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3-17-1982

## The Social Dynamics of the Educated Afro-American Woman

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### Recommended Citation

Smith, J. Clay Jr., "The Social Dynamics of the Educated Afro-American Woman" (1982). *Selected Speeches*. 67.

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MARCH 17, 1982

THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF THE EDUCATED

AFRO-AMERICAN WOMAN\*

Historically, in the matriarchal Negro society, mothers made sure that if one of their children had a chance for higher education the daughter was the one to pursue it. Whitney M. Young, Jr., To Be Equal 25 (McGraw-Hill, New York 1964).

Dear Michelle, Michael, and Stager:

The centerpiece of Afro-American life is closely associated with the educated Afro-American woman. The contemporary Afro-American male has no reason to be concerned about this

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\*/ By DR. J. CLAY SMITH, JR., U.S. Commissioner, The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. This paper is a humble response to the Washington, D.C. Chapter of the Urban League who honor Dr. Smith this day as one of five recipients of the 1982 Whitney M. Young, Jr., awards at its Tenth Annual Whitney M. Young, Jr. Memorial Dinner, Washington, D.C. WHITNEY M. YOUNG, JR. was concerned about the plight of the Afro-American woman and this paper is an extension of that concern. This paper is dedicated to DR. LORRAINE A. WILLIAMS, the Academic Vice-President of Howard University, who was formerly head of the University's Department of History, who has trained legions of Afro-American historians, and who is the first woman to hold the position of Academic Vice-President in the history of Howard Univesity.

Dr. Smith received the A.B. degree in 1964 from the Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska; the J.D. degree in 1967 from the Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C.; and the LL.M. and SJD degrees in 1970 and 1977 respectively, from the George Washington National Law Center in Washington, D.C.

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status as it is an historical fact supported by a distinguished number of men and women. There is a need for Afro-American women to be educated and to strive for the highest level of academic achievement - for the centerpiece of Afro-American life -- the family -- hangs in the balance if she does not. Recognizably, the Afro-American society does not hang together solely because of the educated Afro-American woman, or man. Indeed, the historical record amply demonstrates that a distinguished number of Afro-Americans whether educated or not have been bookbinders of the race. However, today no one can or should quibble with a basic theme: there is a need of and a role for the educated Afro-American women.

In 1895 there came a time when a significant question about educated Afro-American women was raised: "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race?" The question was one which was to be discussed and debated during the 20th century: 1900 - 2000. This debate or discussion is ongoing and Afro-American women, many who will enter the 21st century, in the status of young adults cannot do so without a clear answer to the question stated above; and without being compelled to formulate questions about their role as educated women in the 21st century.

As the Afro-American approached the 20th century they had already decided that women of African decent should receive an education equal to men. This view was shared by a respectable

segment of the Afro-American male population.<sup>1/</sup> Indeed, when the editor of the Twentieth Century of Negro Literature<sup>2/</sup> published this significant piece of scholarship, within the book he included the question: "What Role Is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race?"<sup>3/</sup> Among the women responding to the question included Rosetta Douglas Sprague,<sup>4/</sup>

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- 1/ See e.g., Alexander Crummell, "The Black Woman of the South", address before the Freedman's Aid Society, Ocean Grove, N.J., August 15, 1883, contained in his book Africa and America 59 (Willey & Co., Springfield, Mass., 1891).
- 2/ Twentieth Century of Negro Literature (J.L. Nichols & Co., Naperville, Ill. 1902, Ed. by D.W. Culp.).
- 3/ There were several other questions raised in this book. Each question raised vital issues for public discussion during this century. It is time for Afro-American scholars to review Twentieth Century of Negro Literature and to raise critical questions for public discussion relevant to the 21st century.
- 4/ Ms. Sprague, the oldest daughter of Frederick Douglas, was born on June 29, 1839 in New Bedford, Mass. Here early education was influenced by solicitous friends of her great father; namely, Abigail and Lydia Mott of Albany New York with whom Ms. Sprague lived while Frederick travelled to London. Ms. Sprague was one of the few women who co-authored Twentieth Century of Negro Literature. She was a great champion of The National Association of Colored Women at the turn of the 20th century. The NACW was founded in 1896.

Mary Church Terrell,<sup>5/</sup> Rosa D. Bowser,<sup>6/</sup> and Sarah Dudley Pettey.<sup>7/</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to revisit some of the literature written by these women because their collective words represent a profound and universal statement about: The Social Dynamics of the Educated Afro-American Woman.

The Afro-American woman has been liberated for centuries. Her liberation was forced upon her by the indignities of servitude which ironically liberated the Afro-American woman

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<sup>5/</sup> Ms. Terrell was born in Memphis, Tennessee and was graduated from Oberlin College in 1884 with the A.B. degree. In 1888 she received a M.A. from Oberlin. She taught at Wilberforce University at Xenia, Ohio, and in The Colored High School in the District of Columbia. She travelled to Europe in 1888 where she remained for two years, spending time in France, Switzerland, Germany, and Italy. She married Robert H. Terrell, who was appointed to the bench in the District of Columbia by President Roosevelt. She was the author of Black Women in a White World, civil rights activist during her later life and served as the first president of the National Association of Colored Women. Ms. Terrell's achievements and contributions are extensive.

<sup>6/</sup> Ms. Bowser was born in Amelia County, Virginia and reared in the city of Richmond. She was educated in mathematics and Latin. She founded the Women's League, and was President of the Richmond Mother's Club. Ms. Bowser was one of the most conspicuous members of many benevolent organizations in Richmond before and at the turn of the 20th century.

<sup>7/</sup> Ms. Pettey was born in New Berne, N.C. She was the daughter of E.R. Dudley who served in the General Assembly of North Carolina during reconstruction. She married Charles Calvin Pettey, a Bishop in the A.M.E. Zion Church. She travelled extensively in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Great Britain and Europe.

and ostensibly imprisoned the Afro-American male. Her liberation was not arrogant; it was pragmatic. The aim of the liberation of Afro-American woman was to create for herself a "higher sphere of usefulness." This aim has dominated the extension of her freedom in all aspects of American life. This is clear from statement of Rosetta Douglas Sprague. In 1895 Sprague stated,<sup>8/</sup>

This is unquestionably the woman's era ...  
Every race and nation that is at all  
progressive has its quota of earnest women  
engaged in creating for themselves a higher  
sphere of usefulness to the world --  
insisting upon the necessity of a higher  
plane of integrity and worth -- and this  
the women of the Negro race should be no  
exception in this land of our birth.

From the very early days of her entry into America, the Afro-American male and woman associated freedom with the power of the intellect, the learning process, and leadership ability, and freedom from economic discrimination. She claimed the woman's movement but not to the exclusion of her identity as an Afro-American.

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<sup>8/</sup> Supra n.2 at 168.

The point of group indentity relating to the woman's movement is driven home by Sarah Dudley Pettey. Pettey states,<sup>9/</sup>

The educated Negro woman must take her stand among the best and most enlightened women of all races; and in so doing she must seek to be herself. Imitate no one when the imitation destroys ... personal identity.

Hence, it is clear that the mandate of Afro-American woman is to "take her stand among the best" of her gender without sacrificing the rootage of Afro-American culture, or her identity. Thus with her identity in tact, the educated Afro-American woman set out to make her mark in the 20th century.

From the very beginning of the 20th century the educated Afro-American woman knew that she and her progeny had their work cut out for them. She knew that if the race as a whole did not progress that she could not progress. Mindful of this, the educated Negro woman became an active force in the home, the school, the church, and to the extent that opportunities allowed, a force in politics and the learned professions. She was determined; she was tough; she was visionary. These observations are made clearer by Sprague's statement.<sup>10/</sup>

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<sup>9/</sup> Id. at 184.

<sup>10/</sup> Id. at 169. (Emphasis added.)

[T]he twentieth century is confronted with the fact that there is more work yet to do, and the negro has his part to bear in it. The progress of the race means much to the negro woman, and as she goes forth adding her best energies to the uplifting of her people the work itself will react upon her, and from a passive individual she will be more alert and useful factor in the regeneration of her race and to the social system at large.

The educated Afro-American woman never believed that her role in the society would be pedestrian. She set out to regenerate not only a race but "the social system at large," The "useful factor" is an essential ingredient undergirding the involvement of Afro-American woman in the woman's movement of today. The Afro-American woman is deeply committed to the quest of the woman's movement to assure that it enhances the "social system at large"; that it does not lose sight of her values, her family or her group identity.

There is just reason for the Afro-American woman to take the position espoused by Sprague. Woman of color had labored assiduously for years to secure her rights and those of her people prior to the invitation of Anglo-American to involve Afro-American women in the general woman's movement.



Mary Church Terrell states, <sup>11/</sup>

For years, either banding themselves into small companies or struggling alone, colored women have worked with might and main to improve the condition of their people.

Terrell points to the determination of Afro-American women to alter the legal status of their race by direct involvement in the political system. For example, Terrell states, <sup>12/</sup>

Questions affecting our legal status as a race are sometimes agitated by our women. In Tennessee and Louisiana colored women have several times petitioned the legislature of their respective states to repeal the obnoxious Jim Crow car laws. In every way possible we are calling attention to the barbarity of the convict lease system, of which negroes and especially the female prisoners are the principal victims... .

However high the duty of the educated Afro-American women to get involved in to the whole of the society, she never lost sight

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<sup>11/</sup> Id. at 172.

<sup>12/</sup> Id. at 173.

of the obligation of motherhood and her role in defining that role for herself. As Rosa D. Bowser stated,<sup>13/</sup>

[T]here is great need for proper instruction to wives, mothers, and, in fact, to all women in anticipation of the responsibilities of a home, and the obligations of motherhood.

The recognition of the anticipatory roles of the educated Afro-American woman as a mother/wife and as an independent force in the society drove the Afro-American woman to establish day care centers in order to allow Black women to enter the workforce. As Terrell explains,<sup>14/</sup>

[O]ur women are now urging their clubs to establish day nurseries, a charity of which there is an imperative need. Thousands of our wage-earning mothers with large families dependent almost entirely upon them for support are obliged to leave their children all day, entrusted to the care of small brothers and sisters, or ... neighbor ... .

These quotes establish without question the strategy for the long, hard journey of the Afro-American woman to achieve equality

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<sup>13/</sup> Id. at 178.

<sup>14/</sup> Id. at 182, 184.

as she prepared to leave the 19th century; and as she envisioned her role in the 20th and what she intended to accomplish as an equal member in the body politic by the 21st century.

The principles that the Afro-American woman established in the 19th century to be executed in the 20th century remain the challenge of Afro-American woman as they peep at the 21st century. Pettey's message should be reviewed by Afro-American women who may be confused by their role in the society and by the Afro-American male who may be blind to the depth of their plight. Pettey's words are instructive,<sup>15/</sup>

In the civilization and enlightenment of the negro race, its educated women must be the potent factor ... our women must lead ... . In public affairs woman has her share. She must speak through husband, son, father, and lover. Men go from home into the world to execute what women has decreed.

The educated Afro-American woman must be allowed to share the leadership of the race. She has more than earned her place in the eyes of the world. She has always been cognizant of the plight of her "husband, son, father and lover." And, their is

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<sup>15/</sup> Id. at 184.

evidence that the Afro-American male has been cognizant of the plight of the educated Negro woman. As Lucy Wilmot Smith, editor of a major magazine on women and children wrote in 1888,<sup>16/</sup>

The educated negro woman occupies vantage ground over the Caucasian woman in America, in that the former has had to contest with her brother every inch of the ground for recognition; the negro man, having had his sister by his side on plantations and in rice swamps, keeps her there, now that he moves in other spheres. As she wins laurels, he accords her the royal crown ... doors are opened before we knock, and as well-equipped young women emerge from the class-room, the brotherhood of the race, men whose energies have been repressed and distorted by the interposition of circumstances, give them opportunities to prove themselves... .

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<sup>16/</sup> See I. Garland Penn, The Afro-American Press 380-81 (Willey & Co., Springfield, Mass. 1891) for Smith quote. Lucy Wilmont Smith was born on November 16, 1861 at Lexington, Ky. She began teaching in Lexington in 1877, serving under the Lexington, Ky., school board. She was graduated from the normal department of the State University in 1887. She was secretary to Dr. William J. Simmons, author of Men of Mark. Smith was editor of the Woman's Department of Our Women and Childrens magazine. In journalism, she is one of the early distinguished Afro-Americans. Id. at 376-77.

The rice swamps are still with us. The need for the Afro-American woman and male to work side-by-side to elevate themselves from the swamps of unemployment and interposition of political circumstances is as compelled to day as it was in the 19th century. This is so, in part, because the words of Terrell written in 1895 are regrettably true today,<sup>17/</sup>

[T]he negro is losing ground in the world of labor. If this movement to withhold employment from him continues to grow, the race will soon be confronted by a condition of things disastrous and serious, indeed... .

In conclusion, we must review the question posed to the Afro-American woman in the 19th century: "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race?" It is clear that the answer to this question has not yet been answered in the 20th century. The educated Afro-American woman has articulated her position on what she believes her role to be in uplifting her race.<sup>18/</sup> Her words are not ambiguous; her

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17/ Supra n.2 at 176.

18/ See generally, Black Women in White America (Ed. by G. Lerner, Vintage Books, Random House, N.Y. 1973); J. C. Smith, Jr., "Afro-American Women: Linking Leadership and Service", before the Eastern Area Conference of the Links, Inc., Niagra Falls, N.Y., May 30, 1981.

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achievements are lofty; her determination is admirable; her quest is generically severable. The Afro-American male must make allowance for her liberty, and the Afro-American woman must take advantage of the same as Sprague, Terrell, Bowser, Pettey, and Smith have written.

J. Clay Smith, Jr.