

## 5 The Meaning of Emancipation According to Black Women

---

"Cursed be Cannan!" cried the Hebrew priests. "A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." . . . Are not Negroes servants? *Ergo!* Upon such spiritual myths was the anachronism of American slavery built, and this was the degradation that once made menial servants the aristocrats among colored folk. . . .

. . . When emancipation came . . . the lure of house service for the Negro was gone. The path of salvation for the emancipated host of black folk no longer lay through the kitchen door, with its wide hall and pillared yards beyond. It lay, as every Negro soon knew and knows, in escape from menial serfdom.<sup>1</sup>

After a quarter of a century of "freedom," vast numbers of Black women were still working in the fields. Those who had made it into the "big house" found the door toward new opportunities sealed shut—unless they preferred, for example, to wash clothes at home for a medley of white families as opposed to performing a medley of household jobs for a single white family. Only an infinitesimal number of Black women had managed to escape from the fields, from the kitchen or from the washroom. According to the 1890 census, there were 2.7 million Black girls and women over the age of ten. More than a million of them worked

for wages: 38.7 percent in agriculture; 30.8 percent in household domestic service; 15.6 percent in laundry work; and a negligible 2.8 percent in manufacturing.<sup>2</sup> The few who found jobs in industry usually performed the dirtiest and lowest-paid work. And they had not really made a significant breakthrough, for their slave mothers had also worked in the Southern cotton mills, in the sugar refineries and even in the mines. For Black women in 1890, freedom must have appeared to be even more remote in the future than it had been at the end of the Civil War.

As during slavery, Black women who worked in agriculture—as sharecroppers, tenant farmers or farmworkers—were no less oppressed than the men alongside whom they labored the day long. They were often compelled to sign “contracts” with landowners who wanted to reduplicate the antebellum conditions. The contract’s expiration date was frequently a mere formality, since landlords could claim that workers owed them more than the equivalent of the prescribed labor period. In the aftermath of emancipation the masses of Black people—men and women alike—found themselves in an indefinite state of peonage. Sharecroppers, who ostensibly owned the products of their labor, were no better off than the outright peons. Those who “rented” land immediately after emancipation rarely possessed money to meet the rent payments, or to purchase other necessities before they harvested their first crop. Demanding as much as 30 percent in interest, landowners and merchants alike held mortgages on the crops.

Of course the farmers could pay no such interest and the end of the first year found them in debt—the second year they tried again, but there was the old debt and the new interest to pay, and in this way, the “mortgage system” has gotten a hold on everything that it seems impossible to shake off.<sup>3</sup>

Through the convict lease system, Black people were forced to play the same old roles carved out for them by slavery. Men and women alike were arrested and imprisoned at the slightest pretext—in order to be leased out by the authorities as convict laborers. Whereas the slaveholders had recognized limits to the cruelty with which they exploited their “valuable” human property, no such cautions were necessary for the postwar planters who rented Black convicts for relatively short terms. “In many cases sick convicts are made to toil until they drop dead in their tracks.”<sup>4</sup>

Using slavery as its model, the convict lease system did not discriminate between male and female labor. Men and women were frequently housed together in the same stockade and were yoked together during the workday. In a resolution passed by the 1883 Texas State Convention of Negroes, “the practice of yoking or chaining male and female convicts together” was “strongly condemned.”<sup>5</sup> Likewise, at the Founding Convention of the Afro-American League in 1890, one of the seven reasons motivating the creation of this organization was “(t)he odious and demoralizing penitentiary system of the South, its chain gangs, convict leases and indiscriminate mixing of males and females.”<sup>6</sup>

As W. E. B. DuBois observed, the profit potential of the convict lease system persuaded many Southern planters to rely exclusively on convict labor—some employing a labor force of hundreds of Black prisoners.<sup>7</sup> As a result, both employers and state authorities acquired a compelling economic interest in increasing the prison population. “Since 1876,” DuBois points out, “Negroes have been arrested on the slightest provocation and given long sentences or fines which they were compelled to work out.”<sup>8</sup>

This perversion of the criminal justice system was oppressive to the ex-slave population as a whole. But the women were especially susceptible to the brutal assaults of the judicial system. The sexual abuse they had routinely suffered during the era of slavery was not



arrested by the advent of emancipation. As a matter of fact, it was still true that "colored women were looked upon as the legitimate prey of white men . . ."—and if they resisted white men's sexual attacks, they were frequently thrown into prison to be further victimized by a system which was a "return to another form of slavery."<sup>10</sup>

During the post-slavery period, most Black women workers who did not toil in the fields were compelled to become domestic servants. Their predicament, no less than that of their sisters who were sharecroppers or convict laborers, bore the familiar stamp of slavery. Indeed, slavery itself had been euphemistically called the "domestic institution" and slaves had been designated as innocuous "domestic servants." In the eyes of the former slaveholders, "domestic service" must have been a courteous term for a contemptible occupation not a half-step away from slavery. While Black women worked as cooks, nursemaids, chambermaids and all-purpose domestics, white women in the South unanimously rejected this line of work. Outside the South, white women who worked as domestics were generally European immigrants who, like their ex-slave sisters, were compelled to take whatever employment they could find.

The occupational equation of Black women with domestic service was not, however, a simple vestige of slavery destined to disappear with the passage of time. For almost a century they would be unable to escape domestic work in any significant numbers. A Georgia domestic worker's story, recorded by a New York journalist in 1912,<sup>11</sup> reflected Black women's economic predicament of previous decades as well as for many years to come. More than two-thirds of the Black women in her town were forced to hire themselves out as cooks, nursemaids, washerwomen, chambermaids, hucksters and janitresses, and were caught up in conditions ". . . just as bad as, if not worse than, it was during slavery."<sup>12</sup>

For more than thirty years this Black woman had involuntarily lived in all the households where she was employed. Working as many as fourteen hours a day, she was generally allowed an afternoon visit with her own family only once every two weeks. She was, in her own words, "the slave, body and soul"<sup>13</sup> of her white employers. She was always called by her first name—never Mrs. . . .—and was not infrequently referred to as their "nigger," in other words, their slave.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most humiliating aspects of domestic service in the South—another affirmation of its affinity with slavery—was the temporary revocation of Jim Crow laws as long as the Black servant was in the presence of a white person.

. . . I have gone on the streetcars or the railroad trains with the white children, and . . . I could sit anywhere I desired, front or back. If a white man happened to ask some other white man, "What is that nigger doing in here?" and was told, "Oh, she's the nurse of those white children in front of her" immediately there was the hush of peace. Everything was all right, as long as I was in the white man's part of the streetcar or in the white man's coach as a servant—a slave—but as soon as I did not present myself as a menial . . . by my not having the white children with me, I would be forthwith assigned to the "nigger" seats or the "colored people's coach."<sup>15</sup>

From Reconstruction to the present, Black women household workers have considered sexual abuse perpetrated by the "man of the house" as one of their major occupational hazards. Time after time they have been victims of extortion on the job, compelled to choose between sexual submission and absolute poverty for themselves and their families. The Georgia woman lost one of her live-in jobs because "I refused to let the madam's husband kiss me."<sup>16</sup>



... (S)oon after I was installed as cook, he walked up to me, threw his arms around me, and was in the act of kissing me, when I demanded to know what he meant, and shoved him away. I was young then, and newly married, and didn't know then what has been a burden to my mind and heart ever since: that a colored woman's virtue in this part of the country has no protection.<sup>17</sup>

As during slavery times, the Black man who protested such treatment of his sister, daughter or wife could always expect to be punished for his efforts.

When my husband went to the man who had insulted me, the man cursed him, and slapped him, and—had him arrested! The police fined my husband \$25.<sup>18</sup>

After she testified under oath in court, "(t)he old judge looked up and said: 'This court will never take the word of a nigger against the word of a white man.'"<sup>19</sup>

In 1919, when the Southern leaders of the National Association of Colored Women drew up their grievances, the conditions of domestic service were first on their list. It was with good reason that they protested what they politely termed, "exposure to moral temptations"<sup>20</sup> on the job. Undoubtedly, the domestic worker from Georgia would have expressed unqualified agreement with the Association's protests. In her words,

I believe nearly all white men take, and expect to take, undue liberties with their colored female servants—not only the fathers, but in many cases the sons also. Those servants who rebel against such familiarity must either leave or expect a mighty hard time, if they stay.<sup>21</sup>

Since slavery, the vulnerable condition of the household worker has continued to nourish many of the lingering myths about the

"immorality" of Black women. In this classic "catch-22" situation, household work is considered degrading because it has been disproportionately performed by Black women, who in turn are viewed as "inept" and "promiscuous." But their ostensible ineptness and promiscuity are myths which are repeatedly confirmed by the degrading work they are compelled to do. As W. E. B. DuBois said, any white man of "decency" would certainly cut his daughter's throat before he permitted her to accept domestic employment.<sup>22</sup>

When Black people began to migrate northward, men and women alike discovered that their white employers outside the South were not fundamentally different from their former owners in their attitudes about the occupational potentials of the newly freed slaves. They also believed, it seemed, that "*Negroes are servants, servants are Negroes.*"<sup>23</sup> According to the 1890 census, Delaware was the only state outside the South where the majority of Black people were farmworkers and sharecroppers as opposed to domestic servants.<sup>24</sup> In thirty-two out of forty-eight states, domestic service was the dominant occupation for men and women alike. In seven out of ten of these states, there were more Black people working as domestics than in all the other occupations combined.<sup>25</sup> The census report was proof that *Negroes are servants, servants are Negroes.*

Isabel Eaton's companion essay on domestic service, published in DuBois' 1899 study *The Philadelphia Negro*, reveals that 60 percent of all Black workers in the state of Pennsylvania were engaged in some form of domestic work.<sup>26</sup> The predicament of women was even worse, for all but nine percent—14,297 out of 15,704—of Black women workers were employed as domestics.<sup>27</sup> When they had traveled North seeking to escape the old slavery, they had discovered that there were simply no other occupations open to them. In researching her study, Eaton interviewed several women who had previously taught school, but had been fired



because of "prejudice."<sup>28</sup> Expelled from the classroom, they were compelled to work in the washroom and the kitchen.

Of the fifty-five employers interviewed by Eaton, only one preferred white servants over Black ones.<sup>29</sup> In the words of one woman,

I think the colored people are much maligned in regard to honesty, cleanliness and trustworthiness; my experience of them is that they are immaculate in every way, and they are perfectly honest; indeed I can't say enough about them.<sup>30</sup>

Racism works in convoluted ways. The employers who thought they were complimenting Black people by stating their preference for them over whites were arguing, in reality, that menial servants—slaves, to be frank—were what Black people were destined to be. Another employer described her cook as "... very industrious and careful—painstaking. She is a good, faithful creature, and very grateful."<sup>31</sup> Of course, the "good" servant is always faithful, trustworthy and grateful. U.S. literature and the popular media in this country furnish numerous stereotypes of the Black woman as faithful, enduring servant. The Dilseys (à la Faulkner), the Berenices (of *Member of the Wedding*) and the Aunt Jemimas of commercial fame have become stock characters of U.S. culture. Thus the one woman interviewed by Eaton who did prefer white servants confessed that she actually employed Black help "... because they look more like servants."<sup>32</sup> The tautological definition of Black people as servants is indeed one of the essential props of racist ideology.

Racism and sexism frequently converge—and the condition of white women workers is often tied to the oppressive predicament of women of color. Thus the wages received by white women domestics have always been fixed by the racist criteria used to calculate the wages of Black women servants. Immigrant women

compelled to accept household employment earned little more than their Black counterparts. As far as their wage-earning potential was concerned, they were closer, by far, to their Black sisters than to their white brothers who worked for a living.<sup>33</sup>

If white women never resorted to domestic work unless they were certain of finding nothing better, Black women were trapped in these occupations until the advent of World War II. Even in the 1940s, there were street-corner markets in New York and other large cities—modern versions of slavery's auction block—inviting white women to take their pick from the crowds of Black women seeking work.

Every morning, rain or shine, groups of women with brown paper bags or cheap suitcases stand on streetcorners in the Bronx and Brooklyn waiting for a chance to get some work. . . . Once hired on the "slave market," the women often find after a day's back-breaking toil, that they worked longer than was arranged, got less than was promised, were forced to accept clothing instead of cash and were exploited beyond human endurance. Only the urgent need for money makes them submit to this routine daily.<sup>34</sup>

New York could claim about two hundred of these "slave markets," many of them located in the Bronx, where "almost any corner above 167th Street" was a gathering point for Black women seeking work.<sup>35</sup> In a 1938 article published in *The Nation*, "Our Feudal Housewives," as the piece was entitled, were said to work some seventy-two hours a week, receiving the lowest wages of all occupations.<sup>36</sup>

The least fulfilling of all employment, domestic work has also been the most difficult to unionize. As early as 1881, domestic workers were among the women who joined the locals of the Knights of Labor when it rescinded its ban on female membership.<sup>37</sup> But many decades later, union organizers seeking to unite



domestic workers confronted the very same obstacles as their predecessors. Dora Jones founded and led the New York Domestic Workers Union during the 1930s.<sup>38</sup> By 1939—five years after the union was founded—only 350 out of 100,000 domestics in the state had been recruited. Given the enormous difficulties of organizing domestics, however, this was hardly a small accomplishment.

White women—feminists included—have revealed a historical reluctance to acknowledge the struggles of household workers. They have rarely been involved in the Sisyphean task of ameliorating the conditions of domestic service. The convenient omission of household workers' problems from the programs of "middle-class" feminists past and present has often turned out to be a veiled justification—at least on the part of the affluent women—of their own exploitative treatment of their maids. In 1902 the author of an article entitled "A Nine-Hour Day for Domestic Servants" described a conversation with a feminist friend who had asked her to sign a petition urging employers to furnish seats for women clerks.

"The girls," she said, "have to stand on their feet ten hours a day and it makes my heart ache to see their tired faces."

"Mrs. Jones," said I, "how many hours a day does your maid stand upon her feet?"

"Why, I don't know," she gasped, "five or six I suppose."

"At what time does she rise?"

"At six."

"And at what hour does she finish at night?"

"Oh, about eight, I think, generally."

"That makes fourteen hours . . ."

" . . . (S)he can often sit down at her work."

"At what work? Washing? Ironing? Sweeping? Making beds? Cooking? Washing dishes? . . . Perhaps she sits for two hours at

her meals and preparing vegetables, and four days in the week she has an hour in the afternoon. According to that, your maid is on her feet at least eleven hours a day with a score of stair-climbings included. It seems to me that her case is more pitiable than that of the store clerk."

My caller rose with red cheeks and flashing eyes. "My maid always has Sunday after dinner," she said.

"Yes, but the clerk has all day Sunday. Please don't go until I have signed that petition. No one would be more thankful than I to see the clerks have a chance to sit . . ."<sup>39</sup>

This feminist activist was perpetrating the very oppression she protested. Yet her contradictory behavior and her inordinate insensitivity are not without explanation, for people who work as servants are generally viewed as less than human beings. Inherent in the dynamic of the master-servant (or mistress-maid) relationship, said the philosopher Hegel, is the constant striving to annihilate the consciousness of the servant. The clerk referred to in the conversation was a wage laborer—a human being possessing at least a modicum of independence from her employer and her work. The servant, on the other hand, labored solely for the purpose of satisfying her mistress' needs. Probably viewing her servant as a mere extension of herself, the feminist could hardly be conscious of her own active role as an oppressor.

As Angelina Grimke had declared in her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, white women who did not challenge the institution of slavery bore a heavy responsibility for its inhumanity. In the same vein, the Domestic Workers Union exposed the role of middle-class housewives in the oppression of Black domestic workers.

The housewife stands condemned as the worst employer in the country . . .



The housewives of the United States make their million and a half employees work an average of seventy-two hours a week and pay them . . . whatever they can squeeze out of their budget after the grocer, the butcher . . . (etc.) have been paid.<sup>40</sup>

Black women's desperate economic situation—they perform the worst of all jobs and are ignored to boot—did not show signs of change until the outbreak of World War II. On the eve of the war, according to the 1940 census, 59.5 percent of employed Black women were domestic workers and another 10.4 percent worked in non-domestic service occupations.<sup>41</sup> Since approximately 16 percent still worked in the fields, scarcely one out of ten Black women workers had really begun to escape the old grip of slavery. Even those who managed to enter industry and professional work had little to boast about, for they were consigned, as a rule, to the worst-paid jobs in these occupations. When the United States stepped into World War II and female labor kept the war economy rolling, more than four hundred thousand Black women said goodbye to their domestic jobs. At the war's peak, they had more than doubled their numbers in industry. But even so—and this qualification is inevitable—as late as 1960 at least one-third of Black women workers remained chained to the same old household jobs and an additional one-fifth were non-domestic service workers.<sup>42</sup>

In a fiercely critical essay entitled "The Servant in the House," W. E. B. DuBois argued that as long as domestic service was the rule for Black people, emancipation would always remain a conceptual abstraction. "... (T)he Negro," DuBois insisted, "will not approach freedom until this hateful badge of slavery and medievalism has been reduced to less than ten percent."<sup>43</sup> The changes prompted by the Second World War provided only a hint of progress. After eight long decades of "emancipation," the signs of freedom were shadows so vague and so distant that one strained and squinted to get a glimpse of them.



## 6 Education and Liberation: Black Women's Perspective

---

Millions of Black people—and especially the women—were convinced that emancipation was “the coming of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

This was the fulfillment of prophecy and legend. It was the Golden Dawn, after chains of a thousand years. It was everything miraculous and perfect and promising.<sup>2</sup>

There was joy in the South. It rose like perfume—like a prayer. Men stood quivering. Slim, dark girls, wild and beautiful with wrinkled hair, wept silently; young women, black, tawny, white and golden, lifted shivering hands, and old and broken mothers, black and gray, raised great voices and shouted to God across the fields and up to the rocks and the mountains.<sup>3</sup>

A great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side of the seas. It was a new song . . . and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world's ears with a message seldom voiced by man. It swelled and blossomed like incense, improvised and born anew out of an age long past and weaving into its texture the old and new melodies in word and in thought.<sup>4</sup>

Black people were hardly celebrating the abstract principles of freedom when they hailed the advent of emancipation. As that



"... great human sob shrieked in the wind and tossed its tears upon the sea—free, free, free,"<sup>5</sup> Black people were not giving vent to religious frenzy. They knew exactly what they wanted: the women and the men alike wanted land, they wanted the ballot and "... they were consumed with desire for schools."<sup>6</sup>

Like the young slave child Frederick Douglass, many of the four million people who celebrated emancipation had long since realized that "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave."<sup>7</sup> And like Douglass' master, the former slaveholders realized that "... if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. Learning will spoil the best nigger in the world."<sup>8</sup> Master Hugh's proscription notwithstanding, Frederick Douglass secretly continued his pursuit of knowledge. Soon he could write all the words from *Webster's Spelling-Book*, further perfecting his skill by examining the family Bible and other books in the clandestinity of the night. Of course, Frederick Douglass was an exceptional human being who became a brilliant thinker, writer and orator. But his desire for knowledge was by no means exceptional among Black people, who had always manifested a deep-seated urge to acquire knowledge. Great numbers of slaves also wanted to be "unfit" for the harrowing existence they led. A former slave interviewed during the 1930s, Jenny Proctor recalled the *Webster's Spelling-Book* which she and her friends had surreptitiously studied.

None of us was 'lowed to see a book or try to learn. They say we git smarter than they was if we learn anything, but we slips around and gits hold of that Webster's old blue-back speller and we hides it till 'way in the night and then we lights a little pine torch, and studies that spelling book. We learn it too. I can read some now and write a little too.<sup>9</sup>

Black people learned that emancipation's "forty acres and a mule" was a malicious rumor. They would have to fight for land;

they would have to fight for political power. And after centuries of educational deprivation, they would zealously assert their right to satisfy their profound craving for learning. Thus, like their sisters and brothers all over the South, the newly liberated Black people of Memphis assembled and resolved that education was their first priority. On the first anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, they urged the Northern teachers to make haste and

... to bring their tents with them, ready for erection in the field, by the roadside, or in the fort, and not to wait for magnificent houses to be erected in time of war ...<sup>10</sup>

The mystifying powers of racism often emanate from its irrational, topsy-turvy logic. According to the prevailing ideology, Black people were allegedly incapable of intellectual advancement. After all, they had been chattel, naturally inferior as compared to the white epitomes of humankind. But if they really were biologically inferior, they would have manifested neither the desire nor the capability to acquire knowledge. Ergo, no prohibition of learning would have been necessary. In reality, of course, Black people had always exhibited a furious impatience as regards the acquisition of education.

The yearning for knowledge had always been there. As early as 1787, Black people petitioned the state of Massachusetts for the right to attend Boston's free schools.<sup>11</sup> After the petition was rejected, Prince Hall, who was the leader of this initiative, established a school in his own home.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most stunning illustration of this early demand for education was the work of an African-born woman who was a former slave. In 1793 Lucy Terry Prince boldly demanded an audience before the trustees of the newly established Williams College for Men, who had refused to admit her son into the school. Unfortunately, the racist prejudices



were so strong that Lucy Prince's logic and eloquence could not sway the trustees of this Vermont institution. Yet she aggressively defended her people's desire for—and right to—education. Two years later Lucy Terry Prince successfully defended a land claim before the highest court of the land, and according to surviving records, she remains the first woman to have addressed the Supreme Court of the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Seventeen ninety-three was also the year an ex-slave woman, who had purchased her freedom, established a school in the city of New York which was known as Katy Ferguson's School for the Poor. Her pupils, whom she recruited from the poorhouse, were both Black and white (twenty-eight and twenty respectively)<sup>14</sup> and were quite possibly both boys and girls. Forty years later the young white teacher Prudence Crandall steadfastly defended Black girls' right to attend her Canterbury, Connecticut, school. Crandall persistently taught her Black pupils until she was dragged off to jail for refusing to shut down her school.<sup>15</sup> Margaret Douglass was another white woman who was imprisoned in Norfolk, Virginia, for operating a school for Black children.<sup>16</sup>

The most outstanding examples of white women's sisterly solidarity with Black women are associated with Black people's historical struggle for education. Like Prudence Crandall and Margaret Douglass, Myrtilla Miner literally risked her life as she sought to impart knowledge to young Black women.<sup>17</sup> In 1851, when she initiated her project to establish a Black teachers' college in Washington, D.C., she had already instructed Black children in Mississippi, a state where education for Blacks was a criminal offense. After Myrtilla Miner's death, Frederick Douglass described his own incredulosity when she first announced her plans to him. During their first meeting he wondered about her seriousness in the beginning, but then he realized that

... the fire of enthusiasm lighted in her eye and that the true martyr spirit flamed in her soul. My feelings were those of mingled joy and sadness. Here I thought is another enterprise—wild, dangerous, desperate and impracticable, and destined only to bring failure and suffering. Yet I was deeply moved with admiration by the heroic purpose of the delicate and fragile person who stood or rather moved to and fro before me.<sup>18</sup>

It was not long before Douglass recognized that none of the warnings he issued to her—and not even the stories of the attacks on Prudence Crandall and Margaret Douglass—could shake her determination to found a college for Black women teachers.

To me the proposition was reckless almost to the point of madness. In my fancy I saw this fragile little woman harassed by the law, insulted in the street, a victim of slaveholding malice and possibly beaten down by the mob.<sup>19</sup>

In Frederick Douglass' opinion, relatively few white people outside the anti-slavery activists would sympathize with Myrtilla Miner's cause and support her against the mob. This was a period, he argued, of diminishing solidarity with Black people. Moreover,

... the District of Columbia (was) the very citadel of slavery, the place most watched and guarded by the slave power and where humane tendencies were more speedily detected and sternly opposed.<sup>20</sup>

In retrospect, however, Douglass confessed that he did not really understand the depth of this white woman's individual courage. Despite the grave risks, Myrtilla Miner opened her school in the fall of 1851, and within a few months her initial six students had grown to forty. She taught her Black students passionately over the next eight years, simultaneously raising money and urging



congressmen to support her efforts. She even acted as a mother to the orphan girls whom she brought into her home so that they might attend the school.<sup>21</sup>

As Myrtilla Miner struggled to teach and as her pupils struggled to learn, they all fought evictions, arson attempts and the other misdeeds of racist stone-throwing mobs. They were supported by the young women's families and abolitionists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who donated a portion of the royalties she received from the sale of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>22</sup> Myrtilla Miner may have been "frail," as Frederick Douglass observed, but she was definitely formidable, and was always able, at lesson time, to discover the eye of that racist storm. Early one morning, however, she was abruptly awakened by the odor of smoke and raging flames, which soon consumed her schoolhouse. Although her school was destroyed, the inspiration she provided lived on, and eventually Miner's Teachers College became a part of the District of Columbia public educational system.<sup>23</sup> "I never pass the Miner Normal School for colored girls," so Frederick Douglass confessed in 1883,

... without a feeling of self reproach that I could have said ought to quench the zeal, shake the faith, and quail the courage of the Noble woman by whom it was founded and whose name it bears.<sup>24</sup>

Sisterhood between Black and white women was indeed possible, and as long as it stood on a firm foundation—as with this remarkable woman and her friends and students—it could give birth to earthshaking accomplishments. Myrtilla Miner kept the candle burning that others before her, like the Grimke sisters and Prudence Crandall, had left as a powerful legacy. It could not have been a mere historical coincidence that so many of the white women who defended their Black sisters in the most dangerous of situations were involved in the struggle for education. They

must have understood how urgently Black women needed to acquire knowledge—a lamp unto their people's feet and a light unto the path toward freedom.

Black people who did receive academic instruction inevitably associated their knowledge with their people's collective battle for freedom. As the first year of Black schooling in Cincinnati drew to a close, pupils who were asked "What do you think *most* about?" furnished these answers:

1st. We are going . . . to be good boys and when we get a man to get the poor slaves from bondage. And I am sorrow to hear that the boat of Tiskilwa went down with two hundred poor slaves . . . it grieves my heart so that I could faint in one minute. (seven years old)

2nd. . . . What we are studying for is to try to get the yoke of slavery broke and the chains parted asunder and slave holding cease for ever. . . . (twelve year old)

3rd. . . . Bless the cause of abolition. . . . My mother and step-father, my sister and myself were all born in slavery. The Lord did let the oppressed go free. Roll on the happy period that all nations shall know the Lord. We thank him for his many blessings. (eleven year old)

4th. . . . This is to inform you that I have two cousins in slavery who are entitled to their freedom. They have done everything that the will requires and now they won't let them go. They talk of selling them down the river. If this was your case what would you do? . . . (ten year old)<sup>25</sup>

The last surviving answer came from a sixteen-year-old attending this new Cincinnati school. It is an extremely fascinating example of the way the students gleaned a contemporary meaning from world history that was as close to home as the desire to be free.



5th. Let us look back and see the state in which the Britons and Saxons and Germans lived. They had no learning and had not a knowledge of letters. But not look, some of them are our first men. Look at King Alfred and see what a great man he was. He at one time did not know his a,b,c, but before his death he commanded armies and nations. He was never discouraged but always looked forward and studied the harder. I think if the colored people study like King Alfred they will soon do away the evil of slavery. I can't see how the Americans can call this a land of freedom where so much slavery is.<sup>26</sup>

As far as Black people's faith in knowledge was concerned, this sixteen-year-old child said it all.

This unquenchable thirst for knowledge was as powerful among the slaves in the South as among their "free" sisters and brothers in the North. Needless to say, the anti-literacy restrictions of the slave states were far more rigid than in the North. After the Nat Turner Revolt in 1831, legislation prohibiting the education of slaves was strengthened throughout the South. In the words of one slave code, "... teaching slaves to read and write tends to dissatisfaction in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion."<sup>27</sup> With the exception of Maryland and Kentucky, every Southern state absolutely prohibited the education of slaves.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the South, slaveholders resorted to the lash and the whipping post in order to counter their slaves' irrepressible will to learn. Black people wanted to be educated.

The poignancy of the slaves' struggle for learning appeared everywhere. Frederika Bremer found a young woman desperately trying to read the Bible. "Oh, this book," she cried out to Miss Bremer. "I turn and turn over its leaves and I wish I understood what is on them. I try and try; I should be so happy if I could read, but I can not."<sup>29</sup>

Susie King Taylor was a nurse and teacher in the first Black regiment of the Civil War. In her autobiography she described her persistent efforts to educate herself during slavery. White children, sympathetic adults, as well as her grandmother, assisted her to acquire the skills of reading and writing.<sup>30</sup> Like Susie King's grandmother, numerous slave women ran great risks as they imparted to their sisters and brothers the academic skills they had secretly procured. Even when they were compelled to convene their schools during the late hours of the night, women who had managed to acquire some knowledge attempted to share it with their people.<sup>31</sup>

These were some of the early signs—in the North and South alike—of that post-emancipation phenomenon which DuBois called "a frenzy for schools."<sup>32</sup> Another historian described the ex-slaves' thirst for learning in these words:

With a yearning born of centuries of denial, ex-slaves worshipped the sight and sound of the printed word. Old men and women on the edge of the grave could be seen in the dark of the night, poring over the Scripture by the light of a pine knot, painfully spelling out the sacred words.<sup>33</sup>

According to yet another historian,

(M)any educators reported that they found a keener desire to learn among the Negro children of the Reconstruction South than among white children in the North.<sup>34</sup>

About half of the volunteer teachers who joined the massive educational campaign organized by the Freedman's Bureau were women. Northern white women went South during Reconstruction to assist their Black sisters who were absolutely determined to wipe out illiteracy among the millions of former slaves. The



dimensions of this task were herculean: according to DuBois, the prevailing illiteracy rate was 95 percent.<sup>35</sup> In the histories chronicling the Reconstruction Era and in the historical accounts of the Women's Rights Movement, the experiences of Black and white women working together in the struggle for education have received sparse attention. Judging, however, from the articles in the *Freedman's Record*, these teachers undoubtedly inspired each other and were themselves inspired by their students. Almost universally mentioned in the white teachers' observations was the former slaves' unyielding commitment to knowledge. In the words of a teacher working in Raleigh, North Carolina, "[i]t is surprising to me to see the amount of suffering which many of the people endure for the sake of sending their children to school."<sup>36</sup> Material comfort was unhesitatingly sacrificed for the furtherance of educational progress:

A pile of books is seen in almost every cabin, though there be no furniture except a poor bed, a table and two or three broken chairs.<sup>37</sup>

As teachers, the Black and white women seem to have developed a profound and intense mutual appreciation. A white woman working in Virginia, for example, was immensely impressed by the work of a Black woman teacher who had just emerged from slavery. It "... seems almost a miracle," this white woman exclaimed, that "... a colored woman, who had been a slave up to the time of the Surrender, would succeed in a vocation to her so novel ..."<sup>38</sup> In the reports she authored, the Black woman in question expressed sincere—though by no means servile—gratitude for the work of her "friends from the North."<sup>39</sup>

By the time of the Hayes Betrayal and the overthrow of Radical Reconstruction, the accomplishments in education had become one of the most powerful proofs of progress during that poten-

tially revolutionary era. Fisk University, Hampton Institute and several other Black colleges and universities had been established in the post-Civil War South.<sup>40</sup> Some 247,333 pupils were attending 4,329 schools—and these were the building blocks for the South's first public school system, which would benefit Black and white children alike. Although the post-Reconstruction period and the attendant rise of Jim Crow education drastically diminished Black people's educational opportunities, the impact of the Reconstruction experience could not be entirely obliterated. The dream of land was shattered for the time being and the hope for political equality waned. But the beacon of knowledge was not easily extinguished—and this was the guarantee that the fight for land and for political power would unrelentingly go on.

Had it not been for the Negro school and college, the Negro would, to all intents and purposes, have been driven back to slavery. ... His reconstruction leadership had come from Negroes educated in the North, and white politicians, capitalists and philanthropic teachers. The counter-revolution of 1876 drove most of these, save the teachers, away. But already, through establishing public schools and private colleges, and by organizing the Negro church, the Negro had acquired enough leadership and knowledge to thwart the worst designs of the new slave drivers.<sup>41</sup>

Aided by their white sister allies, Black women played an indispensable role in creating this new fortress. The history of women's struggle for education in the United States reached a true peak when Black and white women together led the post-Civil War battle against illiteracy in the South. Their unity and solidarity preserved and confirmed one of our history's most fruitful promises.