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THE CHALLENGE OF RACE

Rethinking the Position of Black Women in the Field of Women’s History

Leslie M. Alexander

Gerda Lerner’s article beautifully captures the major historiographic shifts and developments in women’s history since 1969. It is important, thirty-five years later, to reflect on the ways in which the study of women’s experiences has evolved. Perhaps the most significant ideological influence on early women’s history was the feminist movement, which sought to overthrow male domination, patriarchy, and gender discrimination. As Lerner notes, the result was a proliferation of feminist scholarship in the 1980s, which placed women’s voices and experiences at the center of scholarly inquiry. Specifically within the field of history, feminist thought advocated for a woman-centered approach, and argued that there was a common sisterhood among women. The creation of new feminist paradigms was tremendously useful in liberating White women from scholarly neglect and oversight, and therefore a debt of gratitude is owed to the scholars who blazed the trail and took intellectual risks to create this field.

Despite the importance of these early contributions, however, I believe that the most significant progress has been made since the 1980s, after Black scholars raised critiques regarding the “implicit racism” in women’s history that systematically overlooked how race and class functioned in the lives of women of color. As Eileen Boris and Angelique Janssens explained, “feminists found themselves increasingly under attack for ignoring differences of race and ethnicity. The universalizing rhetoric of gender claimed to embrace all women when in fact it derived from the standpoint of usually middle-class white women in North America or northern Europe.” Although these criticisms slightly destabilized the field, the resulting creation of intersectionality, which examines how race, class, gender, and sexuality simultaneously influence women’s lives, was an important step in constructing the stories of women’s experiences. Yet as Lerner points out, the changes were not only “dramatic” and “pervasive,” they were also “confusing” (13). At this moment in the development of women’s history, we must be willing to look deeply at our approaches and evaluate their effectiveness. In my opinion, the scramble to incorporate race into the narrative, while critically important, was often clumsy, awkward, and strained. The problem is twofold; first, although feminism is a useful paradigm for White women, the attempt to force Black women...
into the same interpretive model is not applicable, and has prevented full understanding of Black women’s lives. The deeper, yet interconnected, issue is that despite vast improvements in our intellectual approaches, women’s historians have failed to respond adequately to the critiques launched by Black scholars nearly two decades ago.

In order to understand the current state of Black women in women’s history, it is necessary to review the historiographical trends. Following the pattern of Black history and White women’s history, the study of Black women initially employed a contributionist model. As Lerner suggested in her article, she was an important part of this movement to shed light on how Black women enhanced American society. In fact her anthology, *Black Women in White America*, published in 1972, was one of the first collections that sought to rescue Black women’s voices from historical obscurity. Although Lerner also points out that there were problems with contributionism as a scholarly approach, these issues were not immediately apparent and I believe that it was a critical step in the process of uncovering the histories of people who had been ignored and silenced. Darlene Clark Hine, while similarly concerned about focusing exclusively on “superachieving or transcendent” Black women, seems to agree that our understanding of Black women has been enhanced considerably by many of these early studies on Black women.4

By the 1980s, Black scholars issued a new challenge, one that forced historians to move beyond the contributionist model. This movement demanded a broader understanding of the role of race and class in the lives of women of color and urged women’s studies (and the women’s movement) to become more expansive in their interpretations. As Lerner stated, the frustration among Black scholars stemmed from the conflation of “woman” with “white woman” (13).5 This approach, they argued, not only rendered Black women invisible, but also suggested that all women’s experiences could be understood exclusively through the lens of whiteness and White women’s struggles. While the problem of exclusion received the majority of scholarly attention, Black scholars launched an additional critique which opposed the popular notion that there could be a “homogeneous womanhood.”6 Despite serious problems with racism within the movement, feminists had traditionally relied upon the notion of a common sisterhood among all women, both politically and intellectually. Yet women of color maintained that such a perspective eliminated the possibility that there could be multiple definitions and meanings of womanhood. The reality, Black scholars argued, was that race and class created a chasm that made a singular, unified womanhood impossible.7

Faced with the need to reassess their approach, women’s scholars clambered to incorporate race and class into their analysis, yet despite
their best efforts, a fundamental flaw remained. Unable to release the notion of a single womanhood, they only addressed part of the original challenge. While scholars dealt with the first criticism (that “woman” and “white woman” were not synonymous), they did not fully engage the second issue of homogeneity. The result was the emergence of studies that sought to incorporate race into women’s history by focusing exclusively on oppression. In particular, they struggled to understand how race exacerbated gender discrimination. Perhaps not understanding that Black women were not asking simply for an acknowledgement of their additional suffering, women’s historians relied on the “dual oppression” analysis to explain Black women’s experiences. This theory argued that in a White patriarchal society, both race and gender prevented the empowerment of women of color, and created simultaneous layers of subjugation. When class and sexual orientation were added to the discussion, it led to interpretations of triple and quadruple oppressions. Of course, as with contributionism, this understanding of multiple oppressions was certainly useful in its time; however, it ultimately failed to explore the full meaning and function of race.

I argue that the challenge for women’s history today is to understand fully how race functions in Black women’s lives. Early studies of race and gender failed to recognize that race does not only operate as an additional oppressive force but it also forms the foundation of how Black women live their daily lives, and what kinds of liberation strategies they embrace. Black scholars in the 1980s were trying to make this point when they attacked the concept of a homogenous womanhood. And this, of course, is the issue that most women’s historians have yet to grasp: race is not simply about oppression; in reality, race influences culture, community, and political worldview. In 1972, Lerner made some inroads on this subject when she acknowledged that there are distinct cultural differences based on race. “I am persuaded,” she wrote, “that black people and white people in America represent two separate cultures, with separate traditions and oftentimes diametrically opposed past experiences.” Yet the recognition that Black and White women are culturally different opens a Pandora’s box that many women’s historians have understandably wanted to avoid. In particular, we must ask, what specifically are the cultural differences between women and how does the reality of race influence those differences? What effect do they have on women’s lives and, perhaps most important for our purposes, how do they affect the field of women’s history?

Not surprisingly, women’s historians have been reluctant to address these questions because the answers strike at the core of women’s history. In order to explore Black women’s lives, they have to confront differences between and among women and reject the notion of homogeneity. In par-
ticular, they have to look deeply at how race and culture undermined the possibility of a singular womanhood. What they have discovered to this point seems frightening: Black cultural distinctiveness contradicts the use of feminist interpretive models because these paradigms do not generally fit with Black women’s experiences. The concern, of course, is that acknowledging the shortcomings of feminism will undermine everything that women scholars and activists have fought for. Yet the incompatibility of traditional feminism with the Black experience has been undeniable. Numerous scholars, including Bettina Aptheker, Vivian Gordon, and Clenora Hudson-Weems expounded on this intellectual and political quandary. According to Aptheker, racism, genocide, and the lack of social, economic, and political justice in Black communities have rendered feminism irrelevant. As she wrote in 1981, “When we place women at the center of our thinking, we are going about the business of creating an historical and cultural matrix from which women may claim autonomy and independence over their own lives. For women of color, such autonomy cannot be achieved in conditions of racial oppression and cultural genocide. In short, ‘feminist,’ in the modern sense, means the empowerment of women. For women of color, such an equality, such an empowerment cannot take place unless the communities in which they live can successfully establish their own racial and cultural integrity.”9 Thus, Aptheker maintained that feminism would not become useful for Black women until racism and inequality were eliminated.

Many Black women scholars applauded Aptheker’s analysis, particularly her acknowledgement of the damage that racism and injustice have done and her recognition of the limits of feminism. However, they took the argument a step further, suggesting that racism is not the only issue. While they agree that the history of slavery and racism plays a critical role, they also maintain that an understanding of Black culture is equally significant. Within Black culture, the concept of family, community, and kinship makes it impossible to remove Black women (or the study of Black women) from the context of the entire Black community. As a result, approaches such as feminism, which focus exclusively on gender, do not serve as useful models of interpretation for Black women because they seek to extract Black women from their community. As Vivian Gordon explained, “for African American women, sociopolitical transformation has always been highlighted by their identification with the total community—which is ultimately the extended kin, as opposed to an ongoing isolated gender-specific identity.”10 As a result, the stipulations of feminism that require a “gender first” policy have not felt applicable to Black women, who often view racial empowerment as equally, if not more, important than female empowerment. Bonnie Thornton Dill echoed this notion when
she explained that for Black women, the problem with feminism is that it “necessitates acceptance of a concept of sisterhood that places one’s womanhood over and above one’s race.”

Race, gender, and community are inextricably linked and any effort to analyze Black women solely in terms of gender will fail. Simply put, you cannot divorce Black women from the community; for if you do not understand the Black community you will not understand the Black woman.

It is important to note that Black women’s reluctance to espouse traditional feminism does not mean that Black women are not concerned with sexism and gender equality, politically or intellectually. On the contrary, there is widespread acknowledgement of the fact that sexism and patriarchy are real problems in Black women’s lives. Yet the inescapable reality is that while some Black female academics have embraced various forms of feminism, the vast majority of Black women have alternative liberation strategies, which are deeply rooted in their racial identity.

Clenora Hudson-Weems perhaps explained it best when she stated, “gender issues are real concerns for all women, Africana women included, as we are yet operating within a patriarchal system, and therefore, must confront this issue head on. However, attacking gender biases does not translate into mandating one’s identification with or dependency upon feminism as the only viable means of addressing them.”

Assuming, then, that Black women are concerned about gender equality, but do not unilaterally embrace feminism, what are the ramifications for Black women’s history?

Perhaps this question can be answered, at least in part, by looking at how gender is dealt with in the study of Black women. Since feminism is often not the primary mode of interpretation in Black women’s scholarship, issues of gender are usually couched in larger discussions about race. A compelling example of this is illustrated in Lerner’s analysis of recent shifts within the field of women’s history. In particular, she points out that, unlike general women’s history, books centered on Black women’s subjects tended to focus mainly on race and women’s organizations. This is not simply coincidence. Rather, her findings support my central argument: that race and community, including community organizations, remain the most compelling issues in Black women’s lives, and therefore are the focus of most historical studies dealing with Black women’s experiences. Recent biographies on Black women also support this notion—in particular, studies on Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and the women in the Montgomery bus boycott movement reveal that the activism and experiences of Black women must be studied in the context of the entire Black community.

These studies prove that although Black women’s experiences may be gendered, they are shaped most compellingly by their role as members of the Black community. As a result, Black women’s his-
tory is fundamentally different, both in content and in focus, from White women’s history.

Given the profound differences between Black and White women, it would be natural to wonder what the ramifications are for women’s history; particularly because Black women’s cultural orientation creates a unique challenge, both politically and intellectually. For women’s history and women’s studies, Black women’s tendency to resist feminism and to embrace identification with the Black community raises an important question about the position of Black women within the academic field. As Hudson-Weems argued, “the most fundamental issue is whether or not it is appropriate for Women’s Studies’ gender-specific theory to be presumed to address the race-specific and culture-specific issues of women who might wish to work against sexism, but who certainly do not wish to substitute their historic cultural identity for a so-called collective women’s culture.”15 The question Hudson-Weems’ statement raises is, how do Black women fit into the field of women’s history? If Black women are culturally oriented in a way that privileges race, or at least places race on equal footing, then what is our place in women’s studies? Is it possible to reconcile what appears to be a glaring contradiction?

I argue that it is possible for Black women to have a place in women’s history; however, it will require some dramatic changes in the field. I also believe that women’s history is gradually moving in the right direction. Over the past decade, scholars and activists have slowly rejected the notion of homogeneity and are recognizing that women are not a monolithic group. Perhaps more important, Black women scholars have immeasurably enriched the field with studies chronicling the lives and experiences of Black women.16 Yet the problem remained of how to bring race into the core of women’s history. In 1995, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham made a crucial breakthrough when she challenged feminist scholars to rethink their approach to the study of race. She argued that race operated as a “metalanguage,” which required historians to understand the “powerful and all-encompassing effect” that race has on the “construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality.”17 Her analysis was transformative because it forced race into the center of the discussion and urged women’s historians to consider how race shaped gender.

Scholars such as Eileen Boris and Gail Bederman heeded Higginbotham’s call and have made a valiant effort to explore the dual effects of race and gender. As Boris explained, by the mid-1990s she began to push the conversation on gender to “recognize the centrality of race,” especially in discussions on the formation of the nation-state.18 She also wrote extensively about the need to reject oppression models and to de-
velop instead new modes of analysis that seriously grapple with multiple categories of race, class, and gender. Boris’ theory of “racialized gender” has been tremendously useful in revealing how race and gender intersect, interconnect, and operate as systems. Likewise, Bederman’s study on Ida B. Wells offered significant insight on the ways in which Wells’ activism shaped, and interacted with, American definitions of race and masculinity. These works are crucial stepping-stones bringing us closer to where we need to be.

Despite my enthusiasm about these recent developments, I believe there are a series of critical issues that must be addressed before the field of women’s history can respond adequately to Black women’s experiences. The first challenge is largely methodological and reveals my concern that Black women’s voices are slowly vanishing from historical studies. This trend is likely due to the fact that Black women’s experiences have increasingly been used to understand the structure of American society and the systemic nature of racism and sexism. While such studies are undoubtedly important, there is a compelling need to study Black women in their own right. We must resist the temptation to use Black women solely as comparative models through which we can explain other phenomena; we must also explore the activities and contributions of Black women as members of the Black community. In order to understand the influence of race and gender, historians must be willing to ask important questions: how did Black women live their daily lives? How did they view themselves, and their role in the Black community? What did they believe, and what was their worldview? What liberation strategies did they embrace and why? The only way to answer these questions is for all women’s historians to use the strategy employed by Black scholars: bring Black women’s voices into the core of analysis. The challenge remains for us to analyze Black women through their own eyes rather than through the lens of whiteness and oppression.

The final two issues we must address are deeply interconnected, and return us to the criticisms initiated in the 1980s regarding feminism and racial difference. First, we need to reconcile the contradiction between Black women’s experiences, and the scholarly attachment to feminism. The question women’s historians must now ask themselves is, does a study have to be written using feminist tools and approaches in order to be part of the field? It is understandable if the answer is “yes,” but it is important to recognize the consequences of such a decision. Most troubling is that there is no place for the study of Black women in a framework that demands a “gender first” policy. In reality, the convergence of race, culture, and community makes it impossible to privilege gender, either intellectually or politically, over race. Women’s historians must come to terms with that
reality; otherwise they will continue to misunderstand Black women’s lives, both historically and contemporarily. In addition, the insistence upon feminism as the primary methodological approach limits the possibilities of what the field can become because it perpetuates the myth that this model is applicable to all women. In truth, feminism is just one manifestation of womanhood and there are many alternative expressions of women’s experiences.

The need to acknowledge the multiplicity of women’s experiences leads to my final point: we must become truly willing to explore difference. I believe that although most contemporary scholars no longer advocate for homogeneity, they remain reluctant to explore how the reality of race influences Black women’s lives. Despite the creation of new methodologies and modes of interpretation, most women’s historians have failed to comprehend how race shapes Black women’s consciousness and worldview. Race and culture are still the most compelling issues that mold Black women’s lives, and we must be willing to examine how these issues make their lives fundamentally different. Instead, many scholars have become fearful of difference. On this point, I echo Elsa Barkley Brown, who argued in 1995 that women’s historians often “lament that too much attention to difference disrupts the relatively successful struggle to produce and defend women’s history and women’s politics. . . . They seek a way to protect themselves and what they have created . . . and they wonder despairingly, ‘God, what has happened here.’” I, likewise, endorse Barkley Brown’s view that such concern, while understandable, is unnecessary.23

If women’s historians are willing to delve into the differences among women, they will discover that there are rich layers of depth and intricacy that can enrich our understanding of women’s experiences. Rather than lose a gender analysis, we will uncover the range of existing womanhoods. As Audre Lorde lamented in 1979, “The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower.”24 Race, culture, community, class, sexual orientation—all of these factors influence and act upon women’s lives in ways that we are just beginning to explore. We must not be afraid to grapple with diversity, difference, and complexity for only by dealing with these issues can we truly understand women’s lives holistically.

Notes

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Stordeur Pryor deserves particular recognition (and has earned my undying gratitude) for dedicating numerous hours to reviewing, and offering critical commentary on every draft of this essay. Our extensive dialogue enriched this article immeasurably.


3As Darlene Clark Hine suggested, Black women scholars were at the forefront of this movement, which fundamentally transformed women’s history. For more, see Darlene Clark Hine, Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994), 50.


5For Black women’s critiques, see Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981); Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982); and Barbara Smith, ed., Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983). For an excellent example of criticism from scholars of gender in Africa, see Oyeronke Oyewumi, The Invention of Women: Making An African Sense of Western Gender Discourses (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).


7Moraga and Anzaldúa, This Bridge Called My Back, 61–62; 84–5.


11Dill, “Race, Class, and Gender,” 136.

12Scholars such as Barbara Smith, Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins have all adopted brands of feminism. However, the fact remains that most Black women, both in and out of the academy, do not unequivocally accept feminism.


19Boris and Janssens, Complicating Categories, 6.

20Eileen Boris, “Citizenship Embodied: Racialized Gender and the Construction of Nationhood in the United States,” in Identity and Intolerance: Nationalism,


22The notable exceptions to this trend would be the numerous important studies examining clubwomen and Black women’s activism at the turn of the twentieth century.
