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Black Feminist Thought and Classics: Re-membering, Re-claiming, Re-empowering

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I. Re-membering

The questions that first occurred to me when I began to think about this volume on feminist theory and classics were whether there is a role for classics in Black feminist thought and whether there is a role for Black feminist thought in classics. Obviously, I believe the answer to each question is yes, since I am a Black feminist and a classicist. A classicist and feminist, Marilyn Skinner (1987), suggests that the “cultural solidarity” among classicists is comparable to the “race solidarity” among Black feminists. Can Black feminism contribute more to classics than the lessons of solidarity? My Black feminist consciousness answers a resounding yes. There are lessons of re-claiming and re-membering, of giving a voice to ancestors whose life experience has been suppressed and distorted.

But I also have the consciousness of a classicist. As a classicist, I realize that I must validate the existence of ancient African women in accordance with the rigid criteria of documentary evidence upon which my discipline insists. I have seen the contempt classicists have for the work of Van Sertima (1984), James (1954), and Diop (1974), and I do not want to suffer that disrespect. Furthermore, I am, at times painfully, aware that classics is emblematic of White privilege, and the contempt for these Black scholars is part and parcel of that. The discipline (the very word conveys rigidity) of classics still follows the model designed for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century White American gentlemen of independent means. The role of classics in the history of European and American education and the prestige attached to it have led to its self-concept as an elite family of true scholars. Skinner (1987) describes this construction and its ramifications for White feminists. She explores the notion that classics is a family and her vision of family is that of a European, patriarchal and nuclear one. While Skinner’s view is justified, she never takes into account the standpoint of those of us who consider this type of family dysfunctional. No thought is given to those of us

who have experienced woman-centered family structures. The idea that we are one big happy family renders the issue of race virtually invisible. Consequently, like many southern American families—indeed, like the biracial couple which keeps their marriage and children a secret (*New York Times*, December 2, 1991, p. 1)—the classic family has kept its Brown, Black, and biracial ancestors, sisters, and brothers marginalized and invisible.

My experience as a member of a woman-centered family, and as a Black feminist and a classicist, has resulted in what has been expressed best by Patricia Williams (1991). She relates (Williams 1991: 6) how one employer described her being Black and female as at “oxymoronic odds” with the status of a commercial lawyer. She isn’t happy with this particular characterization, but she admits that “my attempts to write in my own voice have placed me in the center of a snarl of social tensions and crossed boundaries” (Williams 1991: 6). Think of the possibilities in my case: feminist classicist and woman classicist, Black classicist and Black woman classicist, and Black feminist and Black feminist classicist. If oxymoronic odds came in degrees, I would be somewhere near the high end. How did I come to this location as a Black feminist classicist?

Questions of gender and sexism had never been an issue for me, even within my family. My family has followed our Iroquois and West African heritage: the woman sets policy and shares in decisions. My father, Charles (“Pete”) Tracy Haley, turned his pay over to my mother, and after she died, to his mother. This isn’t to say my father didn’t assimilate certain patriarchal values. He was the first in his family to attend college; he did so during the depression, and racism drove him to alcoholism. He graduated from Syracuse University in 1937, “thank the laudy,” as he used to say. He wanted one of his sons to follow him to Syracuse. When I was admitted (neither of my brothers applied), he was proud but refused to pay my expenses. “Women don’t need a college education,” he said. My reaction was “I’ll show him,” and I proceeded to get a Ph.D. in classics. I never did disabuse him of the notion that I didn’t need the education. In many ways, my father’s standpoint was framed by what he had experienced. The women in our family had always had jobs: my grandmother was a cook, my mother was a secretary. My aunts (my father’s sisters) had office and sales positions. None of these women had had a college education. So, to my father’s way of thinking, they didn’t need one. However, it was my grandmother who encouraged me to go as far as I could in education. She had always wanted to be a teacher, but had to leave school at the age of twelve to support her family. I don’t think my father ever knew how deeply my grandmother had wanted to go to a teacher’s training college.

Like my fellow classicists, I was trained in the Anglo-Germanic tradition of the discipline. I took Latin in high school in upstate New York, continued it at Syracuse, never intending it as a major but always finding it a source of strength and wonder: I was good at it. Nowadays when people ask me how I became interested in classics, I always say truthfully that it was the only subject in high

school where I did not have to argue with the teacher. I had a social studies teacher who informed our class that Africa and Asia contributed nothing to human civilization. I had an American History teacher who proclaimed to the class that Puerto Rico would never become a state because it wasn’t Anglo-Saxon in background. When I challenged him with the example of Hawaii, I was sent to the principal’s office for “impertinence.” I spent much time in the principal’s office, but never for impertinence in Latin class. It seemed so straightforward; there was nothing to argue about. In college, elementary education was my intended goal, but boredom set in, and I was drawn back to Latin and, more and more, to Roman history. I took Greek and French; I applied to graduate schools; and I won a Danforth Fellowship. As an undergraduate taking classics, I wanted to belong, to be part of that select group who studied Latin and Greek. As I look back on it now, I suppose I liked the feeling of being special and exotic. I enjoyed thumbing my nose at my peers who suggested I would do more for my people if I enrolled in journalism or broadcasting. Those were vocational courses; I was an intellectual.

It has only been in the last few years that I have rediscovered the Black feminists of the nineteenth century who could have served as my role models. Frances Jackson Coppin was a slave whose aunt saved the money (\$123.00) to buy her freedom. She went on to obtain a B.A. from Oberlin College in 1865 and taught Latin and Greek to African-Americans in Philadelphia. Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Church Terrell were members of the Oberlin class of 1884 and they too received B.A.s. The curriculum for this degree was classical and usually taken by men only; for that reason it was called the “gentlemen’s course.” Women took the “ladies” course, a two-year literary curriculum, which led to a certificate. Both Cooper and Terrell went on to teach Latin at the M Street school in Washington, D.C. Terrell highlights the racist assumptions of inferiority prevalent during her life in her autobiography, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940). She relates this incident:

One day Matthew Arnold, the English writer, visited our class and Professor Frost asked me both to read the Greek and then to translate. After leaving the class Mr. Arnold referred to the young lady who read the passage of Greek so well. Thinking it would interest the Englishman, Professor Frost told him I was of African descent. Thereupon Mr. Arnold expressed the greatest surprise imaginable, because, he said, he thought the tongue of the African was so thick he could not be taught to pronounce the Greek correctly (Terrell 1940: 41).¹

Coppin, Cooper, and Terrell viewed classics as a challenge, a concrete way to disprove the prevailing racist and sexist stereotypes of their times. They were educators, intellectuals, and social activists. Each believed that education was the key to overthrowing the disadvantages that Black women and men faced and

still face. Since a classical education was the yardstick for intellectual capability, Coppin, Cooper, and Terrell learned classics, that microcosm of their society where Black women were silenced and thought incapable of intellectual endeavor. That learning, in turn, had a symbolic value for them. Audre Lorde (1984: 112) has written that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”² While that may be true, Coppin, Cooper, and Terrell chipped away at the racist and sexist foundation of the master’s house. Classics, the measure of intellectual supremacy, was transformed by them into a tool of resistance.

But I, their daughter on a metaphorical level, must face the fact that they did not consider themselves classicists. They studied Latin and Greek and excelled; in this regard they are my foremothers and role models. But the social constraints of their time pushed them out of the academy and strengthened their commitment to social activism.³ At the same time, their very education made this commitment vulnerable. As Mary Helen Washington has stated (Washington 1988: xxx), “To counteract the prevailing assumptions about black women as immoral and ignorant, Cooper had to construct a narrator who was aware of the plight of uneducated women but was clearly set apart from them in refinement, intelligence and training.” The same can be said of Terrell; classics was a key to the construction of this distance. These women’s experience has encouraged me to examine the sociology and history of the discipline. Sociologically, my experience with classics mirrors theirs.

It was at the University of Michigan that the structure and implications of patriarchal education struck me. The hierarchy and competition that characterized the program resulted in dehumanizing groveling. The hierarchy was marked by a progression of nomenclature. Entering graduate students were called by their last names; second and third year students who had passed exams were called Miss or Mr. Those admitted to candidacy were called by their first names. Male faculty were always addressed as Mr. _____, after the Harvard model. There was one woman on the faculty when I was there and she was “Mrs.” I noticed, though, that while male faculty in conversation with students would refer to their colleagues as “Mr. _____,” their female colleague was “Gerda.” Humiliation was used to “separate the men from the boys”; the aim of one professor was to reduce female students to tears. I accepted the hierarchical nomenclature but I drew the line at humiliation. When I stood up to the tears-inducing professor, I acquired the reputation of a “militant” and a “tough cookie.”

There was racism. One professor at a social function pointedly told other faculty members within my hearing that Black students were “lousy at Latin” and just not smart enough to take classics. The chair asked me why Blacks were afraid of intellectual disciplines and always went into sociology or education. Another announced during a public lecture that there was no such thing as a “Black classicist.” I was told in my second year (I was still Haley) that the dean of the graduate school was under the impression that there were no Black graduate students in the department. I was ordered by the chair of the department to attend

a departmental colloquium at which the dean would be present so “he could see a brown face.” I didn’t go, even though the subject was one I was interested in. I tended to internalize the anger; my attempts at official complaints were always met with, “That’s a serious accusation; can you prove it?”

What really annoyed me was that the class hierarchy was internalized and perpetuated by the graduate students themselves. First year students could not socialize with doctoral candidates, or second-years or third-years. Likewise, second-years socialized only with second-years and so on. Students who had passed through qualifying exams (taken at the end of the second year) felt themselves superior to those who failed or had not yet taken them. They resorted to a sort of bullying and intimidation.

A group of students established an informal but exclusive discussion group with a selected faculty member; it was held at the University Club. Student participation was by invitation only and not all students were invited. I, two Jewish men, and an Asian-American man never received an invitation. We referred to this discussion group, always highly publicized, but not public, as the “country club.” The group ended when a professor learned that not all students were invited and refused to participate until the group was open to all. Significantly, the main organizers of these discussion groups were two White women, who today consider themselves feminists.

Despite this evidence to the contrary, I continued to believe that classics was the great equalizer. In my mind, these instances of racism were committed by individuals; it wasn’t the discipline that was racist. I knew stories from my history about slaves, fugitive slaves, and newly emancipated people who learned Latin and Greek and were very successful. My own mother and aunts and father knew Latin and had encouraged me when I started it in high school. Anyone who could master Latin and Greek was equal and was playing on a level and even field. At Michigan when the professor said, “There is no such thing as a Black classicist,” I heard, “we’re all classicists.” Yes, I thought, aren’t I lucky to be in such an egalitarian field.

Yet, throughout my college and graduate school experience, buried deep in the recesses of my mind was the voice of my grandmother, Ethel Clemons Haley, saying, “Remember, no matter what you learn in school, Cleopatra was black.” Now where did she get an idea like that?⁴ Schooled only as far as the seventh grade, never having learned any foreign language, just a domestic servant, a cook, she obviously had no knowledge about Cleopatra or classics or anything else intellectual. So I, the great teacher, used to tell her about the Ptolemies and how they were Greek and how Cleopatra was a Ptolemy and so she was Greek. At one point I even showed her the genealogical tables of the *Cambridge Ancient History*. “See,” I said, “Cleopatra was Greek!” “Oh,” she said, “and who wrote those books?” I dismissed her question with exasperation and returned to the study of the ancient sources, confident that what I had been taught to see was indeed what was there to be seen.

I was not very enthusiastic about feminism or feminist theory. I was much like the Black women bell hooks (1981) describes in *Ain't I a Woman?* What is the fuss? All the women in my family had worked, had careers, had families, and balanced everything just fine. They were the center of everything. So the “women’s movement” left me bored. About this time in the academy, there was a rising interest in women’s history. Classics, rather cautiously, established courses on women in the ancient world; the field found some validation when, in 1975, Sarah Pomeroy published *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. As I completed graduate school, I was drawn to this new specialty but investigated it secretly. I still yearned for the approval of classicists and I believed in loyalty to the discipline’s traditional limits. I saw how classicists at Michigan spurned Marxist treatments of ancient history and how African and African-American historians like James and Diop were ignored. In fact I never even heard of George James until I went to teach at Howard University in 1978, although *Stolen Legacy* has been published in 1954. I knew the application of any critical theory to “our” discipline was tantamount to betrayal. I remember making a weak vow at the APA, along with rather more vociferous female colleagues and peers, that I would never teach such a course. Classics was a universally relevant discipline; it was timeless and it didn’t need to change. Did it?

It was a weak vow, and in my second year at Howard, I found myself teaching “Women in the Ancient World.” As I look back at the syllabus now, it was not particularly feminist; it was a classics survey, Homer, the tragedians, Livy, Vergil, with a few women thrown in. The feminist literature I assigned was not particularly current or radical.⁵ I didn’t relate to it personally but found places for it in my course. The only women in Africa I dealt with were Dido and Cleopatra, but I didn’t regard them as Black, or African.

It was Cleopatra who haunted me. In a “Women in the Ancient World” class, we were studying Cleopatra and Octavian’s propaganda against her. Ray, a Black male student, asked me to cover again the arguments identifying Cleopatra as a Greek. I sighed and presented all the evidence. I pulled out the *Cambridge Ancient History (CAH)*, and we pored over the genealogy. I brought in the research of my colleague Frank Snowden (1970). We reviewed other secondary sources: Volkmann (1958), Grant (1972, 1982), and Lindsay (1971). Ray, very politely but intently, repeated the question my grandmother had posed years before: “But Professor Haley, who wrote those books?” I was going through it all again (growing somewhat irate), when I stared at the *CAH* genealogy and saw—for the first time—question marks where Cleopatra’s grandmother should be. As I stared, I heard Ray, again politely, say, “I understand, Professor Haley. You believe what you say is true, but you have bought a lie.” The other students in the class were divided; some agreed with Ray, some with me, others were totally indifferent. I was shaken; what did those question marks mean? Why

didn’t all the students see the evidence as I did? What did they know that I didn’t? In buying the lie, had I sold out my race?

At that point, I confronted Cleopatra, and I discovered that my Black students and indeed my grandmother read her on a different level. For them and for me, although I suppressed her, Cleopatra was the lost and found window where we could “claim an identity they taught us to despise” (Cliff 1988: 61). I had disliked discussing Cleopatra; I had been uncomfortable and ill at ease. Why? I began to see and still am arriving at seeing that Cleopatra is the crystallization of the tension between my yearning to fit in among classicists and my identity politics. I clouded this tension by professing that the Ptolemies of the first century B.C.E. were Greco-Egyptian. To me, “Egyptian”, “Greco-Egyptian”, “Greek”, “Roman” had been cultural designations. I refused, rather self-righteously, I admit, to colorize the question as my grandmother had done, along with my students, and, most recently, *Newsweek* (“Was Cleopatra Black”: September 23, 1991). What I resisted was the fact that my culture is colorized: Black literature, Black music, Black art, Black feminism. Gradually, by reading my history and Black feminist thought, I perceived that Cleopatra was a signifier on two levels.⁶ She gives voice to our “anxiety about cultural disinheritance” (Sadoff 1990: 205), and she represents the contemporary Black woman’s double history of oppression and survival.

In the Black oral tradition, Cleopatra becomes a symbolic construction voicing our Black African heritage so long suppressed by racism and the ideology of miscegenation. When we say, in general, that the ancient Egyptians were Black and, more specifically, that Cleopatra was Black, we claim them as part of a culture and history that has known oppression and triumph, exploitation and survival. Cleopatra reacted to the phenomena of oppression and exploitation as a Black woman would. Hence we embrace her as sister; she is Black. Alice Walker (1989: 267) employs a similar symbolic construction with Medusa. Here Medusa’s decapitation by Perseus represents the rape and cultural suppression of Africa by Europeans.

My grandmother and students were also reading Cleopatra on the level of their experience with miscegenation and the law of miscegenation (Saks 1988). We had been told that if we have one Black ancestor, then we are Black. Films and plays have reinforced this idea. Our family histories and photographs proved this to us. My grandmother was white, had straight black hair, and the nose of her Onondagan grandmother, but she was “colored.” Even as a “Greco-Egyptian,” Cleopatra was a product of miscegenation.⁷ How is it she is not Black? My grandmother and students were being logical; they were applying to Cleopatra the social decoding typically applied to them.

It seemed to me that the Cleopatra I studied as the “true Cleopatra” was a construction of classical scholars and the Greek and Roman authors they consulted.⁸ In this particular case, they were willing—eager—to erase the Black

ancestor and claim the beautiful Cleopatra for Europe. Like the biracial family cited earlier, classics has kept Cleopatra's Africanity and Blackness a secret and questionable. Many African-Americans did the same for themselves. My family claimed the West Indies as our point of origin. Shame arising from internalized racism never let us go further back until the rise of the Black pride movement. Sadoff's (1990) analysis and critique of misreading led me to apply this theory to classics and Cleopatra.⁹ Classicists and historians have misread Cleopatra as a way of furthering ideas of racial purity and hegemony. Martin Bernal's work (1987) on the demise of ancient Egypt in classical scholarship brought him to the conclusion that we classicists still work within racist paradigms.¹⁰

I applied the same critique to the ancient evidence; I began to wonder how the Romans and Greeks misread Cleopatra. I did research on foreign women and their image in Roman history and literature. Here Cleopatra was the archetype of the temptress and she was transformed into other characters: Dido in poetry and Sophoniba in historiography.¹¹ The Romans misread these women as exempla of the temptress who distracted men from their "manliness," *virtus*. As strong queens of African kingdoms, they also constituted a grave threat to the Roman concept of empire. Black feminists, especially King (1988) and Collins (1990), discuss in their work the controlling image of the jezebel/seductress and its impact on the perception and treatment of Black women. Palmer (1983) analyzes the symbolism of Black women in America as sexual enticers who could overthrow reason and social order. She relates this to the virgin/whore dualism in cultural imagery for White women, in existence at least since classical Greece (Palmer 1983: 157).

This same symbol-making process has led to a physical stereotype, which has been applied to ancient African women even by twentieth-century scholars. A good example is Frank Snowden's translation of the physical description of Scybale, an African woman who appears in the *Moretum* (a short Augustan poem of unknown authorship):

Erat unica custos
Afra genus, tota patriam testante figura,
torta comam labroque tumens et fusca colore,
pectore lata iacens mammis, compressor alvo,
cruribus exilis, spatiosa prodiga planta
(*Moretum* 31–35).

African in race, her whole figure proof of her country—her hair tightly curled, lips thick, color dark, chest broad, breasts pendulous, belly somewhat pinched, legs thin, and feet broad and ample (translated by Snowden 1970: 6).

Snowden's translation reminds me too much of the physical stereotype of Black women in the nineteenth century. He does not treat this passage elsewhere in his

work, nor does he seem aware that his translation is stereotypical. Can we read the Latin another way? It seems to me that here is a place where classicists can use a Black feminist perspective and Black feminism can rehabilitate the reading of a text. What would a Black feminist translation of this passage look like? Still using a standard Latin lexicon, here's what I came up with:

She was his only companion,
African in her race, her whole form a testimony to her country:
her hair twisted into dreads, her lips full, her color dark, her
chest broad, her breasts flat, her stomach flat and firm, her legs
slender, her feet broad and ample.

From this translation, it is clearer that the Roman author was relaying somatic differences, but without the racist stigma attached to Snowden's phrases ("thick lips, pendulous breasts, belly somewhat pinched"). The woman is not portrayed as beautiful in Roman terms, but neither is she the object of a racist gaze. She is exotic, as most non-Roman peoples were to the Romans. Black feminist thought encourages us classicists to acknowledge our own racist and sexist attitudes, not just those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It prompts us to reevaluate our work. This in turn can lead to opening up a space in which to reclaim and reconstruct the lives of Black women who have been silenced through a dearth of evidential voice. Black feminist thought and ideology, with their focus on inclusivity, can provide the theoretical framework to read the silences that classics has to offer.

II. Re-claiming

In this part of the essay, I'd like to continue my journey by giving examples of how I have attempted to follow through the Black feminist model of inclusivity.¹² Here I was, trained in Anglo-German methodology, a product of the Michigan department, a Black feminist classicist. In 1985, I left Howard to take a "Target of Opportunity" (TOP) position in the classics department at University of California, Irvine, a position I held until 1989. The overwhelming Whiteness and conservatism of that department left me isolated; my colleagues never let me forget that I was a TOP hire. To maintain my self-esteem and my sanity, I read and was deeply moved by bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), and Elizabeth Spelman (1982; 1988). I was shaken by Lorde's "Open Letter to Mary Daly" (Lorde 1984: 66–71), because it could have been written to me. I didn't at the time know any of the goddesses to whom she refers; I didn't know there were Dahomeian Amazons or women-warriors of Dan; I didn't even know where these places were. I looked again at my course syllabus: there was a passing reference to the Code of Hammurabi. Well, I thought, it's not Greece. But where are the African women: Egyptian, Nubian, Ethiopian? None. But wait, there is

Cleopatra—again. But I wanted to know of women before the coming of the Ptolemies. Could I find out?

I felt overwhelmed by the seeming hopelessness of the task, and reacted like many of my fellow classicists: “I don’t have time for this.” “I don’t know where to look.” “I’m not an Egyptologist.” “There isn’t any evidence.” “Why do I have to do this?” But if I don’t, who will? I decided it was up to me; I began by incorporating ancient Egyptian women in my “Women in the Ancient World” course.

I approached the subject like a classicist. First I read general surveys and handbooks on ancient Egypt: Erman (1894), Aldred (1961), Emery (1961), James (1979). Through these men, I saw ancient Egypt as a Mediterranean culture whose nature was intrinsically patriarchal. Like a well-trained classicist, I found myself uncritically accepting the interpretation of these experts. I kept overlooking the cultural and patriarchal assumptions of these scholars and their predecessors.

Finally, my Black feminist consciousness got through to me. It nagged me to look critically at these sources. I found that the issue of race was often ignored. Very early works strove to strip the Egyptians of their Black African culture and physical features. They ignored the mixed racial heritage and minimized into invisibility the African features of Egyptian culture. Early Egyptologists often achieved this by employing taxonomic distinctions between Egyptians and “negroes.” Punt, a country now identified with Somalia, is often characterized as mysterious and, along with Nubia, is cited as the home of “negroes,” implying that no Blacks lived in Egypt.¹³ Gender, too, is virtually ignored; when it is not, remarkable comments are made. For example, Erman (1894: 150) has this to say:

It has often been said that the essential difference between the civilization of the West and of the East consists in the different status of woman. In the West she is the companion of man, in the East his servant and his toy. In the West, at one time, the esteem in which woman was held rose to a cult, while in the East the question has been earnestly discussed whether women really belonged to the human race.

The contrast would come as a surprise to the reader of Aristotle (*Politics* 1254b3–1277b25; 1313b33–39; 1335a8–17), who opposes women, slaves, children, and animals to men, masters, fathers, and human beings.

Were there sources which acknowledged the Africanity and Blackness of the ancient Egyptians? What was the role of gender in the society? I consulted more sources, in which Africanity along with Semitic influence emerged as factors in ancient Egyptian culture.¹⁴ For the role of women and gender, I had to find other works that dealt with these issues. Lesko (1978) provided me with evidence of female pharaohs and led me to the construction of the pharaohship as a partnership. Lesko (1987: 45) remarks in passing that matrilineage was common in

African society. She hints again at this stance in her later work (Lesko 1989: 313). It appears that except in unusual circumstances there were two pharaohs, co-pharaohs, one male and one female, reflecting the androgyny of the Creator. We have the names of many of these female co-pharaohs, especially from the Old Kingdom (Lesko 1978: 32). I learned the names of female pharaohs who ruled alone: Hetepheres II in the Old Kingdom; Hatshepsut, Twosre, and Mutnodjme in the New. Troy (1986) convinced me of the importance of androgyny, of the feminine principle, and of motherhood in Egyptian religion and monarchy.

Here, I thought, was a society where some women enjoyed high status and power and equality. Lesko (1989) reinforced this further. There were still doubts, though. I wondered whether “pharaoh” was a gender specific term. I kept reading about African society but the perspective was European. Even Van Sertima (1984) has a Eurocentric focus. Reading Van Sertima, I reacted very much as a classicist, embarrassed by the lack of evidence and credible references: Cleopatra’s Blackness is supported by a citation of “Ripley’s Believe It or Not” from 1934. Now I ask myself whether this is “poor” scholarship or support for my thesis that we African Americans misread Cleopatra symbolically.

Throughout my search for ancient African women, I was swayed by Western feminism, which claimed sexism and women’s oppression cut beyond all racial and cultural boundaries. This feminist argument reaches back to the fundamental purpose and function of the patriarchal family, which limited women’s social roles to being childbearers and homemakers. Certainly ancient Egypt could be viewed through that lens and could be interpreted as a similar patriarchal structure: women stayed at home with children; during the New Kingdom, women were sometimes depicted in art as smaller than men; the titles of ruling women are translated as great royal wife, not pharaoh. There seemed to be a contradiction: were Egyptian women somehow equal at the same time that they were limited to the roles of childbearers and homemakers?

I didn’t realize what was wrong until I read further. As I considered Gae Callender’s 1984 essay, “The Status of Women in Old and Early Middle Kingdom Egypt,” it struck me that she and I had looked at ancient Egypt from a Eurocentric and Western feminist perspective, not an Afrocentric and Black feminist one. For example, Callender has, unfortunately, assimilated the racist attitudes of her sources. My rudimentary knowledge of ancient Egypt tells me that of all the historical periods, the Old Kingdom (3100–2180 B.C.E.) deviates the least from the predynastic people who were Black African. Yet Callender (1984: 34) includes the following in her discussion of the scholarship concerning Queen Nitikrity: “Her colorful story [Hall] divided up between a male ruler (about whom nothing is known by the way) and a Greek courtesan called Rhodopis, together with the blonde-haired Queen we looked at earlier, Hetepheres” (my emphasis). My initial reaction to this blonde hair was not as a scholar, but as an African-American woman. “Here we go again, another White scholar telling me the Egyptians were White—and not even being subtle!” In a more scholarly vein, I reflected that

Callender's article is not about the physical anthropology of the Old Kingdom Egyptians; hence the insertion of this physical trait is curious and suspicious, especially since there is no supporting evidence cited. There are racist overtones here. Coming as it does after Callender's praise of Hetepheres as a queen (Callender 1984: 32), Callender seems to make an implicit connection between Hetepheres' "nordic" traits and her success as a queen. This is reminiscent of the racist theory of the dynastic people who came down from the north bringing civilization to the "savage" Egyptians.

It was then I realized how much I had assimilated Western feminism, and how important it was for me to look to Africa and African feminism.¹⁵ It seemed to me that African feminism and the African construction of gender are more applicable to ancient Egypt than is Western feminism, especially if we want to see Egypt as an African society. The fundamental thesis of the Black feminist approach here is in Omolade's words (1980: 240) that "Black women and men in traditional African societies were conscious human beings who designed and constructed their own societies to meet their defined human needs." There is no universal construction of gender to describe this subjectivity.

Obviously, I can't expound here all the similarities between African constructions of gender and those of ancient Egypt. However, as an example I would like to examine briefly the role and status of motherhood and language in the Yoruba and Igbo societies, keeping in mind, of course, the impact of colonialism upon these societies. I can then set these alongside Egypt and show the similarities among them.

Among the Yoruba and Igbo, there is sex role differentiation; people clearly have designated roles and tasks. Women are traders; men are hunters. Women are mothers; men are fathers. But this differentiation is not dichotomized into domestic and public spheres. "To be a good wife and mother, a woman had not only to cook and attend her husband and children, but she also had to farm, trade or otherwise contribute to her household's livelihood" (Sudarkasa 1981: 54). Likewise, men had domestic chores like participating in the socialization of children, as well as a public occupation. Women participated in decision making; they could own property and accumulate wealth from their work. Sudarkasa (1981: 54) states that the "important economic roles of women in traditional West Africa were part and parcel of the overall domestic roles of wife, mother, sister, and daughter." The same was true for women in ancient Egypt (Lesko 1978, 1989).

Yoruba women's greatest authority comes from motherhood, a sign to many Western feminists of oppression. Troy (1986) delineates the importance of the mother in Egyptian society both mythically and historically. Hence Yoruba society, like ancient Egyptian society, is mother centered, and here motherhood is collective. Marriage is organized around production and reproduction, not the control of sexuality. It is important to point out also that among the Yoruba and other peoples of West Africa, "domestic groups are extended families built around

segments of matri- or patrilineages" (Sudarkasa 1981: 52). For the Yoruba, it is the lineage which is important, not the individual or even individual families.

This was also true for the ancient Egyptians. As Diop (1978: 34) states: "In those primitive ages when the security of the group was the primary concern, the respect enjoyed by either of the sexes was connected with its contribution to this collective security." In addition, lineage was important, especially in the royal family where matrifocality insured connections with the goddesses (Troy 1986: 56).

For the Yoruba and Igbo, both males and females have roles of authority within the domestic groups or compounds. Both these societies have developed a seniority system based on age as the primary mode of social organization. Consequently within the compound there are an official male head and female head. This is strikingly reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian pharaohship. In ancient Egypt, as in Yoruba society, motherhood was as much a generational role as a gender role. Women and men related to each other as members of one family. Hence the ancient Egyptian women viewed all men as their brothers; men viewed all women as their sisters. The feminine prototype was that of the mother. As such this prototype was the medium of renewal and is given symmetrical expression in the generational roles of mother, wife, sister, and daughter. As Isis says to Osiris: "I am your sister. I am your wife. I am the daughter of your mother who causes your beautiful face to see" (Troy 1986: 50). The double role of mother/daughter is the primary characteristic of the feminine prototype: she creates the very being by whom she herself has been created.

This mother-centered construction can include men and in both ancient Egyptian and Yoruba society the public and private spheres overlap for men just as they do for women. As a result, for example, men are actively involved in the care of children. Some feminists might argue that there is still a patriarchal cast to Yoruba and Igbo society. The chiefs are men and there can be paternal dominance in the family. One has to wonder how much of this is the result of colonialism. Omolade (1980: 249) correctly reminds us, however, that "the crucial aspect here is not an assertion that African women were liberated in the context of industrialized twentieth century societies, but whether they were citizens with political rights and economic freedoms."

Language provides a further key to the Yoruba construction of gender. In the Yoruba language, there are terms for mother, father, wife, husband, sibling, child. There is no equivalent for men, women, sister, brother, daughter, or son. In Igbo, Amadiume (1987: 89) states that there is no distinction made between male and female in subject pronouns, that is, there is no "she"/"he." Her thesis is that there is a greater possibility for men and women to share attributes.

For sources written in hieroglyphics, I have had to rely on translations undertaken by academics trained in languages which are rigidly gendered. I have already raised the question of whether the term "pharaoh" is gender specific. Diop (in Mokhtar 1990: 28-32) attempted to show the linguistic affinity between

the hieroglyphics and the Wolof language, but he was not looking specifically at gender construction. Troy (1986: 104) observes that “ancient Egyptian is known for its lack of an extensive kinship terminology.” It seems to cover members of the nuclear family: mother, *mwt*; father, *yt*; sister, *snt*; brother, *sn*; daughter, *s3t*; son, *s3*. These terms in turn were used for other family relationships. It is clear these terms were ambiguous and this ambiguity has its background in the structure of the family group. Troy (1986: 105) states further:

if one posits that the basic socio-economic unit was the extended family, consisting of several generations, the use of the limited kinship terminology makes some sense as the designation, not only of blood relationships, but also of the relative ranking of the individuals within the household unit.

It sounds strikingly like the seniority system of the Yoruba and Igbo.

It is safe to say that our view of ancient Egyptian society would change if we could show that Egyptian was structured closer, in terms of gender, to Yoruba than to Greek or Latin or Hebrew. Isis to Osiris would read: “I am your sibling. I am your wife. I am the child of your mother who causes your beautiful face to see.” At this point, I can only speculate, but it appears that this translation is in keeping with the other African features of ancient Egyptian social structures. These connections show that the “Mediterranean basin” really contained a multiplicity of cultures and not just variations on the theme of Graeco-Roman patriarchy. There obviously is still work to be done. A thorough study of ancient Egypt through the lens of African feminism is a promising avenue for collaboration between Black feminists and classicists. To quote Fannie Barrier Williams (Loewenberg and Bogin 1976: 266), “As it is there is much to be unlearned as well as to be learned.”

III. Re-empowering through Re-learning

How do we begin? First we classicists have to move away from the notion of discipline. We speak of the discipline of classics; it evokes an image of narrow boundaries and rigid inflexibility and exclusion. The discipline of classics purports to study the ancient world, yet, in fact, only studies Greece and Rome. But Greece and Rome were not the only cultures in the ancient world. We need to think of classics in terms of ethnic studies and leave ourselves open to all possibilities. Likewise, feminists, whether Black or White, need to rethink the preference for theory over thought (Christian 1988; Lugones and Spelman 1983). Central to this relearning and to my foregoing interpretation of ancient Egypt is the acknowledgement of different standpoints. The standpoint of Black women and its validity is in fact fundamental to Black feminist thought and forms; along with reclaiming our foremothers, it is the core of this ideology (Collins 1990:

21–39). Patricia Hill Collins recently elaborated on the construct of standpoint by retelling “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”¹⁶ The emperor had convinced all the people that his new clothes were wonderful and that his were the only clothes that were wonderful and that that was the only valid comment which could be made about them. The adults were afraid to contradict the emperor because he was the emperor and they never talked to one another. One day, during one of the emperor’s parades, when everyone was praising the emperor’s new clothes, a little African-American girl said to the adult next to her, “It seems to me that the emperor is naked! Why do you all say the emperor’s clothes are wonderful, when he isn’t wearing any?” At first, the little girl was silenced by her fellow bystanders, but she didn’t give up. She kept nudging and asking. Soon people began to *talk to one another* and compare notes. Before this, the people never talked to one another; they just accepted the emperor’s word. But once communication began, the people began to support the African-American girl’s standpoint—not as the sole one, or the “correct” one, but as a valid one. Obviously, Collins’s version of the story was “read” differently by different people in the audience. For some, the emperor represented White male privilege, or knowledge, or voice. For me, he was the construct of the discipline of classics.

Only recently has the impact of the Anglo-Germanic construction of the discipline of classics upon the evidence of the ancient world been fully investigated (Bernal 1987). Martin Bernal shows the impact of Black slavery, racial science, and Romanticism upon the reading of ancient evidence. Many of the assumptions of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries about gender and race are reflected in the discipline. They mean that any signs of culture or intellect found on the continent of Africa must be devalued. Therefore, the Egyptians, when acknowledged as intellectual or civilized, become White. When they are acknowledged to be of “mixed race” or African, then their “culture” is stagnant, passive, or dead.¹⁷ Furthermore, the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa are never mentioned, and this omission implies the nonexistence of culture, or at least its lack of relevance to Greece and Rome. Even the well-documented ethnic and cultural diversity of Roman Africa is not considered an important issue.¹⁸ This kind of exclusion prevails in mainstream scholarship, and results in courses on women in the ancient world that have no African or even Semitic women represented. The same problem has plagued White feminist theories in the past and was poignantly described by bell hooks (1981), Elizabeth Spelman (1982), Elizabeth Hood (1978), and Phyllis Palmer (1983) for White women and Black women, and by Paula Gunn Allen (1988) for White women and Native American women. If the life and experience of Black women in America have been rendered so invisible, it is not surprising to find a deeper invisibility for ancient African women. We need to hear the tension between the ancient African cultures and the culture of the Greek and Roman men who serve as the evidence of their existence. We need to redefine our field so that it includes African languages, African history, African archaeology. We need to hear and acknowledge the

silence of African women when we write books about ancient Africa from a Eurocentric standpoint. We need to learn about African feminism so we can restore their voice. We need to recognize that classics was the educational foundation for our Black feminist foremothers. We need to analyze this as we reclaim these feminists. We have already begun; a good example is Hazel Carby's (1985, 1987) analysis of Pauline Hopkins's use of Sappho in her novel *Contending Forces*.

Black feminist thought provides a standpoint from which to re-member, to reclaim, to re-empower the ancient African woman. Through Black feminist thought, classics can be radically transformed from a discipline into a multi-racial, multicultural, multivalent field which better reflects the ancient world it studies. Black feminists, in turn, should view classics, not as the "enemy," but as a source of symbolic value for so many of our foremothers as they struggled against racism and sexism.

Notes

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1. Londa Schiebinger (1990) analyzes how eighteenth-century science supported this notion of Black intellectual inferiority. These assumptions of Black intellectual inferiority are still around. In 1982, while I was attending the annual meeting of the American Philological Association, I was chatting with a grants person (White male) from NEH. When he learned that I taught classics at Howard, he said, "Gee, it must be grim teaching classics to black people."
 2. Audre Lorde did not have the happy experience I did learning Latin. See Lorde 1982: 60.
 3. Even the American Negro Academy, the foremost scholarly organization for African-Americans contemporary with Terrell and Cooper, did not admit women, despite the recognition of some members that there had been "a higher attainment of scholarship by our women than our men" (Moss 1981: 41). Faculty integration at overwhelmingly White institutions of higher education began only in the 1940s when the University of Chicago accepted a grant awarded by the Rosenwald Fund to pay the salary of a Black faculty member.
 4. Cleopatra's Blackness is part of Black oral history. My grandmother may have learned from that. She may well have been influenced by images of Josephine Baker. Phyllis Rose (1990) titles her biography of Baker *Jazz Cleopatra*. Peiss (1990) discusses the employment of Cleopatra in marketing cosmetics to Black women.
- Other Black women have heard similar stories from their relatives. Compare Golden (1983: 4, her father is speaking): "I don't care *what* they tell you in school, [Cleopatra] was a black woman."
5. Looking at a syllabus from that time I see listed Bullough (1978), de Beauvoir (1974), Putnam (1910), Rogers (1966), and Slater (1968).
 6. My ideas were formed by reading Cooper (1892), DuBois collected by Huggins (1986), King (1988), Collins (1990), Moses (1990), hooks (1981), Walker (1983), Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982), and Terrell (1940).
 7. The *Cambridge Ancient History* genealogy has "by a concubine" where Cleopatra's grandmother should be; the Greeks took Egyptian and Ethiopian women as mistresses. See Pomeroy (1990: 55); cf. Cameron (1990). I think it is safe to say that Cleopatra had Black ancestors.
 8. The construction by scholars and filmmakers struck me as I viewed Pascal's 1945 film version of G. B. Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, starring Vivien Leigh. The dialogue intends for us to take Cleopatra as darker than the Roman Caesar, but the visual presence of a very White and European Vivien Leigh contradicts the dialogue.
 9. The theoretical standpoint I take here has been articulated by Bloom (1973), Gilbert and Gubar (1979), and Sadoff (1990). My use is unusual in that I am applying it to history and historiography rather than literature.
 10. This conclusion is one of the most important and overlooked of his work. The American Philological Association Panel (1989) and the subsequent special issue (1989) of *Arethusa*, "The Challenge of Black Athena," concentrate on rather esoteric points of research and interpretation. Lefkowitz (1992) trivializes the ramifications of this conclusion.
 11. See Haley (1989, 1990).
 12. The Black feminist conception of inclusivity is not that of Kagan, where he states: "We are all familiar with the demand for diversity of representation—one from each color and continent, and so on" (Kagan 1990: 35).
 13. The epithet "mysterious" is always applied to Africa, the "dark" continent. It extends further to the people, especially women. Palmer (1983: 158) analyzes it in this way: "Black women, even more than other women forced to labor outside their homes, come to symbolize sexuality, prowess, mysterious power (mysterious, certainly, since it was so at odds with their actual economic, political and social deprivation); they came to embody the 'myth of the superwoman.' "
 14. For the African in Egyptian culture, see Trigger (1978), Trigger, Kemp, O'Connor and Lloyd (1983), Adams (1978), and Diop (1974, 1978).
 15. I reread Omolade (1980), and consulted Terborg Penn, Harley, and Rushing (1987), Amadiume (1987), and Steady (1981).
 16. Conference on "Integrating Class, Race and Gender into the Curriculum," sponsored by Institute for Research on Women at SUNY, Albany at Albany, New York, June 7, 1991.
 17. As near as I can tell, proponents of this theory posit an indigenous people of "Caucasian stock" who were "diluted" by mixing with the "negroid" peoples of Nubia and Kush. See Derry 1956.

18. The most recent study of Rome and its ethnic diversity is Thompson (1989). Camps (1960) deals with the ethnic and cultural diversity of Roman Africa; Mokhtar (1990) and Davidson (1959) are two of the few who deal with sub-Saharan Africa. Other sources include Cracco Ruggini (1968, 1974, 1979), Thompson and Ferguson (1969), and Bugner (1976). Gender is only touched upon in these sources and usually is ignored.

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