

Introduction

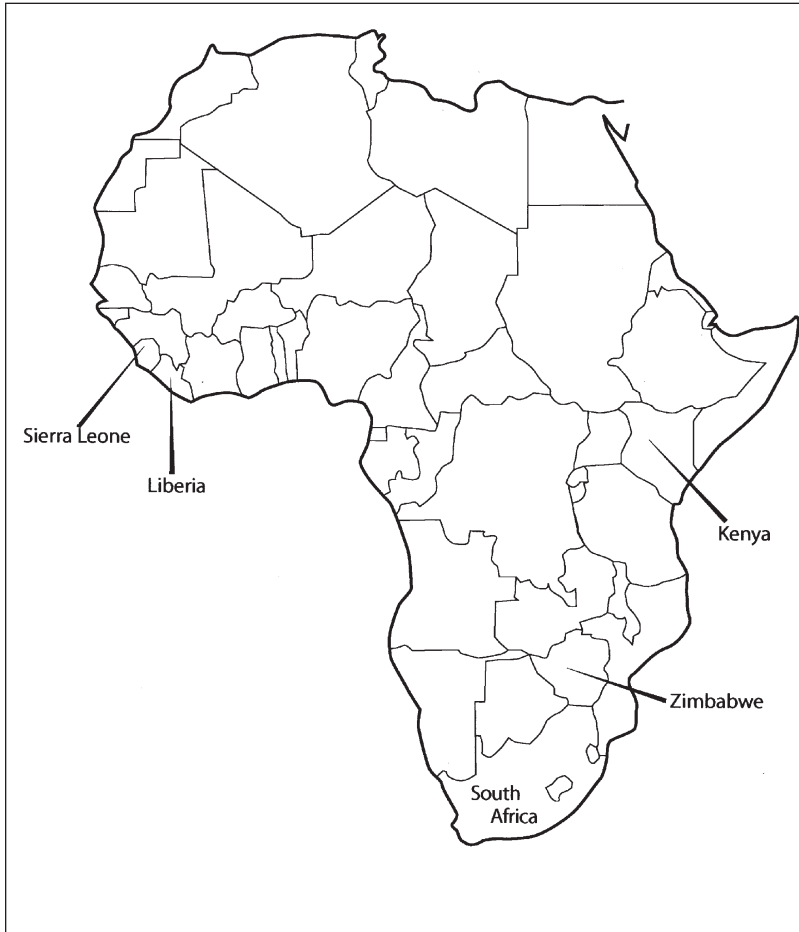
Catherine Higgs and Barbara A. Moss

This volume presents the edited proceedings of a conference held at the University of Tennessee from September 15 to 18, 1999, and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the University of Tennessee. The meeting brought together scholars from South Africa, Jamaica, and the United States to examine the comparative experiences of nineteenth- and twentieth-century black women in African and African diaspora communities. The idea for the conference—and this volume—grew out of our common interests in black women, their lives, their actions, and their aspirations. As scholars, we had met at various conferences in the past and we were intrigued by the similarities in the assumptions black women made and the strategies they employed despite their cultural and geographic differences.

We are using the term *black* because it more effectively describes the women on both sides of the Atlantic whose lives we explore. In the context of the Americas, we focus on the experience of black women in several regions of the United States and the Caribbean basin; in the African context, we will examine the white settler societies of Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa and the black settler societies of Liberia and Sierra Leone.

We recognize that the scope of our collection is ambitious. We have included selections from a broad geographic area, and we are proposing that conclusions may be drawn from paired essays that provide insights into many diverse societies. However, our primary purpose in compiling this collection is to provide a text for classroom use that will examine both the similarities and the differences of black women's experiences in a wide variety of circumstances.¹ This volume is not meant to be a definitive, in-depth anthology. Rather, we are adding to the ongoing integration of African, African diaspora, and women's studies and furthering the dialogue between scholars in Africa, Europe, and the Americas.²

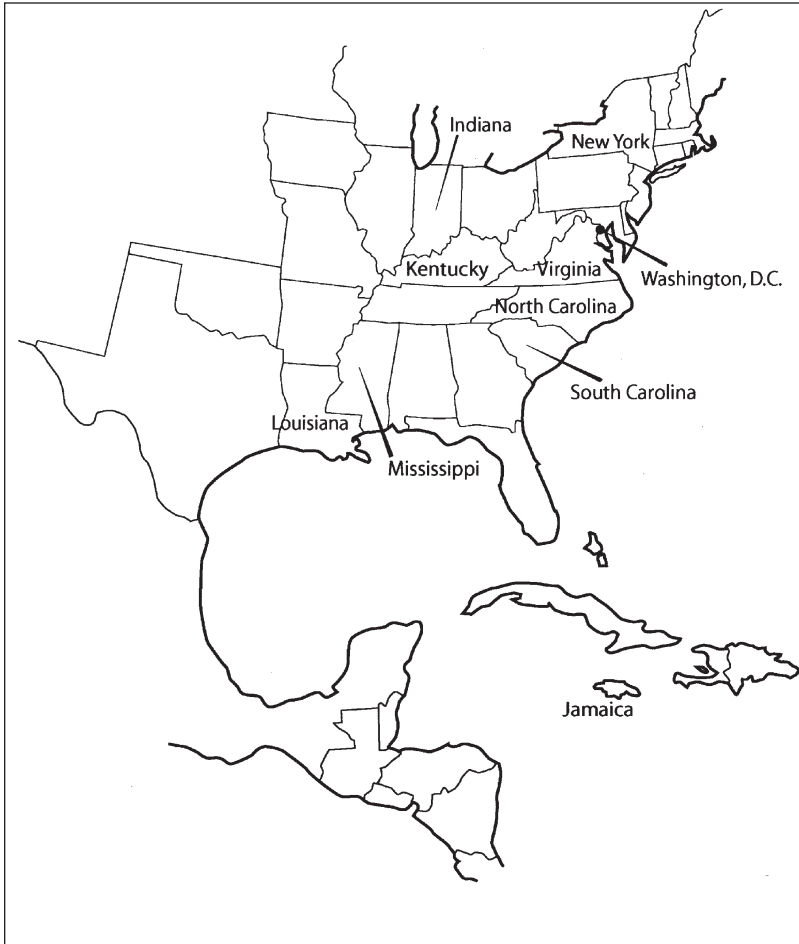
In the Americas and Europe in particular, there is a rich literature about feminism that has been extensively criticized for its initially narrow focus on middle-class white women.³ Prominent among the critics, Darlene Clark Hine and Patricia Hill Collins have reshaped American historiography—Hine by incorporating the experiences of black women into the historical



Africa. Places referred to in the text. Map by Robert Gutchen.

narrative and Collins by exploring the distinctiveness of black feminist thought.⁴ These two scholars have been trailblazers in the development of an extensive literature about African American women since the early 1980s.

The number of studies about African women has also significantly increased over the same period. In addition to the edited collections by Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay, Claire Robertson and Iris Berger, and Jane Parpart and Kathleen Staudt,⁵ there are an increasing number of studies about black women in the former white settler colonies of Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa.⁶



*Eastern United States and Caribbean Area. Places referred to in the text.
Map by Robert Gutchen.*

Since the early 1990s, a newer trend, inaugurated by Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing, has combined African and African diaspora studies with an exploration of the commonalities of black women's experiences worldwide.⁷ It is to this literature that we will contribute. Our study presents a comparative look at basic themes by pairing one essay on Africa with another on the diaspora. Each piece will shed further light on the broader similarities among and differences between the experiences of black women in Old and New World communities.

This volume explores a variety of themes, foremost among them the impact and intersection of gender, race, and class on the lives of black

women in varied locales and cultural settings. The chapters fit into five broad thematic categories that have shaped black women's goals, options, and responses: religion, education, political activism, migration, and cultural transformation.

The two chapters that examine education—Sylvia Ojukutu-Macauley's "British Colonial Policy toward Education and the Roots of Gender Inequality in Sierra Leone, 1896–1961" and Valinda W. Littlefield's "Agency and Constructions of Professional Identity: African American Women Educators in the Rural South"—expand our ideas about education, class affiliation, and community organizing long before the civil rights era. Under colonialism, men and women experienced education differently, as Ojukutu-Macauley's essay reveals. Britain's educational policies in Sierra Leone were instituted to produce a class of Western-educated men who would be able to facilitate colonial administration. To that end, women's education was overlooked, underfinanced, and limited. In the northern part of the colony, this gendered policy reinforced Islamic ideas that endorsed education for males but not necessarily for females. When girls *were* provided with educational opportunities in Sierra Leone, their curriculum focused on domestic duties, whereas boys received a technical or agricultural education that prepared them for employment in European enterprises and leadership positions in their home communities.

Littlefield's chapter examines the role of African American Jeanes Teachers in rural communities in North Carolina. Given responsibility for overseeing educational programs in their communities, many of these educators challenged discriminatory practices, raised money for their activities through gardening and canning, organized evening schools, and extended the school terms for black students. Hindered by Jim Crowism, Jeanes Teachers stepped gingerly through the minefield of racial etiquette to work as community organizers, raising expectations and living standards among the black population. Although their objectives were educational, they recognized the connectedness of larger issues and thus provided health-care information, funding for medical treatment, and assistance to doctors as well. These women, working inconspicuously, traveled alone in rural areas and pushed the boundaries of educational opportunity for blacks.

In "The Search for Anna Erskine: African American Women in Nineteenth-Century Liberia," Nemata Blyden raises the issues of class privilege, sexism, color prejudice, and cultural difference in nineteenth-century Liberian society. African American settlers arrived in Liberia with a sense

of cultural superiority, believing that they needed to bring “Christianity and civilization” to indigenous Africans. Anna Erskine took advantage of her privileged black settler status by acquiring an education, but she also rejected her class affiliation by taking an interest in her indigenous neighbors and learning Arabic. In many ways, her endeavors typified the activities of organized settler women. Despite the strength of the patriarchy in their culture, settler women in Liberia formed self-help groups and promoted female education by opening their own schools and establishing literary societies. In Edward Wilmot Blyden, Anna found someone with whom she shared ideas on education, Islam, and the role of indigenous Africans in Liberia’s national development. She joined him in Sierra Leone, where she bore him five children and taught in Muslim schools from 1886 to 1926, earning the respect of the community. As an independent, unwed mother, Anna Erskine challenged the provincial role assigned to nineteenth-century Liberian women.

While Erskine challenged conventional mores, Verene A. Shepherd argues in “Image and Representation: Black Women in Historical Accounts of Colonial Jamaica” that gendered roles not only stereotyped black women in colonial societies but also created images of them that outlived colonialism. Her chapter traces the representations of black women in Jamaica through colonial narratives, and it provides glimpses of the impact these representations have had on postcolonial women, who show evidence of “mental slavery” in the negative attitudes they hold concerning their own physical blackness.

Catherine Higgs’s “Helping Ourselves: Black Women and Grassroots Activism in Segregated South Africa, 1922–1952” and Earline Rae Ferguson’s “African American Clubwomen and the Indianapolis NAACP, 1912–1914” depict grassroots activism propelled by women’s issues. *Zenzele* (Help yourself) was the motto of the African Women’s Self-Improvement Association, and it could just as well have been the motto of the black clubwomen in the United States. Unable to depend upon their societies’ social service organizations, both African and African American women had to depend upon themselves. In South Africa, a number of improvement clubs, predominantly composed of mission-educated women, sought to teach farming, sewing and other household skills, basic child care, and health care to rural women living in a segregated environment that limited their access to both land and labor. There was much that members of these clubs did not see or chose not to see—including class and ethnic tensions, as well

as the effects of labor migration and the attendant gender tensions. Still, in helping women to help themselves, Zenzele members gave a voice to others, and, in the process, they found a voice themselves.

In contrast to their South African counterparts, African American clubwomen were able to institutionalize their work by using local networks and adopting a group-centered leadership pattern. As Ferguson details, the relative freedom they enjoyed provided a greater opportunity to help themselves and their people, yet they, too, faced segregation that excluded them from employment, public accommodations and facilities, and private hospitals. The clubwomen addressed these issues and laid the foundations for political activism as they worked within a culture that recognized women as legitimate activists. In the black community, beliefs concerning a woman's place have long run counter to prevailing American views. Such beliefs have been fostered both by historical circumstances that left black women unprotected and overworked and by black women's own sense of legitimacy and obligation. Clearly, while the black community has maintained American ideals, it has also held on to alternative beliefs that at times have conflicted with mainstream philosophies.

In Sean Redding's "Witchcraft, Women, and Taxes in the Transkei, South Africa, 1930-1963" and Rhonda Cobham's "Mwen na rien, Msieu': Jamaica Kincaid and the Problem of a Creole Gnosis," precolonial beliefs or systems of thought are resurrected under different social and economic conditions. Redding shows us that in South Africa, long-held beliefs that targeted women as witches were both a cause and an effect of gender divisions. Women were vulnerable and at the same time potentially powerful in precolonial societies, making them prone to witchcraft accusations and the harsh punishments that the condemnations carried. The situation was only exacerbated in the 1930s when male labor migration increased and women became more pivotal in sustaining the rural economy, for many of them were no longer securely under the control of men. Old ways of thinking and speaking allowed men in the community to conceal their fears of such women, but those fears could be articulated in the idiom of witchcraft accusations.

In Jamaica, by contrast, the power of old belief systems was minimized. In fact, African beliefs that endowed spirits with vitality and influence were and still are ignored completely; they have been consigned to the realm of exotic stories and thereby sanitized of their very real power. The seductive Mammywata—often portrayed as a female water spirit—appears in folk

culture in Africa and the Americas and is a key figure in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Kincaid viewed the rejection of such icons as a form of cultural enslavement to victorious European colonizers. Using the novel as her vehicle, Cobham explores the complex, fraught, and often contradictory relationship between modern Caribbean folk culture and the African past.

Voluntary and forced migrations have had a significant impact on the lives of black women, as Cassandra R. Veney's "No Place to Call Home: Refugee and Internally Displaced Women in Kenya" and Leslie Brown's "'The Sisters and Mothers Are Called to the City': African American Women and an Even Greater Migration" exemplify. Refugee and internally displaced populations are disproportionately composed of women. In Sudan and Somalia, civil wars have forced thousands of women and children to seek asylum in Kenya, where the structure of refugee camps has exposed many of them to the very abuses which they fled in their own countries: assault, rape, high rates of infant mortality, torture, and even death. Internally displaced women in Sudan and Kenya are at particular risk, since they have not crossed national boundaries and are thus outside the purview of international aid organizations.

On the other side of the Atlantic, African American women in the United States during the twentieth century were the primary migrants from southern rural areas to urban centers in both the North and the South. Economic and social forces informed black families' decisions to relocate, and many migrant women found that they faced some of the same dangers as their peers in Somalia and Sudan, including assault and rape in a society that hampered black men's ability to protect black women. Economic opportunity in the form of seasonal and casual work for black women was greater than for black men in urban areas, resulting in more women migrants. However, black women in urban areas were often perceived as being outside of male control, and they frequently faced insinuations of immorality. Nevertheless, women's friendship and kinship networks provided structure and organization as women kept contact with family members, provided information on housing and employment, and laid the bases for social and religious organizations.

Religion and spirituality are underlying themes in many of the chapters that follow. Black women have relied on their faith to help them surmount social and economic barriers. Barbara A. Moss's "Mai Chaza and the Politics of Motherhood in Colonial Zimbabwe" and Fayth M. Parks's "Standing

Their Ground: Black Women's Sacred Daily Life" examine the integral nature of spirituality in black women's lives. Many women have enjoyed a personal relationship with the divine, and there has often been little division between the sacred and the secular in their lives. In the precolonial Shona society that Moss describes, women's productive and reproductive labor provided status, prestige, and a degree of economic security; when their fertility failed, they sought to regain their status by becoming spiritual specialists. Under colonialism, African women's productivity decreased due to land alienation, and the spiritual specialists were threatened by Christianity. Using spirituality, in the form of Christianity, Shona women molded the Methodist women's prayer union, Ruwadzano/Manyano, into a vehicle that enhanced motherhood, and one member of that union, Mai Chaza, established her own church in the 1950s, using fertility as a focal point of healing.

For African American women, spirituality has long influenced their perspectives on life and informed their coping strategies. Just as precolonial African women were initiated into spiritual consciousness, African American women have sustained a form of spiritual awakening through religious rituals in their communities. Research on the folk-healing beliefs held by African American women reveals a strong spiritual base from which they develop solutions to their problems. For these women, spirituality serves as both an anchor and a compass as they cope with life's challenges.

Black women have found the faith and courage to overcome all types of major obstacles, including state power. Cora Presley's "Gender and Political Struggle in Kenya, 1948-1998" and Emilye Crosby's "'The lady folk is a doer': Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Claiborne County, Mississippi" investigate black women's roles in liberation struggles. Kenyan women were at the forefront of their country's anticolonial struggle, protesting oppressive policies that threatened their economic survival. For four months in 1951 and 1952, they organized and protested *as* women, demonstrating at colonial offices and burning cattle enclosures. The Mau Mau struggle in Kenya depended heavily on women to provide food, strategic information, and armaments and to transport supplies; these women were politically conscious of their oppression and the consequences of their actions. After Kenya attained independence from Britain, women continued to protest for the implementation of a real democracy in their homeland, and they have been prominent in the more recent resistance to the regime

of President Daniel arap Moi. Like their counterparts in Kenya, African American women were the backbone of a great struggle as well, providing the strong hands, tired arms, and aching feet that kept the civil rights movement in motion. They participated in disproportionate numbers: canvassing neighborhoods, registering voters, taking part in demonstrations, and housing and feeding civil rights workers. They nurtured the movement into being and politicized existing networks of friendship and kinship. In Claiborne County, Mississippi, the area studied by Crosby, 80 percent of the first fifteen hundred blacks who registered to vote were women.

Patricia Achieng Opondo's "Strategies for Survival by Luo Female Artists in the Rural Environment in Kenya" examines how songs allow women's concerns to be heard. The female artists of rural Kenya address their problems and speak for themselves through the medium of *dodo* performance. The term *dodo* means "something pleasant" and refers to the pleasantries that abound at male beer-drinking parties where songs are performed. Taking over a previously male space, Luo women adapt their performances to influence their audiences and shape images of the individuals portrayed in their musical compositions. Dodo songs also socialize women to their expected roles and allow them to express their resentment of and resistance to certain chores. Contemporary issues such as family planning, immunization, and AIDS education also surface in dodo performances. By developing symbiotic relationships with local and national leaders, dodo singers empower themselves and create a forum in which women can "talk back." Through performance, they define social values and celebrate what is historically significant to them, thus creating memories for their communities.

Andrea Benton Rushing's "Wild and Holy Women in the Poetry of Brenda Marie Osbey" similarly demonstrates that memory is a crucial survival strategy. Osbey and the characters she creates have long memories that expand the traditional images of African American women to include the totality of their experiences. These women are quite unlike the earnest, self-sacrificial mothers who resonate in most poetry: some are driven to near insanity by oppressive working conditions that deny their maternal feelings, some are haunted by repressive relationships with men, others exhibit no familial love and callously kill, and many have an intimate relationship with voodoo. Osbey gives a voice to women who have been silenced by community embarrassment and neglect but who nevertheless are members of the communal family.

How black women are portrayed by academia and the media is the subject of our last paired set, Teresa Barnes's "Owning What We Know: Racial Controversies in South African Feminism, 1991–1998" and Deseriee Kennedy's "Decolonizing Culture: The Media, Black Women, and Law." In postapartheid South Africa, the appropriation of black women's history by white women researchers working with black women "research assistants" has created controversy. As Barnes points out, the exploitation of black women's lives for the benefit of white researchers' academic credentials is analogous to the exploitation of black laborers under apartheid. While racial feminist research is debated, the "common experience of oppression" reveals a shared understanding of race, class, and gender. By claiming "what we know," black women researchers can organize against the perpetuation of exploitative methodologies.

A more difficult task is the transformation of media representations of black women, the subject of Kennedy's chapter. Black women have consistently been portrayed as ingratiating, apolitical, happy domestic servants devoid of kinship or ambition and completely enmeshed in their white employers' lives. Such images belie the reality of the working-class black women who worked to maintain their families, demanded dignity, took part in the civil rights struggle, and confronted discriminatory employment practices. The media's ability to present "false truths" relies on the segregated nature of American society, which itself is reinforced by the stereotypes presented in films, television, and other forms of mass media. The images thus presented—which are designed to be palatable to the majority of viewers, as well as producers and sponsors—are shaped in part by the media's structure, legislation, and legal institutions.

It is obvious that many themes in the essays that follow are interrelated. For example, Christianity and missionary education transformed the lives of many women in African and African diaspora communities, but they also contributed to nuances and variations and to internal conflicts and contradictions of class and leadership in black communities. Religion and education highlight black women's roles as agents of change and illuminate the sometimes uneasy negotiations between men and women, insiders and outsiders. An attendant theme is the nature of interactions between elite black women who were products of missionary education and women who were part of the masses. Elite women founded self-help organizations for less privileged women in rural and urban areas, who embraced the organizations. The less privileged women also developed their own strategies for

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personal and community survival and coping with change, all of which, in turn, helped shape elite agendas. Just as black women from every class have taken part in community activism, they have also been maligned by a common oppression and by media stereotypes that seek to rob them of their dignity, identity, and self-reliance.

If any one theme runs throughout all these chapters, it is the significance of black women's agency, self-reliance, and resiliency. Despite cultural differences and geographic variations, black women in Africa and the Americas have provided the foundations from which black communities have not only survived, but also thrived. Facing racial, gendered, and national oppressions, these women have claimed their right to act and to speak, often among themselves, in their own spaces and sometimes in very public places. They have understood that their best allies have always been themselves. Their activism appears normal, with women stepping forward when the need arises, leaving only the oppressors surprised that they are confronted by black women.

