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"Black women speaking in the voice of others"

When the Ladies' Literary Institute of Monrovia celebrated its anniversary in March 1853, Miss L. A. Smith spoke of the "importance of the mental and moral culture of females, in view of the great and powerful, though silent, influence which they exert upon society." (*Liberia Herald*, March 2, 1853). The *Liberia Herald*, reporting the event, agreed with Miss Smith, maintaining that "in every civilized community, females have a powerful influence, and just as civilization advances, does this influence obtain an important character. In proportion, as the women are enlightened and virtuous, will men be - they emphatically `rule the world', and `govern men'."(*Liberia Herald*, March 2, 1853). Liberian settler society did not follow through on its promise to elevate women, or to accord them the importance suggested by the editorial. For all the support the newspaper purported to give to women seeking education and enlightenment, nineteenth century Liberia did not encourage women in their endeavor to improve themselves.

I use this example to posit a reason for the lack of black women's voices in the nineteenth century. It is arguable that throughout the nineteenth century, black women in Africa and the Diaspora were not accorded their due. In trying to recover the voices of black women and to reconstruct their lives we often find that their voices are muted. Occasionally, historians are lucky enough to study black women who were literate, and who might have left a legacy of written work. This is rare. Furthermore, when we do come across documents that present women's voices, these finds are usually limited to women of the African Diaspora, or in settler societies such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. Those voices that we do hear are usually of privileged women, such as Adelaide Casely Hayford of Sierra Leone, or women like her - western educated and Christian. Though we begin to encounter, more frequently, the voices of women from the continent in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, again this is rare. In addition the voices that we do hear most often are those of urban women. Where are the voices of rural women, and women who were not literate? In the United States we have the second hand voices of such women in the form of slave narratives. What are the counterparts to slave narratives in the African context? What methods can we use to restore the voices of black women? For the most part, we learn about the lives of black women through the voices of others, usually men. As a result we are forced to look at, and to see, these women through the

eyes of their male contemporaries. This is often a distorted view, laden with male biases of the particular time period, and laced with contemporary male expectations of women.

Women's voices can be restored in a variety of ways, which would contribute to the existing historiography of Africa and the African Diaspora, transforming it, and allowing it to be more inclusive. Court cases and documents can be a rich source for recovering women's voices, and telling us about their status. Though often filtered through a male voice, court cases were more likely to be transcribed verbatim. Thus we often hear the exact words of women if not their voices. I will cite one example of an 1820 court case in Sierra Leone. The case involved Waterloo, a soldier in the second West India Regiment. Waterloo was indicted for shooting at Nance, "a captured negro woman," with whom he lived. Nance decided to visit Peggy Money, a woman with whom she had lived. Waterloo threatened to shoot her if she attempted to leave. According to Nance, she told him

> If God give you hand to shoot me you can shoot me; but me must go that woman-that woman take care of me, me live in her hand when you see me; you asked her to give me your hand, wash for your, cook for you, have child for you, do everything for you-but me can't left that woman. Suppose me sick, who can take care of me; suppose that woman sick, who can take care of her-no: suppose God give you hand for shoot me, you can shoot me; but me can't left going to that woman.

Nance further testified that she felt threatened by Waterloo and therefore decided to go to Peggy Money for fear of her life and "because he look me with ugly eye"[court documents translate this as "his threatening countenance"]. At this point Waterloo shot at her, but missed. He was found guilty, but we are not told what his punishment was. I use this small case to illustrate what we can learn about the lives of women in Sierra Leone in its early years. Nance, was obviously a liberated African woman, who may have been apprenticed to Peggy Money when she was brought to Sierra Leone. Her relationship with Waterloo may also be seen as normal since many of the soldiers in the West India Regiments took liberated African women as wives or partners. Waterloo himself would have been a recent arrival in the colony since several companies of the Second West India regiment were disbanded in Sierra Leone in 1819. However, more importantly, we can learn something about the status of liberated African women at that time. If they were not apprentices, they usually worked as domestics, or became wives or partners of men for whom they tended house. It was noted that in the course of her testimony, Nance reiterated her role within the household: "me cook your breakfast, me fetch it for you for eat- me cook your dinner, me fetch it for you

for eat-what bad can me have in my heart for you?" I have spent a lot of time on this case, but it is one of the few instances when we can hear the voice of ordinary women.

Women were also defendants in court cases and the documents often tell an interesting story about their lives from the kinds of crimes they committed. They were mostly indicted for stealing, assault, and inappropriate language. From these documents we also get a portrait of women who led colorful lives, were by no means subservient to men, and who frequently challenged authority figures. Sometimes the punishment meted out to women was more severe. For example, on July 29, 1809 the colony's newspaper reported that a woman by the name of Anne Ricket, along with two men, were brought up on charges for assaulting Susanna Taylor. They were found guilty, but the two men received no punishment. Ann was sentenced to a month in jail. The reason cited by the court for the harsher punishment meted out was that men "were often furious and hasty, though this afforded no excuse for their offences; but when a woman, whose chief ornaments were modesty and gentleness, forgot the respect due to her own sex and outraged nature in her violence, the sentence of the law must be necessarily be severe." (*African Herald*, July 29, 1809). This case tells us, among other things, what sort of expectations men in the society had of women. Throughout the proceedings, we never hear Anne's voice, and her reasons for assaulting Susannah are not given.

Another source for recovering the voices of black women is the narratives of European women. This is also rare particularly for the early periods of European contact with Africans, but by the nineteenth century we have more of them. Though biased, these narratives often allow us to view the lives of black women from a female perspective since the concerns of European women usually revolved around their gender. In this paper I use examples from the journal of Mrs. Melville, an Englishwoman resident in Sierra Leone in the 1840's. Through Mrs. Melville, we can create a picture of the lives of women in the Sierra Leone colony during a short time period. It tells us a story of women trying to find a place within that society in a particular time period. Though Melville's descriptions often tell us more about her than they do about the black women she encounters, by reading between the lines, we get a picture of an emerging society, and an independent female population. Mrs. Melville's allusions to black women were usually in reference to their role as domestics. Nonetheless, in her narrative, several clear portraits of individual

women emerge-young liberated African girls, an indigenous African female leader, a nurse, and a few others.

Melville attempted to give us a sense of the speech patterns of some of the women and this allows us to hear their voices. When recounting the history of the early settlers in the colony, Melville made it clear that she received her information mainly from women. This allows us to get a female perspective of a particular historical period. Her account of the initial settlement of Nova Scotians, for example, was based on information received from a woman. According to Melville, "an old settler woman, who was but a girl when they [Nova Scotians] landed here in March 1792, once gave me a graphic description of that period, which however, owing to the quaint style of her expressions, can never be written down with the same force."(Melville, A residence at Sierra Leone, described from a journal kept on the spot, and from letters written to friends at home, p.231) Here Melville acknowledges that she could not bring us the voice of this woman accurately, but she attempts to do so, and we get a sense of the things that were important for women in this society at that time. Melville wrote: "I have written down the settler's own words so far as I can remember them as they convey an idea of the correctness, upon the whole, of the language of her people" (Melville, p. 238). The old woman's account of these early years included an account of early clashes with the indigenous Temne people. Her story included a wonderful description of a Temne woman, and though she does not speak the settler's description of her allows us to speculate on the role women played in Temne society. Describing what she called a Temne "invasion" of the colony the woman stated:

> I been look out de window, and saw dem coming in one great band. At dem head been march de gree-gree or witch woman, beating one drum and dancing and making so many monkey capers. She all hung round wid strings of beads and gree-grees, and shells to keep as dey been tink, de balls from striking de Timmannees, and she went shaking, shaking, and jumping, jumping, all about, and never ceased beating de drum. (Melville, p. 238)

Though we may wonder at how much of this was Melville's paraphrasing of the old woman, her account allows us to get an idea of the prejudices held by settlers toward the indigenous Temne population. We see also her interpretation of Temne religion, contrasting it with her Christianity, and finding it inferior. The woman concluded her story by noting the colony's victory over the Temne, claiming that "dey never come back no more, no! no! dere grand witch woman not able for save dem, dey been get such fright dat time." (Melville, p. 238) Like her male contemporaries, this old woman believed in the rightness of the Freetown

settlement. These are just some examples of ways we can excavate the voices of women using the voices of others. Though not a substitute for the actual voices and words of black women, they are often all we have as historians.

However, there are many gaps in the historiography of women in the African Diaspora. A particular absence, and a gap that needs to be filled, is the story of Caribbean women's relationship with Africa. We know that West Indian women came to Africa for various reasons during the last two centuries. Nevertheless, though we may know of their lives in Africa during the twentieth century this is not true of the nineteenth. The voices of Caribbean women are rarely heard in Africa during the nineteenth century. West Indian women must have come as missionaries and teachers. They definitely came as wives. What is missing is the story of their lives in Africa. What images did they have of the continent before coming? Did these change when they arrived? What kind of lives did they create for themselves? These are all questions worth asking. One of the reasons for the absence of Caribbean women's voices, I believe, is that we tend to rely on official documents for analyzing this period of African and West Indian history. As a result, women do not frequently appear in the documents. The concerns of colonial documents are usually economic and political and rarely deal with social issues, which might be likely to affect women. In my study of West Indians in Sierra Leone, there were but a handful of references to women, usually the wives of West Indians officials claiming pensions of their dead husbands, or as in the case of Mary Ann, the wife of the Trinidadian Queens Advocate, Alexander Fitzjames, in relation to their husbands. In 1860, Mary Ann Fitzjames became a pawn in a feud between her husband and a European lawyer in the colony, Thomas Marston. When Marston insisted on personally summoning her as a witness in a case in which he was a defendant, Alexander Fitzjames accused him of using his wife to embarrass him and claimed that Marston's actions "indicated an intention to insult Mrs. Fitzjames". The documents tell us that Mary Ann obeyed the summons, was never called as a witness and this is the last we ever hear of her. We never once hear her voice, nor do we learn anything about her. Everything said about her comes through a male voice. Had she, and others like her spoken, what would we have learned about the lives of West Indian women in West Africa during the nineteenth century? As historians trying to make links between the Caribbean and Africa we, therefore, have to devise new methodologies for getting at the lives of Caribbean women, recovering their voices, and transforming the current historiography.