

RAISING HER VOICE

African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History



Rodger
Streitmatter

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THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

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Scholarly publisher for the Commonwealth,
serving Bellarmine College, Berea College, Centre
College of Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky University,
The Filson Club, Georgetown College, Kentucky
Historical Society, Kentucky State University,
Morehead State University, Murray State University,
Northern Kentucky University, Transylvania University,
University of Kentucky, University of Louisville,
and Western Kentucky University.

Editorial and Sales Offices: Lexington, Kentucky 40508-4008

PHOTO CREDITS: Maria W. Stewart (woodcut, which appeared with Stewart's essays in the *Liberator*, reprinted by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University). Mary Ann Shadd Cary (reprinted from Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* [Washington: National Association of Colored Women, 1933]). Gertrude Bustill Mossell and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin (reprinted from G.F. Richings, *Evidences of Progress among Colored People* [Philadelphia: George S. Ferguson, 1897]). Ida B. Wells-Barnett (reprinted, by permission, from Wells-Barnett's *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, edited by Alfreda M. Duster © 1970 by The University of Chicago Press). Delilah L. Beasley (reprinted from Beasley's *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* [Los Angeles: 1919]). Marvel Cooke (courtesy of Cooke). Charlotta A. Bass (by permission of the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research). Alice Allison Dunnigan (courtesy of Robert Dunnigan). Ethel L. Payne (courtesy of Payne). Charlayne Hunter-Gault (courtesy of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions/Bruce Lawrence).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Streitmatter, Rodger.

Raising her voice : African-American women journalists who changed history / Rodger Streitmatter.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-8131-1861-1; 0-8131-0830-6 (acid-free)

1. Afro-American journalists—Biography. 2. Afro-American women—Biography. 3. Journalism—United States—History—19th century.
4. Journalism—United States—History—20th century. I. Title.

PN4872.S66 1994

070'.92'273—dc20

93-35932

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This book is printed on recycled acid-free paper meeting the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials. ♻️

RAISING HER VOICE

I dedicate this book to TOM GROOMS.
On so many occasions and in so many
ways, he cleared my mind.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I submitted my first manuscript to a scholarly journal, my research skills were at such an elementary level that any editor in her right mind would have summarily rejected the manuscript. Fortunately, Susan Henry, then editor of *Journalism History*, assiduously avoids being of the "right mind." I have benefited immensely from Susan's daunting intellectual timber as well as her personal commitment to making the world better. Without her, neither that first manuscript nor this book would ever have been published. I thank her.

My second scholarly mentor has been Maurine Beasley. Maurine's integrity, dedication, support, and energy provide a model to which I continue to aspire.

Much of the material in this book originated as conference papers and articles in scholarly journals. Among those persons whose contributions I want to acknowledge, therefore, are dozens of individuals I cannot name because their identities are masked behind the blind review process of the American Journalism Historians Association, History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Institute for Massachusetts Studies, *Journalism Quarterly*, *Journalism History*, *Howard Journal of Communications*, and *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*. Fortunately, the reviewers know who they are, just as I know how much I have gained from them.

In addition, I am indebted to Bernell Tripp for generously sharing her research on African-American journalists with me and to Jerry Baldasty and Barbara Cloud for their friendship, their standard of excellence, and their willingness to critique my work.

On my own faculty in The American University's School for Communication, I thank my colleagues Barbara Diggs-Brown for working with me on the Marvel Cooke chapter and Sanford J.

Ungar and Laird Anderson for providing unwavering support and encouragement.

I very much appreciate the financial support that Dean Ungar and Betty Bennett, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have provided for my research. The District of Columbia Community Humanities Council also has supported my work through two grants that produced public exhibits about Alice Dunnigan and Ethel Payne.

Fern S. Ingersoll of the Women in Journalism Oral History Project of the Washington Press Club Foundation has been an invaluable resource and friend, both through the rich materials she has produced for scholars and the professional standards she has exemplified.

Marvel Cooke, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, and the late Ethel Payne graciously granted me the time to interview them in order to bring more depth to the manuscript. Robert Dunnigan allowed me to rummage through his garage for photographs and other material about his mother.

Much of the information contained in this book could not have been unearthed without the assistance of the individuals working in a long list of research institutions around the country, from the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University to the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division at the Chicago Historical Society. Above all others, I thank Sarah Cooper of the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research for going far more than the extra mile to help illuminate the life and work of Charlotta Bass.

Finally, I thank Chris Delboni, Kim Gazella, and Marles Streitmatter for critiquing the manuscript during its final stages, and Matt and Kate for accepting the very strange fact that their father prefers working at the computer to doing most anything else in the world.

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INTRODUCTION

One afternoon in the summer of 1989, I went to the Martin Luther King, Jr., Library in Washington, D.C., in search of material on a man named William W. Price. I was researching Price, the reporter who transformed the White House into a news beat, and was having difficulty locating original sources. The librarian dutifully went into the closed stacks to see what she could find for me. When she reappeared with a book in hand, I smiled anxiously as she announced: "I'm sorry, sir. I couldn't find a single thing on Price . . . but I did find this book about Alice Dunnigan, the first black woman to cover the White House." I thanked her and accepted the book she handed me, but my smile had turned plastic. I wanted material about a white man of the 1890s; she had given me a book about a black woman of the 1940s. A lot of help she was. I thumbed quickly through Dunnigan's autobiography, then left.

But after finishing the article on Price, I couldn't shake the image of Alice Dunnigan grinning up at me from the cover of her life story. I mentioned Dunnigan's name to a fellow journalism historian who has published as much about American women journalists as anyone in the country. My friend said no one had documented Dunnigan's contributions. I did not yet know it, but I had begun the odyssey that would culminate in this book.

Researching Dunnigan's life and work went smoothly until I attempted to place her contributions into the larger context of African-American women journalists. There was no such context. It was impossible to place Dunnigan because journalism historians, like historians in general, have not fully examined the lives and contributions of African-American women. When I referred to the standard history of American journalism, I found a description of the career of only one black woman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett—whose life was compressed into seven lines.¹ Nor were

histories of the African-American press of much help. When I looked at the standard in the field, I found that the descriptions of women of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were limited to a dozen pages.² Histories of women journalists were somewhat more helpful, containing descriptions of several African-American women. The scholars who described these women, however, also acknowledged the inadequacy of their research. In her book *A Place in the News: From the Women's Pages to the Front Page*, for example, Kay Mills wrote of black women working for the black press: "The experiences of women in that segment of the press should be the subject of another book."³ This is such a book.

The picture I paint is not always a pretty one. Each portrait is a case study of the triumph of the human spirit, but each is sketched against the backdrop of a society rife with prejudice, injustice, and hatred. It is precisely because of these factors that American historians have, until recent decades, largely ignored women of African descent. The chroniclers of this country's evolution—most of whom have been white men—generally have discounted black women as long-suffering victims who not only endured their oppression and degradation but passively submitted to it. Because of the prejudice against these women, they have been perceived as powerless and dismissed as unimportant. Only recently have researchers begun to document that, in reality, many African-American women steadfastly refused to accept their subjugation and, indeed, helped to shape this nation's history. During the last decade, scholars have documented that black women resisted the emotional, physical, and sexual oppression of slavery and that they provided important leadership in the anti-slavery, women's suffrage, and modern civil rights movements.⁴

As my research progressed, I, too, discovered individual African-American women who were anything but passive. The eleven case studies assembled here demonstrate that African-American women journalists, despite racial and sexual discrimination, fought back against their oppression and were at the forefront of major events in American history. From the early 1800s to today, the American woman of African descent has raised her voice in both the black and the white press. The research summarized in this book adds a new chapter to an evolving depiction of the African-American woman as a defiant,

strong-minded, and independent individual who refused to be a silent victim.

The women whose stories follow are, in many ways, a diverse group. Just as they broke new ground for their race and gender by contributing to the news media, they also broke the stereotypes of African-American women of their particular eras. Three became penniless orphans at an early age, but two others were wealthy and highly educated women of the aristocratic black elite of Boston and Philadelphia. Geographically, the women represent virtually all sections of the United States—from Minnesota to Mississippi, Rhode Island to California. Likewise, the portraits painted in this book do not glorify African-American women journalists as universally unblemished in their professionalism or their virtue. Some were driven by a noble sense of journalistic mission; others were not.

But they, to a woman, share one characteristic: defiance. Although they were isolated from each other, both by time and by geographic location, they all defied conformance to the limited spheres that the societies of their respective eras defined as those of the African-American woman. Each woman profiled in this book chose not to submit quietly to the oppression with which society attempted to subjugate her. Each woman fought back. Each woman did so by raising her voice through the news media. Each woman became both a journalist and a racial activist, using her position to advocate equality for her race, for her sisters, and for humankind.

Together as well as individually, these women changed history. Many reporters reject the concept of the journalist as agent of change. A reporter simply chronicles the events of the day, such purists argue, and should not shape those events. Stated another way, the argument is that the role of the reporter is to reflect society, not to lead it. Such an argument would not, however, come from a participant in the African-American press. The history of the black press, grounded in a tradition of advocacy, is closely intertwined with the history of black America. Individuals working in the African-American press have been some of the most important leaders of African-American history.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett is one example. By writing scathing editorials for her Memphis newspaper, Wells-Barnett founded the anti-lynching movement in this country. Later she expanded that

movement to Great Britain, and still later she played a leading role in the American woman's suffrage movement by leading the first national march to demand voting rights for American women. Ethel L. Payne is another example. During a White House press conference in 1954, Payne, a reporter for the *Chicago Defender*, publicly confronted President Dwight D. Eisenhower, asking him point-blank when he was going to ban segregation in interstate travel. The dean of the White House press corps cited Payne's question as the catalyst that moved civil rights onto the national agenda. Payne, in her understated way, later acknowledged: "I've had a box seat on history, and I've been able to chronicle some of the major events that have made a change in society, made a change in the law. My writings may have helped to influence some of that change."⁵

But the most stunning example of a black woman journalist who changed history is Charlotta A. Bass. From the moment in the spring of 1912 when she laid down fifty dollars and bought the *California Eagle* at public auction, she and her newspaper became integral elements in the battle against discrimination in Southern California. Her first investigative reporting project did not stop when her front-page story revealed that the Los Angeles County General Hospital refused to hire black employees. No, indeed. She appealed directly to the county board of supervisors and demanded that the policy be overturned. Although it is not always possible for a journalism historian to show a cause-and-effect relationship between a specific item in the news media and a historical event, with Bass there is little doubt. In the case of the hospital hiring policy, Bass persuaded the supervisors to hire black workers—if, in turn, Bass agreed to interview and select the candidates. For the next year, Bass wore another hat in addition to that of newspaper editor and publisher; she also became an employment counselor. Hundreds of her African-American sisters filed into the *Eagle* office to apply for jobs as nurses aides at the hospital. Bass made her selections, the women were hired, and history was made. During the next four decades, Bass became a one-woman tour de force as she led the desegregation of the Los Angeles Fire Department and Southern California Telephone Company, dealt a body blow to the Ku Klux Klan, and convinced the United States Supreme Court that restrictive housing covenants were unconstitutional—among other actions.

Because of a plethora of incidents such as these, there is no doubt that the thousands of news stories, editorials, essays, columns, and feature articles written by the journalists profiled in this book had impact on the development of both public opinion and public policy.

It is Bass who gave this book its title. In 1915, she spearheaded a campaign against D.W. Griffith's epic motion picture, "Birth of a Nation," because it depicted blacks as savages. As Bass went up against one of Hollywood's leading producers at the same time that motion pictures were becoming the most important commodity in Southern California, she was not intimidated. In a blistering editorial, she wrote: "As long as the Afro-Americans of this country sit supinely by and *RAISE NO VOICE* against the injustice heaped upon them, conditions for them in this country will grow worse."⁶

The first American woman of African descent to raise her voice through the press was Maria W. Stewart, who helped fire the abolition movement by publishing powerful anti-slavery essays in the *Liberator* beginning in 1832. She was followed by Mary Ann Shadd Cary, whose support of the Canadian fugitive slave movement led her to establish her own anti-slavery newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, in 1853. Other nineteenth-century women and the historical movements to which they contributed were Gertrude Bustill Mossell and black America's transition from slavery to self-sufficiency, Ida B. Wells-Barnett and the anti-lynching crusade, and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and the African-American women's club movement. Twentieth-century women and the events they influenced were Delilah L. Beasley and the movement toward accommodation and conciliation to white America, Marvel Cooke and the Harlem Renaissance, Charlotta A. Bass and the emergence of Black Power, Alice Allison Dunnigan and desegregation in the North, Ethel L. Payne and the modern civil rights movement, and Charlayne Hunter-Gault and the blight that continues to shroud black America.

These journalists have been on the forefront of change, making history for their nation while simultaneously making history for journalists of their race and gender. As the generations have passed, these women have become increasingly empowered by their evolving journalistic heritage. Charlayne Hunter-Gault, the youngest of the women, spoke to this progress when she described

her job as national correspondent for the “MacNeil/Lehrer News-Hour,” one of the most prestigious news organizations in the country today. Hunter-Gault said, simply but poignantly: “I have so much *voice* in what I do.”⁷

This book illuminates the lives and works of eleven pioneers through the use of a variety of primary sources. Most important among these sources are the journalists’ published writings. Analysis of the words these women used and the topics they chose to write about identifies recurring themes in their journalistic work. Many statements from their writings are quoted, in an effort to ensure that the women have the opportunity to speak with their own voices. Most of the articles were found in newspapers preserved at the Library of Congress or the Howard University Library in Washington, D.C., although some of the newspapers were used at or borrowed from other libraries around the country. In addition, excerpts from oral history interviews with several of the women enable the subjects to speak directly to the reader. Of particular use were transcripts of the Women in Journalism Oral History Project of the Washington Press Club Foundation. Sources for the personal lives of the women include such traditional sources as census records and marriage certificates, but the sources also extend to a variety of nontraditional documents. Information about Maria Stewart’s early years was found in a claim form she filed in an attempt to receive a pension as the widow of a soldier in the War of 1812. Details of Delilah Beasley’s personal life were gleaned from a library researcher’s card she completed at the California State Library and from medical records at the hospital where she died. Fragments of Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin’s life surfaced in half a dozen documents scattered among four libraries from Massachusetts to Louisiana.

Searching for information about members of a minority group that has been denied its history can be difficult, frustrating, time-consuming—and fruitless. Relatively few African-American newspapers have been preserved, and research libraries contain the personal papers of only a handful of black women. The problem is exacerbated by the invisibility of African-American women; if any journalist’s byline was omitted from an article, it was that of the African-American woman. The challenge of locating primary sources has led to the exclusion of journalists from this book who rightfully deserve their chapters. For example, two scholars have

identified Sarah Gibson Jones as the only African-American woman journalist working for a newspaper during the Civil War, arguably the most important event in the history of black America.⁸ I devoted two months to piecing together Jones's biography and searching for her original newspaper articles in the *Cincinnati Colored Citizen*. I found only two extant copies of the newspaper—one at the Library of Congress and another at the University of Cincinnati. Jones has been excluded from this book, however, because neither copy of the *Colored Citizen* contains any indication of Jones having written or edited any of the articles in it.

To state that primary sources about the journalists described here have been difficult to locate is not to suggest that nothing has been written about these remarkable individuals. Some of the women have been the subjects of previous research. Maria Stewart has attracted a large body of scholarship relevant to her public speeches; Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin has been examined as an organizer of African-American women's clubs. The endnotes to these women's respective chapters identify more than a dozen such works. This book is the first work, however, that looks at Stewart's or Ruffin's words as those of journalists.

This raises another concern in this project—establishing the limits of the term *journalist*. By its narrowest definition, the term applies only to individuals who write, edit, and publish articles about news events. Some of the women appearing in this book do not fit in this little box. Stewart's work for the *Liberator*, for example, consisted solely of essays; she never reported council meetings or fires or legislative issues that are the grist of the news media today. Likewise, the majority of Marvel Cooke's early work during the Harlem Renaissance was in the form of critical reviews that were published in a monthly magazine, and Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin's extant contributions appeared in a monthly publication that could be labeled either a newspaper or a magazine. I have, in short, adopted a broader definition of the term journalist.

This expansion is justified by the fact that, throughout much of American history, both the white and the black press were largely closed to African-American women journalists. The general-circulation newspapers that chronicled the news of the day were a male domain. Women of neither color were written about or allowed to contribute to the writing or editing of the news. Women with a yearning to raise their voices through the media of

their day, therefore, had to seek alternative routes. For Stewart, that route was commentary published in the leading abolitionist newspaper in the country. For Cooke, entering the field of journalism meant writing reviews for the magazine that, more than any other publication of its time, was describing the black experience. For Ruffin, providing a forum through which African-American women could speak and be heard by others of their race and gender meant founding her own monthly publication that others could call a magazine but that she called a newspaper. I am of the belief that an arbitrary definition of journalism should not prevent the stories of these determined and resourceful women from being told—even if to do so means expanding the canon of journalism. For the purposes of this book, therefore, a journalist is defined as an individual whose nonfiction work is disseminated in a regularly appearing publication aimed at a broad audience.

At this point it also seems prudent to define the term *feminist*, as this word has been defined and redefined many times. This book adopts a traditional definition of a feminist as a person who advocates and, to at least some degree, demands for women the same rights that have been granted to men, particularly with regard to political or economic status.

Having overcome the difficulties of locating sources and crafting appropriate definitions of journalist and feminist, this book tells the stories of eleven African-American women who, through their published work, helped shape the evolution of their race, gender, and nation. This book is intended for students of American history. Most especially, it is aimed at students of the history of American women journalists as well as students of the history of American journalism, American women, and Americans of African descent. It is hoped that, through the pages of this book, future generations of scholars and students, unlike those of past generations, will learn that black women journalists have been active participants in the life of this country.

The hope that this book will be read by students as well as scholars has defined the style in which it has been written. Each profile begins with a brief summary of the historical event that the specific journalist helped to shape, and the first notes for each chapter guide readers to sources on those events. The bulk of each chapter is written in a narrative style, telling the story of the woman's life and journalistic work. These individual chapters

purposely are not steeped in the theory of women's history or the African-American experience. Other scholars may want to examine the details of these women's lives through such prisms, but that is not the purpose of this book. Nor is the purpose of this volume to serve as the final, definitive work on each of its eleven subjects. Instead, this volume seeks to tell these women's stories in a straightforward style that is accessible to students and general readers. This book is not written solely for scholars; it also is written for students of American history who previously have had few sources from which to learn about women journalists of African descent. I leave to future scholars the task of writing the comprehensive, theory-based biography of each woman profiled in this book. Each and every journalist described here certainly deserves such specialized treatment.

This book, I believe, will be particularly useful because the women described in it span a broad spectrum of American history. The first woman was born in 1803; two women are still living. My hope is that this breadth will allow professors to avoid the "add women and mix" syndrome that sometimes has been manifested in the teaching of history. This comprehensive examination of black women journalists during the last two centuries invites professors to integrate the experiences of these women into courses with attention to the context of the women's race and gender.

With regard to providing that context, it may be helpful in this introduction to mention a few broad generalizations that may guide readers who are unfamiliar with major themes relevant to the experiences of African-American women. In particular, as a person begins reading the individual profiles, he or she would be well advised not to assume that the themes dominant in the history of white American women are necessarily valid with regard to the history of black American women. The evidence that there has been a tradition of sisterhood of cooperation and similarity of experience between white and black women is far outweighed by the evidence that there has been a tradition of tension. Some of the privileges that white women have enjoyed have been at the expense of black women; some of the opportunities that white women have fought for—such as being allowed to enter the workforce—are ones that black women would have been only too happy to have forfeited generations ago.⁹