as the collective 'I' of the race."[180] These observations cause me to raise a number of significant questions: What does it mean when the "I" of the race is self-consciously and deliberately female? How does the understanding of Black racial identity shift in autobiographies by race women? And how is the theorization of race implicated in positing Black female subjectivity?

Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

[178] Nellie McKay, "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography" in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds) *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 96.

[179] Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth Century America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12.

[180] Gates qtd. in Mostern 12.

The Reading Subject, the Writing Self

A precipitous event early in Wells' life sets the tone for her narrative. While riding on a train to the school where she taught, Wells encountered a racist conductor who was upset with her for sitting in the ladies' car. During the early 1880s, there was no formal Jim Crow law prohibiting Black women from sitting in the ladies' car, but racial segregation was customary. When the conductor approached Wells and refused to take her ticket, she was initially un-phased and "went on reading." The conductor, angered by Wells' dismissive response, removed her with such force that "the sleeves of [her] linen duster [were] torn out" and she "roughly handled."[181] Within this anecdotal frame, Wells textually positions herself as a reading subject whose presence critically "disrupts and revises"[182] the prevailing narratives of race and gender that excluded Black women from consideration as ladies.

Wells' self-presentation does not only constitute a corporeal posture of disruption but also a critical posture of revision and interpretation. By positioning herself as a critical subject within her own text, Wells offers a model of critical reading predicated upon Mae Henderson's notion of "disruption and revision" for Black women scholars who seek to understand the always already critical, and often violent, relationship to the text that characterizes Black women's lives. Here I deliberately attribute this critical orientation to Black female scholars of Black female subjects because Wells' experience provides an important intellectual resource for those Black women who are encountering themselves in discourses that were never designed to speak about them in a humane way.

---

[181] Wells 19.
[182] Mae Henderson refers to disruption and revision as critical literary practices that inform Black women's writing and that should inform how critics read writings by Black women.

[183] Wells' deliberate act of reading marks her as a particular type of subject—critical, intelligent, engaged, and self-possessed—within a social space that does not concede these subjectivities for Black women. As an act of resistance, her assertion of literacy signals resistance within a space that would attempt to deny Black women the respectability of being literate persons. The presentation of the Black woman as a reading subject in early 20th century narratives also signals a shift from the quest for literacy which drives slave narratives and the conversion story that drives spiritual autobiographies by Black women. In both Wells' and Terrell's autobiographies, literacy is a given, and it becomes a useful tool of resistance for negotiating the political exigencies of Black womanhood in the post-Reconstruction moment. As reading subjects, race women are in a position to re-read and reinterpret existing discourses in ways that are more beneficial for Black lives generally, and Black women's lives specifically.

In thinking about Black women's relationship to dominant discourses, Mae Henderson has written that "in their works, Black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma, that is, their works have consistently raised the problem of the Black woman's relationship to power and discourse."[184] In order to negotiate this discursive dilemma, Black women writers "accomplish two objectives: the self-inscription of Black womanhood, and the establishment of a dialogue of discourses with other(s)." The self-inscription process "requires disruption, rereading and rewriting the conventional and canonical stories, as well as revising the conventional generic forms

---

[183] This does not mean that I think non-Black scholars can analyze Black subjects. Of course than can. The point is that Wells' positionality highlights the importance of Black women's intellectual work even within politically hostile contexts.
[184] Henderson 354.

that convey these stories. Through this interventionist, intertextual, and revisionary activity, Black women writers enter into the dialogue with the discourse of the other(s)."[185] Though Henderson's arguments are written primarily with reference to fictional works by Black women, they are instructive even within the genre of Black women's autobiography; Black female autobiographers record their life stories as a way to disrupt and revise canonical and mainstream (read: white) understandings of slavery, racism, and sexism. While their bodies often initially disrupt social and textual space, Black women autobiographers also position themselves as highly literate individuals who can literally re-read narratives that have been handed down to them and rewrite those narratives in the space of their own life stories.

Mary Church Terrell chooses the disruptive mode early in her narrative as well. Recounting her familial origins, she begins with a story of her father and mother, both of whom were born into slavery. Ostensibly to verify her origins, Terrell includes a letter that she received "from a white man of whom I had never heard." The letter writer begins by informing Terrell that her grandmother Emmeline had been his mother's nurse. Eventually, Emmeline was sold away from her mother. According to the letter writer, "My grandfather went to Norfolk, and after assuring your great-grandparent that her little girl would be raised among his own daughters, he bought the very little girl, Emmeline, and gave her to my mother, who was then his baby girl. . . .and she and the little girl, Emmeline, were brought up more as two sisters than as mistress and maid." Eventually, Emmeline and her mistress moved to New Orleans where Emmeline learned French and

[185] Henderson 358.

passed as a Creole."[186] After giving Terrell this unsolicited family history, the writer, in an undoubtedly patronizing tone, closes,

> you know we Southerners take much pleasure in watching the advancement and prosperity of even the younger generation of those whose parents were connected with our household and children's growth. I hope this little memo of history will be interesting to you. If it does, may I ask you to send me a photo of your own family. . .[187]

Most striking is the letter writer's euphemistic and benevolent depictions of slavery, which he describes at different turns as a sisterhood, a "connection," and a "pleasure." Yet his own opening words in the letter betray the real truth of the circumstances surrounding the lives of Terrell's great-grandmother and grandmother. Terrell's reaction to these epistolary ruminations is swift and forceful. Lamenting "the anguish which I know the poor slave mother must have felt, when her little girl was torn from her arms forever," Terrell takes direct aim at the myth of slavery as a benevolent institution:

> when slavery is discussed and somebody rhapsodizes upon the goodness and kindness of masters and mistresses toward their slaves in extenuation of the cruel system, it is hard for me to conceal my disgust. There is no doubt that some slaveholders were kind to their slaves. . . . But the anguish of one slave mother from whom her baby was snatched away outweighs

---

[186] Ironically, Terrell's inclusion of Emmeline recalls a similarly named character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* In that novel, Emmeline was a New Orleans "fancy girl" who passed for Creole.
[187] Terrell 32-34.

> all the kindness and goodness which were occasionally shown a fortunate, favored slave.[188]

Employing the strategies of disruption and revision, Terrell rhetorically executes a wholesale rejection of this epistolary paean for slavery. She includes the narrative as a letter rather than a history, which locates the textual authority of the writer in a non-expert location. Her inclusion of the letter reduces the myth of plantation slavery to the fantastic ruminations of an ill-informed Southerner and denies the historical accuracy of his interpretation. Moreover, including this information in epistolary form makes the hegemonic discourse which undergirds the text of the letter manageable within the space of Terrell's own narrative. In other words, the letter becomes a metonymic representation of the South and its attitudes toward slavery. Because the epistle as genre presumes the act of reading and assumes the possibility of re-reading, Terrell's inclusion of this letter within her narrative places her in prime position to perform a discursive intervention through the act of re-reading. Her revis[ion]ing rescues the distraught mother from the dismissive confines of the letter writer's epistle and from the periphery of the Southern mind, effectively reinterpreting the supposedly harmless consequences of an allegedly benevolent institution. And because this is a narrative of her own life history, Terrell's revision situates her within that history, but claims the freedom to move beyond its narrowing possibilities.

Her refutation of the unnamed white man's epistle, which has been written in some respects to authenticate her origins, resists the authentication tradition of slave narratives, which required introductory written documents attesting to the racial and literary origins of the work in question. Terrell's narrative resists the legitimacy of such a

[188] Terrell 35.

convention, by arguing quite explicitly and also by implication, that she presumes the right to *interpret* the story of her family heritage on her own terms and brooks no allegiances with interpretations of slavery that seek to justify "such a cruel system." That her life story will be "written by herself" is implicitly understood, if not explicitly stated.

Although both texts begin with a similar narrative frame, Wells' discussion is more cursory. She notes that her mother was beaten often and that her father had an uncompromising vitriol for his mother's former slave mistress, Miss Polly and then proceeds rather crudely to discuss her violent encounter on the train. After Terrell discusses her family's slave heritage, she, too, recounts a harrowing incident on the train that sounds eerily similar to Wells. At approximately age five, Terrell accompanied her father on a train from Memphis. He left her in the ladies' car, while he went to the smoker. A racist conductor, after inquiring of the other passengers, "Whose little nigger is this?," attempted to forcibly remove her from the car.[189] Luckily, her father subdued the man with his handgun, and quelled the situation. Narratively, the invocation of trains indicates movement. Here I argue that the trains at these early points in the narratives signal a move away from the emancipatory concerns of the slave narrative towards a concern with the politics of Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction. The recurrence of trains as a trope in these two narratives also suggests that the train becomes a kind of theatre for the enactment of race and gender ideologies, often in ways that are detrimental to Black women and children.[190]

---

[189] Terrell 46.
[190] Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940.* (Pantheon Books: 1998). Hale discusses the ways that buses in particular became theatres for enacting racial segregation and difference which did not exist in the same way outside that space.

When we consider these two early invocations of Black women as reading subjects—Wells intently reading a book on a train and Terrell's exasperation as she grasped a letter that presumed to clarify her origins—we must ask along with Karla Holloway, "What does it mean to have Black bodies and books read as a single narrative?" Holloway goes on to argue that "whether it was an enslaved African who lost life or limb because she dared to read, or laws that made literacy illegal, or citizens who staged anti-Jim Crow demonstrations in local libraries to protest the back doors or the inaccessibility of facilities, the matter of books and reading marks the experience of Black folk in America in a way that is deeply political and resonantly personal."[191] Well into the twentieth century, Black autobiographers "continued a version of marking their literate authority" by "calling attention to their accomplished mastery of books."[192] Holloway recalls the last line of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* –"Look where your hands are. Now."—reminding us that reading is first and foremost a bodily act. So too, I would add, is writing. Thus Black women's autobiographies point not primarily to a disembodied self, but rather a consciously embodied self, determined to both testify and record a life lived on behalf of the race.

The consideration of Black women as reading subjects also begs the question of what they might have been reading. In the chapter immediately following her discussion of her train incident, Wells laments the fact that "none of my people had ever seemed to feel that it was a race matter and that they should help me fight." Almost immediately, she says, "I had always been a voracious reader." The relationship between reading and race work are linked for Wells, not solely because she is at this point in the narrative a

---

[191] Karla Holloway. *Bookmarks: Reading in Black and White.* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 7.
[192] Holloway 9.

teacher, but also because “my only diversion was reading and I could forget my troubles in no other way.”[193] At the same time, however, Wells did not fully equate leadership with intellectual prowess. During her tenure as a teacher, she found that “in the country [the] people needed guidance in everyday life” but “the leaders, the preachers, were not giving them this help.” Thus, Wells writes, “they would come to me with their problems because I, as their teacher, should have been their leader. But I knew nothing of life except what I had read.” Her love of learning and facility for reading did not, in her mind, automatically equip Wells to lead the masses; thus unlike many of her race women counterparts, Wells did not fully embrace the Du Boisian Talented Tenth notion of racial leadership. She also demonstrated some disdain for those whom she felt were better equipped to lead.

Like Douglass and other Black autobiographers, Wells and Terrell offer a booklist in their narratives. Reading acted not only as a public strategy of dissemblance in the face of derogatory discourses, but also as a personal or private strategy of comfort, escape, and affirmation in the presence of an unsupportive community. Believing her reading to serve a personal and character-building function, Wells notes that “I had formed my ideals on the best of Dickens’s stories, Louisa May Alcott’s, Mrs. A.D.T. Whitney’s, and Charlotte Bronte’s books, and Oliver Optic’s stories for boys. I had read the Bible and Shakespeare through, but I had never read a Negro book or anything about Negroes.”[194] In this statement, Wells encodes one of her own impulses to write: to provide stories about Negroes by Negroes. Her booklist presents Wells as a classically well-read, morally sound person, shaped by her engagement with classic literature, the Bible, and

---

[193] Wells 21.
[194] Wells 20-21.

Sunday School stories. Terrell, who loved to recite poetry, particularly that of Tennyson, evinced a special appreciation for Louisa May Alcott as well.

Alcott was born in New England in the 1830s to a prominent abolitionist family. Her mother Abigail May Alcott was active in the Massachusetts abolitionist movement. Louisa's most well-known story *Little Women* was but one of many stories that she published during the 1860s through 1880s. Highly moralistic, these stories presented unconventional early feminist portraits of women in a family sympathetic to abolition. These stories were instrumental in instilling possibilities for a moral, if unconventional notion of womanhood. As literate subjects, race women gleaned many of their ideals about morality, ethics, notions of womanhood, and even ideas about how civil societies ought to function from books. Although many of these ideals were instilled in familial settings, race women, in their life narratives, often point to an additional thirst for knowledge and engagement for which books provided the only means of satiety. Wells found in books a welcome escape to a world that represented the progressive moral and gender ideals and values that she was often at pains to find displayed in her community.

Critical reading was not only a political act, but also an act which allowed this first generation of post-slavery Black women to engage a notion of personal subjectivity as they interacted with the written word. Offering a reading of Frederick Douglass' presentation of a reading self in his famous autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Holloway argues that "Douglass uses this story of his life to call attention to his own habits of reading," in part to point his audience to "his own intelligence and potential."[195] "Blacks," Holloway argues, "developed an intimate relationship to books because of the way books came to personify a story of race, whether

[195] Holloway 7-8.

or not their text told that story." In other words, the booklists provided indicate much about the subjects access, personal literacy, and intellect, even though the narrative within the book being named may have very little to do with race.

Frederick Douglass is a recurring figure in both narratives, a feature which situates both life narratives squarely within the Black autobiographical and emancipatory tradition. Signaling a new era of Black leadership, his death within the space of both autobiographical texts indicates not only a shift away from the slave narrative-- the genre of which Douglass' writing was exemplary—but also a shift away from the race man model of leadership towards a model that is more gender inclusive. In other words, both Terrell and Wells, in writing their autobiographies, came to embody the gender equality in Black communities that Douglass had fought for throughout his life.[196]

It makes sense then that race women would turn to writing as a strategy of personal and communal representation, transformation, and ultimately freedom, for freedom constitutes one of two driving "pregeneric myths" in the African American literary tradition.[197] While Wells was a vocational journalist, Terrell had an avocation as a contributor to newspapers throughout the country. Both women also had wide-ranging careers as lecturers and aspired to careers as fiction writers, each publishing at least one short story in her lifetime.[198] In fact, both women felt that the written word had the ability

---

[196] Giddings notes that this was not an easy transition and that on a few occasions Douglass failed to offer Wells the support she needed to transition into leadership. In fact, it seems he actively undercut her sometimes, but the two continued to enjoy great affection for each other until his death. See Giddings chapter 11, "St. Joan and Old Man Eloquent," 283-310.

[197] Robert Stepto introduces this term in his now classic study *Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) as a way to determine constitutive elements of an African-American literary tradition, which he interrogates through an examination of slave narratives. For him, the quest for freedom and literacy are the driving pregeneric myths that lead to the emergence of early genres of African-American writing.

[198] Terrell's short story, "Venus and the Night Doctors" appeared in the *Washington Post.* See Terrell 264.One of Wells' stories "A Story of 1900" was published in the Fisk Herald 1886. See Giddings 92.

to transform not only their individual communities, but also the larger American body politic. Terrell lamented the fact that she had not achieved more success in publishing short stories, because she "thought for years that the Race Problem could be solved more swiftly and more surely through the instrumentality of the short story or novel than in any other way."[199]

The written word not only had the potential to effect public transformation, but also to bring about a notion of the self. Wells remarked early in her autobiography about her journalistic pursuits that "the correspondence I had built up in the newspaper work gave me an outlet through which to express the real 'me'."[200] The need to achieve a textual representation of the self that could be reconciled to the thick notions of community that inscribed Black women's lives may have necessitated a turn to the autobiography as genre. Nellie McKay argues that "the Black writer did not and could not participate in an ideology of self that separated the self from the Black community and the roots of its culture."[201] In fact, Wells affirms this observation and her own personal commitment to what Stephanie Shaw refers to as an "ethic of socially responsible individualism" in which Black women pursued personal achievement but understood those achievements in terms of their ability to benefit the community.[202] Wells believed that "the people who had little or no school training should have something coming into their homes weekly which dealt with their problems in a simple, helpful way." Thus, she "wrote in a plain, common-sense way on the things which

---

[199] Terrell 274.
[200] Wells 31.
[201] Nellie Y. McKay, "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography" in *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader,* ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 96.
[202] Stephanie Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

concerned our people." Furthermore, "knowing that their education was limited, I never used a word of two syllables where one would serve the purpose."[203]

Her comments are in direct contrast to Mary Church Terrell who charged her NACW audience that "Homes, more homes, purer homes, better homes, is the text upon which our sermons to the masses much be preached." Thus, club women should offer instruction, in part, in "how to clothe children neatly, how to make and especially how to mend garments, how to manage their households economically" because "all these are subjects on which the masses of women need more knowledge."[204] Both women evinced a desire to help the uneducated masses, but Wells' approach is decidedly less-elitist without appearing to be condescending or patronizing.

That subjectivity is formed in relation to a community is not a new concept in autobiography. In these two autobiographies, however, Wells and Terrell forge their emerging identities as race women often in the crucible of conflict with community standards. On the one hand here, I am generally referring to the struggles of Black female leaders to gain respect in the public sphere from audiences of both white people and Black men. But more specifically, I am referring to Wells' and Terrell's early confrontations with notions of race and gender that they found limiting and chose to rebel against, in different but creative ways. Their textual representations of those negotiations are significant.

Scenes of Struggle: Forging Rhetorical Community in Black Women's Autobiography

---

[203] Wells 23-24.

[204] Mary Church Terrell, "First Presidential Address to the National Association of Colored Women" in *Quest for Equality: The Life and Writings of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954,* ed. Beverly Washington Jones (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994).

Describing her first anti-lynching address, Wells recounted her feelings of trepidation as she recalled the lynching of her friend:

> Although every detail of that horrible lynching affair was imprinted on my memory, I had to commit it all to paper, and so got up to read my story on that memorable occasion. As I described the cause of the trouble at home and my mind went back to the scenes of the struggle, to the thought of the friends who were scattered throughout the country, a feeling of loneliness and homesickness for the days and the friends that were gone came over me and I felt the tears coming.[205]

"The scenes of the struggle" which permeated her memory, aptly encapsulates how Wells framed her own life narrative. The first scene of struggle occurs when her parents die during her teen years. Wells is forced to leave school to take care of her family. Her father Jim had been a Master Mason, most probably of the Prince Hall persuasion. Thus the Masons gathered at the Wellses' home to deliberate over how to care for Wells' five orphaned siblings. Wells' skepticism and reluctance at the arrangements is telling in her recounting of the incident:

> Since my father had been a Master Mason, the Masonic brothers were our natural protectors. After a long discussion among them that Sunday afternoon the children had all been provided for except Eugenia and myself. . .Genie was to go to the poorhouse because she was helpless and no one offered her a home. The unanimous decision among the Masonic brothers was that I was old enough to fend for myself.

---

[205] Wells 79.

Wells' silent indignation at "not even [being] consulted" caused her to "calmly"--although with a sense of narrative dramatic irony—"announc[e] that they were not going to put any of the children anywhere. . .if the Masons would help me find work, I would take care of them."[206] Although the Masons relented and gave Wells custody of her brothers and sisters, she did not escape the ordeal unscathed. On his death bed, her father had given his white doctor money to take care of the family. When Wells went to inquire, a rumor was started that she "had been heard asking white men for money." Unbeknownst to the precocious teenager, she had violated an important community norm. Although she "never dreamed that the community would not understand why I didn't want our children separated," the community, according to Wells, believed that she wanted to "live there by myself with the children" so she could get money from and perhaps engage in illicit practices with a white man. Wells' narrative of community alienation here coupled with her later lamentation about the lack of community support for her treatment on the train suggests that her relationship to her community was an embattled one from the beginning.

Centrally, these are conflicts over Wells' relationship to the term "woman," or more precisely her proper performance of acceptable standards of Black womanhood. Her repeated use of the term "Mason"—more than six times in one paragraph--rhetorically instantiates a sense of the male domination that she had to confront to wrest control of her family from its "natural protectors." The fact that her father was a Mason is not only important for understanding the social networks that informed Black people's lives during Reconstruction. Black freemasonry was also a critical site for the performance of Black masculinity, and the Prince Hall Masons were the oldest and most

[206] Wells 16.

well-known of Black fraternal orders.[207] The Masons represent, for Wells, a certain form of dominant Black masculinity that she resists in assuming leadership of her family, especially at such an early age. The community exasperation engendered by her bold stance was only exacerbated by Ida's unfortunate choice to appeal to the white doctor for money. Thus, Wells' process of maturation into womanhood found her caught in the crosshairs of competing community norms about true and respectable Black womanhood.

Most unfortunate in this particular struggle was the maligning of her character by one of her acquaintances. While selling subscriptions for her newspaper in Mississippi, Wells boarded with a local minister and his wife. "Because of the presence of two visiting young ladies," there were several gentlemen callers to the minister's home during Wells' stay. After she left, the preacher proceeded to suggest to her admirers that she lost her teaching job in Memphis because she lacked virtue, although she had actually lost it for protesting the school's substandard learning and working conditions in her newspaper.[208] When Wells discovered this breach of trust, she traveled back to the minister's home, convened "five of the close friends to whom he had told the tale reflecting on my character," and confronted him, demanding that he restore her public integrity and rescind his damaging remarks. She wrote out a statement of retraction and charged him to read it before his congregation the following Sunday, which he agreed to do. Still livid, Ida wrote, "I could have sued him in the courts; but feeling that he had

---

[207] Prince Hall Freemasonry was started in 1784 in Boston, Massachusetts. For further elaboration of the role that Freemasonry played in the assertion and codification of Black masculinity see Craig Steven Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York: NYU Press, 2001) and Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class & the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
[208] Wells 43.

been taught his lesson, I let the matter drop. I felt that I had vindicated the honor of the many southern girls who had been traduced by lying tongues."[209]

The vindication of Southern Black womanhood was critical to Wells' understanding of her own subject position. She notes that she only retold this story "because of its bearing on an important question." Apparently when the minister derogated Wells' character, he had argued that "morally there were no virtuous Southern girls," and instead had "descan[ted] on the virtues of northern girls and their desirability as wives."[210] Wells' rhetoric of the vindication of Southern Black womanhood is interestingly reminiscent of Anna Julia Cooper's calls for the protection of young Black women.

Wells' critique of the rhetoric of male protection was two-fold. Chivalry was not only unreliable in its application, but also a double-edged sword, predicated on Black women's acquiescence and submission to traditional notions of womanhood, even when circumstances like Wells' arose. The men in Wells' community sought to punish her for not conforming to their ideas about her need for protection, even though they fully intended to send her into the world to "fend for herself." In fact, Wells told the minister that "my good name was all that I had in the world, that I was bound to protect it from attack by those who felt they could do so with impunity because I had no father or brother to protect me."[211] Ironically, the more Wells' successfully defended herself and protected her reputation, the more "unsexed" she became. Wells' critique, echoing Cooper's critique of chivalry and of Black men's outdated attitudes towards Black female leadership, points to the volatile and tenuous social position that Black women were

---

[209] Wells 45.
[210] Wells 42.
[211] Wells 44.

forced to assume not only with white men but with Black men in the struggle over leadership roles. Wells, thus, theorizes women as being protectors and defenders not only of themselves but also of the larger community, effectively refuting the idea that Black men are more intrinsically suited to leadership because of their gender. On the contrary, the Black men in Wells' narrative are often ineffective in racial struggle because they are beset by gender bias, reflected in their patriarchal and paternalistic attitudes.

Whereas Wells found the discourse of "ladyhood" virtually inaccessible from the death of her parents onward, an inaccessibility that was cemented in her confrontation on the train, Terrell's class privilege and light skin allowed her to perform the identity of the Southern lady in certain settings. She was most disturbed after her encounter on the train as a young girl that the white passengers had not recognized her as the "little lady" that she had been reared to be. After Terrell graduate from Oberlin, her father expected her to come home and live as a socialite, until she found an acceptable suitor. Terrell reluctantly agreed, but when her father remarried, she determined to leave. This decision led to a great feud between her and her father. Of Robert Church, Terrell writes that he "was the product of his environment. In the South for nearly three hundred years "real ladies" did not work, and my father was thoroughly imbued with that idea. He wanted his daughter to be a lady." But of herself she writes, "said daughter had been reared among Yankees and she had imbibed the Yankee's respect for work."[212] Interestingly, Terrell rejects Southern ladyhood in geographic terms. The ideology of true womanhood is so inextricably bound with the Southern landscape that Terrell literally has to argue that her move from the South and her education in the Midwest (read: North) has fundamentally

---

[212] Terrell 92.

transformed her values. In neither text is the South viewed as a space endowed with transformative possibilities.

Robert Church's ideology of ladyhood is in direct contradistinction to Terrell's notion of herself. She asserts that she "could not be happy leading a purposeless existence," and that she "had conscientiously availed [herself] of opportunities for preparing myself for a life of usefulness as only four other colored women had been able to do."[213] What Terrell had been preparing for was an opportunity to "promote the welfare of my race."[214] Thus, she took a position at Wilberforce, much to her father's chagrin. But Terrell reasoned that though "his reproaches stung me to the quick [,] my conscience was clear and I knew I had done right to use my training in behalf of my race." Her father's uncompromising standards about the proper roles for educated Black women suggest that Shaw's "ethic of socially responsible individualism" was but one idea among competing ideas about the ways that Black women should interact in their communities. Terrell's rejection of the ideology of "real ladyhood," which in this narrative seems to operate as the Black counterpart to Barbara Welter's concept of "true womanhood" significantly suggests that race women understood racial leadership as being fundamentally in opposition to these two concepts of womanhood. In part, they understood that Black women, whether middle or working class, could be denied access to the privileges of Southern ladyhood at any moment. Consequently, they rejected relationships with Black men in their families and communities that were grounded in these tenuous notions of Southern chivalry.

---

[213] Terrell 92. Here Terrell refers to the three other Black women who had been able to secure degrees from Oberlin, including Anna Julia Cooper and Ida Gibbs Hunt. Interestingly, this is the only reference to Cooper, direct or indirect, in the entire book.
[214] Terrell 93.

Shaped by the push and pull of competing community values over womanhood, race women used their autobiographies to argue for a notion of the self within community. Because Wells and Terrell are literally enmeshed in their communities, they must each offer an apologia for the legitimacy of writing their own life story. Selwyn Cudjoe argues that in Black autobiography "the autobiographical subject thus emerges as an almost capricious member of the group, selected to tell his or her story and to explain the condition of the group rather than to assuage his or her egoistical concerns. As a consequence, the autobiographical statement emerges as a *public* rather than *private* gesture."[215] To the extent that race women's writings were invested in making an argument publicly on behalf of the race, these writers, especially because they were women, would have to defend themselves against any perceptions of themselves as unduly self-celebratory or aggrandizing.

To offer a justification for writing her life story, Wells recounts her response to a young interlocutor who asked about the origins of the anti-lynching movement, "I promised to set it down in writing so those of her generation could know how the agitation against the lynching evil began. . . It is therefore for young people who have so little of the race's history recorded that I am for the first time in my life writing about myself. I am all the more constrained to do this because there is such a lack of authentic race history of Reconstruction times written by the Negro himself." Even in her preface, she sets down a scathing a critique of the failures of Reconstruction and the politics of historical writing, even as she argues for the necessity of accurate and positive representations for youth:

---

[215] Selwyn Cudjoe. "Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated" in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, New York: Meridian, 1990: 280.

> The gallant fight and marvelous bravery of the Black men of the South fighting and dying to exercise and maintain their newborn rights as free men and citizens, with little protection from the government which gave them these rights and with no previous training in citizenship and politics, is a story which would fire the race pride of all our young people if it had only been written down. And so because our youth are entitled to the facts of race history which only the participants can give, I am thus led to set forth the facts contained in this volume which I dedicate to them.[216]

Although Wells' historical impulse to document racial achievement is legitimate and is commensurate with similar projects being undertaken by race women like Margaret Murray Washington and Sadie Daniel throughout the 1920s and 30s,[217] she is certainly aware that the audience for her narrative is more wide-ranging than youth. By adopting a stance as a historian for young people, Wells can offer a provocative revisionist narrative that is perhaps less threatening to the race men and to white people whose own versions of these events are summarily different from her own. One of her major intellectual projects in the work is to present an "authentic history of Reconstruction times written by the Negro himself."[218] The "written by himself" reference is not coincidental here and very deliberately situates Wells' narrative within a long tradition of African American autobiographical writing.

---

[216] Wells 5.
[217] In 1922, Margaret Murray Washington started the International Council of Women of the Darker Races for the purpose of establishing African American Studies curricula for Black youth. Sadie Daniel, a teacher in Washington, D.C. and an editor in the 1930s and 40s of the National Council of Negro Women's AfraAmerican's Women's Journal, published a book called *Women Builders* in 1931, with the explicit aim of providing historical narratives of prominent Black women so that Black youth could have apt figures for "hero worship."
[218] Wells 20.

The use of “written by himself” also suggests that Black people should be able to *testify* about their own lived experiences in Reconstruction. The centrality of testimony and lived experience have been central to African-American rhetorical practice, but race women explicitly argue in their autobiographies that testimony is essential not only for the recognition of Black personhood but is also a critical facet of the national historical record. Whereas in slave narratives this appendage was placed in the text to testify to the validity of the author’s identity, within later African American autobiography, these implicit and explicit invocations of “written by himself or herself” are designed to authenticate these narratives as having wider historical validity and application. They are not just narratives of individual experience, but narratives of community, whose “goal is clearly one of definition, documentation, and authentication.” In Wells’ case, Joanne Braxton argues that “her story is intended not only as her own but as the story of her people and her times. She presents her life as a representative and symbolic one.”[219] Wells also has an oppositional aim which is to inculcate racial pride and foster an oppositional consciousness in Black youth built around a sound and thorough historical understanding of Black achievement.

Wells’ historical commitments in the text also foreground another scene of struggle underlying her narrative: her elision from the historical record written by race men. In her diary entry written on January 13, 1930, Wells wrote that the local Negro History Club had been reading Carter G. Woodson’s new book “in which is no mention of my anti-lynching contribution.”[220] Miriam DeCosta-Willis reminds us of how “Wells,

---

[219] Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 109.
[220] Miriam DeCosta-Willis, ed.) *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 12. The Carter G. Woodson book was most probably *Negro Makers of History* published in 1928.

a proud and confident woman, must have felt at being slighted by the foremost African American historian of the period."[221] Woodson's oversight was not the only slight Wells would experience at the hands of prominent race men. Wells had been assured that she would be listed as part of the Committee of Forty individuals who would convene to establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. W.E.B. Du Bois was the only African American commissioned to select names for the list, and Wells supported him. He, however, deliberately left Wells off the list to include another person who had participated in the Niagara Movement, assuring her that she would be represented through the membership of Celia Parker Woolley, a white woman with whom Wells had done activist work. In this respect, the politics of representation become detrimental for Black women because they tend to obscure and diminish specific and significant contributions that Black women have made to racial progress, further justifying the need for race women's autobiographies.[222]

Wells' observations about the need for Black women to write history have important implications for a Black feminist notion of a Black women's standpoint. Patricia Hill Collins has argued that Black women have a unique standpoint that emerges from the creation of oppositional knowledges within "all Black spaces" and from the "the distinctive perspectives gained from their outsider-within placement in domestic work." These two aspects "provide the material backdrop for a unique Black women's standpoint."[223] Collins argues that the source of this oppositional knowledge is passed on from "mothers, othermothers, teachers, and churchwomen in essentially all Black rural

---

[221] DeCosta-Willis, 168.
[222] Wells 325-326.
[223] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York and London: Routledge Press, 2000[ed]), 10-11.

communities and urban neighborhoods." Wells argument in penning her autobiography is that younger Black women do not have automatic access to these oppositional knowledges because they are not necessarily a permanent feature of Black women's communities. Instead, they must be intentionally constructed and transferred.

Darlene Clark Hine has argued that Black women "constructed and participated in multiple communities. These communities or webs of relationships and networks, fell under two umbrella categories, spaces or communal sites—neighborhoods, schools, churches for affirmation and solidarity--and "experiences" of nurturing, mothering, organizing and protesting against multiple oppressions."[224] I would like to augment Hine's observation by suggesting that Black women also exist and engage in dynamic *rhetorical* communities, which they themselves constitute or "court" primarily through the written and spoken word. Ida B. Wells' insistence that her columns offer practical advice to her readers established a kind of code of ethics for initiating and constituting a rhetorical community respectful of those who existed in her experiential and spatial communities. This notion of rhetorical community is important because it is the generative space for locating Black women's public intellectual traditions, beginning with Maria Stewart's fiery speeches before Boston's various literary and abolitionist societies, and other oppositional knowledges. Rhetorical community also provides a mechanism or conduit for understanding the process that undergirds Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined community." On March 26, 1932, she wrote to her brother Thomas Church about her struggles to find a publisher:

> Maybe without meaning to do so I have talked too much about my public work. But that has been my life. . . 'I don't care what the publishers say! I

---

[224] Hine 5.

> believe the public would be deeply interested in it. No colored woman has ever written her autobiography, and that in itself should help to sell it. If I had the money, I would attempt to publish it myself' . . .[225]

Terrell's insistence upon an existing reading public who would be "deeply interested" in her life suggests that she saw her narrative as engaging in the work of "courting community," "of calling collectivities into existence through diverse forms of subversive spiritual, political, and cultural work."[226]

Although these texts are historical, Wells, Terrell, and other race women understood these narratives as also providing space to imagine new possibilities. As Terrell stated in her introduction to her autobiography, she had written it "not because I want to tell the world how smart I am, but because both a sense of justice and a regard for truth prompt me to show what a colored woman can achieve in spite of the difficulties by which race prejudice blocks her path."[227] The ideals of truth and justice which Terrell hoists as a standard or credo for the recognition of Black humanity are located in her identification with the founding American democratic principles. Although the historical goal of much African American autobiography from the slave narratives forward has been a kind of apologia for Black people's fitness for and entitlement to the privileges of American democracy, the political goal has risen from a visionary or prophetic impulse that imagines new possibilities.

Life narratives consequently participate in the process of expanding what Andrew Perrin refers to as the individual's "democratic imagination." The *democratic*

---

[225] Mary Church Terrell Papers, Reel 3.
[226] Kathy Glass, *Courting Communities: Black Female Nationalism and "Syncre-Nationalism" in the Nineteenth Century North* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 1.
[227] Terrell 30.

imagination is “fabricate[d] from our experiences in civic life, along with those in other domains such as work, family and neighborhood. We use this democratic imagination to tell us when and why to get involved in politics, how to do so, and when and how to stay away.” He argues that the democratic imagination, which as I conceptualize it, encompasses the ways, modes, and thoughts of a people about their ability and right to participate in a particular democracy, is “both a creative and a restraining force in relation to citizenship.” Perrin adds that “citizenship (like, perhaps, other kinds of cultural work) is a creative act. Creativity is critical to the practice of citizenship, because it is through acts of creativity—and of particular importance to this inquiry are speech and narrative—that citizens “create public space by engaging in public talk.”[228] The idea that one enlarges the public space through speech acts and narratives suggests that race women’s autobiographies are particularly suited to constituting communities of rhetorical engagement by literally enlarging the space of public discourse and offering their narratives as sites for imagining different kinds of life possibilities for Black people. And the primary acts that catalyze or forge these communities are acts of witness and testimony, both written and spoken.

The belief that written and spoken discourses literally have the ability to transform Black life fits with the prophetic and visionary impulses of these texts. Cudjoe argues that the African cosmological concept of nommo—“the power of the word”—is an appropriate characterization of the ways in which Black women’s writings, particularly autobiographies, as extension of the word, act as a powerful social force.[229] Although African cosmology is relevant to understanding Black women’s lives, this does

---

[228] Perrin 147

[229] Selwyn Cudjoe. “Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated” in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*. Edited by Henry Louis Gates. Meridian:New York, 1990:281.

not negate the importance or centrality of Western epistemology to the ways that Black women have historically come to understand the world. Given the context of Christian religious experience in the West and race women's strong allegiances to Christian thought, I would argue that the concept of logos is a more appropriate cosmological concept for the work of race women. The notion of the embodied word or the word made flesh more critically resonates with Black women's cultural experiences than *nommo*, which refers primarily to the creative power of the word. Black women are always forced to enact the word in light of their embodiment in a Black, female body. And often they are refiguring discourses that have been handed to them, rather than being able to powerfully speak their own discourses into existence. As Carla Peterson argues, "adapting a verse from the Epistle of James to described their self-appointed cultural mission, [Black women] thought of themselves as 'doers of the word'."[230] When one considers Bakhtin's notion of the internal dialogism of the word, or a private dialogue between multiple selves, and Henderson's reading of Bakhtin in a race/gender framework—a framework that does conjure a notion of the corporeal—then one is forced to consider the extent to which race women's internal (private) and external (public) "readings" or interpretations of their own experiences within the space of their writings and speeches dovetails with the visionary and prophetic impulses of their narratives.[231]

Passing Through Dangerous Territory: Trains and Lecture Platforms as Theatres of Resistance

When Wells gives her first testimonial about the lynching of her friends in New York in 1892, she is quite nervous about speaking. She recalls that during her speech

---

[230] Peterson 3. Black women literally see themselves as "doers of the word." Carla Peterson's book *Doers of the Word: African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830-1880* notes that

[231] I invoke visionary here in the sense of Patricia Hill Collins visionary pragmatism. I also invoke prophetic in the sense of

> A panic seized me. I was afraid that I was going to make a scene and spoil all those dear good women had done for me. I kept saying to myself that whatever happened I must not break down, and so I kept on reading. I had left my handkerchief on the seat behind me and therefore could not wipe away the tears which were coursing down my cheeks.[232]

Wells was embarrassed by her public "exhibition of weakness," but her colleagues assured her that "it had made an impression on the audience favorable to the cause and to [her]."[233] This incident bespeaks a moment when Wells, a newly minted race woman, felt her body on display in a way that might have undercut her message. Her audience assured her, however, that her message and her corporeal engagement with it, even to the point of tears, were critical to her believability. That Wells viewed her tears as a show of weakness also points to her resistance to feminized portrayals of womanhood. However, that rare moment of public vulnerability made Wells' hard-hitting narrative palatable. She was thus unable to escape stereotypical notions of womanhood, which required vulnerability as a prerequisite for acceptance and agreement.

At this point, Wells, still a relative novice in the area of public speaking, suggests with a certain obliviousness that she "had not deliberately sought a way to arrest their attention" because she "had no knowledge of stage business."[234] The lecture platform as a performative or liminal space recurs as a trope in the writings of public Black women. Often in that space, they are forced to negotiate politics of body perception either by attempting to mute the body through soft, non-antagonistic speech practices or to use ideas about their bodies to their benefit. Performances at the podium, then, become

---

[232] Wells 79.
[233] Wells 80.
[234] Ibid.

critical sites for locating instantiations of logos or embodied discourse in race women's texts. At the podium, Black women are actively engaging the rhetorical sphere to transform communities and the larger American body politic. When Wells points to the politics of the performative on the speaking stage, she points to but one theatre, namely the lecture platform, in which and upon which Black women enact racial and gender identity.

Though Wells failed to understand the performative in her initial anti-lynching speech, she became a master at using the lecture platform (and her newspaper articles and pamphlets) to dramatize the heinous nature of lynchings. She was disgusted at the way, for instance, that witnesses had stood by in Paris, Texas, in 1893 and watched a man be "tortured for hours before finally the flames were lit to put an end to his agony." And she was equally disturbed at "how the mob fought over the hot ashes for bones, buttons, and teeth for souvenirs."[235] News of this lynching traveled abroad as "the fire lighted by this human torch flamed round the world." Invited to launch her anti-lynching campaign abroad, Wells used her international campaign not only to bring attention to lynching, but also to argue against Jim Crow and American racial politics more generally:

> I began by telling of conditions in the South since the Civil War, jim crow [sic] laws, ballot box intimidation and laws against intermarriage. I told how in spite of such laws to prevent the mixing of the races, the white race had so bleached the Afro-Americans that a race of mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons had grown up within the race, and that such laws put a premium on immorality. I also told of the cruel physical atrocities vented

[235] Wells 84.

> upon my race, and of the failure of whites to allow a fair trial to any accused.[236]

In response, one British journalist, appalled at racial conditions in America, remarked of Wells and her female entourage: "Were it not that the facts are spoken to by ladies, whose reputation for truth and carefulness is beyond suspicion , one would fain believe such [things]. . .But a case has been made out by these ladies that cannot be ignored by those who care for the good name of the United States; and it is no wonder that so much sympathy has gone out to the ladies who have come to tell the people of this country how freedom is mocked in the country that boasts herself the freest in the world."[237] The repeated references to "ladies" suggest that Wells' gender had some bearing on how her message was received. The writer seems to suggest that no respectable lady would dare to speak or write of the horrible tragedies that Wells does unless they were true.

Wells' turn at the lecture podium on behalf of lynching victims was effective internationally, precisely, because of the ways that it engendered racial experience. In other words, things had gotten so horrible, that American ladies had to take to the stage. Instead of using her own body as a way to understand racial experience, however, she testified to the treatment of other Black women and men. In her invocation of logos, Wells took these stories of bodily violence into venues where they might never had been heard, effectively allowing through her testimony, the lynched, burned, and tortured of flesh of Black victims to figuratively speak to and dwell among her audiences. In its reflection of the life and death of Jesus Christ, logos literally incorporates the violence done to innocent Black bodies within Black discourse, written and spoken.

[236] Wells 91.
[237] Wells 92.

Wells' portrait of mangled and tortured Black bodies is significant in the tradition of African American autobiography. Katherine Fishburn argues that the presence of Black bodies in slave narratives "challenge[d] the disembodied rationalism of Western liberalism."[238] However, "during the decades after Reconstruction, the bodies that had been the visible sign of their ancestors' enslavement seem almost to have become an embarrassment to a later generations of middle-class writers and their projects of racial uplift and advancement."[239] Wells' narrative, written in the late 1920s directly refutes Fishburn's line of reasoning. Contrary to those civilizing impulses that attempted to mute the body, Wells exposes the barbarity of lynching—and particularly its contradictions in a supposedly civil society—by dramatizing and publicizing the violence done to Black bodies. This strategy of dramatizing violence against Blacks finds its zenith in the King strategy of Civil Rights in the 1960s.[240] Logos, then, has a public function in its call to witness about violence and a philosophical mandate to recognize Black humanity by honoring the Black body. It also provides a way to account for the subject's corporeal absence in the text. Wells' embodiment throughout her text is less solid than Terrell's. In her dramatization of lynched Black bodies, however, Wells' implicitly posits her own embodiment by agreeing and standing in solidarity with those in her community who have been victimized. Logos, thus, acts for Wells' as a strategy for positing an embodied self within her community.

Wells' creative enactment of logos also serves as an example of the way that logos becomes what Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua refer to as "theory in the

---

[238] Fishburn 1.
[239] Wells 18.
[240] For the quintessential example of this strategy see Martin Luther King, Jr., "Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing," in Clayborne Carson (ed.) *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 89-100.

flesh."[241] When Wells' took the lead as an anti-lynching advocate, she intrinsically based her right to lead on a notion of theory in the flesh—"one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity." Wells understood that theory in the flesh was the only form of theory that could meet the violent realities being experienced by those with actual Black flesh. Logos, as one form of theory in the flesh, provides a way to "bridge the contradictions of [Black women's] experiences" by allowing the space to "tell our own stories in our own words."[242] While there can be a variety of theories in the flesh, logos specifically provides a space to theorize Black women's discursive relationship to the Black body as mediated through both written and spoken texts. It also provides a mechanism for bridging contradictions inherent in the lives of Black female leaders, including sacred versus secular formulations of female leadership and gender role ideology, public versus private selfhood, and issues around sexuality.

Although Terrell also enacted theory in the flesh, anti-lynching causes were not her platform for doing so. In fact, she was diametrically opposed to dramatizing certain aspects of lynching. One commentator noted that in Terrell's lecture "The Bright Side of a Dark Subject"

> She fired no pyrotechnics. She touched lightly on southern bonfires lit with living, human flesh. She only incidentally hinted at the flaying alive of negroes and other holiday sports whereby the 'superior race' wiles

---

[241] Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldua (ed). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. (Berkeley: Third World Press, 2002 ed.), 21.
[242] Anzaldua and Moraga 21.

away the festive hour. The whole discourse was lacking in all efforts at blood-curdling and blood-boiling effects."[243]

The disturbing irony here is that the commentator expects no less than a pornographic approach to describing the violence of lynching and thinks it is bizarre and noteworthy that Terrell would eschew this kind of voyeurism. Even so, Terrell enacts logos, or theory in the flesh, in other ways in her text.

In 1904, she was invited to deliver an address at the International Congress of Women in Berlin. Because of her very light-skin, Terrell was mistaken for a white American woman on the ship over to Germany. When two German women on board discovered that she spoke German and was from America, they began to ask Terrell about " 'die Negerin' (the Negress) from the United States whom they were expecting."[244] Initially, Terrell did not understand that they thought she was white, but when she discovered "that they had no idea they were talking to this very unusually anthropological specimen whom they were seeking," she had a laugh at their expense and kept up the comedy errors for several days as people inquired of her repeatedly about "die Negerin." Terrell's choice not to identify herself as Black on the ship, effectively if not intentionally, rendered her a white woman. Inasmuch as her choice to pass was a form of resistance to the metalanguage of race,[245] the site in which the passing occurred became a theatre in which she could resist racist ideas about Black womanhood.

Because Terrell was fluent in both German and French (not to mention Latin and Greek), she decided to give her address in German. Even when she finally stood to give

---

[243] Terrel 201.
[244] Terrell 238.
[245] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham,"African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" *Signs* 17, no.2 (1992).

her speech, no one realized she was Black. Thus she had to intentionally mark herself as non-white with a "discourse that would impress that fact upon [her] audience."[246] As she said, "I wanted to be sure that they knew I was of African descent." Thus she began her address

> If it had not been for the War of the Rebellion which resulted in victory for the Union Army in 1865, instead of addressing you as a free woman tonight, in all human possibility I should be on some plantation in one of the southern states of my country manacled body and soul in the fetters of a slave.[247]

Terrell further reminded her audience that since she was the "only woman speaking from the platform whose parents were actually held as chattels," and thus "as you fasten your eyes upon me, therefore, you are truly beholding a rare bird." Terrell's heteroglossia, or literal ability to speak in tongues, not only allowed her to communicate across lines of difference but also to re-envision the audience's gaze.[248] She recognized that she could not fully invert the gaze once her audience knew she was a Black subject; so she made her body into a racial spectacle on her own terms—terms which were unapologetically female--characterizing herself as rare and valuable rather than common. Ironically, it is in passing on the trip to Berlin that Terrell *is* able to invert her audience's eager gaze and to control the terms upon which she is received and perceived.

Concluding the first part of her speech, Terrell told the audience that given these historical contingencies, she was "rejoicing . . .not only in the emancipation of my race,

---

[246] Terrell 243.
[247] Ibid.
[248] See also Henderson and Bakhtin.

but in the almost universal elevation of my sex."[249] The intersection of race and gender analysis here is telling, and points to the manner in which Black women publicize their own bodies in strategic forms of resistance to prevailing racial discourses. The theories of dissemblance and respectability have conditioned scholars to engage in a kind of misrecognition of the Black body in Black women's texts in ways that are detrimental to Black women's attempts to achieve self-recognition even within the space of more communal or public texts and settings. Clearly, Black women could not fully and effectively mute the corporeal in their public work. Thus, they drew on common assumptions about who they must be and refigured those assumptions in ways that allowed their message to be heard more effectively. But here Terrell effectively en-gendered her experience of race by presenting her racial identity to her audience in gendered terms. One must concede, however, that her choice to pass also racializes her experience of gender. Indeed the two processes are not discrete.

In her public work, Terrell presents her racial experience in gendered terms, though she begins the practice well before her ascent to public life. It is during a school history lesson as a young girl that Terrell realizes her own descent from enslaved parents. She identifies this moment as a moment of rupture, which leads to a critical re-definition of self: "When I recovered my composure, I resolved that so far as this descendant of slaves was concerned, she would show those white girls and boys whose forefathers had been free that she was their equal in every respect. At that time, I was the only colored girl in the class, and I felt I must hold high the banner of my race."[250] The shifting from first to third person and back again within this passage bespeaks some tensions of dis-

[249] Terrell 244.
[250] Terrell 52.

identification amongst two competing selves. On the one hand, Terrell is a young girl who feels stigmatized by her heritage, but she in other moments evinces a commitment, at least as the writer Terrell interprets in retrospect, to race work. Employing Mikhail Bakhtin's important formulations of dialogism and heteroglossia, Henderson argues that "what is at once suggestive about Black women's writing is it's interlocutory, or dialogic character, reflecting not only a relationship with the 'others' but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of the self that constitute the matrix of Black female subjectivity."[251] The shifting voices within Terrell's writing alert us to two simultaneous dialogic events, a conversation within the self, and a conversation with her reading audience whom she is implicitly inviting to identify with her inner struggle.

Eventually, Terrell claims that the "stigma of being descended from slaves had lost its power to sting" in part because she adopted a historical narrative of racial progression, which argued that "no race has lived upon the face of this earth which has not at some time in its history been the subject of the stronger."[252] While such a narrative is an oversimplistic and pragmatic interpretation of racism and imperialism, Terrell claims that such an understanding "greatly increased my self-respect." In fact, it gave her "the right to look the world in the eye like any other free woman and to hold my head as high as anybody else." In both her formative years and her adult years, Terrell negotiates her racial identity by invoking notions of a historically engendered subjectivity. In her speech at Berlin, she signifies her racial identity through a reference to the Civil War and then brings that historical consciousness to bear on her subjectivity as a *free woman.*

---

[251] Henderson 349.
[252] Terrell 52.

Both of Terrell's articulations here about the ways that racial liberation becomes implicated in her life as a gendered subject reflect an emergent critical consciousness about the intersecting nature of race and gender. Bakhtin suggests that "Consciousness" —which for Terrell, Wells, and other race women means consciousness of difference— "finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of having to choose a language. With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within it; it chooses, in other words, a 'language'." [253] Moreover, Henderson, again drawing on Bakhtin's formulation of consciousness with respect to Black women's writing, argues that "consciousness becomes a kind of 'inner speech' reflecting the 'the outer word' in a process that links the psyche, language, and social interaction.[254] Terrell's inner dialogue during her childhood about her racial positionality and its stigma becomes expressed in two ways—through the outward claim to being "free" and through an embrace of a social disposition as a "free woman" whose intercourse with others—that is, social interaction—is characterized by confidence, or holding one's head high. Henderson argues that reading the text according to these simultaneous, competing discourses allows us to address, then, not only the 'subject en-gendered in the experience of race' but also "a subject 'racialized' in the experience of gender."[255]

Becoming a free woman, able to move unencumbered in the public sphere, was critical to doing the work of the race; similarly, freeing herself from the stigma of racist ideology had direct ramifications for Terrell's experience of womanhood. Terrell's linguistic choice to render her liberation from racial stigma through a discourse of female

---

[253] Bakhtin 295.
[254] Henderson 350.
[255] Henderson 350.

liberation reflects not only a literary-verbal performance of coming-to-consciousness, but also a linguistic representation of her corporeal existence as a woman. In other words, the language of race itself, "has historically been what Bakhtin calls a double-voiced discourse—serving the voice of Black oppression and the voice of Black liberation."[256] Because race acts as a metalanguage in this way, particularly obscuring Black women's gendered experiences of race, then simply claiming racial freedom on the written page is insufficient evidence for Terrell and her audience that she has indeed found a form of freedom. She must render that freedom as a bodily performance of womanhood in order to escape the very linguistic constructions that constrain her free expression of subjectivity as a Black woman. By presenting a notion of freedom embodied in the confident performance of womanhood, Terrell subverts the very terms that attempt to circumscribe her experience—"race" is not allowed to operate with its characteristic opacity vis-à-vis other forms of difference, nor is womanhood an identity left restricted to white women. And the visual imagery of her freedom is that of a woman with her head held high, which points us toward rather than away from Terrell's experience as an embodied, Black female subject. Further, as Terrell travels and passes, "race" literally becomes a traveling sign, which Terrell can manipulate and signify upon as she pleases. As she passes, she literally both becomes and does "theory in the flesh."

The lecture platform as a trope in Black women's autobiography also becomes the stage upon which race women negotiate the tensions and conflicts between their public and private lives. Traveling to lectures created much internal conflict for both Wells-Barnett and Terrell, who were dedicated mothers. At the height of her public work in the 1890s, the newly married Wells-Barnett had also started her family. Because of her

---

[256] Higginbotham, "Metalanguage," 267.

commitment to the anti-lynching cause, she had no choice but to travel with a nursing infant. Although Wells-Barnett had arranged for help with her infant son at each of her stops on a small lecture tour, the baby still managed to disrupt one of her speaking engagements:

> When the time came for me to speak I rose and went forward. The baby, who was wide awake, looked around, and failing to see me but hearing my voice, raised his voice in angry protest. Almost unconsciously I turned to go to him, whereupon the chairman, who instantly realized the trouble, put someone else in the chair, went to the back of the platform, and took the baby out in the hall where he could not hear my voice and kept him there until I had finished my task.[257]

Although Wells had been quite ambivalent about motherhood in her twenties, she became a devoted mother having two children within her first couple of years of marriage. But she is clear that the demands of motherhood created a conflict, and even that her choice to get married became another scene of struggle between her and her community. "Strange as it may seem," Wells wrote, "after word [of the marriage] was sent out to the country, there arose a united protest from my people. They seemed to feel that I had deserted the cause, and some of them censured me rather severely in their newspapers for having done so. They were more outspoken because of the loss to the cause than they had been in holding up my hands when I was trying to carry a banner."[258] Again, Ida felt greatly misunderstood. By her own account, she "did not know how utterly worn out I was physically until I reached a place where I could rest quietly without feeling that I

---

[257] Wells 245.
[258] Wells 241.

must be either on the train or traveling through the country to some place of meeting where I was scheduled to speak."[259]

In this rare moment of interiority, Wells-Barnett unwittingly reveals that she viewed her marriage and her relationship to Ferdinand Barnett as a kind of refuge from a tough public life and a somewhat unforgiving and demanding community. Her allusion to the story of Moses holding up his arms so that the Israelites could defeat the Amalekites in Exodus 17, also suggests that Wells saw herself as a leader of her people. Wells was so exhausted that she did not attend the 1895 meeting of Black women in Boston that eventually led to the formation of the NACW, a move that was all the more ironic given that her career had been the unstated target of the vitriolic press release derogating Black womanhood that had been the catalyst for the meeting.[260]

Terrell tells a similar story of her daughter's intrusion upon one of her public addresses. During one lecture trip in which Terrell had brought along her daughter Phillis, against strong admonitions from her husband and mother to do so, she found her self in mid-speech when

> I spied her walking rapidly—almost running—down the aisle from the back of the big tent. In the twinkling of an eye she darted up the steps to the platform and stood as close to me as she could, looking out upon the large audience without any embarrassment whatever and remaining perfectly still. I was speaking without a manuscript, so I placed my right hand on her shoulder and went on with my address without any stopping. . .It was a tense moment for me, and I realized that when a mother has a

---

[259] Wells 242.

[260] See Wells discussion of the incident on page 242.

> lecture engagement to fill and brings a young child with her she takes a desperate chance.[261]

Phillis' disruption could easily have derailed the critical public work that Terrell was doing, but her mother maintained the professional poise and demeanor that was so critical to her work. This particular story, one of few like it in the entire work, demonstrates the often uneasy convergences between Black women's public and private lives. Simultaneously, however, the viewing audience and the contemporary reading audience are given a picture of a very human mother, attentive to the needs of her child and yet unwavering in her public work.

Terrell indicated as well that her ascent to the platform had the potential to create conflict in her marriage. "Some of my husband's friends," she writes, "warned him gravely against allowing his wife to wade to deeply into public affairs. . . .When a woman became deeply interested in civic affairs and started on a public career, they said, that was the beginning of a disastrous end. Under such circumstances a happy home is impossible."[262] To his credit, Robert Terrell was quite progressive and had been an early supporter of women's suffrage. In fact, Mollie asserts that she had little confidence in her ability to speak and was reluctant to take on speaking engagements that were offered to her. "This irritated my husband considerably," who thought, she writes, that "when so few colored women had been fortunate enough to complete a college course, . . .it was a shame for any of them to refuse to render service which it was in their power to give."[263] Both Ferdinand Barnett and Robert Terrell were quite progressive in their views on Black

[261] Terrell 283.
[262] Terrell 196,
[263] Terrell 197.

female leadership, suggesting that progressive notions of Black masculinity—while not widespread, and certainly exceptional—are also not entirely new.

Well aware of the transformative power of public discourse, Terrell had very particular standards for speech-making. She "decided never to crack a joke at the group's expense [because] nobody could be more fed up on the chicken and watermelon stealing jokes than I am."[264]Perhaps, this was a veiled reference to Booker T. Washington's propensity to tell off-color jokes in mixed company, although Terrell had great personal respect for him. She was uncompromising, however, about "showing the injustice and brutality to which colored people are sometimes subjected," even though her friends had warned her that this "would militate against [her] success as a speaker."[265] Central then to Terrell's own code of ethics for constituting rhetorical community was a magnanimous appreciation for the lived experiences of Black people and a deep commitment to offering non-stereotypical representations of Black humanity and personhood.

For both women, the lecture platform offered the space for engaging in public "testimonials" about Black lived experience. Simultaneously, however, race women who stepped to the platform put their own bodies on the line, subjecting themselves to scrutiny wrought from competing ideas about true womanhood and Black women's respectability. And these women had to negotiate their public lives—exemplified in their time spent behind the podium—in the context of their gender identities as mothers and wives. The lecture platform upon which race women performed much of their work, thus, represents in their texts a space in which they must both argue for and confront the demands of an engendered experience of race, and racial leadership in particular. Their rhetoric on

---

[264] Terrell 200.
[265] Terrell 281.

behalf of the race and its women at these podiums, however, transforms these spaces from being solely liminal spaces of the performative, to being theatres of resistance in which Black women transform prevailing discourses about Black people and Black womanhood.

Inasmuch as the lecture platform acts as a theatre of resistance for race women's gendered experience of race in their texts, their repeated references to the train travel that they used to get to various speaking engagements comes to represent a kind of theatre for the enactment of certain racialized experiences of gender. From the earliest moments of both these narratives, we encounter these young women on trains being mistreated because their race denies them access to the privileges of "ladyhood." In both Wells and Terrell's portraits, they evince a feeling of both public and emotional vulnerability during their time spent on trains. Not only is Wells' physically attacked, but later she writes that her time spent traveling had emotionally exhausted her. Terrell, too, must confront the particular exigencies of womanhood and feelings of loneliness during her train travel. In a letter dated August 18, 1900 written from Danville, Illinois, Terrell writes to her husband:

> I enjoy very much doing this kind of work because I really feel that I am putting the colored woman in a favorable light at least every time I address an audience of white people, and every little bit helps. . . .But it is a great sacrifice for me to leave my home, I tell you. It grows harder and harder every time I leave—I traveled around so much during my childhood and youth that journeys have not the charm for me that they possess for some people—Only a sense of duty to my race and thrift for myself could

> induce me to sally forth as a lecturer—I have already begun to count the minutes which must run off the clock before I can get home . . .[266]

And in the same letter, she also shared with Robert that among other mishaps with her luggage "disasters come not singly, you know, and so a little friend came to visit me on the train yesterday and will remain nearly throughout my trip—I am more and more convinced that woman's place is at her own fireside for many reasons.[267]

Because Wells had received so much resistance not only from Black people but also from her feminist friends like Susan B. Anthony who accused her of having "a divided duty" to her family and to the cause, Wells tried to retire from public work. But, as she writes, "despite my best intentions, . . .I was again launched into public movements."[268] In 1906, Wells was once again called away from her family to go investigate a lynching that had happened in Springfield, Illinois. According to her, when told that her train would be leaving that very evening, she "objected very strongly because I had already been accused by some of our men of jumping ahead of them and doing work without giving them a chance." Moreover, Wells said that she had family business to attend and determined not to go. This time her children came to her bedside and urged her to go. Wells writes, "I looked at my child standing there by the bed reminding me of my duty." Almost as if in response to Anthony, Wells seems to argue that there was no divided duty. As a race woman, she had to defend Black people's public interests, even if she had to sacrifice time with her family. "Next morning," writes Wells, "all four of my children accompanied my husband and me to the station and saw me start

---

[266] Mary Church Terrell to Robert Terrell, August 18, 1900. Mary Church Terrell Papers, Reel 3.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Wells 256.

on my journey."[269] This dramatic rendering of her trip to the train station reinforces the conflicts that train travel represented on a personal level for Black women. These many trips away from home literally took them away from their loved ones and often took them to places of extreme danger.

Terrell repeatedly writes of her sexual vulnerability during her many travels. "There are few experiences more embarrassing and painful than those through which a colored woman passes while traveling in the South." While coming home from college, she was forced to ride in the Jim Crow car, a relatively new experience for Black people in Memphis in 1879. As the night wore on, Terrell grew increasingly fearful, having "heard about the awful tragedies which had overtaken colored girls who had been obliged to travel along on these cars at night." When she asked the conductor to let her move into another car which had more people, "he assured me with a significant look that he himself would keep me company and remain in there with me."[270] She narrowly escaped harm by "calling the conductor's bluff" and telling him she would leave the train. Afraid that he might lose his job since Jim Crow was not yet legalized, the conductor relented.

On another trip, Terrell was forced to get off a train and secure arrangements in Texas. Knowing no one, she asked the conductor for help. Again, she was mistaken for a white woman, and he urged her to go to the hotel. Thus, Terrell chose to pass again and was able to do so without incident. But she remembered feeling great "apprehension and fear" at being caught. Terrell's unintentional passing on the train had acted as a form of protection for her, entitling her to the best treatment. In future travels, she often made the choice to pass not on short trips, but certainly on long journeys. She remarks, "I felt it

[269] Wells 311-312.
[270] Terrell 337.

was my duty to my family, to myself, and to the audience I had been invited to address to keep as fit as possible by taking the proper rest, so that I could give the people the very best I had to offer."[271]

Having been manhandled on trains several times as a young woman, Terrell's negotiations are understandable. In particular, though, her choice to pass while traveling marks the train, particularly during the era of Jim Crow, as a performative space in which notions of race and gender identity and difference were enacted. Thus, in her choice to pass, Terrell often transformed this space into a theatre of resistance by refiguring her racialized experience of gender in a way that allowed her to be perceived as a white woman, and thus, to obtain access to the privileges of white womanhood. As ironic as her choice to pass while traveling to do race work is, Terrell seems to suggest that it is its own form of race work to the extent that it exposes the fallibility of essentialist or biological notions of race. Terrell declares unapologetically

> I taught my daughters they were doing their Heavenly Father a service when they prevented anybody from treating His children with injustice, scorn, or contempt solely on account of color or race. I taught them also they were justified in using any scheme, not actually criminal or illegal, to secure for themselves what representatives of other racial groups enjoyed, but of which they would be deprived on account of their African descent. I impressed upon them that they would perpetrate a great injustice upon themselves if they failed to take advantage of any good thing which they

---

[271] Terrell 346.

> had the right to enjoy, simply because certain people had the power to deprive them of it by making arbitrary and unjust laws.[272]

In other words, Terrell offers a mini-manifesto here for viewing passing as race work! It was not only a privilege but a duty for those with the ability to pass to disrupt and revise the stultifying conditions of a racially unjust system. It is, thus, with humor that Terrell recounts several instances of her older daughter passing at a local theater while using the privilege to get her other, often darker-skinned friends admitted along with her. By encouraging her daughters to pass in order to gain access to their rightful social privileges, Terrell reconfigures the corporeal agenda, originally offered by Cooper. For Terrell, passing is not solely the province of the tragic mulatto, but a very important mode of resistance to oppressive social structures. Terrell is clear, however, that her moments of passing, were not deliberate attempts to misrepresent herself, but rather opportunities to capitalize upon the prejudices of others who were "obsessed with race prejudice."[273]

In a chapter entitled "Crossing the Color Line," Terrell offers an ethnography of the manners and modes of passing. She provides examples of both light and dark complexioned Black people who have managed to cross the color line, either by pretending to be White or a darker Asian ethnicity. Moreover, she informs her audiences of the choices that are required by such a radical social move:

> When a colored person decides to 'pass for white' in the United States it means that he must pursue a course which is both hazardous and hard. He

---

[272] Terrell 287.
[273] Terrell 471.

> must make up his mind to renounce his family if he has one, to give up his friends. . . .[274]

Terrell's discourse on passing, coupled with her manifesto about its use as a political tactic, demonstrates that race women did not simply reconstruct womanhood but also racial identity. Passing, in Terrell's estimation, was a means rather than an end. It was not simply evidence of a self-hating allegiance to white supremacy. Rather, it was a weapon of resistance. And it is also the place to locate Terrell's theorizing about race. Race literally travels throughout the text. It becomes a linguistic sign—with all of its arbitrariness—in its purest form and is biologically indeterminate. As she and her other characters speak other languages—French, German, and various Asian—their race literally signifies something very different. Whereas Wells' invokes the dark brutalized body as a sign of racial antagonism, Terrell attempts to dismantle the underlying theoretical justifications for such treatment: she demonstrates the permeability and malleability of biological notions of race by literally passing through the synapses of race's otherwise gate-keeping impulses.

"To Trip the Light Fantastic": The Dancing Body and the Search for Interiority in Black Women's Public Narratives

Both of these autobiographies are fundamentally public narratives written to document a life of public work. Ida B. Wells-Barnett adheres to this schema almost without deviation. Thus, we find only limited instances of interiority in *Crusade*. Even her marriage to Ferdinand Barnett is mentioned without reference to their courtship and with little discussion of their relationship. It is in their presentations of the interior that these two texts diverge considerably. Unlike Wells, Terrell intermittently discusses her life with Robert Terrell, remarking on their courtship and marriage. Although they were

---

[274] Terrell 414.

"remote and circumspect" in their attempts to hide their courtship from their students at the M Street School, the students knew and often made jokes, like "Mr. Terrell is certainly getting good. He used to go to dances, but now he goes to church."[275] "Though the course of true love did not always run smooth," Terrell recounts that "in explaining my decision to link my destiny with his, I used to say that I enjoyed assisting him in the Latin department so much, I made up my mind to assist him in all departments for the rest of my natural life."[276]

The reference to Robert Terrell as a dancer is perhaps not coincidental. Both he and Mollie loved to dance. In fact, in her discussions of dancing another self emerges in Terrell's text that is fully bodily engaged—a dancing self. Terrell was a mischievous and precocious student, who loved to dance, often against the established school rules:

> It was against the rules for girls to dance at any of the college functions, and decidedly against the rules for young men and women to dance together anywhere. There was a girl in Ladies Hall who loved to dance as well as I did, which is saying a great deal. She and I would betake ourselves to the gymnasium every evening after supper and trip the light fantastic to our heart's content, priding ourselves on the fact that we knew all the latest steps.[277]

Dancing "was frowned upon by everybody who wanted to be considered intellectual or who sighed to be classified as highbrow." Yet many of her teachers and "some very serious minded young women used to come to see my partner and me dance." She avers,

---

[275] Terrell 137.
[276] Ibid.
[277] Terrell 85. More than likely, Terrell got the phrase "to trip the light fantastic" from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest.* See Wikipedia for further discussion of the phrase and its origins.

"No human being has ever enjoyed dancing more than I did. Throughout my youth I would much rather dance any day or night than eat. Even now dancing is my favorite recreation."[278] Terrell offers in her discussion of dance a challenge to the politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance that pivot upon the myth of the muted body. The myth of the muted body refers to the denial of Black women's physical pleasure through bodily experiences, by both themselves and others.

Though Terrell has been critiqued heavily for her own capitulation to class privilege and elitist tendencies, she clearly recognizes the ways in which the politics of respectability functions in relation to discourses of gender and class. Katherine Fishburn, echoing Carla Peterson, argues that in Black women's post-Reconstruction texts, the body becomes absent in ways that it had not been in slave narrative. She suggests that in texts like *Iola Leroy*, even though the body is present, it is in effect hidden through textual invocations of Victorian womanhood.[279] Wells' first anti-lynching pamphlet *Southern Horrors*—which provided vivid accounts of lynching-- also appears in the same year as *Iola Leroy*, strongly challenging the idea that Black writing in the 1890s hid the Black body.

Terrell also explicitly challenges such ideas by suggesting that even serious minded, intellectual, and highbrow individuals could engage in activities focused upon the body. Dancing, in fact, becomes a framing device for her narrative because she returns to it in the final chapter of her book, entitled "Carrying On." She writes

> I can dance as long and as well as I ever did, although I get very few chances to do so. There seems to be a sort of tradition that after a woman

---

[278] Terrell 85.
[279] Fishburn 146-148.

> reaches a certain age she should not want to trip the light fantastic and that even if she is anachronistic enough to wish to do such an unseemly thing, she should not be allowed to indulge in this healthful and fascinating exercise. I believe if a woman could dance or swim a half hour everday, her span of life would be greatly lengthened, her health materially improved, and the joy of living decidedly increased.[280]

Dancing, then, seems to provide another mode for engaging her private self, even in light of ageist and sexist prohibitions that would mute her body. Her love of dancing challenges the view that race women complied uncritically with the demands of the cult of true womanhood and provides us a glimpse of the creative ways in which they resisted limiting ideologies of womanhood. Moreover, she both responds to and delightfully transforms the possibilities of Cooper's paradigmatic call for an engagement with the Black embodied subject.

At the beginning of her narrative when Terrell offers a reason for telling her story, she asserts quite astutely that, "in relating the story of my life I shall simply tell the truth and nothing but the truth-- but not the whole truth, for that would be impossible. And even if I tried to tell the whole truth few people would believe me."[281] Such an assertion is rather cryptic but believable, given that race women are always hyper aware of the rules and structures that will be used to evaluate their creative acts. Terrell clarifies her meaning a bit more in the last chapter of her narrative:

> "In writing the story of my life I might have related many more incidents than I have, showing my discouragement and despair at the obstacles and limitations

[280] Terrell 451.
[281] Terrell 29.

> placed upon me because I am a colored woman. Several times I have been desperate and wondered which way I should turn. I have purposely refrained from entering too deeply into particulars and emphasizing this phase of my life. I have given the bitter with the sweet, the sweet predominating, I think."[282]

In speaking of what is not spoken about in her narrative, of her inability "to tell the whole truth," Terrell points us to an absence that is at the heart of this project. Carla Peterson, drawing on the work of postcolonial theorists argues that the elisions which Terrell refers to are ways that African American discourse disrupts and challenges the boundaries of dominant discourse by "inscribing both presence and absence it its texts."[283] Henry Louis Gates asks "how can the Black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which Blackness is a sign of absence?"[284] Terrell acknowledges this dilemma squarely by telling us that the written word simply will not allow her to tell the whole truth in a manner that would be believable. And though she does not explicitly detail all that she might about her struggles with racism and sexism, she does attempt to account for this absence in another way, by presenting a joyous, dancing body moving through her text. If we read this text according to the "culture of dissemblance" or to the "politics of respectability," we would miss the ways that Terrell attempts to instantiate a notion of personal, embodied subjectivity, in her otherwise public narrative.

Conclusion: Race Women and Interracial Conflict

Notwithstanding the similarities in their narratives, it is most appropriate to conclude this chapter by examining the dynamics that influenced the relationship

---

[282] Terrell 461.
[283] Peterson 14.
[284] Henry Louis Gates, "Writing "Race" and the Difference It Makes" in *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

between Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells. Although Terrell and Wells grew up in Memphis, knew each other, and had mutual acquaintances, their relationship was often strained. Wells viewed her life as a series of struggles; Terrell viewed hers as a series of strategic negotiations. With differing worldviews came different approaches to race work.

Though Wells had been a leader and catalyst in the African American women's club movement from the early 1890s forward, Mary Church Terrell opted not to include her in the program during the 1899 NACW Convention held in Chicago. According to Wells, Terrell, the NACW President, informed her that several women in the city had specifically requested that she not include Chicago's leading race woman on the conference program. Wells, refusing to believe in Terrell's innocence, confronted her: "I told her that although I was very much surprised at the action of the women of Chicago, I was still more surprised that she had obeyed the dictates of women whom she did not know against one she did know, who had come from her own home in Memphis, Tennessee. And that since she had done this I would promise not to inflict my presence upon the organization."[285] Terrell eventually invited Wells to speak anyway, but the rift between the two women was never repaired.

Mia Bay argues that Wells' blame of Mary Church Terrell might have been misguided, and that the conflict was really symptomatic of the increasing leadership status of Booker T. Washington, a figure whom Wells did not support.[286] It was Wells' acquaintance and fellow clubwoman Fannie Barrier Williams who had demanded that Terrell not place Wells on the program. Though Williams' husband and Wells' husband had been law partners, the Williamses' increasing allegiance to Booker T. Washington

---

[285] Wells 259.
[286] Bay 228.

created enmity between the two families. For the sake of politics, Terrell was forced to accede to Williams' wishes, since she (Terrell) was running for another presidential term in the NACW.

During the convention, a major controversy arose over re-electing Terrell to the presidency of the NACW. Terrell writes that she "had declared repeatedly that I did not desire to be reelected."[287] However, through the maneuvers of her supporters, buttressed by Fannie Barrier Williams and the Chicago contingent, Terrell was re-elected. Wells' account does not paint Terrell as the benevolent and gracious servant of the people, but rather as a power-hungry opportunist, whose re-election "was a great loss." According to Wells, "Mrs. Terrell was by all odds the best educated woman among us and had proved herself an able presiding officer and parliamentarian. She had in the beginning the undivided affection of all the women who formed that organization, and it seemed such a pity that selfish ambition should destroy her opportunity to have led the organization to great heights."[288] Though Terrell's intentions remain unclear, history bears out Wells' assessment. Terrell's choice did strategically position her to regain control of the NACW and to assert her own notions of proper Black womanhood: "under Terrell's leadership the NACW would continue to embrace a 'politics of respectability' that marginalized activists such as [Josephine St. Pierre] Ruffin [a Wells' supporter] and the even more outspoken Ida B. Wells-Barnett."[289]

The difference in leadership styles is quite apparent here, however. Terrell was a political power-broker, who had the ability to bring coalitions of people together, because of her judicious parliamentary skills. She weighed political allegiances carefully, and

---

[287] Terrell 191.
[288] Wells 260.
[289] Bay 230.

often acted as mediator between competing interests. Her leadership style is, thus, best characterized as that of a negotiator. The NAACP is a case in point.

Ironically, though the Terrells' and not the Barnetts' supported Washington--Mary Church Terrell's husband Robert owed his D.C. judgeship to his allegiance with Washington—it was Terrell and not Wells who became a founding member of the NAACP, W.E.B. Du Bois' brainchild. Wells was an unequivocal supporter of Du Bois, even referring to herself on occasion as his mentor. Terrell, on the other hand, was more than willing to challenge and disagree with the Du Bois faction. In one very fiery letter to Robert, she vehemently declared

> My dear husband, I shall not allow Archie Grimke, Sinclair[,] Hershaw, Dubois and a whole army of Monroe Trotters deter me from doing something to help remove the awful conditions which injure you and me and all the rest of us. I don't care how they dislike me, how nasty—mean and small they are. They shall not stand between me and the principles in which I believe with all my heart and for which I am willing to suffer, if need be, and work. I am very sorry, very, very sorry, they passed resolutions denouncing President Taft for I am sure they will hurt the cause these people are advocating. If we stay out of every good thing because some narrow, mean, nasty people belong to them, we shall develop into specimens as contemptible as these people are and do no good besides.[290]

In this statement, Terrell's political position was clearly pragmatic and inclusive rather than idealistic and separatist. Because this letter is not dated, it is unclear exactly when it

[290] Mary Church Terrell to Robert Terrell, MCT Papers, Reel 3.

was written. However, given the names of the race men mentioned, Taft's election to the U.S. presidency in 1909, and Terrell's participation in the founding of the NAACP in the same year, more than likely she rejected Du Bois' and Trotter's strident protests against Taft's conservatism. Though Terrell was careful to clarify that Washington's influence had not been the sole determinant of her husband's judicial appointment,[291] she was well aware that her husband's political success was predicated upon his allegiance to the Tuskegee Machine.

An admirer of the Tuskegee model, Terrell was fundamentally committed to Du Bois' position on liberal education, having herself been a beneficiary of liberal training. She, therefore, chose to join the NAACP even though her "husband was warned that this action on his wife's part would alienate Dr. Washington from him and would finally lead to political ruin."[292] In response, the Terrells attempted to invert the logic of Washington's antagonism by informing his cronies that "the people who took it for granted that Dr. Washington was antagonistic to the principles enunciated by the National Assoication for the Advancement of colored People. . .evidently believed he was in favor of having the rights, privileges, and opportunities which other citizens enjoy withheld from his own heavily-handicapped group." Such a view of Washington was, in the Terrell's estimation, "reprehensible." When the attempt at inversion failed, Robert Terrell ostensibly decided that it was the worth the risk. In actuality, however, Mary Terrell managed to stay in Washington's good graces by giving him insider information, particularly around racial dissension within the NAACP. She also convinced him that she and Du Bois "[had] absolutely nothing to do with each other," though the truthfulness of

---

[291] Terrell, 233
[292] Ibid 234.

Washington's claim cannot be verified.[293] Washington came to view Terrell as an invaluable ally that would keep him informed of the inner-workings of the organization. That Terrell both participated in the founding of the NAACP and yet managed to remain in the good graces of Washington is a testament to her skill as a negotiator.[294]

Wells, on the other hand, was a highly-principled, outspoken, summarily uncompromising agitator. Her lack of facility for the dirty business of politics often left her lonely, outcast, and hurt, even though most of her contemporaries recognized her brilliance. In fact, it is fair to surmise that Wells outspoken and uncompromising politics also led to her own rift with the founders of the NAACP including Du Bois and Terrell.[295] Just as Terrell refused to denounce President Taft, she remained conspicuously silent about Wells' omission from the Committee of Forty who helped established the NAACP. Terrell understood the importance of having an accommodationist affect in her political posture, even though her politics were more radical. Moreover, Terrell primarily engaged in her political work through her interaction with the women of the NACW, an organization that could be perceived as non-threatening in its commitment to "women's work." Wells, on the other hand, attempted to work closely with the major male leaders of her day. But her "forthright political style was increasingly anachronistic next to the accommodationist approach perfected by Booker T. Washington. . . .Both Black and female, she was expected to be cautious, deferential and discreet, and consistently failed on all counts."[296] Even her former editor T. Thomas Fortune, a Washington supporter,

---

[293] See Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 372-373 for a discussion of Mary Church Terrell's brief career as a "double agent."
[294] David Levering Lewis. *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919.*(New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993). See Chapters 12 and 14.
[295] See Wells 321-333.
[296] Bay 245.

referred to her as a "bull in a china shop." Wells had rejected the inherent supremacy of dominant masculine leadership from her teen years forward, and this inability repeatedly caused her to be overlooked for her contributions to racial leadership.

As the two earliest autobiographies written by women to document their lives as race women, these texts are central to helping us understand how race women negotiated competing ideas about race, gender, and class. Moreover, these texts force contemporary scholars to rethink many of the central paradigms that have guided the study of Black women's history and literature, and African American history more generally, over the last forty years. Wells' and Terrell's varied uses of logos challenge the uncritical application of the theories of dissemblance and respectability as the central paradigms for understanding Black women's experience. The religious underpinnings of logos also force scholars to interrogate "the religious component of Black women's writings," and to "see how their works obfuscate the secular and religious dichotomies we have created in Black feminist thought."[297] Wells' importance to 19th century desegregation efforts and Terrell's contributions to these same efforts in the 1950s make a wonderful case for Jacqueline Dowd Hall's conception of a "long civil rights movement."[298] As they moved into a new century characterized by the conflict between an insistent ideology of progressivism coupled with recalcitrant Jim Crow politics, race women maintained their influential power in Black communities until the 1930s. They had been trained for leadership during the disappointing roll backs of the 1890s and inspired by the writings

---

[297] Chanta Haywood, *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003): 25.
[298] Though Hall wants to extend our notion of a Civil Rights Movement back to the 1930s, Wells fight for fair treatment based upon the Civil Rights Act of 1875, suggest that we must go back even farther. See Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" in *The Journal of American History*, March 2005.

and lectures of contemporaries like Wells, Terrell, Cooper and Harper. By the mid 20th century, though, these race women would redouble their efforts to provide community services through job agencies, schools, settlement houses for newly arrived Southern migrants, and other business ventures.

Chapter 3:
Breaking the Rigid Molds of Respectability: Pauli Murray's Quest for an Unhyphenated American Identity

Introduction: "The Inverted Sex Instinct and Other Questions"

While a patient at the Long Island Rest Home on December 14, 1937, Pauli Murray struggled to understand what might be the cause of her recurring bouts of severe mental distress.[299] Was "this 'psychosis' the result," Murray wrote in her daily questionnaire to her doctor, "of wanting to have my own way or because of the mental and emotional conflict?"[300] Frustrated by the lack of definite answers, Murray responded in her relentlessly inquisitive fashion, peppering her caretakers with questions, requests, and demands. Two days into her stay, she was finally ready, after some hesitancy, to name the cause of her "mental and emotional conflict." In her questionnaire written on December 16, Murray asks a variety of questions, often in no particular order. She writes, "why do women mother me eventually?" "Why," she asks, "does my conflict take the form of 'trying to help people out?'" "Why," she queries again, "do I tend to believe so firmly in myself in spite of the accepted rules of science?"[301] Humorously, she replies, "overestimation," possibly of her own sense of self-identification. And "why," she finally asks directly, "the inverted sex instinct—wearing pants, wanting to be one of the men, doing things that fellows do, hating to be dominated by women unless I like them?" Her

[299] I want to thank Beverly Guy-Sheftall for her invaluable guidance in alerting me to Pauli Murray's struggle with sexual identity. This knowledge revealed new and important layers about Murray's life and work.

[300] "Ouestionnaire, Sunday, December 14, 1937." Pauli Murray Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University Box 4, Folder 71. Hereafter Pauli Murray Papers are cited as PMP.

[301] Even though Murray seemed to reject scientific assessments, she actually believed that experimental treatments with hormones were a viable option. Doreen Drury has written extensively about the ways that Murray was influenced by the scientific discourses of her time. See Drury, ""Experimentation on the Male Side: Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Pauli Murray's Quest for Love and Identity, 1910-1960," Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston College, 2000, Chapter Three.

response: "glandular." [302] These moments of self-interrogation coupled with Murray's marginal responses recall the prerogatives of Black female subject formation that Mae Henderson discusses: "the interlocutory character of Black women's writing is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or 'generalized Other,' but a dialogue with the aspects of 'otherness' within the self."[303] Murray's dialogues with herself and with her doctors on paper are simply another aspect of the ways in which Black women attempt to grapple with the multiplicitous, harmonious, and cacophonous elements of the self.

In my attempt to examine the life of a woman who often raised more questions than answers, I found myself with the same dilemma in this chapter. Murray's posture of relentless interrogation was perhaps the only way she could think to manage a seemingly impossible conflict; I view her approach as an instructive one, since this chapter will undoubtedly raise many more questions than provide answers. More specifically, this chapter aims to use Pauli Murray as a case study of a 20th century public Black female leader who challenges our understandings of the term "race woman" precisely because she brooks no easy or uncritical identification with either term. Pauli Murray, a civil rights activist, feminist, attorney, Episcopal priest, poet, and writer, deserves space in this dissertation because her work on behalf of anti-racist and feminist struggles places her within the most active traditions of Black female leadership. At the same time, her struggles with transgender identity and her unequivocal rejection of the racial politics of

---

[302] Ibid., "Questionnaire Tuesday, December 16, 1937," PMP, Box 4, Folder 71. See also Drury: "As Murray was well aware, discourses on homosexuals often attributed same-sex attraction to a weakness of mind and morals. Her problem, she desperately sought to prove was *not* "in the brain" but in her "glands." P.106. Drury also writes that Murray was greatly interested in the "naturalist position" on homosexuality which viewed it as "a benign but inborn anomaly, linked to an organic congenital predisposition." Qtd in Drury, 108. This view held that there was a third sex.

[303] Henderson 349.

the Black Power-era raise important questions for contemporary Black feminist thought. These questions include how Black feminist thought theorizes Black female sexuality and gender and how it theorizes race, not to mention the connections between these identities and their attendant politics. Murray's struggle to understand her sexuality in the binary terms—heterosexual or homosexual—available to her in the 1940s speaks directly to many of the questions that feminist theorists like Judith Butler, Monique Wittig, and Anne Fausto-Sterling have been posing for the better part of two decades. Murray's resistance to these binary categories as a Black transgender, feminist and anti-racist activist also expose the potential limitations of Butler's theory of gender as performative.

Similarly, Murray's question of her doctors about her belief "in herself despite the accepted rules of sciences" beckons a Foucauldian exploration of the ways in which discourse determines sexuality. But Murray's own belief in God and in the rule of law challenges the (anti) foundational premises upon which both Foucault and Butler seek to build their arguments. In fact, as a theorist and intellectual in her own right, Murray's analyses of gender and sexuality link her with a long list of prominent Black lesbian and queer activists, writers, and thinkers including Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, Cathy Cohen and Bayard Rustin, a personal friend of Murray, whose lives and work will be important in illuminating the interlocking racial and sexual dimensions of Pauli Murray's quest for leadership.

The deliberate and inadvertent collective historical silencing of the analyses of queer women of color and persons from Black LGBT communities more generally has been an unfortunate hallmark of Black feminist thought. This silencing stems both from unchecked homophobia and conservative gender politics in Black communities and also

from a larger cultural silencing around Black women's sexuality, which Black women themselves have enacted through an adoption of a politics of respectability and a culture of dissemblance, designed to protect them from harmful and damaging stereotypes about Black womanhood. But Hortense Spillers argues that it is not just Black women who "individually and collectively" enact "this silence about sexuality" but also "Black feminist theorists writing about Black women."[304] Part of the reason that skepticism is warranted when attempting to apply the otherwise useful formulations of respectability and dissemblance to the study of Black women, is that at best, what we have is an "incomplete history" "in which Black women's sexuality is ideologically located in a nexus between race and gender, where the Black female subject is not seen and has no voice."[305] This historical elision is one for which my research acts as a remedy. Moreover, the inclusion of a discussion of Pauli Murray's queer identity as being integral to her leadership constitutes a significant and critical intervention within a tradition of Black feminist thought that has traditionally felt public Black women were better served by allowing their sexuality to remain private, in service both of presenting these women as "respectable" and also in offering to them a kind of privacy that has historically been unavailable to Black women as a group.

Though Black queer women's sexuality has been silenced in the historical scholarship on Black female leadership, Pauli Murray was far from silent about her sexual preferences, openly pursuing relationships with women, Black and white, throughout her twenties and thirties, and regularly discussing her conflict over wanting to be male with the aunts who raised her. In this regard, Eve Sedgwick's "epistemology of

---

[304] Hammonds 488.
[305] Ibid.

the closet"—an important theoretical contribution to queer studies--does not necessarily help us to "know" Pauli Murray any better.[306] To her family, close friends, many classmates, and even major Civil Rights leaders, she and her "secret" were known. Marlon Ross has observed that one of the limitations of Sedgwick's formulation is her insistence upon "bracketing" racial concerns without attending to the ways in "racial-class thinking" effects the operation of the closet.[307] The fact that Murray did not have to "come out" to her family exposes the inadequacy of the closet's necessary "binary of secrecy versus revelation" and reveals in some African American communities "a continuum of knowing that persists at various levels according to the kin and friendship relations within the community." Within these communal relational ties, "it is impossible *not* to know something so obvious among those who know you well enough."[308]

Notwithstanding Murray's open female romantic partnerships and her community's knowledge of her sexual preferences, her autobiographies fail to mark her encounters with women as anything other than platonic. In cases like these, "it is clear," avers Evelynn Hammonds "that we need a methodology that allows us to contest rather than reproduce the ideological system that has up to now defined the terrain of Black women's sexuality."[309] And perhaps, more importantly, Black feminists need a methodology that removes the necessarily defensive posture that Black women have historically adopted around sexuality. The interdisciplinary methods of this chapter—archival research coupled with textual analysis of published materials—will help to shed

---

[306] Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990)
[307] Marlon Ross, "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm" in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 182.
[308] Ross 180.
[309] Ibid.

light on the incomplete history of Black female sexuality by offering information about the life of a rather complex public figure.

Though Murray left an extensive archive of materials to the Schlesinger Library at Harvard, only recently has she begun to receive critical attention for her importance to the tradition of Black female leadership and intellectual production. Only one full-length scholarly study of Murray exists, and this text, concerned with her ordination to the Episcopal priesthood in 1976, treats her religious thought, specifically.[310] Drawing extensively upon these archives, my work seeks to insert Murray into a range of other important conversations including Civil Rights history, Black queer theory and history, and the history of African American female leadership. My distinctive examination of Pauli Murray's archival materials coupled with her writings—easily accessible only through her archive—reveal an emerging framework of resistance to institutional and cultural definitions of race, gender, and sexuality through which public Black women contest dominant race and gender norms in service of their own quest for subjectivity and in service of a broader racial and gender politic.

Color Trouble and Gender Trouble: Murray in Dialogue with Foucault and Butler

Throughout the 1930s and 40s, Murray, then in her twenties and thirties, was repeatedly hospitalized with bouts of depression. She wondered about her lifelong "nervous exciteable condition" which had been coupled with "the very natural falling in love with the female sex [and] terrific breakdowns after each love affair [had] become

---

[310] Anthony Pinn, *Becoming "America's Problem Child": An Outline of Pauli Murray's Religious Life and Theology* (Pickwick Publications, 2008). Other significant treatments of Murray are limited to edited volumes or discussion of her in larger historical works. See Anthony Pinn, *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006) and Anne Firor Scott (ed), *Pauli Murray and Caroline Ware: Forty Years of Letters in Black and White* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). See also Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

unsuccessful." The deceptively simple answer would have been for Murray to accept her identity as a lesbian. But not only could she not "accept the homosexual method of sex expression, but" she also "insist[ed] on the normal first," even though it puzzled her that her "greatest attractions [had] been toward extremely feminine and heterosexual women."[311] And while she insisted on the "normal first," she admitted that "when men try to make love to me, something in me fights."[312] Homosexuality also represented an unsuitable proposition for Murray because she "desire[d]" –and pursued—"monogamous married life as a completion."[313] Furthermore, Murray wrote, "why do many other homosexuals irritate me instead of causing a band of sympathy, particularly when I think it is acquired?"

In a "summary of symptoms of upset" that Murray wrote on March 8, 1940, she stated that her "emotional crises have recurred with a fair degree of regularity yearly" since the age of 19. "They usually manifest themselves during an emotional crisis involving a woman—either falling in love with a member of my sex, or finding no opportunity to express such an attraction in normal ways—sex life, marriage, dating, identification with the person and her environment." Elsewhere, Murray noted that she had "conflict with regard to sex" and an "inability to integrate homosexual tendencies into a 'socially acceptable' pattern of living."[314] Apparently, the tensions around her own gender identity collided with Murray's entrenched heteronormative assumptions and created a total dis-identification with notions of queerness.

---

[311] "Questionnaire," Wednesday, December 17, 1937, PMP, Box 4, Folder 71.
[312] Ibid, December 16, 1937.
[313] Murray had a short-lived marriage to William Roy Wynn that began in 1930 and fizzled out very quickly. The marriage was not annulled until 1948.
[314] "Memorandum to Dr. Helen Blount," March 8, 1940, PMP, Box 4, Folder 71

Because the explanations doctors offered were unsatisfactory, Murray proposed—in her characteristic take charge fashion and often to the great aggravation of her doctors--her own set of theories regarding her sexuality. Rejecting her condition as psychosis, she wrote, "why is it that I believe that psychiatry does not have the answer to true homosexuality, but that experimental science does?" For instance, if her problem was "merely an ego-drive, why" then wouldn't she "be satisfied with the splendid treatment I get here and the kindness of the people to me everywhere? Would that not be sufficient satisfaction for the ego?"

Always mindful of the pitfalls of blind allegiance, Murray even questioned why "she [expected] so much out of science," especially given her "deep religious nature."[315] After determining that science was, still indeed, her best bet, she asked doctors whether or not she might be a "pseudo-hermaphrodite"[316] with secreted male genitals." Murray was so convinced of the possibility that she was an intersexed or transgendered person that for the next three years she asked doctors to administer hormone treatments, possibly injections of testosterone that would allow her to become a normally functioning male. Doctors told her that if she needed any hormone treatments at all, she would benefit from receiving injections of female hormones, which could perhaps stabilize the irregular menstrual cycle, which had constituted proof for Murray of her proximity to men on the spectrum of gender. So she wrote during her stay that she "prefer[red] experimentation on the male side, instead of attempted adjustment as a normal woman."[317]

---

[315] Ibid.
[316] This term refers to a person that has biological chromosomes designating them as male *or* female, and genitalia that reflect either both sexes or the opposite sex. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), chapter 3.
[317] Ibid, Wednesday, December 17, 1937.

Michel Foucault's important and groundbreaking discussion of sexuality as discourse helps to explain Murray's ambivalence about her relation to the accepted societal and medical definitions of homosexuality. She fundamentally rejected the idea that a "scientific" diagnosis was intrinsically accurate and seemed to implicitly understand some form of disconnect between how her sexuality was being described (i.e. diagnosed) and what it actually was. Foucault speculates without a definite answer as to whether or not "transformation of sex into discourse" was "governed by the endeavor to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to a strict economy of reproduction: to say no to unproductive activities, to banish casual pleasures, [and] to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation."[318] The invention of the category of homosexuality was one such outgrowth of these drives to codify normal and abnormal sexualities. Homosexuality, is in other words, a discursive invention, "a category," "constituted from the moment it was characterized" in 1870.[319] Murray tried at different turns to resist each of these discourses, first rejecting science in favor of a belief in herself; next embracing science rather than psychiatry, which would have labeled her as deviant; and finally, turning to religious explanations coupled with experimental science. Though Murray evinced a tension at the labels that religion, science, and psychiatry all sought to impose upon her, she was also mired in the discursive in a way that absolutely exasperated her.

If her desire to be male was not an "ego drive," Murray wondered if perhaps it was "a question of race conflict, submission to authority, [and] being hemmed in by

[318] Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 36.
[319] Foucault 43.

restrictions."[320] But, she wrote in a perplexed response, "I am proud of my Negro blood." Though Murray was perhaps unaware, her question about the relationship of race to sexuality is an important one, because her body, which she frantically and actively sought to define within some acceptable scientific language—even the troubling early iterations of intersexuality—had already been marked as a particular kind of subject. Marlon Ross observes that his failure to grapple with the way in which racial discourses inscribed the body constitutes a critical limitation to Foucault's otherwise useful formulation of sexuality. If it is true that "by the eighteenth century, race is already marked 'on the body' as a totalizing sign of invisible anatomical species difference, then what happens in the nineteenth century when, as Foucault argues, homosexuality is marked on 'the body'" in precisely the same way?[321] Foucault fails to answer this question by assuming that the homosexual bodies of which he speaks "are *not* already marked as Negroid or Oriental; that is, in other words, because they are silently, invisibly already marked as unspecified Anglo-Saxons."[322]

When Murray speaks to the relationship between her "ego drive" and her Negro pride, she speaks into what Ross refers to as "the uneven discursive development of race, gender, and sexuality" which begs the question "What does it mean for a racialized body to be named before a gendered or homosexualized one?"[323] Murray's questions are driven by a desire to figure out exactly which discourse marks her as different, her race, her gender, or her sexuality? A committed activist, Murray concluded that her racial identity was not the problem and she frequently recovered from bouts of depression by

---

[320] Ibid.
[321] Ross 165
[322] Ibid 167.
[323] Ibid 166.

throwing herself into work with labor movements, anti-war causes, and anti-racism efforts: "A concrete manifestation" of her conflict, Murray wrote was "over-activity" and "taking on greater responsibilities than I am able carry through to successful conclusion."

Her break-downs and hospital stays often coincided with her work on behalf of the Works Progress Administration and various school, bus, and restaurant desegregation struggles throughout the 1930s and 40s, perhaps because the Murray's passion for justice provided an outlet for her pent-up energy and frustrations. Just two weeks after being committed to Bellevue in March 1940 by her friend Adelene (Mac) McBean, Murray and Mac were arrested in Petersburg, Virginia for defying a bus segregation statute. Mac and Pauli were forced to spend three days in prison. The squalid conditions of the "dirty jail cell where five women have to perform the daily functions of life" prompted Murray to write in her notebook: "to this situation the sensitive, intellectually aware Negro woman is brought—with a hodge-podge of training in various Negro and mixed and public schools, a hatred for filth and uncleanness, a resentment against inequality, and an almost pathetic loyalty to her racial group." The experience was "at once tragic, comic, and exasperating."[324] While Murray recounts this experience in her second autobiography *Song in a Weary Throat* as a pivotal one marking her as a race activist, there is no mention of the harrowing hospital confinement that had plagued her just weeks before. During that confinement, Murray had written "I could not bring myself to accept an adjustment to female life in the normal accepted sense. My desire to be male was so strong that I felt I wanted to wait and think long and earnestly before experimenting with

[324] "Prison" Box 4, Folder 85, PMP

female hormone."[325] Yet by March 25th, 1940, Murray was waxing eloquent about the peculiar plight of the Negro woman-turned-activist.

What was perhaps most "tragic, comic, and exasperating" about her arrest was that Murray was cross-dressing when she and Mac were arrested. In fact, when asked by the police at the scene for her name and address, she told them that her name was Oliver Fleming. One of the passengers on the bus that day was a white sociology graduate student from UNC named Harold Garfinkel. The incident made such an impression that Garfinkel wrote an essay recounting it called "Color Trouble," which was published two months later in *Opportunity* magazine.[326] The fact that Pauli Murray was actually female was so undetectable as to entirely escape Garfinkel's notice. In fact, in his story, he understood Mac and Pauli to be a co-ed couple, and Glenda Gilmore noted that in her conversations with Garfinkel in 2004, he still believed that Pauli Murray was male.[327] The convoluted gender performances that underlie Murray's "respectable" autobiographical narrative create particular challenges for scholars who must confront a narrative that does not fully reveal itself. Clearly, this is a very public performance of Black female sexuality within the very racialized space—a segregated bus—that adherents to the culture of dissemblance and the politics of respectability would argue demanded Black women's silence and allegiance to prescribed heterosexual norms.

What the politics of respectability tells us is that it was detrimental for Black women to actively signal a sexual or erotic self in public, even if that self was heterosexual, because such significations would make them vulnerable to rape. But

---

[325] Memo to Dr. Blount, March 8, 1940, Box 4, Folder 71, PMP
[326] Gilmore 322.
[327] See Gilmore, footnote 120 on page 536. "Color Trouble" was mistaken for fiction and republished in *Best American Short Stories of 1941*.

Murray's performance raises the question of transgendering or gender passing as a form of resistance not only against the immediate threat of rape, but also against the limited public identity performances available to straight Black women. Though it is unclear if Mac was Murray's romantic partner, or simply a committed ally, it is clear that she willingly participated in Murray's queering of gender role ideology. To invoke a contemporary discourse around lesbianism, how does our understanding of Black female respectability change if we understand Black women's performances of Southern ladyhood within the context of butch-femme relationships?

In Garfinkel's intriguing account of the gender politics in the event, Mac protests the bus driver's treatment not only on the grounds of differential racial treatment but differential gender treatment: "' If I were a white woman you couldn't do enough for me.' Here she faltered and her lips trembled. 'I'm colored and I'm sick. . . Will you believe me?"[328] Mac's protest centered on the ways in which Negro women continued to fall outside the boundaries of Southern chivalry. Thus, she attempted to invoke her illness as an especial plea for gendered sympathy, though to no avail. On the other hand, Pauli as Oliver makes no such appeals and is rendered in Garfinkel's account as reticent, non-imposing, and thus non-threatening, notwithstanding some "insolent" impulses.[329] The fact that Murray does not identify as female in this scenario and is not subjected to racial violence in quite the same way as Mac because of her successful gender dissemblance demands that she be situated differently in our understanding of Black female leadership. And since she and Mac were on the bus to Petersburg to spend Easter in Durham with

---

[328] Harold Garfinkel. "Color Trouble" in *The Best American Short Stories 1941*, ed. Edward J. O'Brien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941), 110.
[329] Garfinkel 102.

Murray's Aunt Pauline, who was well aware of Murray's "little boy-girl personality,"[330] reading Murray as closeted is also unsatisfactory. To the extent that dissemblance does not easily fit the historical moment out of which Murray writes, understanding her gender performance is not a simple undertaking. In fact, I would argue that Murray's unapologetic expression of transgender identity and sexuality should not be read as silence but as an active resistance to acceptable gender norms. On the other hand, in all written accounts of this incident, both in her statements written for the lawyers and in Murray's autobiography, she is completely silent about her gender-bending, a silence to which I will return later in this chapter.

How, then, might we understand race work and the women who performed it differently when we pivot to an angle that exposes the sometimes tortured, always complicated relationship between sexual identity, gender identity, and racial identity? How did sexuality, particularly heterosexuality, affect one's ability to become a successful race woman? How does our understanding of the intersection of race and gender identity shift if a moment of "color trouble" is simultaneously an instantiation of what Judith Butler would call "gender trouble?" Murray's "gender trouble" raises a number of important questions not only about the relationship of gender to performance, a central concern of Butler, but also the relationship of gender to sex. Butler begins her inquiry into feminism by interrogating the role of the subject—namely, the category "woman" –within a feminist politic. Beginning from the premise that "juridical power"—the power of law—"inevitably 'produces' what it merely claims to represent," Butler attempts to understand the *production* of the category of women and the ways that that process and product ought impact and shape both feminist theory and politics. She

[330] Correspondence between Pauli and Aunt Pauline quoted in Gilmore, 325.

suggests that that there might not be an actual subject, woman, "'before' the law, awaiting representation by the law. Perhaps the subject, as well as the invocation of a temporal 'before,' is constituted by the law as the fictive foundation of its own claim to legitimacy."[331] If this originary myth is more true than the foundational ones that assume a presocial subject, then Butler is ready to conclude in line with Simone De Beauvoir that "one is not a woman, but rather *becomes* a woman." From this, "it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end."[332] This observation has an important implication for gender which becomes ultimately a "performance" in the sense that the gendered body "has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality."[333] Thus gender is defined as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[334] To a large extent, Murray would benefit from a reading of gender as performative. Note again her description of those *actions* which mark her as male: "wearing pants, wanting to be one of the men, doing things that fellows do, hating to be dominated by women unless I like them."

Her assumption of the persona of Oliver Fleming during her bus trip is itself a kind of gender performance. In fact, Butler argues that such performance are inevitable under a system of compulsory heterosexuality and constitute a kind of parody: "heterosexuality offers normative sexual positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without coherence with these

---

[331] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 4.
[332] Butler 45.
[333] Butler 185.
[334] Butler 45

positions reveals heterosexuality itself not only as a compulsory law, but as an inevitable comedy. Indeed, I would offer this insight into heterosexuality as both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself. . ."[335] Even though Murray creatively responds to her inability to perform the "normal method of sex expression," her transgender identity does raise unique concerns for Butler's theoretical project. As an important feminist theorist herself, Murray does not uncouple sex from gender. Because she "naturally" preferred women, she felt she must be a biological male, a pseudo-hermaphrodite, who had feminine genitalia and "secreted male genitals." To be biological woman who liked other women was in Murray's mind to be a deviant figure, and since she did not believe herself to be a deviant, she thought that science would ultimately discover what amounted to a biological misnomer, which she would remedy by taking the male hormones that would allow her secreted genitals to develop fully, and she pursue life as a normal functioning male.

Murray's wish for a scientific answer was all the more understandable given that she believed her identity "had limited her success because 'this conflict rises up to knock me down at every apex I reach in my career." Moreover, it left her "exposed to any enemy or person who may or may not want to hurt" her.[336] Murray's frustrations over "normal" and "proper" social adjustment links the politics of race and racism to larger questions about sexual identity and homophobia in a very salient manner, and complicates our understanding of the race woman role in the lives of women who do not conform to heteronormative ideals in any of these categories. For instance, Murray's belief in her masculinity and her performance of a masculine self challenges any easy

---

[335] Butler 166.
[336] Gilmore 325-326.

attempts to identify her under the moniker of "woman." Though she does not decouple sex from gender as contemporary feminist theorists have done, Murray's own life attests to a gradual process by which she "becomes a woman," namely in coming first, to accept herself as female and then to perform that gender to the best of her ability. This process of becoming fundamentally problematizes the category of race woman, because Murray's sexuality troubled not only her relationship to gender but also to race. Though she was committed to the plight of Black people, which she referred to as a "pathetic loyalty to her race," she had a very complicated relationship to notions of "Blackness," because of the homophobic silences of the African American community.

Murray's multivalent notions of Blackness and womanhood present a serious dilemma for intersectionality, which often chooses its politics from the standpoint of a unitary intersectional subject, for instance, "the Black woman," as if those categories of race and gender are socially fixed categories themselves. When Blackness, femaleness, and sexuality come to have multiple meanings for the body of any one subject, intersectionality reaches a theoretical impasse that it cannot cross. This is the same tension and exclusivity that lesbians of color have pointed to in some form since the 1970s. Moreover, her choice to openly resist heterosexist formulations of normative sexuality in her personal relationships often placed her beyond the sympathies of many of the male race leaders of her day.

Disturbing the Peace and Confronting Jane Crow

It was during the Petersburg bus incident that Murray had her second set of encounters with important civil rights figures like Thurgood Marshall and Leon Ransom, who were part of the NAACP legal team. She had initially met these men during her

attempt to desegregate a University of North Carolina graduate program in 1938, ironically the same program in which Garfinkel would become a student. Denied admission because of her race, Murray sought to become one of the NAACP's test cases under the Plessy segregation statute. Known for her zealous commitment to any causes for which she had deep conviction, Murray pursued admittance to UNC with her characteristic fervor. She wrote letters to the UNC president, the campus newspaper, and other local opponents, like James Shepard, president of North Carolina College for Negroes.[337] But her unapologetic boldness was perceived as a dangerous, if naïve, brashness by the NAACP's leadership, especially Roy Wilkins.

Gilmore notes that Roy Wilkins actively lobbied against the NAACP taking Murray's case, because "since she has gone this far [in writing letters,] she should be allowed to proceed by herself."[338] The NAACP did decide against taking Murray's case, explaining to her that because she attended college in and had since worked in New York, her state residency claim was not solid enough to press what was essentially a state matter. I concur with Gilmore's assessment that although Marshall's explanation did fit with the NAACP's strategy of incrementalism at that time, his decision was primarily informed by much more personal matters, including Murray's less-than-secret lesbian associations, and even perhaps her mental troubles. Her stint in Bellevue might even have been precipitated by an arrest over a lover's quarrel.[339]

---

[337] Glenda Gilmore. *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950.* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), 265-266. Shepard had impeded past attempts to desegregate UNC in order to lobby for additional funds for his own school's graduate programs.
[338] Gilmore 285.
[339] Gilmore 285. Gilmore makes this assertion in her book, even though my own research in Murray's archive did not offer any evidence of this arrest.

Barbara Smith would argue, however, that the civil rights establishment, which has historically been lukewarm in its support of gay and lesbian rights, adopted a "tacit attitude [that asks] 'Homophobia: Why Bring It Up?"[340] Had Wilkins and the NAACP taken Murray's case, there was a good possibility that they may have had to acknowledge her transgender performance, a move that would actively have introduced discussions of Black queer identity into the larger civil rights movement. Murray was not the only civil rights figure whose public expressions of sexuality created challenges for her. Her friend Bayard Rustin, who she most likely came to know during their work with A. Philip Randolph and the March on Washington Movement, was jailed in the 1950s for engaging in sexual acts with two young men in public. Like Murray, Rustin refused to be closeted about his sexuality, even though this choice came with grave consequences. Though he had an important role in civil rights, even mentoring King in non-violent direct action strategies, Rustin "remained always in the background, his figure shadowy and blurred, [and] his importance masked" because "at any moment, his sexual history might erupt into consciousness."[341]

Murray's refusal to comply, at least during her college and young adult years, with the compulsory heterosexuality demanded by all respectable race figures, especially its women, became costly as she sought to champion racial causes. Wilkins himself was undoubtedly exasperated by what he and Marshall referred to as Murray's maverick spirit.[342] Her leadership style was assertive to the point of aggression, combative, unrelenting, and highly intelligent. With regard to her intellectual and rhetorical ability,

---

[340] See Barbara Smith, "Homophobia: Why Bring It Up?" in *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 113.
[341] John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Free Press, 2003), 193.
[342] Gilmore 287.

Murray never suffered from a lack of confidence. She even had a name for her legendarily lengthy letters: "confrontation by typewriter."[343] Undoubtedly, this sense of self-possession, and even her sense of "wanting to be one of the men" caused Murray to be off-putting to figures like Wilkins and Marshall, who were not known for their progressive attitudes on gender.

Although by the 1940s, Black communities had prominent public leaders like Mary McLeod Bethune, who might be considered a maverick in her own right, and Ella Baker, an activist in New York and a friend to Murray, these women's leadership styles differed considerably from Murray.[344] Bethune was a skillful and diplomatic negotiator, and Baker preferred to have a less public role. But Murray liked to be both center stage and confrontational, a coupling which did not bode well for her relationships with her race men contemporaries like Roy Wilkins. She told A. Philip Randolph that she had "taken it upon [her]self to act as a 'little lieutenant to the Commander of our new movement for Freedom." In this same letter, she took it upon herself to inform Randolph that he was "unquestionably the leader of a young Negro mass who is ready to follow you to the bitter but glorious end;" but she cautioned him "the masses are ready to move, but they don't know how." He could "not count on the support of the already stodgy respectable leadership" who would "walk in and steal the glory for their own personal ends." Instead, she advised, "in order to build a movement for struggle, you need an organization which we do not have now. We have only potentialities."[345] Her presumptiveness and precocity aside, Murray's refusal to submit to gender and sexual

---

[343] Pauli Murray. *Song in A Weary Throat*. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), 96
[344] For more on Ella Baker, see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
[345] "Pauli Murray Letter to Brother Randolph," July 24, 1942 PMP, Box72, Folder 1265

norms as it related to relationships with Black men caused them to see her as a dangerous figure that would ultimately impede the struggle, although Randolph was decidedly patient and obliging in his responses.

Hoping that Petersburg would provide her another opportunity to become a test case for the NAACP, Murray made contact again with her acquaintances there. But the judge, sensing an impending struggle, dismissed the segregation violation and simply charged Murray and Mac with disturbing the peace. Convicted and forced to serve a brief jail sentence, the two young women had indeed disturbed the peace in more ways than one, first, by disrupting the very silences that presumed a willing acquiescence to racial segregation, and second and more subtly, by disrupting those silences that enshrouded compulsory heterosexual self-expression.

Although the Petersburg case did not ultimately become a viable test case, Murray maintained her relationship with Leon Ransom who helped her secure a scholarship to Howard University Law School the next year. At Howard, Murray began to think seriously about what she termed “Jane Crow,” “a twin evil [of Jim Crow] of discriminatory sex bias.”[346] Women were often the butt of sexist jokes much to Murray’s dismay, and as the only woman in her class and in the entire student body—the other female student had dropped out—Murray was routinely excluded from class discussions, not because professors “deliberately ignored” her, but because “their freewheeling classroom style of informal discussion allowed the men’s deeper voices to obliterate [her] lighter voice.”[347] This alleged obliteration of voice was coupled with the assumption that Murray “had nothing to contribute,” and in her words, left her feeling “condemned to

[346] Murray 183.
[347] Ibid.

silence." The use of the term "obliterate" might have been hyperbolic on Murray's part, given her reputation for aggressive questioning and her willingness to confront male opponents.

The function of Jane Crow on Howard's campus further incensed and aggravated Murray because of the increasing commitment of Howard's women students to stand in solidarity with Black male soldiers who were fighting against fascism abroad, by assisting with and largely leading desegregation efforts at home. Pauli Murray's friend Ruth Powell, "a New Englander who had lived all her life in. . .Boston surburb" was devastated the first time she was denied service at a D.C. lunch counter. After "recovering" from her humiliating experience, Powell launched a one-woman sit-in campaign in various downtown drugstores and restaurants. When Powell and three other Howard women were arrested for refusing to over-pay for a cup of coffee, their actions galvanized the campus chapter of the NAACP. Murray's women-centered account of the Howard desegregation campaign provides a direct challenge to the male-centered historiography that has dominated civil rights literature. Powell's arrest undoubtedly reminded Murray of her own 1940 arrest in Petersburg. But Murray also personally felt an additional responsibility to fight for freedom at home since "an accident of gender exempted me from military service and left me free to pursue my career. . ." Apparently, "many other Howard University women were feeling a similar responsibility" to "help make the country for which our Black brothers were fighting a freer place in which to live when they returned from wartime service."[348] Despite the transsexual resonances in Murray's quip about her "accident of gender," she must have felt particularly exasperated by her continuing battle with the "twin evils" of Jim and Jane Crow.

---

[348] Murray 205.

Murray's real reckoning with sexism began, however, after she was excluded from becoming part of an all-male legal fraternity at Howard. When she confronted Dr. Ransom about this obviously exclusive process, he was cordial, but dismissive, telling her to start her own legal sorority. In the 1940s, Howard Law was the national laboratory in which the legal strategies of the civil rights movement were being formulated and tested. Recounting this exciting time, Murray wrote

> Many of the briefs in key cases before the Supreme Court were prepared in our law library, and exceptionally able students were rewarded for excellence by being permitted to research on a brief under the supervision of a professor. When a major case was to be presented to the Supreme court, the entire school assembled to hear dress rehearsal arguments. Faculty members and alert students subjected the NAACP attorneys who argued these cases to searching questions, and by the time the attorneys appeared before the nine justices they were thoroughly prepared to defend their positions.[349]

Thus, her exclusion from the "fraternity of lawyers who would make civil rights history" was not an isolated case of sexism but rather a representative case of a larger practice of sexist exclusion among many of our most notable civil rights pioneers. Later civil rights figures like Dorothy Height and Anna Arnold Hedgeman would both be disheartened and openly protest the exclusion of women from active planning and participation in the March on Washington. "The discovery," wrote Murray, "that Ransom and other men I deeply admired because of their dedication to civil rights, men who themselves suffered racial indignities, could countenance the exclusion of women from their professional

[349] Murray 182.

association aroused an incipient feminism in me long before I knew the meaning of the term 'feminism.'" She named that incipient feminism Jane Crow, a signally important formulation of Black feminist thought because of its historical grounding in Black women's experiences in the struggle for civil rights. This iteration of Black feminist thought was liberal in its inherent appeal to the law for equality and in Murray's formulation of it against the backdrop of her legal education.

It is precisely because of Murray's unwavering belief in the rule of law and its power to equalize and remedy discrimination that we must use Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative advisedly and with caution. Liberal Black feminist thought, of which Murray is an exemplar, has looked to juridical structures to provide forms of validation for Black women as subjects that social structures have routinely, systematically and historically denied. So while Butler is interested in deconstructing the category of "woman" as a viable juridical subject, Murray is invested in demonstrating the ways in which Black women are viable juridical subjects capable of both legal recognition and remedy. Murray writes with regard to "the status of the Black woman under the law" that she "is affected not merely by her relationship to a Black male but also by the position of women in the total society."[350] Murray argues that Black women's historical relationship to the law has been as a "brood mare." Thus, "the forcible rape of a female slave by another person other than her master was not considered a crime but only trespass upon and injury to the property of her master. . ."[351] Given the precarious status of Black women "before" the law, Murray concludes that they "have an important stake in the present movement to make the guarantee of equal rights without regard to sex part

---

[350] Pauli Murray, "Constitutional Law and Black Women" –An Occasional Paper for the Afro-American Studies Program at Boston University, undated, 43. PMP, Box 84, Folder 1460
[351] Ibid 43.

of the fundamental law of the land."[352] Judith Butler fails to recognize that though the law created certain subjects, it essentially failed to recognize other subjects, like Black women, leaving these women outside of the juridical process of "becoming a woman."

In fact, I argue that Murray's own personal process of "becoming" a woman, or accepting her womanhood coincides with her recognition and increasing interest in feminism and legal remedies for sexism. In 1944, Murray wanted to do graduate work at Harvard Law, a tradition for the top student in the Howard graduating class. Because Harvard Law did not yet admit women, she was rejected. In one of her classic confrontations by typewriter, Murray wrote to the Dean and outlined the reasons that she should be granted admission. Included in a laundry list of appeals, Murray writes, "very recent medical examination reveals me to be a functionally normal woman with perhaps a 'male slant' on things, which may account for my insistence upon getting into Harvard."[353] Though it is unclear why Murray thought it a good idea to highlight her sexual difference, it is clear that she wanted Harvard to know that she had the mental capacity of a man, despite her biology. Murray, then, is still in some senses coming to accept herself as a woman. That process is impossible without a recognition of the sexist limitations that the female gender poses. Thus Murray's appeal to the dean that would evaluate her application was also an appeal for recognition as a woman, if a reluctant one, before the law. Murray and her successor Kimberle Crenshaw, both attorneys, have consequently sought to remedy the inability of the law to recognize and respond to the particular plight of Black women in the law through the advocacy of liberal feminism and the creation of paradigms like intersectionality, respectively.

---

[352] Ibid.
[353] Pauli Murray Letter to Mr. Smith, June 24, 1944, PMP Box 18, Folder 415

As the legal strategy of civil rights became institutionally codified in a way that deliberately excluded Black women who did not meet the NAACP's standards of respectability,[354] what Murray experienced was a shift from the politics of leadership that had characterized both her active participation in the labor struggles of the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration and also the tradition of Black female leadership that had characterized the period from the 1890s-1930s. In this period both the NACW and the newly formed National Council of Negro Women (1935) had taken on racial leadership as women, believing that racial problems could be legitimately addressed through programs that aided Black women and children. Although the NCNW continued to enjoy national prominence, its strategy of leadership was still most effective because it mobilized grassroots women's organizations. Notwithstanding the assent of Mary McLeod Bethune and Dorothy Height to positions of national prominence, the organization was highly ineffective at breaking the sexist barriers among the civil rights establishment.

Queer Treason, or Why Negro Girls Stay Single: Mapping the Contours of Pauli Murray's Black Feminism

In her 1947 essay—really, a manifesto-- entitled "Why Negro Girls Stay Single," Murray further developed her conception of Jane Crow. She proclaimed that the Negro woman was in a "state of revolt" against a dual "framework of 'male supremacy' and 'white supremacy' [in which] the Negro woman finds herself at the bottom of the

---

[354] The NAACP was well-known for passing over potential bus desegregation test cases until they found more respectable figures. These were the circumstances under which Rosa Parks was chosen as an appropriate catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She was chosen after the NAACP passed over a young 15-year old girl named Claudette Colvin who had been arrested for the same offense, but was pregnant and unmarried.

socioeconomic scale."[355] The revolt against Jim and Jane Crow was a decidedly middle-class revolution, "felt most keenly among Negro college-trained and professional women." Such a woman, who in many cases had outpaced her male counterpart in educational achievement, could not "find a mate with whom she can share all the richness of her life in addition to its functional aspects." Murray averred that these women's advanced educational skills and increased earning power "were a social handicap if [the woman] wanted marriage." Men would shy away from such relationships, because "it is too great a threat to their security." And since Black women could not look to these relationships for economic security, they might still find in them a modicum of emotional security. "But here again," Murray declares, "she [the Negro woman] is defeated." "The American Negro male is not prepared to offer emotional security because he has rarely, if ever, known it himself. . . .His submerged status in American life places unnatural stresses and strains upon his already inadequate equipment inherited from our immature democracy."[356]

Here Murray betrays a sophisticated and prescient analysis of the ways that national discourses on racism had stunted and entrapped formulations of Black masculinity in a manner detrimental to Black people as a whole. Murray termed this frustrated masculine (and gender) development a "general mis-education of the sexes." This mis-education coupled with "outmoded social tabus [sic]"—no doubt about homosexuality—"have helped to form rigid moulds into which the sexes are poured and which determine in advance the role men and women are to play in community life." These overdetermined sex roles created an expectation that men should "act as if they are

---

[355] Pauli Murray, "Why Negro Girls Stay Single," [PMP, Box 85, Folder 1469]. Originally published in *Negro Digest,* July 1947, p.5

[356] Murray 6.

the lords of creation, the breadwinners and warriors of our time and of all time." But Murray assessed, "they play the role with varying degrees of hamacting and success" and really "are as frightened and insecure as modern women are."[357] Murray's analysis presages a very similar assessment that would not appear to nearly a decade later in E. Franklin Frazier's *The Black Bourgeoisie*, a scathing critique of the Black middle class, published in 1957. In it, he asserts that "discriminations cause frustration in Negro men because they are not allowed to play the 'masculine role ' as defined by American culture. They cannot assert themselves or exercise power as white men do." Negro men overcompensate by "cultivat[ing] their 'personalities,' which enable to exercise considerable influence among whites and achieve distinction in the Negro world." [358]

Traditional sex role ideology also limited the capacities in which women and men could serve in their communities, an observation with direct bearing on someone like Murray, whose transgender struggles impeded her assent to racial leadership. One senses Murray's frustration at and resistance to being poured into the rigid moulds of racial respectability. Having the feel of a prophet of doom, Murray pronounces that "the Negro man who attempts to play the role of the dominant sex in a setting where the Negro woman has partially emancipated herself. . .is face to face with emotional disaster." And again here Murray betrays an elitist bias "in the case of the trained Negro woman who has become perhaps the most aggressive of the human species." Notwithstanding the troubling characterizations of Negro women as aggressive,[359] Murray's assessments of gender conflicts within Black interpersonal relationships is quite astute and foreshadows

---

[357] Murray 6.
[358] E. Franklin Frazier, *The Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: The Free Press, 1957), 221.
[359] Drury argues that Murray was contending with a range of stereotypes about both Black and queer women. In particular the "overachieving Black lady" converged with the aggressively "mannish lesbian." P. 105.

those arguments that will not again be fully explicated by Black feminists until the 1970s, in essays like Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 essay "On the Issue of Roles."[360] Importantly, Murray views Black men as frustrated patriarchs, not as full-fledged patriarchal figures. The Negro male is "the victim of constant frustration in his role as a male because socially he is subordinate to the white woman although he is trained to act as a member of the dominant sex. He is required to fit his human emotions into a racially determined pattern which may have nothing to do with his desires."[361] On the one hand Black men want to dominate white women as true and proper males; on the other hand they are sometimes sexually attracted to them. In both cases, the logic of racial segregation denies them the opportunity to exercise these male prerogatives. This failure, according to Frazier, also leads to female dominated Black households in which Black men, shorn of their dominant status, "must generally let Negro women assume leadership in any show of militancy." Though Frazier's analysis accedes to the outmoded myth of Black matriarchy, both he and Murray are aware of the ways in which race and class politics within Black America interact to create troubling gender scenarios.

It is surprising that Murray does not further interrogate the problematic relationship implied here between Black men and white women, especially since she indicates early in the essay that white women are Black women's allies around issues of sex discrimination. But, then, she is primarily concerned about the ways that these experiences of subordinate masculinity[362] precipitate the abuse of Black women, leading

---

[360] This essay appeared in Bambara's groundbreaking text *The Black Woman.*
[361] Murray 7.
[362] Patricia Hill Collins explicates the relationship between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities in *Black Sexual Politics.* See Chapter 6.

the Black man "to vent his resentments upon the Negro woman who may become his sex partner."

Perhaps because of her "terrific mental breakdowns," Murray's essay pivots upon a conception of what will provide the most emotional security for Negro women. Thus, she argues that "if the emotional security of the Negro woman depends upon proper mating and marriage, she is confronted with the inexorable logic of numbers which demands that she find a mate elsewhere than among Negro males, unless the American society which enforces bi-racialism [segregation] also permits legal racial polygamy." She concludes that from a "biological and functional point of view, the logical solution to a shortage of available Negro males would be that Negro women find their mates in other ethnic groups." Always polemical, Frazier points to the irony of Black women's disdain for interracial marriages among Black men and white women since "generally they have no objection to the marriage of white men to Negro women."[363] But Murray knows that this option "would be denounced as sheer 'treason' in the eyes of the 'no social equality advocates.'" Thus she queries, "What other alternatives are open?" Clearly, Murray's need to consider the decreased marriage prospects of Black women in the 1940s echoes arguments made earlier by Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett and that would be revisited in Orlando Patterson's *Rituals of Blood* and Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Gender Talk*.[364]

---

[363] Frazier 218.
[364] Murray's argument about the shortage of eligible Black males foreshadows several decades of similar arguments by Black men and women. One such late twentieth century treatment of the problem can be found in Orlando Patterson's work *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1998). See chapter 1. See Johnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities,* (New York: One World, Ballantine, 2003). See Chapter 3. *Murray*, a great admirer of Frazier's work, would employ his analysis, in an early iteration of Patterson's observations in her 1965 doctoral dissertation at Yale Law School, "Roots of the Racial Crisis: Prologue to Policy."

More striking here, though, is Murray's own ostensible commitment to strictly heterosexual options for Black women. Even though she seemingly advocates for the possibility of interracial relationships as a solution to Black women's marriage problems, she is certainly not compelled by her own argument, either because of its social improbability or because of its personal undesirability. Murray never explicitly advocates that same-sex relationships be an option, perhaps because this would be perceived as *queer treason*, but her open ended and unanswered question about "other alternatives" is not exactly subtle.

At the same time, however, she argues that the constant conflicts between white men and Black men over their respective treatments of Black women and white women "contributes to a jungle of human relationships, aggravates among Negroes the alienation of the sexes, intensifies homosexuality and often results in a rising incidence of crimes of passion, broken homes and divorces."[365] Surprisingly or perhaps not so surprisingly, Murray characterizes homosexuality as being a deviant result of failed racial relationships and groups it among society's most troubling ills. Although her developing feminist consciousness allowed Murray to have a sophisticated and extensive critique of sex roles, it did not take her far enough to critique the social and sexual limitations which had plagued her own life.

By 1947, Murray had medically confirmed that she was neither a biological male nor intersexed; concomitantly, the residual argument within her manifesto seems to be that she ultimately could have been a better male than most Black men. If society could uncouple sex from gender—by disavowing its "rigid moulds," then she might more effectively perform the type of masculinity that she calls for Black men to engage.

---

[365] Murray 8.

Murray could demonize homosexuality, because she, too, viewed it as a deviant practice. In her estimation, if she were attracted to women, then she must be male, an assessment which betrayed her own failure to decouple sex from gender. In tandem with these presuppositions, Murray ends with a charge to Negro men: "We desire that the Negro male accept the Negro female as his equal and treat her accordingly and that he cease his ruthless aggression upon her and his emotional exploitation of her made possible by her admittedly inferior position as a social human being in the United States." Murray also called for the Black man to "strive for emotional maturity himself" and to "see the Negro woman as a personality" and that he "maintain the dignity and respect for human personality with relation to the Negro woman." Thus, Murray's early 20th century brand of Black feminism demands not only equality for Black women but also progressive forms of Black masculinity, much like its contemporary counterparts have demanded since the 1970s.

Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Politics of Respectability

Murray's ostensible approbation of socially acceptable sexual norms betrays some troubling silences in her manifesto. Her own inability to "integrate her homosexual tendencies" into a "socially acceptable pattern of living" speak directly into women's experiences with compulsory heterosexuality, and in Black communities, to the way in which compulsory heterosexuality has been one of the pillars of a politics of respectability.[366] The proper performance of the politics of respectability has been a non-

---

[366] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose,* Reprint. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994) Rich argues that it is fallacious to understand homosexuality, specifically lesbianism as the "mirror image of heterosexual or male homosexual relations." It is also incorrect to marginalize lesbianism as "alternative," "deviant," or "unnatural." Such characterizations are intrinsic results of a system which views heterosexuality as normative and compels others to do so. Evelyn Brooks Higginboth introduced the term "politics of respectability" in her doctoral dissertation and later in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women's*

negotiable prerequisite for race women's ascent to leadership, and while the discourse of respectability emerged specifically to combat notions about Black women's (hetero)sexual deviance—a charge which left them vulnerable to rape—respectability demanded an allegiance to the proper performance of functional heterosexual unions as evidence of African-American's fitness for citizenship and also for race women's leadership. In fact, presumptive heterosexuality has been so normatively entrenched in the study of Black women's lives, that there has been very little sustained public dialogue about the lack of traditional heterosexual relationships in the lives of race women like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary McLeod Bethune, or Ella Baker, all of whom were widowed or divorced, and apparently disinterested in remarrying.[367] Gloria Hull affirms my concerns here about the "hidden nature of women's sexual lives in general," and more specifically, " lesbian invisibility" which creates particular challenges for doing "lesbian-feminist scholarship, where the subjects feel constrained even in their private utterances from expressing themselves clearly and fully."[368]

Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920. She writes, "Black Baptist women . . .infused concepts such as equality, self-respect, professionalism, and American identity with their own intentions and interpretations. In the dialogic sense of multiple and conflicting meanings, these concepts became new, resistant pronouncements against white public opinion. The Black Baptist women's opposition to the social structures and symbolic representations of white supremacy may be characterized by the concept of the 'politics of respectability." "Adherence to respectability enabled Black women to counter racist images and structures," but because of its " assimilationist leanings," it led to "an insistence upon Blacks' conformity to the dominant society's norms of morals and manners." P. 186-187

[367] The sexual discourses surrounding each of these women is interesting for a variety of reasons. Anna Julia Cooper was widowed just two years after marrying in her twenties, and she never remarried. But she was implicated in the early 1900s in a sexual scandal with one of her students, a scandal which led to her losing her job. Mary McLeod Bethune had a troubled relationship with her husband who had problems with her independent spirit. She was also rumored to live openly with a female partner. Ella Baker was the most silent about her marriage and eventual divorce. Thus many students in the Civil Rights Movement didn't know she had been married, and she seemed committed to the idea that this wasn't inherently public knowledge.

[368] Gloria Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 21.

Acknowledging the complicated and inextricable relationship between race and sexuality becomes critical to understanding Murray's conflicts and the ways it informed her public and private personas. Candice Jenkins argues that "in fact the 'political' and the 'intimate' may be mutually constitutive signs for the Black subject," so much so, that "it may not be possible, or sensible, to think about racial identity without thinking, simultaneously, of intimate subjectivity for African Americans." The larger implication is that "the 'public' and 'private' faces of Blackness cannot and perhaps should not, be distinguished with any great ease."[369] For Murray, her burgeoning and conflicted queer identity collide directly with a politics of respectability that conferred acceptable social status on Black women based upon the extent to which they performed prescriptive ideas of sexual propriety. In a 1943 letter to Lillian Smith, Murray wrote, "What is really pressing upon me is a personal emotional difficulty about which I have been able to do nothing, and about which society, particularly Negro society, is so intolerant, one's life is made miserable. . ."[370]

Murray had become a victim of a racial ideology which Candice Jenkins refers to as the "salvific wish," an iteration of the politics of respectability which is "best defined as the desire to rescue the Black community from racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology through the embrace of bourgeois propriety."[371] The "salvific wish" is a "response to the peculiar vulnerability of the Black subject with regard to intimate conduct," which leaves "Black bodies, understood as sites of sexual excess. . .[as] doubly vulnerable in the intimate arena—to intimacy itself as well as to the violence of social

---

[369] Candice M. Jenkins. *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 33.
[370] Pauli Murray to Lillian Smith, June 21, 1943. [Box 80, Folder 1402] Pauli Murray Papers.
[371] Jenkins 43.

misperceptions surrounding Black intimate character."[372] Murray's own stated allegiances to heterosexuality might therefore more appropriately be read in the context of the "salvific wish," and its beguiling possibilities for combating Black social ills.

But if intimacy itself has such potential for violence-- here understood as denial and exclusion-- then it might be more useful to consider Murray's struggles with queer identity in terms of the exclusions for various breaches of racial conduct that respectability mandated within Black communities. More specifically, we might read the generalized Black female subject of her 1947 manifesto as a kind-of stand in for Murray's own struggles with the gender politics of Black communities. What does it mean, then, if "the salvific wish, with its attempts to repress and discipline Black intimate conduct [by] limiting that conduct to patterns of respectability" becomes a site for the repression of Black intimacy and subjectivity? And more importantly, how do those exclusionary and repressive politics play a role in shaping race women's racial identity and commitments to racial leadership?

Black women's vulnerability to violence at the hands of Black men was just one iteration of the ways that the politics of respectability could inadvertently participate in the kinds of deviant behavior that it sought to eschew. The commitment to sex roles in and of itself has an implication of violence, both physical and emotional, for all Black women and Black men who do not fit "the rigid mould." It is in the interstices and insinuations in Murray's arguments that we find an emergent critique of heterosexism. Certainly, Murray's own sexuality is shrouded in her writings in silence and dissemblance, but her repeated references to Black women's emotional vulnerability in

---

[372] Jenkins 44.

traditional Black heterosexual relationships is a decided gesture in the direction of her own particular struggles.

Another implication of the stultifying and violent sexual politics of Black communities was that queer figures such as Murray might seek recourse and relationships outside the Black community. Murray's failure to gain broad acceptance in African-American communities informed her tendency to pursue friendships, leadership and political consciousness outside of distinctively African-American organizations and networks, though she did not eschew them completely. In the 1940s, she enjoyed great camaraderie with Lillian Smith and her partner Paula Snelling, and Candice Stone (greatniece of Lucy Stone) and her partner Jean, and also Murray's own romantic partner Peg Holmes, whom she met during a stint in 1935 at Camp Tera in upstate New York. It was to these white women that Murray confessed her struggles with homosexuality. Murray was repeatedly disheartened by her romantic liaisons with heterosexual Black women who, when they became attracted to her, told her to obtain psychiatric help, treating her as a deviant. Because of these conflicts, Murray did not always move unencumbered through the Black female social networks that characterized earlier generations of Black female leadership. For while the larger society viewed Black people as racial deviants, her own community viewed her as a sexual deviant, a fact which contributed to her recurring bouts of depression throughout her twenties and thirties.

The entrenched homophobia and heterosexism of Black communities has been an especial problem for Black lesbian and gay thinkers and activists. Audre Lorde has repeatedly challenged the presence and unchecked expression of "heterosexism and

homophobia, two grave barriers to organizing among Black women."[373] The failure of Black communities, writ large, and Black women specifically to address these issues have rendered Black lesbian women as both "sister outsiders" and "outsiders-within" their communities. Lorde, reminding other Black women of her solidarity in struggle with them against sexism, heterosexism, and racism, proclaimed "I do not want to be tolerated nor misnamed. I want to be recognized. I am a Black Lesbian, and I *am* your sister."[374] Additionally, Lorde reminds us that "both lesbian and heterosexual Black women today share a history of bonding and strength to which our sexual identities and our other differences must not blind us."[375] Murray did increasingly forge a sisterhood with Black women, as she got older, but she remained committed to interracial alliances with other white feminists. In part, Murray was never able to fully overcome the sense of being an "outsider-within" even in her own community.

Whereas Patricia Hill Collins originally reads the "outsider-within" as the peculiar way in which the racial politics of white institutions situate Black women as a institutional interlopers or pariahs, so to speak, Murray's experience with homosexuality demands an updated reading of the outsider-within in line with Collins' later work on Black sexual politics. In Murray's case, the collision of her queer identity with the entrenched heteronormativity of Black communities makes her an outsider-within her race. Evelyn Hammonds concurs that "Black lesbians are 'outsiders' in Black communities," and she argues that this outsider status is conferred by straight Black women acting in service of a politics of respectability or silence. "If we accept the

---

[373] Audre Lorde, "I Am Your Sister" in *A Burst of Light*: *Essays by Audre Lorde* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988), 20.
[374] Audre Lorde 26.
[375] Audre Lorde, "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 52.

existence of the 'politics of silence' as an historical legacy shared by all Black women," Hammonds avers, "then certain expressions of Black female sexuality will be rendered dangerous, for individuals and for the collectivity. From this it follows then that the culture of dissemblance makes it acceptable for some heterosexual Black women to cast lesbians as proverbial traitors to the race."[376] But again it is not just Black women, but as Cheryl Clarke points out, "Black bourgeoisie female intellectuals, who "practice homophobia by omission more often than rabid homophobia."[377] This silencing of Black lesbians, in particular, has created serious rifts among Black feminists for decades. Though Pauli Murray never explicitly spoke in her writings to this problem, to fail to discuss her sexuality and its impact on her leadership and her interaction with Black women and men would be to engage in same insidious scholarly acts of misrecognition that have characterized much, though not all, of Black feminist thought. Such practices must be intentionally and consistently overhauled if Black feminism can hope to have any cachet in the 21st century.

Collins has argued that "racism and heterosexism both require a concept of sexual deviancy for meaning." Racism pivots upon a belief in Black hypersexuality and promiscuity, while heterosexism pivots upon "the stigmatization of the sexual practices of homosexuals."[378] The undergirding logic of these two systems views Black people as possessing excess heterosexual desire while viewing LGBT people as possessing an

---

[376] Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* edited by Winston Napier (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 491. See also Cole and Guy-Sheftall, Chapter 6.
[377] Cheryl Clarke, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" in *Dangerous Liaisons: Blacks, Gays, and the Struggle for Equality*, Eric Brandt (ed), 38.
[378] Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism.* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 97.

absence of heterosexual desire.[379] Based upon this logic, "Black people could not be homosexual or those Blacks who were homosexual were not 'authentically' Black."[380] Barbara Smith also noted that this attitude that "homosexuality is a white problem or even a 'white disease' is "particularly destructive because of the way [it works] to isolate the concerns of lesbians and gay men."[381] The view of Black lesbian and gay people as racial traitors has been a guiding premise of late 20th century race-based (i.e. Black nationalist) movements for freedom.[382]

It makes sense that a Murray, as a transgender person would choose to reject Black nationalism as a healthy racial politic and would choose to relinquish the "safety" of uncritical racial identification, because such protections simply were not afforded to her. As Clarke asserts, "as political Black people, we bear the twin responsibilities of transforming the social, political, and economic systems of oppression as they affect all our people—not only the heterosexuals—and of transforming the corresponding psychological structure that fees into these oppressive systems."[383]Because of her insistence, at least in her early adulthood, of claiming and exploring her sexuality in relationships with white and Black women, Murray broke the silence around Black female sexuality that was necessary to maintain respectability, and her engagement in interracial homosexual relationships frustrated the salvific impulses of respectability to a nearly irreparable extent.

---

[379] Ibid.
[380] Collins 106.
[381] Smith 113.
[382] Huey Newton and Bobby Seale are perhaps the most notable exceptions among Black nationalists, who have heavily demonized Black gay men and lesbians.
[383] Clarke 43.

The failure of Black communities to seriously engage the politics of heterosexism has done significant social violence to underprivileged and underserved African American communities, many of whom are battling with the death and destruction wrought from drug abuse and the AIDS epidemic. As a political figure, Murray's failure to find a significant community of allies within her race reflects the manner in which queer identity has been constructed as remaining outside of the purview of racial concerns. Cathy Cohen argues that the struggle for gay and lesbian rights has become a "cross-cutting issue" in Black communities, one in which "those concerns which *disproportionately and directly affect* only certain segments of a marginal group." She further asserts that "a gay sexual identity has been seen in Black communities as mitigating one's racial identity and deflating one's community standing. Thus, cross-cutting issues put into full view the question of who is 'worthy' of support by the larger Black community, specifically by its indigenous political organizations."[384] Murray's embattled position as a lesbian in the early to mid 20th century prefigures these later intraracial struggles: even when the issue of segregation affected the larger group, her queer identity disqualified her from being a group representative and deemed her unworthy of collective Black political resources. As Cohen observes, "cross-cutting issues arise out of a multiplicity of identities that marginal group members embody" and "represent the distinct racialized experiences of different segments of Black communities." Such multiplicity engenders the kind of "fragmentation that threatens a perceived unified Black group identity and interest [and leads to a] corresponding

---

[384] Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 13-14.

reduction in the probability and effectiveness of political mobilization by Blacks as a group."[385]

"Queer As Folk:" Peculiar Readings of Race, Gender, and Nation

A desire to authenticate and ground her racial identity in ways that allowed for a range of Black self-expression drove Murray to pen two autobiographies, the first of which, *Proud Shoes: The Story of An American Family* appeared in 1956. Murray's historical impulse to set the record straight as it related issues of Black participation in the Civil War and her own American origins fits within the range of impulses that have characterized race women's turn to autobiography, including a need to revise "official," exclusionist historical narratives, a desire to theorize about race and gender identity as they relate to Black female subjectivity, and an opportunity to explore forms of embodied discourse, or logos, that might allow them to counter the sexual silences demanded by the politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance. An additional autobiography, two scholarly books, a 1300-page dissertation, two masters theses, a book of poetry, one published and several unpublished short stories, and numerous scholarly and non-scholarly essays attest to Murray's prolific career as a writer. But her scholarship and academic credentials were no match for the Red Scare and the McCarthy era.

In 1952, Murray, already the recipient of three degrees, author of one book, and a practicing attorney, applied for a job as "research assistant to the Director of the Codification of Laws of Liberia, one of many projects developed under Point Four, the program President Truman initiated to provide technical assistance to underdeveloped nations."[386] Participation in this project was at the heart of Murray's own emergent

---

[385] Cohen 16.
[386] Murray, *Song*, 295.

understanding of African-American racial identity. In the prologue to *Proud Shoes*, which remains unpublished, Murray wrote that the project had "special meaning" because the "Liberian Republic was the only instance of large migration from American society to build a new country. Its government was patterned after our own government. Its founders were freed American Negroes. Its traditions were both American and African." Thus the research position would provide a "chance to study first hand how these Americo-Liberians had integrated the two cultures, for American Negroes had lost most of their African culture as slaves in the United States."[387] Aligning herself with E. Franklin Frazier's position in his famous debate over African cultural retentions with Melville Herskovits, Murray believed that Liberia was a laboratory in which a uniquely American based African experience could be tested and perfected for success. Murray viewed herself as quintessentially American, especially given her mixed-race heritage, and thus she believed that Liberia was evidence not of Black or African resistance to failed American idealism, but rather evidence of "what is so basic and enduring about the American dream," that "even the most circumscribed citizens—American Negroes" remain "proud of their homeland and so homesick for their native soil wherever they go abroad."[388]

Nevertheless, after an extensive background check, Murray's earlier participation with the Socialist party made her candidacy unviable. She was denied the job because her unequivocal loyalty could not be ascertained, her "past associations" having been subjected to relentless scrutiny. Left speechless, Murray searched for a way to "answer

---

[387] "Prologue, Draft 4," 1-2. PMP, Box 77, Folder 1365
[388] Murray, "Prologue" 2.

such a veiled charge."[389] A staunch supporter of American democracy, all she wanted was "to be an unhyphenated American and to feel as if I belonged." Moreover, she possessed what she referred to as a "peculiarly American background" of which she was quite proud.

This "peculiar" background undoubtedly referred to her mixed race heritage that was a direct offspring of America's convoluted race relations during and after slavery. But the intentionally vague references to her "past associations" certainly left space to interrogate her non-normative sexual practices and public transgender identity performances, which coincided temporally with her more extreme leftist (read: socialist) politics. In many respects, Murray's attempts to disrupt and revise racial discourses with a view towards asserting, what Albert Murray (no relation) would call, an Omni-American racial identity, might more appropriately be read as both a simultaneous and surrogate attempt to expand the American democratic imagination towards queer sexual practices by broadening its view of racial practices.

To the extent that *Proud Shoes* foregrounds miscegenation, it necessarily foregrounds interracial sex,[390] which I argue might be read as a queer sexual practice inasmuch as it subverts the racial logic that undergirds sexuality—a logic which scholars as wide ranging as Foucault, Ross, and Collins have spoken to--in an American heteronormative context in which heterosexual acts between consenting *white* parties has

---

[389] Murray, Prologue, 6.

[390] Jared Sexton argues in *Amalgamation Blues: AntiBlackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 7, that "conceptions of the multiracial cannot help but imply a production of race in the field of heterosexuality, nominating, more specifically, the reproductive sex act as the principal site of mediation for racial difference itself." Now, Sexton's project is more concerned with debunking the intrinsic heterosexuality implied in discourses around racial admixture, in order to open up space for the discussion on interracial sex in non-heterosexual unions. Murray's project does not go quite so far in deliberately opening up a space for queer sexual practices, but she does offer a "queer" reading of what it means to be American and what it means to embrace any sort of racial identity, Black or white.

historically been viewed as the most appropriate and permissible expression of sexual activity. Drawing upon the work of Robyn Wiegman, who has argued that in the 17th century "color had become the *primary* organizing principle around which the natural historian classified human differences, " Marlon Ross highlights Wiegman's conclusion that the discourses of sexual development, upon which Foucault bases his theory of sexuality, point to an "uneven history" of racial and sexual development.[391] Because racialized discourse marked Black bodies as deviant before homosexuality as a discursive concept actually existed, then it would be critical to dismantle the racial logic of heteronormativity before one could dismantle its sexual logic.[392] And if Murray can win the argument that her experience as a mixed race individual is the more American experience when compared with putatively "Black-only" or "white-only" experiences, then she necessarily opens up the field for new conversations about American sexual practices as they relate to race. To quote Albert Murray, "*American culture, even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite. It is, regardless of all the hysterical protestations of those who would have it otherwise, incontestably mulatto*"(italics in original).[393]

Murray's aunts, who reared her, were particularly vigilant to instill in Murray an appreciation of the broad racial dimensions of her heritage. They recounted for instance how Murray's great-grandfather Thomas was the progeny of Irish royalty. Having "Fitzgerald ancestors from County Kildare, Ireland, was a lilting and magical phrase

---

[391] See discussion in Ross, 164.
[392] See Ross
[393] Albert Murray, *The Omni-americans: Black Experience and American Culture,* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1970), 22. The book also has an alternate subtitle "Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy." Murray goes on to say that the "so-called Black and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other."

[that] strengthened the growing shell of pride used to protect the soft underbelly and wobbly legs of a creature learning slowly to navigate in a cruelly segregated world."[394] Although Murray is in many ways a minor character in her family autobiography, she does draw upon logos, or embodied discourse, by writing her body into the text as vulnerable corporeal subject whose malleability is determined by the racial discourses which govern her life. But if knowledge of her noble white ancestry provided a kind of protection for Murray, it also "more than anything else, kept me," Murray writes, "from an acceptance of my lot. I would always be trying to break out of the rigid mold into which I was being forced. I would always be in rebellion against the crushing walls until people no longer needed legends about their ancestors to give them distinctiveness and self-respect."[395]

With regard to mixed race identity which was prominent in both lines of Murray's matrilineal heritage (i.e. both her maternal grandmother and grandfather were able to pass for white), "people traveled back and forth through this corridor of mixed bloods as they chose."[396] The law was even incapable of effectively regulating the separation of the races, so much so, that many relatives changed their racial status in census counts at will. Murray reads this frequent racial traversing as "lost boundaries." Although today, scholars of American Studies might refer to this phenomenon of racial passing as a type of "borders-crossing," Murray's invocation of irretrievable racial boundaries bespeaks her commitment to a certain liberating erasure of the physical and social demarcations of difference altogether. Yet, she also understood the problematic of "being caught 'betwixt

[394] Murray, *Proud Shoes*, 59.
[395] Murray, *Proud Shoes*, 59.
[396] Ibid, 67.

and between' the races," as a space of "doing battle."[397] This contested space, which the Fitzgerald's, Murray's mulatto relatives occupied, was a "no man's land between the whites and Blacks, belonging wholly to neither yet irrevocably tied to both."[398]

Having established the grounds for a "peculiar" conception of race, Murray "queers the [already blurred] color line" even further by intentionally, writing sexual difference into the interstices of her text. In a letter written in March 1973 to her friend Peg Holmes, a white woman with whom Murray had a romantic relationship in the late 1930s, Murray told Peg, that in the process of "sanitizing" her files for the Radcliffe archives "so as not to expose the privacy of my friends," she was returning pictures, most probably of Peg and a transgendered Pauli, in telling romantic poses. One picture was particularly difficult for Murray "to part with, because it is you as I remember you in my heart—'touched with the sun. It is the inspiration of a passage in Proud Shoes."[399] The passage in question was a description of the massive attempts at familial reconciliation among separated Black families that took place in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War:

> In this restless movement were those for whom freedom meant an unending quest for loved ones. Years before, they had been parted; wives sold one way and husbands another, children separated from their parents and [the] aged separated from their children. When the parting came, each had carried with him an image of his loved one and the place where he had left him. All his remaining years he would be inquiring of people if they had heard of a slave called "Black Cato" or "Yellow Sam" or Sally," and

[397] Ibid., 66-67.
[398] Ibid., 91.
[399] Pauli Murray Letter to Peg Holmes, March 18, 1973 PMP, Box 96, Folder 1688

> trying to get to that place where they had been separated. He would describe the loved one in the intimate way he remembered him—a charm worn about the neck, a dimple in the cheek, a certain manner of walking or smiling. It did not matter that children had grown up and white haired. The description remained the same.[400]

The narrative of familial reconciliation after slavery is a powerful and important moment in Black people's quest for freedom. And reconciliation in this passage becomes a function of memory, of how well we can remember the past, and then articulate and reconstitute the vestiges of that past into a useful present. More importantly, the letter tells us that references to a racial past are almost always also references to a sexual past.

In her narrative, Murray writes of this sexual past as a memory, but she literally carries with her "an image, of his loved one and the place where he had left him." That a photograph, a documentation of this queer interracial past, actually exists transposes memory from the realm of the ephemeral to the actual. The intentional insertion of this narrative into the larger racial narrative stitches Murray's relationship to the backing of America's mulatto heritage and to Black people's queer past. Simultaneously, it signals a different use of race women's revisionist historical project, namely to insert an unspeakable sexual past into a poignant and residual community narrative that marked the shift from unfreedom to freedom by the ability to be with the ones you loved.[401]

---

[400] Murray, *Proud Shoes*, 167-168.

[401] Murray's argues in *Proud Shoes,* which is an important work of Civil War and Reconstruction history in its own right, that freedom was defined by many things for the formerly enslaved. Now these folks could own both their bodies and their souls, could move freely about the world, and could reconnect with kin who were dear to them. Tera Hunter makes a very similar argument in *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

The corporeal imagery in this text coupled with Murray's sexual/textual interpolations is a new iteration of logos in Black women's autobiography. Like her 19th century forebears, Murray celebrates the bodily memories of the newly free, but she also uses these bodies as textual vehicles for her own sexual and bodily pleasures and remembrances. Murray's particular appropriation of this racial narrative queers the narrative of mixed-raced identity and familial connection within the U.S. context. And by projecting her intimate corporeal memories of Peg onto the Black bodies that she so lovingly describes in this passage, Murray also literally queers the Black body of the formerly enslaved man in her narrative and suggests that his freedom is more than just a racial freedom. Murray, thus, provides a way for us to read women's autobiographies "as negotiations in naming the unspeakable."[402] Moreover, the narrative allows us to "claim a critical location from which to read the sexual unspeakable from outside a polarized framework in which normative heterosexuality and oppositional homosexuality operate as authorized and mutually exclusive discourses."[403]

Training to Transgress : Murray's Transgendered Narrative of Black Female Sexuality

Having thus set the historical record straight and constructed an interracial American genealogy, Murray chooses to leave the more personal explorations of her own development as a racial leader and gendered subject to a later project. This second project diverges from the first by situating Murray as its central character, by documenting her life in Black civil rights, labor, and feminist struggles, and by considering her own particular understandings and theorizings of race and gender ideology as they arise from

---

[402] Julia Watson, "Unspeakable Differences: The Politics of Gender in Lesbian and Heterosexual Women's Autobiographies" in *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader* edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 394-395.
[403] Ibid

her politics and life experiences. It is Murray's second autobiography *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* which more closely aligns with the literary conventions that characterize the autobiographies of her race women forebears. Concerned with a meticulous documentation of her public life as an activist, scholar, and writer, it is virtually silent on her person struggles with sexuality and her many female romantic partners. Although Murray reveals her short-lived marriage in 1930 to William Roy Wynn, the incident reads as a failed attempt at heterosexuality:

> We were drawn together by our mutual loneliness and rootlessness, sharing whatever small pleasures we could find that did not cost money. When matters began to get serious and my straitlaced upbringing was a barrier to premarital sex, we got married secretly. . . .It was a dreadful mistake. We were so poor that we spent our honeymoon weekend in a cheap West Side hotel. Both of us were sexually inexperienced, and the bleak atmosphere aggravated our discomfiture. . . .After several months of mounting frustration, we gave up in despair.[404]

Though one could read this moment as the failed choice of a precocious young adult, Murray's mention of her marriage has dual implications in her text. It marks her as a potentially heterosexual being without forcing her to account for her lack of heterosexual relationships. At the same time, however, for the careful reader, Murray's discussion of her failed attempt at "monogamous married life as a completion" is buttressed by her accounts of two incidents that signal, if subtly, her queer identity.

Just before marrying Billy, she, struggling with the economic realities of the Great Depression, had attempted to work as a part-time housekeeper in Greenwich Village. But,

[404] Murray, *Song,* 77.

“after [her employer] tasted my first meal, she paid me for the day and let me go.” In the next paragraph, Murray’s introduction of her marriage sounds as much like a non-sequitur in the text as it does in her actual life. And in just two short paragraphs, Murray tells us that the trials of the Depression found her desiring a change. Thus she decided to hitchhike to California with her friend Dorothy Hayden, with whom she had done hitchhiking in the past. While Hayden very likely may have been a romantic partner, the manner in which Murray speaks about her female friendships in the texts constitutes a kind of intentional ambiguity that makes it nearly impossible to map out a coherent picture of Murray’s sexuality.

Whereas earlier autobiographies by race women choose to challenge compulsory dissemblance by writing their bodies into texts in non-traditional ways—through portrayals of Black bodies victimized by violence (lynching) and Black bodies engaged in joyful practices (dancing)—Murray’s text, because it cannot challenge compulsory heterosexuality and still remain respectable, encodes gender performance literally through the metaphor of travel. It has been my contention that traveling in texts by race women should be read as a metaphor for understanding racial identity and gender identity and sexuality, particularly since these ideologies seem to be traveling and morphing in the texts. In Murray’s case, while her narrative betrays staggering silences about her romantic partners, there is concurrently a profusion of female friendships in the text. When compared with her Black female autobiographical predecessors, Murray’s silences about her sexuality are quite consistent, but the centrality of female friendships and the ambiguity—evident in references to women as friends and compatriots, with no hint of the romantic connections revealed in her archives--surrounding them do constitute textual

clues for the excavation of Murray's sexuality. The fact that her marriage is buttressed on either end by a story of failure to perform a classic female gender role, cooking, and by a celebration of her hitchhiking around the country with a probable female lover textually encodes a resistance to reading Murray's marriage as inherent evidence of her heterosexuality, rather than reading its failure as evidence of a queer sexual orientation.

Feminist and queer theorists of women's autobiographies have found that a focus on female affiliations are a hallmark of women's autobiographies. Scholars like Carolyn Heilbrun and Julia Watson have argued that we must determine a way to "describe[e] women's friendships outside a patriarchal framework." Moreover, Watson's earlier observations about the ways in which Murray allows us to claim the sexual unspeakable remain relevant here.[405] Although queer sexuality remains unspeakable within Murray's texts, she provides a mode for reading gender and sexual identity that allows us "to locate women's autobiographies with respect to sexual demarcations along an axis of sexualities and to read their speaking of sexual identity as complex statements that may challenge or rethink contemporary ideologies of gender."[406]

Song in a Weary Throat employs a triad of approaches to counter oversimplistic gender formulations and to allow for the possibility of reading racial resistance and transgression as a surrogate for gender resistance and transgression. First, Murray allows no identifiable distinction between those friendships with women that were strictly platonic versus those that are romantic, frustrating any attempts to subject her sexual life to binary classification. Second, she invokes the tropes of travel and transportation in

---

[405] Julia Watson, "Unspeakable Differences: The Politics of Gender in Lesbian and Heterosexual Women's Autobiographies" in *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader* edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 394-395.
[406] Watson 394.

service of presenting a racially transgendered identity that moves inconspicuously through her texts. Here, gender travels on trains and buses, rarely alone, and yet always contingent upon the racial and sexual politics that characterize the historical moment. Third, she invokes logos in the form of Black bodies passing as white and female bodies passing as male in order to challenge dominant discourses about race and gender.

When Murray was a resident at Camp Tera[407] in the 1930s where she met and fell in love with Peg Holmes, she roomed with a young Trinidadian woman named Pee Wee Inness. “Pee Wee had an amazing sense of her own worth and she feared no one,” Murray recalled in her autobiography.[408] It was Pee Wee’s “strong convictions about civic responsibilities [that] led her to write long letters to public officials when she was aroused over some injustice.” Murray, thus, attributed “her habit” to Pee Wee. It is also through one of her letters that Murray established a relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt, also a favorite target of Pee Wee’s letters. Murray remarked that the relationship she shared with Pee Wee was “a companionable friendship marked by long silences.”[409] Although it is unclear whether Murray’s connection to Pee Wee was romantic, her reference to the long silences that buttressed her friendship provide an apt analogy for characterizing the unspeakability of sex and eroticism in Pauli Murray’s text specifically, and Black women’s texts more generally. But I also would argue that we should shift the frame into the space of the silences such that we can see silences not as buttresses but rather as being buttressed by Murray’s female friendships, which then provides a way to read sexuality in Murray’s text as a female-anchored project. Viewing friendships in this

---

[407] Camp Tera was one of several federal New Deal-era relief projects; this one was specifically targeted toward women and was located in upstate New York.
[408] Murray, *Song*, 96.
[409] Ibid.

way moves them out of a binary and patriarchal framework which seeks to classify them sexually, and forces us to look more closely at the friendships themselves, than the silences between them. In other words, Murray wants the reader to see not a lack of romantic partners in her text but rather an abundance of female friendships.

In her own accounts, she, too, eschewed platonic/romantic distinctions because they were not particularly useful to her. In a letter to Peg, she wrote, "you, Renee [Barlow], Maida Springer-Kemp, Toni, Pee Wee [Inness], Tom Thumb, Edna Lisle, [and] Lula Barton Bramwell are some of the grand women who are my contemporaries and who have contributed so much to my growth. Your role was particularly important to my discovery of Nature, a new joy of poetry, a willingness to "take to the open road," and the revelation that any two people who are kindred spirits can leap from thought to thought as well as from rock to rock. Thank you for that gift."[410]

The reference to the "open road" referred to a hitchhiking trip through the Midwest, that Pauli and Peg undertook in 1935. Dispossessed and poverty-stricken during the Great Depression, Murray spent much of that year unemployed. "Hitchhiking about the countryside," thus, "was one way of relieving the monotony of having nothing to do."[411] And "being without a job. . .permitted us the freedom to travel about ways that were otherwise not socially acceptable."[412] Although the reference here to socially unacceptable practices at its most literal level refers to the impropriety of two unattached young women hitchhiking without protection, the imagery of women hitchhiking also provides an important metaphor for examining unsanctioned "gender traveling," or "improper" performance of proscribed gender roles. The trip with Peg Holmes was not

---

[410] Pauli Murray Letter to Peg Holmes, March 18, 1973, PMP Box 96, Folder 1688.
[411] Murray 98.
[412] Ibid.

the first time Murray had hitchhiked around the country. In 1931, an attempted move to California was short-circuited when one of her aunts became ill and forced her to return to New York. Penniless and without means to get back to the East Coast, she passed as a young man and hopped freights all the way across the country. That spring "an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 homeless boys—and a smattering of girls" traveled cross country in the same manner. Given the high potential for danger, Murray "soon discovered that her boyish appearance was a protection."[413] Murray's choice to pass for personal protection sounds very reminiscent of Mary Church Terrell's choice to pass as White in order to traverse the South unmolested.[414]

Much like Terrell's text, *Song* proffers a very early narrative of its protagonist experiencing racial harassment at a train station. This story of racial vulnerability not only hearkens back to those stories told by Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells but also recurs so often in Black women's autobiography that it should be considered a convention of the genre. Nine year old Pauli was traveling with her Aunt Pauline in Baltimore when they became separated at the train station. "Suddenly," Murray writes, "I looked up to see a huge, red-faced white man towering over me. . . .I found myself surrounded by a circle of white faces, all regarding me intently and turning to look at one another. Not a word was said, just stares, shrugs and head scratchings."[415] Suddenly, Aunt Pauline came to her niece's rescue, pulling the bewildered Pauli out of the crowd and ushering her to the relative "safety" of the Jim Crow car. Aunt Pauline then explained that because of her poor eyesight, she had left Pauli in the white waiting

---

[413] Murray 79.
[414] This is also reminiscent of the story of Ellen and William Craft, a slave couple who disguised themselves respectively as a white slaveholder and his slave servant in order to escape from slavery. See *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*
[415] Ibid, 38.

room by accident. Since Aunt Pauline "was fair-skinned, her presence did not attract attention." But Pauli was "a borderline racial type and in the poorly lighted station they were trying to determine whether I was colored, and therefore out of place, or some foreign mixture." Aunt Pauline saved her from the debacle, but Murray noted, "the ringleader had followed us out to the train to make sure of our racial identity."[416] The fact that the leader of the racial interrogation had to follow Murray and her aunt out to the segregated train car to confirm their racial status magnifies the fictive nature of biological racial identification, even more than passing.

Just as much as the moment betrays the untenability of phenotypic notions of race, it also reveals the vulnerability of racialized subjects. Murray recalled, "we were the only passengers in the Jim Crow car, and riding alone after that unspoken threat made us so fearful that we sat tense through the night, not daring to sleep and jerking our heads around each time the conductor opened the car door behind us. The incident awakened my dread of lynchings, and I was learning the dangers of straying, however innocently, across a treacherous line into a hostile world."[417] In this scenario, Murray is forced to grapple not only with her racial and sexual vulnerability at the hands of unfriendly white men, but also with the implications of white skin privilege, because she notices that her aunt's white skin initially affords a level of protection, not available to Pauli. Nevertheless, Murray's darker skin impedes her aunt's ability to pass.

The imagery of the two of them sitting on the train together explodes the myth of racial segregation, at least regarding sexuality, because clearly there had to be interracial sexual acts somewhere in the family tree for the two women to end up as relatives. While

---

[416] Murray, *Song in A Weary Throat,* 38-39.
[417] Ibid.

trains still act as a trope for both racial difference and Black racial vulnerability,[418] Murray's narrative resists the logic of racial separation not through the act of passing but through the representation of a mixed race family. Yet, we might also read this moment of corporeal vulnerability and inadvertent racial passing on the part of Aunt Pauline as logos, because Murray uses the bodies as a form of discursive resistance to a dominant racial narrative intent on dismissing America's mixed race heritage.

In *Proud Shoes*, Murray more fully explicated the interplay of whiteness within Black families: "anyone who has been part of a family of mixed bloods in the United States has lived intimately with the unremitting search for Whiteness. To deny that it is part of one's heritage would be like saying one had no parents." Culpability for the polarizing racial schema that sent some "in search for safety" and others on a "quest for acceptance" [419] lay, then, with the supremacist logic of "*whiteness*-- the ability to pass unnoticed in the crowd, the power to avoid humiliation and abuse," a quality which also conferred "immediate and effective protection, beyond even the law."[420] Such protections were necessary in a social order where "white men enslaved and oppressed Black men" and "so long as white men were the hunters and Black men the hunted."[421] As a particularly vulnerable racialized and sexualized subject, Murray understands, all too well, the protections afforded by the invisibility of whiteness.

Murray returns to the narrative of racial vulnerability in *Song,* but in this text, the narrative of racial vulnerability travels through the textual vehicle of a train. By juxtaposing the tightly codified, racial performances that occur within train cars with the

---

[418] W.E.B. Du Bois also writes about the segregated atmosphere of the Jim Crow Car in his essay "Of the Black Belt" in *The Souls of Black Folk.*
[419] Ibid., 88.
[420] Murray, *Proud Shoes,* 89.
[421] Ibid.

actual movement of the train itself, the narrative highlights the untenability of race. While the performance inside the car demands that the races, and therefore race itself, stay in a fixed place, the car itself is simultaneously moving to different locations. To draw from physics, here, if the vehicle is moving at a certain rate of speed, the bodies in the vehicle are also moving at the same rate of speed. Thus even the vehicle that should most effectively manage to contain race as a fixed entity within certain parameters, at least according to segregation statutes, is unable by its very nature as a traveling vehicle to do so. The Black body within these texts proves to be as untenable a vehicle for maintaining racial difference as the trains are for maintaining racial purity through their enactment of racial segregation.

This narrative also exposes potential limitations of the Black feminist conception of intersectionality, since in texts by race women, race and gender moves at its highest rate of speed, always at precisely the same moments that these identities should be most stationary. In other words, in race women's autobiographies, Black women come to understand their own vulnerability to racial and gender violence during moments of travel. Rarely, do we find race women locating their racial and gender coming-to-consciousness within the confines of fixed intersections. What does it mean for Black feminist theory if we consider not what happens at the intersections, but what happens as we travel to and through those intersections? And how do the vehicles used to approach the intersections figure in our understanding of race, class, gender, and sexual identity formation? Preliminarily, we find that while Black women's autobiographies are engaged in a project of "self-inscription" they are simultaneously resisting larger discourses of race and gender circumscription. It might also mean that Black feminist thought has to

develop a *trans-theoretical* orientation, which will allow it to theorize as it and its subjects move, transgress, transition, and transport themselves along different axes of identity.

To return to Murray's 1931 train trip from California, such a trans-theoretical orientation becomes critical for Black feminist theorists seeking to explicate occurrences like these in which Murray's explanation that she passed as male as a form of protection analytically leaves much to be desired. Pauli enjoyed cross-dressing throughout her young adult years, and even referred to her male persona as "Pete." Her classic American tale of conquering the Wild West and the open highway is a decidedly masculine narrative of American manhood and coming of age. She writes of her safe passage across the country not only with relief at avoiding danger but also with triumph at being able to successfully camouflage her gender identity. At one point in the trip, she gets caught by a police officer, and then she invokes her femininity in a "damsel in distress" role in order to persuade the officer to let her go. This was the one time, she writes, that her "sex proved to be an advantage."

Even in this vignette, she struggles to prove her femininity to the officer so much so that-- in a kind of queer obversion of the infamous Sojourner Truth breast-baring incident-- he has to have a female officer to examine her. Perhaps, this was partly what Murray meant when she told an audience years later that she considered herself to be in the leadership tradition of Sojourner Truth. On the one hand, then, this story demonstrates Murray's willingness to exploit the fluidity of her gender identity, but on the other, the story betrays Murray's own budding appropriations of transgender identity. And while she fails to pass as white, when it comes to gender morphing, she passes with flying

colors. Although she cannot appropriate the phenotypic protections offered by white skin, she can appropriate the phenotypic protections offered by her ability to look and act as a male.

Coda: Say It "Proud": Not Black and Not Loud

I have deliberately focused my examination of Murray's autobiographies on the stress points in her narratives that reveal the tangled webs of her racial, sexual, and gender identities. At the heart of this examination, has been my attempt to grapple with what it means for a race woman if she views herself as fundamentally male, and if concurrently, her rise to racial leadership occurs within the purview of this transgendered self. The biggest tensions within Murray's early leadership occurred around her ability to grapple with masculinity. Given the hypermasculine politics that characterized the Black Power era, it is not shocking that Murray vehemently eschewed all identifications with the term "Black." Both autobiographies are a part of Murray's project of mixed-race self-definition. In *Proud Shoes*, Murray formally enumerated her historical justifications for embracing a mixed-racial identity. In fact, she completed one of the chapters of *Proud Shoes* on the same day as the landmark 1954 Brown v.Board of Education decision, an observation which places her work in the narrative along side an American national narrative of racial progress and integrative possibilities.

In *Song*, Murray attempts to place herself within a narrative of a "long Civil Rights struggle" that at least begins as early as the 1930s, if not earlier.[422] In a letter dated November 14, 1971, Murray wrote to Mary McCrory, a nationally syndicated columnist,

---

[422] See Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" in *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4, (2005).

> all of us happen to be the young Negro militants of the World War II period who followed the Grand Old Man A. Philip Randolph, in his first March on Washington Movement, who were early advocates and practitioners of Non-Violent Direct Action and who came out of a Black and white together solidarity labor tradition. In our early sixties, we are the "Old Lions" who have been scarred and seared but who have escaped the hunters' fatal bullets, and we have experience and brainpower on our side. Shirley Chisolm, Julian Bond, and others are literally standing on our shoulders. Because we fought the battle and went to jail in the 1930s and 1940s, they could be elected in the 1960s. Because of our long experience, we are not intimidated by the "Young Turks" because they need us every bit as much as we need them.[423]

In 1942, Murray had written a passionate article entitled "Negro Youth's Dilemma" that captured all the angst and anger that characterized the Young Turks of her generation. In it she asked, "Am I to forget the festering sores of racial intolerance, injustice, brutality and humiliation eating at the core of my national allegiance?" In response to the critics who felt that Black people should "fight a white man's war," Murray riposted "perhaps we are foolish in not realizing that Hitlerism would destroy us utterly while our fellow citizens in Sikeston, Missouri, would merely burn a few of us each year. But men who confront death and women who see the frustrations of their youth cannot be expected to distinguish between brutalities."[424]

As the graduate student advisor for many of the student activist projects at Howard in the 1940s, Murray was thus attuned to "the impatience of young people, the

---

[423] Pauli Murray letter to Mary McCrory, November 14, 1971, Patricia Roberts Harris Papers, Box 374, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C..
[424] "Negro Youth's Dilemma" PMP, Box 84, Folder 1458.

desire for action, whether or not they are informed and trained."[425] Sympathetic to it in her younger years, Murray was bewildered, intimidated and angered by this youthful impatience during its second iteration in the 1960s and 70s. At the bottom of a copy of "Negro Youth's Dilemma," Murray wrote "Postscript, 1969: Another war, another generation of angry youth. How do/shall we answer them?"[426] In 1969, Murray was in her first year as professor of American Studies at Brandeis. She had been recruited in part because of her activist background and the administration's hopes that she would be seen as an olive branch in their struggles with the Black student populace to institute Black studies. But Murray writes, "my loyalties were divided between professional integrity and racial sympathy. . .[In] Black-white confrontations, I found myself in the position of my Fitzgerald forebears, whom I had described in *Proud Shoes* as occupying a 'no man's land between the whites and the Blacks, belonging wholly to neither, yet irrevocably tied to both. . .always at the vital nerve center of racial conflict, stretched taut between the strong bonds of kinship and tides of rebellion."[427] Thus Murray felt "light-years apart" from her students who "were engaged in a collective search for an acceptable identity, which took the form of pride in *Blackness.*"[428]

Whereas Murray's militant descendants, whom she referred in personal correspondence as the "apostles of Black consciousness" had each other for support in this quest for collective identity, Murray's "own quest for identity had been a long, painful, relatively private search," and her "youthful rebellions were individualistic." The process of creating a sustainable self-hood had come by "small, positive accretions—

---

[425] Pauli Murray Letter to Mrs. Rodman, February 28, 1943, PMP, Box 83, Folder 1455
[426] "Negro Youth's Dilemma" PMP, Box 84, Folder 1458.
[427] Murray, *Song*, 390.
[428] Ibid.

periodic recognition of myself as a person of worth interspersed with desolate periods of suffering, bewilderment, anger, rage, and self-doubt—often finding myself so hemmed in by suffocating walls of exclusion that my only safety valve against frenzy was the act of pouring out my feelings through the written word."[429] Murray believed that her students' quest for a limiting conception of Blackness inherently made them unable to identify with her painful racial and sexual past, and with her need to move beyond the "suffocating walls of exclusion."

Unlike her students who affirmed their identity by an allegiance to *Blackness*, Murray writes, "I had chosen to affirm my identity by anchoring myself firmly in the immediate American past, which had produced my mixed racial origins. . . . 'Black is beautiful' had no personal meaning for me. I had come to appreciate the beauty of American Negroes in all their rich variety of features, hair texture, and skin tone . . . revealing the harmonious genetic blending of several races." "And while I never denied my identity as a person of color," writes Murray, "my strong individualism worked against tendencies toward a too strong alliance with a racial group to the exclusion of others not so identified. . . .To thrive, I need a society hospitable to all comers—Black as well as white, women as well as men, 'the lame, the halt, the blind,' the browns and yellows and reds—a society in which individuals were free to express their multiple origins and to share their variety of cultural strains without being forced into a categorical mold."[430] Although they might have appreciated her ideals, inasmuch as they expressed their chagrin at her anachronistic preference for the term Negro, her students surely saw

[429] Ibid., 391.
[430] Ibid.

Murray as a relic of the past. One student even kept a tally during Murray's lectures of how often she used "Negro" versus "Black."

Because of her integrationist politic, Murray was summarily ineffective at negotiating the increasingly hostile racial campus climate that found her students—including a young Patricia Hill Collins—walking out of class and taking over the campus to demand a Black studies curriculum in 1969.[431] Murray was bewildered by the aims and approaches of this "new phase of the struggle," which in her view "confused and distorted the earlier goals" that "had been more universal, emphasizing the international solidarity of the working classes, the racial component of which had been a fire burning underground with only an occasional spurt of smoke and flame becoming visible."[432]

Not only did the separatist rhetoric of Black Power "grate upon [Murray's] sensibilities," but she literally felt that she was "living in a world turned upside down [with] a complete reversal of the goals that had fired her own student activism."[433] Murray's narrative of Black female subjectivity and her political allegiances were predicated upon a very particular notion of Negro or Black racial identity, which foregrounded the mixed racial heritage and American values and aspirations of people of color. In this respect, her more assimilationist values found her embracing and re-inscribing the politics of respectability for a later generation, rather than resisting it, as she had done earlier.

Murray believed, and I think rightfully so, that the way in which Americans read race will determine how they read and understand other identities. For her, a mixed-

[431] About Collins participation in the student takeover, Murray writes, "Patricia Hill, the only Black senior in the class and an honor student, got up immediately and left the room, saying something about 'Black solidarity." Page 408.
[432] Murray, *Song,* 394-395
[433] Ibid., 396.

racial, mulatto heritage, was the only one that could provide a national narrative inclusive of varied forms of difference including sexual difference. *Blackness*, like the *Whiteness*, that Murray had attempted to disavow in *Proud Shoes* offered a narrow, myopic, and parochial formulation of racial and sexual identity for people of color. It relied on notions of purity that were not sustained by historical research. Thus, Murray vehemently rejected it and the political goals that issued from it. Even so, Murray's life and work profoundly challenge our current narratives of civil rights history, LGBTQ studies, and Black women's autobiography. And while Murray saw herself as part of the rich tradition of Black female leaders whom we would call race women, she reminds us that none of these women took up the mantle of racial leadership uncritically.

Chapter 4:
Out of the Shadows: Race Women's Novels and the Inauguration of a Womanist Ethic in Black Feminist Thought

Introduction:

Black women's turn to fiction in the latter half of the 19th century with novels like Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* was a decidedly political project designed to cast new possibilities for African Americans into the world in light of their newly acquired freedom(s). Claudia Tate argues that "Black women's post-Reconstruction domestic novels aspired to intervene in the racial and sexual schemes of the public world of the turn-of-the-century United States by plotting new stories about the personal lives of Black women and men."[434] Frances Harper, a poet, lecturer, abolitionist, and race woman in her own right certainly viewed fiction in this regard and future race women like Mary Church Terrell shared her belief that writing could aid in solving the race problem. Hazel Carby observes that *Iola Leroy* was "written to promote social change" and "to aid in the uplifting of the race."[435] Moreover, novels have been critical to Black women's "self-inscription" process, which provides them a mechanism to negotiate their historically troubled relationship to "power and discourse."[436]

In this chapter, I will argue that novels by and about race women are the dialogic counterpart to Black women's autobiographies and that this dialogism is central to the rhetorical communities that Black women created amongst themselves and with others. These communities have been central sites for the instantiation of a Black feminist ethic

---

[434] Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire,* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 9.

[435] Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1987), 63.

[436] Mae Henderson. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston James (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 354.

of care and concern for the wellness and wholeness of Black communities, writ large. Alice Walker in her important culturally based Black feminist formulation, has argued that womanists, Black women committed to healthy gender politics, must be concerned about the wholeness of the "entire community, male and female." Both novels examined here present different iterations of Black women's relationship to their communities.

Autobiographies, for race women, are designed to document and track the actual movements and achievements of the textual subject. Novels like *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* and its successors, on the other hand, might rightly be viewed as the shadows of the autobiographical record, as necessary texts which confront the "shadows" of Black women's lives--those dark, murky, ambivalent areas that deserve interrogation but tend to fall away in the more explicitly political projects of race women's autobiography. In many respects, Black women's lives constitute a kind of penumbra in the scholarly treatment and recognition of America's past racial atrocities, of the African-American historical record, and of larger Black freedom struggles. "American culture," according to Joy James, "inscribes upon Black females their appearance as shadows, marking them as imperfect imitations of feminized Europeans or masculinized Africans. These projections haunt the public and private lives of Black females," which are respectively represented in their novels and autobiographies.[437] Whereas autobiographies are used to rectify glaring absences in the historical record, testify to Black women's important race work, and posit subjectivity, these works do not explicitly engage notions of ambivalence or ambiguity about racial and gender politics or Black female subjectivity in quite the same way that novels do. Black women's ambivalence about the role of mothering—and their

---

[437] Joy James, *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 172.

mothers—in their lives and their internal struggle to reconcile competing notions of identity—race, gender, and sexual-- to lives overshadowed by racial politics and demands are the stuff of the shadows that Black women must confront, and to which I will turn through an examination of two important novels that have race women as protagonists: Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976).

Iola Leroy, written at the end of Reconstruction, has become a canonical text in the African-American female literary tradition. For many years this novel was thought to be the first published by a Black woman until it was supplanted by the discovery of Harriet Wilson's 1859 novel *Our Nig* and more recently, Hannah Craft's novel *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, a fictionalized slave narrative.[438] Harper's novel recounts, through the life of its heroine Iola Leroy, the transition from slavery to freedom and the implications of this transition not only for the race but also for Black womanhood. Harper was a prolific poet and writer in the 19th century, and "studies of African-American women's writings almost always begin with a consideration of [her] work."[439] Published three-quarters of a century later, Alice Walker's *Meridian* examines the shift from the Civil Rights era to the Black Power era through the life of its protagonist Meridian Hill, a young activist and college student who becomes disillusioned with the politics of Black Power.

Although these two novels differ in historical context, social concerns, and political conclusions, they both interrogate the politics of racial leadership vis-à-vis the role of Black women, and in doing so, offer important insight about the central issues of

---

[438] It is to the credit of Henry Louis Gates, African American literary critic, that both these works have begun to receive critical attention. *The Bondwoman's Narrative* was published in 2002.
[439] Frances Smith Foster, ed. "Introduction." *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), 5.

race and gender identity, the politics of respectability and the role of history in shaping the political concerns and personal identities of public African American women. The two novels also act as important temporal markers for two major historical, social, and cultural shifts relating to Black women's history: woman's era in the 1890s and Black women's literary renaissance in the 1970s. Each of these decades was pivotal in conceptualizing Black women's gendered experiences of racial identity. As the 1890s saw Black women—and white women—grappling with "the woman question" and the 1970s saw Black women confronting the "issue of roles,"—to quote Toni Cade Bambara's important essay-- each decade demanded its own formulation of Black feminist thought that could help Black women confront race and gender discrimination in the public sphere and sexism within Black communities. Harper adumbrated her concerns about the ways in which the particular circumstances of Black women's lives animated larger racial struggles through the imagery of shadows. For her and her race woman contemporaries, the woman question was no less a racial question; thus, she could speak to racial issues from the standpoint of Black women. It is upon this premise that Harper situates Iola at the historical intersection of antebellum and postbellum racial politics.

Meridian, a character who must confront the violent and disheartening shift from Civil Rights to Black Power, raises different questions for Black feminism, namely around the relationship of Black women to Black men, Black women to white women, and Black women to accepted notions of proper and respectable womanhood. Black feminist thought in the 1970s was forced to grapple with all of these questions, and Walker responded to the volatility of this decade's gender politics with her own iteration of feminist thought through her formulation of womanism, a culturally informed

reference that acknowledged Black women's role within their communities, provided space for women's self care, and yet foregrounded a commitment to racial politics as a whole. This chapter will consider the ways in which each race woman protagonist grapples with both the feminist and racial politics of her times.

"Like an Esther Pleading for Her People": Race Women's Abolitionist Politics

Iola Leroy, a newly freed slave and the novel's main character, desires near the end of the novel to "to do something of lasting service for the race," after her brief attempt at a teaching career in the South fails due to poor health. Her suitor, Dr. Latimer, suggests that she could "write a good, strong book which would be helpful to them."[440] Latimer further exhorts Iola that "out of the race must come its own thinkers and writers."[441] If for some reason, the audience failed to ascertain Harper's point, she repeats it in a brief text note at the end of the novel: "there are scattered among us materials for mournful tragedies and mirth-provoking comedies, which some hand may yet bring into the literature of the country. . .and thus add to the solution of our unsolved American problem." Although "the race has not had very long to straighten its hands from the hoe [and] to grasp the pen and wield it as a power for good," Harper observes that "the shadows bear the promise of a brighter coming day."[442] But it would take a novel to actually confront the shadows and provide integrity for any of the political projects encompassed in racial uplift.

Essentially, Harper argues throughout her novel from the title to the epilogue that not only must the race be uplifted, but also those unresolved racial concerns that remained hidden in the shadows—issues around sexuality and miscegenation, around

[440] Frances Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987 ed.), 262.
[441] Ibid., 263.
[442] Ibid., 282.

mothering and the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and around racial loyalty—must be confronted and worked through in order for racial uplift to have any long lasting and substantive effectiveness in the freedom struggle. Shadows are a trope not only for understanding the underside of the politics of racial uplift but also for understanding Black women's unique positionality within the Black freedom struggle. Joy James understands Black women, particularly those radical Black women who evince more revolutionary than reformist, feminist postures as being "shadowboxers" in American culture, "companion-challengers to a dysfunctional democracy," who pursue a range of anti-racist strategies of resistance.[443] The fictional Iola and the actual women like Ida B. Wells and Lucy Delaney of whom she is a composite are not the radical revolutionaries of whom Joy James speaks, but they are their predecessors and foremothers. It is race women's understanding of their umbral presence within African American history and politics that has continually re-energized their commitment to historical self-inscription and textual representation.

Iola is the daughter of a formerly enslaved mother Marie and a planter father Eugene Leroy. Eugene, as a young man, is a self-proclaimed "initiated devotee to debasing pleasures," which in proverbial prodigal fashion eventually leave him "a broken-down young man, prematurely old, [his] constitution a perfect wreck."[444] Marie nurses him back to health, and Eugene, who "encouraged her to talk" finds himself "surprised at the native vigor of her intellect."[445] By turns, Eugene falls in love with

---

[443] Joy James. *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 13-14.
[444] Harper 68.
[445] Ibid., 69.

Marie and makes plans to "take her North, manumit, educate and marry her."[446] After finding a school, "where her connection to the negro race would be no bar to her advancement,"—most probably Oberlin College in Ohio[447]—Marie is enrolled in school and ascends to a very high class ranking, so much so that she is selected to give a commencement address.

Marie imbibes her school's liberal ideas about race and prepares an anti-slavery address entitled "American Civilization, its Lights and Shadows." "Like an Esther pleading for the lives of her people in the Oriental courts of a despotic king, she stood before the audience, pleading for those whose lips were sealed, but whose condition appealed to the strong mercy and justice of the Nation."[448] Marie's passionate anti-slavery address before a mixed-race audience acts as a textual invocation of the early generation of Black women abolitionists and race leaders like Maria Stewart and Sojourner Truth, who summoned powerful rhetorical resources to challenge the views of their audiences. Harper's choice to compare Marie with the Biblical figure Esther is evidence of what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls an early Black feminist theology among Black women. This Black feminist theology found its locus in the stories of Biblical women like Esther, Deborah, and the Virgin Mary, who had assumed important leadership roles. The use of Biblical women leaders was often the first premise upon which race women built an argument for the importance of female leadership, and therefore necessitates a consideration of Marie as a potential race woman in the text. At the same time, Black women's ability to locate their leadership within Biblical milieu

[446] Harper 71.
[447] This was the first predominantly white college to educate African-American women including Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper. The novel remarks that Marie's school was located in Ohio.
[448] Harper 75.

conferred respectability upon women leaders, who otherwise would be seen as not knowing their "place."

Eugene listens attentively to Marie's moving address, but "at times a shadow of annoyance would spread over his face."[449] Harper's use of shadows here is an adumbration of the ambivalence and limitations of Eugene's racial politics, and the way in which Marie's rhetoric of resistance positions her as a resistant figure in the face of such politics. His telling reaction casts a pall over his ostensibly progressive views on race and marriage. Eugene's annoyance stems from the fact that he is a slave-owner, and that though he intends to marry Marie, he has absolutely no intention of freeing his other slaves. Although he claims that he "would willingly free every slave on his plantation," Eugene patronizingly believes that freeing his slaves would "separate them from their kith and kin" on other plantations. Moreover, he tells Marie, who exhorts him to challenge the immorality of slavery, "I have neither the courage of a martyr, nor the faith of a saint," and besides "I believe there are slaves on this plantation whom the flattering offers of freedom would not entice away." Marie informs Eugene that clearly "some of you planters [don't] understand your own slaves. . . .I hate the whole thing from the bottom of my heart." More than annoyed, Eugene realizes that "Northern education has unfitted [Marie] for Southern life."[450] This passionate debate between Marie and Eugene is one of many that appear in *Iola Leroy*. Harper's insistent inclusion of these conversations in secret wooded areas, homes, war camps, conferences, and lyceums, becomes a textual representation of the rhetorical communities that she seeks to replicate and convene in the actual world. These conversations are meant to act as rhetorical

---

[449] Harper 75.
[450] Ibid., 79-80

models and conversation pieces that will stimulate dialogue and help constitute rich rhetorical communities among Harper's audiences.

Notwithstanding Marie's passionate abolitionist views, Harper ultimately chooses to mete out severe consequences for her choice to marry a slave-owner. Marie seems unable to see the contradiction between her disdain for slavery and her choice to escape her status as a "lonely slave girl, with the fatal dower of beauty, liable to be bought, sold, exchanged, and bartered," and her choice to become "the wife of a wealthy planter," and the "mistress to the plantation from which she had gone as a slave."[451] She willingly marries Eugene, bears him three children, Harry, Iola, and Gracie, and rears them with no knowledge of their Black ancestry. These choices make the conferral of "race woman" status upon Marie an ultimately untenable proposition. In many respects, she violates the ethical aims of logos, or embodied discourse, by permitting an incongruency to exist between her discursive self-presentation and her actual life. Though Marie's status as a slave changes during her marriage to Eugene, and though she engages in a discourse of freedom on behalf of the enslaved, she ultimately does not practice what she preaches, and instead chooses the corporeal privileges of whiteness over an ultimate duty to uplift the race.

A Cooperian notion of logos requires an absolute congruency and engagement between what a person says and how she lives. Marie's discursive praxis is admirable but her choice to rear her children as white undercuts the racial legibility of her prior speech act and compromises her racial loyalty. Thus she differs from other Black women like Mary Church Terrell who could, and occasionally, did pass in order to do race work, because such women made the choice at some pivotal moment in their lives not to pass,

[451] Harper 74, 76.

and to publicly mark themselves as Black subjects. By making their own Blackness illegible to her children, Marie allowed them to engage in a discourse on race—Iola was pro-slavery-- that was absolutely antithetical to their own status as racial beings, placing them in a position of certain relegation to involuntary servitude. Certainly, Marie's agency and options are limited within the context of slavery. Even so, those limitations prohibit her from exercising the particular prerogatives of a race woman, namely an uncompromised commitment to the race.

When Eugene dies suddenly of yellow fever, Marie finds her marriage, inheritance and manumission declared null and void at the behest of Eugene's cousin, and she and her children all remanded to slavery. Though Harper is invoking a history of failed acts of manumission among interracial couples during slavery, as a political commentary, she also suggests that those mixed-race persons, who failed to fully commit to the freedom of the race, will find their own privileges of whiteness to be a *passing* fancy and in serious jeopardy, as it were. Harper also signals by the death of Eugene and the remand of his wife and children into slavery the unreliability of incremental or gradual emancipation as political strategies for Black freedom.

The "Whole Complexion of Affairs": Racial Loyalty and the Politics of Whiteness

Iola has been sent north to school when the awful fate of slavery befalls her family. And she, "being a Southern girl and a slave-holder's daughter, always defended slavery when it was under discussion."[452] Not only does Iola support the institution, but she espouses the very problematic benevolent depictions of slavery that are most often identified with 19th century whites. "I never saw my father strike one of them. I love my mammy as much as I do my own mother," declared Iola, adding, "and I believe she loves

---

[452] Harper 97.

us just as if we were her own children."[453] Like her father, she believes that Leroy's "slaves do not want their freedom." Ironically, though Iola espouses all the best in the parochial Southern thinking of her times, she is aware that her mother does not "like slavery very much." She ultimately sides with her father, and thus, like her mother who makes a similar moral miscalculation, she is destined for her own bout with slavery. Her cousin Alfred Lorraine sends a "broker" North to inform Iola of her father's death and to trick the unwitting young apologist into returning home into slavery's clutches.

This is Iola's background, but when we first encounter her in the text, she, having been rescued from her plantation by Tom Anderson, a Union helper and sympathizer, is working as a nurse for the Union Army. Dr. Gresham, a white physician, is enamored with Iola and inquires about the woman whose acts as though "some great sorrow has darkened and overshadowed her life." Gresham cannot understand "how a Southern lady, whose education and manners stamp her as a woman of fine culture and good breeding, could consent to occupy the position she so faithfully holds." Finally, Colonel Robinson reveals the secret of Iola's ancestry to a shocked Gresham: "A woman as white as she a slave?" Dr. Gresham, who was as he put it, "just beginning to think seriously of her," attempts to forego his intentions, telling a protesting Col. Robinson, "what you tell me changes the whole complexion of affairs."[454] Gresham's play on words is central to Harper's critique of slavery. The change in complexion signals both the superficial and ephemeral nature of racial identification while also pointing to its nearly impermeable social ramifications.

---

[453] Harper 97.
[454] Harper 57-58.

This slight shift in racial identification equates to a monumental shift in social relationships. And for Harper who writes this novel during woman's era, highlighting the way that race has the ability to transform identity becomes critical to vindicating Black womanhood. Essentially, Harper challenges her audiences to determine whether Gresham's initial impressions of Iola as "refined," "lady-like," and "self-respecting" are any less true upon learning that she is Black. Dr. Gresham, who makes a great attempt to change his mind, clearly does not think so: "In Iola he [sees] his ideal of the woman whom he was willing to marry. A woman, tender, strong, and courageous. . ."[455] Interestingly, within the series of modifiers that Harper uses, she begins by emphatically referring to Iola as a "woman," so that her female identity and the attendant respect she deserves are not in question. Though Harper uses "woman" here, her adjectival modifiers make the case for Iola as a "respectable lady." Gresham further realizes that Iola's "sad destiny had changed [her] from a light-hearted girl to a heroic woman."[456] Harper deliberately appropriates these figures of ideal and heroic womanhood and applies them to a Black woman. To fully make her case, Harper uses a respectable white male in the text to confer these designations upon the Black female figure. "All the manhood and chivalry of his nature rose in her behalf, and after carefully revolving the matter, he resolved to win her for his bride, bury her secret in his Northern home, and hide from his aristocratic relations all knowledge of her mournful past."[457] Having a white man declare his chivalric inclinations towards a formerly enslaved Black woman is nothing short of radical in the social context out of which Harper writes. In fact, fiction was the only place in which Black women could safely espouse and imagine such ideas.

---

[455] Harper 59.
[456] Ibid.
[457] Ibid., 60.

Dr. Gresham proposes, and Iola is forced to make a choice. In the narrative progression of *Iola Leroy*, we are first given this scenario, followed by the story of Iola's mother Marie and her relationship with Eugene. Harper inserts the story of Marie's dreadful fate as if it were a cautionary tale for Iola as she reflects on the circumstances that have relegated her to slavery in the first place. Immediately after recounting how Iola came to be a slave, Harper returns to Gresham's proposal. Although she is very fond of the doctor, Iola rejects his proposal, unaware that he knows of her background. Her choice not to marry Dr. Gresham not only reflects Iola's moral character and commitment to racial honesty and integrity, but it also signals her desire not to pass, a critical rite of passage for the ascent to race womanhood. In fact, she quips, "There are barriers between us that I cannot pass," namely herself. Dr. Gresham pursues Iola, almost winning her affections, "but she fought with her own heart and repressed its rising love."[458] Gresham reminded Iola of the life she had imagined for herself when she still believed she was a Southern white woman. But because Southern white womanhood was not to be her "lot" in life, Iola rejected all vestiges of that former self, though not without a struggle. After revealing her ancestry, Iola told Gresham, "I did not choose my lot in life, but I have no other alternative than to accept it. . . .Thoughts and purposes have come to me in the shadow I could never have learned in the sunshine. . . .I intend, when this conflict is over, to cast my lot with the freed people as a helper, teacher, and friend."[459] Iola's rejection of Dr. Gresham's proposal becomes simultaneously her public acceptance of her role as a race woman.

[458] Harper 111.
[459] Ibid., 114

Iola understood that a prerequisite for marrying Gresham was that she reject "the disadvantages of her birth." He even knowingly encouraged her to do so. But that proposition is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it might expose the gilded nature of whiteness, but on the other it would force her to admit that Blackness in and of itself was a biological disadvantage. No true race woman could accede to that proposition, for her experience in the shadow, had grounded her experience as a racial being in a way that she simply could not reject. She was also skeptical of Dr. Gresham's ostensible liberalism: "To-day your friendship springs from compassion, but, when that subsides, might you not look at me as inferior." Dr. Gresham was offended and told Iola that she had to believe that "our country has produced a higher type of manhood than the men by whom you were tried and tempted."[460] Gresham's faulty assumptions continued to offer proof of his unsuitability as a husband. Not only did he think it reasonable to ask Iola to deny her African heritage, but he was also guilty of assuming that Black women could never be total victims of white men's unsolicited sexual advances. For while he conceded that white men had "tried" Black women, surely, Black women had also been "tempted."

Iola informs him that she was "'tried, but not tempted.'. . . 'I was never tempted. I was sold from state to state as an article of merchandise. I had outrages heaped on me which might well crimson the cheek of honest womanhood with shame, but I never fell into the clutches of an owner for whom I did not feel the utmost loathing and intensest horror."[461] Iola's monologue-- the only time she ever admits the possibility of sexual victimization--challenges the idea that all Black women sexually desired white men and exposes the sexual "outrages" heaped upon Black women. As Iola continues to push

[460] Harper 115.
[461] Ibid.

Gresham, she exposes to him his own subtle prejudices. As a Northern liberal, he rejects the idea that he has given consent for slavery, instead seeing himself as a white liberal do-gooder who has rejected the institution wholeheartedly. He, however, is an uncritical champion of Northern liberalism, and Iola reminds him that "the negro is under a social ban both North and South." Feeling implicated by her critique, he argues, much like Dr. Latimer, that "out of the race must come its own defenders. With them the pen must be mightier than the sword. It is the weapon of civilization, and they must use it in their own defense." He bases his belief on the "Anglo-Saxon race," which he describes as "proud, domineering, aggressive, and impatient of a rival. . . .They have been a conquering and achieving people, marvelous in their triumphs of mind over matter." Iola defends the race telling Gresham, "the time will come when the civilization of the negro will assume a better phase than you the Anglo-Saxons possess."[462] The battle over Anglo-Saxonism, particularly the racial superiority of these European descendants, was an important site of racial discourse in the 1890s.[463] Iola's engagement with and rejection of this discourse is an intentional part of the novel's political project.

Iola proceeds on these grounds to reject Gresham's romantic advances. Even so, her decision is a difficult one for both parties. Iola questions herself, "why should she refuse herself these desirable boons?" Her answer comes, when "mingling with these beautiful visions of manly love and protecting care, she sees the anguish of her heart-stricken mother and the pale, sweet face of her dying sister."[464] Harper rejects the idea that racial and national progress can occur upon the ground of interracial marriages,

---

[462] Harper 116.
[463] For a longer discussion, see Reginald Horsman's influential work *Race and Manifest Destiny: Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
[464] Harper 118.

because she understands that Black women in those marriages will be forced to deny their racial heritage. Thus, Iola does not repeat her mother's mistakes, choosing instead to sacrifice her personal access to the privileges of whiteness in favor of uplifting the entire race as a teacher.

Womanhood Redefined: On Motherhood, Mammies, and Progress

The relationship between mothers and daughters has been a central conversation in African American women's literature. Mothers become the source of an intergenerational transfer of knowledge and values, especially to their daughters. This has created a particular problem in African-American communities in the case where Black women's status as slaves placed them in a position of being the only individuals who could transfer a position of bondage to their progeny. This tension over the nature of Black women's cultural, political, and epistemological inheritances from their mothers informs both fiction and non-fiction texts by race women. Iola celebrates and valorizes her mother and ultimately reconnects with her after slavery. But Harper is very clear that Iola must reject her mother's actions if she wants the benefits of freedom. Within texts by and about race women, there is, then, this ambivalence about mothering, so that while daughters choose not to explicitly pass judgment on their mothers, their life choices reveal a hint of disaffection with the consequences of their mothers' choices. When Iola and her mother are reunited after the War, Marie says, "my dear child, you are so changed I do not think I would have known you if I had met you in the street!" Iola responds, "Oh, mamma! I have passed through a fiery ideal of suffering since then. But it is useless. . . to brood over the past."[465]

---

[465] Harper 195.

Though Iola does acknowledge her maltreatment during slavery, what remains unspoken tells us more than what she does say. Doveanna Fulton argues that race women's texts employ strategic silences, "mute demonstration[s] that can be used in both affirmation and protest."[466] Iola's silence contours the text by suggesting that there is an unspeakably palpable experience of abuse and perhaps even a feeling of being betrayed by her mother who experienced similar problems but leaves her daughter unprepared. Harper's racial project, however, could not allow Black women to directly indict or critique their mothers in the same way that 20th century texts about race women are more wont to do. In this way, novels engage in supplement larger public dialogues by indirectly striking or attacking, enemies—namely ideas and actions—that are detrimental to racial progress, and specifically Black women's progress. Simultaneously, by at least broaching the conversation of the main character's rape and victimization, novels advance the dialogue about sexual terror that autobiographies can only gesture toward or speak of about Black women generally.

Iola's reunion with her family is also important because her travels in search of her mother facilitate much longer interactions with the folk than either her upbringing or her war experiences have previously permitted. Iola travels with her Uncle Robert to North Carolina, where he introduces her to many of the former slaves that he had known as a young man. Harper marks these folks in the text through a rich use of dialect and Black idiom. The community embraces Iola who feels "a spirit of restfulness" as she sits at dinner with Aunt Linda, whose manner reminds her of the "bright, sunshiny days when she used to nestle in Mam Liza's arms." Her interaction with Robert's extended kin

---

[466] Doveanna Fulton (Minor), *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 66.

evokes a "homely enjoyment [which] was very welcome to her after the trying scenes through which she had passed."[467] The fact that Iola understands Aunt Linda through the lens of Mammy is troubling, but the text is very clear that Iola hates "slavery, root and branch." Iola is thus, not an uncomplicated character. Fulton notes that "instead of excluding and dismissing characters because of their lack of education or economic standing, the more privileged characters engage socially and professionally with the folk."[468] The ease with which Iola moves within her community certainly endears her to the community and reflects Harper's own commitment as a race woman to doing race work on behalf of poor Black women, for whom she gave seminars and speeches at no cost. The deliberate interaction of the clerisy and the folk within these texts challenges readings of race women as being irremediably elitist.

After a brief career as a teacher, failing health forces Iola to move North with her mother, brother, and her newly discovered uncle and grandmother. After being in the North, Iola determines to go out and "join the great rank of bread winners" as a practical exercise of her "theory that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living."[469] Here Harper uses Iola to represent female independence and to challenge the idea that a woman's role was limited to domestic pursuits. In fact, Harper inverts the prevailing justification for women as homemakers on its head, when Iola argues that "I believe a great amount of sin and misery springs from the weakness and inefficiency of women." In the 1890s, most social discourses on gender, which embraced the tenets of the cult of domesticity,[470] celebrated women as the moral custodians of the home and as social

---

[467] Harper 169, 173.
[468] Ibid., 78.
[469] Harper 205.
[470] Also referred to as the cult of true womanhood. Barbara Welter

bulwarks against moral degradation. By arguing that failure to educate and employ women leads to increased sin, Iola provides a moral impetus for exercising her desire for independence and meaningful work. "Every woman should have some skill or art which would insure her at least comfortable support," Iola declares to her Uncle Robert. "I believe there would be less unhappy marriages if labor were more honored among women."[471] This argument echoes Anna Julia Cooper's similar argument that marriage should not be the only source of pleasure in a woman's life, and points more importantly, to early iterations of Black feminist thought among race women of the 19th century.

Although Iola has very advanced ideas about women's right to work and be self-supporting, race still remains a barrier, even in the liberal North. Light enough to pass, Iola refuses to do so with an uncompromised zeal and pride for her racial heritage. Her repeated confrontation with and rejection of such opportunities indicates the importance of the choice to not pass as a litmus test of racial loyalty and leadership. Consequently, she loses the first two jobs she is able to secure after her co-workers and employers discover that she is colored. Harper uses the opportunity to comment on Northern hypocrisy: "In dealing with Southern prejudice against the Negro, we Northerners could do it with better grace if we divested ourselves of our own. . . .We should stamp ourselves on the South, and not let the South stamp itself on us." These remarks, spoken by Iola's newly found employer, echo the same concerns and sentiments that earlier figures like Maria Stewart expressed when she told her audiences to "speak no more of Southern slavery," since Black women were struggling just as hard in the North to overcome discrimination. This rhetoric also reaffirms the political and dialogic roles of Black women's novels as an indispensable part of race women's political conversations.

---

[471] Harper 210.

While Iola is in the process of securing work, she again encounters Dr. Gresham who has come to the North for a medical convention. Reminiscing over their failed attempt at romance, Dr. Gresham is happy to see that the previously lonely Iola has reunited with her family. For him, "'the silver lining of our war cloud is the redemption of a race and the reunion of severed hearts.'"[472] In another deliberately inserted political dialogue, Iola informs Dr. Gresham who is optimistic about the nation's prospects, that she thinks "there is but one remedy by which our nation can recover from the evil entailed by slavery": "'a fuller comprehension of the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and their application to our national life.[473]'" Iola's espousal of Christian beliefs and doctrines places her squarely within the ideological traditions of her race women contemporaries, who also pursued national leadership and racial uplift from a Christian moral framework.

Even though Dr. Gresham agrees with Iola in this regard, he still betrays his commitment to whiteness, when he fails to understand why Iola's brother Harry, himself a race man, chooses to remain in the South as a teacher, as opposed to passing for white which he could easily do. "He would possess advantages as a white man which he could not if her were known to be colored," mused Dr. Gresham. "'Doctor,' said Iola poised to refute him, " 'he has greater advantages as a colored man." Those advantages to Iola were located in his ability to become a race leader: "'To be the leader of a race to higher planes of thought and action, to teach men clearer views of life and duty, and to inspire their souls with loftier aims, is a far greater privilege than it is to open the gates of

---

[472] Harper 216.
[473] Ibid.

material prosperity and fill every home with sensuous enjoyment."[474] Although Iola is defending her brother Harry, by proxy, she is also defending herself, since she has made the same choice not to pass. The choice to permanently pass or not to pass recurs as a pivotal moment in both fiction and non-fiction texts by race women. Mary Church Terrell tells of a similar encounter when she studies in Europe as a college student. She receives two proposals from European men and an invitation to lead a life of luxury. Yet, she, too, chooses to return to the states and assist in remedying the race problem.[475] Race women understand that a true commitment to uplifting the race means a total rejection of the privileges of whiteness, even when the individual race woman, might have access to those privileges because of her light skin.

Dr. Gresham, however, still attempts to marry Iola. He could he told her, "see no use in [her] persisting that [she is] colored when [her] eyes are as blue and complexion as white as [his]." Exasperated, he tells Iola, "'if you love your race, as you call it, work for it, live for it, suffer for it and, if need be die for it; but don't marry for it. Your education has unfitted you for social life among them." Clearly, this is an unreasonable choice for Iola, who is also unprepared to leave her family—the "them," that Dr. Gresham was so ready to dismiss. With firm resolve, she told him, "I must serve the race which needs me most." Having ascertained this resolve, Dr. Gresham relents for "he [knows] that the South need[s] the surrender of the best brain and heart of the country to build, above the wastes of war, more stately temples of thought and action."[476] In her invocation of the

---

[474] Harper 219.
[475] Several race women including Ida B. Wells, Pauli Murray, Angela Davis, describe the lure of internationalism with its promises of racial freedom. But each of these women feels compelled to return to the U.S. to engage in Black freedom struggles. In this respect, race women differ starkly from their race man like Henry Highland Garnet, Martin Delany, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and W.E.B. Du Bois counterparts who embraced expatriation as an option.
[476] Harper 236.

corporeal imagery of brain and heart, Harper invokes logos, as a form of discourse and praxis that will be critical to rebuilding the nation. Within the Christian milieu out of which Black women invoked logos, they understood temples to be not just brick-and-mortar institutions—churches or otherwise—but also human bodies—"temples of the Holy Spirit."[477] Thus Iola's choice vests her with the moral authority to build both better human beings and better national institutions, because her thoughts and actions remain congruent, even when tested.

Iola's capacity to have a different life is directly proportional to her disavowal of her mother's choices. Because she successfully resists the pull of whiteness and its privileges, Iola is now primed to receive her own rewards. Through her connections with Dr. Gresham, Iola meets Dr. Latimer, a young mulatto doctor with a background similar to Iola's. He is the son of a slave mother and planter father. His white grandmother offers him the opportunity to fully assimilate into the white race, but he rejects this option out of loyalty to his mother. Thus, Dr. Latimer belonged to the "negro race both by blood and choice."[478] Dr. Latimer is presented as the foil character to Dr. Gresham, and his presence in the text offers Iola a choice. In fact, the descriptions of both men as aristocratic, noble, even heroic are shared traits. The difference is that Latimer does not esteem whiteness as being intrinsically superior. Unlike Gresham who believes that the only solution to the race question is "the absorption of the negro into [the white] race," Latimer is an environmentalist,[479] who believes that with proper training and social

[477] Biblical support for this view is located in 1 Corinthians 6.
[478] Harper 238.
[479] Two theories of racial origins prevailed during the historical moment of the novel: biological determinism, a belief in the inherent biological inferiority of Black people and environmentalism, or geographical determinism, a belief that physical locale shaped racial characteristics. While both theories were used to support Black inferiority, Dr. Latimer refigures the discourse of environmentalism in such a way that Black people could grow, learn, and excel when placed in the proper environment. See Vivian

access, Blacks can achieve just as much as their white counterparts. Latimer's unequivocal commitment to the race renders him a viable candidate for Iola's affections. They are soon married and move back to the South as workers for the race.

Iola's acceptance of Dr. Latimer's proposal is consummated through a flood of light imagery in the text. "Grand and noble purposes were lighting up their lives; and they esteemed it a blessed privileged to stand on the threshold of a new era and labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new commonwealth of freedom."[480] Iola's shadows—her experience of slavery, familial separation, and sexual abuse—are uplifted within the novel, and that uplift is cast in the language of the racial uplift politics of the 1890s. Simultaneously, though, Iola does not ultimately escape without first giving her testimony about her ordeal. While excited about her marriage, Iola still bears (witness to) the painful memories of past. She tells Dr. Latimer that "mingling with the sunshine of the present came the shadows of the past," and then it is to him that she gives a full testimony of her experience of slavery. Importantly, she tells him, "I was wild with agony and had I not been placed under conditions which roused all the resistance of my soul, I would have lost my reason." Testimony and resistance are the real evidence of Iola's uplift, not her marriage, and these are tools that will remain central to Black women's navigation of their shadows well into the 20th century. Importantly, Harper figures Black women's resistance as the expression of reason rather than the rejection of it, an important philosophical intervention during a historical moment which read Black people's alleged hyper-emotionalism, as evidence of a lack of reason.

May's discussion of this in *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction.* Pages 148-153.

[480] Harper 271.

"My Ideal Woman": Qualifications for Racial Leadership

Harper neatly resolves Iola's future by giving her a mulatto husband with similar political proclivities. In fact, it is precisely because of "their desire to help to the race [that] their hearts beat in loving unison. One grand and noble purpose was giving tone and color to their lives and strengthening the bonds of affection between them."[481] Iola is thus able to resolve the conundrum presented by Dr. Gresham who tells her to do everything for her race but marry it. For Harper, the solution is that Iola should simply marry a race man. Even so, Harper is well aware that racial politics are not so easily resolved, and she seeks to avoid a pristine ending. Again drawing on the strategy of character juxtaposition, Harper introduces a new character in the closing pages of the text named Miss Lucille Delany. Iola mentions to Dr. Latimer in passing that her friend Lucille, who is coming for a visit, is her "ideal woman. She is grand, brave, intellectual, and religious."[482] Dr. Latimer remarks that such a woman would make an excellent wife, an assessment which promptly incenses Iola, who responds, "'Did any of you gentlemen ever see a young woman of much ability that you did not look upon as flotsam all adrift until some man had appropriated her."[483] Miss Delany's presence in the text, and Iola's celebration of her, is peculiar and looks upon first impression to be a superfluous addition to a text already supersaturated with characters. What, then, might be Harper's purpose in putting Miss Delany in the text?

Iola's description of Lucille certainly provides a succinct description of the quintessential race woman, but Harper also has a larger goal in mind. In the text note included at the end of the novel, the author indicates that it is "from the threads of fact

---

[481] Harper 266.
[482] Harper 242.
[483] Harper 243.

and fiction [that] I have woven [this] story."[484] *Iola Leroy* acts as an intermediary text between autobiography and fiction and between slave narratives and post-slavery narratives. What Harper points to is the inescapability of history and social context—much like the inescapability of one's shadow-- in Black women's lives, so much so that it necessarily informs the stories they tell. Fulton notes that Harper's "engagement of fiction with history and revolutionary historical figures recalls the African American naming tradition [and] endows respectable characters with the names of radical Black women and men." To substantiate this assertion, Fulton draws on the work of Gabrielle Foreman who regards Harper's splicing of fiction with history as "histotextuality," or an "encoding [of] characters with names that reflect African American intellectuals and activists in the historical moment in which *Iola Leroy* was written."[485]

For instance, when Ida B. Wells escaped from Memphis in 1892 after the lynching of her friend, she spent some time at Harper's home. Wells' pen name as a journalist was Iola. Fulton sees the same politics of naming at play in the character of Lucille Delany, who "summons up association with Lucy Delaney, whose 1891 autobiography *From the Darkness Cometh the Light* details Delaney's enslavement and struggle for freedom through legal measures." Foreman claims that "both Lucille Delany and Lucy Delaney are 'spiritual daughters to Martin Delany.'"[486] I would argue that Harper might also have been invoking the life of Lucy Craft Laney, the former slave and Georgia educator who started the Haines Institute in Augusta, Georgia, in 1883. Lucille Delany's character in *Iola Leroy* is a school founder from Georgia, much like Lucy Craft Laney. If we read Lucille Delany as a composite of these two actual race women Lucy

[484] Harper 282.
[485] Harper 79.
[486] Fulton 79-80.

Delaney and Lucy Craft Laney, she represents both the transition from slavery to freedom and the tradition of race women educators and institution builders that were critical in the project of racial uplift in the 19th century.

Although Dr. Gresham thinks of Iola as *his* "ideal woman," Iola claims the prerogative to name her own ideal of womanhood, outside of the confines of either the white or Black male figures within the text. Such a move is a powerful one which places the onus on defining proper womanhood on the Black woman herself , and prefigures Black women's quest for a "self-defined standpoint." [487] Delany was a dark-skinned woman, and Harper includes clearly identified darker-skinned characters throughout the novel. These characters like Reverend Carmicle and Lucille are presented as highly intelligent, in order to guard against any readings of the text in which mulatto figures are perceived to be more intelligent, successful, and suited for racial leadership because of their white ancestry. Delany is more outspoken than Iola and less delicate. Whereas Iola cannot sustain a teaching career in the South, Delany manages to start a school. Delany is also an excellent debater, a signal of her intellectual prowess. She offers a very sophisticated critique of Southern labor practices, arguing in the final formal debate in the text that " 'the Southern white people themselves [do not] desire any wholesale exodus of colored people from their labor fields. [Thus] it would be suicidal to attempt their expatriation."[488]

Delany is also a feminist. In a paper that Iola presents, entitled the "Education of Mothers," she argues that the "great need of the race was enlightened mothers." Undoubtedly, Iola is still grappling with Marie's unenlightened mothering to a certain

---

[487] See Collins discussion in *Black Feminist Thought,* 24-25 and 269-271.
[488] Harper 248.

extent. But Lucille goes beyond even Iola's argument adding caustically, "And enlightened fathers, too." She continued, "If there is anything I chafe to see, it is a strong, hearty man, shirking his burdens, putting them on the shoulders of his wife, and taking life easy for himself. . . .I think, said Miss Delany with a flash in her eye and a ring of decision in her voice, "that such men ought to be drummed out of town."[489] Much like more radical and outspoken race women, Miss Delany is unafraid to critique men for contributing to the debased condition of Black women. The fact that Lucille's personality becomes apparent in the context of Iola's critique of racial mothering affirms why she is Iola's "ideal woman," which presumably would be a designation reserved for mothers. Delany's willingness to critique fathers goes beyond even Iola's critique and her fearlessness and intelligence make her an ideal choice as a racial champion. Ultimately, then Harper ends the text by suggesting that Iola still needs further development to become a full-fledged race woman. At the same time, Harper points to a vibrant tradition of Black female racial leadership from which Iola can take instruction.

The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?

Alice Walker's *Meridian* opens with the protagonist, a former student activist turned community activist, leading a group of children to see a grotesque amusement in the form of a woman named Marilene O'Shay, mummified for 25 years, but "preserved in life-like condition." O'Shay's husband had murdered her because of her unapologetic adultery. Meridian is leading the children in a kind of "sit-in" because as one street sweeper tells her friend Truman, "our day for seeing her ain't till Thursday." "*Your* day," replies Truman incredulously, "But the Civil Rights Movement changed all that!" Given the evidence to the contrary, the novel presents the problem that Alice Walker also

[489] Harper 253.

grapples with in her first prize-winning essay "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?"[490]

Though Meridian is using the tactics of civil rights, her object of protest is very different, signaling the political shift that has taken place between the 1960s and 1970s. The children are clamoring to see the body of a dead white woman, who was described ironically as being not so white:

> the oddest thing about her dried-up body, according to Henry's flier, and the one that –though it only reflected her sinfulness—bothered him most, was that its exposure to salt had caused it to darken. And though he had attempted to paint her her original color from time to time, the paint always discolored. Viewers of her remains should be convinced of his wife's race, therefore, by the straightness and reddish color of her hair.

Her inability to be respectable literally rendered her "Black." Meridian thus understands Marilene O'Shay's lack of virtue—signaled in the four signs that mark the exhibit: "Obedient Daughter," "Devoted Wife," "Adoring Mother," and "Gone Wrong"-- to be a hallmark of the public rendering and understanding of Black womanhood. Although Meridian tells her friend Truman later that this amusement was irrelevant to her and that she had really only challenged the segregation on principle, she is implicated in the discourse of womanhood, or rather failed ladyhood, inherent in the exhibit.

In the story of Marilene O'Shay, Walker invokes her own "dark body of discourse," demonstrating the intractability of race from gender and sexuality and the fatal implications of the discourses of respectability. Whereas *Iola Leroy* ends "with

---

[490] Alice Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1983.

Iola's depiction of her "ideal woman," Walker tells us that "Marilene had been an ideal woman, a 'goddess.'"[491] Yet, she ended up murdered and on display as a cash-cow for her husband. Meridian's march exposes the failure of traditional gender roles and the reality of domestic violence, two central feminist concerns of the 1970s. By presenting Marilene as a "dark" body, Walker subtly intimates that Black women are implicated not only in the problem of domestic violence, but also in larger conversations about "respectable" roles for ladies, a discourse which had traditionally been the province of white women. By opening her novel with the death of a white woman, Walker signals that though this is a novel about women, and about gender politics, it is a novel about a Black woman and her negotiation of those politics, not a white woman. The displacement of white women's narratives from the center of feminism is a radical move, characteristic of the Black feminist politic that emerges in the late 1960s.

As Meridian prepares to lead the children into the exhibit, several men scramble into an old Confederate tank that sits at the center of town and attempt to aim it at her and her retinue. Rather than retreat, she marches up to the tank, "rap[s] smartly on its carapace—as if knocking on a door." She then kicks open the door, "and the men who [are] in the tank [crawl] sheepishly out to stare.[492]Meridian directly challenges the antebellum grounds of Southern white ladyhood, and its chivalric (read: violent) white male arbiters. Her willingness to stare down a tank invokes the militaristic and violent imagery that remain in our cultural imaginary about Black politics in the 1970s. At the same time, Meridian's confrontation with the tank positions her as a fictional representation of the Black women shadowboxers whom Joy James describes as

---

[491] Alice Walker. *Meridian.* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 5.
[492] Walker, *Meridian,* 7.

"militant," and as those who challenge "state power and antiradicalism within conventional politics"(James 8). Meridian's racial politic is public, confrontational, unconventional, and potentially violent, and thus constitutes a radical divergence from her race women predecessors.

Many members of the community perceived Meridian's causes to be exercises in lunacy. The street sweeper tells Truman, Meridian's friend and former lover, "she thinks *she's* God . . .or else she just ain't all there." In her now classic essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Alice Walker grapples with the perception of radical Black women as being lunatics. Writing about her love affair with the female characters in Jean Toomer's novel *Cane,* Walker asserts that Toomer's

> Black women [had a] spirituality [so] intense, so deep, so *unconscious* that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. . . .In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than 'sexual objects,' more even than mere women they became 'Saints.' Instead of being perceived as whole persons, their bodies became shrines: what was thought to be their minds became temples suitable for worship. These crazy Saints stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics, like suicides, and the 'God' that was in their gaze was as mute as a stone. Who were these Saints? These crazy, loony, pitiful women? Some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers.[493]

---

[493] Alice Walker, "In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens" in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose.*

Certainly Meridian's bold confrontation with the tank reads like a suicide wish. But really, Walker suggests that this moment is a marker both of the transcendent quality of these women coupled with their very temporal and embodied notions of spirituality. The apparent inability to merge these two divergent notions of Black women's spirituality as both transcendent and embodied has caused them to be viewed as cultural and historical anomalies--lunatics. Meridian exists at the nexus of these competing discourses about spirituality, a fact which is apparent in the two antithetical views of her held by Truman and the street sweeper. *Meridian* does not, in fact, think she is God, but she does view herself as a defender of and advocate for the children's civil rights. In this respect, she is much like her real-life race women counterparts. But her confrontational style also situates her within a long tradition of radical Black women like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Amy Jacques Garvey, and Angela Davis, activists, whom Joy James defines as shadow boxers: "fighters who battle as outsiders, at times criminalized as cultural and political outlaws. Sometimes they are defeated by themselves or the society and state of which they are a part. Sometimes they are victorious until the next battle. Privately they box with themselves, their kin, and sometimes, imaginary opponents. Publicly, their conflicts engage the state's destructive policies."[494] Alice Walker has also suggested that her engagement with Civil Rights provided a mechanism of escaping her own umbral sense of herself: "In the white world I walked less real to them than a shadow; and being young and well hidden among the slums, among people who also did not exist—either in books or in films or in the government of their own lives—I waited to be called to life. And, by

[494] James 176.

a miracle, I was called."[495] Again, Walker's notion of "calling" points to the spiritual dimensions of Black women's freedom struggle.

Meridian's entrance into the movement is similar. Having gotten pregnant at age seventeen because of her lack of knowledge of birth control, Meridian finds herself in a loveless marriage of convenience, feelingly increasingly nihilistic, lethargic, and suicidal as she becomes "aware of the past and present of the larger world" when a local house where student activists are living is bombed.[496] A month later, Meridian still intrigued by the bombing, decides to volunteer: "What was she volunteering into? She had no real idea. Something about the bombing had attracted her, the obliteration of the house, the knowledge that had foreseen this destruction. What would these minds, these people, be like?"[497] Meridian's discovery of the world outside her front door constituted a personal renascence. It was "just knowing," writes Walker autobiographically, that had "meant everything. . . Knowing has pushed me out into the world, into college, into places, into people."[498] Meridian's insatiable desire to know a world different from her own, pushed her out into the world, leaving her toddler son in someone else's care, while she decided to attend college.

As part of the Movement, she, along with Truman and others, typed letters and petitions, marched and sang freedom songs, and endured routine beatings at the hands of local law enforcement. During one violent encounter,

> Within minutes they had been beaten inside, where the sheriff and his deputies waited to finish them. And she realized why Truman was

---

[495] Alice Walker. "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1983), 122.
[496] Walker, *Meridian,* 70.
[497] Walker, *Meridian,* 77.
[498] Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement," 125.

> limping. When the sheriff grabbed her by the hair and someone else began punching her and kicking her in the back, she did not even scream, except very intensely in her own mind, and the scream of Truman's name. And what she meant by it was not even that she was in love: What she meant by it was that they were at a time and place in History that forced the trivial to fall away—and they were absolutely together.[499]

As Meridian experienced this violent bodily trauma, she also came to know herself in a new way: as an agent of history. The desire to affirm themselves as historical subjects and agents has been a driving force and a consistent theme in race women's writings and a signal marker in their quest for subjectivity. Their common experience of struggle forged a significant bond between Meridian and Truman. This bond signals the inextricable link between Black men and women in the struggle for racial freedom, a connection that is a prerequisite of womanist politics.

Weeks after they had been jailed, Meridian passed Truman on a street "and he did not recognize her or even see her. She knew his blankness was battle fatigue. They all had it." Truman's inability to "see" Meridian is both literal and symbolic. Battle fatigue had an ironically obscuring quality about it: the force with which violence assumed center stage in the activist's life necessarily forced other concerns—including other human beings—to the background. Meridian, herself beset with battle fatigue, found that she always

> burst into tears whenever something went wrong or someone spoke unkindly or sometimes even if they spoke, period. . . .This might go on for weeks. Then, suddenly, it would stop and some other symptom would

[499] Walker, *Meridian*, 81.

> appear. The shaking of her hands, or the twitch in her left eye. Or the way she would sometimes be sure she'd heard a shot and feel the impact of the bullet against her back. . ."[500]

When Truman finds Meridian years later, facing down the tank, he recognizes in her a continued willingness to suffer, though he has given up on such notions. Soon she is brought home by four men who have hoisted her paralyzed frame upon their shoulders. Customarily, after Meridian has engaged in one of her causes, she becomes sick and paralyzed and "some of the men. . .always follow [her] home," after a performance "in case [she] needs them."[501] Just as real freedom fighters like Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and Anne Moody suffered from severe psychological and physical trauma and the long lasting negative effects of their participation in the Movement, Meridian seems to have residual complications from her battle fatigue.

The early and pervasive corporeal imagery within this text constitutes an important expression and figuration of logos. Meridian willingly puts her body on the line, even facing down a tank, for her principles, namely that her people should have equal access, even to the most irrelevant of amusements. Truman, disillusioned by revolutionary tactics which he considers to be a fad long past, chides her, "You make yourself catatonic behind a lot of meaningless action that will never get anybody anywhere. What good did it do those kids to see that freak's freaky wife?" But for Meridian, it had been an exercise in dismantling prevailing stereotypes and undermining the power of segregation. Meridian, like Walker, might have been fighting for something more important: "because of the beatings, the arrests, the hell of battle during these past

---

[500] Walker, *Meridian,* 82.
[501] Ibid.,12.

years, I have fought harder for my life and for a chance to be myself, to be something more than a shadow or a number. . ."[502] For Meridian had decided that being an obedient daughter, devoted wife, and adoring mother were roles that she neither could nor should perform. This stance is a radical departure from the gender politics of early race women who argued for racial progress based upon Black women's ability to successfully perform each of these roles. Meridian, on the other hand, must shed every vestige of these roles in order to become a successful activist. Being a wife and mother are not the centerpieces of her activism as they had been for race women in the woman's era, but rather constitute obstacles for the would-be female race activist.

Though her community may not understand her, they generously reward her by providing "boxes and boxes of food," and even a cow. As she tells Truman, " 'They're grateful people.. . .They *appreciate* it when someone volunteers to suffer.' "[503] She becomes, in effect, one of those "crazy saints" that Walker admired in *Cane*. Even during her college days, "the majority of Black towns people were sympathetic to the Movement from the first, and told Meridian she was doing a good thing: typing, teaching illiterates to read and write, [and] demonstrating against segregated facilities. . .Her mother, however, was not sympathetic."[504] These two portraits of Meridian's commitment to her community stand as an inauguration of a womanist ethic and politic within the novel and within African American women's literature more generally. Walker defines a womanist, a term which she gleans "from the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman," as a "Black feminist of color." A womanist could be courageous or willful in her behavior and always wanted "to

---

[502] Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement," 125.
[503] Walker, *Meridian,* 11.
[504] Ibid., 82.

know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one."[505] But a womanist was also "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female." She was "not a separatist, except periodically, for health." The intrepid manner in which Meridian confronted the tank was in itself the courageous and willful behavior characteristic of a womanist politic. At the same time, Meridian engaged in such intrepid acts, even when she was not the direct beneficiary—for instance, in her view of Marilene O'Shay as irrelevant to her personally—because she believed in the health and wholeness of her community.

What's the Word?: A Bakhtinian Reading

Meridian's choice to become a part of the movement against her mother's wishes was certainly a "womanish" move, one which her mother could never understand as "good" for her daughter. In fact this disagreement leads Meridian to invoke a womanist politic of separation in order to heal from the vituperative nature of the interactions with both her mother and her friend and college roommate Anne Marion. The wallpaper of her house is literally composed of "letters [from the two of them that] she had stuck up side by side, neatly at eye level." Some letters were full of Bible verses that Meridian's mother had sent "the gist of which was that Meridian had failed to honor not just her parents, but anyone." The other letters came from Anne Marion and "were a litany of accusations, written with much viciousness and condescension. They all began: 'Of course you are misguided. . .' and 'Those like yourself, who do not admit the truth' and 'You have never, being weak and insensitive to History, had any sense of priorities. . .'"[506]

[505] Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, xi.
[506] Walker, *Meridian*, 9.

Anne-Marion and Meridian had been comrades in struggle during their college days against their two perceived enemies: "Saxon, which wanted them to become something—ladies—that was already obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society."[507] Meridian had resisted from the first the type of person that Saxon wanted to create-- " a finishing school girl whose goal . . .was to be *accepted* as an equal because she knew and practiced all the proper social rules"—by moving a thirteen year old homeless girl named Wile Chile into her room. Dirty, uncouth, and pregnant, the Wild Child resists even Meridian's attempts to care for her, but she acts in the text as an embodied form of resistance to any fanciful notions that the problems confronting Black girls and women stemmed from their failure to be lady-like. Though Meridian had radical ideas, she was still not "revolutionary" enough for Anne Marion. Even so, she does not uncritically accept the content of her critics' assessments. Instead on the letters, "she had gamely scribbled: 'Yes, yes. No. Some of the above. No, no. Yes. *All* of the above."

The dialogic nature of the discourse within *Meridian* is reflective of Mikhail Baktin's theory of heteroglossia or multi-voiced discourse, which Henderson defines as "the ability to speak in the multiple languages of public discourse" and as an orientation toward "public, differentiated, social, mediated, dialogic discourse."[508] Meridian's world is filled with the discourse of both herself and others about who she is, the type of politics she should adopt, and the type of woman she should be. This consciousness of what other Black women in her life think of her is evidence of Bakhtin's assertion that "consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia. It must move in and

---

[507] Walker, *Meridian*, 95.
[508] Mae Gwendolyn Henderson. "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." In *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 353.

occupy a position for itself within it." [509] Meridian's dialogues with her mother and Anne-Marion via their letters reflects Mae Henderson's argument that "what is at once characteristic and suggestive about Black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic character, reflecting not only a relationship with others, but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of the self that constitute the matrix of Black female subjectivity."[510] Meridian's engagement with her other Black female interlocutors is a standard feature of Black women's writing.

That Meridian seeks to heal from her long-standing battle fatigue within a physical space that is permeated with competing and simultaneous discourses about her revolutionary posture and (im)proper performance of Black womanhood suggests again an engagement with logos, or embodied discourse. However, Black women's engagement within a logoistic frame in the late 20th century is fraught with tension, with an inability to fully assimilate their rhetoric and their lives in ways that are acceptable among the discriminating eyes of the community. In race women's autobiographies, the goal of logos is the achievement of a one-to-one correlation between what is preached and what is practiced. A race woman must be fully committed to the race and unambivalently and apologetically so. Certainly, race women evinced clear internal conflicts about uncritical racial loyalty particularly when confronting sexism and heterosexism, but the goal of their autobiographies is to sublimate those conflicts in service of larger racial idealist aims.

Within the novel, race women's struggles to actually achieve a healthy sense of themselves can be more fully rendered and examined. Meridian's conflict with her

---

[509] M.M. Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination.* edited by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, 295.
[510] Henderson 349-350.

mother and friend, presented as a dialogic struggle, signals not a resolution, but rather a tension, an internal struggle. In the compendium of definitions for the word "meridian" that Walker places at the beginning of the novel, there are two definitions that are particularly relevant here: a meridian is defined as "the highest point reached by a heavenly body in its course" and as the "highest point of health, vigor, etc." Here Bakhtin's formulation of the "internal dialogism of the word" is instructive. He argues that novels necessarily understand the word as a living thing constantly interacting with its environment: "No living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape."[511] When we consider Meridian's failing health, a paradox, it becomes apparent that she is literally struggling to become herself. So Meridian's struggle to become meridian, as her name signals, is a battle that she fights discursively with the women in her life.

Although Bakhtin's formulations of heteroglossia is immensely useful, it privileges the discursive over the embodied and does not fully account for the actual physical struggles that Black women have endured in service of their political ideologies. Logos, which signals a turn to embodied discourse, however, does account for the interaction between the discursive and the corporeal. It is logos that illumines what is at stake when Truman asks Meridian about her "readiness" to suffer. She responds: "what

[511] M.M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 276.

you see before you is a woman in the process of changing her mind."[512] This interaction is important, because when Truman looks at Meridian, his description is disturbing: "her face alarmed him. It was wasted and rough, the skin a sallow, unhealthy brown with pimples across her forehead and on her chin. Her eyes were glassy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once. Her breath, like her clothes, was sour."[513] Her process of changing her mind takes a physical toll on her body and reflects a kind of internal embattlement, a result of her failure to have achieved logos, or more specifically a fully meridian notion of herself at this point in the text.

The internal battle staged throughout the text centers upon the discourses that Meridian is able to accept about herself; for, whatever she accepts as true is the discourse that she will have to live out. This is precisely the way in which Meridian relates to the discourses in the letters around her. She understands that who she is, figured in the text as an internal Word, is a dialogic being: "The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group. . ."[514] And the word in dispute for Meridian is revolution. In her discussion with Truman, Meridian is reminded of her interaction with Anne-Marion's group of "revolutionary" friends who had called Meridian a "masochist" and a "coward" because she was not "revolutionary" enough. "To join this group she must make a declaration of her willingness to die for the Revolution, which she had done." But, "she must also answer the question 'Will you kill for the Revolution?' with a

[512] Walker, *Meridian,* 12.
[513] Ibid., 10.
[514] Bakhtin 276.

positive Yes. This, however, her tongue could not manage."[515] Meridian's inability to utter "Yes, I will kill for the Revolution' without a stammer" as Anne-Marion had done, places in her in opposition to the rules of the living utterance, which as Bakhtin argues, "having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue."[516]

Bakhtin's reference to history reaffirms the need for Black women's invocations of logos to be grounded in history. For Iola and the women of her generation, their politics were characterized in notions of "uplift," but for Meridian, the historical moment demands a different engagement with racial politics, namely what constitutes "revolutionary" action. For Walker, "*the real revolution is always concerned with the least glamorous stuff*": "typing, teaching illiterates to read and write, [and] demonstrating against segregated facilities."[517]

Meridian has legitimate objections to the group's meaning of the revolution. She recognizes that Anne-Marion and her friends "might or might not do something revolutionary. . . .And [further] the question of killing did not impress her as rhetorical at all." The group wanted her to say something to gain credibility, even if it were only rhetoric, but she understood that murder and revolution were literally words to live –and die—by. Thus she could not say them, inviting the invective and disdain from not only

---

[515] Walker, *Meridian*, 14.
[516] M.M. Bakhtin. "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 276.
[517] See Walker, "The Unglamorous But Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist, or of the Black Writer Who Simply Works and Writes," in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1983), 135. Second quotation is from *Meridian* 80.

the group but also her friend. But Meridian felt that "revolutionary murder was still murder," and she wondered what the cultural implications would be of taking such a position. "What would the music be like?" she wondered, and for her, the music of the folk, generally found in churches and also in the movement was the most authentic connection to the pulse of the people. Her emergent womanist ethic always placed the primacy of the community's well-being over the individual's need to achieve a revolutionary posture. "They were waiting for her to speak. But what could she say? Saying nothing, she remembered her mother and the day she lost her." Her inability to engage in the demanded utterances effectively banished her from this group.

And Meridian experiences not only a communal rejection but also a maternal rejection. Again, then, the novel turns to this tension between mothers and daughters, particularly daughters who become racial leaders and their maternal forebears. Meridian's mother is a devout Christian who attempts to coerce Meridian to accept Jesus Christ as her Savior. But Meridian could not believe, and thus "her mother's love was gone, withdrawn, and there were conditions to be met before it would be returned. Conditions Meridian was never able to meet."[518] "Still," Meridian understood, "it was death not to love one's mother,"[519] because she thought of Mrs. Hill as "Black Motherhood personified, and of that great institution she was in terrible awe."[520]

Like Iola, Meridian is compelled to reject her mother's belief system in order to attain freedom for herself. For instance, much like Marie, Meridian's mother fails to properly teach Meridian about sex, substituting more substantive instruction with vacuous and meaningless exhortations to "be sweet." Thus Meridian finds herself

---

[518] Walker, *Meridian*, 17-18.
[519] Ibid., 17.
[520] Ibid., 96.

pregnant, married, and a high-school drop out at seventeen. Just as Marie has experienced a fate that she does not want for her daughter Iola, Meridian's mother also becomes pregnant as a matter of convention—it was simply what women her age did-- rather than choice. And she "was not a woman who should have had children. She was capable of thought and growth and action, only if unfettered by the needs of dependents, or the demands, requirements, of a husband."[521] In this respect, Meridian is very much like her mother. But rather than equipping and empowering her daughter, Mrs. Hill resigns herself to a state of ignorance and blind religious allegiance. Meridian, unsatisfied with such a life, has no other options but to reject her mother's choices and the discourses—traditional and religious-- that inform them.

It is when Meridian decides to reject the traditional discourses of "obedient daughter," "devoted wife," and "adoring mother," by giving her baby to another family and going off to Saxon College, on scholarship, that she positions herself to become an activist and community leader. On the one hand, race women's ascent to leadership has always been upon the ground of rejection of traditional feminine gender roles. We see this same moment of confrontation in Mary Church Terrell's and Ida B. Wells-Barnett's life narratives. But Meridian's rejection of motherhood—and by implication, her mother—takes a physical toll on her body: "Meridian felt as if her body, growing frailer every day under the stress of her life, stood in the way of reconciliation between her mother and that part of her own soul, her mother could, perhaps, love. She valued her body less, attended to it less, because she hated its obstruction."[522] Meridian's inability merge a corporeal sense of herself with a notion of subjectivity almost kills her. In her

---

[521] Walker, *Meridian*, 40.
[522] Walker, *Meridian,* 97.

body, she is unable to perform those roles that should come "naturally" as wife and mother. Moreover, because she is Black, she is subjected to untold violence in the movement.

And because she rejects the traditional uses of the female body, her failure to play these roles leaves her open to ridicule and sexual exploitation. As a child, she had always been perceived as "womanish," so much so that a local mortician named Daxter took the liberty—he "had been after Meridian since she was twelve"-- of punishing her precocity through sexual abuse.[523] The abuse made her "suspicious of pleasure" with all men, including her husband and later Truman. Her college professor, Mr. Raymonds, also takes similar liberties, and even in a consensual sexual relationship with Truman, Meridian is unable to have a fulfilling experience. Though she had received a scholarship to Saxon, Meridian still had meager means to support her daily needs. She developed a relationship with Mr. Raymonds, a professor, who was happy to provide her with much needed extras. But this came at a cost. He was the epitome of early 20th century Black male respectability: "he had been "head of the colored YMCA from 1919-1925;" "an elder in the Episcopal Church;" "the Masonic temple's man of the year 1935-36;" "best teacher of farming methods 1938-39." Even his choice of wife was telling: "he had probably chosen a dark-skinned wife because he was one of those old-fashioned 'race men," the radical nationalists of his day—the 1920s. He loved to talk even now of The Race as if it were a lump of homogenized matter that could be placed this way or that way, at will, to effect change. . . .He was also very emotional about protecting the virtue of Black women from white men."[524] Mr. Raymonds politics and achievements place

[523] Walker, *Meridian*, 62.
[524] Ibid., 114-115.

him within the political and cultural moment out of which the race man emerged. Yet his commitment to the virtue of Black women does not stopping him from "grab[bing] her. . .and attempt[ing] to rub his old penis against her." His impotence and consequent inability to complete the raping process does not just signal his age but also the impotency of his particular brand of racial politics. Though race women have always dealt with the specter and sometimes the actualization of sexual abuse, *Meridian* paints a portrait of the abuser as Black rather than white, again signaling an ideological shift among Black feminist politics of the 1970s, which began to deal especially with intraracial sexual abuse.

Meridian's encounter with Mr. Raymonds precedes the only sexual encounter between Truman and Meridian. Truman asks Meridian directly if the old professor has ever attempted to take advantage of her, but in her classic mode of dissemblance, Meridian denies it. Rather than probing more deeply even when he senses that Meridian is not being forthcoming, he instead laments the ways in which the white women who are members of the country club where he works, sexually exploit him, invoking myths of the Black buck. He tells Meridian, "'You women sure are lucky not to have to be up against'em all the time'" to which Meridian responds with a "short muttering laugh."[525] Truman's obtuseness and shallow understanding of sexual politics remain a character flaw throughout the entirety of the novel. Rather than explain the problems with his analysis, Meridian simply proceeds towards their impending sexual encounter, which ultimately leaves her unsatisfied, as "over and over again she nearly reached a climax only to lose it."[526]

---

[525] Walker, *Meridian,* 117.
[526] Ibid., 118.

Meridian becomes pregnant from this encounter, but because Truman decides to date and marry a white woman, notwithstanding his more generalized disdain of them, he never knows about her pregnancy, or subsequent abortion and sterilization. In a later encounter, Truman extols Meridian's beauty "worshipfully" exhorting "urgently" to "have [his] beautiful Black babies."[527] This encounter affirms Walker's observation about the women of *Cane*: "in the selfless abstractions their bodies become to the men who used them, they became more than 'sexual objects,' more even than mere women: they became 'Saints.'" Unfortunately, Truman's rhetoric recalls the problematic Black nationalist rhetoric of the 1970s, in which Black women were understood as "queens" whose job was to take care of their "kings" and bear children for the "revolution." Whether "saints" or "queens," both appellations denied Black women their humanity and agency.

Meridian feels it "doubly unfair that after all her sexual 'experience' and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex."[528] This explicit discussion of sex, and in particular a Black female protagonist's sexual activity and desires, is a significant break from earlier novels that feature the lives of race women figures. Although Jessie Fauset approaches this ground in her discussion of Joanna's sublimated sexual desires in *There Is Confusion*, those desires are presumed resolved when Joanna enjoins herself to a traditional heterosexual marriage and nuclear family. Meridian's rejection of these familial structures seemingly leaves heterosexual pleasure beyond her grasp as well.

---

[527] Walker, *Meridian*, 120.
[528] Ibid., 119.

Meridian's inability to fully experience the erotic, informs her future interactions with Truman, and Lynne, his Jewish wife. Truman continues to love Meridian and whenever his marriage to Lynne falters, he always seeks out Meridian, much to Lynne's chagrin. Lynne, represents the Northern liberal white women who played a key role in both 19th and 20th century Black freedom struggles. Even so, her racial politics are decidedly problematic: "to [her], the Black people of the South were Art.[529] But Meridian understood why Truman had rejected her and run to Lynne: "In Lynne," she told Truman, "you captured your ideal: a virgin who was eager for sex and well-to-do enough to have had 'worldly experiences.'"[530] Truman had been unable to escape a belief in virtuous Southern white womanhood, especially after he discovered that Meridian "had been married and had had a child."[531] His problematic sexual expectations caused Truman to commit what was often a fatal racial taboo in the South: marrying a white woman.

Because Lynne sensed Truman's changing feelings toward her over the years and his strong connection with Meridian, she desired and longed for Black racial acceptance from Meridian, Truman's male friends, and the Black community at large. While she found acceptance, after she and Truman had a child, from the latter, Meridian and Truman's friends were unable to extend unconditional love to her. In fact, Tommy Odds, a recent victim of a racial attack and consequent amputee and one of Truman's friends actually rapes Lynne, out of a sense of revenge, "his only comfort." He cannot take out his rage on "white men at large," and he feels it unethical to do "as Black men had done foolishly for years" killing other Black men or to "marr[y] a Black woman in order to

[529] Walker, *Meridian*, 139.
[530] Ibid., 150.
[531] Ibid., 151.

possess, again erroneously, his own whipping post."[532] Thus in his "convoluted" logic, Lynne is a perfect target: "a white woman without friends. A woman the white community already assumed was fucking every nigger in sight."[533] So he rapes her without remorse and with impunity, because Truman upon finding out, does nothing.

When Lynne finally confides this ordeal to Meridian, she, too, refuses to listen to the story. Lynne, was aware of the history of "white women [lying] about Black men raping them. Maybe this wasn't rape. I don't know. I think it was. It *felt* like it was."[534] Meridian simply tells Lynne, "there are some things I don't want to know." When Lynne asks "you wouldn't believe me *either*," Meridian says "coldly," and decisively, "no." Walker revisits a very important historical narrative about the sexual politics that intertwined white women, Black women, and Black men. On the one hand, Lynne is a victim, though the text figures her ambivalently as a kind of willing victim. But Meridian's response is signally important. Though she does not support Truman's romantic choices, she also does not uncritically align herself with the victimized white woman. She understands the historical implications of such a choice and rejects Lynne's narrative altogether. This is a not so subtle critique on the feminist politics of interracial sisterhood that characterized the 1970s. Walker seems to argue that Black women, while progressive and even feminist in their gender politics, have never uncritically aligned themselves with white women's feminism. This critical allegiance to Black communities is at the heart of a womanist formulation of feminism, which is concerned with gender politics to the extent that they matter for the commonweal of Black communities.

---

[532] Ibid., 177.
[533] Walker, *Meridian,* 177.
[534] Walker, *Meridian*, 165.

Neither white women nor Black men are given a pass for their choices. In fact, Walker does not allow even Lynne and Truman's daughter Camara to live. Apparently, she is the victim of a violent, sexual attack by an older male. The text is unclear. But the death of Camara is Walker's revision of the tragic mulatta stereotype. In this text, the depiction of the death of the mulatta child is at best unsentimental. Her violent, sexual, death signals the death knell for the idealist politics of the King-era. Ironically, however, "the absence of the child herself was what had finally brought them together." Though Meridian must reject Lynne's account of rape for political reasons, she still remains a friend to Lynne, comforting her in the wake of Camara's death. "They grieved [because] the child had been personally known, had been small—six years old—and had died after horrible things were done to her."[535]

Meridian's commitment to Lynne in her loss reflected the "universalist" impulses of womanism, which could identify and respond to death as a universal and unifying experience. In her exquisitely blunt manner, Meridian informs Lynne: "'I tried very hard not to hate you. And I think I always succeeded.'" This had been a struggle for Meridian who grew up in a family of Black women—her mother and grandmother—who thought of white women as "frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity." Her grandmother understood white women as the enemy as "useless except as baby machines which would continue to produce little white people who would grow up to oppress her."[536] Walker's inclusion of Meridian's "education" about white women is deliberately designed to debunk the historical myths of sisterhood that white feminists of the 1970s attempted to advance in service of interracial solidarity. Meridian did not valorize white

---

[535] Walker, *Meridian*, 191.
[536] Ibid., *Meridian*, 110.

women, but instead came to appreciate figures like Harriet Tubman who "Black women were always imitating."[537] "It thrilled her to think she belonged to the people who produced Harriet Tubman, the only American woman who'd led troops in battle."[538] It is this history of radical activism to which Meridian gestures as she leads the group of children into the exhibit at the beginning of the novel. But while Harriet Tubman was one of Meridian's heroes, Truman "did not want a general beside him. He did not want a woman who tried, however encumbered by guilts and fears and remorse, to claim her own life"(112). In his views on and resistance to Black female leadership, Truman was much more like his troubling race man counterpart Mr. Raymonds than either of them might care to admit. Walker's juxtaposition of two figures suggests that race men, young and old, had still failed to escape the "sixteenth century logic" of female leadership, which Anna Julia Cooper critiqued the race men of her day for promoting. In Truman's case, the solution was to marry a white woman. And in light of these troubling Black sexual politics, the most Meridian can offer to Lynne is an earnest attempt not to hate her. In fact, this is the most that Walker—at least the Alice Walker of the 1970s-- is willing to offer any white woman in the quest for interracial feminist alliances.

Righteous Convergence: In Search of Transcendent Community

It is no accident or surprise that King's death is a significant transitional moment in the novel. The radical Black feminist politics which emerged during the 1970s were directly responsive to the failed racial expectations and problematic sexual politics represented in the King strategy of civil rights. The 1970s also marks a decade when Black women emerged militantly from the shadowy corners of civil rights struggles,

---

[537] Ibid., *Meridian*, 111.
[538] Walker, *Meridian,* 112.

where they had been relegated to "double-paned obscurity because of their 'reflections' of others"[539]-- to claim their rightful places as racial leaders and freedom fighters. Walker's rendering of King's funeral procession is almost parodic in its absurdity, as she seeks to represent the high level of disillusionment, if return to realism, that this historic moment brought to politicized Black communities. Meridian ends her brief recall of the incident by noting that "behind her a Black woman was laughing, laughing, as if all her cares, at last, had flown away."[540] This utter disillusionment and inability reconcile King's death with anything approaching rational thinking drives Meridian in search of something more tangible and grounded.

After King's death, Meridian begins "going, irregularly, to church."[541] This choice is interesting and ironic given her staunch rejection of her mother's religion. But because Meridian was a deeply spiritual person in the womanist sense of the word, her choice is not so shocking. On one particular Sunday, she wonders into a Baptist church, only to discover that "the people looked exactly as they had ever since she had known Black churchgoing people, which was all her life, but they had changed the music."[542] Though there was a familiar cultural retention, there had been a discursive shift. Even the content of the sermon is different, more political, perhaps in the mode of the newly emerging liberation theology. Meridian is absolutely bewildered at these changes, but wonders if the church remains relevant because "after all, [it is] the only place left for Black people to congregate, where the problems of life were not discussed fraudulently and the approach to the future was considered communally, and moral questions were

---

[539] James 172.
[540] Walker, *Meridian*, 203.
[541] Ibid., 211.
[542] Ibid., 213.

taken seriously."[543] The church has become more of a "communal spirit," or a "righteous convergence," and one of the "ways for transformation."[544] This experience revivified Meridian's sense of her own importance and reminded her that "the respect she owed to her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably *not* her own."[545] Moreover, "this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life."[546]

Meridian's renewed spiritual understanding of her life as being a conduit of "One Life" constitutes a refiguration of logos within the text. The people, their words, and their cultural artifacts together embody one life. One Life is a secular formulation of logos, which in its religious orientation understands Christ and His people as the living embodiment of the Church. The trip to church and the changing words of the old songs had allowed Meridian to reconcile the internal struggle over the Word that had nearly killed her. Moreover, her logos is figured in the sense that is most useful to the study of contemporary Black women, as issuing from a spiritual context, figured as the Church, but not confined to the rigid dogmas of the church. For contemporary Black women, logos is best understood as righteous convergence, as an ability to live out one's life and values in and through a community of people with shared values and concerns. This attempt at a "transcendent community," constitutes a "cultural coda to Black feminism." The notion of community itself "is understood as requiring and sustaining

---

[543] Ibid., 218.
[544] Walker, *Meridian,* 220.
[545] Ibid.
[546] Ibid.

intergenerational responsibilities that foster the well-being of family, individuals, and a people, male and female."[547]

In that moment, Meridian felt that "yes, indeed she *would* kill," for the revolution. And while her "dedication to the promise did not remain constant," her time in church ushered in an epiphany about herself: "I have been allowed to see how the new capacity to do anything, including kill, for our freedom. . .is to emerge, but I am not yet at the point of being able to kill anyone myself." In this respect, she was "a failure then as the kind of revolutionary that Anne-Marion and her acquaintances were." But, so, too, was Anne-Marion who "had become a well-known poet whose poems were about her two children, and the quality of light that fell across a lake she owned."[548] On the one hand, then, Meridian ultimately rejects a notion of "the race,"—and the attendant, all-encompassing politics of the race woman and man-- in both its historical and contemporary iterations. She refuses blind allegiances to Black women, Black men, and white women, in the text, who have questionable politics. Furthermore, her racial politics reject the idea that there is one mode of racial progress, or even that all Black people should move in the same direction.

> It was this, Meridian thought. . .that has caused me to suffer: I am not to belong to the future. I am to be left, listening to the old music, beside the highway. But then, she thought, perhaps, it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries—those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the Black and therefore go right ahead—when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward

---

[547] James 30.
[548] Walker, *Meridian*, 221.

> and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. For it is the song of the people, transformed by the experiences of each generation, that holds them together, and if any part of it is lost the people suffer and are without soul. If I can do that, my role will not have been a useless one after all.[549]

On the other hand, she accepts a responsibility for changing her community within cultural terms, the music, the songs, the shared spirit of a people with a similar history. Meridian attempts here neither to transcend her own historical frame, nor to engage the movement at a disembodied or detached level, but instead adopts "the role of the Black revolutionary artist," who according to Walker, "must be a walking filing cabinet of poems and songs and stories, of people, of places, of deeds and misdeeds."[550]

Although her figuration of "One Life" gestures toward the transcendent, Meridian remains aware of her own historical limitations, and aware of the fact that "transcendent community remains more often the ideal than the reality."[551] She would be walking alongside the real revolutionaries, but her purpose was to become a living testament to a rich and important past, and to become a human conduit for cultural transformation by providing access to the songs of the past in a way that present and future generations could then transform them. Meridian thus acted in her role as a "revolutionary artist," by becoming an intergenerational bearer of culture. In so doing, she attempts to adopt the best of all the prior leadership traditions that have informed Black women's lives. She remains among the folk, appreciates the richness of Black history and culture, believes teaching to be the highest form of revolution, remains invested in the unity and cultural

---

[549] Ibid.
[550] Alice Walker, "The Unglamorous but Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist, or of the Black Artist Who Simply Works and Writes," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1983), 136.
[551] James 40.

oneness of Black people, understands the spiritual dimensions of transformation, and provides tools for a future generation of leaders to emerge with their own tactics and politics. Simultaneously her view of revolutionary art rejects monolithic racial constructions, limiting sexual politics and traditional women's roles. Meridian thus forges her own notion of revolution, one that privileges culture, life, and humanity over death and rhetoric.

The Sojourner: Race Women and the Politics of Memory

Like Iola Leroy, *Meridian* employs histotextuality by alluding to the names of important Black female leaders throughout the text like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth throughout the text. While a student at Saxon College, Meridian was enthralled by a magical tree, The Sojourner. The Sojourner had been planted by a former slave named Louvinie, whose tongue was cut out after she told a tale so frightening that it literally scared one of her master's sons to death. She retrieved her severed tongue and "buried it under a scrawny magnolia tree on the Saxon plantation."[552] Though Louvinie had been stripped of her power to tell stories, she had cultivated a magisterial place for future generations of women to instantiate community, to claim a voice, to express themselves sexually and to cast off the strictures of Southern ladyhood. The tree having been planted in the middle of the former Saxon plantation became a symbolic act of resistance by a Black woman who had been silenced by the institution of slavery and racism. For the Saxon—itself a semantic allusion to the racial politics of Anglo-Saxonism-- students who came to admire the tree and the story generations later, it became an arboreal representation of resistance not just against racism but against the problematic gender ideology that permeated the Saxon campus. The tree became a site of transgression and

[552] Walker, *Meridian*, 34.

resistance for the young women of the College, who made love in its branches. There they also commemorated the tragedy of Fast Mary, a young woman who committed infanticide and then suicide—because "it was assumed that Saxon young ladies were, by definition, virgins"-- by forming a tight circle of women around the tree. Like its namesake, Sojourner Truth, the tree represented a critical rupture in traditional notions of womanhood for Black women who were summarily unable to access such ideas. In this novel, no symbol of womanhood is sacred. The Saxon students chop down the Sojourner in a fit of rage over the death of the Wild Child. The actions indicate a continuing ambivalence among Black women about how they will relate to the heritage of their foremothers, particularly when that heritage does not seem to offer immediate resources to confront contemporary social realities.

But Walker does take some lessons from her feminist foremothers. She is committed to moving Black women out of the inanity of the domestic sphere. And she is clear that men should engage the domestic sphere. Thus, Meridian leaves her home, with its walls of letters and poems, to Truman who must reconcile all the competing parts of himself and heal from his own tragedies. Such a conclusion is a fitting end to a text that inaugurates a womanist ethic in Black women's literature, namely in its commitment to the "survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female."[553] And yet, Truman's final words to and about Meridian remind us of what is and has always been at stake for those public Black women who dare to lead. In parting, Truman reminded Meridian that " 'your ambivalence will always be deplored by people who consider themselves revolutionists and your unorthodox behavior will cause traditionalists to gnash their

---

[553] From Walker's definition of Womanism

teeth.'"[554] But Black women have never been afraid of ambivalence, which they have figured in their work as shadows and as darkness. Whereas Harper reminded us over and over in her text that in the shadows were the promise of a "brighter coming day," it is Meridian who tells Truman, "in the darkness, maybe we will know the truth."[555] And truthfully, this has been the heritage of all Black women who have gone willingly, if hesitantly, into battle, encountering darkness, on behalf of African-American people, in hopes that they might discover truth. What still amazed Truman was "how deeply Meridian allowed an idea. . .to penetrate her life."[556] Though men had struggled to penetrate Meridian sexually, thus denying sex a kind of seminal hegemony in her life, an idea—namely a notion of revolution--was the regenerative and vivifying force in her life. And, so it has been with her race women forebears who always understood the revolutionary force of a powerful idea lived out with conviction.

---

[554] Walker, *Meridian*, 242.
[555] Walker, *Meridian*, 282.
[556] Ibid., 242.

Epilogue :

Leading Ladies: The Continuing Relevance of Race Women in the 21st Century

The year 1909 found Ida B. Wells pondering ambivalently what her role should be in exposing yet another act of state-sanctioned vigilantism during the Springfield Race Riots. Though she was poised to use her gift for agitation in service of the latest lynch victims, she remained reluctant because race men had accused her of "jumping in ahead of them and doing work without giving them a chance."[557] She could not have anticipated that nearly one hundred years later Springfield, Illinois, would be the platform from which the first African American President would launch his historic campaign. Moreover, only in Wells' wildest dreams could she have imagined that exactly 100 years later, his wife, the first African American first lady, reared on the South Side of Chicago, would take to the lecture podium in the White House to instruct a group of African American children about their enslaved ancestors who had helped to construct the very walls of the Presidential mansion. Yet, in February 2009, while President Obama hailed the bicentennial birth date of President Lincoln, his wife Michelle Obama proclaimed to a group of middle-schoolers visiting the White House, that the Great Emancipator had taken "an important step" in freeing enslaved Africans. Even then, her comments implied a level of nuance that reflected the inchoate status of Lincoln's freedom proclamation for thousands of those in bondage who did not reside in the Confederacy.

The historic significance of Michelle Obama's presence in the public sphere has not been lost on Black women, who have from the halls of academia to modest homes and often inadequate homes in inner cities, been riveted not just by President Obama, but by his partner and all that she represents for Black women. Though I write this not even

[557] Wells, *Crusade for Justice,* 311. Giddings also highlights this point in *When and Where I Enter,* 117.

ninety days since the inauguration of the President, there has already appeared a book of letters to Michelle Obama from African American women, compiled by two African-American women professors at the University at Buffalo. Entitled *Go, Tell Michelle: African American Women Write to the New First Lady* —an allusion to the African American spiritual "Go, Tell It On the Mountain,"-- this book of letters, written in the immediate aftermath of Obama's election, characterizes the wide-ranging hopes and dreams of contemporary Black women, both American and diasporic. The production of a book of letters presupposes that a dialogue can be, will be, and has been established between Black women and the First Lady. It is a 21st century iteration of the dynamic rhetorical communities that Black women have always created as they have navigated their tentative and tenuous relationships in the public sphere.

In the foreword, one Black woman academic reminds us of the historical implications of even having a Black woman to visit the White House. In 1929, when Lou DePriest, wife of the first African American congressman in the 20th century Oscar DePriest, also a Chicagoan, was invited to tea by President Hoover's wife, the First Lady received a scathing letter from the Women's League of Miami, which read in part, "*We thought we were putting a "real" White "Lady" in the White House. Didn't even dream that you would disgrace the White House by associating with Negroes. . ."*[558] The Women's League's comments raise a question that is at the heart of race women's engagement in the public sphere: Can Black women be viewed as "ladies," a role that has been commandeered and closely guarded as the sole and exclusive property of white

---

[558] Barbara A. Seals Nevergold and Peggy Brooks-Bertram (ed), *Go Tell Michelle: African American Women Write to the New First Lady* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), viii.

women? By way of comparison, consider this letter that was written to the Clarion-Ledger Newspaper in Jackson, Mississippi, October 28, 2008,

> We have been spoiled by having the first lady representing us in the White House and representing our nation to the world, to be a soft-spoken, compassionate, humble, tolerant, graceful, forgiving, good-natured and patriotic person. Jackie Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, Barbara Bush and Laura Bush were all of the above .Mrs. Obama is none of the above. She is an angry, caustic, abusive, racist, sharp-tongued anti-white and anti-American person. Mrs. Obama would be the perfect poster person for the Hate America Program.[559]

Since the only characteristics that linked these women of disparate political values were their whiteness and their positions as Presidents' wives, it is clear that the unspoken requirement to be a First Lady in the author's estimation is whiteness. In July of 2008, Dr. Andra Gillespie,[560] professor of political science at Emory University, wrote an astute editorial for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, in which she responded to an ill-informed *New Yorker* magazine cover that portrayed Michelle Obama as a gun-toting, afro-sporting, combat boot-wearing, revolutionary engaged in a surreptitious terrorist plot with her Muslim husband Barack Obama to take over the world. Gillespie's editorial acknowledged that the magazine cover was but one incident in a barrage of stereotypes

---

[559] "Letter to the Editor," *Clarion-Ledger*, October 28, 2008. Special thanks to my colleague Michelle Purdy for letting me know about this information.
[560] I'd like to give special thanks to Dr. Andra Gillespie for generously sharing the personal reactions she received from the public in response to this editorial. See *The New Yorker* cover, July 21, 2008.

that had painted Michelle as unpatriotic, an unwed mother, and an angry Black woman of the Sapphire variety. "In many ways," writes Gillespie,

> Michelle Obama represents the antithesis of her husband. She cannot escape race the way her husband has tried to escape race. She cannot invoke a white parent or an exotic upbringing to deflect racial anxiety. And because the stereotypes leveled against Black women are less visceral (though no less demeaning) than the more brutal stereotypes of Black men, they are harder to identify[and] harder to counter.[561]

Equally as disturbing as the public depictions of Mrs. Obama, are the outpouring of negative responses that Dr. Gillespie received both in print and in person. One critic informed her that her attempt to position the public caricature of Michelle within a long history of demeaning stereotypes like Aunt Jemima, was "a conclusion searching for facts." This letter writer, a self-identified conservative Jewish (and Christian) white male, commanded Gillespie, whom he repeatedly referred to in the email by first name (in a way that was more reminiscent of Southern plantation aristocracy than he would ever admit), to "stop looking at your life through race and gender[;] you are ensnared in a trap."[562]

Another letter writer proclaimed of Mrs. Obama, "a woman is what she aspires to be—decent, respect, revered, and chaste, or vulgar, used, violated, and without morals."[563] Clearly the writer cannot make the choice as to which set of words actually characterize the First Lady, as if either of them are really appropriate. And finally, one writer, absolutely incensed at Gillespie's audacity to refer to Obama as a "lady,"

---

[561] Andra Gillespie, "The Michelle Obama Drama" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* July 20, 2008.
[562] Personal email, dated Sunday, July 20, 2008, in Gillespie's possession.
[563] Personal anonymous letter in Gillespie's possession.

informed her that "lady is a European [read: white] term" and that Obama did not have the requisite "3 B's: blood, background, and breeding" to be considered as such. This writer could not even fathom in the farthest reaches of his democratic imagination that Michelle Obama could possibly be a hostess in the White House: "Can you see her in the White House where Nancy [Reagan], Jackie [Kennedy}, Mamie [Eisenhower], Lady Bird [Johnson], Martha [Washington], and Abigail [Adams] held sway?" he queries. "At a reception, people would think she was a waitress or a maid." And for a crudely fitting end to his diatribe, the letter writer suggests that "in the past, rest room doors said 'Ladies' & 'Gentlemen'. No more."[564] The dilemma Anna Julia Cooper faced when she reached a train station in the 1890s, only to be confronted with signs labeled "for colored" and "for ladies" to demarcate the public restroom, clearly has not been solved. Then as now, Black women surely did not meet the public criteria for ladyhood. And it was Ida B. Wells, daring self-assertion of herself as a lady that caused her to be violently removed from the ladies car of a Memphis train in 1883. The terrain of ladyhood has been and continues to be nothing short of a battleground for Black women.

The contributors to *Go, Tell Michelle,* were not privy to these letters, but the specificity with which these women feel compelled to respond to derogatory notions of Black womanhood indicate that they are still aware of the discursive and social battlefield upon which Black women are positioned. One contributor writes, "you are hope, light, promise—flesh and blood that says yes, African American women can be proud, gentle, graceful, grace filled, intelligent, strong but compassionately positive role models.[565] Another writer echoes these concerns, proclaiming, "mothers, daughters, granddaughters,

---

[564] Ibid, dated July 23, 2008.
[565] Cynthia A. Bond Hopson in Nevergold and Brooks-Bertram, 209-210.

aunts, cousins—First Ladies—standing tall, proud, moral, intelligent, compassionate—First Ladies—not minding, not ashamed, not rejecting, not minimizing that you are African American—First Ladies."[566] Each of these characterizations reflect the impulses that led Black women to adopt a politics of respectability, so that they might have even a modest possibility of coming to represent each of these characteristics in the public sphere. This move to defend Black women's right to be in the position of First Lady reflects a refiguration of the concerns that led Black women to found the National Association for Colored Women in 1896 in order to defend the honor of Black women.

In one letter, which echoes this earlier generation of concerns, entitled "My Great-Great-Grandmother Talks to Michelle Obama," the author summons her foremother's wit, advising Michelle,

> And I know you feel funny when folk call you 'First Lady' but, Baby, you best believe we been called a whole lotta something and ain't none of it had to do with high rankin' womanhood. So when you they call you First Lady you think about me and all them women ain't getting a sliver of light. You turn right nice and you answer. Baby, you answer for each and every one of us 'cause for the first time in the history of this here country we gonna be called by our true name.[567]

Other Black women wrote letters to remind Michelle of her intellectual and activist ancestors composed of public Black women and unsung heroes: "Dear Michelle," begins Debra M. Johnson, "this letter is written in memory of Queen Hatshepsut, Maria W. Stewart, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Hattie W. Spears, Ida M. Johnson," and

---

[566] Norma J. Thomas, in Nevergold and Brooks-Bertram, 131-132.
[567] Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie, "My Great-Great-Grandmother Talks to Michelle Obama" in Nevergold and Brooks-Bertram, 161-162.

others. Johnson exhorts the First Lady to do as Maria Stewart suggested when she "lectured before her audiences," telling "women to look deep inside of them, find their talents and use them to the best of their ability. We have seen your ability to lead, to motivate, and encourage others, just as Mrs. Stewart did in the 1830s."[568]

One professor penned a poem to Michelle that chose in part to situate Michelle Obama within a long line of Black women

> who, in anticipation/ of you, knew this time would surely come and all/ we carried, dreamed, hoped, dared, desired would,/ at last be lifted & delivered from/ the shoulders of Sojourner Truth;/ the soapbox of Maria Stewart;/ the feet of Harriet Tubman; /the words of Phillis Wheatley, Frances Harper & Anna Julia Cooper;/ the song of Marian Anderson;/ the church woman's education of Nannie/ Helen Burroughs;/ the court & news rooms of Mary Ann Shadd Cary;/ the sacrifice & service of Anna Murray Douglas,' the spiritual awakening of Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, & Julia Foote—/all armed, armored & amazing foremother/ancestors/ in anticipation of you.[569]

Finally, Black women wrote scores of letters lauding Michelle Obama for her commitment to motherhood and for her celebration and respect for the Black family. By branding herself "Mom-in-Chief," Michelle Obama spoke into one of the central premises upon which race women did their work: African American women are good mothers, who can rear model citizens that will both uplift a race and a nation. For so

---

[568] Debra M. Johnson, in Nevergold and Brooks-Bertram, 212.
[569] Arlette Miller Smith in Nevergold and Brooks-Bertram, 3-4.

many Black women, simply seeing a positive public representation of an actual Black family is enough of a reason to celebrate.

The outpouring of love and support from Black women to Michelle Obama indicates that the race woman is still a very relevant figure in the lives of African Americans. And the compilation itself represents the best attempts in Black women's long tradition of defending themselves against vicious public attacks, because they seem to understand as Deborah Gray White and other public Black women have understood: "No one will speak for us but ourselves."[570] Many Black women view Michelle Obama's new status as First Lady as vindication of a centuries long assault on Black womanhood, which has characterized Black women as sexually lascivious, lazy, cunning, jezebels and mammies. The ability of Michelle Obama's tenure as First Lady to fully vindicate the derogated public image of Black women remains questionable, given the deep structural inequalities that still characterize Black women's lives. But she represents a hope among Black women, that by her very presence and the presence of her two young daughters, our concerns will gain legitimacy in the public sphere, without the specter of damaging caricatures, and that at the very least, some of these issues will have the possibility of becoming part of the national agenda. The women who wrote letters to Michelle have hung their hopes for a grand entrance into the public sphere, not only on the President but on our First Lady. For they recognize the truth of Anna Julia Cooper's observation made in 1892: "Only the Black Woman can say, "when and where I enter, in the quiet,

---

[570] Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 16.

undisputed dignity of my womanhood, with violence and without suing or special patronage, then there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*"[571]

Entering In: Race Men on Race Women

Yet, again, Cooper's statement, written in response to Martin Delany, points us back to the inextricable, and often volatile relationship, between race men and race women. Unfortunately, race women in the 21st century still have to contend with parochialism among some race men, who feel that race women's agenda is optional in the project of racial advancement. In his recent book *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era*, Houston Baker asserts that

> in Black American life and culture a race man or race woman is one who dedicates his or her life and work to countering the lies, ideological evasions, and pretensions to 'innocence,' and 'equal justice for all' that prop up America's deeply embedded, systemic, and institutionalized racism. Race men and race women . . .seek remedy for harms to the Black body caused by the gospel and practice of white supremacy.[572]

Martin Luther King, Jr. is Baker's exemplar of a 20th century race man, and it is because Black public intellectuals as wide-ranging as John McWhorter, Shelby Steele, Cornel West and Michael Eric Dyson have betrayed Dr. King's radical racial politics in favor of more centrist and neoconservative views that Baker believes these men must be " 'outed' as nostalgic, Black, money-hungry reactionaries who are fully allied with the worst office of white American power brokers, publishers," etc.[573] There are myriad problems with

---

[571] Cooper, *A Voice from the South,* 31.
[572] Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 9.
[573] Baker, xviii.

Baker's assessment, notwithstanding his rich and potentially useful definition of the "race man" and the "race woman." In his attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of contemporary Black intellectual leadership, Baker reinscribes the race man paradigm of leadership, which places and pivots upon King as the center and quintessence of all radical race based politics.

As passionate and valid as *some* of Baker's assessments may be, his text constitutes its own form of race betrayal towards generations of Black women intellectuals who have worked in service of uplifting and advancing Black racial concerns. In this respect, he is more appropriately a colleague and an ally of W.E.B. Du Bois, whose work he also lauds, and Cornel West, rather than a critic of the latter. Ten years ago, in her influential book *Race Men,* Hazel Carby presented a provocative and thoughtful critique of the masculinist biases inherent in the work of both Du Bois and his intellectual contemporaries, Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West. Of Du Bois, she writes, "As an intellectual, Du Bois was obviously concerned about the continuity of intellectual generations, what I would call the reproduction of Race Men. . . .The map of intellectual mentors he draws for us is a map of male production and reproduction. . ."[574] So, too, is the map of intellectual mentors that Baker provides. Though Baker includes race women in his definition of "race people," his intellectual genealogy betrays the kind of masculinist myopia and oversight that is simply unconscionable for an intellectual of his stature to offer in the 21st century, knowing what we now know about the work Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Ella Baker and Pauli Murray, to name just a few Black women intellectuals. That Baker, a full professor at Vanderbilt University and an exemplary African American literary scholar could aim to engage and

[574] Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 25.

critique 20th century Black intellectual production without at least even a cursory mention of the work of these women and have his work published by a major academic press provides enough justification for the intellectual labor that I have sought to perform in this project.

Carby's critique also throws into sharp relief the masculinist bias in the work of two of Baker's foremost targets in *Betrayal*, Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates. Of West and his relationship to Du Bois, Carby writes, "a comparison of the photographs of Du Bois and Cornel West demonstrates how the male body can be sculpted to model an intellectual mentor. But to define this appearance as the *only* acceptable confirmation of intellectual vocation, critical intelligence, and moral action is also to secure these qualities as irrevocably and conservatively masculine."[575] What Carby addresses here is the way that the trope of embodiment functions as a gendered project in each man's work. Judith Butler would certainly remind us that attempts at "repeated stylization" of the body signals first and foremost a performance of gender. Later discussing Gates account of his time as a student at Yale as written in his book *The Future of the Race,* co-authored with Cornel West, Carby detects masculinism in his intellectual genealogy as well:

> Gates generational map, like that of Du Bois is permeated by a particular anxiety of masculinity, an anxiety which is embedded in the landscape of a crisis in the social order. The particularity of the loss of men who are called by name, and grieved in part for the failure of intellectual production, contrasts dramatically with the generality of the social crisis of

[575] Carby 21.

> poverty which he documents as reproduced through the figures of anonymous single mothers.[576]

Ironically, Houston Baker reads and interprets the same passage in Gates' and West's book, painting Gates as a deluded, opportunistic race traitor. The book in Baker's estimation is Gates' apologetic for "why he bailed out on Blackness." Moreover, Gates must be censured for suggesting that the manner in which he "works his way through his Blackness versus humanity dilemma at Yale, is presumably, the key to how Afro-Americans in general (and in the future) can secure the white man's purse."[577] Fed up with both Gates and West, "Ivy League oracles [who] write as though no Black activist public sphere of analytical, oppositional scholarship and politics is possible," Baker dismisses them as metaphoric "side walk vendors found outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art: they promote auras of Black artistic roots originality as the real Black future thing."[578] The most obvious solution to Baker's problem would be to look elsewhere for models of Black intellectual production if these men leave so much to be desired. Yet, he cannot seem to fathom that Black women's intellectual production, either historical or contemporary, has anything to say about the plight of Black people, or more specifically about the plight of Black men. And therein lies "the rub," that ultimately Baker, like Gates and West, is interested in the reproduction of Black male intellectualism, not Black intellectualism generally.

One could argue that there simply are not many public Black women intellectuals with the level of currency shared by West, Dyson, and others from which Baker could have chosen in his examination. This may be true, but what is perhaps even truer is that

[576] Carby 27, referring to the work of Gates and West in their book *The Future of the Race.*
[577] Baker 120-121.
[578] Baker 125.

the manner in which we define intellectual production has always excluded the important work of Black women. This project has sought to remedy this exclusive definition by mining Black women's novels, lectures, essays, critical work, autobiographies, and activism as sites of intellectual production. Moreover, there are several Black women who are traditional intellectuals, though Baker has no anxieties about passing over the important work of scholars like bell hooks, Angela Davis (who receives a cursory acknowledgement), Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Melissa Lacewell-Harris, Johnetta Cole, Mary Frances Berry, Julianne Malveaux, Joan Morgan, and Kristal Brent-Zook, among others. The ease with which these women are erased from Baker's conversation on Black intellectualism suggests that he either does not think they belong there or that it is someone else's job to include them.

Perhaps the paucity of public Black women intellectuals reflects a contemporary iteration of the same concerns that plagued an earlier generation of Black women. Chicago club woman Fannie Barrier Williams cautioned Black women at the turn of the century not to be like "'our colored men, whose innumerable conventions, councils and conferences during the last twenty-five years have all begun with talk and ended in talk.'"[579] These race men relied too much on rhetoric and not enough on action, and many of them chastised Black women for daring to take a leading role in racial matters. And it is this gendered dimension of race women's experience that Baker's definition of race man and race woman fails to address. Surely, for instance, one cannot refer to race women's and men's work of "seeking remedy for the harms done to the Black body" without thinking of the anti-lynching crusade of Ida B. Wells or the civil rights activism

---

[579] Fannie Barrier Williams, qtd in Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), 116.

of Mamie Till Mobley who chose to display the battered body of her lynched son Emmitt Till, in order to arouse the sympathy and action of the American public. As I argue throughout the dissertation, it is Black women in their textual and activist invocations of logos, or embodied discourse, who most effectively call attention to the corporeal damage that racism has wrought upon Black bodies.

That I would have to conclude a dissertation written in the 21st century restating what should at this point be an obvious fact indicates the extent to which some Black male intellectuals, whether neoconservative, centrist, leftist or radical continue to perpetuate the myth that racism is the system of oppression most relevant to Black people's lives. While the pervasiveness and all-encompassing impact of racism cannot be overstated, Evelyn Higginbotham warned us nearly two decades ago that the "metalanguage of race" has some critical blind spots. The Black women in this study have been attempting to emerge from the shadows created by these blind spots for the better part of three centuries. Moreover, my project which considers what exactly Black women have been thinking, saying, and doing in and about race, racism, and their role as race women provides a critical remedy for works that fail to see African American women as intellectuals. Baker and other's would do well to take a page from the journalism of T. Thomas Fortune, who provided refuge for Wells when her life was threatened in Memphis after challenging the lynching of her friend, when he wrote, " 'The race could not succeed. . .nor build strong citizens until we have a race of women

competent to do more than hear a brood of negative men.'"[580] As long as Black intellectuals view race work as the province of race men, we will need *Race Women.*

[580] T. Thomas Fortune quoted in Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 117. Ironically, Fortune and Wells eventually parted ways because of his allegiances to Booker T. Washington and her increasing disdain for Washington's politics. See Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*.

Works Cited

Archival Collections:

Patricia Roberts Harris Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Pauli Murray Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University

Books and Articles:

Alexander, Elizabeth. "'We Must Be About Our Father's Business,': Anna Julia Cooper and the In-Corporation of the Nineteenth Century African-American Female Intellectual." *Signs* 20, no.2 (1995):

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1991.

Andrews, William. *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women Autobiographers of the Nineteenth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Baker, Jr., Houston A. *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Baker-Fletcher, Karen .*'A Singing Something': Womanist Reflections on Anna Julia Cooper.* New York: Crossroads, 1994.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Bay, Mia. *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2009.

Braxton, Joanne. *Black Women Writing Autobiography.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York and London: Routledge, 1990.

Carby, Hazel. *Race Men.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

---. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 2nd ed.* New York and London: Routledge, 2000.

---. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* New York and London: Routledge, 2005.

---. *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Cole, Johnetta Betsch, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall. *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities.* New York: One World, Ballantine, 2003.

Cooper, Anna Julia. *A Voice from the South.* New York: Oxford University Press (ed), 1988.

Clarke, Cheryl. "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community." in *Dangerous Liaisons: Blacks, Gays, and the Struggle for Equality*, edited by Eric Brandt, .

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." In *The Black Feminist Reader*, edited by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, 208-238. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 2000.

---. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." In *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement,* edited by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, 357-383. New York: The New Press, 1995.

Cudjoe, Selwyn "Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated" in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, New York: Meridian, 1990.

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race, and Class*. New York: Random House, 1981.

DeCosta-Willis, Miriam, ed., *The Memphis Diary of Ida B. Wells.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

D'Emilio, John. *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin.* New York: Free Press, 2003.

Drake, St. Clair, and Horace R. Cayton. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1945.

Drury, Doreen Marie. "Experimentation on the Male Side: Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Pauli Murray's Quest for Love and Identity, 1910-1960," Ph.D. Diss., Boston College, 2000.

Du Bois, W.E.B. "The Talented Tenth" in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings.* New York: Library of America, 1987, 842-861.

Duck, Leigh Anne. *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2007.

Dworkin, Ira, ed., *Daughter of the Revolution: The Major Nonfiction Works of Pauline Hopkins.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Evans, Stephanie Y. *Black Women in the Ivory Tower,1850-1954: An Intellectual History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality.* New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Fishburn, Katherine. *The Problem of Embodiment in Early African American Narrative.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997.

Foster, Frances Smith, ed., "Introduction." *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990.

Foster, Frances Smith. *Written By Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction.* New York: Vintage, 1990.

Frazier, E. Franklin. *The Black Bourgeoisie.* New York: The Free Press, 1957.

Fulton (Minor), Doveanna. *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Garfinkel, Harold. "Color Trouble" in *The Best American Short Stories 1941*, edited by Edward J. O'Brien, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1941.

Gates, Henry Louis. "Writing "Race" and the Difference It Makes" in *Race, Writing, and Difference.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Giddings, Paula. *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*. New York: Harper Collins, 2008.

---. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America.* New York: Quill, 1984.

Gillespie, Andra. “The Michelle Obama Drama” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* July 20, 2008.

Gilmore, Glenda. *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950.* New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.

Glass, Kathy. *Courting Communities: Black Female Nationalism and “Syncre-Nationalism” in the Nineteenth Century North.* New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

Grant, Jacqueline. *White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus.* Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.

Guy-Sheftall, Beverly. *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880-1920.* Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994.

---. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought.* New York: The New Press, 1995.

Hammonds, Evelynn. “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality” in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* edited by Winston Napier, New York and London: New York University Press, 2000.

Hall, Jacqueline Dowd. “The Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” *Journal of American History* 91, no.4 (2005):1233-1263.

Harlan, Louis. *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Haraway, Donna. *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Harper, Frances Ellen. *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1987(ed.)

Harper, Frances. “Women’s Political Future” In *Words of Fire*: *An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought.* Edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, New York: The New Press, 1995.

Haywood, Chanta. *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition.” In *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. edited by Winston Napier, New York: NYU Press, 2000.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

---. "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race" in *Signs* 17, no.2 (1992): 251-274.

Hine, Darlene Clark. *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History.* Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994.

Holloway, Karla. *Bookmarks: Reading in Black and White.* New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Horsman, Reginald. *Race and Manifest Destiny: Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Hull, Gloria. *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance.* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Hunter, Tera. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

James, Joy. *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

---. Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.

Jenkins, Candice. *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

King, Deborah. "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of Black Feminist Ideology." In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought,* edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 294-317. New York: The New Press, 1995.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. "Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing," in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,* edited by Clayborne Carson, 89-100. New York: Warner Books, 2001.

Lewis, David Levering. *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993.

Lorde, Audre. *A Burst of Light*: *Essays by Audre Lorde.* Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988.

---. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007.

May, Vivian. *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction.* New York and London: Routledge, 2007.

McKay, Nellie. "The Narrative Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography" in *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader,* edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Moraga, Cherrie L. and Gloria E. Anzaldua, ed., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Berkeley: Third World Press, 2002 ed.

Morgan, Francesca. *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America.* Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1920.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

---. *Classic Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Garvey.* New York: NYU Press, 1996.

Mostern, Kenneth. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Murray, Albert. *The Omni-americans: Black Experience and American Culture.* New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1970.

Murray, Pauli. Constitutional Law and Black Women" –An Occasional Paper for the Afro-American Studies Program at Boston University, undated

---. *Song in a Weary Throat.* New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987.

---. "Three Thousand Miles on a Dime." In *Negro: An Anthology.* Edited by Nancy Cunard. New York: Continuum, 1996.

---. "Why Negro Girls Stay Single," *Negro Digest,* July 1947.

Nevergold, Barbara A. Seals and Peggy Brooks-Bertram, ed., *Go Tell Michelle: African American Women Write to the New First Lady*.Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.

Olney, James. *Metaphors of Self: the Meaning of Autobiography,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972.

Patterson, Orlando. *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries.* Washington, D.C.: Civitas/Counterpoint, 1998.

Perkins, Margo V. *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000.

Perrin, Andrew. *Citizen Speak: The Democratic Imagination in American Life.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Peterson, Carla. *Doers of the Word: African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North, 1830-1880.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Pinn, Anthony. *Becoming "America's Problem Child": An Outline of Pauli Murray's Religious Life and Theology.* Pickwick Publications, 2008.

---. *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings.* Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006.

Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Richardson, Marilyn. *Maria Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer, Essays and Speeches.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Ross, Marlon. "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm" in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005

Ross, Rosetta E. *Witnessing & Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

Schechter, Patricia A. *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880-1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Scott, Anne Firor, ed., *Pauli Murray and Caroline Ware: Forty Years of Letters in Black and White.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

Sexton, Jared. *Amalgamation Blues: AntiBlackness and the Critique of Multiracialism.* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Shaw, Stephanie. *What A Woman Ought To Be and To Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Smith, Barbara. “Homophobia: Why Bring It Up?” in *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999.

Spillers, Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier, New York: New York University Press, 2000.

Stepto, Robert. *Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Stewart, Maria. “Lecture delivered at the Franklin Hall,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 30-33. New York: The New Press, 1995.

---. “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation On Which We Must Build” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 26-29. New York: The New Press, 1995.

Stover, Johnnie M. *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women’s Autobiography.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003.

Summers, Martin. *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class & the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Tate, Claudia. *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Taylor, Ula Y. *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Terrell, Mary Church. *A Colored Woman in a White World*. Amherst: Prometheus Books (ed.): 2005.

---. “First Presidential Address to the National Association of Colored Women” in *Quest for Equality: The Life and Writings of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954,* edited by Beverly Washington Jones, Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994.

Waldrep, Christopher. *African Americans Confront Lynching: Strategies of Resistance from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Era.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*. New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1983.

---. *Meridian.* New York: Pocket Books, 1976.

Washington, Mary Helen. *Invented Lives.* New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Watson, Julia. "Unspeakable Differences: The Politics of Gender in Lesbian and Heterosexual Women's Autobiographies" in *Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader,* edited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Wells, Ida B. *Crusade for Justice.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

---. "The Requisites of True Leadership," in *Can I Get A Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women—An Anthology*, edited by Marcia Y. Riggs and Barbara A. Holmes, 62-67. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood,"*American Quarterly* 18 (1966).

White, Deborah Gray. *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.

Wilder, Craig Steven. *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City.* New York: NYU Press, 2001.