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When And Where I Enter

The Impact of Black Women On Race and Sex In America

By Paula Giddings
William Morrow & Company, New York, 408 pp.

Reviewed by Carolyn T. Brown

1984 will go down in American history as the year that the first Black man made a credible attempt to become the presidential nominee of a major political party, and as the year that a white woman finally joined the national ticket in the vice presidential spot. While the national press has remained relatively silent on the connection between these two major political firsts, Black women have not missed the significance. With the enthusiastic support of Black women, Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition had embraced feminist aspirations as part of a vision of a world that would include all those traditionally locked out of the American dream.

At the Democratic Convention, the party, inhospitable to Jackson's platform planks, sought to show itself the party of the disenfranchised by placing Geraldine Ferraro on the ticket. Mondale's supporters, accused of racial insensitivity, belatedly admitted Richard Hatcher, mayor of Gary, Ind., into the inner sanctums of campaign policymaking, and Ferraro had to correct her omission of Black women from her initial staff appointments. But Black women, seeing the convention de-



Paula Giddings

prive them of full participation despite their own hard work, decided that the only group to be trusted with defining and promoting the political interests of Black women were Black women. Thus they formed the National Black Women's Political Caucus.

How appropriate that 1984 should also mark the publication of Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter*, a rich study providing the historical background to explain the tangled interplay of race and sex that the 1984 Democratic Convention had fully displayed. Just as Black women had responded to the Mondale/Ferraro nominations by forming their own advocacy group, so too Giddings' subtitle underlines the active nature of Black women's responses over the decades. That subtitle, *The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, reminds us that the passive role that the dominant culture so often assigns to women, and especially to poor and Black women, surely is inappropriate to the fighting spirits of the Black women in this history who, despite the prejudices against race and sex, have indeed had a significant impact. By revealing the articulate, determined, and independent voices and deeds of Black women from colonial times until the present, Giddings retrieves for us the largely untold history of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers, of the crusaders and club women, who have shaped so many of our worlds and left us a legacy of feminism and race pride.

Paula Giddings paints her canvas broadly but in detail. She begins with a brief examination of the fluid dynamics of race, sex, and slavery in the colonial period, the hardening of Black slavery into an institution, and its "domestication" in the 1830s. An important adjunct to that "domestic" myth of the happy slaves singing in the shanties behind the big house was "the cult of true womanhood," which

assigned to women guardianship of family morality, demanding of them "domesticity, submissiveness, piety and purity." Because only middle and upper-class women could hope to aspire to such values, the cult divided Black women and working-class women from those best situated to fight for the rights of all women and so solidified the class and racial biases that would continue to undermine feminist successes even up until the present.

Giddings provides full and detailed treatment of the issues and personalities that shaped women's concerns through the middle and end of the 19th century. She demonstrates that in the fight for the abolition of slavery, all Black women (and most Black men) adopted feminist sensibilities, while white women generally enlisted in the Abolitionist cause to further their own liberation from domesticity—not primarily to further the slaves' liberation. She details the debate between the positions of Sojourner Truth and Frances Ellen Harper over whether Black women should support the 15th Amendment's promise of suffrage for the Black male. Only beginning in the 1890s with the National Black Women's Club Movement did Black women form their own independent organizations, auxiliary neither to Black men's groups nor to white women's.

As Giddings turns her attention to the 20th century, she modifies her approach somewhat, devoting proportionately less space to primary materials—speeches, letters, articles—which make so vivid and immediate her presentation of the struggles in the 19th century. Instead, she employs a more narrative description of the forces and personalities shaping the saga of struggle: the successful fight to insure that the 19th Amendment would not exclude Black women from the vote; the interracial cooperation efforts of the 1920s; the activities of Mary McLeod Bethune in enlisting the support of Eleanor Roosevelt and the federal government in opposing lynching and in opening New Deal programs to Afro-Americans; in the 1940s, the role of Black women seeking fairer access to jobs in the war industries, in part a continuation of their role in organized labor; and in the post-war period the continued march of Black women into the professions while their white counterparts were marching back to the kitchen.

Considering the Civil Rights Movement, Giddings documents Ella Baker's observation that "the movement of the fifties and sixties was carried largely by women . . .", in the process charting the roles of Rosa Parks, Daisy Bates, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker herself, and others. Finally, noting Black women's tradition of giving priority to racial rather than gender issues, Giddings discusses the ambivalence of Afro-American women to the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s.

Several striking insights emerge from this comprehensive investigation of Black women's roles. First, Blacks have consistently been staunch supporters of feminism. Never having had the economic privilege of perching on a pedestal, Black women have combined domestic concerns with financial contributions to family welfare, while also often assuming broader social roles. The observation of the white feminist Betty Friedan that "I never knew a woman, when I was growing up, who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved, and had children," decidedly does not describe the experience of Black women who have played all of these roles from the beginning. Further, Black men have been much more supportive than their white counterparts of women's independence; Giddings notes, for example, Frederick Douglass' support of women's suffrage.

Second, where the interests of Black and white women would seem to converge strongly, as in the fight for suffrage and the Women's Liberation Movement, white feminists have repeatedly proven unreliable allies, being ready to embrace class barriers (the call for "educated suffrage" in the 1860s, for instance) or racist barriers (the call for "expediency" in the early 20th century suffrage movement) as long as rights could be secured for white middle-class women. Giddings finds that familiar white feminist myopia also at work in NOW (the National Organization for Women) and notes its self-defeating nature. For history demonstrates, she argues, that "feminism has always had the greatest currency in times of Black militancy or immediately thereafter."

Repeatedly, Giddings points out the relationship between Black militancy and feminism. Historically, she notes, Black women have welcomed the assertiveness of Black men and so have tended to mute their feministic concerns at times of Black

militancy. Conversely, "Black women become more overtly feminist when Black militancy is in eclipse." Because racial survival provides the impetus for their feminism, Black feminists have not exhibited the hostility towards men that white feminists have so often embraced.

All of these observations point to a central contradiction in the Afro-American experience which emerges from Giddings' study: in order to acculturate enough to participate in the dominant culture's economic, cultural and political life, Black Americans have been pressured to acquiesce in the dominant culture's ideology of male superiority; yet at the same time they find it imperative to marshal the full power of all Black men and women to oppose racism and ensure survival. Such a situation has naturally invited ambivalence. When Black men have been allowed to assume even some of the prerogatives of white manhood, they have been tempted to try to nullify Black women's assertiveness; but in so doing they become more vulnerable to racist attack.

The Black woman encounters similar ambivalences: if she takes on the trappings of domesticated femininity, she brings hardship or destruction to a family now deprived of her meager income; if she musters all of her resources to help assure her family's survival, she sacrifices the accolade of "true womanhood" or its modern equivalent. Giddings suggests that Afro-Americans redefine masculine and feminine to express their own experiences. But perhaps what may more easily occur is that as American society moves towards a more general acceptance of feminist aspirations, the tension between Black and white culture on this issue will ease as white culture moves nearer to the Black norm.

When all is said and done, though, probably what stands out most prominently in Giddings' book are the individual portraits of courage and determination: the stubborn resistance of the anonymous root woman who contrived that her master's six to eight female slaves, purchased in rotation over the years for the purpose of breeding, would all mysteriously miscarry by the fourth month, who with her expertise compiled a record of only two live births in the entire course of 25 years; Ida B. Wells, the tiny woman of

immense determination, who almost singlehandedly pursued an anti-lynching campaign which saved innumerable Blacks from violence, and who in her home city, Memphis, ended vigilante violence for 20 years; Ella Baker, who as creator of the organizational structure of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that supported the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and who then as guide to the formation of the "sit-in" students into the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, became "the midwife to the two organizations that would have the most far-reaching impact on the civil rights movement. . . and all the other women warriors, named and unnamed."

On that honorable roster also belongs the name of Paula Giddings herself. Friends at Howard University recall her as the intelligent young English major, graduate of the class of 1969, who edited the art and literary magazine *The Promethean* (renamed *The Afro-American Review*). She herself credits Dr. Arthur P. Davis with having ignited her interest in Afro-American literature and Dr. Jeanne-Marie Miller with having encouraged a career in publishing. She offers to Charles F. Harris of the Howard University Press (where she worked for a while as an editor) the title of a caring mentor, as she does to Ida E. Lewis of *Essence* and then *Encore*. Other achievements have been hers: bureau chief in Paris for *Encore American and Worldwide News*; articles in *The Washington Post*, *Jeune Afrique*, *Amistad 2*, and elsewhere; editorial work with *Essence* and the Book of the Month Club; and the Ford Foundation grant that enabled her to complete this major study of Afro-American women.

Like so many of the working Black women in her study, Giddings has quietly defined her place in the struggle for feminism and race pride, returning our history to us as a tool for understanding our present and future. In so doing she has earned the right to say also for herself—in the words of Anna Julia Cooper (1892)—"when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole . . . race enters with me." □

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