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Rosalyn Terborg-Penn

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Teaching the History of Black Women: A Bibliographical Essay

by Rosalyn Terborg-Penn

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During the latter part of the 1970s, students of American history have recognized that black women's unique history cannot be thoroughly analyzed within the confines of either black history or women's history. Unfortunately, a gap exists between the realization of the goal to correct the problem and the publication of secondary works on black women's history. To date, only one anthology containing original essays treats black women's experiences from an historical perspective: Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (eds.), *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1978). This work is supplemented by two documentary collections, Gerda Lerner (ed.), *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1972), and Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin (eds.), *Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976).

The paucity of secondary books leaves teachers with the problem of locating sources to assist in curriculum expansion and revision. Although only a few books have recently appeared, there are numerous historical essays describing experiences of black women. In addition, there are several older, yet still quite relevant books and articles that can aid history teachers in integrating black women's experiences into United States, women's, and black history courses.

The following bibliographical essay reviews selected literature within the framework of teaching black history and includes recent books and articles as well as some older, but classic studies. In discussing black history from the chronological view, the topics selected might include: African heritage, slavery, free blacks, late nineteenth-century black thought, early twentieth-century black life, blacks during the Great Depression and World War II, and post-World War II Afro-American life. A more thematic approach, however, might emphasize black folk culture, literature and the arts, black families, the church and religion in black life, civil-rights activities, women's rights, and black feminism.

An important contribution using the chronological approach is John Henrik Clark's article, "The Black Women: A Figure in World History, Part I," *Essence*, May 1971. The first essay in this three-part series treats the roles of women in traditional West African societies as well as individual women prominent in early African history.

In discussing slavery, there are several documentary collections from which to choose: Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America*; Willie Lee Rose (ed.), *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life*; and Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, Vol. I (New York: Citadel Press, 1963). The *Narrative of the Life of Sojourner Truth* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., Inc., 1970), though limited, remains the best primary source on black slave women; it was based upon one woman's recollections. Another narrative reprinted recently, with an introduction by Walter Teller (1973), Harriet Brent Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by herself*, edited by L.M. Child (Boston: The Author, 1861) is also useful. Unlike the Sojourner Truth narrative, Jacobs' book appears to be less authentic, but it does provide a perspective on the life of a slave girl as seen through the eyes of a white abolitionist. On the whole, very little has been written about slave women. Herbert Aptheker includes a brief female perspective in an article that surveys slave resistance generally throughout the history of the nation, "Slave Resistance in the United States" in *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, edited by Huggins, Kilson, and Fox (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Inc., 1971). Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), refers to slave women and to their use of contraception and abortion, but for the most part the book lacks a female focus. Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972), devotes more attention to female slave roles. A full scale study of black female slaves, however, remains to be done.

Fortunately, materials about free black women are more numerous. Two articles in the anthology *The Afro-American Woman* are relevant: Sharon Harley's "Northern

Black Female Workers: Jacksonian Era," and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Black Male Perspectives on the 19th Century Woman." Both essays describe the discrimination free black women encountered and how their male counterparts viewed the status of the Afro-American female. In addition, Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), contains numerous references to black female reformers and provides an analysis of their activities. The Loewenberg and Bogin collection also contains documents by several free black women of the ante-bellum period. For sources of information about free-black women activists, one can consult Dorothy Porter's pioneer study, "Sarah Remond, Abolitionist and Physician," *Journal of Negro History*, 20 (July 1935), and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "Nineteenth Century Black Women and Woman Suffrage," *Potomac Review*, 7 (Spring—Summer 1977). These studies reveal the problems of both racism and sexism encountered by black women in their abolitionist and women's rights activities.

For a unit on late nineteenth-century black thought, there are documents in both the Loewenberg and Bogin and the Gerda Lerner documentary collections. Two edited autobiographies reveal the diversity in experiences, lifestyles, and ideologies among educated black women who lived through the post-bellum years as well as into the early twentieth century. One, *The Journal of Charlotte L. Forten*, edited by Ray Allen Billington (New York: Dryden Press, 1953), contains the experiences of the youthful Charlotte as a northern teacher among the Sea Islands freedmen shortly after the civil war. The other journal is *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, edited by her daughter, Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Ida B. Wells was not only the most renowned nineteenth-century anti-lynching crusader, but an opponent of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist views. Both books were based upon the journals of these women whose lives extended into the twentieth century.

Essays covering the twentieth century can be found in the anthology, *The Afro-American Woman*. The first of these articles, Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, "The Black Woman's Struggle for Equality in the South,

1895-1925," surveys the efforts of Southern middle class black women to establish community centers and kindergartens and their resistance to white prejudice as they sought equal opportunity in education during the first generation of the twentieth century. Two other articles are case studies of Washington, D.C., educators, Sharon Harley's "Anna J. Cooper: A Voice for Black Women," and Evelyn Brooks Barnett's "Nannie Burroughs and the Education of Black Women." These essays portray the struggles of two individuals against racism and sexism from the turn of the century through the 1930s. The book concludes with Gerald Gill's essay, "Win or Lose—We Win: The 1952 Vice-Presidential Campaign of Charlotta A. Bass," an effort that provides insight not only into the experiences of a political activist, but into post-World War II Afro-American life. For more materials on twentieth-century black women, one can consult Gerda Lerner's documentary collection (references extend to 1970). In addition, there is Jeanne Noble, *Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978). Her study, while more literary than historical, nonetheless provides a variety of sources on the images of black women, especially in the mid-twentieth century. In shifting to a thematic approach, a variety of primary and secondary sources by and about black women is available. Beginning with the arts, two essays from the book, *The Afro-American Woman*, provide secondary analysis about the literary and musical images of black women. The articles are Andrea Benton Rushing, "Images of Black Women in Afro-American Poetry," and Daphane Duval Harrison, "Black Women in the Blues Tradition." Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mammies, Mulattoes and Bucks* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), studies the images of blacks, including women, in films.

Historians have neglected to trace the role of black women in religion. The substantial contribution of Afro-American women to religious life certainly merits scholarly study. One section is the Loewenberg and Bogin collection, "An Arrow from the Bent Bow of the Gospel," does reveal aspects of the lives of four black religious women in the nineteenth century. In addition, there is a recent history of one of the oldest orders of black nuns in the nation, the Sisters of the Holy Family,

founded in 1842. *Violets in the King's Garden: A History of the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans* was written by a senior member of the order, Sister Mary Francis Borgia Hart (New Orleans: By the Author, 1976). A more recent study by the Women's Missionary Department of Baltimore's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church focuses on both religious and secular activities of mainly contemporary black women in Baltimore. The study, *Kujichagulia: Directory of Organizations for Black Women in Metropolitan Baltimore*, edited by Pamela D. Brogden (Baltimore, Bethel A.M.E. Church Missionary Department, 1979), contains two historical essays as well as studies on religious themes that reflect the experiences of black church women.

The scarcity of secondary material on black church women is overshadowed by the paucity of historical analysis about the role of black women in the family. For the most part, historical works about black family life do not focus upon women. Nonetheless, some information about the roles of black women in family settings can be obtained from Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll*, John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), Elizabeth Pleck's "The Two-Parent Household: Black Family Structure in Late Nineteenth-Century Boston," *Journal of Southern History*, Fall 1972, and Robert H. Abzug's "The Black Family During Reconstruction" in *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*, Vol II, edited by Huggins, Kilson and Fox.

Several articles, both secondary and primary, reveal the historical nature of black women's activities as feminists. Sources on nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century black females and the women's movement include Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's "Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Women's Movement, 1830-1920," in *The Afro-American Woman*, and "The Historical Treatment of Afro-Americans in the Women's Movement, 1900-1920," in *A Current Bibliography of African Affairs*, 7 (Summer 1974). In addition, there is a classic essay by a black woman, who was contemporary to the early twentieth-century women's movement, Adella Hunt Logan, "Woman Suffrage," *The Colored American Magazine*, 12 (September 1905). Biographical data about

early black feminists include the autobiography of Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington: Randall, Inc., 1940), and Carolyn Ashbaugh's biography of a black female anarchist, *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 1976).

For a discussion about civil-rights activities, there are several essays in Toni Cade's anthology, *The Black Woman* (New York: New American Library, 1970), and two articles in a special issue on women in *Southern Exposure*, 4 (Winter 1977). One contribution is "Women's Consciousness and the Southern Black Movement" by Sara Evans, and the other is Cynthia Washington's "We Started from Different Ends of the Spectrum." Both essays are noteworthy for their discussion of the differences in perception and attitude between black and white women in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s.

In seeking assistance when revising and adding to lectures, one might consult two journals which frequently contain articles by and about black women, *Freedomways* and *Black Scholar*. Perhaps the black journal with the broadest historical perspective on females was *The Crisis*, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois from 1910 to 1934. A survey of the treatment in *The Crisis* of women's issues during DuBois' tenure can be found in Irene Diggs, "Du Bois and Women: A Short Story of Black Women, 1910-1934," *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs*, 7 (Summer 1974). When selecting textbooks for black history classes, one should consider those with a female perspective—for example Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), and Arnold Taylor, *Travail and Triumph: Black Life and Culture in the South Since the Civil War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976). Developing a course on black women's history, or integrating black women into the existing history curriculum is not difficult, if one is familiar with black history and can locate the scattered sources about black women. Women are present in the traditional sources, but they have just been overlooked.

Rosalyn Terborg-Penn is an associate professor of history at Morgan State University in Baltimore, where she teaches a variety of courses in American and Afro-American history.