

5. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1978).
6. Janice Sumler-Edmond, "The Association of Black Women Historians," in *Black Women in America*, 2d ed., edited by Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1:37–38.
7. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing, eds., *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1987).
8. William H. Chafe, ed., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South* (New York: New Press, 2001).
9. For theoretical constructs for analyzing black women's history during the mid-1990s, see the works of Adele Logan Alexander, Elsa Barkley Brown, Bettye Collier-Thomas, Sharon Harley, Wanda Hendricks, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Darlene Clark Hine, Nell Irvin Painter, and Deborah Gray White.
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Deborah Gray White

MY HISTORY IN HISTORY

Before the Southern Historical Association meeting of 2003, I never gave much thought to how and why I became a historian. But the meeting was a sort of turning point for me because a session on the impact of my first book, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, was on the program.¹ I was deeply honored, in fact humbled, by the recognition, but in writing my response to the papers on that panel, I was forced to reflect on how I came to write and feel about the book. Two years later, I was again forced to reflect on my life as a historian as *Ar'n't I a Woman?* was again honored with a two-day conference at the Huntington Institute in Los Angeles and a session at the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians.² Something curious began to happen to me as I accepted these tributes—fully twenty years after *Ar'n't I a Woman?* had been published. They certainly filled me with pride and joy and a sense of accomplishment, but they also left me feeling angry and the anger did not pass quickly. With the help of a very gifted professional, I had been dealing with my past, but I had always seen my work as an oasis of sorts, disconnected from my personal life. I felt lucky to make a profession out of what had always been my passion—history. But the sessions and conference on my book brought certain things to light, made me notice things I had not noticed before, and, in classic midlife-crisis style, cast me adrift in a wash of emotions that I am only now getting a handle on. Truth be told, this volume, *Telling Histories*, my first edited volume, is part of the “work” I needed to do to move through this peculiar patch of life.

I always loved history. It was my favorite subject in elementary school, junior high, and high school. It was the subject I could always depend on to boost my overall grade point average. In the early grades, social studies was my forte. In junior high, it was history—any kind of history. In high school, I was good in political science and economics, but history, especially American history, was my favorite subject. I can only guess at why and how that happened.

For sure, I was embarrassed by the bits and pieces of black history I learned. Every Black History Week (it was only a week back then), we learned about

George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington. As I look back, I am appalled at the New York City social studies/history curriculum of the 1950s and 1960s. I always wanted to crawl under the desk in my elementary school class of mostly black and Puerto Rican students when we discussed slavery and black life. My mother was a domestic worker. I—though not my mother, who was proud that she set her own hours and chose her employers—was embarrassed by the fact that she cleaned white people's homes. When my classmates talked about their factory-working mothers, I fell silent. Somehow I associated the history of slavery with my mother's work. I hated and was jealous of her care for the white children of her employers. I hated going to work with her on my days off. I hated going to their country homes when she helped clean them out at the beginning of the summer. I just hated that she was a maid.

But I loved history and the social sciences. I remember reading Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Form of Capitalism* on my crosstown bus ride to and from Julia Richman High School. And I remember the astonishment on my political science teacher's face when I, one of the few "colored girls" in his honors class, explained the book to the entire all-girl class (Richman was single sexed at that time). To this day, I believe he called on me because he thought the reading was above my comprehension. Boy was he surprised.

Thank God my American history teacher, Ms. Rothman,³ embraced my interest in this area. She did all she could to satisfy my craving for something other than the stale history offered up in our high school textbook. One day after class, she handed me a few books that were part of a series on problems in American history. They opened a whole new window of learning and discovery. I devoured the edition that explained slavery, the Civil War, and the decisions made by Lincoln and the Republicans. An article on African Americans in the military helped me understand my father's bitterness about his naval experiences in World War II and my brother's opposition to the Vietnam War. I didn't know then that I would become a historian, but I did make up my mind to be a history teacher, not only because history helped me make sense of my world but also because it was the one subject that made school tolerable, that made my average soar, and that I enjoyed doing the homework for.

I received many honors at my high school graduation, but I was truly disappointed when I did not get the history award. I thought I deserved it, and I believed that the three white girls who got it only received it because the advanced-placement teacher liked them and I was black. We had not received the grades from our AP course by the time of graduation, but I believed I had studied harder and knew more. But the recipients had worked on an independent project with the teacher (not Ms. Rothman), and I, being the silent type,

was not one to "kiss up." Despite the recognition I received as president of the student body of over 3,000 girls, at the graduation ceremony for more than 700 students, what I remember most is that I did not receive the history award that I thought I deserved.

A phone call one Sunday morning in the early spring of 1967 made all the difference. Until that call, I had reconciled myself to attending Hunter College, one of the city colleges of New York. My brother had taxed our family's finances by attending Grinnell College in Iowa. During the years that they scraped enough money together to make up the difference between his scholarships and loans and the tuition, I watched them struggle and argue and silently vowed never to ask my parents for a dime. Hunter was a logical choice because it was near Julia Richman High. I was already familiar with that side of town and had gotten used to a female environment (Hunter had been a woman's college until 1964). I had gotten into Hofstra and Binghamton (Harpur College), but both had given me only limited financial aid. The call changed everything. It was from the New York Bank for Savings informing me that I had been chosen to receive a four-year scholarship—the Clifford Alexander Scholarship—of \$1,000 each year to go to the college of my choice.⁴ Subsequently, some of my mother's "friends" complained that I should not have received the scholarship because it was meant for a student in Harlem and I lived in midtown, but neither I nor my mother, the motive power in our household, paid them any mind. I never looked back; I had my freedom paper. Until this day, I think the scholarship changed the direction of my life. Like my brother, I wanted to get as far away from home as possible. I chose Binghamton over Hofstra because it was farther away, and with the scholarship and the other financial aid, I actually had more money than I needed for tuition, room and board, and books.

Though I came to regard Harpur College as a refuge and affectionately called it Camp Harpur, the four years I spent there were not easy. During freshman orientation, a dean announced the new program that brought minority students into the college under a different set of admissions criteria than the rest of the student body. Hence, from the very first day, I was stigmatized as a "special admissions" student, as were all of the minority students, whether they entered under the new program or not. Boy, did I feel my color. There were only a handful of us (I remember 6) out of a student body of about 3,000, and we were singled out from the beginning as somehow less qualified than the other students.

To me, the original criteria were unfair. My high school grade point average was in the nineties; I had been in student government since elementary school; I

had been a member of Arista, the honor society, since junior high school; and I played the violin (second violin actually) in the Manhattan Borough-Wide Orchestra. As a kid who grew up in the projects, I was an overachiever, a nerd by everyone's standards, and had excelled despite the odds. I had done so well in seventh grade that I was one of three black students to leave the general classes that held all the black and Spanish kids to integrate the all-white special-progress classes in the eighth and ninth grade. In high school, I was one of the few black kids to enter the Country School, Julia Richman's honor school. Presumably, the only things Harpur's white students had on me were higher SAT scores, and many let me know they thought I was inferior to them. It was really hard to confront these students, but deep inside, I remembered the lesson that I had learned in eighth grade when I integrated the all-white "8spe3" class of William J. O'Shea Junior High School: the white kids were separated into the smart class not because they were any smarter than me or my friends but because they were white. It was a heart-stopping and painful lesson for a kid from the mostly colored Amsterdam Projects to learn, and unless I had to, I did not speak in school for most of the eighth grade. At great emotional cost, I acquired this insight early enough to use it to protect myself against some of the mean-spirited and ignorant students at Harpur.

By my second and third years, more minority students were admitted, but this was a double-edged sword. The first year, 1967, there were too few blacks to organize a black student union, but there were enough black and Puerto Rican students to form a small organization that we called the Afro-Latin Alliance. My student-government service and prospective history major seemed to qualify me to head the organization, which I enthusiastically did. One of the first things we did was lobby the administration to bring in more minorities. In those days, everyone was lobbying the administration for something, and it usually caved in to demands. The next year, 1968, more blacks and Latinos came in than we could have hoped for. There were enough to successfully pressure the university to offer black studies courses, but the increased number also spawned divisions. In a very short time, there was a call for a black student organization that was separate from a Latino one. Some of the more nationalist black students called those of us who wanted to keep the Afro-Latin Alliance names like Oreo and Uncle Tom. I felt particularly set upon as president of the Afro-Latin Alliance because the new students demanded masculine representation. Also, my name, Gray, and my straight nose came in for more ridicule than I could bear. I moved off campus after my sophomore year, and though I never got used to being the only black in most of my surroundings or being a moderate among black nationalists, I persevered.

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If success is the best revenge, then I had mine. A "special admissions" student, I played on three varsity women's athletic teams, including the tennis team, and when I lived on campus, I represented my dorm on the student council. I graduated Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude. Upon graduating, I won the Henrietta A. Pitler Harpur College Foundation Award for the most outstanding graduating woman in leadership and scholarship. Maybe I achieved much and got those awards because of affirmative action, but I don't think so. To this day, I support and defend affirmative action and thank God that I was one of its beneficiaries.

I have always said that Harpur gave me the two most important things in my life: tennis and a diploma, in that order. More than I could ever have predicted, tennis changed my life. It provided an alternative social network at Harpur, including more than a few boyfriends, and no matter where I lived, I could always show up on a tennis court or at a tennis club and make instant friends. It was an entrée that I came to depend on again and again. It also gave me a new lens through which to view my birthplace. I learned to hate New York City because there were so few tennis courts and it was too expensive to play in the city. I reluctantly returned to New York City after graduation, frustrated by the overcrowdedness and my craving for time (to play tennis) and open air.

That I became a history professor had more to do with the fact that I could not get a job teaching high school history when I graduated than with any particular planning. In September 1971, I started teaching fifth grade in the Southwest Bronx. By November, I had made up my mind that I would go back to graduate school, and by March 1972, I had a fellowship in Columbia University's history Ph.D. program.

Not getting a high school history job was only one of the reasons I didn't stay in the New York City school system. First, I could never get my lesson plans in on time, and I could not get my class of 22 boys and 8 girls to walk in two straight lines through the hallways. I saw why the students needed to walk in lines, but I also thought too much stress was placed on orderliness and not enough on learning. I especially chafed under the rigidity of the fifth-grade curriculum. The textbooks were dated, and to me they were irrelevant to what was going on in my students' daily lives. I substituted the *New York Daily News*, which my students bought every Monday. We took our spelling and vocabulary words and our science and social studies lessons from the paper. My students loved it, but the assistant principal did not. She started making surprise visits to my classroom to make sure I was covering what was in the curriculum and what I had put in my lesson plans. She was not pleased when she found us reading the

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newspaper, and more than once, I was "written up." I didn't stay in the system long enough to learn the consequences of those write-ups, but I can't imagine that I would have fared well.

As it was, not only was I chafing under the system's inflexibility, but I had landed in the New York City school system right in the middle of the community-control crisis. Everybody was fighting each other: blacks, Jews, Puerto Ricans, whites. No group was happy. I gleefully left for Columbia, though I substitute taught during my year there.

And I got married. I think my family and especially my mother's friends were surprised by this because most people thought that all I did was read books and play sports and that I had no interest in boys. Despite the women's movement, or maybe because of it, many questioned my sexual orientation and wondered out loud where I had found this guy. In fact, I had found him one summer while employed in SUNY Binghamton's Upward Bound Program (something else I brought home besides tennis and a diploma). A friend and I were giving a party and two men walked in wanting to know where the black students hung out. We informed them that the few who were on campus would be arriving soon to party in our room. The rest is history. I married one of them, and my friend married the other.

The marriage brought together two black people with very distinct cultures. I was the child of southern migrants who left their sharecropping families as soon as they could—my mother with a degree from the Colored High School of McColl, South Carolina, and my father with less than a sixth-grade education from a small town near Dothan, Alabama. My husband had immigrated from Jamaica, leaving his mother, a teacher, and his father, a successful businessman. I was brought up in one of the largest cities in the world; he spent most of his childhood in a small country parish before moving to Kingston for high school. I was accustomed to cold weather; he was not. I had a New York accent with a pinch of southern that I picked up during summers spent in Clio, South Carolina; he spoke the Queen's English in formal settings and a patois when with his friends and family. I was used to southern-style food and the Motown sound; he was used to pepper, calypso, and reggae. My father, who as a short-order cook had to compete against immigrants on the job, didn't like West Indians; his mother didn't like African Americans (especially women). Having grown up in a black and brown country, he was more confident around whites than I was. Despite and because of these differences, we fell in love and stayed together for twenty-five years.

My first year of marriage coincided with my first (and only) year at Columbia. It was really rough going, not because the work was hard but because I had

no academic network and everyone seemed so smart. I felt very lonely and isolated. Students in the history program seemed to have networks outside the university in the greater New York area, as did I, but I could not connect with anyone, and as usual, being the only black person made me very self-conscious. Everyone talked the talk, and I did not learn to trust my intellect. I remember sitting through classes, wanting to make a comment but being afraid to say anything. When the professor (I took courses with James Shenton, Nathan Huggins, and Herbert Klein) would say that he wondered why no one thought of this or that, I would kick myself for not having said what I was thinking since it was along the lines of the professor's comment. But for the entire year, the cat ate my tongue. It was like being back in eighth grade again. Throughout my college years, I had often retreated to my world of silence, but my year at Columbia was a longer visit than usual. When my husband got a job in the Chicago area, I was disappointed that I would not complete my degree at Columbia, but it was easy to leave, at least emotionally.

On the anxiety side, in order to receive the master's degree, I had to pass the French test. I wrote my master's thesis ("Mulattoes in the United States") under the guidance of Nathan Huggins, who was very supportive of my work. But all the time I was working on it, I was fretting about the French test. All I had to do was translate a few paragraphs, but it loomed so large. I had started French in high school and took it through college, but I failed my first two attempts at the test. To make matters worse, the last test of the year was given during finals week, after I handed in my thesis (and before my birthday, which ironically is July 14, Bastille Day). I had completed all of the requirements but needed to pass this one test in order for the year not to be a total wash. I bought a book explicitly designed for people like me, with paragraphs that went from easy to hard to harder. I spent as much time studying for the French test as I did for my thesis. It's a terrible feeling to be taking a test that you know you are failing, and that is what I did for the first two. The third, however, was a dream. I have had reason to look back and wonder what my career would have been like, what my life would have been like, if I had gotten a Columbia Ph.D. I have wondered but have not regretted.

I chose to go to the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle (now the University of Illinois at Chicago), because it was cheaper than the University of Chicago. The decision to move from New York came too late for me to apply for financial aid, so despite the fact that John Hope Franklin was at the University of Chicago, going there was out of the question. Besides, I was confident that Circle would work out since Gilbert Osofsky was there and his books, especially *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*, were brilliant. I arrived there in September

1973. Before the beginning of the next year, Osofsky died. Since we had not had many conversations, I was sort of set adrift.

If it hadn't been for an astute associate dean at Circle, I would have drifted right out of the history program. My husband had led the way to Chicagoland, and I became part of his network of corporate ladder-climbing engineers. Bell Laboratories was paying him to work and attend Northwestern for an M.A. and Ph.D., so both of us were in school, but my social circle in Illinois was made up of the newly recruited African American employees at the Bell facilities in Naperville, Illinois. They and their spouses (not all of the new recruits were male) were all employed and making money, and I was the only academic among them. Not only was I unemployed, but I missed my network of friends in New York. Again I was the only black person in the history program, and my longing for more company, combined with my desire to make money, drove me to apply for an assistant dean position at Circle. When I arrived for the interview, I was asked why I wanted to leave the history Ph.D. program. I explained that I needed the money and that I didn't think I fit in well in the department. The dean's response was to call the history department and inquire about a teaching assistantship. I received it and a desk in a T.A. office. I began interacting with other graduate students, most of whom I still communicate with today. I still use the notes from our study groups for lectures in my survey courses.

Being a T.A. had its ups and downs. It certainly was a learning experience. As I look back on it, I realize that age, race, and gender played a big role. Having had teaching experience, I was not afraid to be in front of a class. My fifth-grade teaching and then substitute teaching in a junior high school in the heart of the South Bronx had given me a lot of experience in holding a class's attention and getting students engaged. I was not prepared, though, for the subtle racism of white students who purposely asked questions they thought I could not answer and who challenged every grade but an A or the sexism of black male students who made obscene gestures in class and who saw me as an emasculating matriarch (they had obviously read the Moynihan Report). I was not much older than the black women in my classes, and many of them treated me like a sister, friend, or competitor. I didn't know it then, but these problems would continue for a long time. I eventually worked them out but not before I was well into my middle-age years and not before I got my Ph.D. and tenure.

Being a T.A., finishing my course work, even taking both my written *and* oral (on any question the committee could think to ask) preliminary exams were a cakewalk compared to writing my dissertation and getting tenure. Although

Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South is today regarded as a classic and a pioneering text in African American women's history, it barely escaped the trash heap. I had no idea what I was getting into or what I was taking on when I chose my dissertation topic.

I had not intended to write a dissertation on female slaves. During one of the few meetings I had had with Osofsky, we had settled on a study of black women athletes because Althea Gibson was one of my heroes. The publication of multiple books on slavery and a graduate paper I did on the black family changed my mind. I remember reading works by sociologist Robert Staples and noting the veiled hostility toward black women that seemed to jump off every page. Obviously, the Moynihan Report left me feeling the same way, but so too did works by historians.

Although John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, and Herbert Gutman inserted black agency into slavery historiography, their works gave me an uncomfortable feeling. There was a present-mindedness, a very black nationalist feeling in their works, particularly when they covered black men. I was certainly more attuned to this than my fellow graduate students, who were mostly white and male, and it was a challenge to try to explain (I was talking again) in a graduate class that Blassingame had not identified all plantation stereotypes when he said that the major slave characters were Sambo, Jack, and Nat or that Genovese's constant references to slave women's deference to black men missed the mark. It was the mid-1970s, and I was still smarting from encounters with black male co-eds at Harpur and my male students who demanded "deference" from me. The works on slavery, while in many ways brilliant, still left me feeling like the nun in the Madeline children's books—"Something is not right."

And so I had a dissertation topic. I thought I could just go to the sources, to the archives—to plantation records, to slave narratives, diaries, etc.—find what had been left out, and make things right. Obviously I was wrong. Black women were everywhere but nowhere. In the sources, they were in everybody's background. This was not only a source problem but *the* problem. That I did not rely on traditional plantation sources became a major criticism of the dissertation and then the book manuscript. I had not, it was said, done enough work. I had not examined enough plantation records. I had not combed through enough diaries, court records, wills and probate proceedings, southern journals and newspapers. I had relied, it was said, too much on the WPA narratives.

In retrospect, the criticism puts me in mind of enslaved women who, after working from dawn to dusk, were described as lazy shirkers of work. In reality, I was being told that by relying so heavily on the WPA narratives—the black sources—I was taking the easy way out, that I was shirking the hard work

presented by the traditional white sources. The fact is that I had spent over a year with plantation records and other traditional sources, and finding information had been like getting blood from a stone. I was not a quantifier or a genealogist, and my adviser, though very supportive and helpful with the writing, was not an expert on slavery or women or African Americans. Neither he nor I thought that the WPA narratives were the easy way out. Uncataloged, not indexed, arrayed in a totally nonsensical unending series, they were, in those days, thoroughly unwieldy and in many other ways problematic.

I took this criticism as a personal assault without seeing the larger political picture. Encoded in the criticism was a piercing message. Enslaved women were invisible in the historical record, and I was being told that to make them visible I would have to abide by the rules and regulations of those who had rendered them invisible in the first place. I was being told that enslaved women's voices, as they came through the WPA narratives, would not be heard unless filtered through white and black male-authored sieves. I was being told that my objectivity was suspect because I was a black woman doing black woman's history, and underneath all the critiques of the innumerable "problems" that existed with the WPA narratives (as if they are the only sources on slavery that present problems) was the message that I was a lousy historian.

I realize now that it was good that I took the criticism personally. Had I seen myself at the intersection of racist and sexist gatekeeping, I might have judged the barriers insurmountable. But I was foolish and did the typical female thing—I internalized the criticism, and I promised to do better. Truth be told, what became *Ar'n't I a Woman?* got better. But it was a very painful process because I was rewriting in response to critiques that alleged that I had not done enough work in the proper sources, and I knew that I could spend a lifetime and still not be able to do what was being demanded. It was painful because I was rewriting without a language that expressed the interdependence of race and gender. And I was rewriting without guidance from someone who had done this before and in a climate that at best was benevolent disinterest.

The rejections came fast and furious. A date in November 1977 had been set for my dissertation defense, but at the eleventh hour, three weeks before the defense, my dissertation was rejected. I was devastated. I had never failed at anything; it took three tries, but I had eventually passed even my French qualifier. I had even passed calculus in high school. My hair turned gray and large clumps fell out. For the most part, I kept this rejection to myself. I couldn't tell family and friends that after all these years of schooling, I had failed. They already thought that history was a waste of time, that I was spending way too much time in school and the payback would be minimal. My in-laws, who devalued

everything that did not have to do with the sciences, were maintaining a contemptuous amusement toward my chosen profession. Based on a tip from historian Daniel Scott Smith, I turned to the burgeoning anthropological literature on women. I rewrote the dissertation, and it was accepted fully a year later. I told almost no one about this, nor did I let escape the fact that most of the articles that I sent out kept coming back. Very few knew about the serial rejection of the book manuscript.

I did get some encouragement during the next six years, mostly from women historians. My female colleagues were incredibly supportive. "Put it in another envelope and put another stamp on it," said Margo Anderson. At one point, I was invited to a series of conferences by a professor who was setting up a project on black women. At the first meeting, I was asked to give a paper but was among the last to speak. At first, I was upset because what I had to say was being said by everyone before me. But the feeling evaporated as I heard so many others testify to the source problem inherent in doing black women's history. It was the first confirmation that I was not wrong about the source problem. This conference—part of the Black Women in the Middle West Project—was part of an effort to address the problem. It was the late 1970s, and for the first time since I had begun my project on enslaved women, I received affirmation not only about the source problem but also about the importance of inserting black women into American historiography. And it was the first time that I laid eyes on a living, breathing, functioning black female professor—Darlene Clark Hine, who has since become a dear friend and colleague.

For the most part, however, the six years after I finished the dissertation were survived in unbelievable anguish, not all of it stemming directly from my problems with the manuscript. I was commuting to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee from where I lived in the Chicago area. Under the best of circumstances, the two-hour one-way trip would have drained anyone's energy, but in the wintertime, especially in the late seventies and early eighties, I-94 was treacherous. (I learned how to use a tape recorder and even write during the long stretches of nothing between Chicago and Milwaukee.) On top of this, I had two children during this ordeal. Since I wanted to tuck them in at night, I only occasionally stayed over in Milwaukee. The juggling act between work and mothering proved so difficult that I began to question those in the women's movement who claimed that women could have it all. When I was working, I felt guilty because I was not spending time with my children; when I was with my children, I felt that I would never be able to compete with peers who had nothing to take them away from their work. Until the birth of my daughters, I had not given much thought to sexism. Race was my primary concern. Motherhood, in

particular, changed my perspective. Not only did I become acutely aware of the ways society is structured to make women perform most of the work of parenting, but I got an up-close object lesson in male privilege. I lived with it, and my periods of silence returned.

The problems I was having with my manuscript only increased the stress. I had my first daughter before I began my commute, so the severe preeclampsia that caused her to be born prematurely was not associated with that, though I can't say the same about the difficult research for my dissertation. Four and a half years later, in 1981, after the normal birth of my second daughter, my blood pressure went sky high and until this day must be controlled by medication. I can only speculate on the relationship between my work and my health.

Looking back, I think I might have done it differently, but I don't know how; it was just hard. I got two articles published—one in the *Journal of Family History* and one in the *Journal of Caribbean Studies*. But two articles do not tenure make. I needed a book. Most of my colleagues in the history department were sure that I needed to scrap the manuscript on female slaves and start another project on which to base my tenure. The Department of African American Studies, where 49 percent of my line rested, presented a different problem. When I told the chair what I was working on, he rubbed his chin and frowned. When he lightened up and smiled, I thought he had found a reason to appreciate my work. His response was disheartening. "Oh, I guess that will be useful," he mused. "Black women need to learn how to raise black men for the twenty-first century."

Sadly, his response was not atypical. I remember being a respondent on a panel that reviewed a certain author's work on slavery and nationalism. I praised the work but added that it would have been enriched by a gendered approach and by adding the experience of enslaved women. For the next twenty minutes, I endured what could only be described as an unrestrained verbal thrashing, the likes of which no scholar should have to endure. When I left the session, I headed straight for the bar, where I downed several straight-up brandies. It was not the first or the last time that my subject would drive me to drink.

I had no reason to be optimistic about finding a publisher because publishers' critiques were similarly dismissive. "It was not complete, there was not enough work, the proof wasn't there." And then, almost universally, publishers added, "There is no audience for this book."

What did they mean? Nobody wants this in the historical record; black women's history is not interesting enough for people to pay for it; black women, black people don't read; nobody will believe this because it's about black women com-

ing from a black woman? Was it just about making money? In those days, university presses published esoterica that never went beyond university libraries.

To make a long story short, I was up against the tenure wall. With every year, the ticktock of the tenure clock pounded ever more loudly. I prepared for another career and studied for the LSATs. I even scheduled an interview with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. I prepared for the end of my life as an academic.

And then everything changed, just like that. While walking across campus—my assistant professorship slipping away with every step—I opened a letter that had come from North Carolina. I had carried it around for a couple of days, shoring up my defenses for another rejection. It was really cold and really dreary that day, and it must have been the adrenalin that propelled me from one end of the campus to the other that gave me the courage to open this by-now crumpled letter. I froze in my tracks as I read it. I had been told that I was wrong for so long that I had begun to believe it. But here, right in front of me, in black-and-white print was a letter that said I was right. It was from Anne Firor Scott. She explained that she and Jacqueline Hall were writing a review essay in black women's history (or women in slavery) and had come across my dissertation. Having read everything on the subject, they thought that "Ain't I a Woman?" (the title of my dissertation three revisions ago) was the best work they had read on women's slavery and wanted to know if they could cite it. Scott also wanted to know what my publication plans were. A reader for W. W. Norton, she volunteered to take it to Norton if I had not yet found a publisher. Within a month, I had a contract and reason enough to abandon a career with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Ain't I a Woman? was published in 1985. It proved to be the first full-length published study of enslaved black women and one of the first post-civil rights histories of African American women. So unique was this volume that when it arrived at the Library of Congress it had no place to go. On February 13, 1985, a subject cataloger proposed that the heading "women slaves" be established. The heading was approved at the subject editorial meeting on March 5, 1985, and books about female slaves were recataloged under the new heading.⁵

That was over twenty years ago. Today, as I ponder whether to accept an offer from Brown University and work for one of the people I most admire, President Ruth Simmons, I look back at the profound changes that have occurred in the profession and in my personal and professional life. For sure, some things are still the same, but so much has changed—for the better.

I thought the 1983–84 academic year was traumatic, but it was just a dress

rehearsal for the dreadful nineties. W. W. Norton seemed to seal the deal for tenure, and for the most part, it did, at least in the history department, my tenure home. The chair of African American studies, however, was not convinced that a book on enslaved women was worth much. Moreover, he thought that I was not a good citizen because I repeatedly objected to having to host Friday afternoon socials to introduce students, who never showed up, to the Department of African American Studies. For sure my commute and my children were at the center of my objections, but there was more. I resented the fact that the chair thought this chore particularly suitable for female faculty. I also had objected when I was made the official hospitality hostess when our department hosted the National Council for Black Studies. I simply refused to take on the title or the job. Consequently, I understand that he, alone among the ad hoc committee assembled in African American studies, objected to my tenure. Thank God for the history department, W. W. Norton, and *Ar'n't I a Woman?*

Besides tenure, the year brought another crisis to wrestle with. Everyone associated with AT&T knew that the 1982 decision that broke up the company would have consequences, but no one knew precisely what it meant for them. In the summer of 1983, I found that for me it meant that I would be moving to New Jersey—with or without a job. I was devastated. I had worked so hard and finally would be getting tenure and now it could possibly be for naught since I would be following my husband—who by now was an assistant vice president and primary wage earner of our family—back East. I obviously had mixed feelings since I hated my commute. But in the summer of 1983, I felt defeated. When the fall AHA Perspectives announced a job opening at Rutgers, I saw a glimmer of hope. Margo Anderson again came to the rescue. She dried my tears as she showed me the advertisement and told me what a great place Rutgers, her Ph.D. alma mater, would be. Again, thank God for *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, for I believe that it was on the strength of the manuscript and a good interview that I got the job.

And then came the nineties. I still carry the scars of that decade, but I also wonder where I would be, personally and professionally, without the trauma that forced me to re-create myself. It was a decade of losses. I lost my marriage and the twenty-five-year relationship that went with it. As a consequence of the tumultuous split-up, I lost my in-laws, people who had been my family for most of the twenty-five years and whom I had lived among for more years than I had lived with my birth family. In 1993, I lost my gay brother to AIDS. A genius by any standards (he had an IQ of over 160), he never learned how to live among people of average intelligence, and people of average intelligence never quite warmed up to him. Before he passed, my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

The disease progressed fast, and in 1995, when my father realized that she would no longer be able to care for him, he retreated to the back room of their Clio, South Carolina, house (they were both part of the reverse migration back South) and drank himself to death. My mother continued her progress into the land of the walking dead until 2003, when God showed mercy and took her home, but early on, I was forced to decide whether to care for my ailing mother or to care for my two daughters. I could not do both. The circumstances of the divorce, my own health, and my daughters' needs mandated that I choose. And, of course, there was really no choice. I regrettably put my mother in a nursing home, steeled my nerves, increased the frequency of my visits to my therapist, and dug in for what were the hardest years of my life, even harder than getting the Ph.D. and tenure.

I was remade in the process. As I, alone, saw to the internment of each family member, I did more than bury my past. I literally put it behind me. Left for a time without money to pay the mortgage and threatened, in the broadest sense, with the loss of my children, I redefined my work and my relation to it. In adulthood, I had always had a man to depend on. I had even come to think of my work as supplementary. If the court, which treated me in every respect like a single-parent welfare mom, did not intervene, I would now have to support myself and my children. I accepted every invitation to give a talk, whatever the honorarium. I stepped up the work on *Too Heavy a Load* and published it by the end of the decade. I also added two chapters to *Ar'n't I a Woman?* and published a revised edition before the year 2000. In addition, I wrote a small volume for Oxford University Press entitled *Let My People Go*, a history of antebellum African Americans. I played a lot of tennis too. Most important, I learned to follow the rainbows and welcomed God back into my life.

I learned more about myself in the nineties and in the early years of the new millennium than I had learned in all my previous years. I learned to call myself a historian, not just a professor. I learned to value what I do because my work had sustained me and my daughters through some dark times. As I lived the lessons that I taught in history classes, I learned that I am living proof of the strength and fragility of African American women. I learned to fight for what I believe in and not retreat into silence. Most of all, I learned how not to be silenced, whatever the odds or the risks.

And while all that happened, the profession transformed itself—sort of. I can still go to AHA conventions and wonder if I am in the right professional place. After thirty years, it still feels alien. I can still open books, even those written by feminists, and not find African American women in places they should be. I can still look across the university world and find senior women making less money

than junior male colleagues, African Americans and women passed over for promotions that they should have gotten, and whole historiographies that have resisted race and gender analysis. But unlike when I first entered the profession, I don't have to, and I refuse to, justify my field of inquiry. Though few and far between, there are senior African American women scholars who make a difference in the books that are published, the people who get hired, and the assistant professors who get tenure and other promotions. African American history, women's history, and African American women's history may be ignored, even demeaned, by many. Be that as it may, I am convinced that it will never be eliminated. This volume, *Telling Histories*, may be ignored, but it will not be disappeared. And to me, that is real progress.

NOTES

1. I thank Nancy Hewitt and Steven Lawson, the Program Committee chairs, for conceiving the panel.
2. For the conference at the Huntington Institute, I would like to thank Brenda Stevenson, and for the Berkshire Conference, I extend thanks to Jennifer Morgan.
3. I use the title "Ms." because I do not know her marital status.
4. I only recently learned that the scholarship was named for historian Adele Logan Alexander's father-in-law.
5. Leslie A. Schwalm, "Ar'n't I a Woman?: Rethinking the History of Women, Gender, and Slavery," 3, 5n, unpublished paper presented at the 2003 meeting of the Southern Historical Association.

Sharon Harley

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY AND PLACE

REFLECTIONS OF AN AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SCHOLAR

The same forces responsible for our oppression . . . also seek to control what we know of the past and the present.—Buzz Johnson, 1985

Nearly twenty-five years after receiving a Ph.D. in U.S. history from Howard University, I find that writing a personal reflection of my life as an academic offers an extraordinary opportunity to be my own subject—to share *my own history* of being an African American woman historian and university professor specializing in African American women's history. Since writing a personal memoir or autobiographical text is a chance for a scholar to reflexively confront the continual task of the historian—to consciously (and subconsciously) choose the elements to include and exclude—it reveals significant aspects of my mission in life to both my readers and myself.

Furthermore, historians are especially cognizant that such details will likely be scrutinized and (re)interpreted by generations of historians and other scholars. For these reasons, I—like many female historians of color—am drawn to this task because in telling my own story I can try to reduce (although I realize I can never completely eradicate) the strong possibility that I will be misinterpreted or, worse, maligned by scholars and others. As a historian, I am keenly aware of the long and largely uninterrupted history of misinterpretations and outright falsehoods about people of color at-large. In telling my story, then, I hope to set the record straight—or, at minimum, counter dominant racist and sexist stereotypes.

However, this opportunity, like most others one encounters during a long and unpredictable life, is not without its challenges. There is the daunting task of remembering both the joys and pains of academic and personal life and the twists and turns involved in being a member of the first large cohort of black professional historians and the very small group of female scholars in the pioneering field of African American women's history.

Moreover, in a profession that requires its practitioners to analyze and inter-