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RACE AND GENDER:
THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP IN
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

by

Constance M. Cooper

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
Through the Department of History
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1993

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades the question of authorship and the right of whites to write African-American history has remained an important component of U.S. history. Towards the end of the 1960s the question was especially important to nationalists committed to identity politics. The 1970s marked the beginning of a long hiring freeze and the debate over authorship disappeared. The emergence of women's history, in the early 1980s, marked the return of the debate that has continued until the present day. Through an examination of historical works written by blacks and whites, and the criticisms made about their publications, this thesis traces the history of the authorship debate.

The first chapter begins with a summary explaining why black nationalists felt so strongly that white authored black history weakened their liberating efforts. Next, I compare nationalists' claims with histories written by whites during the 1970s. Though not all whites shared the same point of view, my study confirms that nationalists' fears were partially justified because whites dominated black history. Most of the influential works, especially Eugene Genovese's Roll, Jordan, Roll and Herbert Gutman's The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, were written by whites.

The next chapter examines writings in American women's history and discovers that black feminists re-problematized white authorship. Unlike the history of slavery, African-American women's history was developed by black women. In addition, most black feminists were in agreement that white feminists had to work
harder to incorporate race into their findings. Once white feminists began to address race, the debate re-surfaced and some black feminists challenged white women's attempts to include race. Black activist and feminist bell hooks was critical of whites writing black history. She also argued that whites could write about blacks if they challenged structures of domination, like the organization of race, class and gender. For example, white historian Jacqueline Jones' study Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow stood out as one of the best attempts by a white woman to adequately address race.

The final chapter focuses on the development of postmodern theory in historical investigation and explores the consequences of whites studying blacks in a changed intellectual milieu. Since postmodernism challenged many of the assumptions and practices of contemporary scholarship, it became easier for whites to write about blacks without appropriating their voices. Postmodernist historians such as Joan Scott, for example, deconstructed the concept of difference and argued that a perception of "other" was something discursively produced. Her argument created the possibility that a sense of the "other" could be redefined.

The thesis concludes with the argument that when white authors point out their positions of privilege and use that knowledge to interpret the past, there is a change in the meaning of authorship. Rather than focus all of the attention on direct experience as a requirement of black history, the discourse centres on improving the overall resources that are available to blacks. This approach
creates a discussion more sensitive to the contemporary needs of African-Americans.
DEDICATION

For Wendy, Gary and Tara
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to my thesis adviser Christina Simmons, for her interest, support and advice throughout this project. Every graduate student should have the kind of encouragement and attention that she gave me. Thanks also to my two outside readers Bruce Tucker and Barry Ruth Straus, whose thoughtful criticisms and suggestions were invaluable. This work was further stimulated by my friends in the History Department at the University of Windsor--Laura Brady, Anne Clendinning, James Hirst, Annette Landry, Lori Newton, Stephen Oakes and Michael VanRaalte: they helped me to conceptualize this thesis and shared in my intellectual development. My deepest thanks goes to Shawn Squires who helped me to sustain this project, especially when my faith in it wavered and I needed inspiration. Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my family--to whom this thesis is dedicated--my mother, my father, and my sister. Without them, it could not have been written.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: NATIONALIST POLITICS AND SLAVERY HISTORIOGRAPHY DURING THE 1970s</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN U.S. WOMEN'S HISTORY DURING THE 1980s</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: POSTMODERNISM AND AUTHORSHIP IN FEMINIST HISTORY</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION:</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA AUCTORIS</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction:

Over the past twenty-five years African-American women's history has become an integral part of feminist historiography. Indeed, no understanding of the experiences of American women is complete without a theoretical understanding of the complexities of race. As the discipline has expanded to include an awareness of race, some minority scholars, especially nationalists, have challenged the rights or ability of whites to write "their" history. Examples of this problem are currently being raised in other areas in addition to African-American scholarship, including gay history, women's history, and the history of ethnic minorities. At the heart of the problem is the question of whether or not historians who do not share the same identity as the subjects they study can write about them with as much authority as those scholars who do. I was first challenged by this question during a recent visit from black feminist bell hooks in the Spring of 1992 at the University of Windsor. When I mentioned that I was interested in the lives of black women but had no real sense of why, bell encouraged me to explore the answer more consciously. As painful as her remarks were, as a white woman I realized I had to be more answerable for my interest in the lives of black women and began to consider the question. My interest in race emerged from my experience in contemporary society, where there is a fundamental
connection between images of white women in contrast to images of black women but whose qualities both white and black women are now examining and reclaiming. As a woman I have been assaulted with images that define the parameters of my being, seeking to control not only how women should look, but also what they think, and how they should act. Understanding that these images have an enormous impact in designating the boundaries of political and social power available to women is the first step to be taken in pursuit of change. Even in instances where there are no black women represented, as illustrated in thousands of television commercials and layouts in women's magazines, the portrayal of white woman and the image she embodies is part of white supremacist culture that works to marginalize women who are other. As a white woman I am part of that system which excludes black women, but I am also part of a system which systematically mistreats all women. Accordingly, I think a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which racial attitudes pervade our lives is key to changing the oppressive images white supremacist culture has created for all women.

As I have worked to understand the importance of race, I have become interested in the issue of authorship and I have come to understand that race as a category of analysis must assume a larger role in gender history. Yet, in this age of "multi-culturalism" some historians merely tell the stories of other groups without really changing pervasive modes of domination, the question of who should be the authors that develop this mode of inquiry is indeed
a fair one. White feminist historians need to think more systematically about race but it must be more than that. Racial and gender boundaries need to be deconstructed collectively by black and white women if past representations of black and white women are to be understood in all their complexity.

Early women's history written during the 1970s was criticized by black feminists for ignoring the stories of black women, but since then there has been a steady flow of exciting and innovative scholarship which addresses the history of black women. More recently, many white feminist scholars are working to include an understanding of race in their scholarship because they have realized that whites have race too. As women's historians have become more sensitive to the constraints that racial identities place on the lives of black women, the issue of who can legitimately study different kinds of history has assumed an increasingly important role. While white writers have had a long history of writing about African-American experiences, the emergence of women's history and black history at the end of the 1960s occurred in a period of "identity politics" in which both blacks and women challenged the ability of white men to speak on their behalf when it obviously wasn't "their" history.

Reading history from this perspective has led to challenges of whites doing black history as reflected in the criticisms of white historian Eugene Genovese, who wrote extensively on the black experience under slavery. In part the criticisms against Genovese stemmed from a wider critique of the notion of objectivity in
history and an increased awareness of the importance of the historian's location in the overall social structure and of course his/her political perspective. As Marxists, Genovese and other left historians assumed the issue was important, but they rarely discussed the matter in their scholarship. More recently both white and black historians have begun to raise the issue more explicitly in their criticisms.

Gender historians have also rejected objectivity because their findings challenge the overall framework of historical investigation. By creating historical paradigms which integrate categories of analysis, like race and gender, we provide more sophisticated theories that will ultimately work to undermine present modes of domination like the myth of objectivity. By reviewing past scholarship with the question of authorship in mind I hope to provide insight into ways historians can begin this venture in future scholarship.

Through a systematic examination of recent historiography and the critical discussions of authorship which have increasingly begun to surround new publications, as well as important theoretical discussions in historical journals by theorists such as Joan Scott and bell hooks, this thesis will explore the issue of white writers in African-American scholarship after the controversial Moynihan Report was first issued in 1965. Questions of authorship also raise the issue of white scholars' commitment to

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1For a comprehensive critique of objectivity, see Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession, (Cambridge, 1988).
racial justice. In light of the emergence of poststructuralism into the discipline and the challenges that it poses to nationalism/identity politics in history, I would like to explore the issue of authenticity by revealing how some historians have incorporated the category of race and gender into their scholarship, but resist the tendency for it to effect the overall framework of their scholarship. Integrating race and gender into history should by definition change the way we look at the past and how we use history as a political strategy to affect change in the course of our own daily lives. By exploring the context in which historians write their history and promoting a greater awareness of the experience of the writer in historical narrative I hope to underscore the problems that an objective framework creates for historians. I argue that historians impose interpretations on the past and expose that the writing of history is a political strategy that reflects as much about the present as it does about the past.
CHAPTER 1: NATIONALIST POLITICS AND SLAVERY HISTORIOGRAPHY
DURING THE 1970s

During the 1970s, African-American historiography was dominated by a powerful group of white male historians who redefined the history of American slavery. The new generation of white scholars distinguished themselves from the old generation by attempting to tell the story from the slaves' point of view. By looking at the history of slavery from the bottom up, these historians challenged traditional approaches which portrayed slavery as a benign institution and the slave community as a docile one in which slaves were "Samboized" into submissive behaviour. They criticized older works such as U.B. Phillips' *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929) for arguing that slavery civilized primitive Africans more than to increase profits. They also opposed Kenneth Stampp's *Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1956), which argued that slavery stripped Africans of their culture during the traumatic voyage across the Atlantic. Finally they criticized Stanley Elkins' book *The Peculiar Institution: A Problem in American Intellectual Life* (1956) was also challenged for pushing Stampp's docility argument even

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1Wilson Moses makes the point that Afro-American history written during the early 1970s was dominated by blacks, especially John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (1972). Later works, such as white historian Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, (1974) were inspired, by Blassingame's work. While I agree that Blassingame had an impact on Genovese's approach my point is that by the end of the 1970s slavery history was dominated by whites. See Moses' review of *Deromanticizing Black History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals*, by Clarence E. Walker. In *Journal of American History* 79(March 1993): 1569.
further, drawing an analogy between Nazi concentration camp victims and slaves.

As this new group of historians contested traditional arguments about the history of slavery, they began to be seen as the authorities on black history. Many works, especially Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974) and Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (1976), became required reading in black history courses. Genovese's and Gutman's works exemplified the changes in historiography since both argued that although slavery was a brutal experience the slave community was a thriving cultural enclave. Since both works were so widely read, and both stressed the major themes of the new black historiography, those interested in understanding the issues raised in the new African-American historiography would do well to explore the significance of these two publications. Perhaps more than any others, Genovese's and Gutman's efforts were significant because of the influence they had over pedagogy, actually transforming the way students engaged with history. Gutman and Genovese not only defined the boundaries of discourse on slavery, but their works suggested a new mind-set among whites studying black history because they focused on slave resistance and not just victimization.

As Genovese's and Gutman's works became synonymous with the new black history, black nationalists concerned with identity politics became concerned that their liberating efforts were undermined by white scholars whose publications dominated black
studies. Genovese's and Gutman's efforts, they believed, exemplified one of the main problems facing African-Americans, that is, whites defining the boundaries of discourse on black issues. Genovese's and Gutman's contributions perpetuated, moreover, the invisibility of black scholars in the academic community. Underpinning black nationalists' reservations about whites entering the field of black studies was the question of authority over black history and the right of whites to write it. In an effort to highlight the issues surrounding authorship raised by black nationalists, this chapter will compare Genovese and Gutman's works and the response among critics, and will suggest that the category of authorship needs to be integrated into historical criticism if we are to have a more comprehensive understanding of historical interpretation.

I

Neither black history nor black nationalism was new to American society. In 1882 black historian George Washington Williams published *History of the Negro Race in America from 1619-1880*. Other black historians included Harvard graduate W.E.B. DuBois, Jesse Parkhurst and Chandler Owen. The most celebrated historian of blacks was the southern white scholar U.B. Phillips whose works were unashamedly racist. All these efforts were similar in that they presented the black experience as significant to understanding American history. Unlike other genres opening up
in American history during the 1960s, like women's history, the new historiography on slavery did not have to convince its readers of the historical importance of the black experience. Studies in the history of slavery raised the much more controversial issue of who had the power to define and interpret the black experience.²

The origins of blacks' reservations about white-authored black history during the late sixties grew out of new forms of militancy and an increasing collective consciousness that existed outside of universities.³ The Civil Rights movement, the rise in black nationalism and the controversial Moynihan Report that was issued in 1965 heightened blacks' awareness of white supremacy in academia. The issue to examine, however, is not how blacks became critical of white-authored scholarship. Rather, we need to know what white authored African-American history meant to the black community struggling to raise racial awareness across the nation and how blacks approached the problem in an environment dominated by whites.

In 1968-69 when history departments were scrambling to include black history courses and white historians were offering to teach them, cries of protest were heard from black student militants and nationalist intellectuals.⁴ It mattered not, according to these black liberationists, if the credentials of these white professors


³Ibid., 497.

⁴August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-80 (Urbana, 1986), 291.
were excellent. They questioned their right as whites to study blacks in classroom situations. Whites teaching black history came under attack not only in the classroom but at conferences and conventions as well.

While attending a conference of the Association for the Study of Negro Life, Herbert Gutman was shouted down during his paper on black history.\

Crushed by this experience, Gutman begged his audience to listen to what he was saying, arguing, "I am...extremely supportive of the black liberation movement—if people would just forget that I am white and hear what I am saying...[it] would lend support to the...movement." At another conference featuring black history, Vincent Harding stomped out of the presentation of white historian Robert Starobin's paper "Privileged Bondsmen and the Process of Accommodation: The Role of Houseservants and Drivers as Seen in Their Own Letters." The Starobin incident represented the depth of feeling that this issue generated as even sympathizers such as Starobin were attacked. Starobin expected that once nationalists heard his presentation, they would appreciate his efforts, especially since he was so supportive of the Black Panthers. Instead Sterling Stuckey and Julius Lester harshly criticized Starobin with Stuckey mocking Starobin for mimicking slave letters in black rather than white accents and Lester maligning him for his audacity to write about

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5Novick, Noble, 475.

6Cited in Novick, Noble, 475 from Woodson and Wesley, quoted in August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, Black History and the Historical Profession: 1915-1960 (Urbana, Ill., 1986), 289.
blacks. Less than a year later, the Starobin incident was rendered more dramatic when Starobin committed suicide. Lester later regretted his actions remembering.

It was one of those situations that are unavoidable when blacks and whites come together in post-Black Power America, a situation in which people are not individuals, but historical entities...In absolute terms, the view that the white scholars' presence is unwarranted and undesirable...is obviously unjust. Historically, it is the present reality, and that day,... though I didn't know him (Starobin)... I knew what I had to do to him. He had to be attacked and I did so.'

Prefiguring Starobin's suicide was the much more publicized controversy surrounding William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1966). Nationalists attacked Styron's depiction of Nat as an emotional cripple whose character had been destroyed by the devastating effects of slavery. Nationalists worried that the portrait of a psychologically deranged Nat would undermine their efforts to raise black consciousness by promoting past heros. Vincent Harding understood that Styron's effort illustrated the "profound and bitter steps through which America continually moves towards the creation of a thousand Nat Turners more real than his could ever be."8 Such total betrayal of Nat was likely, Harding concluded, since contemporary whites were so out of touch with black issues: "We must now say with charity that it is likely too much to expect a white, twentieth-century American novelist to be

7Taken from Meier and Rudwick, "On the Dilemmas of Scholarship in Afro-American History," *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-80* (Urbana, 1986), 292.

able to conceive of the world of a black, Old Testament-type messiah."⁹ "There can be no common history," argued Harding, "until we have first fleshed out the lineaments of our own, for no one else can speak out of the bittersweet bowels of our blackness."¹⁰

Since Eugene Genovese had come out as Styron's boldest champion, Genovese's work was regarded with increasing caution among nationalists. Genovese responded by publishing "Black Studies: Trouble Ahead," an essay outlining the problems with nationalists' demands. Despite of the discussion raised in Genovese's article, the nationalists' criticisms of Styron had an impact, as Styron was the last major writer to connect white oppressiveness with black pathology. Even Genovese scarcely mentioned the emotional effects of enslavement in Roll, Jordan, Roll (1974).¹¹

While nationalists' reservations about Styron and Genovese had substance, I believe that the principal enemy in all of this was not individual white scholars like Genovese and Styron, but rather the system of white patriarchy, which places the professional aspirations of white males above all other groups. Similarly the system of white patriarchy validates a white male approach and excludes other modes of inquiry. Along with that it favours white

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⁹Ibid., 29.
¹⁰Ibid., 32.
males to tell the stories and since most reviewers are likewise white men, they take the findings of white scholars like Genovese and Gutman more seriously than works written by blacks. Similarly, scholars like Genovese and Gutman also have greater access to more prestigious presses than less advantaged groups. White historians are responsible in that they reproduce power arrangements in the system by participating in the process and for failing to think more critically about how to change it. Even though these black and white historians shared similar ideological views, white domination of slavery studies was a powerful lesson for black academics that the only way to remove racial discrimination was to take control of their history.

During the most intense period of Black Power 1968-1969, the sense of frustration and desperation over racial inequalities left black nationalists divided from their white colleagues. Activists like Vincent Harding, Marcus Cunliffe, Sterling Stuckey and Julius Lester were opposed to white scholarship because they believed that in order for the system to change, blacks must draw their own conclusions about the past and become "possessors" of their own history.\textsuperscript{12} Once blacks were in the predominant position in black studies programmes, whites would be better able to sense the "tragic depths" of black experiences. The slow pace of racial reform both inside and outside of the academy made them question the right of whites to write black history.

The development within the historical profession that most

\textsuperscript{12} Harding, "You've Taken My Nat," 33.
contributed to the criticisms against white authorship was the growth of social history. Although this approach to history was inspired by events and circumstances outside the academy, growing frustration within the profession prompted younger historians to criticize traditional narratives that focused on Great-Man history. They argued that older histories did not speak for everyone and that historians had to be more sensitive about difference. Civil rights history, for example, had been told from the perspective of the way it seemed to whites.\textsuperscript{13} In the new approach to history, the study of the past was increasingly presented in ways that offered differing and even competing interpretations. The same event could be told from many points of view. Even though collectively the discipline seemed disjointed and fragmented by this process, the new approach signified the complexities present in contemporary society and stressed the diversity in it.\textsuperscript{14} Owing to the bottom up approach, or the approach that stresses the importance of understanding the experiences of less advantaged groups, history was increasingly viewed as a vehicle for social change. Among the most explicit scholars to argue for history with a purpose were black historians Vincent Harding and Sterling Stuckey, who declared history to be a valuable tool in the struggle for black liberation. The new black historians challenged the predominant position of white scholars in the field.


\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 125.
Unfortunately, though, nationalists could not convince white historians of the necessity of such black ownership. Genovese, for example, still missed the point. He recalled this period as a time in which "any white working in black history had to take a lot of crap." He went on:

We all felt it, but my attitude was I'm not going to take the crap. After awhile I didn't get very much because I quickly developed a reputation for being quite savage. One of these guys would get up and run off at the mouth about who are you to write about black people and I'd look him straight in the eye and say "you're an idiot," and proceed from there. I didn't enjoy it but the point was I didn't know how else to handle this. Either you do that or you retreat. 15

Genovese's recollections about that period illustrate how contentious the issue had become and his defensive response confirms that he did not take their reservations lightly.

Another white historian, Lawrence Levine, was likewise critical of nationalists attempts to control their own history. In his 1970 "Historians and the Culture Gap," he argued that what was being suggested by black nationalists represented a "new historical obscurantism." Years earlier, in 1963, Professor Carl Bridenbaugh, in his presidential address to the American Historical Association suggested that since many of the younger generation of historians were lower middle-class or of foreign origins, their "emotions not infrequently got in the way of historical reconstruction." 16 Bridenbaugh went on to say that minority historians were "in a very real sense outsiders on our past and feel themselves shut

15 Novick, Noble, 477-8.

out...they have no experience to assist them, and the chasm between them and the Remote Past widens every hour."17 As a Jew studying William Jennings Bryan, Levine was made to feel that "the door to the American past in all likelihood would remain closed..."18 Six years later Levine was reminded of Bridenbaugh's sentiments when nationalists began to argue that as a white scholar, he had little chance of understanding the black past. In response, Levine argued that "becoming a sensitive and perceptive historian still remains an individual process, the meaning of which demands more study and thought than we have devoted to it."19

While Levine's point was persuasive in that Bridenbaugh's observations were racist, drawing a parallel between Bridenbaugh and the nationalists simplified a more complex situation. Bridenbaugh as a white middle-class male scholar was in a position of considerable power, and his criticism of the influx of people entering the field whom he considered marginal to the American experience represented a frantic effort to maintain control by the already dominant group. Blacks were definitely not part of the dominant group. Instead, they were and continue to be pathetically under-represented in American universities and barred from membership in the mainstream of American scholarship. The nationalists' attack on whites controlling black studies was an attempt to subvert this trend. Gutman, Levine, and Genovese may

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17Ibid., 309.
18Ibid., 324.
15Ibid., 315.
have been "marginal" to Carl Bridenbaugh but from a black perspective, they were "white".

Nationalists felt that they needed to control their history to raise consciousness and force a racial revolution. Sterling Stuckey maintained:

Only from radical perspectives can the necessary new questions and answers come to consciousness. As we move away from "integrating" blacks into American history, we must concern ourselves increasingly with examining that larger society which arrogantly calls itself the mainstream.  

Stuckey was not only advocating that blacks write black history but also that only those with revolutionary ideologies were acceptable.

Underpinning the rise of identity politics was the idea that historical writing was is an instrument of political change. In the 1920s black power was represented by Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement and his ambitious project to reclaim Africa for blacks.  

In contrast to Garvey's nationalism, its return to American political culture in the 1960s marked a change in its meaning with most activists advocating a movement that challenged systems of power within the U.S.. Many aspects of American culture were under attack and the control of knowledge was no exception. It did not matter to nationalists that whites like Genovese argued that the black culture forged under slavery profoundly influenced

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American culture as a whole and was the foundation for contemporary black nationalism. Despite Genovese's indebtedness to black scholars, to black nationalists experience was what counted, and they believed the experience of living in the black community was essential to understanding the African-American past. Since black scholars believed their blackness as what directed them to study black history, they argued that black history was best done by blacks.

Despite Stuckey's misgivings, white historians like Genovese saw themselves as insiders who were exempt from the politics over authorship because of their exceptional insight and sensitivity about black issues. Regardless of Genovese's sympathy, it is important to realize that without intending to, Genovese and other white historians studying black history were upholding racial inequalities by assuming the role of expert. This kind of paternalism so familiar in American institutional life remains an unresolved and important issue to this day. While it is unlikely that whites studying black history would have relinquished academic power if the voice of protest had been stronger and had lasted longer, it is still important to study the issue as it generates discussion and exposes existing racial inequalities in American universities. We can use studies such as this one, moreover, to provide a critical distance in contemporary academic life where racial inequalities are still apparent and use them to help make us understand how necessary progressive employment policies, the allocations of grants and admittance into graduate schools are if
we are to change the system which so clearly favours whites over other groups.

II

Genovese's commitment to the new social history began when he was an undergraduate student. He was initially drawn to study Southern history because he could identify planters and slaves in Marxian terms. In terms of ideology, radical Marxist convictions were not exclusively what led Genovese to study slavery. Genovese was first exposed to the slavery debate as an undergraduate at Brooklyn College where southern historian Arthur Cole and Hans Rosenberg, the scholar of the Prussian Junker class, heightened his interest in both the South and class-based analysis. Later as a graduate student, Genovese was drawn to Frank Tannenbaum's thesis on the organic relationship between planters and slaves. After receiving his doctorate in 1959 from Rutgers, Genovese worked on understanding the southern economy and published his findings, The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South (1965), several years later. Another topic of interest for Genovese was the absence of slave rebellions, an absence that had been misinterpreted as an indication of docility


among slaves. His interest in slave culture, Genovese remembered, was in part owing to black historian Sterling Stuckey and his white colleague George Rawick, whose emphasis on slave life and behaviour helped shape his thesis on planter paternalism. Expanding on Hegel's dialectic, Genovese linked the history of planters and slaves together, arguing that the distinctive experiences of each group were part of a single process. This dialectical vision of southern society, emphasizing class and racial divisions, allowed Genovese to move away from the monolithic theme of white oppression developed by Stampp and Elkins towards an explanation that revealed how both groups had shaped southern society.

By telling the common history of planters and slaves, Genovese explained how each group created the context within which the other acted in the system of slavery. Africans were susceptible to slavery owing to the cultural situation in pre-industrial Africa, while white power hinged on the enslavement of blacks. Planters struggled to maintain that power even after it had ceased to be profitable since they did not know how to remain empowered without it.

Reflecting on his intellectual debts, Genovese denied that renowned historian E.P. Thompson's work on working-class culture influenced his study of slave culture and cited Stuckey and Rawick as the historians who most influenced him. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, however, argued that it was "hard to avoid the conclusion that his analysis represented a fusion of perspectives from both
black nationalists and working-class history. " While there were individual influences on Genovese's scholarship that partially explain how he personally came to study slavery, he must also have been affected by the broader movement occurring in American historiography that he was so obviously a part of.

For many historians the 1960s marked a turning point and as the political culture moved to the left they developed socialist commitments in their history but in different ways than Old Leftists. Whereas the most renowned historians of the Old Left stressed political events as the significant features of American history, these New Left historians asserted that social features such as slavery were the major forces that shaped American society. 25 Genovese completely but unintentionally changed the historiography and distinguished himself from his older colleagues by integrating black history with what had traditionally been called Southern history.

As a member of the new group of scholars, Genovese offered a radically new way of thinking about history in which black history was central to an understanding of the American experience. In addition to changing the historiography this new way of thinking about "experience" challenged the professional norms of the


discipline. By highlighting the differences between black experiences and white experiences, for example, he confronted the problem of universalism, the assumption that only one truth existed. Genovese's approach also rejected the myth of objectivity, which implied there was only one story to be told.

Genovese still had to struggle to identify with black slaves, not just because he was white, but also because the antebellum South was a lost world. His commitment to Marxist theory, however, provided an effective framework for focusing on slave conditions. In slavery Genovese saw a pre-industrial class struggle in which planter hegemony developed. This focus on hegemony was central to the thought of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist who developed the theory that specific classes contained class antagonisms. Since most of Gramsci's writings took place while he was in prison, his findings are fragmented, disjointed and hotly contested among scholars. In this way, it is difficult to know in what way Gramsci's writings influenced Genovese. At the same time, it is clear that Gramsci and Marx influenced Genovese's theoretical orientation, as illustrated by his interest in class. This attachment to class-based analysis gave him a focus and provided him with a connection to slaves and a way to rethink the history of Southern slavery.

If Genovese's commitment to Marxism and Gramscite political

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26 Frederic Spotts & Theodor Wieser, Italy a Difficult Democracy (Cambridge, 1986), 56, 57.
theory supported an interest in slavery, it also prompted respect and admiration for his subjects. There were, however, limitations to this approach. As a white studying slavery, Genovese's work was part of a larger discourse on slavery that was dominated by white men. While Genovese possessed profound empathy for his subjects and a commitment to civil rights, his scholarship perpetuated the paradigm of whites controlling black history.

By the mid 1960s, Genovese's professional career was taking off, including teaching appointments at the University of Montreal, Yale, and in 1969, an appointment to the Chair's position at the University of Rochester's History Department. By the time he published Roll, Jordan, Roll, Genovese was an established historian of black history. Nationalists were so concerned with Genovese's scholarship because they saw his professional success as indicative of the problems in black studies. As Genovese's career continued to take off, black historians assumed an increasingly smaller voice in the field of black history in the sense that the most influential works tended to be written by whites.

While the 1960s had been an exciting time for historians, the 1970s marked the beginning of a long hiring freeze, and there were many fewer opportunities for black and white historians. As the new generation of scholars began to obtain tenure and the black power movement subsided, the voice of opposition to white authorship weakened. Towards the end of the sixties Genovese's strong views on the integrated approach to black history evoked equally strong feelings on the part of black nationalists, but by
the 1970s things had changed. When Eugene Genovese published his epic volume, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, there was scarcely any mention of his whiteness in reviews.

Relying on slave testimonies, diaries, letters, songs, and oral histories, Genovese attempted to understand the complexities of daily life in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Genovese set forth his objective as an attempt to "tell the story of slave life as carefully and accurately as possible." Structuring the work into four sections, he looked at various aspects of slave life in an effort to expose the world the slaves made. In section one, Genovese described the unique relationship between slaves and planters that developed through southern paternalism. In sections two and three, he accounted for the relative acquiescence of slaves by showing how in their beliefs, work, and leisure time slaves both accommodated and resisted slavery. In the last section, Genovese brought to light the ways in which this dual system of accommodation and resistance was part of a single process that worked to stabilize and perpetuate the institution of slavery.

Genovese also exposed the contradictions inherent in the southern system of bondage. On the one hand he acknowledged that enslavement was oppressive and on the other hand he maintained that slavery was a system "of mutual rights and obligations." This system of plantation paternalism implied that planters recognized the slaves' humanity and accommodated them by allowing them to forge a separate culture that also shaped plantation life.

In revealing how a distinct African-American culture
influenced life on the plantation, Genovese established a new place for black history in relation to American history. He set a new trend in motion, arguing it was "absurd to study the history of say the South without carefully studying black history." Within the context of the debate on slavery Genovese's work integrated black history and white southern history into a more comprehensive understanding of enslavement. In response to black nationalists who sought to keep the history of blacks separated, Genovese argued, "However much the black presence has produced a unique and distinctly national Afro-American experience, it has also formed part of a broader, integrated national culture." 

Genovese was among the first white historians to challenge traditional white-authored approaches in the slavery debate. While he was already renowned for his earlier works, few scholarly publications received the degree of critical attention that Roll, Jordan, Roll generated. Discussed in both popular and professional journals, Roll, Jordan, Roll received over fifty-three reviews including commentaries by historians, sociologists, clergy, and a host of newspaper journalists. Identified from his earliest publications as a Marxist, reviewers were drawn to Genovese's effort for a variety of reasons. He was, for example, applauded by white historians for providing the first significant Marxist

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28 Ibid., 39.

interpretation of American history.30 Sympathizers, such as J.H. Plumb, maintained that his work offered a "salutary, disturbing critical effect,...on the writing of American history" with one reviewer linking his service to prominent British Marxist historians Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawn.31 Others praised Genovese for challenging Stampp's and Elkins' portrayals of slavery and for presenting slaves as something other than dehumanized.32 Cited by Arthur Zilversmit as a work that "will serve as a basis for all discussions of the impact of slavery for many years to come," Genovese's contribution to the slavery debate was indeed major.33

Genovese's analysis of slave autonomy also generated much interest among religious journals since his argument hinged on the slaves' unique interpretation of Christianity. One critic noted that Genovese's interpretation far surpassed any pro-religious writers of the past two centuries, because his arguments exposed the pervasive role that religion played in the lives of slaves and confirmed the spiritual element that exists in society in general.34 Thomas O'Connor commended Genovese for the overpowering religious tone that the entire book possessed, including his

30Novick, That Noble Dream, 421.


32Nathan Scott Jr. Commonweal 101(December 6, 1974) 244.


"appropriate" references from the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{35} In a critical overview of the year's reading, Nathan Scott, Jr. could not think of any theological works that dealt arrestingly with contemporary experience in the context of our time, but cited \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll} as a deeply affecting work.\textsuperscript{36} It is ironic that Genovese's work was so successful among clerics since he was so well known as a Marxist.

In spite of the favourable reviews among clerics and Marxists, Genovese received his share of criticism from the historical community. Most reproached him for the book's excessive length. Several found that he had exaggerated the role that paternalism played in the lives of slaves. This approach, argued one critic, "cannot help but fascinate romantics seeking a past or future golden age."\textsuperscript{37} Other critics were wary of his digressions into what one scholar referred to as "academic stream-of-consciousness" where Genovese attacked chauvinist scholars, white South Carolinians, and the American armed forces in Korea and Viet Nam.\textsuperscript{38} Historians were also perplexed by his numerous references to learned but unrelated material, including T.S. Eliot, Nietzsche, and Hegel, with one scholar citing this trend as "intrusive" and pretentious.


\textsuperscript{36} Nathan Scott Jr., \textit{Commonweal}, 101(December 6, 1974): 244.


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 504.
It is peculiar that the black activists who had earlier been so critical of Genovese ignored *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. By the time of publication (1974), the black power movement had lost much of its strength, but his work was overlooked to the point that it was not even reviewed in black journals. In part neglect from black journals arose from the sense that his accomplishment was more about planters than slaves and did not express a black point of view. It is also possible that nationalists had been scared off by Genovese's rather tough stance of self-defense. In "Black Studies: Trouble Ahead" (1969) Genovese criticized demands for exclusively black faculties, departmental autonomy and student power. He linked these sentiments to fascism:

The demand for all-black faculties rests on the insistence that only blacks can understand the black experience. This cant is nothing new: it forms the latest version of the battle cry of every reactionary nationalism and has clear antecedents, for example in the nineteenth-century German Romantic movement. To be perfectly blunt, it now constitutes an ideologically fascist position and must be understood as such. The general reply to it—if one is necessary—is simply that the history of every people can only be written from within and without.39

Considering that he had devoted over a decade of attention to slavery studies, Genovese's attack on nationalists was predictable. Meier and Rudwick argued that of all the historiography on slavery, Genovese's approach was the only one that sought "to place the development of slave culture in a nationalist framework."40 Although Genovese did not name black nationalists in his

acknowledgements to Roll, Jordan, Roll, he later declared: "whatever such black colleagues as Harding, Lester,...or Stuckey think of my book..., I could not have written it without them."[41]

Although Harding, Lester and Stuckey did not publish reviews of Roll, Jordan, Roll, Genovese's comment suggests that he had heard that they disapproved. It is unfortunate that Harding and the others did not publish their criticisms. The criticism of black nationalists against white authored black history was an important phenomenon in social history because it addressed the issue of authorial privilege. The disappearance of authorship as a category of critical analysis in Afro-American history was serious because it strengthened the trend of whites speaking on behalf of blacks. As a result, Genovese's work was accepted as a work that represented the black perspective when in fact his findings were also equally about the slaveholding class and the white perspective ended up dominating the text.

III

If Eugene Genovese's Roll, Jordan, Roll stood out as one of the most significant works in black history, Herbert Gutman's The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, likewise represented one of the most influential works on the reassessment of slavery. Unlike Genovese, who was drawn into the debate as a graduate student, Gutman's effort was prompted as a challenge to Daniel Patrick

[41] Ibid., 273.
Moynihan's controversial study "The Negro Family: The Case for National action," (1965) long after he had earned his doctorate. In his report, Moynihan argued that contemporary problems in black families, including absentee fathers, unemployment and higher rates of criminality, had their roots in slavery. Family disorganization under slavery, argued Moynihan, had produced a "culture of poverty" that continued down until the present day. As Assistant to the Secretary of Labor to Lyndon Johnson, Moynihan's aim in the report was to influence government policy regarding blacks' inferior social and economic positions. In large part Moynihan's study was written to justify drafting inordinate numbers of blacks for the Vietnam war effort. Not only did a job in the army guarantee income for destitute black families, but it also restored black fathers as heads of households.\footnote{Cited in Novick, Noble, 481-85.} For that reason Moynihan's report was regarded with hostility among black leaders and white sympathizers who were growing increasingly disillusioned with Lyndon Johnson's administration.

The issue of disorganized slave families was not a new one in the slavery debate. Over a century earlier antebellum whites had justified slavery by arguing that slave's behaviour was uncivilized; indeed, to think differently would have undermined white rationalisations of slavery. While Moynihan's conclusions were consistent with traditional interpretations, his work sparked controversy because of a broader shift in attitude regarding race and poverty. Black leaders, white sympathizers and members of the
black power movement were becoming increasingly aware of racist elements in government policy, academic scholarship and in popular culture. Moynihan's thesis perpetuated existing stereotypes of the black family as deviant. It symbolized, moreover, a movement away from progressive social reform promised in the early sixties. By blaming black family organization rather than the social system, Moynihan was attempting to absolve the government of its social responsibility for the worsening conditions of black families.

In opposition to Moynihan, Gutman suggested that slaves' familial values did not disintegrate under the ruthless treatment of planters. Gutman found not only that the black family survived for over 175 years, but also that during and after enslavement there was a high degree of stability among black families despite harsh working conditions, high death rates, and sale of family members. The dominant theme *The Black Family* was that slave family and kinship ties were very powerful and important force in southern society and that despite the institutional barriers of slavery, strong family loyalties developed. Gutman's thesis, moreover, implied that contemporary problems among black families were owing to structural problems, including chronic underemployment and economic discrimination.

Unlike Genovese, who claimed that it had been the nationalists who had most influenced him, Gutman acknowledged Oxford historian E.P. Thompson's seminal study *The Making of the English Working-Class* (1963) as the basis of his refutation to Moynihan. Thompson argued that the harsh conditions caused by industrialization
prompted a materially based consciousness among English workers. Gradually this working-class consciousness produced a separate culture that recognized employers as the oppressors. Gutman similarly argued that despite planters’ power slaves shaped their own culture by adjusting a rich array of African traditions to slavery. The fusion between black history and working-class analysis was consistent with Gutman’s theory that oppressed groups did not necessarily absorb the rules of the dominant class. Gutman found similar trends among slaves as among impoverished immigrant families.

In launching his crusade against Moynihan, Gutman attempted to establish family patterns and kinship trends that challenged the Moynihan mentality once and for all. As evidence, Gutman examined a variety of sources including census data, Freedmen’s Bureau records, birth registers, family letters and a photograph of a slave family of five generations which Gutman described as his single most telling piece of evidence. He established, for example, that blacks often named their children for kin, which he interpreted as an attempt to preserve family traditions. By looking at cultural values such as naming practices and sexual behaviour Gutman found the basis for his assertion that a viable black family existed during and after slavery.

In his research on sexuality Gutman found that although young slave women often had one or two children by different men, they usually married afterwards, and that once couples settled down, marital fidelity was expected. Gutman established that by 1850
most slave children were born and raised in two-parent households. Slave sales, not disorganized family behavior, Gutman argued, most often dislocated families. Even by the twentieth century (1905), Gutman estimated that 83 percent of black families were still headed by males. As late as 1925 Gutman found evidence of a viable black family.

In addition to challenging Moynihan, Gutman denounced his colleagues, among them Genovese, for assuming that slave culture depended on plantation owners’ treatment. This perspective, he argued, undermined the concepts of slave resilience and the endurance of slave culture. He further criticized Genovese for being "ahistorical," failing to give an account of change over time. According to Gutman, Genovese made it seem as though black culture was almost entirely reactive and that slaves merely responded to planter hegemony. Gutman has been criticized for his rather nasty interpretation of Genovese's work. In a review of Gutman's book Richard Sennett pointed out, "Making Genovese this sort of whipping boy may help Gutman underline his own position that the black family transcended those limitations, but simplifying his colleague's work can only, in the end, demean his own."[3]

The historical community had long awaited Gutman's book because he had been working on his findings for over ten years. Once it finally appeared, critics immediately drew comparisons

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between his and Genovese's efforts. Most commentators favoured Genovese's version for the brilliance in his concept of paternalism. Anthony Astrachan, for example, argued Gutman's effort lacked "the breadth of flow" that Genovese's possessed.44 Black historian John Blassingame, professor of history at Yale, argued that "Most of the shortcomings in Gutman's discussion of the slave family are a result of his failure to place the family within the context of total culture."45

Blassingame's criticism implied that Gutman had not contextualized the slave experience within the framework of southern culture as he and Genovese had. David Brion Davis, a white historian also working at Yale, similarly argued that Gutman's book was an overreaction that denied the realities of power, calling Gutman's thesis "naive."46 Like Blassingame, Davis was uncomfortable with Gutman's exclusive focus on slaves. Another black reviewer, Marcus Cunliffe, argued that Gutman had not considered enough elements in his analysis: "Surely we need to consider other elements--diet, speech, music, religion--of the sort brilliantly illuminated in Genovese's Roll, Jordan, Roll."47

Others argued for the books' striking similarities, seeing


45John Blassingame, New Republic 175(December 4, 1976): 27

46David Brion Davis, American Historical Review 82(June 1977): 745.

Gutman's effort as one which reinforced Genovese's findings. Henry Wilkinson Bragdon and Harrold Connolly both commented on the obvious connections between Genovese and Gutman. Even Cunliffe, who had favoured Genovese's effort, saw the two books as constituting a third phase in slavery studies that he characterized as radical. Most scholars, however, concluded that Genovese's study was more compelling. That none of the reviewers raised the question of authorship or political perspective confirmed the trend that was present in Genovese's reviews. By 1976 the writing of black history by whites was no longer the divisive issue it had once been.

IV

While these works were similar in that both scholars were informed by a leftist viewpoint, their interpretations varied considerably. In Roll, Jordan, Roll, for example, Genovese argued that there was a dialectical relationship between slaves and masters. Although Genovese's focus on masters was not exclusive, it perpetuated more traditional forms of scholarship by also including white elites. In contrast, Gutman focused solely on slave families. While both scholars shared similar subject matter, the differences in their theoretical perspectives illustrates that not all whites treated the subject in the same way. What did Genovese, an Italian American-born Gramscite offer black history, in contrast to Gutman, a working-class Jew from New York City? The
differences between them became so serious that they eventually ended up in a bitter feud with each other.

Since both were relatively well known and employed together in the Department of History at the University of Rochester, the feud between them is well documented. After Gutman finally published his work on the slave family, Genovese condemned Gutman for ignoring his works and other research dealing with slave history. Genovese criticized Gutman's failure to review the literature but was also hostile towards Gutman because he felt Gutman's work undermined his own efforts. He argued that Gutman denied the impact that whites had on black culture and moved "perilously close to asserting an impossible total autonomy for black culture." In one final criticism Genovese argued that Gutman's work had no real thesis. While Genovese raised some important questions, his criticisms were beside the point. The differences between them had become personalized to the point that the level of criticism was more about destroying the other publicly than about illuminating an understanding of the slave family.

The personal differences that developed between them were also a manifestation of a much deeper shift occurring inside academia. Genovese's attitudes about slaves were designed to serve a more traditional audience that was not accustomed to even thinking about Southern history in terms of slavery. His argument sounded a little too much like a modern version of U.B. Phillips scholarship.

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that portrayed slavery as a benign institution, only Genovese argued that slavery was paternalistic. In contrast, Gutman's approach represented an even greater shift in consciousness about less advantaged groups that Genovese's study lacked. Since Gutman focused exclusively on slaves he was better able to empathize with his subjects from a non-hierarchial point of view.

Black historian and activist Nell Painter noticed that there were important differences between white scholars. She went so far as to say that although white and black historians had different sensibilities, "not all whites hold what I'm calling white views; ...Herbert Gutman, for instance, [thought] about history in what I'd call black ways." Due to Genovese's focus on the slaveholding class, Roll, Jordan, Roll mirrored traditional approaches to slavery which were more committed to understanding the history of the slaveholding class. Since the reviewers did not adequately address the vital differences in vantage point between Gutman and Genovese, they missed the opportunity to develop a dialogue on how some individuals within the community of white scholars had a better understanding of the black perspective.

While Genovese attempted to identify with blacks, Gutman had more success. The majority of historians who have written on the black experience over the last thirty years have tended to be white. They have had varying degrees of success in terms of writing about black experiences from a black perspective. David

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43 Nell Painter, "Who Decides What is History?" Nation 134 (6 March 1982): 277. He also suggested that Lawrence Levine wrote about blacks from a black perspective.
Brion Davis, George V. Winthrop Jordan, Morgan Kousser and James McPherson, were all whites writing about black history but they wrote on white perceptions of blacks. Other groups within the community included white women and Jews. Most women historians concerned about Afro-American history did not begin publishing their research until the 1980s. Jews, although not united as a scholarly group, were writing at the same time as Davis and the others and tended to treat blacks as subjects. Scholars like Ira Berlin, Herbert Gutman, Lawrence Levine, Leon Litwack, George Rawick and Gerda Lerner were more interested in representing a black point of view. Although Jews were more successful in representing a black point of view, with the exception of Lerner, their efforts did nothing to challenge white male domination in black studies. White male historians still outnumbered blacks to the point that their collective presence slowed down efforts to end discrimination in publishing and teaching appointments. As Meier and Rudwick noted, "the total group of Negro professors both in absolute and in relative terms remained small." 50 In the end most of the highly acclaimed books and articles written during this period were written by whites, and Gutman's and Genovese's works exemplified this trend. Once black leaders stopped discussing the issue publicly, the matter was dropped, and hiring practices, publishing, and teaching all served to reenforce white domination in black history.

50 Meier and Rudwick, "Dilemmas of Scholarship," 306.
By the early 1980s most black male historians had changed their position regarding the question of authorship. John Hope Franklin's assertion reflected this attitude when he said, more than twenty-five years ago, that he was not a Negro historian but an historian of the South who happened to be Negro. Franklin's views on history were formed during the fifties when the desire to relate the past as it "really" happened was the dominating principle of historical inquiry. During the sixties and seventies with the movement toward identity politics, Franklin's position had seemed remarkably out of touch. With the return of conservatism in the 1980s, however, Franklin's demand for a so-called objective framework was gaining strength.

Franklin maintained that the historian must resist "the temptation to pollute his scholarship with polemics, diatribes, arguments... If he yields to this attractive temptation, he can by one act destroy his effectiveness and disqualify himself as a true and worthy scholar." He was disgusted, moreover, with the bickering among black scholars that had taken place over the question of authorship during the past decade. He adopted the classical liberal argument that scholars be judged on their work

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and not on the basis of their race or colour. Franklin's views on authorship sounded like the consensus style history developed during the 1950s.\textsuperscript{53} While consensus historians argued from different points of view, they all agreed that intellectual freedom was the most sacred practice of historical investigation and that any person could study any particular field and they had very little consciousness of race or gender. While not fully endorsed by the new generation of young black male scholars, a version of Franklin's view was put forth by several prominent black male historians in the academy. These men associated with Franklin's way of thinking recognized the difference between white authored and black authored scholarship, but like Franklin they no longer saw it as a scholarly dilemma. They justified the proliferation of whites in black studies by arguing that since whites were making important contributions to black history, whites should continue with their research.

Nathan Huggins, for example, acknowledged that black Americans working in the field of black history were different from their white colleagues. He even suggested that since black historians are researching black history in a "deep, personal and emotional way they will never be able to escape their personal identification

\textsuperscript{53}In postwar America historians developed new approaches to U.S. history. The dominant approach came from scholars who belonged to the consensus school such as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin and David Potter. These scholars agreed but argued from different points of view that American politics were marked by consensus rather than conflict and that the American people shared more in common than not. These postwar historians also believed in the Lockean assumption that scholars were intellectually free to study what ever they wanted to.
with it however much scholarly distance is achieved."\textsuperscript{54} While he recognized differences between white authored and black authored history, Huggins viewed segregated history as irrelevant saying that Afro-American history must be "necessarily within the fabric" of the larger stream of history.\textsuperscript{55} In his view historians must work harder to create a new synthesis that takes into account all of the subfields of social history and treats each category of study as a "building block". Huggins feels that if Afro-American historians work towards this end, "for the first time...in the black American experience; rather than being an anomaly, it is central to the story."\textsuperscript{56}

Thomas Holt similarly argued for a reinterpretation of African-American history. He advanced the argument that historians ought to establish linkages with external developments and movements in the larger world that laid "claim to centrality in the national experience."\textsuperscript{57} Holt’s suggestion implied a more integrative approach to black history, and he was silent about the nationalists from the sixties who challenged his way of thinking. In Holt’s view white interest in black studies was beneficial, and


\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., 159.

\textsuperscript{56}Ibid., 167-168.

it showed that whites recognized the importance of studying black experiences.

There were, however, exceptions such as black historian Vincent Harding. Harding had maintained his nationalist views on black history and incorporated his ideology in his findings. In *There Is a River* (1981), Harding linked religious messianism and revolutionary black nationalism together in an account of slavery that portrayed slaves on the verge of insurrection. Using the motif of a river as an image of black struggle Harding drew on past slave revolts to argue the necessity for direct confrontation in the black struggle for freedom in contemporary society. He criticized nineteenth-century activists such as Frederick Douglas who, he said, sold out during the Civil War in his cooperation with the government to recruit black soldiers. The message for Harding's audience was to use the tradition of black protest as a point of reference for change in the contemporary black liberation movement.

Most of Harding's white critics were uneasy with what they deemed his manipulation of the past. While they did not criticize him directly for it, they were defensive about Harding's political agenda. Implicit in their criticism of Harding was the assumption that their position as white scholars made them more objective.58 George Fredrickson, for example, suggested that white readers "may

be put off by evidence of what they take to be 'inverse racism'; for there are few if any white heroes or black villains in these pages," and belittled Harding's entire effort as an exaggeration.\textsuperscript{55} Fredrickson's apparent assumption of a stance of "objectivity" displayed whites' unquestioned and unconscious acceptance of a white-centred point of view as legitimate.

Although blacks like Huggins and Holt did not question white authored black history, Meier and Rudwick maintain that the controversy over authorship still left "important residues" in the historical community.\textsuperscript{60} In an interview with black feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine, Meier and Rudwick found that she was not only apprehensive about the predominance of whites in the discipline but also bitter that "most of the highly-acclaimed historical works were, with a few exceptions, written by white scholars."\textsuperscript{61} Even though Hine's comments served as a reminder of the discussion, her scholarship was influenced by white methodology. In her published dissertation the desire to have her work accepted as scholarly, compelled her to play down her strong political commitments and present her dissertation as a conventional narratives.\textsuperscript{62}

By the early 1980's black history was no longer the instrument


\textsuperscript{60}August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, "On the Dilemmas of Scholarship in Afro-American History," 294.

\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., 294.

\textsuperscript{62}Ibid., 299.
of change that it once had been. The level of commitment to revolutionary ideology had faded and many historians were concealing their political agendas in an attempt to make it appear as if their history was nonideological. The intense professional competition, racial and gender discrimination, changing race relations and job scarcity caused by government cut-backs and changing demographics of the college-age population contributed to a feeling of powerlessness among less advantaged historians. The limited opportunities within the profession changed the way many blacks felt about black history. When they came up against such overwhelming structures of domination they found it required a more universal outlook and that they either change their nationalist perspectives or work to conceal their political convictions to make it seem as if they could assimilate into white power arrangements. Trends such as white male domination in slavery studies spread to other subfields and the goals of blacks in the profession changed from radical political objectives to supposedly non-ideological and professional ones.63

63Ibid., 298.
CHAPTER 2: RACE AND REPRESENTATION IN U.S. WOMEN'S HISTORY DURING THE 1980s

When historians of Afro-American history wrote of "the black experience" as being distinct from other groups, they generally meant the history of black men. By ignoring gender diversity within the Afro-American community, they had failed to address vital differences between black women and men. The only mention of black women came in Eugene Genovese's analysis of the role of plantation mammys in Roll, Jordan, Roll, and these observations made up only a tiny subsection of the book and they lacked the strong theoretical insight contained in the rest of the text.¹ The only other works that addressed slave women were Gerda Lerner's Black Women in White America (1972) an anthology of primary material by black women from slavery to 1970, with extensive editorial comment by Lerner, and Angela Davis' "Reflections on the Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves."² Although Lerner's book was not a traditional monograph, it contained valuable primary source material otherwise unavailable to historians. Yet Lerner's effort was not even reviewed in historical journals. Similarly, Davis' work was ignored in the historical community. There were barely any works in print that addressed black women from a

¹Herbert Gutman likewise mentioned mammys in The Black Family, but his observations were even briefer, and they only appeared in a footnote.

feminist perspective and gender analysis on the whole was sadly lacking in slave historiography.

It was not until the early 1980s when black women's history emerged as an autonomous area of inquiry that more works appeared with black women as the central focus. As black women's history began to be taken more seriously, the question of authorship that had emerged towards the end of the 1960s with the black nationalists re-surfaced among black feminists. Works like Mary Ellen Obiko's "Custodians of a House of Resistance: Black Women Respond to Slavery," (1979), Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984), and Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985), stand out as examples of the new works by black women that address race and gender.

Once black women's history developed into a subfield in its own right, the debate over authorship was renewed. Black women's historians were drawn to the question because there were even fewer black women scholars in the profession than black men. At the basis of their interest in themselves was the sense that: "We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us." In light of what had happened to black history during the 1960s and 1970s black

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feminists argued that they ought to be the ones to develop their own voice. The statement of The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group organized around the notion that their specific oppression needed more attention, explains why black women felt so strongly that equality would come sooner if they took matters into their own hands.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.\(^5\)

Although this group of women was not made up of historians, their manifesto was connected to the debate forming in women's history because they were addressing all mediums that worked to improve the status of black women and black history was no exception.

While the Combahee River Collective's commitment to identity politics resembled some of the principles of black nationalism, they were ultimately opposed to nationalist ideology owing to its patriarchal view of women. Many black feminists of the late 1970s and 1980s had been active in Civil Rights, black nationalism and the Black Panthers. Their ideology, personal lives, and goals were shaped by their involvements in these movements.\(^6\) But along with membership in these organizations came serious disappointment at the way they were marginalized. In addition, other supposedly "progressive" groups like New Left organizations tended to be dominated by a white male power structure that likewise put black

\(^5\) Ibid., 275.

\(^6\) Ibid., 273.
women on the fringes. If black organizations and leftist groups did not acknowledge the needs of black women, the newly established white middle-class feminist movement was similarly insensitive to issues like racism and poverty that less advantaged women faced. These experiences led to the need for the development of separate organizations that specifically addressed the needs of black women.

Once groups like the Combahee River Collective established their mandates, black women began to develop a separate consciousness. The development of this new consciousness not only revealed the sexism inherent in black nationalism, and the racism in the women's movement, but it likewise led to a commitment to challenge these structures of domination. In history, for example, not only was there scarcely anything written that focused on black women as historical subjects, but there was a lack of black women present in history departments. Black women's underrepresentation in university history departments raised the question of the profession's commitment to hiring women of colour and likewise confirmed the need for more aggressive recruiting policies that encourage black women to go on with their studies at the graduate level. Having established the need for more works that address less advantaged women and the fact that there are too few of them working as historians, black women have also begun to confront issues of appropriation. As their voices began to be heard, some historians of white women began to respond by including race in their findings. Does an inclusion of race perpetuate the problem created in the 1970s when white men dominated slavery studies? Or
is there a way to publish monographs about black women that avoids the kind of white domination that happened during the 1970s?

I

One of the most outspoken critics of white domination in academia is bell hooks, a dynamic young black feminist literary scholar, who has re-problematized authorship. Actually named Gloria Watkins, bell hooks uses her great-grandmother's name to pay tribute to the unlettered insight of her foremothers. At present hooks is a professor of English and Afro-American studies at Oberlin College, and has written an impressive array of works that address black women. In her first book Ain't I a Woman: black women and feminism (1981) she surveys black women's place in U.S. history. Her desire to write the book began as a young graduate student. After being frustrated and disappointed with the scarcity of books on black women, hooks felt that she should write one. While researching the project, she worked part-time at the telephone company and a local book store to help make ends meet. From the outset critics scoffed at her concern, but with her partner Nate's support and her own commitment to learn more about


8See, for example, bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (Boston, 1985), Talking Back, (Boston, 1989), Black Looks: Race and Representation, (new York, 1992) and Sisters of the Yam: black women and self-recovery, (Toronto, 1993).
black women's history she remained dedicated to the project.\(^5\) As she worked to understand the status of black women, she began to realize that both racism and sexism had an enormous impact on their material and social lives. Although not a historian, hooks has had a major impact on black women's theory and her scholarship has greatly influenced feminist history.

Identifying herself from the first as a feminist, hooks' book not only discusses black liberation but also announces that the feminist movement belongs to black women as well as white. "Our struggle for liberation," she writes "has significance only if it takes place within a feminist movement that has as its fundamental goal the liberation of all people."\(^10\) Drawing on the intense motivation that black women of the nineteenth century had when they joined the feminist struggle, hooks encourages contemporary black women to join. Just as nineteenth-century activists did not allow white racism to prevent them from becoming involved with women's rights, contemporary black women must also remain committed. In challenging black women to join the struggle, hooks moves black women's issues from the margin of feminist discussion to its centre. To this end, not only does Ain't I a Woman appeal to black women as an empowering manifesto, but it also serves as a consciousness-raising exploration for white women and black and

\(^5\) bell hooks, Ain't I a Woman?: black women and feminism, (Boston, 1981): introduction. Beverly Guy-Sheftall also writes about hooks' background in her review in "Black Women and Feminism: Two Reviews," Phylon 44(March 1983) 84.

\(^10\) bell hooks, Ain't I a Woman?, 13.
white men.

Hooks divides her book up into five chapters and traces the history of the devaluation of black womanhood by both white women and black men. In Chapters 1 and 2 hooks examines the history of slavery and its abiding legacy for black women. She links slave women's experiences with black women's contemporary lives and suggests that black womanhood continues to be devalued owing to the sexism of white and black men and the racism of white women and men. Hooks argues that black matriarchy - the idea that black women have been in powerful positions ever since the days of slavery because of black men's limited access to power - is a myth since poor economic situations barred them from financial and social security.

In Chapter 3, "The Imperialism of Patriarchy," hooks argues that patriarchy continues to function as a pervasive social system invading the lives of all members of society. Black women who complain that black men are weak have accepted patriarchal structures of domination because they assume that black men should better identify with their designated role as breadwinner. Similarly, she reprimands black men who criticize the white male power structure but actually only seek access to the same kind of male power for themselves. It is not enough, argues hooks, to criticize the system; black liberationists and feminists must fully deconstruct the system of patriarchy.

In Chapter 4, entitled "Racism and Feminism: The Issue of Accountability," hooks examines the feminist movement and exposes
the racism which has inhibited its success. Beginning with
nineteenth-century feminism and continuing up to the present, hooks
contends that all American women's movements have been based on
racist foundations. She reveals how the early movement for women's
rights was really about seeking equality for white women. In the
contemporary movement, which at least acknowledges social equality
for all women, white women have tended to argue that since they did
not create the racism which black women experience, they cannot be
held accountable for it. Hooks maintains that while white women
are oppressed through sexism, they also engage in racism by
advancing racist ideology in many elements of American life.

In the last section of the book "Black Women and Feminism,"
hooks argues that systemic racism prevented black women from
becoming leaders. As an example of the lasting effects of this
internalized racism, hooks refers to the contemporary feminist
movement where most black women have resisted the notion that the
struggle for women's rights is a universal struggle. Hooks argues
that it is only by joining the women's movement that black women
can confront and resist the sexism inherent in American
institutional life.

Hooks' theoretical commitment to feminism distinguishes her
approach from that of her male contemporaries. She stresses that
sexism figured in the lives of black women as much as racism did.
Her focus on sexism, moreover, highlights problems with
contemporary studies that ignore gender considerations in their
analyses. Her work represents the first sophisticated attempt to
deal with the subject of black women in a comprehensive historical study. Owing to this scarcity of representation, hooks offers her effort as a "love gift from me to black women." Not only is her work a gift to black women but, *Ain’t I a Woman* also represents an important turning point in black history since her contribution changes the way historians conceptualize African-American history. By insisting, for example, that sexism figured in the lives of slave women as much as racism did, hooks’ scholarship leads to the notion that like racial identities, gender identities are also socially constructed.

Hooks’ insights went even further than a critical analysis of feminist and black movements in the United States; hooks challenged the right of white feminists to control black women’s history. Commenting on white feminist Gerda Lerner’s anthology about black women, hooks noted:

Many anthologies appeared with collections of material drawn from the writings of 19th century black women; these works were usually edited by white people. Gerda Lerner, a white woman born in Austria, edited *Black Women in White America, A Documentary History* (1972) and received a generous grant to aid her scholarship. While I think that the collection is an important work, it is significant that in our society white women are given grant money to do research on black women but I can find no instance where black women have received funds to research white women’s history.  

At the heart of her criticism is a belief in the validity of experience. If black women’s history is told from the perspective of privileged white women who have no experience of what it is like to exist on the margins, than hooks questions whether or not it is  

11Ibid., 10.
sensitive to the less tangible ways in which structures of domination affect black women's lives. Hooks argues that Lerner's book stands out as an example of how even an attempt to address the lack of works published about black women can still be structurally racist because of the way in which the funding was arranged. Hooks not only shows a rare insight into the hierarchy of contemporary academic research, but in a more nuanced way she confirms that racial and gender identities are produced and reproduced in all areas of life including the allocation of grants. The lack of opportunity for black women to study themselves as well as other groups is an extension of this problem and stands out as another way in which black women are excluded from participating in academic research.

White feminists were initially silent over hooks' criticism, but it was an important turning point in that it at least renewed the question. When Lerner's book appeared black writer Maya Angelou had raised the issue of Lerner's whiteness.\(^\text{12}\) To drive her point home, Angelou even included a photograph of Lerner in her review. It is significant too that Lerner's work wasn't reviewed in any scholarly journals, and Angelou's important comments appeared in the popular magazine \textit{Life}. Despite Angelou's insight, with the exception of Angela Davis' article "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves", in the ten years between Lerner's publication and hooks' effort there were scarcely

any works published on slave women by whites or blacks.¹³

Historians and feminists within the academy also (at least initially) ignored hooks' effort. The arrival of women and blacks with revolutionary ideas designed to transform academia such as bell hooks came as a serious threat to mainstream scholarship. Neither feminist nor history journals published reviews of this book. They were, I suspect, thrown off balance by hooks' scathing criticism of academia for consistently ignoring black women. She observes, "when black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women."¹⁴ In addition, while hooks' scholarship is impressive, it may have seemed too radical and feminist for the great majority of readers in academia who are unsympathetic to these issues.

Those critics who did review hooks' work were for the most part black women themselves. Despite the fact that these women were united by race and gender, they resisted her arguments and were uncomfortable with her rejection of an "objective" framework. Linda Perkins of Radcliffe College, for example, dismissed the study as a serious scholarly examination of black women and feminism arguing that the "frequent personalized comments and subjectivity by Hooks make this book primarily an autobiographical

¹³Angela Davis, "Reflections on Black Women's Role in The Community of Slaves,".

¹⁴hooks, Ain't, 7.
and speculative one." Maria K. Mootry Ikerionwu, also a black woman, suggested that while the book is lucid and interesting for its contributions to feminism, she only recommends it to people interested in black history and women's history, segregating the book from people otherwise interested in American history. Another black reviewer Beverly Guy-Sheftall reviewed hooks favourably but she undermined hooks' theoretical approach because she found it too controversial: "Despite the controversial nature of this uniquely theoretical approach to the subject of Black women and feminism, Bell Hooks deserves praise for her courage and audacity at even attempting such a monumental task." Guy-Sheftall and the other black reviewers were so dominated by mainstream expectations of what constitutes scholarly inquiry that they were unable to reject the very marginalization hooks complained of.

Black lesbian feminist, Barbara Smith added another dimension to the range of negative interpretations offered by black women reviewers. She criticized hooks' emphasis on heterosexual paradigms and reprimanded her for ignoring Third World feminist theory. She also felt that the book was full of too many contradictions, a perception that led her to question hooks'
conclusions. She admitted that reviewing the book "worried her to death" and that it was no easy task to review it, but found that, "It soon became clear that despite its subject I was in profound disagreement with the assumptions of this book." Smith was uncomfortable with hooks' tone: "Why do I constantly get the impression that Hooks sees Ain't I A Woman as an opportunity to finally put black men and white women in their place?"13

According to Smith, another aspect of criticism was its publication by a "radical" press. She was critical because South End publishers did not extend the same editorial expectations to hooks that they require of works written by whites. While South End Press is known as an alternative leftist publishing house, most works published by South End are written by white male theorists. Since editors at South End rarely choose to publish feminist works, let alone ones written by black women, it is important to note that Ain't I A Woman is a radical departure from their past publishing record.

In this case, [however], South End's desire to appear 'politically correct' with minimal effort is transparent. Clearly an insidious double-standard was operating that led the editors-publishers to overlook the book's grave analytical and ideological problems, which would never have been permitted in another work--for example, not requiring footnotes or a concise approach to class...I despise the kind of racism that says, "black people are just different. We can't ever understand them and it's not our place to question or challenge them."20


19Smith, 40.

20Ibid., 45.
Smith suggested that she would have expected hooks' work not to be accepted by an alternative press because of hooks' failure to include Third World feminist theory. But Smith assumed that the folks at South End have the same kind of expectations that a large publishing house has and interpreted their rejection of mainstream methods of scholarship as structural racism. This perspective suggests diversity within black feminist thought.

Hooks' highly charged political message, rejection of the social scientific approach and her neglect of lesbian issues led Smith to reject hooks' arguments. Perhaps if Smith had noticed hooks' attempt to move away from white methods of inquiry she might have realized that traditional methods of research such as footnoting style do not always make sense to blacks. Footnoting is a practice embedded in a western, Euro centred historiographical tradition and after polling a group of working-class black women, she discovered that they weren't prepared to read a book which contained footnotes. Appropriately she developed a methodology that would appeal to interested readers both in an outside of academia.

Yet Smith raised some important points, especially her observation that hooks ignored some of the recent moves among black women to organize black feminist groups and the attempt by some white feminists to take more responsibility for racism.21 While

21 Hooks ignores groups like the Combahee River Collective's commitment to feminism. "Some examples of white feminists' early attempts to address racism include Margaret A. Simon, "Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood," Feminist Studies 5(Summer
hooks' oversights are a weakness, I still found the book to be useful for challenging the persistence of structural in racism in the feminist movement. I was therefore alarmed at Smith's criticism that white feminists who endorse hooks' claims are racist. Hooks' effort is one of the only books that I have read that challenges the organization of class, gender and race relations in the U.S. There is likewise so much insight into the problems with the contemporary feminist movement that I found that her book penetrated the basis of my own ideology. While there are increasingly different responses to the problem of racial discrimination among white feminists, there is still a large component that resists these charges.

Smith's and the other black women reviewers' negative responses may also have been owing to hooks' youth or to her lack of training in history. Her background in English makes the book all the more stunning and yet it also contributes to her neglect by "mainstream" history. The criticisms against hooks show interest, praise, and a discomfort with the lack of "objectivity," but most importantly there is an unwillingness to place the book in the context of "serious," "mainstream" history. While black women reviewers did not totally reject hooks' effort, they were unable to welcome approach because of their own marginalization. In order to have their own work taken seriously these black women accept dominant methodologies, making it all the more difficult for black

women like hooks to articulate their findings in a way that challenges conventional norms.

II

Initially many feminist historians ignored race in their scholarship, but with the development of a black feminist perspective, white feminist historians are increasingly including race in their research. The origins of the change are complex. Some argue white feminists are becoming more sensitive to racial concerns because black women have voiced opposition to their continued marginality in the feminist movement. Another explanation for the change is a shift in attitude and perception about social equity that grew out of the civil rights and feminist movements. Whatever the reasons for the change in sensibilities, race is finally receiving attention among white feminists and with it comes the realization that black women have to think about how they want race as a category of analysis to affect white women and their findings about gender.

American women's historian Jacqueline Jones and Southern historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese were among the first white feminists to apply race as a category of analysis in their findings. Comparing their works and examining the differing responses among critics reveals some of the problems with white

authorship in black feminist studies. At the same time, a comparative approach reveals how some white women such as Jones can effectively discuss experiences of black women in an understanding and illuminating manner. In addition, an examination of the issue of authorship will help to develop a more critical understanding of how racial and gender identities are produced in both the past and present.

Jacqueline Jones' study, *Labour of Love, Labour of Sorrow: Black Women Work and The Family, From Slavery to the Present* (1985) grew out of a disturbing trend she noted in undergraduate seminars at Wellesley College, where she teaches. She observed that many mostly white middle-class undergraduates saw work outside of the home as a liberating experience. In addition it concerned her that these students associated motherhood and women's role as household head with "some sort of all-encompassing power over her spouse and children." Student perceptions changed, however, as they unlearned their own preconceptions about work and family. While Jones fails to mention that she is a white woman writing black history, her acknowledgement to her students places her research in her own personal experience. By stating her personal stake in the project, Jones' makes her book more meaningful because she at least partially reveals her own vantage point.

In the book Jones rethinks the labour history of black women over an extended period of time in an effort to correct the way

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historians have portrayed black women as either the helpless victim or the strong grandmother type. She illustrates how on the one hand black women rejected their victimization by subordinating the demands of their employers to the needs of their families. On the other hand, she also shows how they endured great sorrow and sacrifice at great personal cost to their own health. Using a range of sources including manuscripts, diaries, interviews, narratives, articles and secondary sources, Jones also shows how pervasive racial and sexual prejudices were in shaping black women's working experiences.

Yet understanding the impact racism and sexism had in shaping black women's work experiences is only part of her story; Jones also uncovers a legacy of resistance to this discrimination revealing that these women did not internalize the bigotry they experienced but rather coped with racism in work situations by formulating closer bonds with their respective families and communities. She notes that both their priorities and work strategies were shaped in order to circumvent the inequalities they faced. That black women experienced such different work situations and implemented unique forms of resistance in comparison to both black men and white women helps, according to Jones, to explain why black women developed different work expectations. She notes, for example, the differences between black and white working-class women. "Although young working girls of both races might have indulged in romantic fantasies about marriage," writes Jones, "few black women could count on a wedding to end their days of sustained
Most working-class black women could not afford to stop working once they were married. In contrast many more working-class white women could stop working for certain periods during their married lives or in some cases for the rest of their married lives.

Since Jones narrows her focus exclusively to labouring experiences over the long term, she confirms how race and sex completely shaped the options available. Not only were black women's career options limited because of double oppression, but also their colour and sex were used by employers to justify lower earning power. By using a "grass roots" approach, Jones has also given a voice to the masses of working-class black women rather than the handful of prominent black women who gained public identities through their contributions to the women's movement and black rights.

Unlike Lerner's and hooks' efforts, Jones' book was widely reviewed. With the exception of one hostile reviewer most critics recognized the depths of her contributions. Writing in the Journal of Economic History Anne Mayhew advised: "readers of this JOURNAL will find little of value in her book." Mayhew's criticism hinged on Jones' conclusion that work was not necessarily a liberating experience for black women. Instead of serving her well, Mayhew contended that this perspective resulted in a

24 Ibid., 182.

"selection of quotations and anecdotes that illustrate the continuing harshness of the world of the black woman." Mayhew's criticism attempted to redirect the attention away from the hard lessons of black women's working experiences and replace it with more neutral analysis. By emphasizing the horrors of black women's working experiences, Jones describes a painful but important chapter in American history. With the exception of the occasional black woman, most were subjected to exploitive working conditions for low wages. A focus on the harsh working conditions black women have endured, moreover, emphasizes the systems dominant society used to oppress black women. These experiences need a voice, however awkward and unappealing they are to hear.

Paula Giddings approved Jones' voice but criticized the last section of the book. As a journalist more familiar with contemporary black women's lives, Giddings focused on Jones' analysis of the 1960s and 1970s and asserted that her "logic fails when it comes to analyzing contemporary black women." Giddings observed:

It is both arrogant and incorrect to measure black women's commitment to feminism by our participation in predominantly white organizations...black women as a group are more feminist than their white counterparts. A 1984 Louis Harris poll, published by Ms., found that a higher percentage of black women than white endorsed the passage of the ERA; would vote for a female candidate for Congress if she were equally

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25 Ibid., 565.

qualified with a male; and felt that feminist issues were of prime importance. 

Giddings' interpretation of Jones' work is especially useful because she also reviewed bell hooks' later work Feminist Theory From Margin to Center (1985) and raised the issue of authorship. Given her vantage point as a black feminist scholar, it is significant that she made a distinction about their racial identities and their mutual commitment to feminism. Giddings' sensitivity to the dilemma over authorship does not necessarily mean that she preferred hooks' work just because it was written by a black woman. According to Giddings, it is not that white women cannot write black women's history, but that they must make black women's experiences more central to their analysis of feminist issues. In Giddings' view, any work dealing with feminist ideas must take into account the central role of black women and the impact of race and class. Thus she gave Jones a more favorable review than hooks because Jones portrays black women as model feminists whereas hooks is critical of contemporary black women's failure to organize. Giddings argued that just because black women are on the margins doesn't mean that they are on the fringes of the modern feminist movement. In Giddings' opinion white women can sometimes write about black women with as much authority as black women.

In a comparative review of Jones, Dorothy Sterling's We Are Your Sisters and Paula Giddings When and Where I Enter, white

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Ibid., 26.
historian Bettina Aptheker has written about their distinct point of view. She observed that they share what Alice Walker refers to as a "womanist" perspective -- the idea that "women are accorded a historical autonomy and voice, and their thinking, as represented and understood by the historian, informs the interpretive core of each of these works." their own voice and separate experiences influences the historian's. In contrast to Mayhew, Aptheker commended Jones for rejecting the victim mentality by providing insight into the various ways black women defined the boundaries of their own existence.

Other black women reviewers were critical of the final sections of Jones' book where she addressed recent experiences in which many of them had personally participated. Bonnie Thornton Dill and Toni Morrison, for example, argued that the book offered rich insights into black women's lives for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but that the later sections suffered from a lack of analysis. Over all Morrison felt that Jones' racial identity did not prevent her from understanding black women's work experiences. Dill similarly felt that the issue is not Jones' whiteness but that women's historians regardless of their colour

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must work to include the experiences of those outside the mainstream.

In comparing the various responses among black women scholars there was a distinct preference for Jones over hooks. Even when reviewers examined the racial identity of the author, they were only critical if they felt the scholarship undermined contemporary black feminist organizing.31 In contrast, Jones' whiteness worked in her favour and reviewers used that knowledge to understand her work. The black women who reviewed bell hooks, were critical of her message and took liberties with her that they probably would not have if she had been white. Most of their resentment surrounded hooks' criticism of contemporary black women for failing to organize during the 1970s. Their responses were rendered particularly poignant because some of them felt that they had personally been a part of a small but vital black women's movement. On the other hand, the black women who reviewed Jones' effort were aware of her racial identity, but it was not an issue in their reviews. Jones' racial identity, then, figured in, but it worked to her advantage. The differing responses by black women to Jones and hooks shows that black women are not all of one mine. Similarly their preference for Jones shows that their openness to a white scholar who treats black subjects respectfully.

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31Ironically Giddings was most critical of hooks for her critique of contemporary black feminism.
In contrast, white historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese was not as successful in writing about black women's experiences as Jones. In her book *Within the Plantation Household* (1988), Fox-Genovese focuses exclusively on the slavery period and traces the philosophies, work habits, and family practices of women of the slaveholding class and their slave women who worked in the big house. Unlike Jones, who argues that family commitments compelled black women to suffer through the dehumanizing requirements of slavery, Fox-Genovese focuses on how gender, racial, and class identities forced slave women to acquiesce. She shows on the one hand how these socially constructed boundaries forced slave and slaveholding women into conflicting relationships with each other and discouraged individual white women from developing feminist and abolitionist values. On the other hand she shows how plantation mistresses were beneficiaries of the system of slavery who willingly participated in the hegemony of the slaveholding class.

Although Fox-Genovese earned her Ph.D. in eighteenth-century European history, she recalls being drawn "to women's history during the 1970s and increasingly to American women's history."32 Like her husband Eugene Genovese, Fox-Genovese argued that slavery was a complicated institution in which the ruling class dominated slaves but that slaves also influenced the slaveholding class.

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What distinguished her ideas about history from her husband's was her commitment to feminism. Combining her interest in gender relations with a study of the South, Fox-Genovese developed a keen interest in southern systems of gender.

As the title implies, much of her focus in *Within the Plantation Household* is on the household. In a lengthy explanation Fox-Genovese defines the plantation household as the central organizing unit of production and reproduction around which slave society formed. She forewarns those "with no taste at all for theoretical arguments...to pass over...lightly," her work on theory.³³ Rather than develop an overarching theory, though, Fox-Genovese uses her first chapter to ward off what reviewer Christine Stansell refers to as "trouble". Stansell writes, "Southern history is a notoriously contentious field, and you can almost hear the feuds rumbling through the text even if you don't know enough to spot where, exactly, the trouble is coming from."³⁴ She notes Fox-Genovese's strategy involves "taking elaborate precautionary measures to shore up points that readers untutored in the academic schisms would probably happily take for granted."³⁵ Using narratives, diaries, letters and published works Fox-Genovese attempts to get into the mental world of plantation women with an understanding that gender constructs shaped their lives.


³⁵Ibid., 417.
In six loosely related chapters Fox-Genovese traces how this seamless wrapping of gender, combined with race and class interests shaped and divided southern women's lives. The strongest section of her book is contained in her point, which black women have been arguing for years, that there is no united sisterhood. Fox-Genovese demonstrates the flaccidity in the category of gender as a paradigm for theoretical analysis when she writes:

Southern women's history should force us to think seriously about the relation between the experiences that unite women as members of a gender and those that divide them as members of specific communities, classes, and races. It should, in other words, challenge us to recognize class and race as central, rather than incidental, to women's identities and behaviour—to their sense of themselves as women. 36

To that end Fox-Genovese shows how slaveholding women benefitted from their position as members of the privileged class. She shows, for example, how southern white women embraced the idea of motherhood but did not accept childcare as a central responsibility in their lives. Ultimately white women were responsible for their children, but day to day child care work was given to slaves. In contrast, slave women were denied the right to embody the image of domesticity and motherhood, but they were responsible for raising young white slaveholders. Slaveholding women and slave women, argues Fox-Genovese, occupied inimical positions in the southern system of bondage that often contributed to conflicts between them.

Since Fox-Genovese discusses black and white women in

36 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 39.
alternating chapters, the work fails to expose how fundamentally integrated southern women's lives were with each other. This approach, moreover, leaves black women with less of a voice than their white sisters since Fox-Genovese's research relies so heavily on diaries and letters and there are so few sources written by slave women. While I understand that the scarcity of sources written by black women is an obstacle for historians, there are still ways to analyze black women's lives, as Jacqueline Jones' study shows. Fox-Genovese does not seem to see black women as important as white women and does not hear their voices. Underpinning her work I noticed a distinct admiration for her white subjects that is lacking in her analysis of black women. Although most reviewers were white, they also raised the issue in their reviews.

Catherine Clinton, for example, wrote "On a stylistic level, the technique of segregating black and white women into separate chapters undermines Fox-Genovese's theme, and on a more substantive level, the integration of subordinates into dominant households proves problematic."37 George M. Fredrickson similarly observed that "the result is a book of great strength and incisiveness when it deals with the white side of things but which is less than memorable and compelling on black women."38 Dorothy Sterling, a


white Jewish historian, feels that she needs more on black women to "balance" her analysis. She writes "Taken altogether, the book is skilfully written, profusely illustrated, and copiously annotated. However, Fox-Genovese is so determined to be non-judgemental about the 'monstrous' slave system that she fails to balance her sympathetic report on plantation ladies with an equally insightful account of the slave women who made their privileged lives possible." 35

When it comes to Fox-Genovese's weaker analysis of black women, Jacqueline Jones concluded that it is a testimony to "the cleavages of race," as the book's structure represents black and white women's estrangement from one another on the plantation. 40 While Chris:ine Stansell recognized that black women remain more elusive in part owing to poor sources, she felt that with more imagination and flexibility Fox-Genovese could have featured black women's lives more clearly instead of just glossing over them. She noted, "Somehow, the black women themselves recede behind the shifting grid of class, race and gender that Fox-Genovese creates to interpret them... In contrast, readers come to know the mistresses well." 41

For bell hooks, Within the Plantation Household embodies the

33 Dorothy Sterling review of Within the Plantation Household, by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in Journal of Southern History 56(August 1990): 528.


41 Stansell, 418.
problem with white authored black feminist history. Not only does Fox-Genovese's account of black women pale in comparison to her work on white women, but she also failed to account for her interest in, and commitment to, the lives of slave women. In a telephone interview with Cory Dean, Fox-Genovese revealed that "it felt a bit odd at times to be a white woman writing about black women. On the other hand, I am deeply committed to the idea that we all have to be able to study any subject provided we are honest."42 In response to Fox-Genovese's remarks, hooks observed, "While valorizing the notion of intellectual freedom, the comment obscures the more crucial issues involved when a member of a privileged group 'interprets' the reality of members of a less powerful, exploited, and oppressed group."43 Hooks' reservations encourage white feminists to explore what draws them to study black women. Her questioning of Fox-Genovese's right as a white woman to write about black women, moreover, forces us to be more answerable about the subjects we study and why we study them and encourages us to realize how deeply imbedded the structures of domination are within the realm of historical methodology.

Powerful criticism that questions white women's involvement in black women's history does not mean that white women cannot write about black women. White feminist politics have an obvious connection to black feminist issues, particularly surrounding


43hooks, Yearning, 54-55.
sexual oppression. But black women face another kind of oppression that exists in addition to sexism and white feminists need to become more fully aware of how pervasive racism is even within our own scholarship. This means more than a superficial comprehension of race in our research and understanding of black history.

In Fox-Genovese’s book, for example, the author develops creative and imaginative ways of understanding white slaveholding women at the expense of understanding slave women’s experiences. As critic Jacqueline Jones observed:

Despite its title, then, white women remain at the center of this study, and the author feels it unnecessary to dwell on the "inevitable atrocities" perpetrated by plantation mistresses in defense of their peculiar world—a world that we can only judge as pathological and (must it always go without saying?) morally repugnant...Of the pain slave mothers endured we hear relatively little. Here, instead, are lovingly detailed passages about white women’s devotion to their own husbands and children. It is not enough to include race as a category of analysis. Showing little concern for the oppression of slave women not only undermines Fox-Genovese’s study, but also furthers contemporary racial tensions. By trying to include white and black women, Fox-Genovese ends up writing a book like her husband’s book Roll, Jordan, Roll. That is, whites dominate the text and the voices of black women are lost.

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44Jacqueline Jones review of Within the Plantation Household by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 6(February 1989): 5.
In conclusion, this comparison illustrates that the writing of history is a political project, and an understanding of race and gender is fundamental to historians regardless of their sex or colour. Fox-Genovese's study stands out as an example of how, without intending to, white scholars can expropriate black women by not interrogating their own whiteness and stating their stake in the project. The current interest that white women have in black women should not focus on race just to be politically correct. Historians should have a personal conviction about the subjects they study. They must look for ways to address structures of domination and be careful to avoid the kind of thinking only directed at furthering their personal careers. Similarly, black women need to become more aware of their own marginalization and realize that when they criticize works written by black women for not aspiring to academic standards it also perpetuates the white hegemony in academia. In my point of view hook's more openly polemical writing is good and the imposition of traditional standards of "neutrality" is in fact a conservative political stand. White women must understand that just as gender history necessarily involves us in the present, so too does race. We must keep in mind that the study of race and gender helps question contemporary developments and that these developments lead us to question traditional historical representations. It is not enough though to talk about the experiences of black women. Historians must become more active in the hiring process in their recruitment
of graduate students and hiring possibilities. In order to correct race and gender inequalities in the profession, positive policies are required that encourage black women to research and write their own history.
CHAPTER 3: POSTMODERNISM AND AUTHORSHIP IN FEMINIST HISTORY

The question of authorship remains an important issue in feminist scholarship, especially since the arrival of postmodern theory challenges so many of the fundamental principles of western thought. Since postmodern theory emerged at the same time as the recognition among white middle-class feminists that racial analysis had been fundamentally lacking in their research, it once again raised the question of authorship in historical investigation and the right of white women to write about the experiences of black women. Whereas at the outset of the 1980s the major criticism of feminist scholarship was that black women's experiences were ignored, more recently a split has developed in which some feminist scholars discourage white women from "expropriating" black women's stories. In light of the arrival of postmodernism on the feminist scene, this chapter will explore the issue of credibility for whites in writing about women of colour. Through an examination of recent works on feminist theory, I will suggest some ways to deal with credibility versus expropriation in a postmodernist framework.

One of the most highly charged instances of the hostility generated over the question of expropriation is the controversy that erupted when in the summer of 1988 members of the Women's Educational Press in Toronto (or Women's Press as it is better known) rewrote their editorial policy in an effort to eliminate racism in new works.\(^1\) Although the split at the Press in Toronto

posed a direct challenge to Canadian feminists, the division raised broader questions about scholarship in general and is central to the controversy over multiculturalism and authorship that has stirred up so much interest among feminists across North America. Some of the members were concerned that when white women depicted black women in a way that was supposed to resist racism, they often ended up perpetuating racist stereotypes leaving black women as marginal characters in stories about the struggle for their own rights.

The division unfolded when one of the members was keying in a manuscript that was to appear in the collection of short stories, *Imagining Women*. She noticed that the story (members at the Press have requested that the story not be identified) was racist because it presented a white woman thinking about a posting in Somalia in a way that made travel to Africa sound exotic. Afterwards the group decided that it had better review all the stories to make sure there were no other instances of racism and found at least two more examples. A majority vote by the Publishing and Policy Group (PPG) rejected the stories by the three white writers, but some of the long-time members disagreed.

The members who rejected the stories suggested that in order to avoid any further trivialization of the experiences of less advantaged women, it would be better to reject all stories written by white women that only portrayed women of colour as secondary
characters and/or as supplements to the text. The antiracist guidelines went on to suggest that since it is impossible for white middle-class women to write about black women when white women's experiences are so removed from black women's, it would be better to reject all stories written by white women that depicted women of colour. Members at the Press laid out their position in the new policy guideline:

Arriving at an understanding of the necessity for an antiracist rather than a non-racist position involved absorbing the implications of our observation that we live in a society whose origins, development, and dominant cultures are defined by racist attitudes and structures...Having identified expressions and acts of racism as endemic to our communal interaction, it is impossible to call ourselves non-racist without taking an active role against them. A passive position does not acknowledge the extent or pervasiveness of the problem: and it will certainly not bring about change.

Under the new guidelines only writers' concrete experiences were valued, and writers were asked not to speak for anyone but themselves.

Some feminists came out in support of the Press's decision. Dub poet and reggae artist Lillian Allen was enthusiastic about the press's move, arguing that the cries of censorship were a defense

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2 Other guidelines include a mandate to avoid manuscripts that "contain imagery that perpetuates the hierarchy that black equals bad and white equals good" - "black moods" or "black comedy," for example. Additional editorial policy states that "terminology that reinforces stereotypes" is to be avoided as well as manuscripts "in which white middle-class women's perspective is characterized as normal and the perspective of Women of Colour is presented as unusual or exotic." Taken from "Antiracist Guidelines, For Submissions," in Susan Cole, NOW March 23-29, 1989, 11.

mechanism created to defend the interests of whites. The Jamaican-born supporter not only thought that the approach was called for, she felt white writers have a responsibility not to take from other cultures: "Writers who consider they have any commitment toward addressing the inequalities of our society and the exploitation of women of color have a responsibility not to take (from other cultures). Their major commitment should be to emerge in people's voices and support them in their work. I think it's unacceptable that some women think they have the right to again appropriate something else." Ann Wallace, president of Williams-Wallace publishers, a press group that already publishes works by people of colour, also applauded the Press' move. She said: "Let us talk for a change," and suggested that "The writers who feel they've been alienated should try to feel how all of us felt when we couldn't get published." Ann Decter also spoke out in favour of the new guidelines, drawing a parallel between women's feelings about sexism and gays and lesbians' thoughts on homophobia to explain blacks strong feelings about racism. She said, "As feminists, as women, we do not allow men to define what sexism is; as lesbians and gays we do not allow heterosexuals to define homophobia; it is people of colour who define racism."

Not all of the members, however, were prepared to accept that

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the stories were racist and they also argued that the radical solution violated freedom of speech, a basic principle of literary tradition. Promotion and marketing manager Margie Wolf, a paid worker at the Press since 1977, was fired over the controversy. Liz Martin, also a member of the press, admitted that the Press' publishing record was weak in terms of including the voices of women of colour, but she felt that the PPG went too far, "So, of course, there's something to criticize about our books, but it... went beyond that at certain times and they were called 'pluralistic' and 'liberal nothingness'." Eight members, including Martin and Wolfe, responded to the charges by publishing their own statement:

The debate has never been over whether a new policy should be adopted, but rather over how this should happen...However, we have found that opposition to particular ideas, both in these committee meetings and in the Publishing and Policy Group, was construed as resistance to the anti-racist project itself...It became clear that embracing the correct position overrode any concern for moving the debate forward in a way which respected us as speaking from a position of conscience and as allies. Wolfe and the other members who disagreed with the collective's decision also gained the support of many people belonging to the publishing community. Libby Scheier, chair of the Rights and Freedoms Committee of The Writers Union of Canada (TWUC), recommended to its members that "they not engage in business with the Press until it can be demonstrated that recognizable professional standards and procedures have been re-

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8 Ibid., 4.
instituted and are being respected." Novelist Sarah Sheard also opposed the decision, declaring that editorial policy which rejected writers on the basis of skin colour was akin to censorship and limited the artists' creative imagination. Allan MacDougall, a partner at the sales agency firm that represented the press Stanton & MacDougall, stated that he was stepping down as the Press' representative owing to the Press' decision to go public with the controversy. MacDougall said, "We don't want to be involved in an internecine battle. It was unnecessary for the internal politics to become external." \(^{10}\)

Seven other members left the Press to join Wolf and establish a new press. The new press called Second Story Press has a more conventional focus than the old Women's Press, which has in the meantime completely changed its leadership, officially dedicating itself to fighting racism. While the members have solved their differences by choosing to separate from each other, the split has left feminists outside the press divided over the issue.

The uproar over authorship at the press is part of a broader trend that signifies how divisive an issue racism remains. In feminist theory the issue of expropriation has revealed that both a united sisterhood and the notion that all feminists share the same goals are myths. In addition, cries of expropriation from black women pose a challenge to white women to invent ways of addressing racism in their own situations without diminishing or

\(^5\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 4.
threatening black women's attempts to create and control the development of their own thought.

Reflecting on my own interest in black women, for example, has made me realize how completely my interest in race is tied to the privilege of being white. Even though racial identities affect whites as well as blacks, as a white woman I can choose to ignore the racial overtones that are present in all aspects of life because of racial power structures that are already in place.\(^\text{11}\) Black women, on the other hand, cannot ignore the ways in which racial identities shape their experiences. White women's experiences are likewise shaped by corresponding racial identities, but white women often think of themselves as the norm. In this way, racial oppression is a system of exclusion that limits the power of one group in order to empower the other group.

The logic of this approach has also structured recent women's history. Many feminist historians have increasingly moved their focus from examining the experiences of women to the study of the various ways in which gender is central in all aspects of life.\(^\text{12}\) Gender theory accordingly provides a starting point, or a thought space, that can facilitate a rethinking of concepts that reinforce oppressive attitudes such as sexism and racism because of the way it views gender relations as intrinsic to all social relations. In

\(^{11}\) White women benefit from black women's oppression but they might not be as aware of it as are black women.

addition, gender studies stimulate a rethinking of concepts that are normally taken for granted. A gendered approach also addresses the tenets of the established social order such as freedom of speech, freedom of artistic creativity and supposed rights of the individual. While gender analysis holds tremendous possibilities for unlearning oppressive attitudes, there are problems with the logic of this approach, as it does not speak to other theorizations such as race and class. To this end, deconstructionist theory offers another means to rethink concepts, create new boundaries and include other theories that are also intrinsic to social relations.

The process of deconstruction, whereby scholars question the construction of knowledge, was started by a group of French philosophers belonging to the schools of postmodernism and poststructuralism. Although the original scholars drew distinctions between the two theories, in North America there is a tendency to group postmodernists and poststructuralists together, and for the purposes of this discussion I will borrow analyzing techniques from each. Both schools are part of a cultural movement that has affected many disciplines and art forms. Each discipline was exposed to this process under different circumstances. In architecture, for example, postmodernism developed in response to the failing modernist movement and its faith in progress. By the late sixties modernist architecture came under increasing attack for creating cold and livable buildings. With so many of the buildings deteriorating because of problems in structure and materials, many architects declared that modernism was dead and
turned their attention towards a new style. In contrast, in philosophy and literary theory, modernism was understood to already mean post, since scholars had been debating whether or not "God" and "Man" were dead. Modernity was seen as the end of ideology and not just an artistic movement within an historical era. Thus, differences in the understood meaning of modernity, and whether it implies a beginning or an ending, have affected whether scholars embraced postmodernism or whether they rejected it. As Charles Jencks points out, the concept of post, at least in philosophy and literary theory, has come to mean "anything resisting or deconstructing common assumptions of culture." Many postmodernists, especially male ones, have failed to consider gender. Feminists have addressed the problem by reworking deconstructive literary techniques to include a consciousness about gender. In light of the problems with early postmodern philosophy, deconstructionist feminist thought has been successful in challenging some of the myths of western philosophy by broadening an awareness of ourselves and of how women function in the established social order.

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14 Charles Jencks, What is Postmodernism?, 30.

15 One of the most ardent feminists to adopt postmodern philosophy into her work is historian Joan W. Scott. Her most acclaimed pieces include "Gender: A Useful category of Historical Analysis," in Gender and the Politics of History (New York, 1988): 28-50 and "The Evidence of Experience," Critical Inquiry 17(Summer
Another important feature of the postmodernist feminist agenda is the recognition that knowledge and power are linked. Postmodernist feminists recognize that the most powerful groups control and define knowledge and make it seem as if what they know through experience is true and relevant for everyone. Likewise dominant groups tend to see themselves as the most knowledgeable and claim superiority by assuming that everyone else is inferior. Postmodern feminists, such as Joan Scott, argue that deconstruction offers a way to understand the construction of knowledge by studying the ways in which discourse or language creates meaning and how those meanings are generated through language.¹⁵

In addition, the convergence of postmodernism and feminism calls into question the authority of experience. Early feminists claimed that the best and most insightful analysis came from writers who told about subjects that were either like themselves or closely resembled themselves. Indeed writers are often told to write what they know. In historical writing this advice was more difficult to carry out because historians are separated from their subjects by place and time. To use your own voice in women's history usually meant that although the historian hadn't lived through the particular experience she was writing about, she could better empathize with her subjects than male historians could because of her vantage point as a woman.

In contrast, deconstructionist feminism replaces the authority

¹⁵Scott, Gender and the Politics of History, 7-9.
of experience as a criterion of meaning with a concentration on language. More specifically, this approach focuses on meanings that are generated through language and the way those meanings are produced and reproduced. Postmodern feminists argue that there is no such thing as experience outside of the way that language constructs it.\textsuperscript{17} In other words, experience is inescapably perceived through cultural frameworks and language within people's minds.

The consequences of a rejection of experience are far reaching. First, history does not exist in the way that it has been previously construed. Under more traditional modes of investigation historians use their own experience as a guide to find sites of human agency, participation, domination and resistance in their subjects. In contrast, language theorists claim that these actions and conditions were discursively produced as the products of a distinct historical and not essential human characteristics.\textsuperscript{18} In short, postmodern historians break down the language of conventional historical inquiry, and deconstruct concepts that have normally been taken for granted, and put concepts such as agency in their historical context. Second, further examination of experience reveals that to accept the stance that personal experience is a requirement for historical investigation borders on an acceptance of the theory of

\textsuperscript{17}Joan Scott, "Evidence of Experience,"

essentialism. To say that it is impossible for whites to understand and interpret the experiences of blacks is to say that race determines one's ability to understand. In other words, an individual's race pre-determines whether or not they will be able find genuine meaning in the acts of subjects who are unlike themselves. Postmodern feminist inquiry challenges the demand for concrete experience by suggesting that historians can learn to see the lives of others in an understanding and illuminating manner. By rejecting the us-and-them mentality scholars can begin to cross the borders of scholarly inquiry and create an alternative epistemology that rejects the assumptions and practices of orthodox history.¹³

Not all feminists, however, are as enthusiastic about the new relations between postmodernism and feminism.²⁰ They are suspicious that deconstruction blurs the goals of feminism.²¹ Some


²⁰See, for example, Judith Bennett, "Feminism and History," Gender and History 1, no.3 (1989): 251-272, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism (London, 1991), 145.

of the most outspoken criticisms of postmodernism come from black feminists. They argue that with feminists' attention focused on multiple subjectivities, the voices and claims of difference are lost in the fragmentation that postmodernism produces. Since postmodernism calls into question all theories of knowledge, it becomes clear that even one's own identity is uncertain. It is ironic that just at the moment when black women begin to remember their experiences and establish themselves as subjects, white women are engaging in an exercise that further fragments feminist studies and undermines the uses of experience or the process on which black women base their identity.

At the same time that Afro-American and Afro-Canadian feminists are suspicious of postmodernism, they also share with postmodernists in their mutual rejection of objectivity. In opposition to deconstructionist postmodernism, however, they argue that their theories and analyses must be based on both experience and action. Bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins stand out as the most outspoken black feminist critics of postmodernism. They insist that scholars remain dedicated to the struggle against racism and sexism. If postmodernism obscures that agenda, then they prefer to employ strategies that effectively confront those...

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oppressions. While Collins has deep reservations about postmodern methodology, hooks believes that it can be useful.

Hooks, for example, uses deconstruction to address critics who claim that limiting authorship violates freedom of speech. In her view freedom of speech is a notion that was constructed at a particular moment in time and not some ahistorical principle that protects less advantaged groups from censorship.\(^2^4\) In its historical context, she argues, freedom of speech was a liberal myth that was devised to defend the interests of the empowered rather than to guarantee literary equality for all. Despite realizing that postmodernism can effectively challenge what we usually take to be universal truths, hooks remains wary of its uses.

In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), bell hooks explains that black people are wary of critiquing experience because they fear they will lose their history. She claims that many black people view experience as their only link to the past. Hooks writes:

> The unwillingness to critique essentialism on the part of many African-Americans is rooted in the fear that it will cause folks to lose sight of the specific history and experience of African-Americans and the unique sensibilities and culture that arise from that experience.\(^2^5\)

Experience is linked to the theory of essentialism because the notion promotes the idea that understanding is determined by race.


\(^2^5\)Ibid., 29.
The belief that race is shaped outside of culture ignores the ways in which dominant society uses that same theory to define blacks as naturally inferior and more primitive. A more useful alternative theory advanced by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, termed social constructionism, argues that biology only gives the basic conditions and does not in and of itself determine human nature. An acceptance of the notion that ideas are socially constructed leads to the possibility that racism can be eliminated and scholars can learn to understand their subjects in effective and thoughtful ways.

Rather than limit herself to the two conceptions offered by essentialism and social constructionism, hooks uses ideas from both schools as a way of better understanding black feminist thought. For example, hooks recognizes the importance of experience in terms of stimulating black feminist thought, but she does not insist that white women cannot talk about race in their findings. Listening closely to hooks, white women can make black women their subjects and confront racism, but they must do so in a way that brings black women in from the margins of academic discussion.

Reviewer Susan Bordo takes hooks' criterion to its logical conclusion and lays out the job of the white feminist scholar. In a wonderful passage about travel, Bordo creates a powerful metaphor for white feminist historians. She writes:

The world-travelling thinker thus mustn't be prepared only to "appreciate" the foreign but also to recognize and nurture

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those places where worlds meet. And the world-travelling thinker will always be ready to abandon familiar territory when it seems required for human understanding and communication."

It is evident from Bordo's reading of hooks that there is a future for white feminists interested in issues of race, but hooks has serious reservations concerning how we go about doing this. In her chapter "Critical Interrogation talking race: resisting racism" hooks criticizes the recent attention accorded multi-culturalism. She claims that when scholars express an interest in ethnicity it is too often separated from its political and historical context, and scholars end up "divorcing" themselves from recognizing racism. With the loss of an explicit anti-racist perspective scholars also forget about how whites dominate blacks and how blacks continue to suffer because of it. In her view, ethnic studies does not have the same critical edge that black studies used to have because whites tend to use such discussions as a starting point for white self criticism.18

Similarly, she argues that when white feminists use postmodern literary techniques to talk about racism they may lose sight of what deconstruction means for black women. She wonders, for example, what it means "when primarily white men and women are producing the discourse around Otherness?" and she describes the


18hooks, Yearning, 20-21. Hooks borrows this idea from Michele Wallace who calls this process "seeing African-American culture as the starting point for white self criticism." Since hooks uses no footnotes, I was unable to reference Wallace's observations.
supposedly antiracist literature as both "racist" and "condescending". Ultimately in hooks' view, deconstruction theory can be beneficial for black feminism. Post-modernist deconstruction of the master narratives, for example, provides black women with the opportunity to establish their own critical voices that have been silenced for too long. According to hooks, it is only through this process of deconstruction that culture can be transformed, and while hooks admits that it is risky business because of the intense fragmentation that results, she feels strongly that it is a risk worth taking.

In her article, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," Patricia Hill Collins takes a more explicit stance on the issue of subjectivity by arguing that black women must control the development of knowledge that centres on them as subjects. Since black women have experienced the things that they are talking about directly, Collins concludes that black women's insights are more credible than those of others who have just read or thought about it. Present day black feminist historians can better understand past black women's experiences than white women because of the resistance to authority that black women have shared across time. In other words, the authority of experience extends back through

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25 Ibid., 53.


31 Ibid., 745,746. Collins ignores vital social and economic differences between blacks that might have influenced the degree of resistance.
time and there is a connection between contemporary black women and their foremothers. "Thus," as Collins points out, "concrete experience as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by Black women when making knowledge claims." Collins encourages black women to create and control their own knowledge based on of the theory that all thought reflects the interests of its creators. Not only do black women's situations put them in a position to see things differently, but they also must realize that empowered groups have a vested interest in suppressing the development of such thought.

In Collins' view it is also necessary that black women produce their own thought because outsiders will not be seen as credible in the eyes of other black women. To this end, Collins adds another criterion for writing black feminist thought -- namely that scholars possess a desire and a willingness to discuss their research with ordinary people, especially people outside of academia. In addition, scholars must reject a stance of objectivity and become personal advocates for the subjects they study. This means that they must accept personal responsibility for the implications of their work.

Although Collins feels strongly that black women must control the development of their own thought, she does provide a space from which white women and men and black men can operate. In her view outsiders should be encouraged to think about black women's issues. She writes, "Black men, white women, and members of race, class,

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\[\text{Ibid., 759.}\]
and gender groups should be encouraged to interpret, teach, and critique the Black feminist thought produced by African-American women."\textsuperscript{33} For Collins the evidence that counts the most in the creation of black feminist thought is the evidence of experience that comes from living as a black woman.

Collins rejects postmodernism by completely avoiding it. Since Collins draws on existing models of scholarly inquiry, she is unsuccessful in challenging existing assumptions of difference. While she takes a radical position, the form, structure and organization of her findings resemble more orthodox modes of inquiry. Joan Scott has advanced a similar critique of the problems created when the evidence of experience is offered as proof. She feels that the "critical thrust" of any history of difference is weakened when historians rely on experience because it appeals to readers as uncontestable evidence and tends to become the basis for all further interpretations. Even more problematic is the fact that these historians "take as self-evident the identities of those whose difference is being documented and thus naturalize their difference."\textsuperscript{34} Not only does postmodern theory challenge existing boundaries of difference. It also examines how difference gets constructed in the first place.

Hooks' and Collins' attachment to the evidence of experience, is closely tied to their open political goals, since common black experience seems to them the basis of resistance to oppression. As

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., 770.

\textsuperscript{34}Joan Scott, "Experience," 776.
Sonya Rose notes, "the feminist analyses by women of color are often deliberately political and are oriented to empowering the people of their communities and to dismantling structures of domination." Since they advocate experience as a requirement of black feminist writing, I think they lose the possibility of creating a new kind of consciousness about difference. Another matter black feminists like hooks and Collins should address is the relationship between essentialism and the call for concrete experience.

Some white feminists also hold a similar attachment to the importance of experience in driving feminist studies. Whereas Collins feels that black feminist theory should be left to black women, white historian Ruth Roach Pierson, in "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," suggests that rather than exclude white women from writing about less advantaged women, each work should be judged for itself. If writers can engage with their subjects in an enlightening manner, than they should continue to publish their findings. Like Collins, however, Pierson relies heavily on the evidence of experience and recognizes the problems that are created when scholars are not personally connected to the experience of their subjects. For example, Pierson cautions men against leading feminist scholarship noting that some male historians have not demonstrated a personal connection between themselves and the women

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they study.35 On the other hand, Pierson argues that some privileged white women, like Canadian feminist historian Sylvia Van Kirk, can credibly write about less advantaged women, as demonstrated in Van Kirk's study of Native women, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870*.

Although Van Kirk is "distanced" from her subjects by race and time, just as men are distanced from writing about women by gender and time, in Pierson's view Van Kirk writes successfully about her subjects because she is attached to her subjects by both gender and her own personal convictions.37 The goal for feminist historians, argues Pierson, is to put the voices of women in a context that exposes their discursive reality so that we may come to know what influenced them and how they lived.

Pierson recognizes that in certain "political moments" privileged feminists must embrace a kind of "epistemic humility" whereby they step aside and let less advantaged women tell their own stories.38 At the same time she insists that to prevent white


37At the same time Pierson notes that some men have been successful at writing feminist history. Canadian historian Angus McLaren, for example, has been enormously successful at writing on birth control and childbirth because he does not attempt to speak for women, focusing instead on contextualizing the many social aspects of women and their bodies.

feminist writers from narrating the histories of nonwhite women because they have not "lived" that experience is to suggest a kind of "naive empiricism" that implies the aim of the historian is to reclaim voices. Pierson comes to the conclusion that white feminists must be prepared to listen with humility to a chorus of different voices.  

Like Pierson, Joan Scott criticizes the argument that only African-Americans can teach African-American history, and Scott's analysis is also based on a critique of experience. In "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity," Scott offers an insightful discussion on racism. What is so brilliant about Scott's analysis is that it forced me to reflect on the ways in which racism is produced in this society. She did not just describe how racist we all are and how miraculous it is that black people have survived this oppression, or suggest that whites are somehow wounded by processes of discrimination in the same way as blacks. Instead, Scott criticizes the recent attention accorded multiculturalism and the conception of identity groups in pluralist terms as part of the legacy of individualism.

The ideology of individualism is a set of assumptions and principles that claims all individuals are equal units. Proponents of this theory who were powerful during the Reagan and Bush administrations, boast that public policy and court decisions are designed to protect the rights of individuals and that no

40 Joan Scott, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity,"
individual should have more rights than any other. Scott points to
problems with this logic in the recent administrations of Reagan
and Bush. Under Reagan and Bush the courts reversed affirmative
action decisions, vetoed Civil Rights legislation and denied
analysis and policies based on discrimination against groups and
defended themselves by saying that these acts were done in the name
of justice to individuals. But they ignored the reality of
systemic domination and oppression against categories of people.

Multiculturalism was similarly conceived within the context of
individualism. An emphasis on diversity is not a new way of
thinking about "Others" but an application of old logic and its
extension to all groups. Advocates of the new multiculturalism
emphasize the great diversity and variety that exist in the U.S.
but downplay the contradictions and conflict and differences of
power that exist among groups. They focus on improving one's
personal behaviour rather than recognizing the systems of
subordination that are at work.41

While Scott is certainly not the first feminist scholar to
criticize individualism, her critique is distinct because she makes
unpopular criticisms against all groups who use individualism
whether as a basis for their support or for a critique of
multiculturalism. She points out that individualism is the

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41Scott refers to Kenneth Jackson, who argues that with the
exception of slavery America has always been welcoming to
immigrants, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who thinks we should focus
on assimilation rather than difference. He wants to uphold
individualist principles and ignore the process which sets up
difference. Ibid., p. 7.
justification for right-wing opposition to multiculturalism, for the liberal universities' concession to subscribe to its newly diverse population, as well as for the identity politics of minority groups. 

Whereas in the early days of identity politics groups used the term experience to mean something historically produced, today, in an age of increasing conservatism, they often use the term "experience" in an essentialist way to suggest that their viewpoint "comes from deep down inside".

This process of individualizing discrimination has led to an increasing reliance on direct experience as the only form of true knowledge. While less advantaged groups like African-Americans object to contemporary history curricula which leave them out, Scott disagrees with the criticism that if whites do include stories about blacks, they are inevitably racist. As an alternative to identity politics Scott proposes that we must work to understand why African-Americans have been ignored and what the consequences of their exclusion are. This approach will expose "the process by which difference has been created and maintained." She argues, moreover, that the premise of identity politics is merely an imitation of the strategy of dominant groups who keep power by producing epistemologies that insist on separatism. In Scott's view, an approach that seeks to understand the complexities of difference by creating sophisticated theories

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42 Ibid., 8.
43 Ibid., 9.
44 Ibid., 10.
such as her own is a much more adequate way of understanding politics than the liberal pluralism that currently dominates thinking on race. Scott suggests that in the current situation in which progressive policies are jeopardized by reactionary groups, her approach "might be all to the good."^{5}

Scott's piece is an example of how post-structuralism works in the new way of thinking about history. Rather than search for findings that tell "wie es eigentlich gewesen" (how it really happened), Scott crosses disciplinary boundaries and borrows findings from literary theory that the "real" can only be discovered by understanding language and systems of meanings. Crossing disciplinary boundaries as Scott has, however, does not go far enough because she does not insist that scholars must likewise explore how their own point of view has been produced and account for how they came to the subject. Many scholars, especially those who write about different races, classes and genders, need to explain their vantage point to make their findings more understandable and Scott should do likewise.

Vron Ware's recent Beyond The Pale is an excellent example of how much more successful history is when authors tell about their point of view. Ware declares the stakes in her findings by asking the question, "What exactly has racism got to do with white women?"^{6} As a white woman, Ware wants to know her role in systems

^{5}Ibid., 11.

of discrimination which both construct identities for people and then exclude them from power. She speaks candidly about the hostility generated among black women when white women address racism and makes it clear that she is not speaking on behalf of other less advantaged women who have experienced racism directly. Her aim is to address the social relations that produced the racism and discrimination. In other words, Ware is not claiming knowledge of other women's lives. She recounts the criticisms made against her for interest in race and argues that race as a category of analysis does not belong to black people.

While white women move to the forefront of poststructural analysis and continue to interpret their experiences in increasingly sophisticated ways, many of their attempts to include race (with the exception of Ware, Scott and Pierson) remain rooted in racist thinking as they often amount to little more than tokenism. The concept of gender itself, with its frequently monolithic outlook on sex roles has often excluded less advantaged women because seminal studies that used it made generalizations that did not take into account the experiences of black women. Black feminist historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, for example, has argued that the cult of domesticity was mostly embraced by white middle-class women and that it tells us almost nothing about

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black women's lives.\textsuperscript{45}

Jane Flax attempts to expand her awareness of gender to include race within a postmodern framework. In "The End of Innocence",\textsuperscript{46} she points out some of the limits of the uses of poststructuralism in contemporary feminist theory but is convinced that it is a useful tool in historical research. One advantage of postmodern theory is that it links black feminist findings with postmodern theory. Like postmodernism, writings by women of colour also expose problems with difference and the relations of domination that white feminist theorists have apprehended as the basis for their own theories.

The major problem that she has with postmodernism is her feeling that there are still elements of structural racism present in white feminists discussions on postmodernism. According to Flax, postmodern discourse centres on the problem with the category of difference because white feminists are uneasy about reconstituting our knowledge of difference and the "nature" of feminist theorizing. Closer examination reveals that white feminists are still bitter about how the "others" and their claims of difference destroyed the illusion of an all-inclusive sisterhood. She writes, "Since directly attacking women of colour or voicing our resentment of them (in public) would be politically


unthinkable, is it easier and more acceptable for white women to express our discomfort with difference discourses and the politics of knowledge claims by categorically rejecting postmodernism and branding it politically incorrect?"50

As a practising psychotherapist,51 Flax provides thoughtful insight into the ways academics privilege the social scientific approach to mask discomfort and guilt about our own theorizing.52 I also agree with her solution that the best way to stop the exclusion of black women is to deconstruct the systems of domination in the production of epistemologies. In this way, postmodernism discloses the racist thinking that is concealed in more orthodox approaches to theory.

Although Flax addresses black women, she does so only in her conclusion. It is evident that she too, has not fully appreciated the importance of race. For instance, she only refers to women as white in relation to her discussion of black women and fails to clarify the racial identity of her subjects when she talks about "feminists". This is known as "marking" and "non-marking". By not providing the qualifying adjective black or white, Flax sets up the unmarked term as the norm and the subject is assumed to be white unless marked otherwise. For the most part, in the rest of the

50Ibid., 459.

51Susan Bordo, "Postmodern Subjects, Postmodern Bodies," review of Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism(104"

52Flax, "Innocence," 459.
text when Flax writes feminists, she means white feminists and only uses white if she uses black. If postmodernism creates a consciousness about difference, than we have to begin to deconstruct whiteness by thinking about race outside of situations when we are talking about black women. We must likewise begin to read black writers for issues that transcend their claims of otherness. In this way, postmodernism can become a place to begin this process.

The recent book *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (1993) by bell hooks has helped me to confront my hostility about discussions that fail to adequately address race. While the book is written primarily for black women as a guide to self-examination and healing the inner-self, her methodology left a sharp impression on me. I realized that in my struggle to confront the question of expropriation, I became so self-absorbed that I at times lost my grasp of what the process was all about. Hooks' new book restored the meaning that this project originally had for me by reminding me that the issue of authorship is important because as a white woman I am writing from a privileged point of view and the desire to write about less advantaged women has to be addressed with this in mind.

In her book, hooks teaches about forgiveness and understanding and reminds me that the aim of black feminist inquiry is to empower black women in their fight against racism and sexism. The discussion over authorship is not intended to raise consciousness that point of view matters. Who wrote the piece, their racial
identity, personal agenda, and ideology have a direct bearing on how we interpret what is put before us.

As a white woman doing black women's history I can never live the experience of being a black woman. As Ruth Roach Pierson points out, since white women are in a position of dominance, they are apt to be ambivalent at times about the "lived experience" of black women and the fact that dominance is central to their experience.\(^5\)\(^3\) The project of writing about black women or white women and racism should be aimed at getting black women's voices to be heard or at analyzing the meaning of race in white women's lives. For the most part these discussions about whether or not white women can write about blacks are presented as an issue for whites to consider and end up being more about whites than blacks.

The race issue that split the Women's Press in Toronto exemplifies how white feminists' insensitivities can cause serious damage when they fail to see the reality of lived oppression, especially within their own circles. To dismiss the charges of racism is to fail to respect deeply held perceptions by a number of black women, and that, surely, does nothing to advance the dialogue. The opponents of the Press' decision took refuge behind the principle of artistic freedom rather than continue to engage in a dialogue with the other women. As Pierson notes, the request that comes from the Women's Press can be interpreted as a view of racism that argues anti-racist literature can be voiced only by

\(^{53}\) Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice," 93.
those who have directly lived racism. But it can also be applied to historical inquiry as a request that women's historians acknowledge in their research and findings the position of their own voice and proceed with epistemic humility.

Throughout this project I have struggled with my own authority as a white feminist doing black women's history. Marlene Nourbese Philip points out, however, that the issue at stake is not whether white women have a right to make black women their subjects. Rather, the problem, in her view, relates to the fact that women of colour seldom have the resources required to allow or permit "any sort of writing to take place, let alone writing from a particular point of view." She is critical that in the media hype surrounding the split, the press became obsessed with the question of the role of white women and none of the exchange focused on how to create ways to get more black women into print or how to make writing projects non-racist. Reading Philip, I came to an understanding that the debate over expropriation is flawed in that it is too often presented in terms of how it relates to white women. She is right when she says we have to focus on ways of providing less advantaged groups with equal access to all of the resources that society has to offer. While Philip finds plenty of

\footnote{Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice," 93.}

\footnote{Ibid., 93.}

\footnote{Marlene Nourbese Philip, "The Disappearing Debate: Racism and Censorship" in Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel eds., Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender, Views by Canadian Women Writing in English, (Toronto, 1990): 213.}
reasons to ban white authorship, she still finds this solution to be an unsatisfactory approach to the problem. Besides being completely unenforceable, prohibiting whites from making blacks their subjects does not address structural racism, and more importantly, as the hard lesson of the split at the press illustrates, it gives the people who are insensible about living with oppression a red-herring to "sink their anti-censorship teeth into."  

It is significant to note that the anthology in which Philip's work appears, came after the Women's Press conflict. *Language In Her Eye* (1990), was edited by Libby Scheier and Sarah Sheard, two of the most outspoken critics of the Women's Press' antiracist guidelines. At the time of the split Scheier worried that the guidelines violated freedom of speech. In her view, while the guidelines didn't censor writers, the logic of that approach made censorship possible. "It's not censorship," said a troubled Scheier, "but it adds to an atmosphere that makes censorship possible." While Philip opposed the guidelines because they excluded white women from writing about race, she was supportive of the courage it took to make the decision to take a tougher stance on racism. Since Philip is still a member at the Press, it is important that Scheier and Sheard included her in the anthology because it opens the possibility for more thoughtful and insightful dialogue.

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57 Philip, "The Disappearing Debate," 213.

I agree with Philip's position because she is looking at the structural problems that prevent black women from writing in the first place. She feels that the Press' guidelines should be aimed at encouraging women of colour to write. White women and men still dominate the publishing world and with black discrimination so obvious black women still need to find a way to improve the resources available to them and make their voices heard.

While there are distinct differences between what hooks, Collins and Philip are advancing in comparison to Pierson, Scott and Ware, black feminist theory and feminist postmodernism have more in common than not and are both useful in advancing anti-racist scholarship. I think that black feminists should examine more closely how their scholarship perpetuates an unchanging concept of identity but on the other hand white feminists need more empathy when critiquing the voices of their black sisters.

Representing the voices of the less advantaged is a risky business. Examining the motives and identifying point of view is the safest way to proceed because it engages white writers in a dialogue with themselves about privilege. It also encourages a rethinking of concepts such as freedom of speech, artistic creativity and censorship. In a small way, if whites embrace this process, they are made aware of how operating from their own privilege, whether intentionally or not, limits the access that less advantaged women have to publishing. Pierson's and Philip's call for epistemic humility and Susan Bordo's recommendations for the world-travelling thinker are likewise responsible guidelines to
get past the self-absorption this issue generates, to confront the
guilt surrounding their positions of dominance, and to get on with
the business of feminist analysis.
CONCLUSION:

I must admit that it upset me when bell hooks suggested that I had better explain my interest in black women. I felt that no one had questioned me when I was an undergraduate and I wanted to research the Holocaust, or later as a graduate student when I studied the concept of love in medieval marriage. So why did I have to explain my interest in black women? Her criticism made me realize the importance of point of view and lead me to the understanding that the personal interests of individuals don't come from deep inside them, they are shaped by outside forces like class, race and gender. Who I am not only determines what I am interested in but it also structures how I approach it. In short, what I had taken for granted as a natural interest in black women was really part of a much larger process that involved a shift in attitude about less advantaged groups.

I also realize that as a white Canadian feminist who is interested in African-American history I am in an awkward position to write about the issue of authorship. Not only does my vantage point as a white woman put me outside of African-American experiences, but I am also writing from a position of privilege. Without a doubt I am an outsider to this discussion. While I cannot change my point of view, it is a useful starting point to state my position so that readers will at least know where I am coming from. The discussion itself remains an important one because it has direct relevance on the future of historical writing and how historians can adequately approach subjects who are
different from themselves. To some extent the past is a lost world for all historians who are always separated from their subjects by time and place. With this in mind, I believe that the question is relevant for all historians who for the sake of better understanding need to clarify their relationship to what it is that they study, whether it be in the study of modern Europe, medieval times, or Native history scholars need to be more accountable for the history that they produce.

The recent attention accorded black women by white women has produced mixed results. Hooks is rightly sceptical about dominant groups' desire to construct the discourse centred around otherness because whites are often only interested in-so-far as it is a starting point for white self-criticism. Reading hooks has also made me aware of how completely this issue has been underlined by Anglocentrism. Too often the discussion focuses on how the issue affects whites with scant attention being paid to how it affects blacks. Black interests have only been represented in-so-far as describing their role in the making of the argument and few white scholars understand their commitment to this issue. White writers prefer to focus on the issue as a violation of freedom of speech. The debate surrounding authorship is continually presented as an issue for whites to consider and none of the discourse seems to be about addressing the concerns of black writers.¹

I also think that the increase in interest about black women

¹The split at the Toronto Women's Press is a good example of how the press and publishing community focused on the subject as if it were exclusively an issue that concerned white writers.
is to the good. There have been, for example, changes in many institutions' recruiting policies both in Canada and in the U.S.. Many universities and government institutions are committed to hiring and promoting less advantaged groups as evidenced by the increasing number of white and black women being hired by history departments. While there is still great resistance to these changes, these commitments far exceed past attempts that amounted to little more than tokenism. In sum, a discourse about difference reflects a change in consciousness in contemporary society that is committed to improving the status of less advantaged groups and is making a difference.

Reflecting on my overall conclusions about the right of whites to write African-American history I realize how torn I have been over the issue. What message did the image of white men teaching and writing black history send to students? On the one hand, nationalists rightly challenged whites teaching and writing black history because so many works were written by whites and they tended to be racist.² After the Civil Rights movement and the rise of social history many white historians belonging to the New Left were more aware of the black perspective. Eugene Genovese's Roll, Jordan, Roll (1974) tried to tell about the lives of slaves but ended up telling more about the ruling class. On the other hand,

²See, for example U.B. Phillips' Life and Labor in the Old South (1929). While not racist, Kenneth Stampp's Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South (1956) and Stanley Elkins's book The Peculiar Institution: A Problem in American Intellectual Life (1956) were also limiting as they were quite paternalistic in their approach.
Herbert Gutman's book *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (1976) suggested that it was possible for whites to write about slavery because his approach looked specifically at how slavery affected blacks and their families. While Gutman's effort was an attempt to understand slavery from the inside out, his book did nothing to challenge the fact that whites dominated studies on slavery. Whites teaching black history, even when sympathetic, perpetuated the status quo in which blacks were overwhelmingly culturally disempowered. In addition, by the early 1980s not only did whites dominate the history of slavery but also the ideological pendulum had swung back to the right and many histories about blacks lacked the obvious political commitment and contemporary relevance that earlier works written by nationalists had.\(^3\)

Similarly, although the issue posed a different problem in the writing of women's history which has only come of age recently, the writing of black women's history by white women also left me divided. Feminists were initially concerned with why women had been excluded from history books and in most cases the concern focused around the invisibility of white women. Most of the time black women didn't show up in early women's history. By the time white women responded to the exclusion of black women, black women had already established a considerable influence over the control

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and development of their own history.

Since black women helped form their own history, most of their criticism focused on getting white women to include race in their findings. Some attempts were better than others. Critics rightly criticized Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's book *Within the Plantation Household* (1988) for failing to incorporate the history of black women on the plantation in the same illuminating way that she wrote about white women's plantation experience. In contrast, Jacqueline Jones set forth an interpretation of ordinary black women's working experiences that emphasized black women's agency, love of family and how they coped with such oppressive working conditions. Though not written by a black woman, Jones' approach expressed the subjective experience of African-American women more thoroughly than Fox-Genovese and led me to the conclusion that it is possible for whites to write about blacks. Differences between Jones and Fox-Genovese also confirmed that are better and worse ways for white women to write about black women.

The arrival of postmodernism likewise gave me a mixed feeling about authorship. Deconstructionist theory poses profound conceptual problems for the question of authorship because it calls into question the organization of knowledge and the ways in which historians have traditionally approached the subjects they study. Theorist Joan Scott, for example, objects to the use of experience as a requirement in the writing of history.¹ First, she points out

that experience only exists so long as it is discursively produced. Second, she exposes how a preoccupation with experience tends to naturalize differences and she emphasizes the ways in which that perspective reenforces the theory of essentialism.

How then to acknowledge differences in perspective? This issue weighs heavily on feminist scholars and has inspired a multiplicity of responses. Jane Flax notes that just at the moment that black feminist criticism begins to take shape in feminist theory, post-structuralism emerges with a concentration on language rather than difference and voice. She wonders too whether postmodernism slows down the advancement of black women's criticism with its focus on meaning and epistemologies. While deconstructionism offers a way to see racist subtexts in a more complex manner, at the same time it diminishes black women's demands for changes since most postmodernist findings are directed by white women. Whether or not white and black feminists agree to use postmodernism as a means to understand the past, the theory is dangerous if white feminists become so absorbed in its uses that they forget about race.

In sum, nationalists and black feminists like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins have raised some important questions. They have rightly pointed out that the writing of history is a political project. In the past blacks have either been excluded from history books or stories about them were written in a racist way. In

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showing this they have challenged the right of whites to write black history. The next step is to turn the focus back on the concerns of black writers and look for ways to increase the access that they have to the world of research and publishing. Establishing progressive policies that prohibits discrimination on the basis of race and gender is one way to encourage blacks and other less advantaged groups to enter college and in this way universities will create fuller participation by less advantaged groups.
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