

"Tryin' to Make Ends Meet"

African American Women's Work on Brooks Farm, 1920–1970

7

Valerie Grim

RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND WOMEN'S WORK: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, race, class, gender, and work functioned in unique ways to protect white supremacy and the Southern way of life. With the restoration of Southern political, conservative, and democratic power during the late 1870s, black men and women were excluded from participation in the dominant society's politico-jural sphere, and were denied access to authority. Furthermore, according to Diane Lewis, special measures were implemented to reaffirm black male inferiority. Since slavery coexisted with male dominance in the broader society, African American men, as men, constituted a potential threat to the established order of white superiority. As a result, laws were formulated that specifically denied black men normal adult prerogatives. Racial intimidation acts—such as lynching and the rape and sexual exploitation of black women—further intensified African Americans' powerlessness.¹

Because whites believed themselves to be superior and blacks inferior, race and skin color were used to establish a system of segregation where blacks were expected not only to respect their presumed social "betters," but also to accept their place and way of life in the American society. In this system of Jim Crowism, blacks' movement and interactions were limited. They could not engage in social intercourse with whites which would have allowed them to attend the same recreational and educational facilities as their social counterparts. They could not vote or engage in political activities. Neither could they expect equal distribution of jobs, wages, and union representation once they obtained employment. Segregation, established and protected by a system of racism,

created such a discrepancy between the standard of living among African Americans and that of whites that blacks were always struggling to survive and to gain respect for their race outside the African American community.²

To help advance and protect black people, African American women, because they had established a historical tradition of operating in the public sphere—working outside the home, for example—manipulated racism. Although they were given the lowest-paying factory, service, and domestic jobs, African American women's participation in the labor force helped to reduce the economic strain black families felt due to racism. With their pennies, nickels, dimes, and few dollars, African American women helped to construct black communities that specialized in racial uplift through the establishment of businesses, institutions, and organizations that served blacks' needs. Although racist attitudes and conventional norms suggested that developments in the African American community were inferior to those that evolved in white areas, they nevertheless created ways for black women to make contributions to their families and communities despite racial and class segregation and domination.³

The struggle blacks encountered to gain respect and equal opportunities was not only induced by race. Class formations and systems also helped. Lacking political, social, professional, educational, cultural, and economic prestige, African Americans were assigned to the lowest class status. Even with the best of education, as W. E. B. Du Bois noted, blacks were still perceived as a lower form of human life. Their skin color assigned them to inferior social positions where they were beneath the poorest, uneducated, and most uncultured whites. Taken together, both race and class created a caste for African Americans which they are presently trying to destroy. In the American society, class helped to sustain racism and segregation, while racial prejudice and discrimination continued to protect the interest of the white elite. Through racial identification, the elite was supported by poor whites, who joined in the effort to protect white supremacy. This system on the one hand oppressed them because of their poverty and class, but on the other hand made them feel valued because of the color of their skin and their position over blacks.⁴

Despite the social, political, and economic injustices class and race created on the part of blacks, both served, to some extent, as a motivator providing black women with the incentive they needed not to be totally victimized by race and class oppression. Instead, black women worked within racial and class confines to improve the standard of living for themselves, as women and blacks, as well as for the whole of the African American community. "We didn't care," Carrie Gordon said,

'bout how or what white folk really thought 'cause the only thing that mattered was what we thought of ourself and how what we felt was goin' to push us forward in ways that was gone keep us from starvin' and bein' totally mistreated.⁵

Gender is a socially constructed experience, not a biological imperative, that has historically been used to oppress women. In discriminating against women because of sex—biological identity as male or female—and in defining them primarily, and sometimes only, as nurturers and providers who cooked, cleaned and cared for their children and husbands, society has not had to show respect for the contributions women made to their family, community, and the American society, because their efforts were not translated into economical/monetary terms. The lack of respect and appreciation that women have experienced is due, in part, to the sexual division of labor and the way in which it has been internalized by society. Economists view the sexual division of labor as central to the gender differentiation of men and women. By assigning the sexes different and complementary tasks, the sexual division of labor creates different and complementary genders.⁶ For example, in Brooks Farm, women—because of their supportive roles and because of their biological ability to bear children—typically performed household roles, including child care and rearing as well as cooking and cleaning, while men usually concentrated on inter-familial activities which allowed them to be considered the heads of the households and the breadwinners of the families. However, in farm communities—as the Brooks Farm experience will show—women, by also performing atraditional work roles, reduced the amount of power men held due to the sexual division of labor. The division became insignificant as Brooks Farm women, in addition to performing household chores and responsibilities, also planted, chopped, and picked cotton, marketed the crops, hauled crops to the gin and elevator, and gathered firewood and water for household use. What this adoption of nontraditional work roles suggests was that, while some women experienced gender oppression through the acceptance and performance of traditional work roles, others may or may not have, especially since race and class differentiated their experiences.

Due to race and class domination, black women have occupied a structural position subordinate to white women in society. They have had less access to deference, power, and authority. Historically, Western women, for example, accepted deference in their often highly valued roles as helpmates, objects of sexual desire, or the driving force behind successful men. In contrast, black women, who have played important economic roles in societies, have lacked deference. African American women, because black men were excluded from the job market, have been forced to share with black men marginal participation in the public work world of the dominant society through low-paying jobs. Because their economic role assured them power over the limited resources available to a racially excluded group, black women, on the basis of power over crucial resources, held a relatively high position within a dominated society.⁷

This contrasts with the deference accorded white women in the same society. For unlike white women, black women have lacked deference in the dominant society principally because of the stigma of race. Within the dominated society, their source of power has become one basis of denial of deference. As a result,

the highly valued roles played by white women—the driving force behind every successful man and the objects of sexual desire—were frequently denied black women because black men were excluded from the workplace, while African American women were denied all possibilities of attaining a white standard of beauty. Yet against these odds, African American women’s resistance and courage have been essential to their people’s struggle for survival, freedom, and self-determination. For centuries, black women have stood at the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression, but they were rarely cowed by the burden of these injustices. Instead, they created a legacy of hard work and fierce dedication to themselves, their families, and their community, as well as a militant struggle against oppression and domination which they fought through active participation in the workplace and in their society.⁸ As Brook Farm women’s experiences will show, African American women, even on farms in the countryside of the rural, segregated South, found ways to circumvent race, class, and gender oppression to feel empowered.

BROOKS FARM: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

During the 1920s, in the Yazoo, Mississippi delta, a wealthy white Virginian, Palmer Herbert Brooks, established an African American community, Brooks Farm, in the small, rural town of Drew, Mississippi. Brooks Farm initially existed as a plantation until the 1940s, when P. H. Brooks sold the land to families in Brooks Farm, thereby helping these former plantation workers—day laborers, sharecroppers, tenants, and renters—achieve their goals of self-management, self-sufficiency, preservation, and landownership. In this achievement, families in Brooks Farm became the only community of people in the Yazoo Mississippi delta, during the first half of the twentieth century, whose landownership evolved from the initiation of a white planter. During the 1940s and 1950s, the community attained its largest population. It grew from sixty families during the 1920s to ninety by the 1930s to 125 during the 1940s, and 175 by 1960.⁹

From the onset, women were involved with Brooks Farm’s development; desiring more than individual independence and large families, they, along with men and children, sought to establish a self-sufficient community. These African Americans founded their own economic, social, religious, and cultural institutions. To develop an economic foundation based on landownership and crop production, men and women in Brooks Farm purchased land from P. H. Brooks. To complement their agricultural economy, they erected molasses and saw mills, gins, boarding houses, cafes, juke joints, and grocery stores. To supplement their incomes, some families created home businesses where they sold surplus vegetables, eggs, meats, and fruits. Women also established in-house sewing, laundry, and hairdressing businesses.¹⁰ “We did all we could to make a livin’ from the land and have it make a livin’ for us,” Birdell Vassel explained,

and 'cause there was women out here who own they own land, farm, stores and business, they naturally saw themselves in a different light and was good examples for other women to follow, so they could understand how to operate in a society that like to make the man the head and black folk the bottom.¹¹

Understanding the relationship between self-reliance and personal and community improvement, women in Brooks Farm helped to establish churches and schools to address the community's religious, cultural, and educational needs. To develop moral, spiritual, and intellectual training simultaneously, women in Brooks Farm helped to erect nine churches and four schools. With nickels and dimes generated from chicken dinners, bake sales, rallies, pledges, and donations, Brooks Farm families, in conjunction with other black families in neighboring communities and towns, founded Merry Grove Missionary Baptist Church, East Mount Olive Baptist Church, New Hope Methodist Church, and Palestine Church of God and Christ during the 1920s; Smith Methodist Church, Christian Union Baptist Church, and New Light Baptist were established during the 1930s; Stranger Home Baptist Church was built during the 1940s; and Morning Star Baptist Church was established during the 1950s. Established also at central locations throughout the community were the Brooks High School and Rosenwald Elementary, built during the 1920s, and Rosenwald High School and Spruill Elementary, constructed during the 1930s, to enhance social development within the community.¹² "I can remember my mother, grandmother, and they women friends," Willie McWilliams explained,

searchin' for places they thought churches and schools should be built because it was the women who was gone spend most of the time takin' care of the church and school, and 'cause of this fact, they felt they had a right to want them built within workin' and walkin' distance from the house and the fields.¹³

Recognizing the need to offer more than advice and direction in the physical construction of the community, Brooks Farm women also assisted with other infrastructural developments. They helped to clear virgin land of trees, shrubs, and brushes. These African American farm women dug roads and hauled lumber to mills and to places where houses, schools, and churches were to be constructed. Furthermore, these twentieth-century southern rural black women made suggestions as to where and how houses should be built so large families could be somewhat comfortable, and they used their money to help purchase gravel for roads, vehicles for transporting children to schools, and low-input implements to begin farming. In their spare time, usually on Saturday nights and Sundays, women in Brooks Farm raised the majority of the money needed to furnish and decorate the community's religious and educational institutions and to carry out their social relief programs.¹⁴

During the formative years, women's work and progress in Brooks Farm

were aided by the politics of separation. In the small, rural town of Drew, Mississippi, where Brooks Farm was located, blacks and whites, like both races throughout the rural South, lived separate lives, except for the instances where their occupations intersected. Members of both races interacted on the plantations and in the homes of whites, where blacks worked primarily as maids, cooks, gardeners, butlers, chauffeurs, butchers, and laundresses. The distrust that blacks and whites had of each other forced each group of people to attend segregated churches and schools, and to live in segregated housing, with whites on one side of the railroad tracks and blacks on the other. Each group also attended separate recreational and amusement facilities. White-only parks, restaurants, hotels, and theaters were created, while blacks took their meals and overnight stays in black-owned cafes and boarding houses in the countryside. The politics of separation and discrimination in Drew, Mississippi, and throughout the rural South provided the opportunity for African American rural and farm women in Brooks Farm not only to make economic contribution to the family, farm, and community, but to feel empowered as a result of their efforts, despite the racial, class, and gender oppression of black women throughout America.

BROOKS FARM WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FAMILY

Women in Brooks Farm performed many of the traditional roles that the majority of farm women inherited from the family and community. They managed the household, cleaning, cooking, and providing for their spouses and children. They also worked in the fields, and when time permitted, they took care of the sick and elderly, and organized community functions. But it was their work as nurturers and providers that was most important to family stability and community survival.

This was evident in the amount of time given to child care. To ensure that Brooks Farm survived and that family life remained stable, women implemented programs that taught children how to become progressive adults. First, they developed moral and spiritual character. In this training, women taught values that emphasized belief in God, cooperation, respect, obedience, and sacrifice. This value system was necessary, since Brooks Farm was a community that depended on collaborative efforts to survive. The essence of the moral and spiritual training taught children, according to Fannie Turner, "that they should treat each other and other people how they want to be treated, talk to people the way they want folk to talk to them, and just do unto other the way they would have folk do unto them."¹⁵

The role Brooks Farm women played in community child-rearing was consistent with black women's nurturing responsibilities throughout America. In African American communities, fluid and changing boundaries, according to Patricia Hill Collins, often distinguished biological mothers from other women who cared for children. Biological mothers are expected to care for their

children. But African and African American communities have also recognized that assigning one person with the responsibility of mothering a child was not the best strategy to adopt. Consequently, othermothers—women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood. The ability of Brooks Farm women, like other African American women, to define, value, and shape black motherhood as an institution does not only show comparable diversity, but also illustrates the severity of oppression they faced and how they resisted it. Moreover, Brooks Farm women viewed their child-rearing work as both contributing to their children's survival and instilling values that encouraged their children to reject "their presumed place" as blacks and to strive for an improved life.¹⁶

Women's training, in addition, involved teaching children how to work. Boys and girls learned their work roles from their mothers who, in many instances, disregarded the sexual division of labor, and taught every child how to cook, clean, wash, sew, can food, and work in the fields. "I taught all eight of my children," Willie McWilliams explained, "to do all kind of work in the field and the house, so that when they got older they wouldn't have to depend on nobody to live, eat, sleep or cook for them."¹⁷ "This was important," Freddie Wiley added,

because we live in a society that didn't think much of black folk and didn't think our need was all that important, so we thought of ways to make ourself, and our children, and our community be important by doin' things to make every aspect of it better despite the racism and low class status we was given.¹⁸

Perhaps women in Brooks Farm gave tremendous attention to their children out of concern for their welfare. During the early twentieth century, black men and boys were frequently accused of rape and were lynched repeatedly for such allegation, while African American women and girls faced constant sexual exploitation from white men. Through a system of community control where women and men kept eyes on each other's children from one house to the next and especially when they traveled outside of the community, women in Brooks Farm helped to save their daughters from the grip of white men's lust and their sons from affairs with white women who often cried rape when their sexual interludes with African American men were uncovered.

The importance of African American farm women's role in the family can be seen in the amount of respect they commanded as the family organizer. This was evident in the amount of time women spent coordinating household and work schedules to complete the work day. For example, having to work eight to ten hours a day in the fields, most women rose around 5:00 A.M. Breakfast was served no later than 6:00 A.M. Dinner was ready at 12:00 A.M., and by 7:00 P.M., supper was completed.

Scheduling became even more important when women, in addition to

preparing meals, had to determine how to incorporate washing, ironing, waxing, mopping, sewing, quilting, and dusting into their weekly routine. Black farm women, like those in the Brooks Farm community, usually washed, ironed, mopped, and waxed on Saturdays. On Friday nights, water was hauled and washing began early Saturday morning. When African American farm women had to sew or quilt, they ironed and mopped during the week so clothes and bed linens could be made on Saturdays. During the canning season, farm women preserved food on Sunday evenings and during their noon dinner hour. In farm communities, a day's work began with the women, and they determined how much work the family would complete, not only by establishing an efficient cooking and eating schedule, but by their attitudes and their sense of importance to the family and farm.¹⁹ Performing these roles and involving themselves in the work, both as laborer and organizer, black farm women compensated for the gender oppression women, in general, felt.²⁰

BROOKS FARM WOMEN'S ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FAMILY AND FARM

As economic contributors, black farm women assisted their families in two important ways. Through their work, they saved the family unnecessary expenses, and by establishing makeshift businesses, they added to the family's income.

Working both to earn and to save money, women in Brooks Farm became very involved with farm production. They planted, cultivated, and harvested crops. Some plowed the fields, chopped and picked cotton, packed the cotton trailers, carried the cotton crop to the gin and the grain crop to the elevator, and made frequent trips to town "to pick up some machine parts, seeds, feeds or whatever we need," Mae Liza Williams recalled.²¹ As partners in the farm business, women often "kept the books" or records of each transaction, and they supervised the children in the fields. Calculating the value of women's field work on the basis of potential cost had the family employed laborers, statistics show that a black farm woman's daily work in the field saved the family \$1.15 per day during the 1930s and \$3.32 per day by 1960. Stated differently, women's farm work during the busiest months of farming, June to September, saved \$23.73 per month during the 1930s and \$139.00 per month by the 1960s.²²

The female farm workers in Brooks Farm were members of landowning, sharecropping, tenant, and day-laboring families. Unlike many African American farm women during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who lived in old slave quarters and who were put to work in labor gangs at low wages and who often resisted this post-slavery economic system by slowing down the pace of work and by withdrawing themselves and their children from labor force, women in Brooks Farm continued to work hard to make ends meet because they believed they were working for themselves.

In the absence of state commodity and welfare programs during the early twentieth century, Brooks Farm women contributed economically by producing

the majority of the family's food. Garden and livestock production provided meals for farm families throughout the year. Women grew vegetables, planted fruit trees and vines, and produced poultry. "We didn't have to spend money on food," Birdell Vassel explained, "'cause we women was out in the garden plantin' all kind of vegetable for the family to eat."²³ Because of their importance to family and community survival, these food production roles Brooks Farm women played, although gender-specific, transcended both gender and racial oppression women in the American society generally felt, because the performance of these roles constantly reinforced not only the importance of women's work, but the necessity of their contributions to community survival.

Published reports from Agricultural Experiment Stations, Cooperative Extension Services, and the United States Department of Agriculture showed that black farm women's work on the farm, between 1920 and 1970, saved approximately fifty percent of their families' total income. Using the 1940 decade as an example, research showed the contribution women made to their families' food budgets. Forty-two percent of the families had values of food produced of \$100.00 and under; twenty-one percent of the families had values of \$300.00; and thirty-seven percent had values of \$101 to \$300. The importance of these numbers is better understood when one considers the fact that most black farm families' yearly income in the rural South during the 1940s never rose above \$500. For the majority of black farm families in Southern rural communities, whose income, by 1946, ranged from \$250 to \$400, the value of women's food production ranged from a third to a half of the family's income.²⁴

Trying to ensure the survival of the family and farm, black farm women, in addition, created ways to add to the family's earnings. Farm duties aside, nearly all Brooks Farm women sold eggs, milk, cheese, butter, and vegetable produce. They also sold livestock, made clothes and sold them, took in laundry and boarders, and dressed hair for a price. An income was also earned from delivering babies, and operating and managing one-room stores from their homes. In addition to working on the farms which they owned, rented, or sharecropped, Brooks Farm women also worked as seasonal laborers for white farmers to earn extra money for their families.²⁵

Off-farm employment during the late 1950s and early 1960s helped Brooks Farm women make additional economic contributions to their families. Although jobs were limited, some women found employment in factories as seamsters and machine operators. Others worked in schools as cooks, janitors, and teacher's aides. Still others obtained work from grocers as butchers, stackers, and janitors. Yet others secured work in the traditional service fields. They worked as maids, nannies, cooks, and chauffeurs for middle-class white families. Ocean Myes explained:

Although we knowed we was given these kind of jobs 'cause folk thought that this was all black women could do, our spirit was not broken 'cause we would

always see the value of our work in our home and community when the children and our husband and friend would say, did you make enough to help out with things at home and we would say yes we did. . . . Our husbands would meet us at the door tellin' us how proud they was of us goin' out in that tough world—where nobody really care 'bout black folk—just so we could help make ends meet.²⁶

Although Brooks Farm women held jobs that had been defined for them by America's class and racial systems, the empowerment they felt as a result of their contribution transcended the oppression black women typically experienced as blacks and women because they, unlike the majority of white women during this time, before the 1960s, operated in the public sphere and held jobs that were not always gender specific. Due to the seasonal and marginal nature of black men's work, black farm women's economic contribution to the family was crucial, especially when environmental factors such as floods, droughts, and insects prevented the family from harvesting a bountiful and profitable crop. During disastrous years, the money farm women made helped to pay property taxes and bills associated with food items not produced on the farm—flour, sugar, and rice, for example—and furniture such as beds, chairs, dressers, and tables.²⁷ Even with the tremendous demands on their money, women still found ways to use it to help the community and to fund social activities—dances, picnics, festivals, church, and school programs—in Brooks Farm.

BROOKS FARM WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COMMUNITY

Women in Brooks Farm engaged in a variety of activities that enhanced community relations. This was evident in the amount of assistance they provided during bereavement, illness, and childbirth. In each of these circumstances, women moved from one house to another, assisting those in need. For example, during childbirth they assisted the midwife in delivering the baby by providing warm water, clean towels, and their energy to help the mother through the delivery. Following delivery, they helped with the care of the infant child and with the women's household responsibilities. As supporters, women cooked, cleaned, and washed clothes.²⁸

To show the sick and elderly that they were still valued members of the Brooks Farm Community, women provided them with similar assistance. Rotating the responsibilities, women stayed at the homes of those people who were too ill or old to provide for themselves on a constant basis. Like the mothers of infant children, the sick and elderly also had their houses cleaned, meals prepared, and errands run. At times, their gardens were worked, food canned, and water and firewood hauled. On weekends, Brooks Farm women organized themselves into groups of prayer warriors, and traveled throughout the community visiting the sick and elderly, praying for their spirit and health.²⁹

Especially during periods of bereavement, women's prayers and assistance

provided comfort to community members. Women assisted in funeral arrangements, child care, and housework. Recalling the help he received from women after his wife Ruby died, George Turner explained:

I received a lot of support when my wife Ruby pass. The care of the people in this community pull me through. I didn't want for nothin' 'cause whatever I need I could tell some of them women and some of them would cook, wash and clean up for me. When Ruby died, the women done all they could to make things pleasant 'til I could do for myself.³⁰

Through these community functions, women in Brooks Farm established relations throughout the community that helped Brooks Farm function as a family of people who relied on each other to survive.

As nurturers and supporters of the community, black farm women continued to perform roles that made the Brooks Farm Community stronger as a body of people. In their role as community organizers, they used their money, energy, and time to strengthen community relations by organizing activities that encouraged participation from every member of the Brooks Farm society. Like many black women throughout America, women in Brooks Farm arranged dances, picnics, parties, and community dinners, usually held at churches, so residential and nonresidential families could socialize. Meetings of this sort provided the opportunity for intimate conversations about children and family, as well as the chance for individuals to see persons whom long working hours had kept them from visiting for periods of time.³¹ These kinds of activities showed that Brooks Farm women desired to establish relations with each other and other women who played major roles in developing rural communities.

Much of Brooks Farm women's work in the community and within their families resembled the work of members of the National Association of Colored Women. Within this club movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, African American women in cities dedicated themselves to educating and aiding poor African American women and girls as well as to politically mobilizing black women of all classes.³²

The success of Brooks Farm Women's work solidified their influence in this segregated rural community. Eva Glenn explained:

When we saw how much the children and grown people was enjoyin' themselves, we knowed we was doin' a good thing, 'cause it was clear to us, on every occasion, that the community could not survive without we women. . . . We was not only told by our husband and children what a good job we was doin' to make things better for ourself and folk in the community, but we was also told by the white women—who a lot of us iron, wash, cook and clean for—that we color women was sure a credit to our race 'cause we didn't sit back and let the men run the house, the business, the church, and everything in the community like they sat back and let the white man do.³³

“We had,” Josie Fountain added:

a life in Brooks Farm that was respected by everyone and we had a life outside our community that other folk acknowledge as valuable work to our people 'cause our contribution was at the core of the survival of our family.³⁴ Through their various work roles, these African American farm women in Brooks Farm, like many black women throughout America, defied deference and achieved in its stead self-respect and personal empowerment. Denied access to the public podium, women in Brooks Farm did not spend time theorizing about alternative conceptualizations of community, instead, they, through daily actions, created alternative communities that empowered them.

The lack of a clearly defined sexual division of labor was one of the reasons why black farm women's work was recognized as a significant contribution to the family, farm and community. Black farm communities were located in the backwoods of established towns. In these communities, black rural and farm people lived in closed societies with limited contact with whites, except when conducting business. Much of their work and daily living took place within the community, and everybody worked so the family and community could survive. Although men and women performed different roles, responsibilities overlapped where both sexes, especially the women, performed the same roles. Because farming was their life, Brooks Farm women worked more frequently in the fields than men did in the home. While women worked daily in the fields, men occasionally gardened, cared for the chickens, hauled wash water, and sold vegetables, eggs and butter. They sometimes looked after the children when the women were away working or selling their goods.

Consequently, the responsibilities black farm women accepted created respect for their work, while the lack of a well-defined division of work roles placed women in Brooks Farm on equal footing with men in the community, even though they, like black women throughout the United States, continued to be victims of racism and classism within the broader society.³⁵ However, this attitude in Brooks Farm is not meant to suggest that men in this and other black farming communities did not believe in patriarchy, because they did. They, however, recognized that being “head of the house,” according to Earnest McWilliams,

didn't give we men the right to treat the women, our wife, any kind of way, not allowin' them to do what they could to help and not givin' them the respect they deserve for all the work they did in the house, on the farm and out in the community.³⁶

Two significant circumstances explain Brooks Farm women's position in the family and community. Women were involved with the building of Brooks Farm from its initial stages. Like past generations of black women, they helped

erect institutions, worked in the fields and community, and established community support networks through kin and non-kin groups. Because of black farm women's involvement with community development at every level, it was more difficult for black farm men to completely subordinate black farm women, since they had established themselves not only as laborers and nurturers, but as providers for the family, farm, and community. By making the community stronger, women in Brooks Farm became empowered, and because of their invaluable work and contribution, the community of Brooks Farm served as a source of support when they encountered race, gender, and class oppression within the dominant society.

NOTES

For the purpose of this study, more than fifty persons were interviewed between 1987 and 1992. Twenty-two men and twenty-eight women agreed to answer questions on the history and life of Brooks Farm. Their ages ranged from thirty-nine to one hundred and five. These were individuals who still lived in Brooks Farm and surrounding communities. Others were persons who lived more than fifty miles away, but who had worked and lived in the community. Each of the interviewees answered the same questions on religion, education, work roles, especially the roles of women and men in the context of community development, social life, economic development, sharecropping, tenant farming, day laboring, rural businesses, family life, the roles of the church and school, landownership, gender, class, caste, and race relations. Questions pertaining to perception and attitude regarding work roles and individuals' contributions to the family, farm, and community, as well as their participation in the labor force, were also asked. Each interview was taped. In an effort to get a representative sample of life and work in Brooks Farm, persons were chosen randomly.

1. For a general understanding of the black experience and expression in America, see John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 7th edition (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1993). For additional analysis of race, class, gender, sex, and caste and their impact on the black community, especially African American women, see Diane K. Lewis, "A Response to Inequality, Black Racism, and Sexism," in Micheline R. Malson et al., eds., *Black Women in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 41; Teresa L. Amott and Julius A. Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States* (Boston: Southend Press, 1991); Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge Press, 1990).
2. For a discussion, see T. L. Amott and Julius A. Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the U.S.*; M. L. Anderson and P. H. Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender*; and P.H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.
3. For a discussion, see William L. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact*

- of *Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984); Bert James and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their thoughts, Their feelings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976); Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982); Micheline R. Malson, Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, Jean F. O'Barr, and Mary Wyer, *Black Women in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984).
4. For a discussion see W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903).
 5. Carrie Gordon, interview with author, Cleveland, Mississippi, August, 23, 1988.
 6. For a discussion, see Teresa L. Amott and Julie A. Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work*; Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins, *Race, Class, and Gender*; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; and Micheline R. Malson et al., *Black Women in America*.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Ibid.
 9. Merry Grove and East Mount Olive Baptist Churches, Records, 1920–present, Drew, Mississippi. See also School Records, 1930–1970, Leflore County, Leflore County Board of Education, Greenwood, Mississippi; School Records, 1930–1970, Sunflower County, Sunflower County Board of Education, Indianola, Mississippi.
 10. Eva Glenn, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, April 29, 1987.
 11. Birdell Vassel, interview with author, Minter City, Mississippi, April 30, 1987. For discussion and comparison to other farm women, see Janet Bokemeier, Carolyn Sachs, and Verna Keith, "Labor Force Participation of Metropolitan, Nonmetropolitan, and Farm Women: Comparative Study," *Rural Sociology* 4 48, (1984), pp. 515–39; Sara Brooks and Thordis Simonsen, "You May Plow Here," *Southern Exposure* 8, 3 (1980), pp. 50–61; Robert O. Blood Jr., "The Division of Labor in City and Farm Families," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 20 (1958), pp. 170–74; Cornelia Flora and Sue Johnson, "Discarding the Distaff: New Roles for Rural Women," in Thomas Ford, ed., *Rural USA: Persistence and Change* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1978); and Sally Hacker, "Farming Out of the Home: Women in Agribusiness," *Science for the People* 10, 2 (1978), pp. 15–28.
 12. School Records, 1920–1960, Leflore County, Leflore County Board of Education, Greenwood, Mississippi; School Records, 1920–1960, Sunflower County, Sunflower Board of Education, Indianola, Mississippi; Church Records, Merry Grove and East Mount Baptist Churches, 1930s–present, Drew, Mississippi.
 13. Willie E. McWilliams, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, June 10, 1989.
 14. Beatrice Collins, interview with the author, Drew, Mississippi, April 29, 1987. Also, Mason Cooper, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, June 3, 1989; C. B. Myes, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, June 19, 1989; and Steve Hearon, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, June 11, 1989.
 15. Fannie Turner, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, July 12, 1989. For a discussion and comparison, see Howard W. Beers, "A Portrait of the Farm Family in Central New York State," *American Sociological Review* 2, 5 (1937), pp. 591–600; L. Bescher-Donnelly and L. W. Smith, "The Changing Roles and Status of Rural Women," in Raymond T. Coward and William M. Smith, Jr.,

- eds., *The Family in Rural Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981); and Robert O. Blood, Jr., "The Division of Labor in City and Farm Families," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 20 (1958), pp. 170–74.
16. Patricia H. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 118–25.
 17. Willie E. McWilliams, interview with the author, Drew, Mississippi, June 10, 1989.
 18. Freddie Wiley, interview with the author, Ruleville, Mississippi, June 16, 1989.
 19. For a comparison, see Joan M. Jensen, *Promise to the Land: Essays on Rural Women* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Carolyn Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983); Lillian Schlissel, "Mothers and Daughters on the Western Frontier," *Frontiers* 3, 2, (1978), pp. 29–33; and David E. Schob, *Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).
 20. For a discussion, see Margaret L. Anderson, *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*; and Teresa L. Amott and Julie A. Matthaei, *Race, Gender, and Work: A Multicultural Economic History of Women in the United States*.
 21. Mae Liza Williams, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, May, 1987.
 22. United States Census of Agriculture, 1930–1970. See also Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*; and National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor, *Report on Farm Labor: Public Hearings . . .* Washington, DC, February 5–6, 1959. (New York: National Advisory Committee on Farm Labor), 1959.
 23. Birdell Vassel, interview with author, Minter City, Mississippi, April 30, 1987.
 24. United States Agricultural Experiment Station Records, 1920–1970 (see the cost of food and food production in the Southern states); United States Cooperative Extension Service Reports, 1920–1970 (see the cost of food and food production in the Southern states); and United States Department of Agriculture, Annual Reports, 1920–1970.
 25. For a discussion, see Minnie Miller Brown, "Black Women in American Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 50, 1 (1976), pp. 202–12; Ruth Allen, *The Labor of Women in the Production of Cotton* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1931); Bengt Ankarloo, "Agriculture and Women's Work: Directions of Change in the West, 1700–1900," *Journal of Family History* 4, 2, pp. 111–21; Milton C. Coughenour and Louis Swanson, "Work Statures and Occupations of Men and Women in Farm Families and the Structure of Farms," *Rural Sociology* 48 1, (1977), pp. 23–43; and James A. Sweet, "The Employment of Rural Farm Wives," *Rural Sociology* 37, 4 (1972), pp. 553–77.
 26. Ocean Myes, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, June 16, 1989.
 27. Hattie Philip, interview with the author, Drew, Mississippi, April 28, 1987. For a comparison and contrast, see Dorothy M. Brown, *American Women in the 1920s: Setting a Course* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987); Susan M. Hartmann, *American Women in the 1940s: The Home Front and Beyond* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982); Eugenia Kaledin, *American Women in the 1950s: Mothers and More* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984); and Susan Ware, *American Women in the 1930s: Holding Their Own* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982).
 28. Francis Walker, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, May 2, 1987.

29. Irene Scott, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, April 28, 1987. Also, Beatrice Collins, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, April 29, 1987.
30. George Turner, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, June 10, 1989. Also, Ella and Jodie Hearon, interview with author, Memphis, Tennessee, July 3, 1989; and Edna and Edward Scott, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, July 7, 1989.
31. Margaret Ball, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, April 27, 1987. For an additional discussion of black women's work and the impact of it on social developments in their communities, see Robert L. Daniel, *American Women in the Twentieth Century: The Festival of Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1987); Linda Kerber and Jane DeHart-Mathews, *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Glenda Riley, *A Place to Grow* (Arling Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1992).
32. For a discussion, see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*.
33. Eva Glenn, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, April 29, 1987.
34. Josie Fountain, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, April 30, 1987. For a discussion on the politics of empowerment from a black woman's perspective, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.
35. For a discussion, see William L. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*; Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in America*; Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings*; Micheline R. Malson et al., *Black Women in America*; Gloria T. Tull et al., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*; and Dorothy Sterling, *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*.
36. Earnest McWilliams, interview with author, Drew, Mississippi, June 10, 1989.