Heights Libraries
Opening Doors, Opening Minds

Unpacking Our History Article Packet

White Supremacy Part 6

Feminism

October 12, 2023

6:30 – 8:00 PM

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353

Upcoming Unpacking Our History Programs

Nov 9: White Supremacy Part 7
Carceral Society

Dec. 14: White Supremacy Part 8
Race Future

Second Thursday of each month hosted on Zoom
Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353

Please check out our 1619 Discussion Homepage
heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project

The Library's 1619 interviews are on Youtube

Unpacking 1619 Podcast
New episode every other Wednesday

Contact John Piche at jpiche@heightslibrary.org

This Month's Authors

Martha S. Jones is an American historian and legal scholar. She is the Society of Black Alumni Presidential Professor and Professor of History at The Johns Hopkins University.

Duchess Harris is an African-American academic, author, and legal scholar. She is a professor of American Studies at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota, specializing in feminism, Law of the United States, and African American political movements

Kim McLarin is an American novelist, best known for Growing Up X: A Memoir by the Daughter of Malcolm X, co-authored with Ilyasah Shabazz, and Jump at the Sun. Her works include contemporary novels, short stories and non-fiction.

How Black Suffragists Fought for the Right to Vote and a Modicum of Respect: Hallie Quinn Brown and Other "Homespun Heroines"

Author: Martha S. Jones
Source: Humanities. Summer 2023, Vol. 44 Issue 3

Hallie Quinn Brown knew the power of black women and urged anyone who heard her to let it flourish.

Read her remarks from 1889 and you might believe she saw the future or at least had the capacity to call it into being: "I believe there are as great possibilities in women as there are in men . We are marching onward grandly . We love to think of the great women of our race--the mothers who have struggled through poverty to educate their children . There are many wives who are now helping to educate their husbands at school, by taking in sewing and washin I believe in equalizing the matter. Instead of going to school a whole year, he ought to stay at home one half, and send his wife the other six months . I repeat, we want a grand and noble womanhood, scattered all over the land. There is a great vanguard of scholars and teachers of our sex who are at the head of institutions of learning all over the country. We need teachers, lecturers of force and character to help to teach this great nation of women."

These remarks, delivered before a conference of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, marked a debut for Brown as an advocate of women's rights, including the right to vote. If finding the start of a suffragist's career in a church sanctuary surprises, it is only because the route to women's suffrage taken by black women is still too often relegated to the margins or obscured by misunderstanding. Consider how black women did not take part in the mythical 1848 women's meeting in Seneca Falls, New York. When we look for them in that year, we find that, instead, some of them were already at work demanding women's rights, but they were doing so in black churches rather than in women's conventions. And what about 1920 and ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment? Study of that hallmark moment reveals that, while some black women in the North and West had reason to celebrate, it was but a brief pause in their ongoing struggle for voting rights. Especially for black women in southern states, the struggle for the vote extended for decades more, to 1965, when the Voting Rights Act would finally topple barriers constructed by Jim Crow.

Hallie Quinn Brown's call for a vanguard that would empower a "great nation" of black women expressed a vision that would guide her to yet another pivotal moment in the history of black women and the vote. In 1923, in the wake of the Nineteenth Amendment's ratification, Brown took pen to paper and denounced a proposal by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) to dedicate a monument to the mythical black mammy of the South--a figure in servant's garb cradling a white infant. Her words cut: Rather than loyal supplicants, "slave women were brutalized, the victims of white man's caprice and lust. Often the babe torn from her arms was the child of her oppressor." As president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), Brown spoke the thoughts of many thousands, descendants of enslaved women who derided the hypocrisy of white southerners who in "one generation held the black mammy in abject slavery [and in] the next would erect a monument to her fidelity." She doubted the "deep reverence and gratitude" professed to undergird the monument. White southern women would better "make restitution," Brown advised, by interceding with their husbands and fathers to "with one hand upraised stop mob rule and lynching."

The "mammy" figure, rather than new, was part of a long-standing Lost Cause myth that relied on the fiction that enslaved people had been docile, content, and loyal to slaveholders. But by 1922, the notion of a "Monument to the Faithful Colored Mammies of the South" won the interest of Congress, where a bill had proposed to authorize the Washington, D.C., chapter of the UDC to install such a figure on public grounds "as a gift to the people of the United States." Black Americans saw through to the irony of such a framing and cried foul. The monument was mere propaganda aimed to distract the nation from real, twentieth century needs: adequate homes, schools, and heath care. Brown joined others in opposition--from grassroots activists to leaders like W.E.B. DuBois--and the bill died of inaction.

The "mammy" monument controversy erupted at a historic crossroads. It was one part a story about how the UDC promoted the Lost Cause. It was also a story about the emerging power of the NAACP. Hallie Quinn Brown's role points to yet one more story about how black women organized to win political power, including the vote, and then used it. As leader of the era's largest organization of black women, the NACW, Brown condemned the monument for its degrading caricature of an African-American woman. Her insight derived from the spirit expressed in Anna Julia Cooper's 1892 black feminist manifesto: "Only the black woman can say 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 enter[s] with me."

I recently revisited the life of Hallie Quinn Brown after having long known her as part of a generation of black women activists who battled Jim Crow in its early decades. Students of African-American women's history know Brown best by way of her 1926 edited collection of biographical essays, Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction, which remains a useful reference. But finding Brown leading a challenge to the "mammy" monument made me rethink what I knew. I am at work on a history of black women and the vote, and one thing has already become clear: I must always look for early twentieth-century black suffragists in unexpected places. The racism they encountered in better remembered suffrage organizations, such as the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) or the National Women's Party (NWP) meant that too few women like Brown worked through those organizations. To tell their stories, I must follow their lead.

Brown and women like her came to the cause of women's suffrage by paths that ran through African-American-led institutions: Antislavery societies, churches, and women's clubs. Committed to winning political rights in the early twentieth century, most black women remained just where they had begun, in black-led institutions, testing ideas and building political savvy. Those that could--mostly women in northern and western states, where Jim Crow did not exclude them from politics--signed on as supporters of the Republican party. Their purpose was often distinct. Black women sought the vote to further what they termed human rights, meaning the rights of women and men alike. They were rarely single-issue in their concerns; they battled for political rights while also advocating for temperance, education, prison reform, and the rights of working people. They especially attended to troubles that arose at the crossroads of race and gender. When Brown railed against the prospect of a "mammy" monument in the nation's capital, she did so knowing that the promotion of such a false and degrading image undercut black women's political aspirations. She was part of a "great vanguard" prepared to fight back and further empower a "great nation of women."

For Brown, women's education was foundational. Though she was free born in 1849 in Pittsburgh, Brown's parents had been enslaved. To better educate their children, the household migrated to Chatham in Canada during Brown's teen years, where the family lived alongside fugitive slaves and dissident black emigrants who had abandoned the United States. By 1870, in the wake of the Civil War and during early Reconstruction, Brown returned to the U.S., where she enrolled at Wilberforce University in Ohio. After graduation, Brown's career as an educator took her to public schools, north and south, and to Allen University in South Carolina and Alabama's Tuskegee Institute. Along the way, she studied elocution, and in 1893 Brown settled in as a professor at her alma mater, Wilberforce. It would be her institutional home for the next decade.

"Give her your votes," insisted Gertrude Bustill Mossell, referring to Brown in 1892. Mossell admonished those men who saw Brown's womanhood as a bar to her holding the office of the secretary of education in the AME Church: "Let the sex have its representation for we all know they willingly accept more than their share of the taxation." With that--a run for office--Brown was baptized into women's politics, part of a maelstrom in which, alongside her, other churchwomen were claiming the right to hold office by way of ordination into the ministry. The resulting debates consumed and nearly tore apart the AME Church community. Brown learned valuable lessons: In her aim to assume power she had allies, women like Mossell, and, at the same time, she could expect opposition.

Brown's early political education was earned in battles over the public representation of black women. At stake was whether black women would exercise rights as full citizens. As with many of her generation, Brown was drawn out from familiar settings such as the classroom and church, as their benevolent work took a sharply political turn and their leadership consolidated at a national level. First, there was a controversy during the planning of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, when the sponsors failed to include African-American planners or themed exhibits. Brown managed to be appointed a clerk in the fair's department of publicity and promotion and then used her position to expose the degree to which those in charge intended to leave black Americans invisible and unaccounted for. In the same years, Brown led the women of the Colored League of Washington, D.C., to the first meeting of what would become the National Association of Colored Women. The women had been galvanized when James Jacks, then president of the Missouri Press Association, publicly ridiculed Ida B. Wells and her antilynching campaign and then impugned all black women, branding them prostitutes, thieves, and liars. Jacks's letter ignited a "pressing need of our banding together if only for our protection."

In the decades leading to passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Brown grew to be a sophisticated activist who moved along intertwined paths, the sort of journey shared by many black suffragists. She appears to have avoided any sustained association with NAWSA or the NWP. The antiblack racism that ran through such organizations likely kept her at a distance. Brown did not, however, operate in deference to a divide between black and white women, nor did she avoid suffrage politics. Temperance brought her to London, where she spoke at the 1895 convention of the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union, one of only three black American women to do so. In the summer of 1900, Brown was in London to attend the International Congress of Women, where she heard women's suffrage debated and reported favorably on an exchange in which antiwomen's suffrage ideas were "torn to shreds."

Black women's clubs became the heart of Brown's public work. There, by 1899, leaders were heralding the movement for women's suffrage as "the pioneer force for woman's emancipation and progress." By 1901, NACW president Mary Church Terrell won an "ovation" for her remarks on "The Justice of Women Suffrage": "Woman's rights were not protected as they should be. Not until woman had the ballot to be used for her protection and self-defence [sic] can she hope to secure the rights and privileges to which she is entitled." Brown, in 1904, helped write a resolution which provided "that the women of our Association prepare themselves by the study of civic government and kindred subjects for the problems of city, State, and National life that they may be able to perform, intelligently, the duties that have come to some and will come to others in the natural progress of the Woman Suffrage movement." In 1911 and 1912, she headed the NACW's "Suffrage" department and, in 1920, Brown assumed the association's presidency.

Looking ahead from 1920, Brown charged the women of the NACW with picking up where the movement for the Nineteenth Amendment had left off. The enfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of black women, the majority in the American South, was not yet complete. Brown led thousands of clubwomen with the same vision that had initially drawn her to the podium in 1889. Historian Nikki Brown explains that Brown's aim was to harness black women's votes and thus win them influence in the Republican party and in Washington, D.C. Brown urged black women to regard the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment as an opening for an acquisition of power: "Let us remember that we are making our own history. That we are character builders; building for all eternity. Woman's horizon has widened. Her sphere of usefulness is greatly enlarged. Her capabilities are acknowledged . Let us not ask: what shall we do with our newly acquired power? Rather, what manner of women are we going to be?" She framed women's votes as a next chapter in the long struggle for black political rights: "We stand at the open door of a new era. For the first time in the history of this country, women have exercised the right of franchise. The right for which the pioneers of our race fought, but died without the sight."

Brown's opposition to the UDC's "mammy" monument fit precisely at the confluence of a victory for women's suffrage and the ongoing work of civil rights. And a new moment demanded a new strategy. Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction, published in 1926, leveled one of Brown's most robust and enduring shots at those who doubted black women's suitability as voters. The book was styled as what historian Brittney Cooper has termed a "listing." It was a disruptive volley that countered limited visions of the body politic as one consisting of white women and also of men, black and white. Brown collaborated with more than 25 other women to produce--across 250 pages and more than 60 biographical sketches, essays, and poems--an argument about the past, present, and future of black women. The book demolished myths and brought to light the lives of real women--their ideas and their activism. As Brown put it in her introduction, Homespun Heroines aimed to inspire young people to "cleave more tenaciously to the truth and to battle more heroically for the right." On the horizon, Brown suggested, was a time when universal womanhood suffrage would be realized.

Mammy--as a subservient, content and enduringly loyal slave--was exposed as pure fiction. The biographies in Homespun Heroines introduced enslaved women who recognized their exploitation, resisted at great personal risk, and were committed to their own families rather than to those of slaveholders, even when subjected to forced, prolonged separation. Dinah Cox battled in court for over 14 years when her late owner's family refused to free her as his will provided. Upon her manumission, Charlotta Gordon MacHenry Pyles and her family risked a treacherous journey from Kentucky, through Missouri, finally arriving in the free state of Iowa. Once settled, Pyles set out to purchase family members who remained enslaved and reunited loved ones separated by sale. Harriet Tubman freed herself, returned at great risk to liberate her family and neighbors on Maryland's Eastern Shore, and then aided Union army officials, working as a "scout," and "outwitting the Confederates." Lucretia Harper Simpson had been separated from her entire family while enslaved in Kentucky and, when the war came, she and three other young women took their chance and crossed the river into Ohio. These women were neither docile nor content. Nor were they loyal, at least not to those who had held them in bondage.

Citizenship was a birthright for which black women were prepared. The women of Homespun Heroines were paradigmatic voters, women of independence and integrity. For many, formal education had bestowed the insight, reason and discernment that suited them for citizenship. Others, especially those born enslaved, still managed to make manifest qualities--piousness, fidelity, benevolence, selflessness, and compassion--that evidenced their suitability as citizens and voters. Elizabeth Smith had won her education despite violent opposition to the presence of young black women at Prudence Crandall's school in Canterbury, Connecticut. Caroline Sherman Andrews-Hill, though enslaved, stole learning as the household's white children were being taught, only to be banned from working nearby during lesson time. Anne E. Baltimore, Mary Burnett Talbert, and Mary J. Patterson attended Oberlin College. So did Fannie Jackson Coppin, who took the "gentleman's course," despite advice that she do otherwise.

Black women had earned the vote, Homespun Heroines argued. They had as suffragists aided all American women to secure a constitutional amendment. Sojourner Truth had been a "zealous advocate for the enfranchisement of women" who "saved the day and won the victory for women," at an 1851 suffrage convention. Harriet Tubman had taken up the cause of women's suffrage, allied with the Empire State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs to whom she sent a last message before her death: "Tell the women to stick together. God is fighting for them and all will be well!" Journalist Mary Ann Shadd Cary toured with white antislavery lecturers who also spoke on women's rights, including Abby Kelley, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone. Cary's commitment sustained itself through the 1880s, when she joined the National Woman's Suffrage Association. Sarah J. S. Garnet was the woman behind Brooklyn's Equal Suffrage Club and Superintendent of the NACW's suffrage department. Eliza Ann Gardner helped found Boston's Woman's Era Club and championed women's rights in the AME Zion Church. Amanda Berry Smith preached in pulpits across the globe and "wherever she went there always sprang up an eager discussion on the subject of women's right to preach." Laura A. Brown was, during the administration of President Warren Harding, appointed a member of the executive board of the Republican Women's Committee of Allegheny County in Pennsylvania, and in 1922 she ran for the state legislature, perhaps, Brown suggested, the first black woman in the United States to do so.

Hallie Quinn Brown was a suffragist. She was simultaneously an educator, church worker, temperance advocate, and club movement leader. She was a Republican party activist and she was a writer. Homespun Heroines may not have rivaled in page count the six-volume History of Woman Suffrage, begun by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage in the 1880s. But it was no less an effort to chronicle the history of women's activism and then mobilize that history for political ends. As the celebration in 1920 of the Nineteenth Amendment faded, Brown and the women of the NACW were left with serious work in front of them. Jim Crow still kept too many of their sisters away from the polls, and untruths wrought of racism and sexism sustained their disenfranchisement. The way forward was fraught--with competition in black politics from an increasingly influential NAACP, and with indifference on the part of women's suffrage organizations like the National Women's Party. The NACW would be hampered internally by an elite politics of respectability that kept it distant from black women of the working class. Other black women activists would take an internationalist view of politics, rejecting the vote and parties as too tainted by racism to take them forward. Still, Brown's book endured, aiding those activists who followed her, and historians like me, to better understand and build upon that "great nation of women" of which she was a part.

*This article was updated on July 19, 2019, to say that it was not Frances Dana Gage but rather Matilda Joslyn Gage who began work, with coauthors Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, on History of Woman Suffrage.

A History of Black American Feminism

From Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Trump by Duchess Harris

Black power, the women's movement, and feminist organizations like the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and the Combahee River Collective all contributed to the emergence of a new voice for Black women in American politics and social life in the second half of the twentieth century. But the disintegration of the Combahee River Collective coincided with a conservative backlash, an era that saw the rise and fall of Vanessa Williams as Miss America and which set the stage for the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings. The roots of the conservative backlash that had such a detrimental effect on Black women can be traced to the major ideological shift that occurred in social welfare discourse during the 1960s and the supposedly liberal, progressive Kennedy administration. The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program had been driven ideologically by gender and class frameworks, but as a result of the social turbulence and political forces of the sixties, the discourse surrounding social welfare came to be dominated by race, with gender and class as supporting ideological frameworks.

The early part of the 1960s marked a renewed social consciousness of issues surrounding poverty. One prominent example of the heightened awareness of economic issues and class is embodied in the popularity of Michael Harrington's book, The Other America, which described the plight of millions of poor Americans. Harrington's book challenged a number of contemporary notions about American affluence, and though it was not an immediate bestseller, The Other America was read widely within academic and policy circles, attracting many favorable reviews and sparking strong interest in research about poverty. Harrington's book attracted the attention of both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. In fact, the actual use of the word "poverty" to describe socioeconomic conditions of the poor did not appear in the Congressional Record or the Public Papers of the President until 1964.

There was an explosion of Americans on public assistance during the 1960s and into the early 1970s. Payment to families on AFDC grew from less than $1 billion in 1960 to $6 billion by 1972. The majority of this growth occurred as a result of a massive influx of new enrollees into the AFDC program. In 1960, 3.1 million people were enrolled in AFDC; by 1969, this number had nearly doubled to 6.1 million.

By 1974, AFDC rolls ballooned to 10.8 million recipients. This dramatic increase in social welfare spending reflected a paradox for a number of policy-makers, in that it occurred as the country was experiencing an extended period of economic prosperity. As one social services administrator noted, for the first time the expansion occurred in both good and bad years, seemingly unrelated to the state of the economy. Poverty had declined sharply throughout the 1960s. In 1959, 40 million people, almost a quarter of the American population, were living below the poverty level. By 1969, that number declined to 12.2% of the population, or 24 million individuals. Additionally, this decline was sharpest for non-white populations; in 1959, 56.2% of non-whites were in poverty, but by 1969, the number had dropped to 31.1%. Demographically, it should be noted that there was a significant change in the racial makeup of the new AFDC participants. The huge expansion of the welfare rolls disproportionately came from higher concentrations of minority groups (principally African-Americans) as the new enrollees. The Washington Post reported in 1970 that the AFDC rolls in the capital had grown 66%. Of that growth, over 95% of these new welfare applicants were Black. By 1970, about 48.1% of the AFDC recipients were white; 45.2% Black; and 6.7% from other races. However, it should be kept in mind that after the initial restrictions of the Social Security Act of 1935, non-white populations had enrolled in AFDC in significant numbers. Non-whites made up 32% of the welfare caseload in 1950; in 1960, that number grew to 41% and reached 46% by 1967. Thus, the face of the typical AFDC recipient was already changing quite rapidly as early as the 1950s, but the image of a single Black woman as the typical welfare recipient emerged only after the turbulent events of the 1960s: the Civil Rights movement, the Moynihan Report, and growing urban unrest.

By 1968, the sharp backlash against racial liberalism had produced its first major fruit with the election of Richard Nixon. In 1964, opinion polls showed virtually no difference on race-related issues between the two major parties. But shortly after 1964, with the turbulent events of the Civil Rights movement, the development of the War on Poverty, and the explosion of the welfare rolls, the Democratic Party would be seen as the home of racial liberalism. The Republican Party, meanwhile, would come to be considered the home of racial conservatism. In an analysis of polling data from 1956 to 1968, Rutgers political scientist Gerald Pomper found:

"The most striking change has occurred on racial issues. In 1956, there was no consensus on parties' stands on the issues of school integration and fair employment... and the Republicans were thought to favor Civil Rights as strongly as did the Democrats. By 1968, there was a startling reversal in this judgment. All partisan groups recognized the existence of different party positions on this issue, and all were convinced that the Democrats favor greater government action on civil rights than do Republicans."

During this time, Democrats lost 47 Congressional seats, which effectively erased Johnson's liberal majority. Additionally, eight governorships switched over to the Republican Party in 1966.

Florida elected its first Republican governor since 1872, and California voters overwhelmingly sent former actor, and future President, Ronald Reagan into his first term as the state's chief executive.3 The Democrats' continued close association with liberal or "radical" causes, in conjunction with the growing sense of chaos and aimlessness that became the trademark of the late sixties, would prove even more disastrous in the 1968 presidential election.

The '68 Election and the Nixon Phenomenon

The central element in Nixon's rise to power was his successful employment of subtle, demagogic political appeals concerning race-related issues. Nixon's victory and the popularity of Southerner George Wallace, a third-party candidate who had split from the Democratic Party principally on racial issues, established the framework for the successful conservative political dominance of presidential elections throughout the 1980s.4 From the late 1960s until the end of the 1980s, a key component of successful candidates' electoral strategies was the exploitation of racial stereotypes in connection with liberalism and "big government."

As political analysts, Tom and Mary Edsall observed: "Nixon... developed strategies essential to capitalizing on the issue of race, while avoiding the label of racism. Nixon in 1968 was among the first Republicans to understand how the changing civil rights agenda could be made to offer a politically safe middle ground to candidates seeking to construct a new conservative majority.... The Nixon strategy effectively straddled the conflict between growing public support for the abstract principle of racial equality and intensified public opposition to government-driven enforcement mechanisms."

This was the crux of the messages used to court white/ethnic working-class groups in the backlash against liberalism and hence the Democratic Party. By shrewdly employing political rhetoric that was heavily racially coded, Nixon was able to cultivate the bitterness against liberalism that was emerging chiefly from the white ethnic and working-class groups, thereby developing a powerful and effective political coalition.

Welfare abuse, particularly embodied in the stereotype of the welfare queen, was an extremely potent political tool to court white ethnic and working-class voters. This group was a crucial segment in the New Deal coalition that had allowed the Democratic Party to dominate the national political scene since the 1930s. As E. J. Dionne commented, "Repeated claims of liberal solicitude for the common people had been key to Democratic triumphs under Franklin Roosevelt. Thus, the New Deal slogan, 'If you want to live like a Republican, vote Democratic.'" But with the seemingly "liberal" excesses over civil rights and the War on Poverty emanating in the late sixties, this crucial bloc of white working-class voters had become increasingly alienated within the Democratic Party. The Machiavellian brilliance of the welfare queen trope was that it immediately brought forth connotations of deeply embedded racial stereotypes without ever explicitly doing so, thereby evading claims of racism. Welfare and crime had become racial code words in a new political language that was developed in the late sixties and utilized by conservatives like Nixon.

The chaotic political climate of the late 1960s was perfect for exploitation based on racially coded words and symbols. With rising urban violence, crime in major cities, and burgeoning public assistance rolls, crime dependency and welfare dependency were permanently racialized and deemed "Black" within the mainstream political culture. A variable further complicating the increasingly racialized dynamics of American politics was the controversy that resulted from the 1965 Moynihan Report, which directly linked welfare dependency to pathological behavior of the "poor." According to Senator Moynihan, there was a "ghetto" pathology among African-Americans in the depressed inner cities that was producing an alarming rise in single-mother households and dramatic increases in the rate of illegitimate births and, consequently, a rise in welfare dependency. The vitriolic response to the Moynihan Report and subsequent liberal acquiescence to critics' claims, without addressing some of the substantive findings of the report, served to further alienate liberals from the mainstream.

As Edsall stated: "The reluctance of liberalism and of the Democratic party to forthrightly acknowledge and address the interaction of crime, welfare dependency, joblessness, drug use, and illegitimacy with the larger questions of race and poverty reflected not only an aversion to grappling with deeply disturbing information, but compounded the political penalties the party would pay for its commitment to racial liberalism."

These political penalties would appear in full force in the 1968 presidential contest and would hamper Democratic presidential candidates from Nixon onward. Democratic dominance in capturing the Oval Office would decline dramatically after 1964, with only one victory in the two decades prior to 1988.

A Black Feminist Response to the Conservative Majority

In 1975 feminist, scholar, and author Michelle Wallace tackled the issue of power relations between Black people and white people and described how, in a capitalist society where white people have power, Black people are left to fight each other for the leftovers. Wallace described the resulting dynamics in the following way. The Black man does not receive enough power to change the situation of the race, but he is made to believe that the Black woman is to blame. Black women, in turn, have learned that feminism is for white women, so they are left with no way of empowering themselves. Wallace pointed out that problems arise when white women choose to look at Black women as fellow victims; instead of critiquing the society that pits Black men against Black women, and where the remaining way to assert their manhood, is to oppress Black women. Wallace observed that white women stand against white men much more often than Black women are allowed to criticize Black men. With her 1975 essay, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," published in the New York weekly, Village Voice, Wallace encouraged Black women to stand up for themselves and form an organization that dealt with their issues. Wallace, who was one of the founding members of the National Black Feminist Organization, warned against Black women copying white feminists and getting stuck on the same issues that had divided white feminists. Wondering if the time might be right for a Black feminist movement, she urged Black women to unite and find out.

Wallace's essay in the Village Voice was a preview of ideas that she would go on to develop more fully in her later books, including Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman. The book contains two essays, "The Black Macho" and "The Myth of the Superwoman." One of the most important parts of the book is Wallace's critique of the 1965 Moynihan Report and, specifically, Senator Moynihan's scapegoating of Black women for the plight of Black people. Moynihan wrote, "[I]n essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male."9 Moynihan failed to point out the conditions that created this "matriarchy," successfully projecting the problems in the Black community on Black women instead of white racism. The

Moynihan Report was a thinly veiled political agenda, but it was still received with praise, influencing both the policies of government and the sentiment of the American public. Even Black men were affected. Wallace wrote, "[J]ust as Black men were busiest attacking Moynihan, they were equally busy attacking the Black woman for being a matriarch."10 Wallace criticized the fact that even if Black men wanted to reject the notion of Black women being too domineering and loud, the Moynihan Report and its ripple effects in society prompted Black men to feel threatened by Black women and their social role. The Moynihan Report tried to provoke Black men to control their women in order to regain their "manhood." Few Black men questioned what whites might gain from the report and its stereotyped assumptions. The Moynihan Report came at a crucial time in Black history. During the Civil Rights movement, Black women fought to gain the same rights as Black men. Black men who felt threatened by Black women's assertion of equality felt safer with white women, and the Moynihan Report provided evidence that Black men had reason to feel this way. As Wallace concluded, "The Black man needed a rest. No wonder he wanted a white woman. The Black woman should be more submissive and above all keep her big Black mouth shut."

The title of Wallace's book reflected the author's intent to shatter the myths that surround Black people, both men and women. Wallace claimed that even during slavery, Black men and women were equal and there were reasons why patriarchy did not characterize Black family patterns. Wallace historicized the notion of the Black macho and the ways in which white society tried to spread such myths in order to handle Black men and control them even after slavery was abolished. Lynching was a successful method that white men used to punish Black men who had excelled in their own societies. After lynching became socially and legally unacceptable, the white dominant society tried other ways to disempower Blacks through stereotyping. For Black men, stereotypes such as "coons" and "Toms" were prevalent and were perpetuated through movies and books. Black men either were unthreatening fools who missed the good old days of slavery or were hyper-threatening, uncontrollable aggressors who had to be curbed, lest they unleash social unrest and disorder.

For Black women, similar dichotomous stereotypes existed with the Mammy and Jezebel images. When Wallace wrote her book, she criticized Black men for starting to internalize and believe in the stereotypes of Black women as Jezebel and Sapphire. Black men felt that Black women caused their own disempowerment and poverty. Wallace wrote that "the Americanized Black man's reaction to his inability to earn enough to support his family, his impotence, his lack of concrete power, was to vent his resentment on the person in this society who could do least about it—his woman."12 Wallace showed why these stereotypes started to appear in the American society and how they have lived on in official policies and documents such as the Moynihan Report. She claimed that Black men and women started having problems in their relationships when they started to copy white couples and internalize their problems. Wallace further claimed that Black men and women also internalized the stereotypes that existed about each other and about themselves. While Black women felt that they needed to be tougher on Black men because they were "no good," Black men, especially in the early seventies, wanted to embody the "buck" stereotype, which was highly sexual and provocative, but was still created by white people. One of the issues that Wallace discussed is the highly taboo issue of the relationship between Black men and white women. She argued that within this white, racist, patriarchal society, it is not strange that the symbol of power and achievement for Black men has been to have a white woman. Indeed, "the notion of the Black man's access to white women as a prerequisite of his freedom was reinforced." The notions of the stereotypes, the Moynihan Report, and the sudden trend for Black men to be with white women all culminated in the Black Power movement in the 70s, which Wallace calls "the Black man's struggle to attain his presumably lost 'manhood.'"

Wallace offered examples of the role of Black Power movement leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael, noting that they represented the new "model" of what a man should be. The macho men were supposed to replace the so-called matriarchy with a much-needed patriarchy. Wallace claimed that very little was gained during the Black Power movement except further disempowerment of Black women and separation of Blacks along class lines. In the second part of her book, Wallace concentrated on the reactions of Black women with respect to the Black Power movement. There was a feeling that Black women's place was behind their men, that they had already been liberated, and that being Black was more important than being female. In this section, Wallace shifted her focus from ordinary Black women to radical activists such as Angela Davis, whom Wallace admired although she was critical of the picture of her that the Black Power movement portrayed: a woman acting because of love and not because of political convictions. "For all her achievements, Davis was seen as the epitome of the selfless, sacrificing 'good woman'—the only kind of Black women the movement accepted." Wallace argued that there was an unwillingness to see a woman for her political convictions and actions. Women within the Black Power movement were supposed to find their place behind their men or their male leaders, but Wallace urged Black women to criticize Black men when criticism was necessary.

Wallace's frustration with the isolation and misunderstanding experienced by many Black feminists was articulated clearly in passages such as, "If a Black female celebrity is pretty, or sexy or is married to a White man, she is called a talent less whore. If she's elegant or highbrow or intellectual, she's pronounced funny looking, uptight, and in need of a good brutal fuck. If she happens to appeal to a White audience, she is despised. If she's independent, physical or aggressive, she's called a dyke."

Wallace did not stop her criticism with the Black male leaders of the sixties and seventies, but continued with Black male authors, such as Ishmael Reed, whose work Wallace charged as being "talky, bitter, complicated, [and] accusatory." She also criticized filmmaker Spike Lee for his treatment of Black female characters. Thus, Wallace was one of the first Black intellectuals to link the political with the social and to examine—and, importantly, to forcefully articulate—the ways in which racism in the political and social sphere impacted cultural productions in the creative and artistic sphere. Shortly before Wallace published The Black Macho, the poet Ntozake Shange had created a new literary genre with her "choreopoem," which she titled "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf." The choreopoem, which debuted at the New Federal Theatre on Broadway in 1976, is a collage of pieces delivered by seven women in which they convey their individual experiences in African American society and with Black men in particular. The women are named after the colors of the rainbow; significantly, they do not have their own names. Shange's "for colored girls" attracted strong criticism as a production that was naïve, immature, and anti-male.17 Yet the fact that Shange asserted women's right to have their own narratives and, moreover, the right to tell those narratives opened a door to a new type of creative cultural production that expanded opportunities for Black women to explore, discuss, and understand the issues that affected their lives, as well as present these issues before a broader and more diverse audience. Shange's choreopoem and its subsequent revivals also served as a way to further illuminate both the shortcomings of sociopolitical movements constructed around identity, as well as misunderstandings of them.

For instance, on April 24, 1994, The Washington Times reviewed a revival of "for colored girls," with the critic proclaiming, "Black men and white people will find absolutely no redeeming images of themselves here." These lines, which appeared in the beginning of the review, came 20 years after the play was written and first performed. The reviewer tries to find something redeeming within the play but still situates it only during the 70s, as if Black women, or other women of color or marginalized people, cannot see themselves in the play today. At the same time, the critic also failed to put "for colored girls" into an appropriate sociohistorical context. As a result, Shange's best-known work continues to be misinterpreted and misunderstood. Robert Staples critiqued both Wallace and Shange in his essay, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," which was published in the March–April 1979 issue of the Black Scholar. Staples wrote that "watching a performance of 'for colored girls' one sees a collective appetite for Black male blood."

Even Black women scholars such as Jacqueline Trescott insisted that Shange's men "are scheming, lying, childish, and brutal baby-killers, they are beasts humiliated for the message of sisterly love." Critics like Staples and Trescott did not stop and ask themselves why these two Black women wrote as or what they did; instead, they judged and condemned these women writers and tried to protect the men's behavior in the texts. Staples wanted to persuade his readers to accept the men's behavior since he thought that, "there is a curious rage festering inside Black men, because, like it or not, they have not been allowed to fulfil the roles (e.g., breadwinner, protector) society ascribed to them."

Is this a valid reason why Black women should sit back and accept it if Black men treat them badly? How does this reasoning improve the situation? If copying a white patriarchal system and behavior has not worked and does not work for Black men, why not put it aside and find a new and more just pattern of relationship that does not oppress Black women? Nowhere in his essay did Staples engage any of these questions. It is true that Black men have been and are victims within a racist, capitalistic system, but they also have their own responsibilities within it. Staples, for his part, did not acknowledge that people could be both victims and oppressors at the same time. In opposition to Staples, Neal Lester argues in his essay, "Shange's Men: 'for colored girls' Revisited, and Movement Beyond," that Shane attacked the abusive behavior in some Black men but not all because the characters in the play long for closeness and relationships with Black men despite their poor treatment.

Neither Shange nor Wallace demanded abstinence, lesbianism, or a move away from Black men as a political action. They both expressed their love for Black men, but that love is not without conditions. Even if Shange showed the brutal side of some Black men through her characters, she did not minimize the victimization of Black men in this society. As Sandra H. Flowers wrote in "'colored girls' Textbook for the Eighties," "I believe that Shange's composition for Black men surfaces most noticeably in this poem and that her portrayal of Below Willie recognizes some of the external factors which influence relationships between Black men and women."

Shange's play showed what kinds of ideals Black women were searching for. Shange insisted "[M]y target in 'for colored girls' is not Black men per se, but the patriarchy in general, which I view as universal in its oppression of women." Shange also resisted the notion that she glamorized Black women at the expense of Black men, and insisted that her treatment of Black women was neither glamorizing nor uplifting, but rather a refection of how she viewed reality. Black men, and some Black women, were not accustomed to seeing Black women stand up for a Black autonomous feminism that not only questioned racism within white feminist movements but also went against sexism within Black society.

Such a stance is central to Wallace and Shange's writing, since they did not attack all Black men—only the ones who abuse and oppress women and those who let other men do so without educating them to act otherwise. It is clear that the Black establishment was not ready for Wallace or Shange, since both women were so unapologetic for their strong feminist views and their insistence on sharing these views publicly. There are many similarities between Shange's play and Wallace's book, both of which criticize the way Black men have been socialized to oppress Black women in order to exert their own manhood. Both authors tried to create a sisterhood and a way for women to comfort one another and feel close to one another.

The women in Shange's play sing, "I found God in myself, and I loved her!" An important aspect of Shange's play, unrecognized by male critics in particular, is that it opened the discourse about Black feminist theater and revealed a whole new—indeed, alternative—meaning to black power. It seems as though Shange's play and Wallace's book came before their time, since not only Black men but also some Black women could not understand them. Nonetheless, both texts were—and are—critical cultural products because they helped situate women in the political sphere and, as historical documents, help current readers to understand the sociopolitical realities of the 1970s for Black women. Wallace and Shange were not seen as isolated examples of angry Black feminists.

John Cunningham wrote an article in The Guardian on August 13, 1987, titled "The New Black Man's Burden." In this article, Cunningham argued that "the revenge of the women" had gone too far and that people like Ntozake Shange, Michele Wallace, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou all owed their fame and fortune to Black men, since it was through bashing men that these authors gained the reading public's attention. The author accused the women of reinforcing racial stereotypes and dividing the Black community by portraying some Black men as abusive. Cunningham also quoted Ishmael Reed, who suggested that Black feminists were conspiring behind Black men's backs with white conservatives in order to further marginalize and demonize Black men. Clearly, Cunningham's failure to both contextualize and analyze these writers and their works thoughtfully was representative of a larger problem with sociopolitical movements of the day.

While I do not wish to suggest that scholars, Black or white, should restrain themselves from articulating their beliefs, what is problematic about Cunningham's framing of Black women writers' work is that it was both shallow and lacking context. Furthermore, these types of limited analyses only served to further complicate and divide communities already sorely in need of unification. Similar problems were evident in the aforementioned essay by Robert Staples. In the essay in which Robert Staples responded to the controversy over Wallace's book, Staples claimed that Shange and Wallace were influenced by white media, and he justified the behavior of Black men that Shange and Wallace criticized by arguing that Black men were socialized to behave in such a manner by the country's capitalist system. Staples alleged that both Shange's and Wallace's work was limited in value because neither examined capitalism and its impact critically.

He wrote, "To completely ignore capitalism's systemic features and its role in Black oppression is to adopt the normative approach of neo–conservative social analysis and bias no different than Whites, which makes [these texts] an example of the rightward turn in America. Staples also claimed that Black men did not have the institutional power to oppress Black women except in two areas—the church and the family, as if either of these institutions is a negligible aspect of Black women's lives. Staples further claimed that Black men do not inherit anything from male supremacy since they are the truly disadvantaged, which, he asserted, cannot be said of Black women. According to Staples, Black women have more education, and their mortality rate is lower. He also claimed that since more than half of Black women are divorced, widowed, or never married, "this aloneness is a factor in the anger of Black women toward Black men."

Staples' argument was reflective of an ideological framing of responses to Black women's intellectual and cultural production during the period. In several articles by other critics, the phrase "angry Black feminists" was used frequently as if to suggest that Black feminists suffer from a disorder, that they are irrational, and therefore cannot be taken seriously. This attitude is a remnant of Victorian times, which is, sadly, still common whenever women try to go against the status quo and critique patriarchy. Male academics and critics were not, apparently, familiar with the practice of "theorizing from the self," and if they were, they did not want to acknowledge such a practice as a rigorous academic approach. Instead, male critics such as Staples dismissed Black feminists' theories wholesale, casting the female intellectuals as hysterics, traitors, and unqualified academics.

Despite the publication of many reviews and critical essays on Wallace and Shange, no Black male intellectual was ready to stand up for these Black feminists and say that there is at least something redeeming in them and their work. Additionally, almost half of the women scholars reviewing their work went against Wallace and Shange in a way that suggests they had internalized the negative sentiments against these two Black feminist writers. One example was the economist Julianne Malveaux, who wrote, [W]hile Wallace can be credited with bringing the social politics of Black people out of the closet, she does little to evaluate the discussion past those late evening conversations that happen often when we get together. Emotionally charged, bandying about lots of accusation, her book resolves nothing.24 Yet Malveaux seemed to have missed the point entirely. Neither Wallace nor Shange intended to resolve any questions. Rather, they intended to pose questions that each reader was invited to answer from his or her own personal experience. Neither Wallace nor Shange claimed that they had answers; instead, they raised taboo issues and encouraged social dialogue to engage those issues. The critics, male and female alike, could find little praiseworthy about Wallace's or Shange's work. Malveaux even accused Wallace of having written an "emotionally charged" book, privileging the cool detachment of traditional academic writing as a more legitimate narrative posture. Wallace, in particular, writing from within the establishment, railed against the notion that a work is considered more valid if the author is detached and dispassionate. Malveaux also condemned Wallace's work as "hyped up" and the effect of manipulative white media.

Based on the volume and tone of critical response, it seems that Wallace and Shange touched a raw nerve. Critic Terry Jones suggested that the content of *Black Macho and for colored girls* offered one of the most serious threats to Black people since the slave trade. He considered the works to constitute "[a] threat from within" the Black community. The not-so-subtle underlying message of the hostile criticism lodged against Wallace and Shange was that these women should "stop dwelling on the negative aspects of our existence."

Fifteen years after Black Macho was first published, Michelle Wallace wrote a new foreword for the 1990 edition. Her views had changed, and she admitted some mistakes, including her failure to acknowledge the Black women who had written before her, as well as the problems of "nationalism as a liberation strategy for women." Wallace also confessed in the new foreword that if she were to write the same book again, she would not claim that Black Macho was "the crucial factor in the destruction of the Black Power movement." Even though this construct remains important, Wallace acknowledged that it is difficult to back such a claim with hard evidence and data. Nonetheless, Black Macho remains a well-articulated account of the betrayal and frustration that was felt by many women in the Black Power movement at the time.

Wallace's book was one of the first published productions of Black feminist thought, in the same way that Shange's choreopoem was one of the first Black feminist plays. Wallace's "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," which paved the way to the book Black Macho, is quoted in the Combahee River Collective's A Black Feminist Statement, which came out just a few years before her book was published: [W]e exist as women who are Black feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done, we would have to fight the world. ("A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood") The inclusion of Wallace's writing in the Collective's statement affirmed that Wallace had accurately taken the pulse of the Black feminist movement—at least a significant part of it—and had articulated its concerns. Analyzing Wallace's essay, the CRC wrote that Wallace "is not pessimistic but realistic in her assessment of Black feminists' position, particularly in her allusion to the nearly classic isolation most of us face.

We might use our positions at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action." The work of Michelle Wallace and Ntozake Shange shook Black academe and the predominantly male establishment, creating necessary controversy that advanced the Black feminist movement. Without the debates the works engendered, Black feminism and Black women's writings would not be as developed as they are today. Wallace's and Shange's works were also necessary since they were articulations not only about Black women, but by Black women, offering a narrative that diverged considerably from the limiting stereotypes of the Moynihan Report, as well as those in books such as Soul on Ice by former Black Power leader Eldridge Cleaver. Black men had a long way to go before grasping Black feminism and its concerns, but Wallace's and Shange's work also revealed that Black women had a great deal of thinking to do and action to take as well. Without Wallace and Shange, would there have been bell hooks' book, Ain't I a Woman, or Black Feminist Thought by Patricia Hill Collins?

One thing is certain, and that is that Black feminist studies would not have been able to create its own identity and criticism if the ideas of self-love and the knowledge of self-hatred and sexism had not been articulated by Wallace and Shange. If it were not for early Black feminists' writing that explicitly critiqued Black men's sexism, many Black lesbian feminists would have felt very alienated and distanced from their straight sisters. Books like Black Macho and plays like for colored girls helped people like Barbara Smith of the Combahee River Collective to come back into the feminist movement after having been disenchanted, disenfranchised, and disempowered by the Black Power movement\. Perhaps more women would agree with Wallace and Shange today than 20 years ago, but there is still a noticeable trend among Black men to stand up for other Black men in spite of obvious sexism during the Million Man March and the controversy over Anita Hill. This shows that some Black men still distance themselves from "those angry Black feminists" and are not willing to engage on a deeper level with the issues that Wallace and Shange brought up in their work.

Ronald Reagan and the Culture of Politics

As Wallace and Shange were busily stimulating conversation on the cultural scene with radical works, the political climate in the USA was growing increasingly conservative. The backlash movement against liberalism that emerged with Nixon was finally consummated with the election and presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. As Edsall and Edsall commented, "In many respects Ronald Reagan, in his quest for the presidency, updated and refined the right-populist, race-coded strategies of Wallace and Nixon." Reagan had made bids for the presidency in 1968 and 1976, but it was not until 1980 that the political environment was ready for the California governor's explicit, racially driven, ideological rhetoric. In making his case to voters in 1980, Reagan made it clear that his planned assault on government would rely primarily on the means tested programs (i.e., "welfare") that disproportionately served minorities.

Reagan's concentrated attack on AFDC and other means-tested programs was in alignment with the growing public support and sympathy for the plight of Blacks and other minorities. In 1979 and 1980, national support for increased spending to improve the conditions of Blacks and other minorities fell to a record low of 24%. Opposition to welfare spending swelled to its highest level in 1976 and remained intense through 1980. In addition, the 41% of respondents in 1980 who thought, "Blacks and other minorities should help themselves" versus those saying that "Government should improve the social and economic position of Blacks" (19%) was an all-time high, compared to 37 and 29%, respectively, in 1976 and 38 and 31% in 1972.2

The emerging racial conservatism within the electorate cut across racial lines, as a chasm developed between the views of Black and white Americans. Just as Wallace and Shange had oppressive social structures, the increasingly oppressive and highly racialized economic structures and policies of the nation prompted intellectuals and cultural creatives to explore issues related to Black poverty in their work. No work was more seminal during this period than Alice Walker's novel, The Color Purple.

Understanding Alice's Garden: The Color Purple Controversy In 1981

Alice Walker wrote The Color Purple, which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for fiction. The novel was one of the most controversial books written by a Black woman and sparked years of discussion. Walker's third novel, published after The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Meridian, The Color Purple is centered on the subject of Black relationships and a clear critique of patriarchy, as well as an examination of the social and economic structures that perpetuate such conditions. The novel is set in the South, a region with which Walker was familiar.

She was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1944, the youngest of eight children. She attended Spelman College in Atlanta and was offered a scholarship to attend Sarah Lawrence College; instead, Walker took a leave of absence and travel to Africa. She came back from Africa pregnant, contemplated suicide, but had an abortion instead, and wrote her first poetry book, Once. Walker was extremely influenced by her family and their lives. "She makes no bones about loving her grandfathers and the stories they'd tell." Her family and her surroundings influenced Walker when writing The Color Purple, and that is why she used Black vernacular and why Anglo American culture was so absent from the book. The author said, "[W]riting The Color Purple was not so much a struggle – but it was more a letting go, of just trying to clear my channels enough."

Before discussing the implications of the novel and the political message that it conveyed, it is important to place the book in a historical context that helps us to understand the significance of its arrival in the early 1980s. The Color Purple continued the tradition of Ntozake Shange's 1976 choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf and Michele Wallace's 1979 book Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, both of which were catalysts for discussions of sexism within Black society. The Color Purple was influenced not just by Wallace and Shange, but also by other "troublemakers" such as Lorraine Hansberry, who was dismissed by Black male critics in the 1960s, and countless other Black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, similarly important to but marginalized during the Harlem Renaissance.

One of the problems with the discussion that resulted from Walker's book and the movie adaptation of The Color Purple is that few people are aware of the difference between the two. Most of the critique that Walker received was in response to the movie, and most of the people who criticized her felt that she was to blame for all the shortcomings of the film. The media also focused on the negative aspects of the movie instead of showing that most Black women enjoyed the movie and felt that it was both an accurate refection of their experiences and a positive portrayal of Black women in general. As Jacqueline Bobo stated, in reaction to Black women's favorable responses to the film, Black male criticism of the film began to attain much more media space. In January 1986 The New York Times reported that the film was the dominant topic of conversation on radio and talk shows.

The film reached its audience in several stages, and each time it induced a strong reaction. It was released during the holiday season in 1985, but was re-released theatrically at the beginning of 1987. The movie grossed $100 million by 1986, which is much more than the book's profits, so it is safe to say that more people saw the movie than read the book; however, many people equated the two synonymously and talked about them as such. The critique of the movie extended from the producer and director to Walker herself, whose own version of the screenplay had not been used for the movie. Even people who had not read the book started critiquing it and the author, calling Walker a "man hater." One of the most vicious condemnations of Walker came from The Washington Post columnist Courtland Milloy, who wrote that some Black women would enjoy seeing a movie about Black men shown as brutal bastards. Furthermore, he wrote, "I got tired a long time ago of White men publishing books by Black women about how screwed up Black men are." The problem was that Milloy had not read the book, but still felt justified in commenting about the novel and its author.

Even Spike Lee declared in Film Comment that "the reason that Hollywood elected Alice Walker's novel to make into a film was that Black men are depicted as one-dimensional animals." Such a comment is particularly curious coming from Lee, whose movies are widely considered to portray women unidimensional and, often, negatively. The wide range of criticism reflected fear, especially among Black men, of a popular book by a Black female author in which they are being criticized. This fear existed in the white society as well, since the media and the talk shows are controlled by the white dominant society. It was a fear which would characterize another event that was about to unfold, and one which was far more visible to pop culture enthusiasts: The scandal involving Miss America, Vanessa Williams.

While Alice Walker's novel may have represented a highbrow threat to Black masculinity and to dominant culture, Sarah Banet-Weiser argued that "... the [1983] crowning of Vanessa Williams is a particularly visible instance of the politics of the 1980s and Reaganism," accessible to anyone with a television, radio, or a newspaper. To understand exactly what it was that Vanessa Williams represented and how her fall from grace constituted a threat to her symbolic accomplishment, it is first necessary to understand some of the dominant tropes deployed by politicians that cast Black women into the unidimensional role of the welfare queen. One of Ronald Reagan's favorite anecdotes on the campaign trail, in multiple campaigns, was the story of a Chicago "welfare queen" who had "80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and a tax-free income of over $150,000."

This supposedly true story represented a melding of resentments against the poor. At its most extreme, the image of the welfare queen conjured up a picture of a gold-clad, Cadillac driving, promiscuous Black woman living off the government dole and buying steak and beer with food stamps. The food stamp program, another means-tested program, was a target of Reagan's ire and also became an important part of the welfare queen narrative. Food stamps, according to the Hollywood actor-turned-President, were a vehicle to let "some fellow ahead of you buy T-bone steak while you were standing in a checkout line with your package of hamburger."

Reagan's depiction of the welfare queen was based on a woman from Chicago, Linda Taylor, who had been charged with welfare fraud in 1976. She was actually charged with defrauding the state of $8000, not $150,000.33 Not only was Taylor misrepresented, but also the President's extensive use of the welfare queen narrative served to permanently consolidate racist stereotypes of Black women within contemporary political discourse. As a result of this shrewd manipulation of racist caricatures, social welfare discourse during the 1980s became fundamentally structured around the "welfare queen" trope, with race as its central ideological organizing axis.

As Patricia Williams remarked, "Somewhere during the Reagan-Bush years the issue of race [became] more firmly wedded to the notion of welfare than ever before, and the rest is history" (Rooster's Egg, year, 5). Vanessa Williams was the first Black Miss America and, like many other "first" Black Americans, was truly positioned as a test case for the viability of competing racial discourses in the context of emerging multiculturalism and New Right politics. Williams "was marked as a race-transcending American icon, and the pageant itself participated in marketing diversity as it happened, thereby incorporating it–and Williams herself–as a crucial element fueling the national imagination."

When Williams was first crowned, her success at crossing the historical color line of the Miss America pageant was read as evidence that Black women could be included within the parameters of white femininity. Former US Representative Shirley

Chisholm said at the time of Williams' coronation, "My first reaction is that the inherent racism in America must be diluting itself.... I would say, thank God I have lived long enough that this nation has been able to select a beautiful young woman of color to be Miss America." Chisholm continued by emphasizing the significance of Williams' victory for Black communities in the USA, claiming that "because it didn't 'put bread on the table' people might say 'So what?' when considering the importance to the civil rights movement of a Black woman's winning of the crown.... [But the event was] not trivial because it shows a sense that the country, for whatever the motivation might be, seems to be trying desperately to move toward an egalitarian set of circumstances."

Williams' success and the narrative constructed around it were not to last, however. In July 1984, Penthouse ran an issue that featured Vanessa Williams engaged in sexual acts with a white woman. These photographs, taken three years before the pageant, were the reason the Miss America pageant commission asked Williams to relinquish her crown and title. Banet-Weiser observed: Just as she was granted individual personhood when she won the Miss America crown, she was summarily denied this same category when the photographs were published: she became all Black women in U.S. society, and she affirmed mass-mediated representations of this identity.

The "exposure" of Vanessa Williams recalled and foregrounded historically powerful narratives about Black women and sexuality, and it confirmed racist beliefs embedded within beauty pageants concerning 'questionable morals' purportedly held by all Black women. It can also be seen as an instance of a broader discourse about race and difference, and we should consider the story of Williams a particularly instructive instance of the ways the discourse of diversity works in U.S. culture. Jackie Goldsby added:

[T]he telling and retelling of Vanessa Williams's impressive victory and equally impressive downfall provided an opportunity –a lost opportunity– to engage in public conversation about the various ways race conditions and intersects sexuality. Without interrogating the racial specificity of the context in which Williams was positioned, her story could not be told– indeed, there was no available social narrative for the telling.

Like the [White] feminist reaction to Anita Hill, the elative silence that greeted events precipitating Williams's downfall was a result of America [stumbling] into a place where African-American women live, a political vacuum of erasure and contradiction maintained by the almost polarization of "Blacks and women" into separate and competing political camps.

Vanessa Williams became an Icarus figure who few too high and fell. Once she lost her crown, many members of the Black community felt betrayed. One woman journalist wrote, "That [Williams] had been hailed as a particularly 'exemplary' queen, one who injected new life into the homogeneously bland pageant, only makes her fall more keenly felt by Black women who are trying hard to exert a sense of self."36 Williams's subsequent exploitation is the quintessential act of resistance against Black women in the 1980s. The "exemplary" queen of the '80s is quickly and efficiently replaced by the welfare, quota, and condom queens of the '90s.

Can black women and white women be true friends?

Perspective by Kim McLarin

Washington Post March 29, 2019

In the scene from "Roots" I most remember, Missy Anne informs Kizzy that she is to become her property.

Missy Anne (the name itself is black shorthand for a white woman, a forerunner of "Becky") and Kizzy have grown up together. Missy Anne has even secretly taught Kizzy to write and read. She is delighted at the prospect of becoming the legal owner of her friend.

Kizzy is less so: Among other things, she doesn't want to leave her family. But she knows enough not to voice her displeasure; she feints and feigns until Missy Anne demands an answer.

"Kizzy, don't you want to be my slave?" the white woman pouts. "Aren't you my friend?"

Generally speaking, it's not that I dislike white women. Generally speaking, it's that I do not trust them. Generally speaking, most black women don't. That's a big statement, impossible to either prove or disprove. I make it based upon a lifetime of observation and study, and also a highly unscientific survey of friends and friends of friends, ranging in age from 20 to "well over 60."

Among the findings: This distrust — or, more precisely, this absence of trust — seems to hold true whether or not the black woman has lived and worked mostly in predominantly white environments, whether or not she has any white female friends, whether or not she feels this absence as a loss.

When I ask black women why they have so few white female friends their answers range — "Too much trouble," "They don't see me," "Seems like something about us just sticks in their craw" — but seem to cluster around two major themes: power and invisibility.

Put simply, white women have power they will not share and to which they mostly will not admit, even when wielding it. Think about all the white women calling the police on black women and men for capital crimes such as grilling near a lake, driving through a neighborhood, bumping a leg on an overcrowded plane.

White women sit at the right hand of power, leaning in, not down. There have been 41 white female governors (and two Latina and one South Asian governors) but not a single black female one. In fact, black women represent 4.5 percent of all female statewide elected officials. Twenty-one of the 25 female U.S. senators are white, as are the vast majority of female members of Congress.

White women hold 4.4 percent of CEO positions, but black women hold 0.2 percent. Every "Equal Pay Day," white feminists decry that women average 80 percent of a man's salary but rarely mention that the figure applies mostly to white women: Latinas average 54 cents for every dollar, black women average 68 cents, American Indian and Alaskan Native women make 58 cents.

Far more concerning is the wealth gap: The wealth of white women swamps that of black women — regardless of age, marital status or education level.

Yet rarely do white feminists take up the greater cause of black female inequity. White women are among the most vocal and vociferous opponents of affirmative action, despite being equal, if not greater, beneficiaries.

This is what black women know: When push comes to shove, white women choose race over gender: Every. Single. Time.

That white women do not want to relinquish their spot on the second rung is to be expected. "Power concedes nothing without a demand," wrote Frederick Douglass. "Never has, never will."
It's the pretense that's maddening.

Every fall, I teach a survey class in African American literature, an undertaking I consider one of the chief honors of my life. One of my favorite books to teach in this class is Harriet Jacobs's seminal slave narrative, "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl."

Authenticated as the first book-length slave narrative written by a woman, "Incidents" is a powerful and compelling examination of slavery's impact on black women and the black family.

"Slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women," she writes in the narrative's most famous line. The students nod. They're with Jacobs as she details the physical, psychological and sexual terrorism of slavery. They're with her as she asserts the resilience and importance of black kinship. They're definitely with her as she critiques the hypocritical Christianity of the South.

But when Jacobs gets around to criticizing white women — both Southern white women who turn a blind eye to, or actively enable, their husbands' rape and debasement of enslaved women and their Northern counterparts who, enraptured by the romantic myth of the wealthy Southern gentleman, do the same — some students begin to balk. Without fail, at least one young white woman will raise her hand, eyes determined, chin quivering: "Yes, but all women were property back then." Or: "Gender discrimination has always been a bigger problem than racism." Or: "Well, white women didn't have it much better than slaves." Which is simply untrue.

I find these moments revealing, the student's face both intense and needy as she mounts her defense of white women past.

If this student, who is young but neither thoughtless nor ill-informed, insists on believing that white women in 1850 were as oppressed as enslaved people, if she cannot and will not acknowledge the power differentials that existed within a system of legal, racialized slavery, how can she grapple honestly with the power imbalances of today?

And if she won't, how can she and her black classmate possibly be friends?

Audre Lorde asked, "If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the theory behind racist feminism?"

Aristotle defined friendship as "reciprocated goodwill." What distinguishes friendships, he wrote, is the source of this goodwill.

In friendships of pleasure or utility, the bond extends from the benefits we receive from the relationship: either pleasure or usefulness. But Aristotle considered friendships of virtue — in which each person values the other person for her own sake and supplies goodwill toward that person, even above her own interests — the only perfect form of friendship. Friendships based on personhood endure as long as the person endures.

The catch here is that to love someone simply because of who she is, one must first see that person. Not a stereotype or a fantasy, neither a charity case nor an abstract threat. Just a human being.

This is where, between black women and white women, things get difficult.

At the core of love is vulnerability; so, too, friendship. To be vulnerable is to be human and to be human is to be vulnerable, whether we like it or not. But the brutal truth is that many white women, like much of white America in general, do not consider black women vulnerable. Which means they do not consider us to be fully human.

To confirm this takes only a passing glance at pop-cultural depictions of black women, at the ugly, debasing vitriol directed at Michelle Obama, at the ways in which black mothers mourning for their slain sons at the hands of police officers are dismissed and demeaned.

Friendship is not possible between a human being and one who doubts her humanity — whether that doubt is framed in terms of the Angry Black Woman or, just as damaging, the Black Superwoman.

At the last high school reunion I bothered to attend, I had a conversation with a classmate, a woman I had known but not well. She began the ritual remembrance of intimidating teachers and painful heartbreaks, blistering self-consciousness and bewildering adolescence, intensified by being at one of the nation's top boarding schools. I said something along the lines of, "Yeah, we were all pretty much scared s---less," and she said, "Not you! You were always so strong and confident!"

This would have been laughable if it weren't also revealing and sad. I was a poor black girl who had been plucked from the bunch at my Memphis public school and shipped unwilling and terrified off to New Hampshire to diversify the prep school, or at least put on a good front. I was overwhelmed, terrified and alone.

But this chick saw me as "strong and confident." Which would be forgivable except for the fact that 25 years later, when I tried to correct her impression, she still refused to hear.

"For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive," Lorde wrote, "and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered."

The key words here are "each other" — white women must not only expect nurturing but also must nurture in return.

Adapted from "Womanish: A Grown Black Woman Speaks on Love and Life," by Kim McLarin, published in January by Ig Publishing.