African-American Women's History
and the Metalanguage of Race

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THEORETICAL DISCUSSION in African-American women's history begs for greater voice. I say this as a black woman who is cognizant of the strengths and limitations of current feminist theory. Feminist scholars have moved rapidly forward in addressing theories of subjectivity, questions of difference, the construction of social relations as relations of power, the conceptual implications of binary oppositions such as male versus female or equality versus difference—all issues defined with relevance to gender and with potential for intellectual and social transformations.[1] Notwithstanding a few notable exceptions, this new wave of feminist theorists finds little to say about race. The general trend has been to mention black and Third World feminists who first called attention to the glaring fallacies in essentialist analysis and to claims of a homogeneous "womanhood," "woman's culture," and "patriarchal oppression of women."[2] Beyond this recognition, however, white feminist scholars pay hardly more than

[1] See, e.g., Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), and Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies, Feminist Criticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Toril Moi, *Sexual/ Textual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1985); Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[2] By the early 1980s women of color from various disciplines had challenged the notion of a homogeneous womanhood. A few include: Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1978); Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *But Some of Us Are Brave* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1982); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood," *Feminist Studies* 9 (Spring 1983): 131–50.

lip service to race as they continue to analyze their own experience in ever more sophisticated forms.

This narrowness of vision is particularly ironic in that these very issues of equality and difference, the constructive strategies of power, and subjectivity and consciousness have stood at the core of black scholarship for some half-century or more. Historian W. E. B. Du Bois, sociologist Oliver Cox, and scientist Charles R. Drew are only some of the more significant pre-1950s contributors to the discussion of race as a social category and to the refutation of essentialist biological and genetic explanations.[3] These issues continue to be salient in our own time, when racism in America grows with both verve and subtlety and when "enlightened" women's historians witness, as has been the case in recent years, recurrent racial tensions at our own professional and scholarly gatherings.

Feminist scholars, especially those of African-American women's history, must accept the challenge to bring race more prominently into their analyses of power. The explication of race entails three interrelated strategies, separated here merely for the sake of analysis. First of all, we must define the construction and "technologies" of race as well as those of gender and sexuality.[4] Second, we must expose the role of race as a metalanguage by calling attention to its powerful, all-encompassing effect on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality. Third, we must recognize race as providing sites of dialogic exchange and contestation, since race has constituted a discursive tool for both oppression and liberation. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue, "the effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle."[5] Such a three-

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[3] Charles Drew, in developing a method of blood preservation and organizing blood banks, contributed to the explosion of the myth that blacks were physiologically different from whites. See Charles E. Wynes, *Charles Richard Drew: The Man and the Myth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 65–71; and C. R. Drew and J. Scudder, "Studies in Blood Preservation: Fate of Cellular Elements and Prothrombin in Citrated Blood," *Journal of Laboratory and Clinical Medicine* 26 (June 1941): 1473–78. Also see W. E. B. Du Bois, "Races," *Crisis* (August 1911), 157–58, and *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940), 116–17, 137; Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class and Race* (1948; reprint, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 317–20.

[4] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* vol. 1, *An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 127, 146. Teresa De Lauretis criticizes Foucault for presenting a male-centered class analysis that disregards gender (see *Technologies of Gender* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987], 3–30). In both cases "technology" is used to signify the elaboration and implementation of discourses (classificatory and evaluative) in order to maintain the survival and hegemony of one group over another. These discourses are implemented through pedagogy, medicine, mass media, etc.

[5] For discussion of race and signification, see Robert Miles, *Racism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 69–98; also, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in*

pronged approach to the history of African-American women will require borrowing and blending work by black intellectuals, white feminist scholars, and other theorists such as white male philosophers and linguists. Indeed, the very process of borrowing and blending speaks to the tradition of syncretism that has characterized the Afro-American experience.

Defining race

When the U.S. Supreme Court had before it the task of defining obscenity, Justice Potter Stewart claimed that, while he could not intelligibly define it, "I know it when I see it."[6] When we talk about the concept of race, most people believe that they know it when they see it but arrive at nothing short of confusion when pressed to define it. Chromosome research reveals the fallacy of race as an accurate measure of genotypic or phenotypic difference between human beings. Cross-cultural and historical studies of miscegenation law reveal shifting, arbitrary, and contradictory definitions of race. Literary critics, as in the collection of essays *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, compellingly present race as the "ultimate trope of difference"—as artificially and arbitrarily contrived to produce and maintain relations of power and subordination. Likewise, historian Barbara Fields argues that race is neither natural nor transhistorical, but must rather be analyzed with an eye to its functioning and maintenance within specific contexts.[7]

Like gender and class, then, race must be seen as a social construction predicated upon the recognition of difference and signifying the simultaneous distinguishing and positioning of groups vis-à-vis one another. More than this, race is a highly contested representation of relations of power between social categories by which individuals are identified and identify themselves. The recognition of racial distinctions emanates from and adapts to multiple uses of power in society. Perceived as "natural" and "appropriate," such racial categories are strategically necessary for the functioning of power in countless institutional and ideological forms,

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the United States from the 1960s to the 1980s (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 68.

[6] Jacobellis v. State of Ohio, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1964).

[7] Although Fields does not use the term "trope," her discussion of race parallels that of Gates. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed., *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), esp. articles by Gates, Jr., "Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," 1–20; Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," 21–37; and Tzvetan Todorov, " 'Race,' Writing, and Culture," 370–80. See also Barbara J. Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History," in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143–47.

both explicit and subtle. As Michel Foucault has written, societies engage in "a perpetual process of strategic elaboration" or a constant shifting and reforming of the apparatus of power in response to their particular cultural or economic needs.[8]

Furthermore, in societies where racial demarcation is endemic to their sociocultural fabric and heritage—to their laws and economy, to their institutionalized structures and discourses, and to their epistemologies and everyday customs—gender identity is inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity. In the Jim Crow South prior to the 1960s and in South Africa until very recently, for instance, little black girls learned at an early age to place themselves in the bathroom for "black women," not in that for "white ladies." As such a distinction suggests, in these societies the representation of both gender and class is colored by race. Their social construction becomes racialized as their concrete implications and normative meanings are continuously shaped by what Louis Althusser terms "ideological state apparatuses"—the school, family, welfare agency, hospital, television and cinema, the press.[9]

For example, the metaphoric and metonymic identification of welfare with the black population by the American public has resulted in tremendous generalization about the supposed unwillingness of many blacks to work. Welfare immediately conjures up images of black female-headed families, despite the fact that the aggregate number of poor persons who receive benefits in the form of aid to dependent children or medicare is predominantly white. Likewise, the drug problem too often is depicted in the mass media as a pathology of black lower-class life set in motion by drug dealers, youthful drug runners, and addicted victims of the ghetto. The drug problem is less often portrayed as an underground economy that mirrors and reproduces the exploitative relations of the dominant economy. The "supply-side" executives who make the "big" money are neither black nor residents of urban ghettos.

Race might also be viewed as myth, "not at all an abstract, purified essence" (to cite Roland Barthes on myth) but, rather, "a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all

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[8] Michel Foucault describes the strategic function of the apparatus of power as a system of relations between diverse elements (e.g., discourses, laws, architecture, moral values, institutions) that are supported by types of knowledge: "I understand by the 'term' apparatus a sort of . . . formation which has its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*. . . . This may have been, for example, the assimilation of a floating population found to be burdensome for an essentially mercantilist economy" (*Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977,* ed. Colin Gordon [New York: Pantheon, 1980], 194–95).

[9] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation)," in his *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays,* trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 165.

due to its function."[10] As a fluid set of overlapping discourses, race is perceived as arbitrary and illusionary, on the one hand, while natural and fixed on the other. To argue that race is myth and that it is an ideological rather than a biological fact does not deny that ideology has real effects on people's lives. Race serves as a "global sign," a "metalanguage," since it speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race.[11] By continually expressing overt and covert analogic relationships, race impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted. It makes hair "good" or "bad," speech patterns "correct" or "incorrect." It is, in fact, the apparent overdeterminancy of race in West-ern culture, and particularly in the United States, that has permitted it to function as a metalanguage in its discursive representation and construc-tion of social relations. Race not only tends to subsume other sets of social relations, namely, gender and class, but it blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops. It precludes unity within the same gender group but often appears to solidify people of opposing economic classes. Whether race is textually omitted or textually privileged, its totalizing effect in obscuring class and gender remains.

This may well explain why women's studies for so long rested upon the unstated premise of racial (i.e., white) homogeneity and with this presumption proceeded to universalize "woman's" culture and oppres-sion, while failing to see white women's own investment and complicity in the oppression of other groups of men and women. Elizabeth Spelman takes to task this idea of "homogeneous womanhood" in her exploration of race and gender in *Inessential Woman.* Examining thinkers such as Aristotle, Simone de Beauvoir, and Nancy Chodorow, among others, Spelman observes a double standard on the part of many feminists who fail to separate their whiteness from their womanness. White feminists, she argues, typically discern two separate identities for black women, the racial and the gender, and conclude that the gender identity of black women is the same as their own: "In other words, the womanness un-derneath the black woman's skin is a white woman's and deep down inside the Latina woman is an Anglo woman waiting to burst through."[12]

Afro-American history, on the other hand, has accentuated race by calling explicit attention to the cultural as well as socioeconomic impli-cations of American racism but has failed to examine the differential class

[10] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 118, 120.
[11] Ibid., 114–15.
[12] Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 13, 80–113.

and gender positions men and women occupy in black communities—
thus uncritically rendering a monolithic "black community," "black ex-
perience," and "voice of the Negro." Notwithstanding that this discursive
monolith most often resonates with a male voice and as the experience of
men, such a rendering precludes gender subordination by black men by
virtue of their own blackness and social subordination. Even black wo-
men's history, which has consciously sought to identify the importance of
gender relations and the interworkings of race, class, and gender, none-
theless reflects the totalizing impulse of race in such concepts as "black
womanhood" or the "black woman cross-culturally"—concepts that
mask real differences of class, status and color, regional culture, and a
host of other configurations of difference.

Racial constructions of gender

To understand race as a metalanguage, we must recognize its historical
and material grounding—what Russian linguist and critic M. M. Bakhtin
referred to as "the power of the word to mean."[13] This power evolves
from concrete situational and ideological contexts, that is, from a posi-
tion of enunciation that reflects not only time and place but values as
well. The concept of race, in its verbal and extraverbal dimension, and
even more specifically, in its role in the representation as well as self-
representation of individuals in American society (what psychoanalytic
theorists call "subjectification"), is constituted in language in which (as
Bakhtin points out) there have never been " 'neutral' words and forms—
words and forms that can belong to 'no one'; language has been com-
pletely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents."[14]

The social context for the construction of race as a tool for black
oppression is historically rooted in the context of slavery. Barbara Fields
reminds us: "The idea one people has of another, even when the differ-
ence between them is embodied in the most striking physical character-
istics, is always mediated by the social context within which the two
come in contact."[15] Race came to life primarily as the signifier of the
master/slave relation and thus emerged superimposed upon class and

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[13] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist,
trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981),
352.

[14] Bakhtin argues: "Language is not an abstract system of normative forms but
rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world." For my purposes of discussion,
"race," therefore, would convey multiple, even conflicting meanings (heteroglossia) when
expressed by different groups—the multiplicity of meanings and intentions not simply
rendered between blacks and whites, but within each of these two groups. See Bakhtin
on "heteroglossia" (293, 352).

[15] Fields, "Race and Ideology in American History," 148–49.

property relations. Defined by law as "animate chattel," slaves constituted property as well as a social class and were exploited under a system
that sanctioned white ownership of black bodies and black labor.[16] Studies of black women in slavery, however, make poignantly clear the role of
race not only in shaping the class relations of the South's "peculiar
institution," but also in constructing gender's "power to mean." Sojourner Truth's famous and haunting question, "Ar'n't I a Woman?" laid
bare the racialized configuration of gender under a system of class rule
that compelled and expropriated women's physical labor and denied
them legal right to their own bodies and sexuality, much less to the bodies
to which they gave birth. While law and public opinion idealized motherhood and enforced the protection of white women's bodies, the opposite held true for black women's. Sojourner Truth's personal testimony
demonstrated gender's racial meaning. She had "ploughed, and planted,
and gathered into barns," and no male slave had outdone her. She had
given birth to thirteen children, all of whom were sold away from her.
When she cried out in grief from the depths of her motherhood, "none
but Jesus heard."[17]

Wasn't Sojourner Truth a woman? The courts answered this question
for slavewomen by ruling them outside the statutory rubric "woman."[18]
In discussing the case of *State of Missouri v. Celia,* A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., elucidates the racial signification of gender. Celia was fourteen years old when purchased by a successful farmer, Robert Newsome.
During the five years of his ownership, Newsome habitually forced her
into sexual intercourse. At age nineteen she had borne a child by him and
was expecting another. In June 1855, while pregnant and ill, Celia defended herself against attempted rape by her master. Her testimony reveals that she warned him she would hurt him if he continued to abuse
her while sick. When her threats would not deter his advances, she hit
him over the head with a stick, immediately killing him. In an act presaging Richard Wright's *Native Son,* she then burned his body in the
fireplace and the next morning spread his ashes on the pathway. Celia
was apprehended and tried for first-degree murder. Her counsel sought to
lower the charge of first degree to murder in self-defense, arguing that

[16] Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York:
Pantheon, 1974), 3–7, 28.
[17] Sojourner Truth's speech appears in Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin,
Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life (University Park: Pennsylvania State
University Press, 1976), 235. For works on slave women, see Deborah Gray White,
Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: Norton, 1985);
Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of
the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), esp. chaps. 3
and 6.
[18] Fox-Genovese, 326.

Celia had a right to resist her master's sexual advances, especially because of the imminent danger to her health. A slave master's economic and property rights, the defense contended, did not include rape. The defense rested its case on Missouri statutes that protected women from attempts to ravish, rape, or defile. The language of these particular statutes explicitly used the term "any woman," while other unrelated Missouri statutes explicitly used terms such as "white female" and "slave" or "negro" in their criminal codes. The question centered on her womanhood. The court found Celia guilty: "If Newsome was in the habit of having intercourse with the defendant who was his slave, . . . it is murder in the first degree." Celia was sentenced to death, having been denied an appeal, and was hanged in December 1855 after the birth of her child.[19]

Since racially based justifications of slavery stood at the core of Southern law, race relations, and social etiquette in general, then proof of "womanhood" did not rest on a common female essence, shared culture, or mere physical appearance. (Sojourner Truth, on one occasion, was forced to bare her breasts to a doubting audience in order to vindicate her womanhood.) This is not to deny gender's role within the social and power relations of race. Black women experienced the vicissitudes of slavery through gendered lives and thus differently from slave men. They bore and nursed children and performed domestic duties—all on top of doing fieldwork. Unlike slave men, slave women fell victim to rape precisely because of their gender. Yet gender itself was both constructed and fragmented by race. Gender, so colored by race, remained from birth until death inextricably linked to one's personal identity and social status. For black and white women, gendered identity was reconstructed and represented in very different, indeed antagonistic, racialized contexts.

Racial constructions of class

Henry Louis Gates argues that "race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which—more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interest."[20] It is interesting that the power of race as a metalanguage that transcends and masks real differences lies in

[19] A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., notes: "One of the ironies is that the master's estate was denied a profit from Celia's rape. Despite the court's 'mercy' in delaying execution until the birth of the child, the record reflects that a Doctor Carter delivered Celia's child, who was born dead" ("Race, Sex, Education and Missouri Jurisprudence: Shelley v. Kraemer in a Historical Perspective," *Washington University Law Quarterly* 67 [1989]: 684–85).

[20] Gates, Jr., "Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes" (n. 7 above), 5.

the remarkable and longstanding success with which it unites whites of disparate economic positions against blacks. Until the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, race effectively served as a metaphor for class, albeit a metaphor rife with complications. For example, not all Southern whites were slave owners. Nor did they share the same economic and political interests. Upcountry yeomen protested the predominance of planters' interests over their own in state legislatures, and white artisans decried competition from the use of slave labor.[21] Yet, while Southern whites hardly constituted a homogeneous class, they united for radically different reasons around the banner of white supremacy, waged civil war, and for generations bemoaned the Lost Cause.

The metalanguage of race also transcended the voices of class and ethnic conflict among Northern whites in the great upheavals of labor during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Amid their opposition, capital and labor agreed sufficiently to exclude blacks from union membership and from more than a marginal place within the emerging industrial work force.[22] Job ceilings and hiring practices limited the overwhelming majority of black men and women to dead-end, low-paying employment—employment whites disdained or were in the process of abandoning.[23] The actual class positions of blacks did not matter, nor did the acknowledgment of differential statuses (such as by income, type of employment, morals and manners, education, or color) by blacks themselves. An entire system of cultural preconceptions disregarded these complexities and tensions by grouping all blacks into a normative well of inferiority and subserviency.[24]

The interplay of the race-class conflation with gender evoked very different social perceptions of black and white women's work roles. This is exhibited by the concern about "female loaferism," which arose in the

[21] Fields, "Ideology and Race in American History" (n. 7 above), 156.

[22] Abram Harris and Sterling Spero, *The Black Worker: A Study of the Negro in the Labor Movement* (1931; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1968), 158–61, 167–81; Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915–45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 13–14, 18, 39–79; Dolores Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 152–78; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love: Labor of Sorrow* (New York: Basic, 1985), 148, 168, 177–79.

[23] See Sharon Harley, "For the Good of Family and Race," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 340–41.

[24] Patricia Hill Collins argues persuasively for the continued role of race in explaining social class position in her analysis of studies of contemporary black low-income, female-headed families. In her critique of the Moynihan report and the televised Bill Moyers documentary on the "vanishing black family," Collins argues that social class is conceptualized in both these studies as "an outcome variable" of race and gender rather than the product of such structural factors as industrial flight, mechanization, inadequate schools, etc. ("A Comparison of Two Works on Black Family Life," *Signs* 14, no. 4 [Summer 1989]: 876–77, 882–84).

years immediately following Emancipation. Jacqueline Jones vividly exposes the ridicule and hostility meted out to black families who attempted to remove their wives and mothers from the work force to attend to their own households. In contrast to the domestic ideal for white women of all classes, the larger society deemed it "unnatural," in fact an "evil," for black married women "to play the lady" while their husbands supported them. In the immediate postwar South, the role of menial worker outside their homes was demanded of black women, even at the cost of physical coercion.[25]

Dolores Janiewski calls attention to the racialized meaning of class in her study of women's employment in a North Carolina tobacco factory during the twentieth century. She shows that race fractured the division of labor by gender. Southern etiquette demanded protection of white women's "racial honor" and required that they work under conditions described as "suitable for ladies" in contradistinction to the drudgery and dirty working conditions considered acceptable for black women. Janiewski notes that at least one employer felt no inhibition against publicly admitting his "brute treatment" of black female employees.[26]

The most effective tool in the discursive welding of race and class proved to be segregation in its myriad institutional and customary forms. Jim Crow railroad cars, for instance, became strategic sites of contestation over the conflated meaning of class and race: blacks who could afford "first class" accommodations vehemently protested the racial basis for being denied access to them. This is dramatically evident in the case of Arthur Mitchell, Democratic congressman to the U.S. House of Representatives from Illinois during the 1930s. Mitchell was evicted from first-class railroad accommodations while traveling through Hot Springs, Arkansas. Despite his protests, he was forced to join his social "inferiors" in a Jim Crow coach with no flush toilet, washbasin, running water, or soap. The transcript of the trial reveals the following testimony:

> When I offered my ticket, the train conductor took my ticket and tore off a piece of it, but told me at that time that I couldn't ride in that car. We had quite a little controversy about it, and when he said I couldn't ride there I thought it might do some good for me to tell him who I was. I said . . . : "I am Mr. Mitchell, serving in the Congress of the United States." He said it didn't make a damn bit

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[25] For discussion of "female loaferism," see Jacqueline Jones, 45, 58–60.
[26] Dolores Janiewski, "Seeking 'a New Day and a New Way': Black Women and Unions in the Southern Tobacco Industry," in *"To Toil the Livelong Day": America's Women at Work, 1780–1980,* ed. Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 163.

of difference who I was, that as long as I was a nigger I couldn't ride in that car.[27]

Neither the imprimatur of the U.S. House of Representatives nor the ability to purchase a first-class ticket afforded Mitchell the more privileged accommodations. The collective image of race represented Mitchell, the individual, just as he singularly represented the entire black race. Despite the complicating factor of his representing the federal government itself, Mitchell, like his socially constructed race, was unambiguously assigned to the second-class car, ergo lower-class space.

A long tradition of black protest focused on such treatment of women. During the late nineteenth century, segregated railroad trains were emblematic of racial configurations of both class and gender; the first-class railroad car also was called the "ladies car." Indeed, segregation's meaning for gender was exemplified in the trope of "lady." Ladies were not merely women; they represented a class, a differentiated status within the generic category of "women." Nor did society confer such status on all white women. White prostitutes, along with many working-class white women, fell outside its rubric. But no black woman, regardless of income, education, refinement, or character, enjoyed the status of lady. John R. Lynch, black congressman from Mississippi during Reconstruction, denounced the practice of forcing black women of means and refinement out of first-class accommodations and into smoking cars. He characterized the latter accommodations as "filthy . . . with drunkards, gamblers, and criminals." Arguing in support of the Civil Rights Bill of 1875, Lynch used the trope of "lady" in calling attention to race's inscription upon class distinctions:

> Under our present system of race distinctions a *white woman* of a questionable social standing, yea, I may say, of an admitted immoral character, can go to any public place or upon any public conveyance and be the recipient of the same treatment, the same courtesy, and the same respect that is usually accorded to the most refined and virtuous; but let an intelligent, modest, refined *colored lady* present herself and ask that the same privileges be accorded to her that have just been accorded to her social inferior of the white race, and in nine cases out of ten, except in certain portions of the country, she will not only be refused, but insulted for making the request. [Emphasis added][28]

[27] Mitchell v. United States, 313 U.S. 80 (1941), app.; also see Catherine A. Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow: The Desegregation of Southern Transit* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 1–2.

[28] See John R. Lynch's speech on the Civil Rights Bill of 1875 in U.S. Congress, *Congressional Record* (February 3, 1875), 944–45.

Early court cases involving discrimination in public transportation reveal that railroad companies seldom if ever looked upon black women as "ladies." The case of Catherine Brown, a black woman, was the first racial public transportation case to come before the U.S. Supreme Court. In February 1868, Brown was denied passage in the "ladies car" on a train traveling from Alexandria, Virginia, to Washington, D.C. Brown disregarded the demand that she sit in the "colored car" instead. Her persistence in entering the ladies car was met with violence and verbal insults.[29] The resultant court case, decided in her favor in 1873, indicated not an end to such practices but merely the federal government's short-lived support of black civil rights during the era of radical Reconstruction. The outcome of Brown's case proved to be an exception to those that would follow.

Within a decade, Ida B. Wells sued the Chesapeake, Ohio, and Southwestern Railroad for physically ejecting her out of the "ladies" car. When the conductor grabbed her arm, she bit him and held firmly to her seat. It took two men finally to dislodge her. They dragged her into the smoking car and (as she recalled in her autobiography) "the white ladies and gentlemen in the car even stood on the seats so that they could get a good view and continued applauding the conductor for his brave stand." Although her lawsuit was successful at the lower court level, the state Supreme Court of Tennessee reversed the earlier decision, sustaining both the discrimination and the bodily harm against her.[30] The racist decision, like others of the courts, led to *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and the euphemistic doctrine of "separate but equal."

Racial constructions of sexuality

The exclusion of black women from the dominant society's definition of "lady" said as much about sexuality as it did about class. The metalanguage of race signifies, too, the imbrication of race within the representation of sexuality. Historians of women and of science, largely influenced by Michel Foucault, now attest to the variable quality of changing conceptions of sexuality over time—conceptions informed as much by

[29] Railroad Co. v. Brown, 84 U.S. 445 (Wall) 445 (1873).
[30] See Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 18–20; for full discussion of this case and those of other black women on buses and streetcars, see Willie Mae Coleman, "Black Women and Segregated Public Transportation: Ninety Years of Resistance," *Truth: Newsletter of the Association of Black Women Historians* (1986), reprinted in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in United States History* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990), 5:296–98.

race and class as by gender.[31] Sexuality has come to be defined not in terms of biological essentials or as a universal truth detached and transcendent from other aspects of human life and society. Rather, it is an evolving conception applied to the body but given meaning and identity by economic, cultural, and historical context.[32]

In the centuries between the Renaissance and the Victorian era, Western culture constructed and represented changing and conflicting images of woman's sexuality, which shifted diametrically from images of lasciviousness to moral purity. Yet Western conceptions of black women's sexuality resisted change during this same time.[33] Winthrop Jordan's now classic study of racial attitudes toward blacks between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries argues that black women's bodies epitomized centuries-long European perceptions of Africans as primitive, animallike, and savage. In America, no less distinguished and learned a figure than Thomas Jefferson conjectured that black women mated with orangutans.[34] While such thinking rationalized slavery and the sexual exploitation of slave women by white masters, it also perpetuated an enormous division between black people and white people on the "scale of humanity": carnality as opposed to intellect and/or spirit; savagery as opposed to civilization; deviance as opposed to normality; promiscuity as opposed to purity; passion as opposed to passionlessness. The black woman came to symbolize, according to Sander Gilman, an "icon for black sexuality in general."[35] This discursive gap between the races was if anything greater between white and black women than between white and black men.

Violence figured preeminently in racialized constructions of sexuality. From the days of slavery, the social construction and representation of black sexuality reinforced violence, rhetorical and real, against black

[31] For work by historians on sexuality's relation to class and race, see the essays in Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons, with Robert Padgug, eds., *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

[32] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1:14, 140, 143, 145–146, and *Power/Knowledge* (n. 8 above), 210–11.

[33] Nancy Cott calls attention to the role of evangelical Protestantism and, later, science in contributing to the image of "passionlessness" for American northern women ("Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850," *Signs* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1978): 219–36); for changing Western representations, see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[34] See discussion of Jefferson and larger discussion of Western views toward blacks in Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (New York: Norton, 1977), 24–40, 151, 154–59, 458–59.

[35] See Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," in Gates, ed. (n. 7 above), 223–40.

women and men.[36] That the rape of black women could continue to go on with impunity long after slavery's demise underscores the pervasive belief in black female promiscuity. This belief found expression in the statement of one Southern white woman in 1904: "I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman."[37]

The lynching of black men, with its often attendant castration, reeked of sexualized representations of race.[38] The work of black feminists of the late nineteenth century makes clear that lynching, while often ratio-nalized by whites as a punishment for the rape of white women, more often was perpetrated to maintain racial etiquette and the socioeconomic and political hegemony of whites. Ida Wells-Barnett, Anna J. Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Pauline Hopkins exposed and contrasted the specter of the white woman's rape in the case of lynching and the sanc-tioned rape of black women by white men. Hazel Carby, in discussing these black feminist writers, established their understanding of the inter-section of strategies of power with lynching and rape:

> Their legacy to us is theories that expose the colonization of the black female body by white male power and the destruction of black males who attempted to exercise any oppositional patriarchal control. When accused of threatening the white female body, the repository of heirs to property and power, the black male, and his economic, political, and social advancement, is lynched out of ex-istence. Cooper, Wells, and Hopkins assert the necessity of seeing the relation between histories: the rape of black women in the

[36] Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Wom-en's Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 129–57, 220; Ida Wells-Barnett, *On Lynching*, reprint ed. (New York: Arno Press, 1969); Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 117–51; Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[37] "Experiences of the Race Problem: By a Southern White Woman," *Independent*, vol. 56 (March 17, 1904), as quoted in Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *Journal of Southern History* 56 (February 1990): 10. Neil R. McMillen observes for the early twentieth century that courts did not usually convict white men for the rape of black women, "because whites generally agreed that no black female above the age of puberty was chaste" (*Dark Journey: Black Mississippi-ans in the Age of Jim Crow* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989], 205–6).

[38] A number of writers have dealt with the issue of castration. For historical studies of the early slave era, see Jordan, 154–58, 463, 473; also discussing castration statutes as part of the slave codes in colonial Virginia, South Carolina, and Pennsylvania is A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Pro-cess* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 58, 168, 177, 282, 413, n. 107. For discussion of castration during the twentieth century, see Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch," in his *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938; re-print, New York: Harper & Row, 1965); and Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 29–68.

nineties is directly linked to the rape of the female slave. Their analyses are dynamic and not limited to a parochial understanding of "women's issues"; they have firmly established the dialectical relation between economic/political power and economic/sexual power in the battle for control of women's bodies.[39]

Through a variety of mediums—theater, art, the press, and literature— discourses of racism developed and reified stereotypes of sexuality. Such representations grew out of and facilitated the larger subjugation and control of the black population. The categorization of class and racial groups according to culturally constituted sexual identities facilitated blacks' subordination within a stratified society and rendered them powerless against the intrusion of the state into their innermost private lives. This intrusion went hand in hand with the role of the state in legislating and enforcing racial segregation, disfranchisement, and economic discrimination.

James Jones's *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* provides us with a profoundly disturbing example of such intrusion into blacks' private lives. Jones recounts how a federal agency, the Public Health Service, embarked in 1932 upon decades of tests on black men with syphilis, denying them access to its cure in order to assess the disease's debilitating effects on the body.[40] The federal agency felt at liberty to make the study because of its unquestioning acceptance of stereotypes that conflated race, gender, and class. By defining this health problem in racial terms, "objective scientific researchers" could be absolved of all responsibility. Some even posited that blacks had "earned their illness as just recompense for wicked life-styles."[41]

The Public Health Service's willingness to prolong syphilis despite the discovery of penicillin discloses not only the federal government's lack of concern for the health of the men in its study, but its even lesser concern for black women in relationships with these men. Black women failed to receive so much as a pretense of protection, so widely accepted was the belief that the spread of the disease was inevitable because black women were promiscuous by nature. This emphasis on black immorality pre-

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[39] Bettina Aptheker, *Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex and Class in American History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 53–77; Hazel V. Carby, " 'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory," in Gates, ed., 314–15.

[40] James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: Free Press, 1981), 11–29.

[41] Ibid., 22. Elizabeth Fee argues that in the 1920s and 1930s, before a cure was found for syphilis, physicians did not speak in the dispassionate tone of germ theory but, rather, reinforced the image of syphilis as a "black problem" (see her study of Baltimore, "Venereal Disease: The Wages of Sin?" in Peiss and Simmons, eds. [n. 31 above], 182–84).

cluded any sensitivity to congenital syphilis; thus innocent black babies born with the disease went unnoticed and equally unprotected. Certainly the officials of the Public Health Service realized that blacks lived amid staggering poverty, amid a socioeconomic environment conducive to disease. Yet these public servants encoded hegemonic articulations of race into the language of medicine and scientific theory. Their perceptions of sexually transmitted disease, like those of the larger society, were affected by race.[42] Jones concludes:

> The effect of these views was to isolate blacks even further within American society — to remove them from the world of health and to lock them within a prison of sickness. Whether by accident or design, physicians had come dangerously close to depicting the syphilitic black as the representative black. As sickness replaced health as the normal condition of the race, something was lost from the sense of horror and urgency with which physicians had defined disease. The result was a powerful rationale for inactivity in the face of disease, which by their own estimates, physicians believed to be epidemic.[43]

In response to assaults upon black sexuality, according to Darlene Clark Hine, there arose among black women a politics of silence, a "culture of dissemblance." In order to "protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives," black women, especially those of the middle class, reconstructed and represented their sexuality through its absence — through silence, secrecy, and invisibility. In so doing, they sought to combat the pervasive negative images and stereotypes. Black clubwomen's adherence to Victorian ideology, as well as their self-representation as "super moral," according to Hine, was perceived as crucial not only to the protection and upward mobility of black women but also to the attainment of respect, justice, and opportunity for all black Americans.[44]

Race as a double-voiced discourse

As this culture of dissemblance illustrates, black people endeavored not only to silence and conceal but also to dismantle and deconstruct the

[42] For a study of the social construction of venereal disease, from the late nineteenth century through the AIDS crisis of our own time, see Allan M. Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); also see Doris Y. Wilkinson and Gary King, "Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Use of Race as a Variable: Policy Implications," *Milbank Quarterly* 65 (1987): 68.
[43] James H. Jones, 25, 28.
[44] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 915.

dominant society's deployment of race. Racial meanings were never internalized by blacks and whites in an identical way. The language of race has historically been what Bakhtin calls a double-voiced discourse— serving the voice of black oppression and the voice of black liberation. Bakhtin observes: "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his [or her] own intention, his [or her] own accent, when he [or she] appropriates the word, adapting it to his [or her] own semantic and expressive intention."[45] Blacks took "race" and empowered its language with their own meaning and intent, just as the slaves and freedpeople had appropriated white surnames, even those of their masters, and made them their own.[46]

For African-Americans, race signified a cultural identity that defined and connected them as a people, even as a nation. To be called a "race leader," "race man," or "race woman" by the black community was not a sign of insult or disapproval, nor did such titles refer to any and every black person. Quite to the contrary, they were conferred on Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida Wells-Barnett, Mary McLeod Bethune, and the other men and women who devoted their lives to the advancement of their people. When the National Association of Colored Women referred to its activities as "race work," it expressed both allegiance and commitment to the concerns of black people. Through a range of shifting, even contradictory meanings and accentuations expressed at the level of individual and group consciousness, blacks fashioned race into a cultural identity that resisted white hegemonic discourses.

The "two-ness" of being both American and Negro, which Du Bois so eloquently captured in 1903, resonates across time. If blacks as individuals referred to a divided subjectivity—"two warring ideals in one dark body"—they also spoke of a collective identity in the colonial terms of a "nation within a nation."[47] The many and varied voices of black nationalism have resounded again and again from the earliest days of the American republic. Black nationalism found advocates in Paul Cuffee, John Russwurm, and Martin Delany in the nineteenth century, and Marcus

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[45] Bakhtin (n. 13 above), 293, 324.

[46] On slave surnames, see Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 230–56; also George P. Cunningham, " 'Called into Existence': Desire, Gender, and Voice in Frederick Douglass's Narrative of 1845," *Differences* 1, no. 3 (1989): 112–13, 117, 129–31.

[47] Martin Robison Delany wrote in the 1850s of blacks in the United States: "We are a nation within a nation;—as the Poles in Russia, the Hungarians in Austria, the Welsh, Irish, and Scotch in the British Dominions" (see his *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, reprint ed. [New York: Arno, 1969], 209; also W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* [New York: Washington Square Press, 1970], 3).

Garvey, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael in the twentieth.[48] We know far too little about women's perceptions of nationalism, but Pauline Hopkins's serialized novel *Of One Blood* (1903) counterposes black and Anglo-Saxon races: "The dawn of the Twentieth century finds the Black race fighting for existence in every quarter of the globe. From over the sea Africa stretches her hands to the American Negro and cries aloud for sympathy in her hour of trial. . . . In America, caste prejudice has received fresh impetus as the 'Southern brother' of the Anglo-Saxon family has arisen from the ashes of secession, and like the prodigal of old, has been gorged with fatted calf and 'fixin's.' "[49]

Likewise Hannah Nelson, an elementary school graduate employed most of her life in domestic service, told anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney in the 1970s: "We are a nation. The best of us have said it and everybody feels it. I know that will probably bother your white readers, but it is nonetheless true that black people think of themselves as an entity."[50] Thus, when historian Barbara Fields observes that "Afro-Americans invented themselves, not as a race, but as a nation," she alludes to race as a double-voiced discourse.[51] For blacks, race signified cultural identity and heritage, not biological inferiority. However, Fields's discussion understates the power of race to mean nation—specifically, race as the sign of perceived kinship ties between blacks in Africa and throughout the diaspora. In the crucible of the Middle Passage and American slavery, the multiple linguistic, tribal, and ethnic divisions among Africans came to be forged into a single, common ancestry. While not

[48] See, devoted to the subject of nationalism, John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds., *Black Nationalism in America* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon, 1972); Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1978).

[49] Pauline Hopkins, "Heroes and Heroines in Black," *Colored American Magazine* 6 (January 1903): 211. The original publication of *Of One Blood* was serialized in issues of the *Colored American Magazine* between November 1902 and November 1903. See the novel in its entirety, along with Hazel Carby's introduction to the Oxford edition, in Pauline Hopkins, *Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); also Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 155–62.

[50] See John Langston Gwaltney, "A Nation within a Nation," in *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*, ed. John Langston Gwaltney (New York: Random House, 1980), 3–23; and Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 765–70. For a critique of race and essentialism, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 73–96.

[51] Robert Miles (n. 5 above) argues that both race and nation are "supra-class and supra-gender forms of categorisation with considerable potential for articulation" (89–90). Also, see Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," *New Left Review*, no. 181 (May/June 1990), 115.

adhering to "scientific" explanations of superior and inferior races, African-Americans inscribed the black nation with racially laden meanings of blood ties that bespoke a lineage and culture more imagined than real.

Such imaginings were not unique to African-Americans.[52] As nation states emerged in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the concept of "race" came increasingly to articulate a nationalist ideology. Racial representations of nation included, on the one hand, "cosmopolitan" views that characterized each national grouping as contributing its own "special gift" to the complementarity of humankind, and, on the other hand, views of hierarchical difference that justified the existence of nation states and the historical dominance of certain groupings over others. Hence, Thomas Arnold could speak of the Anglo-Saxon's lineage in an 1841 lecture at Oxford: "Our English race is the German race; for though our Norman forefathers had learnt to speak a stranger's language, yet in blood, as we know, they were the Saxons' brethren: both alike belonged to the Teutonic or German stock."[53] Such cultural conceptions surely informed nineteenth-century African-American perceptions of the black nation as a site of group uniqueness.

Throughout the nineteenth century, blacks and whites alike subscribed to what George Fredrickson terms "romantic racialism."[54] Blacks constructed and valorized a self-representation essentially antithetical to that of whites. In his article "The Conservation of Races," published in 1897, Harvard-trained W. E. B. Du Bois disclosed his admiration for what he believed to be the "spiritual, psychical" uniqueness of his people—their "special gift" to humanity.[55] Twentieth-century essentialist concepts

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[52] See Benedict R. Anderson's discussion of nation as "imagined" in the sense of its being limited (not inclusive of all mankind), sovereign, and a community, in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York and London: Verso, 1983), 14–16.

[53] Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D.D.*, 12th ed. (London 1881), 2:324, quoted and cited in Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 66.

[54] George Fredrickson discusses "romantic racialism" within the context of "benign" views of black distinctiveness. This view was upheld by romanticism, abolitionism, and evangelical religion and should be distinguished from "scientific" explanations or cultural interpretations that vilified blacks as beasts and unworthy of human dignity (*The Black Image in the White Mind* [New York: Harper & Row, 1972], 97–99, 101–15, 125–26).

[55] W. E. B. Du Bois stated: "But while race differences have followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of these groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on the physical but infinitely transcending them" ("The Conservation of Races," in *W. E. B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches*

such as "negritude," "soul," and most recently "Afrocentricity" express in new and altered form the continued desire to capture transcendent threads of racial "oneness." Frantz Fanon described the quest for cultural identity and self-recovery as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence."[56] These efforts seek to negate white stereotypes of blacks and in their place insert a black worldview or standpoint. Of critical importance here are the dialogic racial representations effected by blacks themselves against negative representations—or more precisely, blacks' appropriation of the productive power of language for the purpose of resistance.[57]

Such a discursive rendering of race counters images of physical and psychical rupture with images of wholeness. Yet once again, race serves as myth and as a global sign, for it superimposes a "natural" unity over a plethora of historical, socioeconomic, and ideological differences among blacks themselves. This is not to understate the critical liberating intention implicit in blacks' own usage of the term "the race," when referring to themselves as a group. But the characterization obscures rather than mirrors the reality of black heterogeneity. In fact, essentialist or other racialized conceptions of national culture hardly reflect paradigmatic consistency. Black nationalism itself has been a heteroglot conception, categorized variously as revolutionary, bourgeois reformist, cultural, religious, economic, or emigrationist.[58] Race as the sign of cultural identity has been neither a coherent nor static concept among African-Americans. Its perpetuation and resilience have reflected shifting, often monolithic and essentialist assumptions on the part of thinkers attempting to identify and define a black peoplehood or nation.

Acceptance of a nation-based, racialized perspective even appears in the work of black women scholars, who seek to ground a black feminist standpoint in the concrete experience of race and gender oppression. Notwithstanding the critical importance of this work in contesting racism and sexism in the academy and larger society, its focus does not permit sufficient exploration of ideological spaces of difference among

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and Addresses, 1890–1919, ed. Philip S. Foner [New York: Pathfinder, 1970], 77–79, 84); see also Appiah's critique of Du Bois (n. 7 above), 23–29.

[56] Frantz Fanon offers this definition of national culture in contradistinction to one based on "an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature" (*The Wretched of the Earth* [New York: Grove, 1968], 233).

[57] Raymond Williams asserts: "Language has then to be seen as a persistent kind of creation and re-creation: a dynamic presence and a constant regenerative process" (*Marxism and Literature* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1977], 31).

[58] See Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick, eds. (n. 48 above), xxvi–xxx; Winant and Omi (n. 5 above), 38–51.

black women themselves. For example, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins identifies an ethic of caring and an ethic of personal accountability at the root of Afrocentric values and particularly of Afrocentric feminist epistemology, yet she does not investigate how such values and epistemology are affected by differing class positions.[59] In short, she posits but does not account for the *singularity* of an Afro-American women's standpoint amid diverse and conflicting positions of enunciation.

The rallying notion of "racial uplift" among black Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries illustrates the problematic aspects of identifying a standpoint that encompasses all black women. Racial uplift was celebrated in the motto of the National Association of Colored Women—"lifting as we climb." The motto itself expressed a paradox: belief in black womanhood's common cause and recognition of differential values and socioeconomic positions. Racial uplift, while invoking a discursive ground on which to explode negative stereotypes of black women, remained locked within hegemonic articulations of gender, class, and sexuality. Black women teachers, missionaries, and club members zealously promoted values of temperance, sexual repression, and polite manners among the poor.

"Race work" or "racial uplift" equated normality with conformity to white middle-class models of gender roles and sexuality. Given the extremely limited educational and income opportunities during the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, many black women linked mainstream domestic duties, codes of dress, sexual conduct, and public etiquette with both individual success and group progress.[60] Black leaders argued that "proper" and "respectable" behavior proved blacks worthy of equal civil and political rights. Conversely, nonconformity was equated with deviance and pathology and was often cited as a cause of racial inequality and injustice. S. W. Layten, founder of the National League for the Protection of Colored Women and leader of one million black Baptist women, typified this attitude in her statement of 1904: "Unfortunately the minority or bad Negroes have given the race a ques-

[59] E. Frances White's perceptive analysis of African-Americans' contestation of the discursive representation of Africa calls attention to the conservative implications of Afrocentric feminism. See E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism," *Journal of Women's History* 2 (Spring 1990): 90–94; Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" (n. 50 above), 765–70, and *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 10–11, 15. Also for a good critique, see bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

[60] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History," *Gender and History* 1 (Spring 1989): 58–59.

tionable reputation; these degenerates are responsible for every discrim-
ination we suffer."[61]

On a host of levels, racial uplift stood at odds with the daily practices
and aesthetic tastes of many poor, uneducated, and "unassimilated"
black men and women dispersed throughout the rural South or newly
huddled in urban centers.[62] The politics of "respectability" disavowed, in
often repressive ways, much of the expressive culture of the "folk," for
example, sexual behavior, dress style, leisure activity, music, speech pat-
terns, and religious worship patterns. Similar class and sexual tensions
between the discourse of the intelligentsia (the "New Negro") and that of
the "people" (the "folk" turned proletariat in the northern urban con-
text) appear in Hazel Carby's discussion of black women novelists of the
Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s.[63]

Today, the metalanguage of race continues to bequeath its problematic leg-
acy. While its discursive construction of reality into two opposing camps—
blacks versus whites or Afrocentric versus Eurocentric standpoints—
provides the basis for resistance against external forces of black subor-
dination, it tends to forestall resolution of problems of gender, class, and
sexual orientation internal to black communities. The resolution of such
differences is also requisite to the liberation and well-being of "the race."
Worse yet, problems deemed too far astray of respectability are sub-
sumed within a culture of dissemblance. The AIDS crisis serves as a case
in point, with AIDS usually contextualized within a Manichean opposi-
tion of good versus evil that translates into heterosexuality versus homo-
sexuality or wholesome living versus intravenous drug use. At a time
when AIDS is a leading killer of black women and their children in
impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, educational and support strate-

[61] National Baptist Convention, *Journal of the Twenty-fourth Annual Session of the
National Baptist Convention and the Fifth Annual Session of the Woman's Convention,
Held in Austin, Texas, September 14–19, 1904* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing
Board, 1904), 324; also, I discuss the politics of respectability as both subversive and
conservative in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's
Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Uni-
versity Press, 1992), in press, chap. 7.
[62] Houston A. Baker, Jr., in his discussion of the black vernacular, characterizes the
"quotidian sounds of black every day life" as both a defiant and entrancing voice (*Afro-
American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* [Madison: University of
Wisconsin Press, 1988], 95–107); see also Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology and
Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1984), 11–13. Similarly, John Langston Gwaltney calls the "folk" culture of today's
cities a "core black culture," which is "more than ad hoc synchronic adaptive survival."
Gwaltney links its values and epistemology to a long peasant tradition. See Gwaltney,
ed. (n. 50 above), xv–xvii.
[63] Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* (n. 49 above), 163–75; also Henry Louis
Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the
Black," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 129–55.

gies lag far behind those of white gay communities.[64] Black women's groups and community organizations fail to tackle the problem with the priority it merits. They shy away from public discussion in large measure because of the historic association of disease and racial/sexual stereotyping.

Conclusion

By analyzing white America's deployment of race in the construction of power relations, perhaps we can better understand why black women historians have largely refrained from an analysis of gender along the lines of the male/female dichotomy so prevalent among white feminists. Indeed, some black women scholars adopt the term *womanist* instead of *feminist* in rejection of gender-based dichotomies that lead to a false homogenizing of women. By so doing they follow in the spirit of black scholar and educator Anna J. Cooper, who in *A Voice from the South* (1892) inextricably linked her racial identity to the "quiet, undisputed dignity" of her womanhood.[65] At the threshold of the twenty-first century, black women scholars continue to emphasize the inseparable unity of race and gender in their thought. They dismiss efforts to bifurcate the identity of black women (and indeed of all women) into discrete categories—as if culture, consciousness, and lived experience could at times constitute "woman" isolated from the contexts of race, class, and sexuality that give form and content to the particular women we are.[66]

On the other hand, we should challenge both the overdeterminancy of race vis-à-vis social relations among blacks themselves and conceptions of the black community as harmonious and monolithic. The historic reality of racial conflict in America has tended to devalue and discourage attention to gender conflict within black communities and to tensions of class or sexuality among black women. The totalizing tendency of race

[64] See Bruce Lambert, "AIDS in Black Women Seen as Leading Killer," *New York Times* (July 11, 1990); Ernest Quimby and Samuel R. Friedman, "Dynamics of Black Mobilization against AIDS in New York City," *Social Problems* 36 (October 1989): 407–13; Evelynn Hammonds, "Race, Sex, Aids: The Construction of 'Other,' " *Radical America* 29 (November–December 1987): 28–36; also Brandt (n. 42 above), 186–92.

[65] Anna Julia Cooper stated: "When and where I enter in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (*A Voice from the South*, reprint of the 1892 ed. [New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969], 31).

[66] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii; also see, e.g., Elsa Barkley Brown's introductory pages and historical treatment of Maggie Lena Walker, black Richmond banker in the early twentieth century, which reflect this perspective ("Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs* 14, no. 3 [Spring 1989]: 610–15, 630–33).

precludes recognition and acknowledgment of intragroup social relations as relations of power. With its implicit understandings, shared cultural codes, and inchoate sense of a common heritage and destiny, the meta-language of race resounds over and above a plethora of conflicting voices. But it cannot silence them.

Black women of different economic and regional backgrounds, of different skin tones and sexual orientations, have found themselves in conflict over interpretation of symbols and norms, public behavior, cop-ing strategies, and a variety of micropolitical acts of resistance to struc-tures of domination.[67] Although racialized cultural identity has clearly served blacks in the struggle against discrimination, it has not sufficiently addressed the empirical reality of gender conflict within the black com-munity or class differences among black women themselves. Historian E. Frances White makes this point brilliantly when she asserts that "the site of counter-discourse is itself contested terrain."[68] By fully recognizing race as an unstable, shifting, and strategic reconstruction, feminist schol-ars must take up new challenges to inform and confound many of the assumptions currently underlying Afro-American history and women's history. We must problematize much more of what we take for granted. We must bring to light and to coherence the one and the many that we always were in history and still actually are today.

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[67] I am using "micropolitics" synonymously with James C. Scott's term "infrapoli-tics." According to Scott, the infrapolitics of subordinate groups not only constitute everyday, prosaic, "unobtrusive" level of political struggle in contradistinction to overt protests but also constitute the "cultural and structural underpinning" of more visible discontent (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990], 183–92).
[68] White (n. 59 above), 82.