WOMEN, RACE & CLASS

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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.[1]

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.[2] 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.[3]

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."[4]

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."[5] 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."[6]

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.[7] 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."[8]

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 …"[9]—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."[10]

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,[11] 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."[12]

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"[13] 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.[14]

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."[15]

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."[16]

> … (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.[17]

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.[18]

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.' "[19]

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"[20] 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.[21]

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.[22]

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."*[23] 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.[24] 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.[25] 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.[26] 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.[27] 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."[28] 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.[29] 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.[30]

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."[31] 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."[32] 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.[33]

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.[34]

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.[35] 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.[36]

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.[37] 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.[38] 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 …"[39]

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.[40]

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.[41]

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.[42]

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."[43] 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.