

emerging fields and subjects. The forum concludes with Higginbotham's response to our essays and her own reflections on the "Metalanguage of Race" on the twenty-fifth anniversary of its publication.

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On Violence and Carcerality

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It is hard to believe that a quarter century has passed since Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham urged historians to treat race not as a subordinate question of minority identity but as a metalanguage that gave gender, class, and sexuality their "power to mean" (1992, 257). Building on the work of black feminist thinkers such as Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Frances Beal, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), and Patricia Hill Collins (1991), to name a few, Higginbotham's challenge was directed at the burgeoning field of US women's history. Her groundbreaking essay, it should be remembered, was not an isolated salvo. During the early 1990s, a new wave of black women's historians radically extended Joan Wallach Scott's (1988) critique of "woman" as a universal category, developed a framework for thinking through difference dynamically rather than in terms of discrete categories, and demonstrated theoretically and empirically that gender, class, and sexuality are always raced (just as gender and class structure race).¹

Not surprisingly, their appeals to US women's historians to deepen their analysis of race and the dynamics of difference initially fell on deaf ears. I lived through this moment in the 1990s and attended many conferences where eminent white feminist historians nodded their heads in agreement and then proceeded to demonstrate their attention to race by identifying the black

¹ This group includes Elsa Barkley Brown (1989; 1991; 1992, 302-7) and Deborah Gray White (1987). Scott's foundational essays critiquing the category "woman" are collected in *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988).

women who had come up in their research.² In other words, many remained trapped by the very metalanguage Higginbotham was attempting to locate, interrogate, and dislodge: the assumption that “race” applies only to the non-white, just as “gender” applies only to those who are not heterosexual males, and that among women, gender is the universal whereas race marks difference. Today, there is near-universal agreement among feminist scholars that such assumptions have no analytical grounding; they are produced discursively, embedded in the dominant ideology, residing comfortably in the unconscious and passing as common sense. Rereading the essay nearly a quarter of a century later, I’m struck by how forcefully she argued that a “metalanguage of race” is not just about marking blackness or brownness but about attending to the ways in which whiteness, in addition to giving gender, class, and sexuality their “power to mean,” also determines normativity, thereby rendering race invisible for whites. Indeed, the very construction of whiteness as normative and, therefore, raceless is constitutive of the metalanguage of race Higginbotham invoked.³

To be marked nonnormative or nonconforming—which is to say, outside the limited protections of whiteness—is to be vulnerable to punishment, violence, and surveillance. As Higginbotham pointed out, in order for black women to escape this coercive racial regime and enjoy even the most limited forms of protection, the state and civil society had to recognize them as “ladies.” Yet “no black woman, regardless of income, education, refinement, or character, enjoyed the status of lady” (Higginbotham 1992, 261).⁴ She

² Of course, there were numerous exceptions. Some historians of women and gender have attended to whiteness but are rarely given credit for doing so; see Gilmore (1996), Frank (1998), Hewitt (2001), and Ware (2015). For a discussion of some of the debates over the analysis of race in relation to white women as well as women of color, see Hewitt (2005) and Kleinberg, Boris, and Ruiz (2007).

³ In making this argument, Higginbotham drew on Elizabeth Spelman’s influential *The Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988), which takes canonical feminist thinkers to task for failing to acknowledge how their whiteness shapes their gender identity. In the early 1990s, nearly everyone I knew who was working on gender in African American history was reading Spelman’s book.

⁴ Of course, we learned from Ida B. Wells and historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall that the ostensibly chivalrous act of protecting white womanhood served as a mode of social control in which white women’s subordination, deference, and obedience to patriarchal gender norms were the price they paid for their “protection”; see Hall (1983; 1993, 129–57). We also know from Crystal M. Feinster’s stunning book, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (2009), that the vaunted pedestal did not protect white women from violence; the very language of protection under patriarchal authority masked white men’s acts of intimate and sexual violence, and white women deemed unruly or transgressive sometimes found themselves facing down mobs.

went on to describe how race is imbricated in the construction of sexuality—itsself a social construction or category rather than a biological fact. The metalanguage of race produces a set of binaries along a racial axis: “carnality as opposed to intellect and/or spirit; savagery as opposed to civilization; deviance as opposed to normality; promiscuity as opposed to purity; passion as opposed to passionlessness” (263). As a consequence, the law did not simply fail to protect black women from sexual violence; instead, it criminalized virtually all black women as alleged sex workers. In the Jim Crow era, law enforcement officials operated on the presumption that every unescorted black woman was soliciting. In Atlanta, for example, the police enforced what was called a “sundown law,” directed primarily at black women. It did not matter if the woman was a known sex worker or not; if she was alone in a restaurant or a club, she was likely to be arrested (Kuhn, Joye, and West 1990, 190; see also Hunter 1998).

Higginbotham not only observed that violence governs the racial construction of gender and sexual normativity, she understood black female sexuality as inseparable from the violence that constrains and dominates black women’s lives: rape, confinement, torture, and denigration are the conditions in which they have historically struggled to express sexual identity and bodily sovereignty. While these observations may seem obvious today, they were quite profound at the time, anticipating—and even inspiring—a new generation of historians exploring how black women negotiate violent regimes of containment and carcerality. In the space remaining, I want to draw attention to a few examples of work in this field that build on Higginbotham’s insights into the formative role of racialized violence in constructing gender and sexuality.

The late Stephanie M. H. Camp’s extraordinary book, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (2004), is chock full of original insights and new conceptual frameworks drawing on spatial analysis to map the limits of containment and resistance. She also gives us a genealogy of the criminalization of black women’s bodies. Transforming African women into property, concubines, and Negroes required routine violence—flogging, torture, slaps and punches, assaults with household and agricultural tools, and, of course, rape. Routine violence was also the most common cause of flight by enslaved women, which in turn reinforced racialized and gendered constructions of the wild, unruly, undisciplined, irresponsible, shiftless black female. And masters, overseers, and drivers were not the only source of violence. Black women were vulnerable to partner violence, especially around harvest time, when white and black men consumed large quantities of alcohol. Indeed, contrary to prevailing wisdom, Camp reveals that enslaved women experienced violence more frequently

than men—in their secondary work for the big house, in their perceived vulnerability as women, in their position as sexual property, and as objects of sexual jealousy.

To grasp the significance of racialized gendered violence, we must resist the private/public binary frequently used to distinguish the household from civil society. Patriarchal violence has long been shrouded and protected by the veneer of privacy because the family was (and still is) considered a form of private property. Under the slave regime, there was no such veneer. As geographer Katherine McKittrick points out, “ownership of black women during transatlantic slavery was a spatialized, gendered, often public, violence; the black female body was viewed as a naturally submissive, sexually available, public, reproductive technology. . . . Once the racial-sexual body is territorialized, it is marked as decipherable and knowable—as subordinate, inhuman, rape-able, deviant, procreative, placeless” (2006, 45).

Insisting that black women’s bodies were the primary objects of violence, Camp urges that we pay particular attention to sexual violence, rape, and other forms of gendered violence as the terrain of political struggle.⁵ Hannah Rosen takes up the challenge in her book *Terror in the Heart of Freedom* (2009). As she points out, freed people were subjected to both discursive and physical violence—the former fueling the latter, constructing black subjects as sexually abject, dangerous, threats to social order and racial purity. The alleged incapacity of African Americans to sustain families, earn a living, abide by the law, and exercise sexual self-restraint were offered as evidence that black people were not worthy of citizenship. Black women were accused of lewdness, sexual promiscuity, prostitution, and resistance to patriarchal control—that is to say, of violating normative family relations. Black men were defined as rapists, dishonest, lazy, unwilling to support their families with honest labor, and possessing an overwhelming appetite for white women.

These representations do important discursive work in buttressing and legitimizing the racial regime and masking the massive violence that both suppressed the potential for multiracial democracy and continued to exclude black women from normative gender conventions and protections. And yet, as Rosen demonstrates, by courageously testifying to the sexual violence committed by white men before the Freedmen’s Bureau, black women “claimed citizenship by demanding protection from violence and affirming their right” to control and possess their own bodies (2009, 9). Relentlessly claiming that state protection from sexual violence was a right of citizenship, black women

⁵ See also the pioneering work of Laura F. Edwards (1997).

attempted to expand the scope of democracy by making the prohibition of sexual violence a public rather than a private matter.

Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910, Kali N. Gross's (2006) magnificent study of turn-of-the-century Philadelphia, examines the dynamic process by which imprisoned black women contested dominant representations of black female criminality produced by the carceral state and the media. Gross not only views the courtroom as a kind of theater of competing race and gender performance but finds ample evidence in prison publications, journals, and judges' statements of how the metalanguage of race—the simple act of adding the adjective "Negro"—rendered these women innately criminal and violent, unworthy of justice, mercy, or the benefit of the doubt. Because popular discourse tended to represent black women as masculine, the police and courts never questioned the capacity of the accused to commit violent crimes. In their own defense, black women were placed in the unenviable position of having to prove their authentic womanhood by invoking tropes of femininity. The courts contributed by marking black women's behavior as pathological, often focusing on the nature of the crime (the victims were usually men), on presumptions about these women's sexuality (gender-nonconforming behavior was treated as evidence of masculinity), and, of course, on race (blackness = criminality).

Cheryl D. Hicks also turns to the urban criminal justice system to explore how race as a metalanguage shaped the criminalization of black working-class women as well as struggles across class over the control of black women's sexuality. *Talk with You like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890–1935* (Hicks 2010) is a remarkable study of how black women offenders have had to engage the state, social reformers, and their families and communities over the nature and meaning of crime and incarceration. Like Gross, she demonstrates that racialized constructions of gender were vigorously contested, revealing sharp class conflicts often masked by a metalanguage of race.⁶ On the one hand, white residents and the dominant classes expected the criminal justice system to regulate black behavior, to deal with the moral panic created by the presence of black bodies in their midst. On the other hand, black working-class families had their own moral panics and worried about regulating the sexuality and behavior of young black women—namely their daughters, sisters, and wives.⁷

⁶ As Higginbotham put it, "a metalanguage of race" masks the "construction and representation of other social and power relations" (1992, 252).

⁷ Mary E. Odem (1994) finds similar desires among immigrant families during the same time period.

That black women had significantly higher rates of arrest, were given longer sentences, and faced reluctant parole boards should not surprise us. But what *Talk with You like a Woman* reveals is how these disparities result precisely from the ways in which racism is gendered. Penal authorities, judges, and police assumed that all black women were sexually licentious, prone to theft, irresponsible, generally inferior to whites, and thus unlikely candidates for rehabilitation. Like other sectors of the state, the legal system adhered to the gender conventions of the Victorian era, but race determined who fell inside the bounds of womanhood and who did not.⁸

Sarah Haley goes further, arguing that black (working-class) women were not merely excluded from Victorian definitions of womanhood or denied the status of “lady” but rendered outside the category of woman altogether through a violent process, “ungendering” (Haley 2016, 87). Haley’s *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (2016), a brilliant account of women inmates in Georgia’s criminal justice system from Reconstruction to the 1930s, demonstrates that black women were routinely convicted of charges related to urban disorder, which were little more than “quality of life” crimes: cursing in public, throwing dirty water in the streets, petty theft. Arson and infanticide were also common charges, despite evidence that such “crimes” resulted from work-related accidents or stillbirths, often caused by poor health, overwork, and the like. For these kinds of offenses, they were sent to convict labor camps where they were forced to toil in mines, farms, and turpentine camps; to make and haul bricks; and to provide the necessary reproductive labor that sustained the penal camps. Haley demonstrates that criminalization was a mechanism of labor control and containment, a means through which the state policed black women’s lives and bodies. Being forced to work “like . . . a man” (187) constituted an essential element in the process of ungendering, which entailed “institutionalized gendered racial terror” (3), sexual violence, policing, surveillance, and various forms of exploitation. “Gendered racial terror,” Haley argues, “was a resource in the production of race as a metalanguage giving words, in this case ‘black’ and ‘woman,’ the power to mean” (86; see also LeFlouria 2015). That power rendered black women’s bodies “monstrous”—rough, dangerous, masculine at best, nonhuman at worst—severely limiting claims to citizenship, political rights, economic opportunities, access to basic human welfare, and protection from violence.

⁸ On the uses of the myth of black women’s sexual licentiousness to contain and criminalize black women, see, e.g., Berry (1991, 849–51), Hunter (1998, 33–34), Rosen (2009), and Gross (2015, 26–28).

The irony, of course, is that black women were punished and exploited "like men" for "crimes" that transgressed the bounds of womanhood. In other words, they were policed as women and held to the standards of Victorian morality while being denied the status of women. Black women were well aware of this glaring contradiction. Elite and many working-class black women sought to protect themselves through what Higginbotham identifies as "a politics of respectability" (1992, 272 n. 61).⁹ By upholding the virtues of chastity, temperance, and Christian morality through rigorous self-monitoring, the community was somewhat effective in contesting dominant representations of black women, but it could never eradicate gendered racial terror. Instead, as all of the authors discussed here have shown, black laboring women—enslaved and free—sought pleasure, joy, and release and saw no benefit in respecting Victorian mores. Rather, they struggled to repossess their bodies and nourish their souls.¹⁰ Thus Camp writes eloquently of "the pleasures of resistance" (2002): stealing away to enjoy a respite from violence, the bodily pleasures of dance and song, story and breath. Haley's chapter on sabotage and the blues is a stunning exegesis on black women's agency—their expressions of desire for independence, mobility, and freedom from patriarchal violence; their poetic critiques of the carceral regime, Jim Crow modernity, and morality; their dreams of revenge, retaliation, and flight; their capacity to laugh and love in the face of terror. And the model for much of this work is Tera W. Hunter's pathbreaking book, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (1998). Her discussion of how black domestic workers found respite, regeneration, and resistance in the blues and dance cultures of the early twentieth-century

⁹ Higginbotham developed her critique of the "politics of respectability" in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (1993, 14–15, 100, 145). For further elaboration on the politics of respectability, see Gaines (1996, 45–46, 57, 76–83), Wolcott (2000, 11–48), and White (2001, 36–39).

¹⁰ In 1994, I floated a version of this argument in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (Kelley 1994, chap. 2). There is a huge literature on the ways in which working-class women, including black women, took back their bodies by engaging in commercial leisure and other pleasures. Notable examples include Peiss (1986), Hunter (1998), and Wolcott (2000). However, I want to single out the recent work of Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (2015). Underscoring the fact that the context in which the black body found expression was one of violence, racialization, sexualization, and collective movements for freedom, Ford shows that the repossession of the body as a site of identity and an assertion of self meant that adornment was itself an assertion of freedom. Here Ford reminds us of Higginbotham's assertion that the meta-language of race functioned as a "double-voiced discourse" and thus a potential source of a collective identity associated with a striving for freedom and liberation (Higginbotham 1992, 266–67).

urban South is simply breathtaking. Not only does Hunter document black women's agency and transgressions of gendered norms, her reflections on what the "blues aesthetic" (181) meant for the postemancipation black working class opened the door for Haley's elaboration on the blues as a counterdiscourse on Jim Crow modernity.¹¹

Not surprisingly, sexuality rests at the heart of the question of agency, as Marlon M. Bailey and L. H. Stallings (2017) suggest in their essential contribution to this forum. They correctly warn that the binaries generated by the metalanguage of race can foreclose the possibility of sexuality as a site of pleasure and joy. This was a much-debated problem in African American women's historiography in the 1990s and early 2000s: how much do we privilege black women's sexual agency as opposed to the sexual violence they have had to endure? The newer scholarship has moved beyond this impasse. Hicks, for example, finds black women in Bedford Prison who exhibited decorum and adventure, sexual agency, and certain moral self-limits. But she also recognizes these expressions not as contradictory but as the responses of a dynamic generation confronting the rapid expansion of commercialized leisure spaces and modern representations of womanhood.¹²

I have obviously left out a huge body of scholarship that was influenced by Higginbotham's "Metalanguage of Race," and I have not done justice to the richly detailed and nuanced work discussed in this brief essay. Nonetheless, I want to highlight the importance of Higginbotham's often overlooked insight that the racial construction of gender and sexual normativity is always a violent process requiring constraint and containment, ultimately producing regimes of carcerality. The historians discussed here not only developed this insight but produced urgent and necessary work in a contemporary world in which the surveillance, criminalization, and disposability of black women continue to be a fact. Black women—especially poor women—continue to be monitored, harassed, jailed, and subjected to reproductive control on the pretext that they possess illicit or diseased bodies, and their presumptive criminality means they can be killed or disappeared with no corresponding investigation or concern.

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¹¹ Hunter's (1990) PhD dissertation, "Household Workers in the Making: Afro-American Women in Atlanta and the New South, 1861–1920," is also widely discussed.

¹² This argument, which is made in Hicks's *Talk with You like a Woman* (2010), first appeared as "'Bright and Good Looking Colored Girl': Black Women's Sexuality and 'Harmful Intimacy' in Early Twentieth-Century New York" (Hicks 2009).

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Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Cross-Identity Coalitions for Progressive Social Change

Tamar W. Carroll

In her landmark 1992 article, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham issued a compelling challenge to historians of women and gender: all scholarship—not just that primarily focused on African American women—must take into account the ways in which race defines gender and how race serves as a key language for other hierarchical social relations, including class and sexuality. While historians of women and gender have in recent years embraced intersectionality and made the diversity of women's experiences central to the discipline (see, e.g., Block, Alexander, and Norton 2014), collectively we have not yet fully realized Higginbotham's challenge to demonstrate how race has operated as a metalanguage for other kinds of inequalities of power and position. In general, save for work that takes black women or interracial sex as its subject, relatively little scholarship has responded to Higginbotham's challenge. Studies of women's labor activism have done the most to incorporate analyses of race and ethnicity alongside gender and class as categories shaping women's experiences and determining their relationship to structures of power; Nancy A. Hewitt's (2001) examination of women's activism in Tampa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries comes to mind as a model (see also Guglielmo 2010). Indeed, social movements are a particularly productive site to study racial identity and the production of meanings.

Knowledge of the accomplishments of women activists is a crucial legacy. I began my graduate research as a feminist seeking to understand activism in a way that did not reproduce dominant understandings of the women's

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