

The Impact of the “Cult of True Womanhood” on the Education of Black Women

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This paper compares the primary purposes and functions of educating black and white women in the 19th century. For white women, education served as a vehicle for developing homemaker skills, for reinforcing the role of wife and mother, and a milieu for finding a potential husband. For black women education served as an avenue for the improvement of their race or “race uplift.” The economic, political and social conditions which contributed to these purposes are discussed within a historical context.

To better understand the education of black women vis-a-vis the education of women of the larger society, it is important to place black women within a social and historical context. This essay examines the impact of the “true womanhood” philosophy on the education of white women, and the black philosophy of “race uplift” on the education and development of black women in the nineteenth century. Although blacks considered the women of their race “women” in the early and mid-nineteenth century, by the end of the century they began to place more emphasis on them being “ladies”. This shift in attitudes toward women by many educated male blacks will also be discussed.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CONTEXT: THE ANTEBELLUM PERIOD

Observers of the early nineteenth century frequently cite the emergence of the ‘cult of true womanhood’ as significantly shaping women’s education during this

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period. This concept of the "true woman" emphasized innocence, modesty, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Female education was necessary for the molding of the "ideal woman". Such education reinforced the idea of women's natural position of subordination and focused upon women being loving wives and good mothers. Literacy was deemed important for the reading of the Bible and other religious materials. And needlepoint, painting, music, art, and French dominated the curriculum of "female" education (see Cott, 1977, Rosenberg, 1982, Rothman, 1978; Welter, 1966).

This "true womanhood" model was designed for the upper and middle-class white woman, although poorer white women could aspire to this status. However, since most blacks had been enslaved prior to the Civil War and the debate as to whether they were human beings was a popular topic, black women were not perceived as women in the same sense as women of the larger (i.e., white) society. The emphasis upon women's purity, submissiveness and natural fragility was the antithesis of the reality of most black women's lives during slavery and for many years thereafter.

Not surprisingly whites of the early nineteenth century developed an educational philosophy to correspond with their attitudes towards women. At the same time, blacks espoused a philosophy of education for "race uplift". This education was for the entire race and its purpose was to assist in the economical, educational and social improvement of their enslaved and later emancipated race (For a detailed discussion see Perkins, 1981). Unlike their white counterparts, blacks established coeducational schools and similar curricula for both males and females.

The early decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic shift in the social and economic fabric of the nation. The growth of factories and increased industry provided employment outside homes and altered the colonial self-sustaining family. With the coming of urbanization and industrialization a new role for women emerged. Unlike the colonial period, when single and married white women worked without stigma, the early nineteenth century emphasized women's "proper sphere" as being within the home (See Rothman, 1978). Throughout the antebellum years, white women were deluged with sermons and speeches which stressed the "duty" of a "true woman". These speeches and sermons were reinforced by a proliferation of magazines, journals and other printed materials that focused upon instructing women of their proper sphere (Cott, 1977).

During the period of the development of the norm of "true womanhood", antebellum blacks struggled to abolish slavery and obtain equality in the nation. The theme of "race uplift" became the motto within the black communities of the nation. It was expected that blacks who were able to assist, i.e. "uplift", other members of their race, would do so (Perkins, 1981).

Although white society did not acknowledge the black women as female,

the black race did. During the first half of the nineteenth century, black women's educational, civic and religious organizations in the north bore the word "ladies" in their titles, clearly indicating their perceptions of self. One of the earliest black female educational societies, the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia, combined educational and civic objectives for the group's purposes. The Preamble of the organization's constitution reflected the women's commitment to the philosophy of race "uplift". They wrote, it was their "duty . . . as daughters of a despised race, to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding, to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping, that by so doing, we may in a great measure, break down the strong barrier of prejudice, and raise ourselves to an equality with those of our fellow beings, who differ from us in complexion." (reported in the *Liberator*, December 3, 1931.). Clearly the woman spoke of their oppression as a result of their race and not sex.

Unlike women of the white society, black women were encouraged to become educated to aid in the improvement of their race. An 1837 article entitled "To the Females of Colour" in the New York black newspaper, *The Weekly Advocate*, (Jan. 7, 1837) urged black women to obtain an education. The article stated, "in any enterprise for the improvement of our people, either moral or mental, our hands would be palsied without woman's influence." Thus, the article continued, "let our beloved female friends, then, rouse up, and exert all their power, in encouraging, and sustaining this effort (educational) which we have made to disabuse the public mind of the misrepresentations made of our character; and to show the world, that there is virtue among us, though concealed; talent, though buried; intelligence, though overlooked." (To the Females of Colour, 1837). In other words, black females and males would demonstrate the race's intelligence, morality, and ingenuity.

It should be understood that during the antebellum period, free blacks lived primarily in an occupational caste. The men were relegated to menial positions while women were primarily domestic workers. Although blacks perceived education as "uplifting", most whites viewed education of blacks as threatening to their position of dominance.

By the time of emancipation in 1863, every southern state had laws that prohibited the education of slaves, and in many instances free blacks as well (Woodson, 1919/1968). There were scattered opportunities for both free blacks and slaves to become literate prior to the 1830s in the nation. However, education for blacks was viewed as dangerous after the fiery *Appeal* of David Walker in 1829 and the 1830 slave revolt of Nat Turner—both literate men. After the 1830s, all southern states instituted laws prohibiting the education of blacks, and such activities were thereby forced underground (Woodson, 1919/1968).

The decades of the 1830s and 1840s in which free blacks sought access to educational institutions in the North paralleled the founding of seminaries for white women. Historian Ann Firor Scott (1979) points out in her study of Troy

Female Seminary, the first such institution to open, that the school combined the “true womanhood” ideal with feminist values from its opening in 1822. Under the direction of Emma Willard, the institution sought to preserve the traditional social and political status of women while challenging the notion of women’s inferior intellectual status. Despite this challenge to society’s view of the intellectual inferiority of women, Troy instilled within its students that “feminine delicacy . . . was a primary and indispensable virtue.”

Other such seminaries proliferated in the nation prior to the Civil War. These institutions began the professional training of female teachers. However, few opened their doors to black women on a continuous basis. The lone exception was Oberlin College, which received notoriety in 1833 when it decided to admit both women and blacks on an equal basis with white men. As a result, most of the earliest black college graduates, male and female, were Oberlin graduates (DuBois, 1900). It was not atypical for black families to relocate to Oberlin for the education of their daughters. For example, when Blanche V. Harris was denied admission to a white female seminary in Michigan in the 1850’s, her entire family moved to Oberlin (Henle & Merrill, 1979). Similarly, Mary Jane Patterson, who in 1862 became the first black woman to earn a college degree in the United States, moved from North Carolina in the 1850s to Oberlin with her family because of the educational opportunities at the College. Three Patterson females and one male graduated from Oberlin. Fanny Jackson Coppin, the second black woman to earn a college degree in the nation, was sent from Washington, D.C. to Newport, Rhode Island, where her educational opportunities were greater. After completing the Rhode Island State Normal School, she also went to Oberlin and graduated in 1865. Bishop Daniel Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was so impressed with the ambition of Fanny Jackson Coppin that he aided her with a scholarship to Oberlin (see Coppin, 1913). This financial assistance is not insignificant when one remembers that when Fanny Jackson Coppin entered Oberlin in 1860, no black women in the nation had a college degree and very few black men attempted higher education. Bishop Payne’s enthusiasm and support for Coppin’s education contrasts with the debates on the danger of higher education that surrounded the question of education for white women. These arguments stated that higher education not only reduced a woman’s chance of marriage but also resulted in physical and psychological damage (Woody, 1929).

As early as 1787 Benjamin Rush in his publication, *Thoughts on Female Education*, stated that women should be educated to become “stewards, and guardians” of the family assets. And Noah Webster warned that “education is always wrong which raises a woman above her station.” Even as high schools for women became available after the Civil War, historian Thomas Woody, in his seminal history of women’s education (1929) notes that the primary purposes of such institutions were to (1) extend the scope of “female education”, (2)

increase the social usefulness of women, and (3) train teachers for the lower grades as opposed to the preparation for college which was the primary aim of the male high school.

Studies of the students and graduates of white female high schools and seminaries confirm that marriage usually terminated employment of the women. Teaching, the predominant profession of these women, was merely a way-station until matrimony. Scott's work on Troy women students and graduates during the period 1822–1872 indicates that only 6 percent worked during marriage and only 26 percent worked at any time during their life. David Allmendinger's (1979) research on Mt. Holyoke students from 1837–1850 is consistent with Scott's data. Although the majority of the student population taught at some point in their lives, most did so for less than five years. Only 6 percent made teaching a lifetime profession. Although data on black women for these periods are inconclusive, the literature on black attitudes towards education strongly takes the view that educated black women and marriage were not incompatible. W. E. B. DuBois' study of 1900 of the black college graduates indicates that 50 percent of the black women college graduates from 1860–1899 were married. Similarly, census statistics in 1900 report that ten times as many married black women than married white women were employed. (DuBois, 1900) This disproportionate ratio is no doubt a reflection of the economic necessity of black women to their families.

AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

For several thousand New England white women who journeyed South to teach after the Civil War, it appears that the "cult of true womanhood" was a significant impetus. The women were overwhelmingly single, upper and middle-class, unemployed and educated in New England seminaries and Oberlin College (McPherson, 1975). Their letters of application to the missionary societies sponsoring teachers to the South often reflected a deep need to escape idleness and boredom. A letter stating, "my circumstances are such that it is necessary for me to be doing something" was the common theme (Jones, 1980). In contrast, black women who applied were overwhelmingly employed and financially supported families. Their letters of application consistently reflected a theme of "duty" and "race uplift". While the tenure of the white female educator in the South was normally two to three years, the black female expressed a desire to devote their entire lives to their work and most did (Perkins, in press).

Although conscious of their gender, the earliest black female college graduates repeatedly stated their desire for an education was directly linked to aiding their race. Fanny Jackson Coppin expressed in her autobiography of 1913 that, from girlhood, her greatest ambition was "to get an education and to help [her] people." Anna J. Cooper (1882), an Oberlin graduate of 1884 whose papers are

housed at Howard University, stated she decided to attend college while in kindergarten and devoted her entire life to the education of her race. Affluent Mary Church Terrell, also an Oberlin graduate of '84, jeopardized her inheritance when her father, who wished her to model her life on the upper-class white "true womanhood" ideal, threatened to disinherit her if she worked after graduating from Oberlin. Terrell wrote years later (1968) of this dilemma: "I have conscientiously availed myself of opportunities for preparing myself for a life of usefulness as only four other colored (women) had been able to do . . . All during my college course I had dreamed of the day when I could promote the welfare of my race." Although she was forced by law to forfeit her public school teaching post after marriage, she taught voluntarily in an evening school and became a widely known lecturer and women's club leader.

"Race uplift" was the expected objective of *all* educated blacks; however, after the Civil War, the implementation of this philosophy was placed primarily on the shoulders of black women. Women were prominent among the many educated blacks who migrated or returned south after emancipation to aid in the transition of emancipated blacks from slavery to freedom. For example, Louise DeMontie, a noted lecturer who migrated from Virginia to Boston in the 1850's, moved to New Orleans in 1865 to open the city's first orphanage for black youth. Mary Shadd Cary, who migrated to Canada in the 1850's, returned to the United States after the outbreak of the War to serve as a scout for the Union army. Scores of other black women went South to engage in the massive effort to educate the newly emancipated blacks (Blassingame, 1973; Williams, 1883).

Throughout the War and afterwards, northern black women raised money and collected clothes to send South. On one occasion the Colored Ladies Sanitary Commission of Boston sent \$500 to blacks in Savannah. Similarly, in Washington, D.C., Elizabeth Keckley, the mulatto seamstress of First Lady Mary Lincoln organized the Contraband Relief Association of Washington in 1862. With forty other black women, in its first two years of existence, the group sent nearly one hundred boxes and barrels of clothing to southern blacks and spent in excess of \$1600 (McPherson, 1965).

Perhaps more impressive were the efforts of black women in the South to aid themselves. Viewing charity primarily as an activity for the fortunate to aid the unfortunate, white missionaries frequently recorded with astonishment the establishment of black self-help groups. One such report in *The National Freedmen* in 1865 (May 1, 1865, Number 4) cited a group of poor black women in Charleston who formed an organization to aid the sick. After working all day, members of the group devoted several hours to duty in the hospitals. In fact, *The National Freedmen*, the organ of the National Freedmen Relief Society, often reported the general charity among blacks in general and black women in particular. One such missionary report stated:

I have been greatly struck with the charity of these colored people. There are few of them even comfortably situated for this world's goods. Yet, their charity is the most extensive,

hearty, genuine thing imaginable. They have innumerable organizations for the relief of the aged, the helpless or needy from whatever. (*The National Freedmen*, December 15, 1865, Number 11).

The observer was greatly impressed by the work of black women. He wrote that he witnessed black women “past the prime of life and with no visible means of support” who took in whole families of orphaned children. These stories were found repeatedly in missionary letters.

Despite the significant contributions of black women to the economic, civic, religious, and educational improvement of the race, after emancipation there was a noticeable shift in the attitudes towards the role of women by many members of the race.

Schools for blacks in the South proliferated after the close of the Civil War and, by the 1870’s, those founded by northern missionaries and the federal Freedmen’s Bureau became the backbone of the public schools for blacks (Bullock, 1970). DuBois, in his 1900 study of the *Negro Common School*, reports that in 1890 there were over 25,000 black teachers. Half of this number were women. With education being placed at the top of the race’s agenda for progress, a huge number of black teachers was necessary. By 1899, more than 28,500 black teachers were employed in the nation.

While public schools for blacks were overwhelmingly coeducational, and girls received primarily the same instruction as boys, the black men greatly outnumbered black women in higher education. By 1890, only 30 black women held baccalaureate degrees, compared to over 300 black men and 2,500 white women. In this same year, white women constituted 35 percent of the undergraduate collegiate student bodies (Cooper, 1892; Graham, 1975). Whereas prior to the Civil War education was viewed as important for all members of the race, during and after Reconstruction, those black women who were educated were trained almost exclusively to become elementary and secondary school teachers. In contrast, the small number of educated black men had more encouragement and access to institutions of higher education. Further, employment options of black men were greater than those of black women (Johnson, 1938).

The issues of sexism and racism were confronted head on in 1892 by Anna Julia Cooper in her book, *A Voice from the South*. Citing all of the well known arguments against higher education of women promulgated by whites in the past, Cooper stated that most black men had accepted these arguments and also believed women to be inferior to men. Cooper wrote, on the women question: “[Black] men drop back into sixteenth century logic.” These men, according to Cooper ascribed to the view that “women may stand on pedestals or live in doll houses . . . but not seek intellectual growth.” Cooper continued, “I fear the majority of colored men do not yet think it worth while that women aspire to higher education.” (Cooper, 1892, p. 75).

Cooper’s observations were correct concerning the view of many educated black men. The passage of the fourteenth amendment in 1870 which granted

black men the right to vote, signaled the first major gender distinction acknowledged by society towards them. As a result, black men during the latter decades of the nineteenth century moved temporarily into high political offices. Twenty-two black men served in the nation's Congress by 1900 and scores of others held local and state political positions (Franklin, 1969). As black men sought to obtain education and positions similar to that of white men in society, many adopted the prevailing notion of white society, of the natural subordination of women.

SEXISM AND THE EDUCATION OF BLACK WOMEN

Given the unique history of black women in their race, to view them as less than men was not only retrogressive but absurd. Even though the prevailing economic deprivation of blacks at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demanded that black women work, many elite blacks nevertheless embraced the Victorian "true womanhood" ideal of the 1820's and 1830's (see Williamson, 1971). As were New England white women of the antebellum period, black women were expected to be self-sacrificing and dutiful. (Prior to emancipation, *all* blacks were expected to do so.). Speeches and articles abound citing black women as the nurturers and the guardians of—not the thinkers or leaders of the race. Most black women educators accepted that charge. (See Laney, 1899)

By the end of the nineteenth century, sexism had increased significantly among educated blacks. When the first major black American Learned Society was founded in 1897, by a group of well known black men, the constitution of the organization limited membership to "men of African descent". The issue of female membership was debated by the group and they resolved that the male stipulation would be rescinded; however, this was never done (Moss, 1981). It was clear by the end of the nineteenth century that many black men viewed women as their intellectual subordinates and not capable of leadership positions. When Fanny Jackson Coppin eulogized Frederick Douglass in 1896 (included in *In Memoriam: Frederick Douglass*) she praised him for "his good opinion of the rights of women . . . that women were not only capable of governing the household but also of elective franchise." The fact that she made this the point of her praise for Douglass indicates that his view of women was the exception rather than the rule.

Fanny Coppin headed the prestigious Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia, the oldest black private high school in the nation from 1869–1901. After she was forced to retire in 1901, the school was henceforth headed by black men. (For details on Coppin's years at the Institute for Colored Youth, see Perkins, Note 1.) Likewise, the prestigious, oldest black public high school in the nation, M Street School in Washington, D.C. was initially headed by a black woman, Mary Jane Patterson. Patterson served as Assistant Principal to Coppin at the

Institute for Colored Youth from 1865–1869 and was appointed principal of M Street in 1869 (Perkins, Note 1). She was removed several years later so that a male could head the institution. Anna Julia Cooper also served briefly as Principal of M Street from 1901–1906 but was dismissed for her refusal to adhere to the inferior curriculum prescribed for black students. Like the Institute for Colored Youth, by the turn of the century, and thereafter M Street was headed by black men (Anna J. Cooper Papers, Howard University).

As the century came to a close, “race uplift” was synonymous with black women. With the formation of the National Association of Colored Women 1896, educated black women focused their activities on community development. Reflecting the century old race philosophy, the group chose as their motto “lifting as we climb”. Throughout the South, the organization founded orphanages, homes for the elderly and educational institutions, and supported religious programs. The crusade against lynching of this period was also spearheaded by a black woman, the fearless Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

In 1894, the black Senator John Mercer Langston from Virginia recalled his visits in the South after Emancipation and noted:

They (black women) were foremost in designs and efforts for school, church and general industrial work for the race, always self-sacrificing and laborious . . . Through all phases of his advancement from his Emancipation to his present position of social, political, educational, moral, religious and material status, the colored American is greatly indebted to the women of his race. (Langston, 1894, p. 236)

Later, black scholar W. E. B. DuBois (1969) would also write, “after the war the sacrifice of Negro women for freedom and black uplift is one of the finest chapters in their history.” Yet, today this chapter is rarely found in black, women’s or educational histories.

Even into the twentieth century, the focus on educating black women to “uplift” and primarily to educate the race continued. In 1933, dean of women at Howard University, Lucy D. Slowe wrote a piece entitled “Higher Education of Negro Women” which addressed many of the same issues raised by Anna J. Cooper in 1892. Slowe voiced concern for the lack of opportunity for college educated black women to get leadership training within black colleges. Noting that while black men college graduates were found in the fields of ministry, law, medicine and other professions, teaching constituted the largest occupation of black women college graduates. After surveying the responses of forty-four black coeducational institutions, Slowe found that black women received little in courses, activities or role-models to aid them in leadership development. Slowe conceded that many black families were conservative when it came to the issue of independent and assertive women; however, black colleges aided in fostering this paternalistic and conservative view of women. She wrote: “The absence of women or the presence of very few on the policy-making bodies of colleges is

also indicative of the attitude of college administrators toward women as responsible individuals, and toward the special needs of women (Slowe, 1933, p. 357).

Despite the feminist writings of Anna J. Cooper and Lucy Slowe, the education of black women into the twentieth century continued to be focused towards teaching and "uplifting" the race. In a 1956 study of the collegiate education of black women, Jeanne L. Noble observed that the education of black women continued to be basically utilitarian- to provide teachers for the race. One of the 412 women in her study commented on this professional isolation.

There are entirely too many fine Negro women in the teaching profession. There should be vocational guidance to encourage them into new fields. Around this part of the country middle-class women go into teaching because this is the highest type of position for them (Noble, 1956, p. 87).

Unlike black women of the mid and late nineteenth century who consciously prepared themselves for leadership positions, as Lucy Laney stated in 1899, to many black women in the twentieth century such a role had become a burden. Rhetaugh Graves Dumas indicates in her (1980) essay "Dilemmas of Black Females in Leadership," that their leadership has been 'restricted to primarily female and youth organizations most often surrounding the black community. Recent work by sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes also confirms that the education of black women leaders has been focused to meet the black community needs (Gilkes, 1980).

The shift in attitude towards women in the black community and the role they were expected to assume vis-a-vis men paralleled the acceptance by black men of the dominance of man after Emancipation. Although black women have worked far out of proportion to their white counterpart, out of economic necessity, sexism and paternalism among the men of their race have resulted in relegation of black women to the roles of nurturer and "helpmate." The recognition of sexism within the black community has been slow. Recently (Summer, 1982, Volume 51) the *Journal of Negro Education* (1982) devoted a special issue to the Impact of Black women in Education—the first such issue in the journal's fifty-one year history.

Although the shift from egalitarian to sexist views of black women can be explained historically, sociologically, and psychologically, the continued depressed economic and educational status of blacks demands that race "uplift" return to its original meaning to include both men and women.

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