

In the first chapter of her 1981 book, *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis encouraged historians to explore “the multidimensional role of Black women within the family and within the slave community as a whole.” Indeed, the titles Davis mentions to highlight the ways historians evaluated the effects of slavery on black family formation demonstrate how limited were historical investigations of the topic of black women and motherhood. Davis notes that scholars including John Blassingame (*The Slave Community*, 1972), Eugene Genovese (*Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, 1974), and Stanley Elkins (*Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 1959 & 1976) proposed that slavery had so damaged black families that its effects could still be seen into the mid-twentieth century. Davis was correct when she concluded that these historians had not produced “a serious study of the Black woman during slavery.” However, she did single out Herbert Gutman’s work *Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976) as an exception to the existing scholarship because it demonstrated that “the [black] family’s vitality proved stronger than the dehumanizing rigors of slavery.” To his credit, Gutman also “dethroned the Back Matriarch thesis” that placed the blame for family and community dysfunction at the feet of black women who supposedly usurped black men’s authority. Gutman would not long be the only historian making such arguments.

The 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s would see the publication of many books and scholarly articles that in many ways answered Davis’ call for a more *comprehensive assessment of black women’s experiences in slavery and freedom*. These works include many of my favorites:

Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (1972)

Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985 & 1999)

1988, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese would release *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*

Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (1985 & 2010)

Tara Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (1997)

Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (2008)

The emphasis of much of this body of scholarship parallels what we see throughout Davis’ *Women, Race, and Class*. Davis repeatedly discusses the conflicts that arose for black women who endured exploitation

and often violence when they performed slave labor and, after emancipation, paid labor for whites while also attempting to perform domestic labor for their own families. Scholars have been excavating the sources that tell us about the ways that slavery and paid labor after slavery drew black women out of their own homes and forced them to perform domestic labor and in many instances mother work in white homes. Chapter 5 of *Women, Race, and Class*, “The Meaning of Emancipation According to Black Women,” provides an example of this approach. I’d like to use it as a springboard to consider the topic of black women and motherhood in the decades after WWII, to demonstrate the continued need for research in response to Davis’ critique that there needs to be a “the multidimensional role of Black women within the family.”

First an overview of “The Meaning of Emancipation According to Black Women.” In this chapter, Davis introduces the statistics that show where black girls and women worked in the first three decades following the Civil War, highlighting their overrepresentation in agriculture and domestic service. Significantly, she emphasizes the ways that both black women and men suffered because of the exploitative nature of sharecropping and tenant farming. She then describes the convict lease system that scholars including Michelle Alexander (*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 2010) and documentary film maker and writer Sheila Curran Bernard (*Slavery by Another Name*, 2012 based on the book by Douglas A. Blackman) have revisited to demonstrate how this system was “slavery by another name.” Davis notes that while officials did not make distinctions between black women’s labor potential in the convict lease system, the potential for sexual abuse was high for women female convicts and women who worked as domestics in white homes.

Davis spends the rest of the chapter discussing her main argument that “the occupational equation of Black women with domestic service was not, however, a simple vestige of slavery destined to disappear with the passage of the time.” Instead, the formula that conflated black women with domestic labor also stigmatized domestic labor as degrading. Other disparaging ideas about black women flowed from these formulations. Davis notes that in this context, white employers and political officials justified inequality because they considered black women to be inept and promiscuous. Ironically, some whites believed that it was

complimentary to associate black people with the label of “good or faithful servants. Although ideas about race informed this kind of thinking, class also structured domestic labor. Davis notes that immigrant women performed domestic labor and that the wages they earned reflected the degraded status of domestic work. Here I want to add that, although Davis argues that the low status and wages that immigrant domestics experienced were “tied to the oppressive predicament of women of color,” historians have shown that employers oppressed immigrant women in the North in this occupation before African-American women became associated exclusively with domestic labor in that region in the early twentieth century.

Historian Vanessa H. May has also explored the reasons behind Davis’ assessment of the ways that white middle-class women played in role in making the unionization of domestic labor difficult (*Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform, 1870-1940* by Vanessa H. May). The women who benefitted from the exploited labor of domestics were reluctant to fight for reforms to protect domestic laborers even if they did see the need for reforms to protect women in industrial labor. Davis notes that the exploitative nature of domestic labor and black women’s experiences as exploited laborers would persist until WWII when some black women would find opportunities in war industries. However, she concludes that “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.”

Since the publication of *Women, Race, and Class*, scholars in many fields have evaluated the reasons for these rather grim assessments of black women and domestic labor. But few have explored the ways that alternate versions of the story of domesticity unfolded for black women in the post war years and this absence bothered me when I began researching black families in the early 2000s. Like Davis, I was grateful to Herbert Gutman for challenging the thesis that black families were dysfunctional because of slavery. I was also glad that he worked to debunk the myth of black matriarchy. But Gutman’s work stopped in the 1920s, so I began looking for ways to extend this kind of analysis into the post-WWII years. Not surprisingly, uncovering “the multidimensional role of Black women within the family” was a challenge, in part because of the lack of

sources that described this aspect of black women's lives. I often have to remind my students that history is a social science that relies on evidence. And the fact that black women left so little in the way of written evidence has presented a real methodological hurdle for scholars interested in excavating their lives. Often we are left to piece together these histories from sources that talk about black women that were often produced by white observers. This limitation helps explain why so much of the scholarship focuses on women and paid labor. Simply put, we can often find that evidence in the government and agency documents that captured these stories. But what about black women and the domestic labor they performed on behalf of their own families? How do we get at stories about black motherhood that actually show that patriarchy did not lead to dysfunction?

I started by looking at black popular magazines to get a sense of how they characterized black women and motherhood. Then I followed the trail they revealed to study the ways that adoption agencies evaluated black women and motherhood. The stories the black press carried about adoption were surprising because they often described the ways black women successfully paired adoptive motherhood and paid labor. This type of equation was not common in the records of social workers who evaluated white or black prospective families in the immediate aftermath of WWII. In fact, child welfare professionals discouraged or rejected outright adoption applications from couples if a wife planned to remain in paid labor after an adoption. However, a curious shift took place after the Korea War. Because of the desperate circumstances of the children of Korean women and US soldiers – black and white – some child welfare professionals began reconsidering their negative assessments of black working wives. Instead of seeing these mothers as deficient or dysfunctional if they planned to work for wages and care for an adopted child, some social workers began to complement the efforts black adoptive mothers made to do both well. In qualitative and quantitative ways, the couples that became promising adoption candidates after the Korea War were similar (and in some cases the same) couples that agencies rejected in the years prior to the war. It is telling that these changes took place during the early years of the Cold War and the modern civil rights movement when Americans had to deal with the problems caused by the international exposure of the nation's history of racial inequality. These shifts reveal how subjective were

(and are) the standards some used to evaluate whether a black woman who was a working mother could also be a good mother.

Of course, African Americans knew that there was nothing inherently incompatible with paid labor and motherhood, and this is why reading the records of adoption case workers and the black press is so instructive. While the case notes show that ideas about women, race, and work have always been subject to economic, social, and political influences, stories about working mothers in the black press demonstrate that such mothers were often celebrated figures in black communities. Although it is certain that economic, social, and political forces shaped the black press' discussions of working mothers, newspapers and magazines did not just discuss the behaviors of exemplary mothers as a kind of race uplift propaganda. They also carried stories about women who were not good mothers for many reasons. I believe that a consideration of this more comprehensive representation of black motherhood will allow researchers, and especially historians, to continue the work of uncovering "the multidimensional role of Black women within the family" in the post WWII decades that Davis argued was necessary in 1982 and which remains important today.

Thank you!

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