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Preface

Surviving the Silence

> We are deeply, passionately connected to black women whose sense of aesthetics, whose commitment to ongoing creative work, inspires and sustains. We reclaim their history, call their names, state their particulars, to gather and remember, to share our inheritance.
>
> —bell hooks

> [T]o survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak.
>
> —Audre Lorde

I FIRST CAME ACROSS JEAN STEARNS AND MARSHALL STEARNS' BOOK *Jazz Dance* while preparing a review of the literature on black dance during my first year in graduate school. Chapter 12 of this 45-chapter text on the dance greats of the jazz era is devoted entirely to the Whitman Sisters, a fascinating and extremely successful black vaudeville troupe. The Whitman Sisters, I learned, was the highest paid act on the Theatre Owners Booking Association (a.k.a. TOBA or Toby) circuit and one of the longest surviving touring companies. The troupe frequently changed its repertory with the times to assure that its performances remained popular. The Whitman Sisters was considered "the greatest incubator of dancing talent for Negro

shows on or off T.O.B.A.,"[1] helping to foster the careers of tap dance greats Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Jeni LeGon, and Pops and Louis; singer Ethel Waters; musician Count Basie; comedians Butterbeans and Susie; and many more. As I continued researching, finding smaller blurbs about the sisters in other dance and theater texts, I discovered that the Whitman sisters were remarkable both on and off stage. They fought for desegregation in theaters, stayed committed to African American communities, and promoted what I will argue were black feminist agendas.

I've loved dance and theater all my life and developed in college a feminist interest in exceptional black women. So why hadn't I heard of these four women? I spoke with other theater scholars and found only a few who knew of the sisters. Black theater and dance scholars and black cultural librarians were aware of the sisters, but even they could not tell me the details of their work or point to a definitive, extensive resource. The librarian at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture remarked on how famous the Whitman Sisters were, but told me that she had no idea where to find further information on them. The Library of Congress also had no information on the Whitman Sisters. The collections did contain a few scripts for comedian Bert Williams and the troupe Black Patti's Troubadours, but by no means did the collections contain a sufficient number of sources on early African American theater for an extensive study. University collections, including those at Howard, Harvard, and Yale, were similarly lacking in source material. I was shocked by the scant resources but determined to find out as much as I could about these women. The more I investigated, the more I began to understand an all-too-common situation regarding African American performers of the Whitman Sisters' era. In many cases, scholars of this subject must do more investigative work than is necessary for other topics in order to locate resource materials. It may not be surprising to some to learn that many records regarding the Whitman Sisters, like those of so many other early black artists, have been lost or have not been archived or cross-referenced, and research facilities devoted to this type of material are generally understaffed and underfunded. The Schomburg Center is a notable exception, having a uniquely good collection of resources on African American arts and culture. Yet, it too has a very limited amount of information on the Whitman Sisters. As a result, the Whitman Sisters, like many other black acts of that era, has been largely forgotten or hidden from history.

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Two words keep echoing as I contemplate this work: silence and survival. How do I survive studying a history that has silenced so many of my foremothers and threatens to silence me? How can the Whitman sisters survive the institutionalized silencing that has almost erased them from national memory and nearly deleted them from history? How do we black women survive the silencing to which we have been subjected for centuries and combat the silencing and warping of images of ourselves?

Silencing works in many ways. The most obvious example pertinent to this work is the silencing of slaves in the antebellum South by white men. Black women were also silenced by white women during the women's suffrage movement of the 1900s and 1910s. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn reminds us that black women had to battle not only institutionalized disenfranchisement but also attempts from white women to exclude them from their dream. "Unfortunately, with little influence among white women, the black suffragists were powerless and their words went unheeded."[2]

Also, white feminist theorists often neglect to consider race and class as modes of oppression that complicate gender oppression or to recognize that the issues important to women of color may be different from those important to white women. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham tells us, "[W]hite feminist scholars pay hardly more than lip service to race as they continue to analyze their own experience in ever more sophisticated forms."[3] This failure to include race results in an absence of black women from feminists' literature and a silencing of black women from their discourse.

Black women were also silenced by black men during the 1960s black liberation movement as they were told to take a step back and let men lead the way. Paula Giddings explains that in periods of racial assertion throughout history and especially during the 1960s movement, black women tended to be "muted."[4] In her autobiography, Angela Davis discusses the ways in which she was silenced and asked to take a less active role in the movement. She says:

> I ran headlong into a situation which was to become a constant problem in my political life. I was criticized very heavily, especially by male members of [Ron] Karenga's organization, for doing a "man's job." Women should not play leadership roles, they insisted. A woman was to "inspire" her man and educate his children.[5]

The joke below, told by white male minstrels at the beginning of the twentieth century in blackface about black women, who of course were forbidden to share the stage with them, shows how the black female voice

was something to be feared and suppressed. This example also illustrates the proliferation of silencing as part of American cultural production. Though performed in jest, the banter suggests that hers is a voice not to be heard.

> INTERLOCUTOR—I would like my wife to resemble a town clock . . . Because then she would speak but once an hour.
>
> BONES—Well, I wouldn't want my wife to resemble no town clock, for when she did speak, the whole town would hear her. . . . I couldn't stand that.
>
> INTERLOCUTOR—That is so. Well, I guess I would like my wife to resemble an echo.
>
> Bones—Why so?
>
> INTERLOCUTOR—Why then she would speak only when spoken to.
>
> BONES—No, sir. I wouldn't want my wife to resemble no echo.
>
> INTERLOCUTOR—Why not, Bones?
>
> BONES—Why, she'd always have the last word and that would break me all up.[6]

These are just a few examples of the proliferation of the silencing of African American women throughout history. But what are the results of this systematic silencing? Glenda Dickerson explains the damage done by silencing black women:

> That voice [of women of color] has been silenced for centuries, breaking forth sporadically, choked, and gasping for air. . . . The depiction and perception of African-American woman in this country through stereotypes has [*sic*] garbled her voice and distorted her image. The real tragedy is that the African-American woman herself has too frequently bought that distortion.[7]

So, we are presented with distorted images of African American women against which we find it difficult or impossible to speak. Part of my reasons for doing this work and writing this book is to provide accounts of black women that are true and not based on stereotypes so that history more accurately reflects the complexities of black female identity. I hope to make it more difficult to buy into the stereotypes by offering historical figures as examples.

Many black feminists and womanists have interrogated the ways in which black women have been silenced throughout history and have proposed strategies for breaking the silences and speaking about our concerns. Hazel Carby reminds us that historically, in order to gain public voice, black women have had to "confront the dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood which excluded them from the definition 'woman.'"[8] In an 1831 speech, Maria Stewart stated: "O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves."[9] Audre Lorde also writes on the transformation of silence into language and action, arguing that black women have been rendered invisible by being silenced, and must speak in order to reclaim the language that has been made to work against us:

> We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired . . . and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.[10]

The challenge for many of us is to be able to speak using the full range of our voices, to attempt to express the totality of ourselves. And for black female scholars, that act of speaking out serves to locate our experiences within an intellectual framework and validate our histories. Talking back is tantamount to confronting those silencing hegemonic forces and to speaking as a peer, standing on equal ground with those in power. As bell hooks reminds us:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of talking back, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.[11]

As black women in the United States have been silenced, we have also been redefined, primarily by the white male hegemony that controls the systems dominating our lives. For black female performers, this system of silence and redefinition operates in terms of the roles we are permitted to play, the compensation we can expect to receive, and the criticism to which we are subjected. I argue that the Whitman sisters confronted these obstacles by challenging stereotypical roles, fighting for the salaries they deserved

and pleasing many types of audiences and critics, garnering in the process exceptional reviews. They retained agency over their identities instead of accepting the labels imposed on them by others by speaking out for themselves in the press and in speeches before each show, explaining who they were and what their beliefs were. In this way, they resisted dominant forces and survived. By taking stands for their rights, by challenging expectations of what black women were "supposed" to do, and by owning and operating their company, the sisters survived in an industry not designed for them. As we look back on their lives, we see that as black women in the entertainment industry they made conscious efforts to assure their success. In this book I analyze how they were able to hold onto their images and define their identities despite opposition.

Although we black women were never meant to survive, we have done so, to much surprise and perhaps disappointment. Maya Angelou articulates the politics of oppression and the fact of our survival:

> The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power.
>
> The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.[12]

Silence immobilizes us, and there are so many silences to be broken. One important way to break the silences of history is to tell our stories, the stories of our foremothers and the stories that inspire us. In this book I attempt to tell the stories of these four women by analyzing the social and political forces in which (and more often against which) they operated. In this way, as we embark on the new millennium, we can learn from their stories and be inspired by their strengths.

But how can the Whitman sisters break through the silences of history, when they are so long dead? How can their narratives survive? How can their stories serve scholarship? How can we learn from their experiences? This is "when and where I enter."[13] In this book, I function as an archeologist in the tradition of VèVè Clark, attempting to break the silences by excavating the materials that have been buried and presumed lost in order to fill in the gaps and tell the stories of those forgotten.[14] Valuing all of the artifacts

of history—textual, visual and oral—I compile the facts to describe and analyze their lives.

During this elaborate, historical treasure hunt I have evoked the Whitman sisters' ancestral spirits and have asked them to help me find what I need to tell their stories. Throughout this process, while paging through archives of black newspapers, some days finding only a nugget in terms of a line written about them, some days finding a gold mine of information that lent insight into some crucial outstanding question, and while organizing, assembling, analyzing, and writing about what I have discovered, I have felt the sisters' presence. I can fully appreciate now Alice Walker's spiritual journey to literally and metaphorically break the silence surrounding Zora Neale Hurston's life and career and to give her her deserved place in history.[15] Walker researched Hurston's work, persisted in finding her grave and putting a marker on it, and told the world of Hurston's literary importance. The more I have researched the Whitman sisters, the clearer it has become that like Hurston, the Whitman sisters deserve to, need to, and must be written back into history with the prominence that is rightfully theirs. Dancer Louis Williams told Jean and Marshall Stearns that "The Whitman sisters stood for something. They were the ones I was going to build a monument for on Broadway—they knew talent when they saw it and gave hundreds of dancers their first big break."[16] Though not a Broadway monument, it is my hope that this book serves as a tribute to their importance.

On a research trip to Atlanta I found the Whitman family plot in the Southview Cemetery. I was shocked and saddened by the lack of upkeep at the gravesite. I had to pull the weeds away to find Alberta Whitman's headstone, which was broken. Essie Whitman's headstone is all but buried by a wall erected after her death. Mabel Whitman's headstone is missing. Alice was buried in Lincoln Cemetery, North Township, Illinois. Nowhere at Southview is there any indication of the family's accomplishments. I found this profoundly symbolic and was further inspired to complete the book.

I cannot speak for the Whitman sisters. Nobody can. This is an important point to make as theories that attempt to make totalizing statements that claim universal applicability are, by their very nature, suspect.[17] Rather, I can analyze the information and draw conclusions based on the evidence. And although I cannot speak their voices, my job as a scholar is to provide an accurate, detailed analytical account so that scholarship may be furthered and so that we may learn from their stories. It is also important to state that this book is my analysis of the materials, informed by my biases, my position as a black female scholar at this particular time, and my understanding of the constructions of truth and history. I am hopeful that

the next scholar who approaches this material will bring a new perspective and be able to further expand the work begun here. In this book I attempt to apply a theoretical analysis to the Whitman sisters' work in order to interrogate the ways in which they illuminate, contradict, and complicate issues of identity politics at the beginning of the twentieth century in terms of the constructions of race, gender, and class.

So that they are not silenced, I reclaim their history. So that they are not silenced, I call out their names. So that they are not silenced, I state their particulars. This book is intended for those of us who need this history in order to survive, so that we, as a community, may gather and remember, to share our inheritance and learn from the past. My hope is that more scholars will take up the challenge to write forgotten women of color back into history.