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Doing Research on Black American Women

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"You ask about 'preoccupations.' I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women. In The Third Life of Grange Copeland, ostensibly about a man and his son, it is the women and how they are treated that colors everything. In my new book In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women, thirteen women—mad, raging, loving, resentful, hateful, strong, ugly, weak, pitiful, and magnificent, try to live with the loyalty to black men that characterizes all of their lives. For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world."


"Fascinating" as black women are, there are as many unexplored questions about black women's lives as there are people to ask them. Less is known about this group, whose identity encompasses membership in two oppressed castes, than is known about either of these castes separately. Black studies and research focus almost exclusively on black men and women's studies and research focus almost entirely on white women. Black women, whose experience is unique, are seldom recognized as a particular social-cultural entity and are seldom thought to be important enough for serious scholarly consideration. This invisibility, however, means that the opportunities for creative research are infinite. Since there are no "experts" on black women's lives (except those of us who live them), there is tremendous freedom to develop new ideas, to uncover new facts.

Even traditional methods of scholarship have not been applied to black women and might therefore yield important results, yet untraditional methods might be the only way to proceed in a field where there is barely any published data to consult. Despite the fact that everything has yet to be verified and written, it is important to keep your topic manageable and specific. Instead of trying to get to the bottom of the myth of black matriarchy, for example, why not investigate black women's attitudes toward childrearing or observe their actual childrearing practices, as influenced perhaps by their class backgrounds? Another way to get at the matriarchy question might be to trace out the origins of the term "mama" as it is used about black women on the street, in music and in sexual encounters. You might find out more about matriarchy by looking at portrayals of black family life in poetry and fiction than you would in surveying thousands of statistics.

Imagination is the key. To do this kind of research, you must look at what exists, find what is available to you, and use it. Books by black women authors are the richest written source, because in the creation of the work, we can assume that little has stood between the black woman and the telling of her story. At least the distance between her truth and the end result is not as great as that between the truth of black welfare mothers, for example, and the white male researcher who interprets and records it. Black women's literature can be approached in many more ways than as pieces of written art. History, sociology, psychology and economics are inherently available in these works.

The thematic reading list that follows contains only a few ideas about what might be looked at when you are trying to understand and expose black women's invisible lives. Unfortunately, many of the most valuable works by black women are out of print and therefore unavailable. (This unavailability and the policies and attitudes of publishers, reviewers and readers that cause it would itself be a fine topic to research.) There is obviously a huge amount of work to be done and each person who attempts to do a part of it with sensitivity and insight is making a contribution to more than scholarship. You are working quite tangibly toward the freeing of all of our lives.

INDEPENDENT BLACK WOMEN

Black women have often been forced to live independently without the traditional support systems that the patriarchy provides. Unable to depend on fathers, brothers or husbands to run interference between them and the outside world, black women have been responsible for creating their own lives. It should always be kept in mind, however, that this “independence” is double-edged. It can either contribute to the building of remarkable strength in black women or it might never allow a woman to get beyond the most bitter struggle for material survival. Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God. (1937) Fawcett World, 1972.


THE MYTH OF MATRARCHY

This topic is closely related to that of independence. Both black and white male writers and social scientists have attributed many of the black community’s social ills to the supposed dominance of black women. The concept of matriarchy necessitates the reality of female power, yet black women are by every significant measure powerless. The works listed expose the real conditions of black mothers struggling to raise their children.


Sarah E. Wright, This Child’s Gonna Live. Dell, 1975.

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GROWING UP BLACK AND FEMALE
Growing up female is admittedly rough. Growing up black and female is rougher still. The issues of developing a positive self-image in a culture whose standards of "beauty" are universally white and of coping with racial oppression at an early age are only two major aspects of this experience.

Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. Dell, 1970.

THE SPECTER OF WHITE BEAUTY
The struggle to conform to white standards of beauty has been a major factor in black women's social and psychological history. Passing, that is, trying to become acceptably white in mind as well as in body, is a painful indication of black people's problematic identity in a hostile land. The huge issue of how black women feel about white women and how they relate to them also seems relevant when exploring this area.


BLACK WOMEN AND BLACK MEN
Because of racial and economic oppression, the black family has been under severe stress in America, beginning with the fragmentation during slavery. Not surprisingly, relationships between black women and men have often been difficult. Consider, for example, how traditional blues lyrics deal almost exclusively with male/female relationships, their joys, but more often their sorrows. Even certain verbal expressions that black people use to describe emotional states reflect much hostility and violence. The issues of distrust, commitment, violence and abandonment continue to arise between the sexes, and until black people begin to examine seriously the sexual politics of their interactions, they are likely to persist.


BLACK WOMEN WORKING
Black women have always been workers, not because they were necessarily "career-oriented," but because of economic necessity. The ways in which the harsh struggle for survival determines black women's working lives are focused upon in the following works.


BLACK LESBIAN WRITERS
The experience of women-identified black women is almost totally unavailable in fiction and poetry as well as in the social sciences. The closets that have hidden gay life in the past still prevent black lesbians from being heard. The subject is not only unpopular, that is, noncommercial, it is deeply taboo within the black community. Those few black women who deal honestly with the reality of women loving women share the strength, independence and courage of all black women.

Audre Lorde, various titles including, *The First Cities, Cables to Rage, From A Land Where Other People Live and New York Head Shop and Museum*. Both the latter are available from Broadside.


BLACK WOMEN AND THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT
The popular assumptions about this question are that black women are not interested in "women's lib," (sic) that they have never been interested in it and that they are already liberated. Despite the fact that the majority of black women have not joined the second wave of feminist political action, the current women's movement has affected their lives in direct and indirect ways and a small black feminist movement is now evolving. Although there is no definitive book-length work on this subject, the following articles explore the ways in which sexism affects black women and how racism and sexism are closely interdependent in the workings of America's power structure.


WHAT IS BLACK WOMEN'S CULTURE?
Black culture has become an acknowledged reality in American life and a distinct women's culture has also strengthened and gained recognition with the resurgence of feminism. You might consider whether there is also a distinct black women's culture as manifested in artistic works and in life. What do black women think about, talk about and laugh about that is peculiar to their own experience? Also consider how they think, talk, laugh and view the world. You might study black female visual artists to arrive at some answers. A fantastic study of black women's culture could be done by studying black beauty parlors. Who comes there, what goes on, what's said when black women are among themselves in a context that is peculiarly black and female?

serious about defining proper limitations of women’s roles, i.e., that they enjoyed traditionally masculine activities. The girls of nonsexist occupational perspectives. They altered their opinions about stereotypical personality characteristics and admitted that they enjoyed traditionally masculine activities. The girls showed a new belief in a greater equalization of the relative social power of the sexes. In contrast, ninth grade boys became more serious about defining proper limitations of women’s roles, i.e., they expressed traditional opinions more freely.

An important exception to the above generalizations about the ninth graders occurred in one class taught by an enthusiastic, effective teacher. Both boys and girls showed significant attitude changes. Students in this class became more positive about alternative sex roles. They believed women could enjoy both occupational and family roles. Often, in their stories, they portrayed men in family roles. On the pre-measures, this class was in no way different from any other ninth grade class. Thus, this exception suggests that even in a period as short as six weeks, a concerned and able teacher, provided with sufficient materials can help students, even at this age, to re-evaluate and modify their attitudes about sex-role stereotyping.

Findings from this intervention study suggest several implications for educators. Because pre-adolescent students seem to be the most open to change and the least rigid about stereotypes, particularly for their own sex, nonsexist curricular materials may be most effective in the elementary grades. Moreover, girls can probably be influenced to develop nonsexist attitudes about occupational and social roles more easily than boys. However, the need to reduce the effects of traditional sex-role stereotyping seems to be the greatest at adolescence. While the social/psychological pressures of same sex peer groups appear to exert an even more powerful influence at the high school level, there is some indication that active and highly motivated teachers can, with the aid of carefully chosen material, counteract this influence.

Sandra Stotsky

1. A description of this project and the curricular materials used will be available in Undoing Sex-Stereotypes, M. GuttenTag and H. Bray, et al., McGraw-Hill (in press).

2. Particularly useful were curricular materials and ideas contained in Nonsexist Curricular Materials for Elementary Schools, Laurie Olsen Johnson, ed. The Feminist Press, 1974.

RESEARCHING BLACK WOMEN (continued)


BLACK WOMEN POETS

Most of the references above have been to novels, autobiographies or other works of nonfiction. The following are contemporary black women poets, chosen on no other basis than personal preference: Gwendolyn Brooks (Annie Allen, The Bean Eaters, Bronzeville Boys and Girls, Family Pictures, In the Mecca, Riot, Selected Poems, A Street in Bronzeville, The World of Gwendolyn Brooks, Report from Part One); Lucille Clifton (Good Times, Good News about the Earth, An Ordinary Woman); Mari Evans (Where Is All the Music, I Am a Black Woman); Sarah Fabio (A Mirror, A Soul); Julie Fields (East of Moonlight); June Jordan (Some Changes, Who Look at Me); Audre Lorde (The First Cities, Cables to Rage, From a Land Where Other People Live, New York Head Shop and Museum); Pat Parker (Pit Stop, Child of Myself); Sonia Sanchez (Homecoming, We a BaddDDD People, A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women); Alice Walker (Once, Revolutionary Petunias); Margaret Walker (For My People, October Journey).

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

The following works provide excellent basic materials for researching black women and black women writers.


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