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## AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN: A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITINGS FROM HISTORICAL AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

**D**URING THE PAST half-decade I have been grappling with the issues raised in the historical studies of Afro-American women, as well as those in the writings of Black feminists. For two years I participated in a faculty seminar exploring the differences and similarities between the assumptions and goals of Black Studies and Women's Studies. I team-taught a course entitled "Feminism, Black Nationalism, Marxism," taught three courses devoted to the experiences of Black women—"Afro-American Women and the Women's Movement: 1848—the Present," "No Crystal Stair: Black Women's Lives 1915–1945" (co-taught), and "Black Women: 1807–1987." I revised two of my more "traditional" courses—"Afro-American History: 1860–1954" and "Black Sociological Thought"—to address more specifically the lives of Black women and the concerns of Black feminists. One conclusion immediately apparent while working one's way through the readings was that the Afro-American women historians paid little heed to the issues raised by Black feminists, and that Black feminists paid little if any attention to the historical literature being produced specifically about Black women.

The basic assumption of most of the work produced by historians of Afro-American women is that there is a large body of unexplored accomplishment that merely awaits those with the interest and resources to dig it out and write it up. They view Black women as being oppressed by a number of social forces such as racism and sexism. They do not see Black women as mere victims, or as being defeated by these forces. They assume that since Black people have not only survived but have contributed much to the world in which we live, Black women must have played a large role in those processes. Historians of Black women generally emphasize racial as opposed to sexual oppression, study Black women within the general context of the history of Black Americans, and pay little attention to matters of sexual preference or to the personal and private behavior

of those they are studying. Black feminists, on the other hand, seem to come to the study of Black women with the concerns of the White feminist movement, most of whose participants share the racist attitudes of White males. Black feminists tend to emphasize issues of sexual preference and personal, private behavior, and give a much greater weight to the role of sexual oppression by Black males in determining the life chances of Black females. They assume, in many cases, that Black women were oppressed in much the same way as White women—i.e., were denied political and economic roles of significance. Black feminists, therefore, are very weak on the actual achievements of Black women throughout their history in the United States. They have a tendency to ignore the communal roots and context that enabled such figures as Bessie Smith and Zora Neal Hurston, for example, to accomplish what they did.

One purpose of this brief bibliographical introduction is to point out, as an outsider to both groups, the works that were most helpful to me in understanding the new and important changes that are taking place in the writing of American, Black, and Women's history as the role of Black women is given its proper due. A second purpose is to introduce the writings of some leading Black feminists to a different audience than I suspect they have previously enjoyed. As a historian I have deliberately omitted discussion of works of fiction, literary criticism and "theory."

One way to begin an encounter with the richness of the history of Afro-American women is to read several of the collections of documents. A pioneering work is Gerda Lerner's *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972). Two other collections of note are Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976) and Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).

There is a growing body of scholarly articles appearing in such journals as *Signs* and *Feminist Studies*. The works mentioned here are just the starting points for a more detailed investigation of a particular issue, activity, or period. One could begin with William Chafe, *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) for an interesting comparison of the similarities and differences between racial and sexual oppression. Through focusing more on the Black family than on Black women as such, Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976) was a major factor in expanding the scope and complexity of the debate. One could then turn to Bettina Aptheker, *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex and Class in American History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), and Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (eds.), *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and*

*Images* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1978) both of which address the situation of Black women in the late nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries. There are three works that are indispensable: Deborah Gray White's *Arn't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in American* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1984) and Jacqueline Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). Giddings is not a professional historian, and there are several places where one can quibble about factual matters and interpretations; overall her work is a moving account of the political activities of Black women. Jones' sub-title reveals the scope of her work, which is of major significance for all students of United States history.

An anthology that includes essays on the sociological and cultural, as well as the historical experiences of Black women in Africa, the West Indies, and the United States is Filomina C. Steady's *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1981). For a more extensive assessment of the field of Black women's history see Darlene Clark Hine's "Lifting the Veil, Shattering the Silence: Black Women's History in Slavery and Freedom," in Hine (ed.), *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

The volume of writing on contemporary feminism—Black and White—is enormous. The most successful starting point for me was Sara Evan's *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980). Evans is generally persuasive in her conclusions about the significant influence both of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements on the New Left and the women's movement. An important early collection of the concerns of Black women is Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970). The best scholarly introduction to some of the issues of Black feminism is Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1981; and Boston: South End Press, 1986). This book was extremely useful in delineating some rather crucial differences between the experiences of Black women and White women that had been given little consideration in the writings of most of the White feminist writers I had encountered. The contrast between Joseph and Lewis—who write alternate chapters—in terms of language, tone and style is instructive. Books of essays that indicate the range of issues being addressed by Black feminists include June Jordan's *On Call: Political Essays* (Boston: South End Press, 1985) and *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981) and Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jova-

novich, 1984). I was appalled by the intellectual shoddiness of Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Warner Books, 1979) and Bell Hook's *Ain't I A Woman* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), both of which are so full of factual errors that the rest of their analysis is rendered suspect. Other Black feminists make their basic arguments in a much more coherent and credible fashion.

The group of writers I had the most initial difficulty in understanding were the Black women—Doris Davenport, Barbara Smith, *et al.*—included in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings of Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA.: Persephone Press, 1981). I was misled by the conflation of the term feminist with that of “lesbian,” which were quite often used interchangeably. Barbara Smith seemed to be a pivotal figure in this group so I followed her writings in such places as Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith, (eds.), *Conditions Five: The Black Woman's Issue* (New York, 1979); Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull, and Patricia Bell Scott (eds.) *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some Of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1982) and Barbara Smith (ed.), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983). All of these collections include a variety of forms of expression—i.e., transcripts of conversations, poetry, memoirs, short stories, political and analytical essays. They all raised issues that could not be wished away, and much of the writing was of great strength and beauty. It was only when I read *In the Memory and Spirit of Frances, Zora, and Lorraine: Essays and Interviews on Black Women and Writing* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Arts and Humanities, Howard University, 1979), the proceedings of a conference held at Howard University, that I fully comprehended the depth of the hostility of other Black scholars—male and female—to the points of view expressed by Smith and her colleagues.

It should be a matter of some concern that the community of Black academics and thinkers—as small as it is—could ignore the ideas of any group. One of the strengths of Black life in this country, despite some lapses from time to time, has been our openness to a wide range of ideas, and our willingness to give everybody a fair and honest hearing. For example, the columnists who write for the *Baltimore Afro-American* represent a range of opinion—left to right, male and female—that the *New York Times* would never tolerate. Dialogue, debate, even disagreement, should be our approach; not expressions of disdain and disgust. For their part the Black feminists could pay much more attention to the rich and complex historical literature that already exists about Black people—women included. An overemphasis on victimization often blinds them to the substantial achievements that Black women have made. It is worth speculating on the value of a conference or some form of structured dialogue

taking place that would include members of the Association of Afro-American Women Historians and the contributors to *Home Girls*. The Black community, men included, would benefit from such an exchange. At a minimum we would get more clarity on the issues raised by Black feminists and Black female historians than exists at present. Ignorance is not bliss and on the issue of gender relations within the Black community, can be destructive.