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When and Where I Enter

*The Impact of Black Women
on Race and Sex in America*

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~ *Casting of the Die: Morality, Slavery, and Resistance* ~

I most sincerely doubt if any other race of women could have brought its fineness up through so devilish a fire.

—W.E.B. DU BOIS

Chattel slavery in the North American colonies preceded the arrival of the first African men and women, who came to Virginia in 1619. Many of the White, mostly poor, indentured servants who came to the colonies found themselves “manipulated in the interests of the [Virginia] Company” and “held in servitude beyond a stipulated term,” according to colonial historian James Ballagh. The system of indenture, he added, “tended to pass into a property relation which asserted a control of varying extent over the bodies and liberties of their person during service as if they were things.”¹ Henry Spelman knew that; in 1609 he was sold to a group of Native Americans by Captain John Smith. In the same year, Thomas Salvage was traded to Native Americans for one of their own servants.

Furthermore, not all of the approximately quarter-million servants who came to the settlements did so voluntarily. Some were kidnapped, others lured under false pretenses, coerced or entrapped. They came on overcrowded ships, were hoisted onto auction blocks where they were stripped, examined, and sold without regard to the separation of families. They were thought to be contented with their lot, lazy, and immoral. Female servants were sexually exploited by masters. And not all so victimized were adults. Records show the arrival of 1,500 “friendless boyes and girls” who were expropriated to work in the colonies. The authorities were so pleased with their services, they pleaded for more.

A month before African men and women set foot in Virginia, the colony’s legislative body, the House of Burgesses, passed a law stating that masters could whip their servants and that female servants could

not marry without the master's consent. Another ominous development was that in the same year, 90 "young and incorrupt" English women were sold to the Virginia settlers as wives for 120 pounds of tobacco each.

During the first years of the African presence in North America, Blacks had a higher status than other servants, because the circumstances of their seizure put them under the protection of international law. The first Africans worked as servants for the colonial administrators, and in subsequent years they worked side by side with White servants. Africans worked out their indentures, and several subsequently purchased large parcels of land—and the services of their own servants. Black women and White also shared the same kinds of labor in a society where, as historian Eleanor Flexner points out, little distinction was made among the duties of the indentured servant, the artisan's wife, and the gently born mistress.

Perhaps the historically most important Black woman of the first generation of Africans was Isabell Williams. Her marriage to Anthony, who had been on the same ship, resulted in the birth of probably the first Black child in America. Baby Williams made his auspicious appearance in 1624. The threesome were not listed as servants on the official register, indicating that they were most likely free persons in the colony.

But all of that would change as the need for labor—more profitable labor—increased. Some would have to be exploited more than others, and that meant creating categories of class and color. The dress rehearsal for slavery and sexual exploitation had already taken place, and the mind-set of the English administrators influenced the casting of the various roles. It was a seventeenth-century mind that had been shaped by the Renaissance, with its cult of individualism and the "moral" right to exploit those weaker than oneself; by the Protestant Reformation's ethic and evangelical piety, which separated body from soul; by the Age of Discovery, which found a continent of people different from the explorers; and by the Commercial Revolution, with its vision of wealth on a global scale. The slow but inexorable change in the status of Blacks and women reflected all these developments.

The 1619 bride sale presupposed that the settlers made a distinction between servants and those "incorrupt" women specifically imported to be wives. After all, it had been accepted as far back as Plato that women fell into three categories: whore, mistress, and wife—the last of whom was expected to organize the household and provide "legitimate" heirs to her husband's material acquisitions.

Of course, acquisition was what this early multinational corporation, later called America, was largely about. And the seventeenth-century outpost of Western civilization offered a tremendous challenge to colonial administrators. Profit had to be wrung out of an erotic wilderness that could make a man forget why he was there in the first place. The challenge became more emotive as the colonies were populated by increasing numbers of Africans, who at once represented the means of wealth and the "dark," sensuous side of the English soul. So, Englishmen had to "remind themselves constantly what it meant to be civilized, Christian, rational, sexually controlled and white," observed historian Ronald Takaki.² This need would have a tremendous impact on the history of both women and Blacks in America. Blacks would be victimized by the White impulse to affirm, through Black degradation, "the virtues of self-control and industry";³ to impute "to people they call 'savages' the instinctual forces they had within themselves," as Takaki observed.⁴

While Blacks were to be degraded for this purpose, White women would be "elevated"—sometimes tyrannically so. In addition to organizing the household, their job was to civilize men, raise them "above the sordid and sensual considerations which hold sway . . . in their intercourse with each other."⁵ The Protestant ethic, which delayed gratification in order to accumulate capital, did not abide well with "sordid and sensual considerations." And women who provoked passion rather than warding it off were looked down upon and often punished.

Black women—described by English slave traders as "hot constitution'd ladies," possessed of a "lascivious temper," who had an inclination for White men—would be impaled on the cutting edges of this race/sex dialectic.⁶

Thus it is little wonder that the focus fell on them when colonial administrators began to make this dialectic the law of the land. The first judicial decision that specifically referred to race in the model Virginia colony involved a Black woman. The decision, *Re: Davis*, rendered in 1630, read:

Hugh Davis to be soundly whipt before an assembly of negroes & others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and the shame of Christianity by defiling his body in lying with a negro which fault he is to actk [sic] Next sabbath day.⁷

As law historian A. Leon Higginbotham infers, since the race of Davis was not mentioned he was probably White. The rarity of mas-

ters' being whipped suggests that Davis was not a member of that class. The tendency of court records to specify the given names of Black men leaves one to assume that the "negro" in question was a woman (and further, that Black women were held in lower regard than Black men). Although all "fornicators" were punished (if caught, that is) Davis's crime evidently contravened not only the law of man, but of God and Christianity as well. That his punishment was to be witnessed by an "assembly of negroes" indicates it was to be an example for the Black community as well as the White.

The implications of the Davis decision became clearer as the number of Africans rose in the colony from a mere twenty-three in 1625 to three hundred by 1640. The increase stimulated the inexorable force that would bind slavery and race inextricably. No African man or woman who set foot in Virginia after 1640 had the benefit of indentures or the hope that their "service" would be anything but lifelong. Other colonies also reflected this trend. In that year a Black servant, John Punch, and two White servants were found guilty of attempting to run away from their master in Maryland. The Whites were sentenced to four additional years of service, but Punch was to serve his master "or his assigns for the time of his natural life, here or elsewhere." For Blacks it was an ominous precedent, although there was still equal-opportunity exploitation: A year later Massachusetts, that bastion of Puritan piety, became the first colony to recognize slavery by statute, but its first victim was a White servant sentenced to slavery for hitting his master. Also in 1641, Virginia authorized the branding of both Black and White servants.

In the same year as the Punch case, a Virginia court again rendered a decision regarding the punishment of a White man who slept with a Black woman, impregnating her. Perhaps reflecting the deterioration of the status of Blacks in the colony, this time the woman was to be whipped for the indiscretion while the man simply did penance before the church.

By 1643, clear evidence that Blacks were seen as less than human came with the plummeting status of Black women that was established by Virginia's new division of labor. In 1629, Virginia administrators had designated "tithable persons" as all those that "worke in the ground of what qualitie or condition soever." In 1643, however, tithable persons included all adult men and in addition *Black* women.⁸ This distinction was made twice again before 1660 in Virginia, and Maryland adopted a similar policy in 1664. How the new division of

labor reflected upon women of African descent became clear in a 1656 tract written by Virginia's John Hammond. Servant women, he wrote, were to be used in a domestic capacity, rather than the field. "Yet som wenches," he concluded "that are nasty and beastly and not fit to be so employed are put in the ground."⁹

In 1661 Virginia gave official statutory recognition to slavery, and seven years later erased the ambiguity surrounding the status of the Black woman in the colony. Was she "nasty and beastly" because of her color, or because of her status? The question was answered simply. Even free Black women were to be considered tithable, the law stipulated, and they should in no way expect to be "admitted to full fruition of the exemptions and impunities of the English."¹⁰ A year later Virginia passed the most insidious legislation affecting Black women:

Children got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother, and if any Christian shall commit fornication with a Negro man or woman, he shall pay double the fines of the former act.¹¹

The circle of denigration was virtually complete with this law, which managed to combine racism, sexism, greed, and piety within its tenets. Fornication with a Black woman or man was unchristian and so carried a greater fine than intraracial liaisons. At the same time, children born of a Black woman, no matter who the father was, would inherit *her* status—which was rapidly becoming synonymous with that of a slave. That the status was inherited from the mother was in direct contradiction of the English law—and with reason. Such legislation laid women open to the most vicious exploitation. For a master could save the cost of buying new slaves by impregnating his own slave, or for that matter having anyone impregnate her. Being able to reproduce one's own labor force would be well worth the fine, even in the unlikely event that it would be imposed.

White women were not immune to these legal developments. Virginia administrators were always complaining about "loose" servant women who attempted to gain their freedom by laying "all their bastards to their master." It was no coincidence that in the same year the above legislation was passed, another law said that any servant woman who had a child by her master was subject to two additional years of service. The guilty servant was to be "sold" to the churchwardens, who would employ her in the tobacco fields. The fruits of

her labor would be shared by the parish. (Interestingly, men were not punished for their role in the matter.) The preamble of the 1662 law demonstrated the impulse to "raise" White women while denigrating Black women. White servant women were sentenced to the church, to discourage the tendency of "dissolute masters" who had "gotten their maids with child" in order to claim economic benefits.¹² That of course was exactly what the law regarding Black women encouraged.

But in the late seventeenth century it was evident that a loophole was undermining all of this meticulous legislation. White women, and, most disturbingly, free White women, continued to cohabit and produce mulatto children with Black men. Consequently, in 1691 another piece of legislation stipulated that any free Englishwoman who had a "bastard child by a Negro" was to pay a fine of fifteen pounds. Default in payment meant that she would be sold to those mean old churchwardens for five years.¹³ But what if they or even White servant women chose to marry their Black partners? Well, that was taken care of too. Another provision of the law showed that the administrators had come to realize that everyone had to be taken into consideration. The provision said that if a White, whether bond or free, intermarried with a Negro, mulatto, or Indian, bond or free, the couple would be banished from the colony forever—a grim punishment in the seventeenth century. Even so, the punishment could have been worse. Banishment may have been chosen by the Virginia lawmakers after hearing of the problems of their sister colony Maryland, which also tried to stop interracial marriages. There they attempted to *enslave, for the lifetime of her husband*, any freeborn Englishwoman who married a Black slave. However, the courts were finally forced to rescind the law. The attitude toward Blacks, the laws of God, and pure White womanhood notwithstanding, so many masters purchased White women for the explicit purpose of marrying them to their Black slaves, "thus making slaves out of them," that it had become a scandal.

By 1705 Virginia had made it patently clear who were slaves and who were not. In that year, the publication of Robert Beverley's *History & Present State of Virginia* carried a note of finality regarding the status of both Blacks in general and Black women in particular. "Slaves are the Negroes" he wrote and:

Sufficient distinction is also made between the female Servants & Slaves: for a White woman is rarely or never put in the Ground, if she be good for anything else, and to Discourage all Planters from using Women so. Their Law imposes the heaviest Taxes

upon Female-Servants working in the Ground. . . . Whereas on the other hand it is a common thing to work a Woman Slave out of Doors: nor does the law make any Distinction in her Taxes, whether her Work be Abroad or at Home.¹⁴

So, by the early eighteenth century an incredible social, legal, and racial structure was put in place. Women were firmly stratified in the roles that Plato envisioned. Blacks were chattel, White men could impregnate a Black woman with impunity, and she alone could give birth to a slave. Blacks constituted a permanent labor force and metaphor that were perpetuated through the Black woman's womb. And all of this was done within the context of the Church, the operating laws of capitalism, and the psychological needs of White males. Subsequent history would be a variation on the same theme.

Resistance

In its infancy, slavery was particularly harsh. Physical abuse, dismemberment, and torture were common to an institution that was far from peculiar to its victims. Partly as a result, in the eighteenth century, slave masters did not underestimate the will of their slaves to rebel, even their female slaves. Black women proved especially adept at poisoning their masters, a skill undoubtedly imported from Africa. Incendiarism was another favorite method; it required neither brute physical strength nor direct confrontation. But Black women used every means available to resist slavery—as men did—and if caught were punished as harshly.

In 1681 a slave named Maria and two male companions were tried for attempting to burn down the home of their master in Massachusetts. One of the men was banished from the colony; the other was hanged. In the judgment of the Puritan court however, Maria's crime was more serious than mere arson. The court found that "she did not have the feare of God before her eyes" and that her action was "instigated by the devil."¹⁵ Whether Maria feared God or not is open to speculation, but it is not difficult to imagine the look in that woman's eyes. Maria was burned at the stake, and perhaps as an afterthought the lifeless body of her companion was thrown in to burn with her ashes.

In 1708 a woman was among a small band of slaves who killed seven Whites in Newton, Long Island. Four of the slaves were executed; the men were hanged, the woman burned at the stake.

In 1712, New York City (where the first non-Indian women were Black) was gripped in the panic of a slave revolt. Twenty-three slaves, men and women, had armed themselves with guns and knives and gathered to set fire to a slaveholder's house. They were ultimately subdued, but not before nine Whites had been killed and six injured. Among those arrested was a slave woman, visibly pregnant.

In 1732 the discovery of a slave plot in Louisiana resulted in the hanging of a Black woman and the "breaking on the wheel" of four of her male conspirators. Their heads were stuck onto poles at each end of New Orleans as a warning to others.

In 1741, a slave named Kate and a Black boatswain were convicted of trying to burn down the *entire community* of Charlestown, Massachusetts. Like Maria, Kate was singled out for having a "malicious and evil intent." (The devil, it seems, was very busy in Massachusetts.)

In 1766 a slave woman in Maryland was executed for setting fire to her master's home, tobacco house, and outhouse, burning them all to the ground. The prosecutor in the case noted that there had been two other houses full of tobacco burnt "in the country this winter."¹⁶

Few attempted revolts struck more fear into the hearts of slaveholders than the one led by Nancy Prosser and her husband, Gabriel, in Virginia, when one thousand slaves met outside of Richmond in 1800 and marched on the city. Though they were routed by the militia, the specter lingered of thousands of slaves—estimated at two thousand to fifty thousand in number—primed for rebellion.

Black women resisted slavery in other ways as well. During the Revolutionary War period for example, the issue of slavery was raised anew as the contradictions sharpened between enslavement of Blacks on the one hand and the colonists' struggle for independence on the other. In this era, slaves like Jenny Slew and Elizabeth Freeman (an eighteenth-century relative of W.E.B. Du Bois) of Massachusetts successfully sued for their freedom on the grounds that the Bill of Rights applied to them as "persons." Freeman's case, heard in 1781, established the legal fact that "a Bill of Rights, in Massachusetts at least, had indeed abolished slavery."¹⁷ The success of Slew and Freeman, among others, largely reflected the fact that the late eighteenth century was a fluid period for Blacks. The underlying philosophy of the war was one reason; the need for Black soldiers to fight it was another. In the beginning, the American commanders were loath to arm Blacks or permit them to fight. However, the need for additional manpower,

and the fact that the English Loyalist forces not only welcomed Blacks but promised them freedom for their efforts, made the Americans respond in kind.

An intriguing footnote to this history is that at the height of the war, George Washington invited a Black slave to confer with him at his headquarters. The slave was Phillis Wheatley, a poet who had published a volume of verse and thus become the first Black and the second woman in America to do so. What the country's most famous slaveholder and the country's most famous slave discussed during the half-hour meeting is open to speculation. However, only days later, George Washington issued an order to conscript Blacks into the Continental Army.

The role of Blacks in the Revolutionary War, the discontent of a White working class forced to compete with slave labor, and the infeasibility of slavery at a time of increasing industrialization hastened its abolition in the North by 1830. At the same time, however, slavery became more viable in the South with the invention of the cotton gin and the demands for cotton to feed England's nascent industrial revolution. But after 1830 there were new challenges hurled at the South. The increased number of freedmen and women—there were 100,000 in the South alone by 1810—and the rise of the new abolitionists bent on total and uncompensated abolition, demanded a new southern strategy, one that would suppress the potential for slave revolts such as the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831. And the institution did indeed change.

After 1830 slavery became "domesticated," according to historian Willie Lee Rose. It became "a domestic institution which came to mean slavery idealized, slavery translated into a fundamental and idealized institution, the family."¹⁸ Especially among the wealthier planters, this meant that slave masters adopted a new ethic, and a new image. No longer the cruel and sadistic abusers who kept slaves in submission by beating them half to death, they became "benign," if stern, patriarchs who lorded over their Black "brood." The stick was replaced by the carrot. Masters provided protection, physical necessities, and minimum brutality in return for slave obedience and loyalty. This practice was even reflected in the new Slave Codes, which required that slaves be decently provided for, while prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment.

If the social contract was upheld on both sides, then the slave master and his slaves ideally functioned like an extended "family."

Thus prevailed the resplendent myth of the Big House with the wily mammy, and house slaves—some of whom may have been the master's own progeny. Thus the tranquil picture of the field couples in their cabin surrounded by grinning pickaninnies; of "aunties" and "uncles" with eyes lidded by years of obedience. And what better authority figure than the paternalistic slave master, aristocratic in bearing, bragging that his slaves were better treated than the working classes of Europe? And of course there was the mistress, patronizingly tolerant, and as loyal to Mammy as Mammy was to her.

However operative all this was in practice, the ideal of a Victorian domestic institution had a tremendous effect on slaves and on women. Although the slaves may have been physically better off than before, the psychological effects of the new slavery were potentially devastating. Along with the "benefit" of obedience came the no-holds-barred response to disobedience. The double-sided coin "caused abolitionists to assert that slavery was becoming harsher with each passing year, and enabled southern apologists to state, with equal confidence, that slavery was becoming milder," notes Willie Lee Rose. She continues:

In fact both sides were right, and both sides were wrong. As physical conditions improved, the slave's essential humanity was being recognized. But new laws restricting chattels' movement and eliminating their education indicate blacks were categorized as a special and different kind of humanity, as lesser humans in a dependency assumed to be perpetual. In earlier, harsher times, they had been seen as luckless, unfortunate barbarians. Now they were to be treated as children never expected to grow up.¹⁹

The emphasis on family was another dimension of the new slavery. Unlike the slavocracies of South America and the Caribbean, Southerners encouraged organic family units among their slaves. In other countries there were disproportionate numbers of male slaves, illustrating the tendency of those countries primarily to import males to work the plantations. In contrast, by 1840 the ratio of Black men to women in the United States was almost equal. This factor had a number of consequences: Family relationships among American slaves both discouraged rebellion and runaways, and encouraged a self-sustaining reproduction of the labor force.

The Victorian family ideal also carried a specific consequence for women. White southern women found themselves enmeshed in an interracial web in which wives, children, and slaves were all expected

to obey the patriarchal head of the household] as historian Anne Firor Scott observed. The compliance of White women became inextricably linked to that of the slaves. For, it was believed, "any tendency of one member of the system to assert themselves against the master threatened the whole."²⁰ As it was often asserted by slavery apologists, any change in the role of women *or* Blacks would contribute to the downfall not only of slavery, but of the family and society as well. Little wonder that the English-born feminist Margaret Fuller held that "There exists in the mind of men a tone of feeling toward women as toward slaves."²¹ Little wonder that the earliest White American feminists, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, had been reared in a wealthy slaveholding family. And little wonder, too, that southern women, as a group, were the most reluctant to assert a feminist sensibility.

The Victorian "extended" family also put the "moral" categories of women into sharp relief. The White wife was hoisted on a pedestal so high that she was beyond the sensual reach of her own husband. Black women were consigned to the other end of the scale, as mistresses, whores, or breeders. Thus, in the nineteenth century, Black women's resistance to slavery took on an added dimension] With the diminution of overt rebellion, their resistance became more covert or internalized. The focus of the struggle was no longer against the notion that they were less human, as in Elizabeth Freeman's time, but that they were different kinds of humans. For women this meant spurning their morally inferior roles of mistress, whore, and breeder—though under the "new" slavery they were "rewarded" for acquiescing in them. It was the factor of reward that made this resistance a fundamentally feminist one, for at its base was a rejection of the notion that they were the master's property. So Black women had a double challenge under the new slavery: They had to resist the property relation (which was different in form, if not in nature, to that of White women) and they had to inculcate the same values into succeeding generations.]

The narrative of Linda Brent, a South Carolina slave, revealed her struggle against the exchange of sexual favors for material reward. Brent's master, Dr. Flint, didn't try to "rape" Brent by physically overpowering her; he endeavored to make the young slave submit to his will. From the age of fifteen, Flint tried "to people my young mind with unclean images," Brent wrote.²² He began telling the young girl that she was his property and "must be subject to his will in all things."²³ According to Brent, her master seemed to become obsessed with her "voluntary" submission. He "met me at every turn," she said, "swearing . . . he could compel me to submit to him."²⁴

Finally he offered her a cabin on the edge of the plantation if she would accede to his demands. Brent resisted, however, and escaped to the North. Even then, Flint continued to pursue her until a friend purchased her freedom. Although Brent could feel safe for the first time in her adult life, she couldn't help viewing her "purchase" with mixed emotions. "The more my mind had become enlightened," she wrote, "the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property; and to pay money to those who had so grievously oppressed me seemed like taking from my suffering the glory of triumph."²⁵

For a slave like Linda Brent to have developed such a consciousness, it was necessary for some authority figure to have given her a sense of self that contradicted the dictates of the new slavery. In her case it was a grandmother, for as Brent wrote, her hatred of her master stemmed from his attempt to destroy the values her grandmother had "inculcated" in her. Slave narratives are replete with examples of mothers attempting to impart such values to their children, often at the price of great emotional anguish. The writer of Sojourner Truth's narrative wrote, for example, that when Truth became a mother, "she would sometimes whip her child when it cried for more bread rather than give it a piece secretly, lest it should learn to take what was not its own."²⁶ As Truth explained in the narrative, her action was a means of keeping herself and her child from being compromised by the slave system. "The Lord knows how many times I let my children go hungry, rather than take secretly the bread I liked not to ask for," she said.²⁷

The efforts of slave mothers to instill values in their children had an effect that was not always positive. The need to be exceedingly harsh or enterprising where their children were concerned often created emotional distance between mother and child. A slave by the name of Aunt Sally recalled how stern her mother was, "rarely talking with her children, but training them to the best of her ability in all industry and honesty. Every moment she could gain from labor," the narrator wrote, "was spent in spinning and knitting and sewing to keep them decently clothed."²⁸

The tension was greater, noted the slave Bethany Veney, when the child was a daughter, whose "almost certain doom is to minister to the unbridled lust of the slaveowner."²⁹ When Veney's daughter was born, she wished that both of them could "die right there and then."³⁰ Such a wish is commonly expressed in the slave narratives of women, and a number of the rare but not insignificant instances of infanticide can be seen within this context.

It is not difficult to imagine the anxiety of a mother whose daughter had reached the age of puberty in the slave South. According to the narratives, it was that anxiety that created the greatest friction between mother and daughter. "The mother of a slave is very watchful," Brent wrote, especially after she reaches puberty. "This leads to many questions, and this well-meant course has a tendency to drive her from maternal councils."³¹

In Brent's case it caused desperate loneliness, which led to an illicit affair with a White man. When Brent's grandmother discovered Linda's indiscretion, the recrimination was harsh. "I'd rather see you dead," her grandmother told her. "You are a disgrace to your dead mother."³² The grandmother tore off a wedding ring and silver thimble from Brent's fingers—keepsakes of her deceased mother—and told Brent never to talk to her again.

In the world of the slave mother, there was little room for compassion, because there was no room for weakness. This was especially true when the mother herself had been compromised. A Northerner who settled in Mississippi spoke of mothers who were concubines there: "They had too much pride and self-respect to rear their daughters for such a purpose," he said. "If driven to desperation, she destroyed herself to prevent it, or killed them."³³

Slave communities also enforced moral codes. Undiscriminating behavior could get a person run out of church; and in some communities a "loose" woman could be the subject of collective recrimination. One slave, Priscilla McCollough, explained that if a woman wasn't acting as she should, her neighbors would adopt an African custom and "play the banjo" on her: make her a subject of a public song that warned her that she "betta change."³⁴

Although, as in many African societies, prenuptial intercourse was not necessarily frowned upon, having a baby outside of marriage often was. In spite of the vagaries of the slave system, marriage, fidelity, and an organized family life were important values, combining the ethics of the society, African mores, and resistance to the new slavery.

Perhaps the most dramatic and least known act of resistance was the refusal of slave women to perform their most essential role, producing baby slaves, for which they were rewarded. "Every woman who is pregnant," observed the plantation mistress Frances Kemble, "is relieved of a certain portion of her work in the field. . . . Certain additions of clothing and an additional weekly ration are bestowed upon the family. . . . The more frequently she adds to the number of

her master's livestock by bringing new slaves into the world, the more claims she will have upon his consideration and good will."³⁵

Even so, a Texas slave by the name of Rose Williams tried to resist a forcible mating. When her master placed a healthy specimen by the name of Rufus in her cabin for this purpose, she chased him out with a three-foot poker. Subsequent visits by Rufus met with the same response. Rose Williams finally relented when the master threateningly reminded her that he had purchased her entire family to save them from being separated. Rose upheld her end of the desperate bargain and bore Rufus two children.³⁶

Some slave women, perhaps a significant number, did not bear offspring for the system at all. They used contraceptives and abortives in an attempt to resist the system, and to gain control over their bodies. In 1860 a Tennessee physician, reading a paper before the Rutherford County Medical Society, talked of the wide use of camphor as a contraceptive: "They take it just before or after menstruation, in quantities sufficient to produce a little nervousness for two or three days; when it has effect they consider themselves safe."³⁷

When contraception failed, slave women took more extreme measures. "All country practitioners are aware of the frequent complaints of planters about the unnatural tendency in the African female population to destroy her offspring," observed a Georgia physician in 1849. "Whole families of women . . . fail to have any children."³⁸ Another physician, writing in a Nashville, Tennessee, medical journal, told of a planter who kept between four and six slave women "of the proper age to breed," but in twenty-five years only two children had been born on the plantation. When the slave owner purchased new slaves, every pregnancy miscarried by the fourth month. Finally it was discovered that the women were taking "medicine" supplied by an old slave woman to induce abortions.

At least one slave narrative indicates that the women understood the larger significance of their act. "If all bond women had been of the same mind," wrote the slave Jane Blake, "how soon the institution could have vanished from the earth."³⁹

Resistance Among the Free

Free Black women in the North also had to struggle with the consequences of being perceived as a "different kind of humanity." Abolition hadn't erased the taint of their alleged immorality, and converging social and economic forces in the 1830's added a new

challenge. With the emergence of a self-conscious middle class, Black women had to overcome notions about the relationship of class—as well as color—to morality.

Symbolized by the humming New England textile mills, northern industrialization was reaching new heights in this period. The consequent broader flow of capital created a new middle class striving for upper-class status. For women, the vehicle for these aspirations was what became known as the "cult of the lady" or the "cult of true womanhood." The idea of the lady was not new of course. What had changed was the *cult* idea, its elevation to a status symbol, as feminist historian Gerda Lerner points out. Now a woman had to be true to the cult's cardinal tenets of domesticity, submissiveness, piety, and purity in order to be good enough for society's inner circles. Failing to adhere to any of these tenets—which the overwhelming number of Black women could hardly live up to—made one less than a moral, "true" woman.

Domesticity had a central position in the cult idea. The true woman's exclusive role was as homemaker, mother, housewife, and family tutor of the social and moral graces. Isolated within the home, women "raised" men above lusty temptation while keeping themselves beyond its rapacious grasp. Women's imprisonment in the home virtually guaranteed piety and purity. Submissiveness, too, was assured where housewives depended on male support. When leisure (formerly scorned as idleness) rather than industriousness indicated one's social standing, middle-class women, once contributors to the family economy, became models of "conspicuously unproductive expenditure," as economist Thorstein Veblen noted.⁴⁰

For White men, the cult was convenient. In an increasingly industrial economy, more of them were forced to leave the farms for occupations that middle-class women had enjoyed. Factory owners benefited from the new status symbol as well. During the early rise of the factory system, the main source of labor was proud—if needy—Puritan girls who saw their work as a stopgap until they married. Although the work was strenuous and the wages low, such employment still carried a certain status—and the women showed themselves willing to organize in order to better working conditions and pay. With the coming of the cult idea, however, work outside the home lost its prestige, and women like the Puritan girls were no longer expected to be *in* the labor force but to stay home and *reproduce* the labor force. So when the cult of the lady took hold, they were replaced by poorer immigrant women, a cheaper, more permanent, and more

exploitable source of workers. Therefore it was no coincidence, Lerner observed, that "the slogan 'a woman's place is in the home' took on a certain aggressiveness and shrillness precisely at the time when increasing numbers of poorer women left their homes to become factory workers."⁴¹ It was also no coincidence, she could have added, that it occurred at a time when the abolition of slavery brought Black women into the wage-labor force. They, however, were excluded from the factories, which for white women had afforded, in the words of the nineteenth-century writer Harriet Martineau, "a most welcome resource to some thousands of young women, unwilling to give themselves to domestic service."⁴² The exclusion of Black women from the industrial labor force created a legacy that continued for more than a century.

Nor was it only the factories that excluded them. "There was not a single trade in which Negroes were allowed to work beside white people," a study of northern Blacks revealed. "They were banished to the galleys of menial labor."⁴³ By 1847 a census revealed that close to half the female Black population of Philadelphia consisted of washerwomen and domestic servants. About 10 percent were needlewomen, and 5 percent involved in trades like hairdressing and dressmaking, jobs that could be performed in their own homes. While the White female labor force was made up primarily of single women, Black women, both married and single, were forced to work, though single women tended to be domestics, while married women, who needed to tend to children and family, were most often washerwomen.

At a time when the former White servant class moved a rung higher, the economic reasons for relegating Black women to the lowest category of labor are obvious. But Black women were also forced to confront a new dimension of racial discrimination in this period, one that emerged as a result of "true womanhood."

As the women's magazines and romance literature of the period suggested, madness, sometimes death, and always tragedy were the fate of a woman who could not fulfill the "attributes" of true womanhood. To be lacking in any of those qualities meant a woman was unnatural, unfeminine, and thus a species of a different—if not lower—female order. Since only women of leisure could even hope to join the pantheon of ladyhood, true women, with all the attendant moral implications, became virtually synonymous with the upper class. So, "Victorian morality," as Gerda Lerner observed "applied to the 'bet-

ter' classes only. It was taken for granted during the period and well into the 20th century that working-class women—and especially Black women—were freely available for sexual use by upper-class males."⁴⁴ The assumption had less to do with real circumstances than with the idea of immutable natural laws that governed morality and femininity. These laws stated that women who worked outside the home, or whose race had a history of sexual exploitation, were outside the realm of "womanhood" and its prerogatives.

Black women activists traversed a tricky and sometimes contradictory path in responding to the challenge. On the one hand they agreed with the fundamental premises of the Victorian ethic. On the other, they opposed its racist and classist implications. At the same time they were conscious of the pressure on free Blacks to prove they could be acculturated into American society. Because of their alleged inability to do so, organizations like the American Colonization Society, which included some of the most influential White liberals in the country, were stepping up efforts to repatriate free Blacks to Africa. For Black women, *acculturation* was translated as their ability to be "ladies"—a burden of proof that carried an inherent class-consciousness.

In part, the proliferation of Black ladies' literary, intelligence, temperance, and moral improvement societies in this period was a reaction to that pressure. But despite their titles, these organizations did more than pursue cultural activities. The Ohio Literary Ladies Society, for example, "probably did more towards the establishment of schools for Black children than any other group of the time in the state," noted the Howard University archivist Dorothy Porter in her study of the Black women's literary societies organized between 1828 and 1846.⁴⁵ The societies also helped needy Black women, gave financial aid to Black newspapers, and provided forums for discussion of relevant issues.

In the latter capacity, the Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of Boston did a daring thing. It sponsored a young abolitionist's speech before a mixed audience of men and women in Boston's Franklin Hall. The act was a daring one because the abolitionist was a woman, and a Black woman at that. In 1832 women didn't speak in public, especially on serious issues like civil rights and, most especially, feminism. In June, just four months before her appearance, the most progressive of the abolitionist newspapers, *The Liberator*, counseled: "The voice of woman should not be heard in public debates,

but there are other ways in which her influence would be beneficial."⁴⁶ But the speaker, Maria Stewart, who had been born free in Connecticut twenty-nine years earlier, would hear none of that. Not only did she speak, thus becoming the first American-born woman to give public speeches and leave extant texts of her addresses,⁴⁷ but in speaking about civil and women's rights, she used a chastening tongue. Although her public career was short-lived, lasting barely a year, Stewart articulated the precepts upon which the future activism of Black women would be based. Her ideas reflected both the fundamentals of the Victorian ethic and criticism of its inherent biases. Out of that mix emerged a distinct ethos which underlined Black women's activism for generations to come. And as is evident in Stewart's words, it was an ethos that had its contradictions.

Naturally, Stewart railed against the racism toward Blacks that fueled discrimination in the North and provided a rationale for slavery in the South. Although Stewart had a rudimentary education, her rhetoric often demonstrated knowledge of ancient history. Though "we are looked upon as *things*," she said, "we sprang from a scientific people."⁴⁸ Stewart also spoke of the relegation of Blacks to menial jobs. Continual hard labor "deadens the energies of the soul, and benumbs the faculties of the mind," she said. Orphaned at the age of five and "bound out" to work thereafter, Stewart told her audiences that she had learned the consequences of constant drudgery by bitter experience.

Nevertheless, Stewart castigated free Blacks for not doing enough for their own uplift. She believed they were politically lethargic and ultimately responsible for the continuance of slavery. "Were the American free people of color to turn their attention more assiduously to moral worth and intellectual improvement, this would be the result," she said: "Prejudice would gradually diminish, and the whites would be compelled to say, unloose those fetters!"⁴⁹

In keeping with the Victorian ethic, Stewart believed that Black women had an important part to play in the race's moral and intellectual development. She counseled that Black women excel in "good house-wifery, knowing that prudence and economy are the road to wealth."⁵⁰ The role of mothers was essential. "O ye mothers," Stewart implored, "what a responsibility rests on you! It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, the abhorrence of vice, and the cultivation of the pure heart."⁵¹ Like most women of the period, Stewart also seemed

to subscribe to the doctrine of submissiveness. "My beloved brethren . . . it is upon you that woman depends; she can do little besides using her influence," she concluded.⁵²

But in Stewart's view, that influence was undermined by uncultivated women who, in her words, "did not blush at vulgarity." As a woman of her times, Maria Stewart believed in the "cult" notion that only "true women" could exercise the proper moral influence on the family. "Did the daughters of our land [Africa] possess a delicacy of manners, combined with gentleness and dignity; did their pure minds hold vice in abhorrence and contempt, did they frown when their ears were polluted with its vile accents, would not their influence become powerful? Would not our brethren fall in love with their virtues?" she asked.⁵³ However, Stewart and other Black woman activists challenged the cult idea in a very fundamental way. Though they may have agreed with many of its precepts, they fought against the idea that morality and worth were inherent to a particular class or race. On the contrary, it was external circumstance rather than natural law that determined character, morality, and, in the case of women, "true womanhood." Stewart revealed this perspective in remarks directed toward White women who believed differently:

O ye fairer sisters whose hands are never soiled, whose nerves and muscles are never strained, go learn by experience! Had we the opportunity that you have had, to improve our moral and mental faculties, what would have hindered our intellects from being as bright, and our manners from being as dignified as yours? Had it been our lot to have been nursed in the lap of affluence and ease, and have basked beneath the smiles and sunshine of fortune, should we not have naturally supposed that we were never made to toil?⁵⁴

Although she felt Blacks could do more on their own behalf, she understood that Whites, including White women, conspired to keep Blacks from "rising above the condition of servants." She had once asked White women "who transact business for themselves" to hire Black girls to work for them, she told her audience, but the women had refused for fear of "losing the public patronage."⁵⁵

Most significantly, Stewart opposed the idea that women, including Black women, were responsible for their own degradation—an attitude which was perhaps the most destructive (and controlling) of any of the cult ideas. Although Stewart criticized the dearth of Black

women "who will blush at vulgarity," the primary responsibility lay on America, "who caused the daughters of Africa to commit whoredoms and fornications; . . . upon thee be their curse."⁵⁶

Stewart's assumptions—what would later become known as modernist thinking—gave Black women a freer rein to express and act upon ideas that liberated them from the oppression of both sex and race. The moral urgency of their being Black and female—heightened especially in times when Black men were politically lethargic ("It is of no use for us to wait any longer for a generation of well educated men to arise," Stewart said scornfully)⁵⁷—suffused Black women with a tenacious feminism, which was articulated before that of Whites like Sarah Grimké, who is credited with providing the first rationale for American women's political activism.

For Black women no such rationale was necessary. In their world view, many of the obstacles that White women faced simply didn't apply to their circumstances or beliefs. For example, Black women saw no contradiction between domesticity and political action. So Stewart could talk about dependence on men and excelling in good housewifery, and at the same time make an unmistakably feminist appeal to Black women.

Do you ask what we can do? Unite and build a store of your own. . . . Do you ask where is the money? We have spent more than enough for nonsense. . . . We have never had an opportunity of displaying our talents; therefore the world thinks we know nothing. . . . Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted. Sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason that you cannot attain them. Weary them [men] with your importunities.⁵⁸

Black women also bypassed the barrier of religious thought that circumscribed even radical White activists until the late 1830's, when abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison introduced a rationale for criticizing organized religion. Again, Black women had been able to justify their activism even earlier. "What if I am a woman?" Stewart declared. "Did [God] not raise up Deborah to be mother, and a judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead?"⁵⁹

A woman who had experienced a religious conversion, Stewart was confident enough to challenge the exhortations of Saint Paul,

whose words had long been used to justify slavery and sexism. Stewart, well, simply went over his head.

"Saint Paul declared that it was a shame for a woman to speak in public," she noted, "yet our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offence than this. . . ." ⁶⁰ In any case, Paul's words were of another time, and Stewart was convinced that if he had understood the urgency of these times, his attitude would have been different. "Did Saint Paul but know of our wrongs and deprivations," she said confidently, "I presume he would make no objections to our pleading in public for our rights."⁶¹

Their perspective also enabled Black women to see a world not of fixed proportions, but of change. Speaking of a past which was bound to become a present again, Stewart talked of women in history who had had a voice in moral, political, and religious affairs. She spoke of women in the pre-Renaissance days who occupied chairs of philosophy and justice, who "harangued" in Latin before the Pope, who were poets as well as nuns. And finally Stewart touched upon an even more ancient history, when nations "imagined that women could look into futurity," when they were seen as "approaching divinity," and when not only non-Western nations but the Germans, Britons, and Scandinavians believed that "the Deity more readily communicates himself to women."⁶²

For Stewart, simple logic demanded that in light of the role of women in the past, "God at this eventful period should raise up your females to strive . . . both in public and private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us at present."⁶³ Maria Stewart was sure enough of her beliefs to warn others not to doubt the mission of her sex. "No longer ridicule their efforts," she counseled. "It will be counted as sin."⁶⁴

Stewart had little doubt that Black women's prospects were "fair and bright." However, a year after her debut, she announced that her own immediate future in Boston was dim. Citing prejudice among her own people, she announced that she was going to leave the city, perhaps never to return. Her parting thoughts, sanctioned in her mind by God, history, and the need for racial progress, showed that she left undaunted. "Having God for my friend and portion, what have I to fear?" she asked. "As long as it is the will of God, I rejoice that I am as I am; for man, in his best estate, is altogether vanity. Men of

eminence have mostly risen from obscurity; nor will I, although a female of darker hue, and far more obscure than they, bend my head or hang my harp upon willows."⁶⁵ With that, Maria Stewart left Boston and ended her public career.

The cult of true womanhood left a bitter legacy. For White women, it was used as a means to circumscribe, and make dependent, the very women who had the education and resources to wage an effective battle for their rights. The cult reduced them to an image of frailty and mindless femininity, which in itself became a rationale for their inability to withstand the rigor of the franchise or anything else outside the domestic circle. If the cult caused Black women to prove they were ladies, it forced White ladies to prove that they were women.

If the two had been able to work together to challenge their respective images, there is no telling what could have happened. A glimpse of the potential alliance was seen in 1851 at a women's rights meeting in Akron, Ohio. From the very beginning of the conference, the White women were overwhelmed by the jeers and hoots of men who had come to disrupt the meeting. Their most effective antagonist was a clergyman who used both the gender of Jesus and the helplessness of women to counter their feminist arguments. Present at the meeting was the legendary abolitionist Sojourner Truth, who squelched the heckler with an oft-quoted speech. In the first place, she said, Jesus came from "God and a woman—*man* had nothing to do with it."⁶⁶ Secondly, Truth asserted that women were not inherently weak and helpless. Raising herself to her full height of six feet, flexing a muscled arm, and bellowing with a voice one observer likened to the apocalyptic thunders, Truth informed the audience that she could outwork, outeat, and outlast any man. Then she challenged: "Ain't I a woman?"⁶⁷

Fearful at first that if Truth spoke, their cause would be associated with "abolitionists and niggers" the White feminists now responded to her remarks with "streaming eyes and hearts beating with gratitude," as one of them wrote.⁶⁸ Gratitude did not extend, however, to realizing that Black women had advanced ideas which would help all women. The cult of true womanhood soured potential alliances not only between middle-class White reformers and working-class women, but also among Black women of all classes. This was evident as early as the 1830's, when the first interracial abolitionist societies

were organized. A few Black women, whose background of wealth and education exceeded that of most of their White colleagues, were found acceptable to become officers in some of the societies. But the question of Black mass participation in those societies remained more often than not an issue of bitter contention.

It seems ironic that White women abolitionists would discriminate against Black women. For Whites, though, abolitionist activism was primarily a means of releasing their suppressed political energies—energies which they directed toward the goal not of Black liberation, but of their own. White women's discontent "with their position was as much cause as effect of their involvement with the antislavery movement," observed women's historian Ellen Carol Du Bois. "Abolitionism provided them with a way to escape clerical authority, an egalitarian ideology, and a theory of social change, all of which permitted the leaders to transform the insights into . . . the beginning of the women's rights movement."⁶⁹

As both the race and feminist issues intensified in the 1840's and 1850's, it was inevitable that Black and White women abolitionists would come to a parting of the ways. The parting was due not only to White racism, but also to the primacy of race or sex as issues in their respective struggles. All Black women abolitionists (and most of the leading Black male abolitionists) were feminists. But when it came to a question of priorities, race, for most of them, came first. As the words of Stewart revealed, for Black women it was the issue of race that sparked their feminism.

There was something else too. As Sojourner Truth's message implied, Black women had already proven their inherent strengths—both physical and psychological. They had undergone a baptism of fire and emerged intact. Therefore, their convictions concerning the rights of women were deeply rooted in experience as well as theory.