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Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West

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One of the most remarked upon but least analyzed themes in Black women's history deals with Black women's sexual vulnerability and powerlessness as victims of rape and domestic violence. Author Hazel Carby put it baldly when she declared: "The institutionalized rape of black women has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching. Rape has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting a sexual attack. The links between black women and illicit sexuality consolidated during the antebellum years had powerful ideological consequences for the next hundred and fifty years."<sup>1</sup> I suggest that rape and the threat of rape influenced the development of a culture of dissemblance among Black women. By dissemblance I mean the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.

To be sure, themes of rape and sexual vulnerability have received considerable attention in the recent literary outpourings of Black women novelists. Of the last six novels I have read and reread, for example, five contained a rape scene or a graphic description of domestic violence.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, this is not a recent phenomenon in Black women's writing.

Virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever present threat and reality of rape. Two works come immediately to mind: Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave,*

I benefited greatly from conversations with D. Barry Gaspar and Deborah Gray White. I am grateful to Tiffany Patterson and to Elsa Barkley Brown for their comments. An earlier version of this talk was presented as the endnote address at the First Southern Conference on Women's History, Converse College, Spartanburg, South Carolina, June 10–11, 1988.

<sup>1</sup> Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 39.

<sup>2</sup> See Terry McMillan, *Mama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Grace Edwards-Yearwood, *In the Shadow of the Peacock* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1988); Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972); Gloria Naylor, *The Women of Brewster Place* (New York: Penguin, 1983).

and *Four Years in the White House* (1868). Yet there is another thread running throughout these slave narratives—one that concerns these captive women's efforts to resist the misappropriation and to maintain the integrity of their own sexuality.<sup>3</sup> The combined influence of rape (or the threat of rape), domestic violence, and economic oppression is key to understanding the hidden motivations informing major social protest and migratory movements in Afro-American history.

Second only to Black women's concern for sexual preservation is the pervasive theme of the frustration attendant to finding suitable employment. Oral histories and autobiographical accounts of twentieth-century migrating Black women are replete with themes about work. Scholars of Black urban history and Black labor history agree that Black women faced greater economic discrimination and had fewer employment opportunities than did Black men. Black women's work was the most undesirable and least remunerative of all work available to migrants.

As late as 1930 a little over three thousand Black women, or 15 percent, of the Black female labor force in Chicago were unskilled and semiskilled factory operatives. Thus, over 80 percent of all employed Black women continued to work as personal servants and domestics. Historian Alan H. Spear pointed out that "Negro women were particularly limited in their search for desirable positions. Clerical work was practically closed to them and only a few could qualify as school teachers. Negro domestics often received less than white women for the same work and they could rarely rise to the position of head servant in large households."<sup>4</sup>

Given that many Black women migrants were doomed to work in the same kinds of domestic service jobs they held in the South, one wonders why they bothered to move in the first place. There were some significant differences that help explain this phenomenon. A maid earning seven dollars a week in Cleveland perceived herself to be, and probably was, much better off than a counterpart receiving two dollars and fifty cents a week in Mobile, Alabama. A factory worker, even one whose work was dirty and low status,

<sup>3</sup> Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987). Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, introduction by James Olney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). See also Rennie Simson, "The Afro-American Female: The Historical Construction of Sexual Identity," in *The Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Sharon Thompson, and Christine Stansell (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 229–35.

<sup>4</sup> Alan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 34.

could and did imagine herself better off than domestic servants who endured the unrelenting scrutiny, interference, and complaints of household mistresses and the untoward advances of male family members.

I believe that in order to understand this historical migratory trend we need to understand the noneconomic motives propelling Black female migration. I believe that many Black women quit the South out of a desire to achieve personal autonomy and to escape both from sexual exploitation from inside and outside of their families and from the rape and threat of rape by white as well as Black males. To focus on the sexual and the personal impetus for Black women's migration in the first several decades of the twentieth century neither dismisses nor diminishes the significance of economic motives. Rather, as historian Lawrence Levine cautioned, "As indisputably important as the economic motive was, it is possible to overstress it so that the black migration is converted into an inexorable force and Negroes are seen once again not as actors capable of affecting at least some part of their destinies, but primarily as beings who are acted upon—southern leaves blown North by the winds of destitution."<sup>5</sup> It is reasonable to assume that some Black women were indeed "southern leaves blown North" and that there were many others who were self-propelled actresses seeking respect, control over their own sexuality, and access to well-paying jobs.

My own research on the history of Black women in the Middle West had led me to questions about how, when, and under what circumstances the majority of them settled in the region. These questions have led to others concerning the process of Black women's migration across time, from the flights of runaway slaves in the antebellum period to the great migrations of the first half of the twentieth century. The most common, and certainly the most compelling, motive for running, fleeing, migrating was a desire to retain or claim some control and ownership of their own sexual beings and the children they bore. In the antebellum period hundreds of slave women risked their lives and those of their loved ones to run away to the ostensibly free states of the Northwest Territory, in quest of an elusive sexual freedom for themselves and freedom from slavery for their children.

Two things became immediately apparent as I proceeded with researching the history and reading the autobiographies of late

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 274.

nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migrating, or fleeing, Black women. First, that these women were sexual hostages and domestic violence victims in the South (or in other regions of the country) did not reduce their determination to acquire power to protect themselves and to become agents of social change once they settled in midwestern communities. Second, the fundamental tension between Black women and the rest of the society—referring specifically to white men, white women, and to a lesser extent, Black men—involved a multifaceted struggle to determine who would control their productive and reproductive capacities and their sexuality. At stake for Black women caught up in this ever evolving, constantly shifting, but relentless war was the acquisition of personal autonomy and economic liberation. Their quest for autonomy, dignity, and access to opportunity to earn an adequate living was (and still is) complicated and frustrated by the antagonisms of race, class, and gender conflict and by differences in regional economies. At heart though, the relationship between Black women and the larger society has always been, and continues to be, adversarial.

Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle.

The inclination of the larger society to ignore those considered “marginal” actually enabled subordinate Black women to craft the veil of secrecy and to perfect the art of dissemblance. Yet it could also be argued that their secrecy or “invisibility” contributed to the development of an atmosphere inimical to realizing equal opportunity or a place of respect in the larger society. There would be no room on the pedestal for the southern Black lady. Nor could she join her white sisters in the prison of “true womanhood.” In other words, stereotypes, negative images, and debilitating assumptions filled the space left empty due to inadequate and erroneous information about the true contributions, capabilities, and identities of Black women.

This line of analysis is not without problems. To suggest that Black women deliberately developed a culture of dissemblance

implies that they endeavored to create, and were not simply reacting to, widespread misrepresentations and negative images of themselves in white minds. Clearly, Black women did not possess the power to eradicate negative social and sexual images of their womanhood. Rather, what I propose is that in the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of the sexuality of Black women, it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self. A secret, undisclosed persona allowed the individual Black woman to function, to work effectively as a domestic in white households, to bear and rear children, to endure the frustration-born violence of frequently under- or unemployed mates, to support churches, to found institutions, and to engage in social service activities, all while living within a clearly hostile white, patriarchal, middle-class America.

The problem this penchant for secrecy presents to the historian is readily apparent. Deborah Gray White has commented about the difficulty of finding primary source material for personal aspects of Black female life: "Black women have also been reluctant to donate their papers to manuscript repositories. That is in part a manifestation of the black woman's perennial concern with image, a justifiable concern born of centuries of vilification. Black women's reluctance to donate personal papers also stems from the adversarial nature of the relationship that countless black women have had with many public institutions, and the resultant suspicion of anyone seeking private information."<sup>6</sup>

White's allusion to "resultant suspicion" speaks implicitly to one important reason why so much of the inner life of Black women remains hidden. Indeed, the concepts of "secrets" and "dissemblance," as I employ them, hint at those issues that Black women believed better left unknown, unwritten, unspoken except in whispered tones. Their alarm, their fear, or their Victorian sense of modesty implies that those who broke the silence provided grist for detractors' mills and, even more ominously, tore the protective cloaks from their inner selves. Undoubtedly, these fears and suspicions contribute to the absence of sophisticated historical discussion of the impact of rape (or threat of rape) and incidences of domestic violence on the shape of Black women's experiences.

However, the self-imposed secrecy and the culture of dissemblance, coupled with the larger society's unwillingness to discard tired and worn stereotypes, has also led to ironic incidences of

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Gray White, "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): 237-42, esp. 237-38.

misplaced emphases. Until quite recently, for example, when historians talked of rape in the slavery experience they often bemoaned the damage this act did to the Black male's sense of esteem and respect. He was powerless to protect his woman from white rapists. Few scholars probed the effect that rape, the threat of rape, and domestic violence had on the psychic development of the female victims. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Carby has indicated, lynching, not rape, became the most powerful and compelling symbol of Black oppression. Lynching, it came to be understood, was one of the major noneconomic reasons why southern Black men migrated North.

The culture of dissemblance assumed its most institutionalized form in the founding, in 1896, of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACW). This association of Black women quickly became the largest and most enduring protest organization in the history of Afro-Americans. Its size alone should have warranted the same degree of scholarly attention paid to Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Not surprisingly, the primary objects of NACW attack were the derogatory images and negative stereotypes of Black women's sexuality. By 1914 it had a membership of fifty thousand, far surpassing the membership of every other protest organization of the time, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League. In 1945, in Detroit, for example, the Detroit Association of Colored Women's Clubs, federated in 1921, boasted seventy-three member clubs with nearly three thousand individual members.<sup>7</sup>

Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the NACW, declared in her initial presidential address that there were objectives of the Black women's struggle that could be accomplished only by the "mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters of this race." She proclaimed, "We wish to set in motion influences that shall stop the ravages made by practices that sap our strength, and preclude the possibility of advancement." She boldly announced, "We proclaim to the world that the women of our race have become partners in the great firm of progress and reform. . . . We refer to the fact that this is an association of colored women, because our peculiar status in this country . . . seems to demand that we stand by ourselves."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Robin S. Peebles, "Detroit's Black Women's Clubs," *Michigan History* 70 (January/February 1986): 48.

<sup>8</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Lifting the Veil, Shattering the Silence: Black Women's History in Slavery and Freedom," in *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 223-49, esp. 236-37.

At the core of essentially every activity of NACW's individual members was a concern with creating positive images of Black women's sexuality. To counter negative stereotypes many Black women felt compelled to downplay, even deny, sexual expression. The twin obsessions with naming and combatting sexual exploitation tinted and shaped Black women's support even of the woman's suffrage movement. Nannie H. Burroughs, famed religious leader and founder of the National Training School for Women and Girls at Washington, D.C., cajoled her sisters to fight for the ballot. She asserted that with the ballot Black women could ensure the passage of legislation to win legal protection against rapists. Calling the ballot a "weapon of moral defense" she exploded, "when she [a Black woman] appears in court in defense of her virtue, she is looked upon with amused contempt. She needs the ballot to reckon with men who place no value upon her virtue."<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, determination to save young unskilled and unemployed Black women from having to bargain sex in exchange for food and shelter motivated some NACW members to establish boarding houses and domestic service training centers, such as the Phillis Wheatley Homes, and Burroughs's National Training School. This obsession with providing Black women with protection from sexual exploitation and with dignified work inspired other club members in local communities around the country to support or to found hospitals and nursing training schools.

At least one plausible consequence of this heightened mobilization of Black women was a decline in Black urban birth rates. As Black women became more economically self-sufficient, better educated, and more involved in self-improvement efforts, including participation in the flourishing Black women's club movement in midwestern communities, they had greater access to birth control information. As the institutional infrastructure of Black women's clubs, sororities, church-based women's groups, and charity organizations sunk roots into Black communities it encouraged its members to embrace those values, behaviors, and attitudes traditionally associated with the middle classes. To urban Black middle-class aspirants, the social stigma of having many children did, perhaps, inhibit reproduction. To be sure, over time the gradually evolving male-female demographic imbalance meant that increasingly significant numbers of Black women, especially those employed in the professions, in urban midwestern communities

<sup>9</sup> Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Woman Suffrage: 'First because We Are Women and Second because We Are Colored Women,'" *Truth: Newsletter of the Association of Black Women Historians* (April 1985), 9; Evelyn Brooks Barnett, "Nannie Burroughs and the Education of Black Women," in *The Afro-American Woman*, ed. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Sharon Harley (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1978), 97-108.



would never marry. The point stressed here, however, is that not having children was, perhaps for the very first time, a choice enjoyed by large numbers of Black women.

There were additional burdens placed upon and awards granted to the small cadre of single, educated, professional Black women who chose not to marry or to bear children. The more educated they were, the greater the sense of being responsible, somehow, for the advance of the race and for the elevation of Black womanhood. They held these expectations of themselves and found a sense of racial obligation reinforced by the demands of the Black community and its institutions. In return for their sacrifice of sexual expression, the community gave them respect and recognition. Moreover, this freedom and autonomy represented a socially sanctioned, meaningful alternative to the uncertainties of marriage and the demands of child rearing. The increased employment opportunities, whether real or imagined, and the culture of dissemblance enabled many migrating Black women to become financially independent and simultaneously to fashion socially useful and autonomous lives, while reclaiming control over their own sexuality and reproductive capacities.

This is not to say that Black women, once settled into midwestern communities, never engaged in sex for pay or occasional prostitution. Sara Brooks, a Black domestic servant from Alabama who migrated to Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1930s ill-disguised her contempt for women who bartered their bodies. She declared, while commenting on her own struggle to pay the mortgage on her house, "Some women woulda had a man to live in the house and had an outside boyfriend, too, in order to get the house paid for and the bills." She scornfully added, "They meet a man and if he promises en four or five dollars to go to bed, they's grab it. That's called sellin' your own body, and I wasn't raised like that."<sup>10</sup> What escapes Brooks, in this moralizing moment, is that her poor and powerless Black female neighbors were extracting value from the only thing the society now allowed them to sell. As long as they occupied an enforced subordinate position within American society this "sellin' your own body" as Brooks put it, was, I submit, Rape.

In sum, at some fundamental level all Black women historians are engaged in the process of historical reclamation. But it is not enough simply to reclaim those hidden and obscure facts and names of Black foremothers. Merely to reclaim and to narrate past deeds and contributions risks rendering a skewed history focused

<sup>10</sup> Thordis Simonsen, ed., *You May Plow Here: The Narrative of Sara Brooks* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 219.

primarily on the articulate, relatively well-positioned members of the aspiring Black middle class. In synchrony with the reclaiming and narrating must be the development of an array of analytical frameworks which allow us to understand why Black women behave in certain ways and how they acquired agency.

The migration of hundreds of thousands of Black women out of the South between 1915 and 1945, and the formation of thousands of Black women's clubs and the NACW are actions that enabled them to put into place, to situate, a protest infrastructure and to create a self-conscious Black women's culture of resistance. Most significant, the NACW fostered the development of an image of Black women as being super-moral women. In particular, the institutionalization of women's clubs embodied the shaping and honing of the culture of dissemblance. This culture, grounded as it was on the twin prongs of protest and resistance, enabled the creation of positive alternative images of their sexual selves and facilitated Black women's mental and physical survival in a hostile world.

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