
Teaching *Ar'n't I a Woman?*

Daina Ramey Berry

Each spring semester, I begin my African American women's history class with images of black women from the seventeenth century to the present.¹ Students squirm in their seats because the first few slides depict enslaved women in coffles being transported to slave ships. Images of half-naked bondwomen, with agonizing facial expressions, exposed breasts, and children clinging to their ankles, shock the students. Some cringe when the next slide appears. Pictured is an enslaved woman forced to her knees, her arms twisted behind her, while two men stamp a hot iron rod on her shoulder to brand the initials of a slave-trading firm or slaveholder. Moving forward to the twentieth century, students seem relieved to see the familiar image of Hattie McDaniel from *Gone with the Wind*.² No more naked bodies, they think; no more distressing photographs. Yet this stereotype is in some ways equally disturbing.

I begin this course the same way Deborah Gray White opened *Ar'n't I a Woman?*—by debunking the myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions of enslaved women as the promiscuous Jezebel, the angry Sapphire, or the loyal Mammy. “In antebellum America,” White explained, “the female slave’s chattel status, sex, and race combined to create a complicated set of myths about black womanhood”: one “carnal, the other maternal.”³ I have been amazed by the way students seem comfortable with the Mammy stereotype. “Jezebel,” on the other hand, is more difficult for them to discern because it means that they have to consider the sexual exploitation of enslaved women, which makes many students uncomfortable. The Sapphire stereotype, at least for most students, is represented by the domineering black woman they saw in such 1970s television characters as Esther from *Sanford and Son* or Florence from *The Jeffersons*.

Reflecting on her work in the 1999 revised edition, White noted that “there is now more history than myth” when it comes to our understanding of enslaved women.⁴ For two decades, scholars have used *Ar'n't I a Woman?* in survey and seminar courses, enabling students to think about the institution of slavery from a female perspective. In addition to how I have used the book in the classroom, this essay also discusses some of the reasons it remains the premier book adopted in history and African American, women, and gender studies courses at institutions of higher learning. *Ar'n't I a Woman?* is an instructive tool that I have used and relied on to teach the history of slavery from a gendered perspective.

The first time I assigned this book was in an undergraduate survey course on African American history. I opened the class with the following questions: What was the role of women in West African communities, during the transatlantic slave trade, on board the slavers crossing the Atlantic, and in colonial and antebellum America? Students were stumped because they had not considered that women's experiences differed from men's. They had not considered how a lactating mother had to take care of an infant during the middle passage; how a woman who had recently given birth had to labor in the tobacco, cotton, and rice fields of Virginia, Georgia, or South Carolina; or how women and men employed different resistance strategies. They came to class with the assumption that the enslaved experience was universal. Soon, however, White's scholarship pushed them to consider the lives of enslaved females. Students read *Ar'n't I a Woman?* in conjunction with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In their midterm papers, they discussed the ways in which women and men experienced slavery based on these three readings. Many of them argued, as Harriet Jacobs poignantly expressed in her narrative, that "slavery was terrible for men, but far more terrible for women."⁵ They analyzed legal cases on Lexis-Nexis that involved bondwomen. Some wrote about the methods enslaved women used to cope with slavery.⁶ Some organized their essays around the life cycle of female slavery as White did in chapter 3; they found her chapters "Nature of Female Slavery" and "Men, Women, and Families" extremely useful in developing their arguments. They wrote about diverse topics: labor and marriage; enslaved children, runaways, and truants; rape and domestic abuse—all topics discussed in *Ar'n't I a Woman?* In their course evaluations, several students commented that *Ar'n't I a Woman?* changed their view of the American past.

In an upper-division undergraduate historical methods course on gender and slavery that I teach, White's book served as the model for considering the lives of enslaved women. In this course, students also read work by Gail Bederman, Bertram Wyatt Brown, Catherine Clinton, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Darlene Clark Hine, Gerda Lerner, Anne Firor Scott, and Joan Scott to inform their gender and racial categories of analyses.⁷ After studying theory, students applied what they had learned to topics such as labor, family, resistance, religion, economy, and literacy. Using White's book as a foundation, they soon discovered the difficulties of researching enslaved women. Some came to my office frustrated because they could not "find any sources" that distinguished between male and female slavery; others said that they did not have access to the rich Works Progress Administration (WPA) testimonies White used in her work. The students needed assistance.

I gave the class an assignment: to work with a bibliographer in the library to identify resources on campus for their research papers.⁸

In "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," an essay White published in 1987, just two years after *Ar'n't I a Woman?* was released, she explained that "our ability to understand the complex ways in which race and gender have shaped black women's lives depends on intensive work in primary sources."⁹ Like White, I argue that equally challenging is the historical invisibility of black women as a whole. For far too long in the historiography, the terms *slave* and *male* were synonymous; *Ar'n't I a Woman?* made black women more visible.¹⁰

Enslaved women kept few written accounts of their experiences. This means that those of us who are interested in them must comb through archives of plantation records to catch a glimpse of what life was like for bondwomen. There are few published primary writings, and most of us are familiar with them: Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckley, Susie King Taylor, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Phyllis Wheatley, for example. Although these women wrote for "themselves," many had the assistance of white amanuenses who often had abolitionist intentions.¹¹ Other black women's life experiences—those of Sally Hemings, Ellen Craft, Celia, and Margaret Garner—were (and still are) clouded by major controversy, which leave readers to ponder unanswered questions about the "truth" or "accuracy" of their histories.¹² When we have the opportunity to interpret their experiences through narratives, we are forced to review these documents with caution, given the editing and authenticating that preceded their publication.

In addition to learning about black women directly, we have learned about their experiences indirectly through the eyes of their male counterparts: men such as Charles Ball, John Brown, William Craft, Frederick Douglass, and Josiah Henson.¹³ Likewise, members of the planter class related the history of enslaved women in their diaries, letters, journals, and personal papers.¹⁴ The WPA narratives are another source of black women's experiences during slavery that White maintained "are a less problematic source than plantation records, which were recorded mostly by white males who had very distorted and self-serving ideas about African American women."¹⁵ Although many of these women's histories have been questioned, critiqued, and dismissed, they have also been occasionally authenticated. These narratives represent the extant personal accounts of women's experience during slavery; that alone is reason to use them.

Reflecting on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, what has not changed much since 1985 is that scholars still grapple with ways to circumvent the "culture of dissemblance" or "the culture of

secrecy" that black women adopt to protect their legacy, as identified by Darlene Clark Hine.¹⁶ How do we tell the stories of women who did their best to keep their private lives private? According to White, "[f]urther research [on African American women] will undoubtedly turn up records previously buried in unrelated files and in damp dusty cellars and attics"; there is no doubt that this will ultimately help to enrich our understanding of American history.¹⁷

Even though I have taught *Ar'n't I a Woman?* in several classes, one class in the spring 2005 semester was the most rewarding. Students used White's work as a springboard to study the history of slaveries in America. They wrote papers on infanticide, breeding, the fancy girl trade, and slaves with disabilities, among other topics. They relied on primary documents (from my personal collection and from various websites), and they cited recent publications.¹⁸ For their final papers, I asked students to collect primary images, songs, or stories that depict black women in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. They discovered that involuntary exploitation during slavery has become voluntary for some contemporary women who choose sex and their sexuality as a commodity.

Twenty years ago, when W. W. Norton published this seminal work—the first book-length study of enslaved women in the United States—who could have anticipated that approximately 100,000 copies would be sold during that year alone? In the following years, even before the release of the second edition in 1999, an additional 200,000 copies left the shelves of bookstores and landed in the hands of those with an interest in the topic or those studying women and slavery for their college courses. Although it is impossible to determine how many courses have used her book or estimate the number of times it has been cited during the past twenty years, it is safe to state that its impact has been profound. For this we say, "Thank you, Deborah Gray White."

NOTES

I would like to thank Stephanie M. H. Camp, Leslie Harris, Barbara Krauthamer, Jessica Millward, and Jennifer L. Morgan for discussing the significance of Deborah Gray White's work at the 2005 Berkshire conference. Many of the panelists were continuing a conversation that started more than two years ago when Brenda E. Stevenson organized a conference to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of this important publication. I appreciate Anne Rogers and Jessica Millward for their written comments and suggestions on an early draft of this essay.

¹Daina Ramey Berry, "Introductory Lecture, African American Women" (lecture, History 312, Department of History, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, 6 January 2005).

²Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind* (New York: Macmillan, 1936); *Gone with the Wind*, DVD, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000).

³Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985; repr., New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 28, 46.

⁴*Ibid.*, 5.

⁵Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁶See Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, *Judicial Cases Concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 4 vols. (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1925–36).

⁷Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Mask of Obedience: Male Slave Psychology in the Old South," *American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1228–52; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Meta-language of Race," *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992): 251–74; Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 913–20; Darlene Clark Hine and Ernestine Jenkins, eds., *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972; New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); and Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

⁸See the course guide created by librarian Michael Unsworth for History 201, Fall 2001 and 2002, <http://www.lib.msu.edu/unsworth/Course/H201/Ramey-Fall-02.htm>.

⁹Deborah Gray White, "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," *Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (1987): 237–42.

¹⁰White published an article on enslaved women two years prior to *Ar'n't I a Woman?* See Deborah Gray White, "Female Slaves: Sex Roles and Status in the Antebellum Plantation South," *Journal of Family History* 3, no. 3 (1983): 248–61. More than a decade earlier, Angela Davis published "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," *Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (1971): 3–15. For publications in the late 1980s and the 1990s see Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women"; Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998); Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost of Accounting," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 125–46; Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Thelma Jennings, "'Us Colored Women Had to Go Through

Plenty': Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 3 (1990): 45–74; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850–1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985).

¹¹See, for example, Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (Denver: W. H. Lawrence and Company, 1887); Olive Gilbert, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York in 1828* (Boston: Printed for the Author, 1850); Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes: Or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*; Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes from the Life of Harriet Tubman* (New York: Corinth Books, 1869); and Susie King Taylor, *A Black Woman's Civil War Memoirs: Reminiscences of my Life in Camp with the 33rd U.S. Colored Troops*, ed. Patricia W. Romero (1902; repr., New York: Marcus Weiner Publications, 1988). For some of the not-so-well-known women, see *Six Women's Slave Narratives*, with an introduction by William L. Andrews (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Wilma King provided an excellent analysis of Celia in "Mad Enough to Kill: Enslaved Teens and Murder in Antebellum Missouri" (paper presented at "Slave Women's Lives: Twenty Years of Ar'n't I a Woman? and More" symposium, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, 21 May 2005).

¹²Toni Morrison used the story of Margaret Garner in her prize-winning novel *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987). See also Melton McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997); and William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London: W. Tweedie, 1860).

¹³Charles Ball, *Fifty Years in Chains: Or the Life of An American Slave*, (New York: H. Dayton, 1859); John Brown, *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave Now in England* (1855; repr., Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971); Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (New York: Mulligan, New York, and Auburn, 1855); and Josiah Henson, "An Autobiography of the Reverend Josiah Henson," in *Four Fugitive Slave Narratives* (1881; repr., Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1961).

¹⁴See, for example, Melanie Pavich-Lindsay, ed., *Anna: The Letters of a St. Simons Island Plantation Mistress, 1817–1859* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002); Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle, *A Woman Rice Planter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961); and Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838–1839* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).

¹⁵White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 191–92 n. 3.

¹⁶Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women."

¹⁷White, "Mining the Forgotten," 242.

¹⁸We now have book-length studies on reproduction, resistance, and midwives, to name a few, that place gender in general, and women in particular, at the center of the analysis. See, for example, Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in the Making of New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Stephanie M. H. Camp, *To Get Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Sharla Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). See also Daina Ramey Berry, *"Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe": Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Leslie A. Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830–1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
