PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER

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BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment

Perspectives on Gender, Volume 2

Patricia Hill Collins

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Chapter 1

THE POLITICS OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

In 1831 Maria W. Stewart asked, "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" Orphaned at age five, bound out to a clergyman's family as a domestic servant, Stewart struggled to gather isolated fragments of an education when and where she could. As the first American woman to lecture in public on political issues and to leave copies of her texts, this early Black woman intellectual foreshadowed a variety of themes taken up by her Black feminist successors (Richardson 1987).

Maria Stewart challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that racial and sexual oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty. In an 1833 speech she proclaimed, "like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name . . . while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support." Stewart objected to the injustice of this situation: "We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance: we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them" (Richardson 1987, 59).

Maria Stewart was not content to point out the source of Black women's oppression. She urged Black women to forge self-definitions of self-reliance and independence. "It is useless for us any longer to sit with

our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us," she exhorted. "Possess the spirit of independence. . . . Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted" (p. 53). To Stewart, the power of self-definition was essential, for Black women's survival was at stake. "Sue for your rights and privileges. Know the reason you cannot attain them. Weary them with your importunities. You can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not" (p. 38).

Stewart also challenged Black women to use their special roles as mothers to forge powerful mechanisms of political action. "O, ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you!" Stewart preached. "You have souls committed to your charge. . . . It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, . . . and the cultivation of a pure heart." Stewart recognized the magnitude of the task at hand. "Do not say you cannot make any thing of your children; but say . . . we will try" (p. 35).

Maria Stewart was one of the first Black feminists to champion the utility of Black women's relationships with one another in providing a community for Black women's activism and self-determination. "Shall it any longer be said of the daughters of Africa, they have no ambition, they have no force?" she questioned. "By no means. Let every female heart become united, and let us raise a fund ourselves; and at the end of one year and a half, we might be able to lay the corner stone for the building of a High School, that the higher branches of knowledge might be enjoyed by us" (p. 37). Stewart saw the potential for Black women's activism as educators. She advised, "turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power" (p. 41).

Though she said little in her speeches about the sexual politics of her time, her advice to African-American women suggests that she was painfully aware of the sexual abuse visited upon Black women. She continued to "plead the cause of virtue and the pure principles of morality" (p. 31) for Black women. And to those whites who thought that Black women were inherently inferior, Stewart offered a biting response: "Our souls are fired with the same love of liberty and independence with which your souls are fired . . . too much of your blood flows in our veins, too much of your color in our skins, for us not to possess your spirits" (p. 40).

Despite Maria Stewart's intellectual prowess, the ideas of this extraordinary woman come to us only in scattered fragments that not only suggest her brilliance but speak tellingly of the fate of countless Black women intellectuals. Recent scholarship has uncovered many Maria Stewarts, African-American women whose minds and talents have been suppressed by the pots and kettles symbolic of Black women's subordination (Guy-Sheftall 1986).[1] Far too many African-American women intellectuals have labored in isolation and obscurity and, like Zora Neale Hurston, lie buried in unmarked graves.

Some have been more fortunate, for they have become known to us, largely through the efforts of contemporary Black women scholars (Higginbotham and Watts 1988). Like Alice Walker, these scholars sense that "a people do not throw their geniuses away" and that, "if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists, scholars, and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, . . . if necessary, bone by bone" (Walker 1983, 92).

This painstaking process of collecting the ideas and actions of "thrown away" Black women like Maria Stewart has revealed one important discovery. Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive standpoint on self, community, and society and, in doing so, created a Black women's intellectual tradition. While clear discontinuities in this tradition exist—times when Black women's voices were strong and others when assuming a more muted tone was essential—one striking dimension of the ideas of Maria W. Stewart and her successors is the thematic consistency of their work.

If such a rich intellectual tradition exists, why has it remained virtually invisible until now? In 1905 Fannie Barrier Williams lamented, "the colored girl . . . is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term 'problem,' and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her" (Williams 1987, 150). Why are African-American women and our ideas not known and not believed in?

The shadow obscuring the Black women's intellectual tradition is neither accidental nor benign. Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of an independent consciousness in the oppressed can be taken to mean that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization (Fanon 1963; Friere 1970; Scott 1985). Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas is critical in structuring patterned relations of race, gender, and class inequality that pervade the entire social structure.

In spite of this suppression, African-American women have managed to do intellectual work, to have our ideas matter. Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Behune, Toni Morrison, Barbara Smith, Ida B. Wells, and countless others have consistently struggled to make themselves heard and have used their voices to raise essential issues affecting Black women. Like the work of Maria W. Stewart, Black women's intellectual work has fostered Black women's resistance and activism.

This dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the

suppression of Black women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, comprises the politics of Black feminist thought. More important, understanding this dialectical relationship is critical in assessing how Black feminist thought—its definitions, core themes, and epistemological significance—is fundamentally embedded in a political context that has challenged its very right to exist.

THE SUPPRESSION OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

The vast majority of African-American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves. This initial condition shaped all subsequent relationships that Black women had within African-American families and communities, with employers, and among each other, and created the political context for Black women's intellectual work.

Black women's oppression has been structured along three interdependent dimensions. First, the exploitation of Black women's labor—the "iron pots and kettles" symbolizing Black women's long-standing ghettoization in service occupations—represents the economic dimension of oppression (Davis 1981; Marable 1983; Jones 1985). Survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined. The drudgery of enslaved African-American women's work and the grinding poverty of "free" wage labor in the rural South tellingly illustrate the high costs Black women have paid for survival. The millions of impoverished African-American women currently ghettoized in inner cities demonstrate the continuation of these earlier forms of Black women's economic exploitation.

Second, the political dimension of oppression has denied African-American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to white male citizens (Prestage 1980; Burnham 1987; Scarborough 1989). Forbidding Black women to vote, excluding African-Americans and women from public office, and withholding equitable treatment in the criminal justice system all substantiate the political subordination of Black women. Educational institutions have also fostered this pattern of disenfranchisement. Past practices such as denying literacy to slaves and relegating Black women to underfunded, segregated Southern schools worked to ensure that a quality education for Black women remained the exception rather than the rule (Perkins 1983; Mullings 1986b). The large numbers of young Black women in inner cities and impoverished rural areas who continue to leave school before attaining full literacy represent the continued efficacy of the political dimension of Black women's oppression.

Finally, the controlling images of Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of Black women's oppression (King 1973; D. White 1985; Carby 1987). Ideology represents the process by which certain assumed qualities are attached to Black women and how those qualities are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression.

Taken together, the seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect elite white male interests and worldviews. Denying African-American women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African-American women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics. Moreover, while Black women historians, writers, and social scientists have long existed, until recently these women have not held leadership positions in universities, professional associations, publishing concerns, broadcast media, and other social institutions of knowledge validation. Black women's exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite white male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women's ideas and interests in traditional scholarship and popular culture (Scott 1982a; Higginbotham 1989).

Women's studies has offered one major challenge to the allegedly hegemonic ideas of elite white men. Ironically, feminist theory has also suppressed Black women's ideas. Even though Black women intellectuals have long expressed a unique feminist consciousness about the intersection of race and class in structuring gender, historically we have not been full participants in white feminist organizations (Hooks 1981; Giddings 1984; Andolsen 1986; Zinn et al. 1986). Even today African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian-American women criticize the feminist movement and its scholarship for being racist and overly concerned with white, middle-class women's issues (Hooks 1981; Moraga and Anzaldua 1981; Cross et al. 1982; Smith 1982a; Dill 1983; Andolsen 1986; Davis 1989).

This historical suppression of Black women's ideas has had a pronounced influence on feminist theory. Theories advanced as being universally applicable to women as a group on closer examination appear greatly limited by the white, middle-class origins of their proponents. For example,

Nancy Chodorow's (1974, 1978) work on sex role socialization and Carol Gilligan's (1982) study of the moral development of women both rely heavily on white, middle-class samples. While these two classics make key contributions to feminist theory, they simultaneously promote the notion of a generic woman who is white and middle class. The absence of Black feminist ideas from these and other studies places them in a much more tenuous position to challenge the hegemony of mainstream scholarship on behalf of all women.

Black social and political thought has also challenged mainstream scholarship. In this case the patterns of suppressing Black women's ideas have been quite different. Unlike the history of excluding Black women from both dominant academic discourse and white feminist arenas, African-American women have long been included in Black social and political organizations. But with the exception of Black women's organizations, male-run organizations have not stressed Black women's issues (Beale 1970; Hooks 1981; Marable 1983). Even though Black women intellectuals have asserted their right to speak both as African-Americans and as women, historically these women have not held top leadership positions in Black organizations (Giddings 1984).

Civil rights activist Ella Baker's experiences in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference illustrate one form that suppressing Black women's ideas and talents can take. Ms. Baker virtually ran the entire organization, yet had to defer to the decision-making authority of the exclusively male leadership group (Cantarow 1980). Civil rights activist Septima Clark describes similar experiences: "I found all over the South that whatever the man said had to be right. They had the whole say. The woman couldn't say a thing" (C. Brown 1986, 79).[2]

Black social and political thought has been limited by both the reformist postures toward change assumed by many Black intellectuals (Cruse 1967; West 1977–78; Childs 1984) and the secondary status afforded the ideas and experiences of African-American women. Adhering to a male-defined ethos that far too often equates racial progress with the acquisition of an ill-defined manhood has left Black thought with a prominent masculinist bias. Calvin Hernton points out that the "masculine perspective itself, concerning the manhood of the black race, has always occupied center stage in the drama of Afro-American literature" (1985, 7). Black feminist activist Pauli Murray (1970) found that from its founding in 1916 to 1970, the *Journal of Negro History* published only five articles devoted exclusively to Black women.

Much of contemporary Black feminist thought stems from Black women's increasing willingness to strive for gender equality within African-American organizations. Septima Clark describes this transformation:

> I used to feel that women couldn't speak up, because when district meetings were being held at my home . . . I didn't feel as if I could tell them what I had in mind. . . . But later on, I found out that women had a lot to say, and what they had to say was really worthwhile. . . . So we started talking, and have been talking quite a bit since that time. (C. Brown 1986, 82)

African-American women intellectuals have been "talking quite a bit" since 1970 and have insisted that both the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought and the racist bias in feminist theory be corrected (see, e.g., Bambara 1970; Hooks 1981; Jordan 1981). Recent works in both African-American and feminist scholarship indicate that Black women's voices are being heard. For example, Manning Marable (1983) devotes an entire chapter in *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* to how sexism has been a primary deterrent to Black community development. Similarly, works by prominent white feminist theorists (see, e.g., Spelman 1982; Harding 1986; Andersen 1987) reflect similar efforts to incorporate Black women's ideas.

While these signs are promising, the recent resurgence of Black women's ideas has not gone unopposed. The virulent reaction to earlier Black women's writings by some Black men, such as Robert Staples's (1979) analysis of Ntozake Shange's (1975) choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*, and Michele Wallace's (1978) admittedly flawed volume, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, illustrates the difficulty of challenging the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought. In describing the response of Black men to the outpouring of publications by Black women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, Calvin Hernton offers an incisive criticism of the seeming tenacity of a masculinist bias:

> The telling thing about the hostile attitude of black men toward black women writers is that they interpret the new thrust of the women as being "counter-productive" to the historical goal of the Black struggle. Revealingly, while black men have achieved outstanding recognition throughout the history of black writing, black women have not accused the men of collaborating with the enemy and setting back the progress of the race. (1985, 5)

Though less overtly hostile, the resistance to Black women's ideas in the white feminist scholarly community has been similarly entrenched. Alice Walker (1983) writes of her stint sharing an office with a prominent white feminist who expressed superficial interest in Black women's ideas yet compiled an anthology of women writers from which women of color were noticeably absent. Similarly, white women who possess great competence

in researching a range of issues omit women of color from their work claiming that they are unqualified to understand the "Black woman's experience." Both examples reflect a basic unwillingness by many white feminists to alter the paradigms that guide their work.

THE SHAPE OF ACTIVISM

Even if they appear to be otherwise, oppressive situations such as the suppression of Black women's ideas within traditional scholarship and the struggles within the critiques of that established knowledge are inherently unstable. Conditions in the wider political economy simultaneously shape Black women's subordination and foster activism. People who are oppressed usually know it. For African-American women, the knowledge gained at the intersection of race, gender, and class oppression provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge[3] of a Black women's culture of resistance[4] (Caulfield 1974; Foucault 1980; Scott 1985).

Prior to World War II, self-contained Black communities created under slavery and maintained by de jure and de facto segregation served as one contradictory location stimulating an African-American women's culture of resistance. Even though the overriding purpose of Black ghettoization was political control and economic exploitation (Fusfeld and Bates 1984), all-Black communities simultaneously provided a separate space where African-Americans could articulate an independent Afrocentric worldview.

Every culture has a worldview that it uses to order and evaluate its own experiences (Sobel 1979). For African-Americans this worldview originates in the Afrocentric ideas of classical African civilizations, ideas sustained by the cultures and institutions of diverse West African ethnic groups (Diop 1974). By retaining significant elements of West African culture, communities of enslaved Africans offered their members alternative explanations for slavery than those advanced by slaveowners (Herskovits 1941; Gutman 1976; Webber 1978; Sobel 1979). Confining African-Americans to all-Black areas in the rural South and northern urban ghettos fostered the continuation of certain dimensions of this Afrocentric worldview (Smitherman 1977; Sobel 1979; Sudarkasa 1981b; Asante 1987). While essential to the survival of African-Americans, the knowledge produced in Black communities was hidden from and suppressed by the dominant group and thus remained extant but subjugated.

As mothers, othermothers, teachers and sisters, Black women were central to the retention and transformation of this Afrocentric worldview.

Within African-American extended families and communities, Black women fashioned an independent standpoint about the meaning of Black womanhood. These self-definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups. In all, Black women's grounding in traditional African-American culture fostered the development of a distinctive Afrocentric women's culture.

Black women's position in the political economy, particularly ghettoization in domestic work, comprised another contradictory location where economic and political subordination created the conditions for Black women's resistance. Domestic work allowed African-American women to see white elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from Black men and from these groups themselves. In their white "families," Black women not only performed domestic duties but frequently formed strong ties with the children they nurtured, and with the employers themselves. On one level this insider relationship was satisfying to all concerned. Accounts of Black domestic workers stress the sense of self-affirmation the women experienced at seeing white power demystified. But on another level these Black women knew that they could never belong to their white "families," that they were economically exploited workers and thus would remain outsiders. The result was a curious outsider-within stance, a peculiar marginality that stimulated a special Black women's perspective (Collins 1986b).

Taken together, the outsider-within perspective generated by Black women's location in the labor market and this grounding in traditional African-American culture provide the material backdrop for a unique Black women's standpoint on self and society. As outsiders within, Black women have a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies. Nancy White, a Black inner-city resident, explores the connection between experience and beliefs:

> Now, I understand all these things from living. But you can't lay up on these flowery beds of ease and think that you are running your life, too. Some women, white women, can run their husband's lives for a while, but most of them have to . . . see what he tells them there is to see. If he tells them that they ain't seeing what they know they *are* seeing, then they have to just go on like it wasn't there! (in Gwaltney 1980, 148)

Not only does this passage speak to the power of the dominant group to suppress the knowledge produced by subordinate groups, but it illustrates how an outsider-within stance functions to create a new angle of vision on

the process of suppression. Ms. White's Blackness makes her a perpetual outsider. She can never be a white middle-class woman lying on a "flowery bed of ease." But her work of caring for white women allows her an insider's view of some of the contradictions between white women thinking that they are running their lives and the actual source of power and authority in white patriarchal households.

African-American women question the contradictions between ideologies of womanhood and Black women's devalued status. If women are allegedly passive and fragile, then why are Black women treated as "mules" and assigned heavy cleaning chores? With no compelling explanations offered by a viable culture of resistance, the angle of vision created by being a devalued worker could easily be turned inward, leading to internalized oppression. But the presence of a legacy of struggle suggests that African-American culture generally and Black women's culture in particular provide potent alternative interpretations.

African-American women intellectuals are nurtured in this larger Black women's community. While the economic, political, and ideological dimensions of Black women's oppression lead directly to the suppression of the Black feminist intellectual tradition, these same conditions simultaneously foster the continuation of Afrocentric culture and the creation of an outsider-within stance essential to Black women's activism. Black women intellectuals' critical posture toward mainstream, feminist, and Black scholarly inquiry has been similarly shaped by Afrocentric culture and the outsider-within stance characterizing a more generalized Black women's culture of resistance. Out of the dialectic of oppression and activism come the experiences of African-American women generally that stimulate the ideas of Black women intellectuals.

The exclusion of Black women's ideas from mainstream academic discourse and the curious placement of African-American women intellectuals in both feminist and Black social and political thought has meant that Black women intellectuals have remained outsiders within in all three communities (Hull et al. 1982; Christian 1989). The assumptions on which full group membership are based—whiteness for feminist thought, maleness for Black social and political thought, and the combination for mainstream scholarship—all negate a Black female reality. Prevented from becoming full insiders in any of these areas of inquiry, Black women remain outsiders within, individuals whose marginality provides a distinctive angle of vision on the theories put forth by such intellectual communities.

Alice Walker's work exemplifies both of these fundamental influences on the Black women's intellectual tradition. Walker describes the impact that an outsider-within stance had on her own thinking: "I believe . . . that it was from this period—from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast—that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships" (Walker 1983, 244). Walker realizes that "the gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision of society or one's people that has not previously been taken into account" (p. 264). And yet marginality is not the only influence on her work. By reclaiming the works of Zora Neale Hurston and in other ways placing Black women's experiences and culture at the center of her work, she draws on the alternative Afrocentric feminist worldview extant in Black women's culture.

RECLAIMING THE BLACK FEMINIST INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

Starting from the assumption that African-American women have created an independent, viable, yet subjugated knowledge concerning our own subordination, contemporary Black women intellectuals are engaged in the struggle to reconceptualize all dimensions of the dialectic of oppression and activism as it applies to African-American women. Central to this enterprise is reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition.

Black women academicians' positions as outsiders within fosters this reclamation process. Stimulated by the knowledge that the minds and talents of our grandmothers, mothers, and sisters have been suppressed, the task of reclaiming Black women's subjugated knowledge takes on special meaning for Black women intellectuals. Alice Walker describes how this sense of purpose affects her work: "In my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—I write all the things *I should have been able to read*" (Walker 1983, 13).

Reclaiming this tradition involves discovering, reinterpreting, and, in many cases, analyzing for the first time the works of Black women intellectuals who were so extraordinary that they did manage to have their ideas preserved through the mechanisms of mainstream scholarly discourse. In some cases this process involves locating unrecognized and unheralded works, scattered and long out of print. Marilyn Richardson's (1987) painstaking editing of the writings and speeches of Maria Stewart, Gloria Hull's (1984) careful compilation of the journals of Black feminist intellectual Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Mary Helen Washington's (1975, 1980, 1987) collections of Black women's writings typify this process. Similarly, Alice Walker's (1979) efforts to have Zora Neale Hurston's unmarked grave recognized parallel her intellectual quest to honor Hurston's important contributions to the Black feminist literary tradition.

Reinterpreting existing works through new theoretical frameworks is another component of this process of reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition. Mary Helen Washington's (1987) reassessment of anger and voice in *Maud Martha*, a much-neglected work by novelist and poet Gwendolyn Brooks, Hazel Carby's (1987) use of the lens of race, class, and gender to reinterpret the works of nineteenth-century Black women novelists, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1989) analysis of the emerging concepts and paradigms in Black women's history all exemplify this process of reinterpreting the works of African-American women intellectuals through new theoretical frameworks.

Reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition also involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals. Denied formal education, nineteenth-century Black feminist activist Sojourner Truth is not typically seen as an intellectual.[5] Yet her 1851 speech at an Akron, Ohio, women's rights convention provides an incisive analysis of the definitions of the term *woman* forwarded in the mid-1800s:

> That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Loewenberg and Bogin 1976, 235)

Sojourner Truth exposes the concept of woman as being culturally constructed by using the contradictions between her life as an African-American woman and the qualities ascribed to women. Her life as a second-class citizen has been filled with hard physical labor, with no assistance from men. Her question, "and ain't I a woman?" points to the contradictions inherent in blanket use of the term *woman*. For those who question Truth's femininity, she invokes her status as a mother of thirteen children, all sold off into slavery, and asks again, "and ain't I a woman?" Rather than accepting the existing assumptions about what a woman was and then trying to prove that she fit the standards, Truth challenged the very standards themselves. Her actions demonstrate the process of deconstruction—namely, exposing a concept as ideological or culturally constructed rather than as natural or a simple reflection of reality (Alcoff 1988). By deconstructing the concept *woman*, Truth proved herself

to be a formidable intellectual. And yet Truth was a former slave who never learned to read or write.

Examining the contributions of women like Sojourner Truth suggests that a similar process of deconstruction must be applied to the concept of *intellectual*. Just as theories, epistemologies, and facts produced by any group of individuals represent the standpoints and interests of their creators, the very definition of who is legitimated to do intellectual work is also politically contested (Mannheim 1936; Gramsci 1971). Reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition involves much more than developing Black feminist analyses using standard epistemological criteria. It also involves challenging the very definitions of intellectual discourse.

Assuming new angles of vision on the definitions of who can be a Black woman intellectual and on what constitutes Black feminist thought suggests that much of the Black women's intellectual tradition has been embedded in institutional locations other than the academy. At the core of Black feminist thought lie theories created by African-American women which clarify a Black women's standpoint—in essence, an interpretation of Black women's experiences and ideas by those who participate in them. African-American women not commonly certified as intellectuals by academic institutions have long functioned as intellectuals by representing the interests of Black women as a group and fostering Black feminist thought. Without tapping these so-called nontraditional sources, much of the Black women's intellectual tradition would remain "not known and hence not believed in" (Williams 1987, 150).

Reclaiming the Black women's intellectual tradition involves examining the everyday ideas of Black women not previously considered intellectuals. The ideas we share with one another as mothers in extended families, as othermothers in Black communities, as members of Black churches, and as teachers to the Black community's children have formed one pivotal area where African-American women have hammered out a Black women's standpoint. Musicians, vocalists, poets, writers, and other artists constitute another group of Black women intellectuals who have aimed to interpret Black women's experiences. Building on the Afrocentric oral tradition, musicians in particular have enjoyed close association with the larger community of African-American women comprising their audience. Through their words and actions, political activists have also contributed to the Black women's intellectual tradition. Producing intellectual work is generally not attributed to Black women artists and political activists. Such women are typically thought of as nonintellectual and nonscholarly, classifications that create a false dichotomy between scholarship and activism, between thinking and doing. Examining the ideas and actions of these excluded groups reveals a world in which behavior is a statement

of philosophy and in which a vibrant, both/and, scholar/activist tradition remains intact.

OBJECTIVES OF THE VOLUME

African-American women's position in the economic, political, and ideological terrain bounding intellectual discourse has fostered a distinctive Black feminist intellectual tradition. Two basic components of Black feminist thought—its thematic content and its epistemological approach—have been shaped by Black women's outsider-within stance and by our embeddedness in traditional African-American culture.

My overall goal in this book is to describe, analyze, explain the significance of, and generally further the development of Black feminist thought. In addressing this general goal, I have several specific objectives. First, I summarize some of the essential themes in Black feminist thought by surveying their historical and contemporary expression. Drawing primarily on the works of African-American women scholars, and on the thought produced by Black women intellectuals in everyday and alternative locations for knowledge production, I explore several core themes that comprise a Black women's standpoint. The vast majority of thinkers discussed in the text are, to the best of my knowledge, Black women. I cite a range of Black women thinkers not because I think Black women have a monopoly on the ideas presented; instead I aim to demonstrate the range and depth of thinkers who exist in my community. Placing the ideas of ordinary African-American women as well as those of better-known Black women intellectuals at the center of analysis produces a new angle of vision on feminist and African-American concerns, one infused with an Afrocentric feminist sensibility.

While Black women intellectuals have consistently investigated a series of core questions, namely the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression, the importance of self-definition in resisting oppression, and analyses of specific topics such as motherhood and political activism, not all issues have received equal theoretical attention. My second objective is to explore selected neglected themes currently lacking a comprehensive Black feminist analysis. For example, even though Black women have written about topics such as rape, sterilization abuse, and sexual harassment, comprehensive Black feminist analyses of sexual politics that incorporate the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression remain scarce. While the ideas of African-American women intellectuals lie at the core of all arguments forwarded in this volume, I use Black women's ideas as a point of departure in exploring neglected topics. By synthesizing the

ideas of thinkers from diverse race and gender groups, I develop my own independent analyses of themes important to Black women.

My third objective is to develop an epistemological framework that can be used both to assess existing Black feminist thought and to clarify some of the underlying assumptions that impede the development of Black feminist thought. This issue of epistemology raises some difficult questions. I see the need to define the boundaries that delineate Black feminist thought from other arenas of intellectual inquiry. What criteria can be applied to ideas to determine whether they are in fact Black and feminist? What essential features does Black feminist thought share with other bodies of intellectual criticism, particularly feminist theory, Afrocentric theory, Marxist analyses, and postmodernism? Do African-American women implicitly rely on alternative standards for determining whether ideas are true? Traditional epistemological assumptions concerning how we arrive at "truth" simply are not sufficient to the task of furthering Black feminist thought. In the same way that concepts such as woman and intellectual must be deconstructed, the process by which we arrive at truth merits comparable scrutiny.

Finally, I aim to use this same epistemological framework in preparing the book itself. Alice Walker describes this process as one whereby "to write the books one wants to read is both to point the direction of vision and, at the same time, to follow it" (1983, 8). This was a very difficult process for me, one requiring that I not only develop standards and guidelines for assessing Black feminist thought but that I then apply those same standards and guidelines to my own work while I was creating it. For example, one dimension of Black feminist thought that I explore in Chapters 2 and 9 is that Black women intellectuals create Black feminist thought by using their own concrete experiences as situated knowers in order to express a Black women's standpoint. To adhere to this epistemological tenet required that I reject the pronouns "they" and "their" when describing Black women and our ideas and replace these terms with the terms "we," "us," and "our." Using the distancing terms "they" and "their" when describing my own group and our experiences might enhance both my credentials as a scholar and the credibility of my arguments in some academic settings. But by taking this epistemological stance that reflects my disciplinary training as a sociologist, I invoke standards of certifying truth about which I remain ambivalent.

In contrast, by identifying my position as a participant in and observer of my own community, I run the risk of being discredited as being too subjective and hence less scholarly. But by being an advocate for my material, I validate the epistemological stance that I claim is fundamental for Black feminist thought. To me, the suppression of the Black women's intellectual

tradition has made this process of feeling one's way an unavoidable epistemological stance for Black women intellectuals. As Walker points out, "she must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself" (1983, 8).

NOTES

1. Numerous Black women intellectuals have explored the core themes first articulated by Maria W. Stewart (see Hull et al. 1982 and Higginbotham and Watts 1988). Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's (1978) ground-breaking collection of essays on Black women's history foreshadowed volumes on Black women's history such as those by Noble (1978), Giddings (1984), and D. White (1985). A similar explosion in Black women's literary criticism has occurred, as evidenced by the publication of book-length studies of Black women writers such as those by Barbara Christian (1985) and Hazel Carby (1987).

2. Black women's acceptance of subordinate roles in Black organizations does not mean that we wield little authority or that we experience patriarchy in the same way as do white women in white organizations. See, for example, Evans (1979), Gilkes (1985), and Chapter 7, this volume.

3. My use of the term *subjugated knowledge* differs somewhat from Michel Foucault's (1980) definition. According to Foucault, subjugated knowledges are "those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised," namely, "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (p. 82). I suggest that Black feminist thought is not a "naive knowledge" but has been made to appear so by those controlling knowledge validation procedures. Moreover, Foucault argues that subjugated knowledge is "a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it" (p. 82). The component of Black feminist thought that analyzes Black women's oppression certainly fits this definition, but the long-standing, independent Afrocentric foundation of Black women's thought is omitted from Foucault's analysis.

4. My use of the term *culture of resistance* should not imply that a monolithic culture of resistance exists. Instead I suggest that such cultures contain contradictory elements that foster both compliance with and resistance to oppression. Key African-American social institutions, such as the institution of Black motherhood discussed in Chapter 6 and Black women's political activism discussed in Chapter 7, illustrate these contradictions.

5. Sojourner Truth's actions exemplify Antonio Gramsci's (1971) contention that every social group creates one or more "strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields" (p. 5). Academicians are the intellectuals trained to represent the interests of groups in power. In contrast, "organic" intellectuals depend on common sense and represent the interests of their own group. Sojourner Truth typifies an "organic" or everyday intellectual, but she may not be certified as such by the dominant group because her intellectual activity threatens the prevailing social order. The outsider-within position of Black women academicians encourages us to draw on the traditions of both our discipline of training and our experiences as Black women but to participate fully in neither (Collins 1986b).

Chapter 2

DEFINING BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Widely used yet rarely defined, Black feminist thought encompasses diverse and contradictory meanings. Two interrelated tensions highlight issues in defining Black feminist thought. The first concerns the thorny question of who can be a Black feminist. One current response, explicit in Patricia Bell Scott's (1982b) "Selected Bibliography on Black Feminism," classifies all African-American women, regardless of the content of our ideas, as Black feminists. From this perspective, living as Black women provides experiences to stimulate a Black feminist consciousness. Yet indiscriminately labeling all Black women in this way simultaneously conflates the terms *woman* and *feminist* and identifies being of African descent—a questionable biological category—as being the sole determinant of a Black feminist consciousness. As Cheryl Clarke points out, "I criticized Scott. Some of the women she cited as 'black feminists' were clearly not feminist at the time they wrote their books and still are not to this day" (1983, 94).

The term *Black feminist* has also been used to apply to selected African-Americans—primarily women—who possess some version of a feminist consciousness. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1986) contends that both men and women can be "Black feminists" and names Frederick Douglass and William E. B. DuBois as prominent examples of Black male feminists. Guy-Sheftall also identifies some distinguishing features of Black feminist ideas: namely, that Black women's experiences with both racial and gender

oppression that result in needs and problems distinct from white women and Black men, and that Black women must struggle for equality both as women and as African-Americans. Guy-Sheftall's definition is helpful in that its use of ideological criteria fosters a definition of Black feminist thought that ecompasses both experiences and ideas. In other words, she suggests that experiences gained from living as African-American women stimulate a Black feminist sensibility. But her definition is simultaneously troublesome because it makes the biological category of Blackness the prerequisite for possessing such thought. Furthermore, it does not explain why these particular ideological criteria and not others are the distinguishing ones.

The term Black feminist has also been used to describe selected African-American women who possess some version of a feminist consciousness (Beale 1970; Hooks 1981; Barbara Smith 1983; White 1984). This usage of the term yields the most restrictive notion of who can be a Black feminist. The ground-breaking Combahee River Collective (1982) document, "A Black Feminist Statement," implicity relies on this definition. The Collective claims that "as Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic" (p.17). But in spite of this statement, by implying that only African-American women can be Black feminists, they require a biological prerequisite for race and gender consciousness. The Collective also offers its own ideological criteria for identifying Black feminist ideas. In contrast to Beverly Guy-Sheftall, the Collective places a stronger emphasis on capitalism as a source of Black women's oppression and on political activism as a distinguishing feature of Black feminism.

Biologically deterministic criteria for the term *black* and the accompanying assumption that being of African desccent somehow produces a certain consciousness or perspective are inherent in these definitions. By presenting race as being fixed and immutable—something rooted in nature—these approaches mask the historical construction of racial categories, the shifting meaning of race, and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping conceptions of race (Gould 11981; Omi and Winant 1986). In contrast, much greater variation is afforded the term feminist. Feminists are seen as ranging from biologically determined—as is the case in radical feminist thought, which argues that only women can be feminists—to notions of feminists as individuals who have undergone some type of political transformation theoretically achievable by anyone.

Though the term Black feminist could also be used to describe any individual who embraces Black feminist ideas, the separation of biology from ideology required for this usage is rarely seen in the works of Black women intellectuals. Sometimes the contradictions among these competing definitions can be so great that Black women writers use all simultaneously.

Consider the following passage from Deborah McDowell's essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism":

> I use the term here simply to refer to Black female critics who analyze the works of Black female writers from a feminist political perspective. But the term can also apply to any criticism written by a Black woman regardless of her subject or perspective—a book written by a male from a feminist or political perspective, a book written by a Black woman or about Black women authors in general, or any writings by women. (1985, 191)

While McDowell implies that elite white men could be "black feminists," she is clearly unwilling to state so categorically. From McDowell's perspective, whites and Black men who embrace a specific political perspective, and Black women regardless of political perspective, could all potentially be deemed Black feminist critics.

The ambiguity surrounding current perspectives on who can be a Black feminist is directly tied to a second definitional tension in Black feminist thought: the question of what constitutes Black feminism. The range of assumptions concerning the relationship between ideas and their advocates as illustrated in the works of Patricia Bell Scott, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, the Combahee River Collective, and Deborah McDowell leads to problems in defining Black feminist theory itself. Once a person is labeled a "Black feminist," then ideas forwarded by that individual often become defined as Black feminist thought. This practice accounts for neither changes in the thinking of an individual nor differences among Black feminist theorists.

A definition of Black feminist thought is needed that avoids the materialist position that being Black and/or female generates certain experiences that automatically determine variants of a Black and/or feminist consciousness. Claims that Black feminist thought is the exclusive province of African-American women, regardless of the experiences and worldview of such women, typify this position. But a definition of Black feminist thought must also avoid the idealist position that ideas can be evaluated in isolation from the groups that create them. Definitions claiming that anyone can produce and develop Black feminist thought risk obscuring the special angle of vision that Black women bring to the knowledge production process.

THE DIMENSIONS OF A BLACK WOMEN'S STANDPOINT

Developing adequate definitions of Black feminist thought involves facing this complex nexus of relationships among biological classification, the

social construction of race and gender as categories of analysis, the material conditions accompanying these changing social constructions, and Black women's consciousness about these themes. One way of addressing the definitional tensions in Black feminist thought is to specify the relationship between a Black women's standpoint—those experiences and ideas shared by African-American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society—and theories that interpret these experiences.[1] I suggest that Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it.

This definition does not mean that all African-American women generate such thought or that other groups do not play a critical role in its production. Before exploring the contours and implications of this working definition, understanding five key dimension of a Black women's standpoint is essential.

The Core Themes of a Black Women's Standpoint

All African-American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent. This commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristic themes will be prominent in a Black women's standpoint. For example, one core theme is a legacy of struggle. Katie Cannon observes, "throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed" (1985, 30). Black women's vulnerability to assaults in the workplace, on the street, and at home has stimulated Black women's independence and self-reliance.

In spite of differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding African-American women. Anna Julia Cooper, a nineteenth-century Black woman intellectual, describes Black women's vulnerability to sexual violence:

> I would beg . . . to add my plea for the *Colored Girls* of the South:—that large, bright, promising fatally beautiful class . . . so full of promise and possibilities, yet so sure of destruction; often without a father to whom they dare apply the loving term, often without a stronger brother to espouse their cause and defend their honor with his life's blood; in the midst of pitfalls and snares, waylaid by the lower classes of white men, with no shelter, no protection. (Cooper 1892, 240)

Yet during this period Black women struggled and built a powerful club movement and numerous community organizations (Giddings 1984, 1988; Gilkes 1985).

Age offers little protection from this legacy of struggle. Far too many young Black girls inhabit hazardous and hostile environments. In 1975 I received an essay entitled "My World" from Sandra, a sixth-grade student who was a resident of one of the most dangerous public housing projects in Boston. Sandra wrote, "My world is full of people getting rape. People shooting on another. Kids and grownups fighting over girlsfriends. And people without jobs who can't afford to get a education so they can get a job . . . winos on the streets raping and killing little girls." Her words poignantly express a growing Black feminist sensibility that she may be victimized by racism and poverty. They also reveal her awareness that she is vulnerable to rape as a gender-specific form of sexual violence. In spite of her feelings about her community, Sandra not only walked the streets daily but managed safely to deliver three younger siblings to school. In doing so she participated in a Black women's legacy of struggle.

This legacy of struggle constitutes one of several core themes of a Black women's standpoint. Efforts to reclaim the Black feminist intellectual tradition are revealing Black women's longstanding attention to a series of core themes first recorded by Maria W. Stewart (Richardson 1987). Stewart's treatment of the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression, her call for replacing denigrated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images, her belief in Black women's activism as mothers, teachers, and Black community leaders, and her sensitivity to sexual politics are all core themes advanced by a variety of Black feminist intellectuals.

Variation of Responses to Core Themes

The existence of core themes does not mean that African-American women respond to these themes in the same way. Diversity among Black women produces different concrete experiences that in turn shape various reactions to the core themes. For example, when faced with stereotypical, controlling images of Black women, some women—such as Sojourner Truth—demand, "ain't I a woman?" By deconstructing the conceptual apparatus of the dominant group, they invoke a Black women's legacy of struggle. In contrast, other women internalize the controlling images and come to believe that they are the stereotypes (Brown-Collins and Sussewell 1986).

A variety of factors explain the diversity of responses. For example, although all African-American women encounter racism, social class differences among African-American women influence how racism is experienced. A young manager who graduated with honors from the University of Maryland describes the specific form racism can take for middle-class Blacks. Before flying to Cleveland to explain a marketing plan for her company, her manager made her go over it three or four times in front of him so that she would not forget *her* marketing plan. Then he explained how to check luggage at an airport and how to reclaim it. "I just sat at lunch listening to this man talking to me like I was a monkey who could remember but couldn't think," the Black female manager recalled. When she had had enough, she responded, "I asked him if he wanted to tie my money up in a handkerchief and put a note on me saying that I was an employee of this company. In case I got lost I would be picked up by Traveler's Aid, and Traveler's Aid would send me back" (Davis and Watson 1985, 86). Most middle-class Black women do not encounter such blatant incidents, but many working-class Blacks do. For both groups the racist belief that African-Americans are less intelligent than whites remains strong.

Sexual orientation provides another key factor. Black lesbians have identified homophobia in general and the issues they face living as Black lesbians in homophobic communities as being a major influence on their angle of vision on everyday events (Shockley 1974; Lorde 1982, 1984; Clarke et al. 1983; Barbara Smith 1983). Beverly Smith describes how being a lesbian affected her perceptions of the wedding of one of her closest friends: "God, I wish I had one friend here. Someone who knew me and would understand how I feel. I am masquerading as a nice, straight, middle-class Black 'girl'" (1983, 172). While the majority of those attending the wedding saw only a festive event, Beverly Smith felt that her friend was being sent into a form of bondage.

Other factors such as ethnicity, region of the country, urbanization, and age combine to produce a web of experiences shaping diversity among African-American women. As a result, it is more accurate to discuss a Black *women's* standpoint than a Black *woman's* standpoint.

The Interdependence of Experience and Consciousness

Black women's work and family experiences and grounding in traditional African-American culture suggest that African-American women as a group experience a world different from that of those who are not Black and female. Moreover, these concrete experiences can stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality.[2] Being Black and female may expose African-American women to certain common experiences, which in turn may predispose us to a distinctive group consciousness, but it in no way guarantees that such a consciousness will develop among all women or that it will be articulated as such by the group.

Many African-American women have grasped this connection between what one does and how one thinks. Hannah Nelson, an elderly Black domestic worker, discusses how work shapes the perspectives of African-American and white women: "Since I have to work, I don't really have to worry about most of the things that most of the white women I have worked for are worrying about. And if these women did their own work, they would think just like I do—about this, anyway" (Gwaltney 1980, 4). Ruth Shays, a Black inner-city resident, points out how variations in men's and women's experiences lead to differences in perspective. "The mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same" she notes, "but this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don' even have to think about" (Gwaltney 1980, 33).

This connection between experience and consciousness that shapes the everyday lives of all African-American women pervades the works of Black women activists and scholars. In her autobiography, Ida B. Wells describes how the lynching of her friends had such an impact on her worldview that she subsequently devoted much of her life to the antilynching cause (Duster 1970). Sociologist Joyce Ladner's (1972) *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, a groundbreaking study of Black female adolescence, emerged from her discomfort with the disparity between the teachings of mainstream scholarship and her experiences as a young Black woman in the South. Similarly, the transformed consciousness experienced by Janie, the light-skinned heroine of Zora Neale Hurston's (1937) classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, from obedient granddaughter and wife to a self-defined African-American woman, can be directly traced to her experiences with each of her three husbands. In one scene Janie's second husband, angry because she served him a dinner of scorched rice, underdone fish, and soggy bread, hits her. That incident stimulates Janie to stand "where he left her for unmeasured time" and think. Her thinking leads to the recognition that "her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered . . . she had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (p.63).

Consciousness and the Struggle for a Self-Defined Standpoint

African-American women as a group may have experiences that provide us with a unique angle of vision. But expressing a collective, self-defined Black feminist consciousness is problematic precisely because dominant groups have a vested interest in suppressing such thought.[3] As Hannah

Nelson notes, "I have grown to womanhood in a world where the saner you are, the madder you are made to appear" (Gwaltney 1980, 7). Ms. Nelson realizes that those who control the schools, media, and other cultural institutions of society prevail in establishing their viewpoint as superior to others.

An oppressed group's experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult. Elderly domestic worker Rosa Wakefield assesses how the standpoints of the powerful and those who serve them diverge:

> If you eats these dinners and don't cook 'em, if you wears these clothes and don't buy or iron them, then you might start thinking that the good fairy or some spirit did all that. . . . Black folks don't have no time to be thinking like that. . . . But when you don't have anything else to do, you can think like that. It's bad for your mind, though. (Gwaltney 1980, 88)

Ms. Wakefield has a self-defined perspective growing from her experiences that enables her to reject the standpoint of more powerful groups. And yet ideas like hers are typically suppressed by dominant groups. Groups unequal in power are correspondingly unequal in their ability to make their standpoint known to themselves and others.

Individual African-American women have long displayed varying types of consciousness regarding our shared angle of vision. By aggregating and articulating these individual expressions of consciousness, a collective, focused group consciousness becomes possible. Black women's ability to forge these individual, unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is key to Black women's survival. As Audre Lorde points out, "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (1984, 45).

One fundamental feature of this struggle for a self-defined standpoint involves tapping sources of everyday, unarticulated consciousness that have traditionally been denigrated in white, male-controlled institutions. For Black women, the struggle involves embracing a consciousness that is simultaneously Afrocentric and feminist. What does this mean?

Research in African-American Studies suggests that an Afrocentric worldview exists which is distinct from and in many ways opposed to a Eurocentric worldview (Okanlawon 1972; Asante 1987; Myers 1988). Standard scholarly social constructions of blackness and race define these concepts as being either reflections of quantifiable, biological differences among humans or residual categories that emerged in response to

institutionalized racism (Lyman 1972; Bash 1979; Gould 1981; Omi and Winant 1986). In contrast, even though it often relies on biological notions of the "race," Afrocentric scholarship suggests that "blackness" and Afrocentricity reflect longstanding belief systems among African peoples (Diop 1974; Richards 1980; Asante 1987). While Black people were forced to adapt these Afrocentric belief systems in the face of different institutional arrangements of white domination, the continuation of an Afrocentric worldview has been fundamental to African-Americans' resistance to racial oppression (Smitherman 1977; Webber 1978; Sobel 1979; Thompson 1983). In other words, being Black encompasses *both* experiencing white domination *and* individual and group valuation of an independent, long-standing Afrocentric consciousness.

African-American women draw on this Afrocentric worldview to cope with racial oppression. But far too often Black women's Afrocentric consciousness remains unarticulated and not fully developed into a self-defined standpoint. In societies that denigrate African ideas and peoples, the process of valuing an Afrocentric worldview is the result of self-conscious struggle.

Similar concerns can be raised about the issue of what constitutes feminist ideas (Eisenstein 1983; Jaggar 1983). Being a biological female does not mean that one's ideas are automatically feminist. Self-conscious struggle is needed in order to reject patriarchal perceptions of women and to value women's ideas and actions. The fact that more women than men identify themselves as feminists reflects women's greater experience with the negative consequences of gender oppression. Becoming a feminist is routinely described by women (and men) as a process of transformation, of struggling to develop new interpretations of familiar realities.

The struggles of women from different racial/ethnic groups and those of women and men within African-American communities to articulate self-defined standpoints represent similar yet distinct processes. While race and gender are both socially constructed categories, constructions of gender rest on clearer biological criteria than do constructions of race. Classifying African-Americans into specious racial categories is considerably more difficult than noting the clear biological differences distinguishing females from males (Patterson 1982). But though united by biological sex, women do not form the same type of group as do African-Americans, Jews, native Americans, Vietnamese, or other groups with distinct histories, geographic origins, cultures, and social institutions. The absence of an identifiable tradition uniting women does not mean that women are characterized more by differences than by similarities. Women do share common experiences, but the experiences are not generally the same type as those affecting racial and ethnic groups (King 1988). Thus

while expressions of race and gender are both socially constructed, they are not constructed in the same way. The struggle for an Afrocentric feminist consciousness requires embracing both an Afrocentric worldview and a feminist sensibility and using both to forge a self-defined standpoint.[4]

The Interdependence of Thought and Action

One key reason that standpoints of oppressed groups are suppressed is that self-defined standpoints can stimulate resistance. Annie Adams, a Southern Black woman, describes how she became involved in civil rights activities:

> When I first went into the mill we had segregated water fountains. . . Same thing about the toilets. I had to clean the toilets for the inspection room and then, when I got ready to go to the bathroom, I had to go all the way to the bottom of the stairs to the cellar. So I asked my boss man, "what's the difference? If I can go in there and clean them toilets, why can't I use them?" Finally, I started to use that toilet. I decided I wasn't going to walk a mile to go to the bathroom. (Byerly 1986, 134).

In this case Ms. Adams found the standpoint of the "boss man" inadequate, developed one of her own, and acted on it. Her actions illustrate the connections among concrete experiences with oppression, developing a self-defined standpoint concerning those experiences, and the acts of resistance that can follow.

This interdependence of thought and action suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness. The significance of this connection is succinctly expressed by Patrice L. Dickerson, an astute Black feminist college student, who writes, "it is a fundamental contention of mine that in a social context which denies and deforms a person's capacity to realize herself, the problem of self-consciousness is not simply a problem of thought, but also a problem of practice, . . . the demand to end a deficient consciousness must be joined to a demand to eliminate the conditions which caused it" (personal communication, 1988). The struggle for a self-defined Afrocentric feminist consciousness occurs through a merger of thought and action.

This dimension of a Black women's standpoint rejects either/or dichotomous thinking that claims that *either* thought *or* concrete action is desirable

and that merging the two limits the efficacy of both. Such approaches generate deep divisions among theorists and activists which are more often fabricated than real. Instead, by espousing a both/and orientation that views thought and action as part of the same process, possibilities for new relationships between thought and action emerge. That Black women should embrace a both/and conceptual orientation grows from Black women's experiences living as both African-Americans and women and, in many cases, in poverty.

Very different kinds of "thought" and "theories" emerge when abstract thought is joined with concrete action. Denied positions as scholars and writers which allow us to emphasize purely theoretical concerns, the work of most Black women intellectuals is influenced by the merger of action and theory. The activities of nineteenth-century Black women intellectuals such as Anna J. Cooper, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell exemplify this tradition of merging intellectual work and activism. These women both produced analyses of Black women's oppression and worked to eliminate that oppression. The Black women's club movement they created was both an activist and an intellectual endeavor.

Contemporary Black women intellectuals continue to draw on this tradition of using everyday actions and experiences in our theoretical work.[5] Bell Hooks describes the impact working as an operator at the telephone company had on her efforts to write *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). The women she worked with wanted her to "write a book that would make our lives better, one that would make other people understand the hardships of being black and female" (1989, 152). To Hooks, "it was different to be writing in a context where my ideas were not seen as separate from real people and real lives" (p. 152). Similarly, Black feminist historian Elsa Barkley Brown describes the importance her mother's ideas played in the scholarship she eventually produced on African-American washerwomen. Initially Brown used the lens provided by her training as a historian and assessed her sample group as devalued service workers. But over time she came to understand washerwomen as entrepreneurs. By taking the laundry to whoever had the largest kitchen, they created a community and a culture among themselves. In explaining the shift of vision that enabled her to reassess this portion of Black women's history, Brown notes, "it was my mother who taught me how to ask the right questions—and all of us who try to do this thing called scholarship on a regular basis are fully aware that asking the right questions is the most important part of the process" (1986, 14).

REARTICULATING A BLACK WOMEN'S STANDPOINT

The existence of a Black women's standpoint does not mean that African-American women appreciate its content, see its significance, or recognize the potential that a fully articulated Afrocentric feminist standpoint has as a catalyst for social change. One key role for Black women intellectuals is to ask the right questions and investigate all dimensions of a Black women's standpoint with and for African-American women.[6] Black women intellectuals thus stand in a special relationship to the community of African-American women of which we are a part, and this special relationship frames the contours of Black feminist thought.

This special relationship of Black women intellectuals to the community of African-American women parallels the existence of two interrelated levels of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women growing from our everyday thoughts and actions constitutes a first and most fundamental level of knowledge. The ideas that Black women share with one another on an informal, daily basis about topics such as how to style our hair, characteristics of "good" Black men, strategies for dealing with white folks, and skills of how to "get over" provide the foundations for this taken-for-granted knowledge.

Experts or specialists who participate in and emerge from a group produce a second, more specialized type of knowledge. The range of Black women intellectuals discussed in Chapter 1 are these specialists, and their theories clarifying a Black women's standpoint form the specialized knowledge of Black feminist thought. The two types of knowledge are interdependent. While Black feminist thought articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African-American women as a group, the consciousness of Black women may be transformed by such thought. The actions of educated Black women within the Black women's club movement typify this special relationship between Black women intellectuals and the wider community of African-American women:

> It is important to recognize that black women like Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells were not isolated figures of intellectual genius; they were shaped by and helped to shape a wider movement of Afro-American women. This is not to claim that they were representative of all black women; they and their counterparts formed an educated, intellectual elite, but an elite that tried to develop a cultural and historical perspective that was organic to the wider condition of black womanhood. (Carby 1987, 115).

The work of these women is important because it illustrates a tradition of joining scholarship and activism, and thus it taps the both/and conceptual orientation of a Black women's standpoint.

The suppression of Black feminist thought in mainstream scholarship and within its Afrocentric and feminist critiques has meant that Black women intellectuals have traditionally relied on alternative institutional locations to produce specialized knowledge about a Black women's standpoint. Many Black women scholars, writers, and artists have worked either alone, as was the case with Maria W. Stewart, or within African-American community organizations, the case for Black women in the club movement. The emergence of Black women's studies in colleges and universities during the 1980s, and the creation of a community of African-American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor, have created new institutional locations where Black women intellectuals can produce specialized thought. Black women's history and Black feminist literary criticism constitute two focal points of this renaissance in Black women's intellectual work (Carby 1987). These are parallel movements: the former aimed at documenting social structural influences on Black women's consciousness; the latter, at exploring Black women's consciousness (self-definitions) through the freedom that art provides.

One danger facing African-American women intellectuals working in these new locations concerns the potential isolation from the types of experiences that stimulate an Afrocentric feminist consciousness—lack of access to other Black women and to a Black women's community. Another is the pressure to separate thought from action—particularly political activism—that typically accompanies training in standard academic disciplines. In spite of these hazards, contemporary Afrocentric feminist thought represents the creative energy flowing between these two focal points of history and literature, an unresolved tension that both emerges from and informs the experiences of African-American women.

The potential significance of Black feminist thought as specialized thought goes far beyond demonstrating that African-American women can be theorists. Like the Black women's activist tradition from which it grows and which it seeks to foster, Black feminist thought can create collective identity among African-American women about the dimensions of a Black women's standpoint. Through the process of rearticulation, Black women intellectuals offer African-American women a different view of themselves and their world from that forwarded by the dominant group (Omi and Winant 1986, 93). By taking the core themes of a Black women's standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black women intellectuals can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms and rearticulates a consciousness that

already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness empowers African-American women and stimulates resistance.

Sheila Radford-Hill stresses the importance of rearticulation as an essential ingredient of an empowering Black feminist theory in her essay "Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change." In evaluating whether Black women should espouse feminist programs, Radford-Hill suggests, "the essential issue that black women must confront when assessing a feminist position is as follows: If I, as a black woman, 'become a feminist,' what basic tools will I gain to resist my individual and group oppression" (1986, 160)? For Radford-Hill, the relevance of feminism as a vehicle for social change must be assessed in terms of its "ability to factor black women and other women of color into alternative conceptions of power and the consequences of its use" (p. 160). Thus Black feminist thought aims to develop a theory that is emancipatory and reflective and which can aid African-American women's struggles against oppression.

The earlier definition of Black feminist thought can now be reformulated to encompass the expanded definition of standpoint, the relationship between everyday and specialized thought, and the importance of rearticulation as one key dimension of Black feminist thought. Restated, Black feminist thought consists of theories or specialized thought produced by African-American women intellectuals designed to express a Black women's standpoint. The dimensions of this standpoint include the presence of characteristic core themes, the diversity of Black women's experiences in encountering these core themes, the varying expressions of Black women's Afrocentric feminist consciousness regarding the core themes and their experiences with them, and the interdependence of Black women's experiences, consciousness, and actions. This specialized thought should aim to infuse Black women's experiences and everyday thought with new meaning by rearticulating the interdependence of Black women's experiences and consciousness. Black feminist thought is *of* African-American women in that it taps the multiple relationships among Black women needed to produce a self-defined Black women's standpoint. Black feminist thought is *for* Black women in that it empowers Black women for political activism.

At first glance, this expanded definition could be read to mean that only African-American women can participate in the production of Black feminist thought and that only Black women's experiences can form the content of that thought. But this model of Black feminism is undermined as a critical perspective by being dependent on those who are biologically Black and female. Given that I reject exclusionary definitions of Black feminism which confine "black feminist criticism to black women critics of black women artists depicting black women" (Carby 1987, 9), how does the expanded definition of Black feminist thought address the two original definitional tensions?

WHO CAN BE A BLACK FEMINIST? : THE CENTRALITY OF BLACK WOMEN INTELLECTUALS TO THE PRODUCTION OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

I aim to develop a definition of Black feminist thought that relies exclusively neither on a materialist analysis—one whereby all African-American women by virtue of biology become automatically registered as "authentic Black feminists"—nor on an idealist analysis whereby the background, worldview, and interests of the thinker are deemed irrelevant in assessing his or her ideas. Resolving the tension between these two extremes involves reassessing the centrality Black women intellectuals assume in producing Black feminist thought. It also requires examining the importance of coalitions with Black men, white women, people of color, and other groups with distinctive standpoints. Such coalitions are essential in order to foster other groups' contributions as critics, teachers, advocates, and disseminators of a self-defined Afrocentric feminist standpoint.

Black women's concrete experiences as members of specific race, class, and gender groups as well as our concrete historical situations necessarily play significant roles in our perspectives on the world. No standpoint is neutral because no individual or group exists unembedded in the world. Knowledge is gained not by solitary individuals but by Black women as socially constituted members of a group (Narayan 1989). These factors all frame the definitional tensions in Black feminist thought.

Black women intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought for several reasons. First, our experiences as African-American women provide us with a unique standpoint on Black womanhood unavailable to other groups. It is more likely for Black women as members of an oppressed group to have critical insights into the condition of our own oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures. One of the characters in Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's 1892 novel, *Iola Leroy*, expresses this belief in the special vision of those who have experienced oppression:

> Miss Leroy, out of the race must come its own thinkers and writers. Authors belonging to the white race have written good books, for which I am deeply grateful, but it seems to be almost impossible for a white man to put himself completely in our place. No man can feel the iron which enters another man's soul. (Carby 1987, 62)

Only African-American women occupy this center and can "feel the iron" that enters Black women's souls, because we are the only group that has experienced race, gender, and class oppression as Black women experience them. The importance of Black women's leadership in producing Black feminist thought does not mean that others cannot participate. It does mean that the primary responsibility for defining one's own reality lies with the people who live that reality, who actually have those experiences.

Second, Black women intellectuals provide unique leadership for Black women's empowerment and resistance. In discussing Black women's involvement in the feminist movement, Sheila Radford-Hill points out the connections among self-definition, empowerment, and taking actions in one's own behalf:

> Black women now realize that part of the problem within the movement was our insistence that white women do for/with us what we must do for/with ourselves: namely, frame our own social action around our own agenda for change. . . . Critical to this discussion is the right to organize on one's own behalf. . . . Criticism by black feminists must reaffirm this principle. (1986, 162)

Black feminist thought cannot challenge race, gender, and class oppression without empowering African-American women. "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story," notes Bell Hooks (1989, 43). Because self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment, using an epistemology that cedes the power of self-definition to other groups, no matter how well-meaning, in essence perpetuates Black women's subordination. As Black feminist sociologist Deborah K. King succinctly states, "Black feminism asserts self-determination as essential" (1988, 72).

Stressing the importance of Black women's centrality to Black feminist thought does not mean that all African-American women exert this leadership. While being an African-American woman generally provides the experiential base for an Afrocentric feminist consciousness, these same conditions suppress its articulation. It is not acquired as a finished product but must continually develop in relation to changing conditions.

Bonnie Johnson emphasizes the importance of self-definition. In her critique of Patricia Bell Scott's bibliography on Black feminism, she challenges both Scott's categorization of all works by Black women as being Black feminist and Scott's identification of a wide range of African-American women as Black feminists: "Whether I think they're feminists is irrelevant. *They* would not call themselves feminist" (Clarke et al. 1983, 94). As Patrice L. Dickerson contends, "a person comes into being and knows herself by her achievements, and through her efforts to become and know herself, she achieves" (personal correspondence 1988). Here is the heart of the matter. An Afrocentric feminist consciousness constantly emerges and is part of a self-conscious struggle to merge thought and action.

Third, Black women intellectuals are central in the production of Black feminist thought because we alone can create the group autonomy that must precede effective coalitions with other groups. This autonomy is quite distinct from separatist positions whereby Black women withdraw from other groups and engage in exclusionary politics. In her introduction to *Home Girls, A Black Feminist Anthology*, Barbara Smith describes this difference: "Autonomy and separatism are fundamentally different. Whereas autonomy comes from a position of strength, separatism comes from a position of fear. When we're truly autonomous we can deal with other kinds of people, a multiplicity of issues, and with difference, because we have formed a solid base of strength" (1983, xl). Black women intellectuals who articulate an autonomous, self-defined standpoint are in a position to examine the usefulness of coalitions with other groups, both scholarly and activist, in order to develop new models for social change. However, autonomy to develop a self-defined, independent analysis does not mean that Black feminist thought has relevance only for African-American women or that we must confine ourselves to analyzing our own experiences. As Sonia Sanchez points out, "I've always known that if you write from a black experience, you're writing from a universal experience as well. . . I know you don't have to whitewash yourself to be universal" (in Tate 1983, 142).

While Black feminist thought may originate with Black feminist intellectuals, it cannot flourish isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups. The dilemma is that Black women intellectuals must place our own experiences and consciousness at the center of any serious efforts to develop Black feminist thought yet not have that thought become separatist and exclusionary. Bell Hooks offers a solution to this problem by suggesting that we shift from statements such as "I am a feminist" to those such as "I advocate feminism." Such an approach could "serve as a way women who are concerned about feminism as well as other political movements could express their support while avoiding linguistic structures that give primacy to one particular group" (1984, 30).

By advocating, refining, and disseminating Black feminist thought, other groups—such as Black men, white women, white men, and other people of color—further its development. Black women can produce an attenuated version of Black feminist thought separated from other groups. Other

groups cannot produce Black feminist thought without African-American women. Such groups can, however, develop self-defined knowledge reflecting their own standpoints. But the full actualization of Black feminist thought requires a collaborative enterprise with Black women at the center of a community based on coalitions among autonomous groups.

Coalitions such as these require dialogues among Black women intellectuals and within the larger African-American women's community. Exploring the common themes of a Black women's standpoint is an important first step. Moreover, finding ways of handling internal dissent is especially important for the Black women's intellectual community. Evelynn Hammond describes how maintaining a united front for whites stifles her thinking: "What I need to do is challenge my thinking, to grow. On white publications sometimes I feel like I'm holding up the banner of black womanhood. And that doesn't allow me to be as critical as I would like to be" (in Clarke et al. 1983, 104). Cheryl Clarke observes that she has two dialogues: one with the public and the private ones in which she feels free to criticize the work of other Black women. Clarke states that the private dialogues are the ones that "have changed my life, have shaped the way I feel . . . have mattered to me" (p. 103).

Coalitions also require dialogues with other groups. Rather than rejecting our marginality, Black women intellectuals can use our outsider-within stance as a position of strength in building effective coalitions and stimulating dialogue. Barbara Smith suggests that Black women develop dialogues based on a "commitment to principled coalitions, based not upon expediency, but upon our actual need for each other" (1983, xxxiii). Dialogues among and coalitions with a range of groups, each with its own distinctive set of experiences and specialized thought embedded in those experiences, form the larger, more general terrain of intellectual and political discourse necessary for furthering Black feminism. Through dialogues exploring how relations of domination and subordination are maintained and changed, parallels between Black women's experiences and those of other groups become the focus of investigation.

Dialogue and principled coalition create possibilities for new versions of truth. Alice Walker's answer to the question of what she felt were the major differences between the literature of African-Americans and whites offers a provocative glimpse of the types of truths that might emerge through an epistemology based on dialogue and coalition. Walker did not spend much time considering this question, since it was not the difference between them that interested her, but, rather, the way Black writers and white writers seemed to be writing one immense story, with different parts of the story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. In a conversation with her mother, Walker refines this epistemological vision: "I believe that the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer's story. And the whole story is what I'm after" (1983, 49). Her mother's response to Walker's vision of the possibilities of dialogues and coalitions hints at the difficulty of sustaining such dialogues under oppressive conditions: "'Well, I doubt if you can ever get the *true* missing parts of anything away from the white folks,' my mother says softly, so as not to offend the waitress who is mopping up a nearby table; 'they've sat on the truth so long by now they've mashed the life out of it'" (1983, 49).

WHAT CONSTITUTES BLACK FEMINISM? THE RECURRING HUMANIST VISION

A wide range of African-American women intellectuals have advanced the view that Black women's struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment. In an 1893 speech to women, Anna Julia Cooper cogently expressed this alternative worldview:

> We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. . . . The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that . . . not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won—not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.(Loewenberg and Bogin 1976, 330–31)

Like Cooper, many African-American women intellectuals embrace this perspective regardless of particular political solutions we propose, our fields of study, or our historical periods. Whether we advocate working through separate Black women's organizations, becoming part of women's organizations, working within existing political structures, or supporting Black community institutions, African-American women intellectuals repeatedly identify political actions such as these as a *means* for human empowerment rather than ends in and of themselves. Thus the primary guiding principle of Black feminism is a recurring humanist vision (Steady 1981, 1987).[7]

Alice Walker's preference for the term *womanist*, a term she describes as "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender," addresses this notion

of the solidarity of humanity. To Walker, one is "womanist" when one is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." A womanist is "not a separatist, except periodically for health" and is "traditionally universalist, as is 'Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?' Ans.: 'Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented'" (1983, xi). By redefining all people as "people of color," Walker universalizes what are typically seen as individual struggles while simultaneously allowing space for autonomous movements of self-determination.

In assessing the sexism of the Black nationalist movement of the 1960s, Black feminist lawyer Pauli Murray identifies the dangers inherent in separatism as opposed to autonomy, and also echoes Cooper's concern with the solidarity of humanity:

> The lesson of history that all human rights are indivisible and that the failure to adhere to this principle jeopardizes the rights of all is particularly applicable here. A built-in hazard of an aggressive ethnocentric movement which disregards the interests of other disadvantaged groups is that it will become parochial and ultimately self-defeating in the face of hostile reactions, dwindling allies, and mounting frustrations. . . . Only a broad movement for human rights can prevent the Black Revolution from becoming isolated and can insure ultimate success. (Murray 1970, 102)

Without a commitment to human solidarity, suggests Murray, any political movement—whether nationalist, feminist or antielitist—may be doomed to ultimate failure.

Bell Hook's analysis of feminism adds another critical dimension that must be considered: namely, the necessity of self-conscious struggle against a more generalized ideology of domination:

> To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (Hooks 1981, 194)

Former assemblywoman Shirley Chisholm also points to the need for self-conscious struggle against the stereotypes buttressing ideologies of domination. In "working toward our own freedom, we can help others work free from the traps of their stereotypes," she notes. "In the end,

antiblack, antifemale, and all forms of discrimination are equivalent to the same thing—antihumanism. . . . We must reject not only the stereotypes that others have of us but also those we have of ourselves and others" (1970, 181).

This humanist vision is also reflected in the growing prominence of international issues and global concerns in the works of contemporary African-American women intellectuals (Lindsay 1980; Steady 1981, 1987). Economists Margaret Simms and Julianne Malveaux's 1986 edited volume, *Slipping through the Cracks: The Status of Black Women*, contains articles on Black women in Tanzania, Jamaica, and South Africa. Angela Davis devotes an entire section of her 1989 book, *Women, Culture, and Politics*, to international affairs and includes essays on Winnie Mandela and on women in Egypt. June Jordan's 1985 volume, *On Call*, includes essays on South Africa, Nicaragua, and the Bahamas. Alice Walker writes compellingly of the types of links these and other Black women intellectuals see between African-American women's issues and those of other groups: "To me, Central America is one large plantation; and I see the people's struggle to be free as a slave revolt" (1988, 177).

The words and actions of Black women intellectuals from different historical times and addressing markedly different audiences resonate with a strikingly similar theme of the oneness of all human life. Perhaps the most succinct version of the humanist vision in Black feminist thought is offered by Fannie Lou Hamer, the daughter of sharecroppers, and a Mississippi civil rights activist. While sitting on her porch, Ms. Hamer observed, "Ain' no such thing as I can hate anybody and hope to see God's face" (Jordan 1981, xi).

Taken together, the ideas of Anna Julia Cooper, Pauli Murray, Bell Hooks, Alice Walker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and other Black women intellectuals too numerous to mention suggest a powerful answer to the question "What is Black feminism?" Inherent in their words and deeds is a definition of Black feminism as a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community.

NOTES

1. For discussions of the concept of standpoint, see Hartsock (1983a, 1983b), Jaggar (1983), and Smith (1987). Even though I use standpoint epistemologies as an organizing concept in this volume, they remain controversial. For a helpful critique of standpoint epistemologies, see Harding (1986). Haraway's (1988) reformulation of standpoint epistemologies approximates my use here.

2. Scott (1985) defines consciousness as the symbols, norms, and ideological forms people create to give meaning to their acts. For de Lauretis (1986), consciousness is

a process, a "particular configuration of subjectivity . . . produced at the intersection of meaning with experience. . . . Consciousness is grounded in personal history, and self and identity are understood within particular cultural contexts. Consciousness . . . is never fixed, never attained once and for all, because discursive boundaries change with historical conditions" (p. 8).

3. The presence of a Black women's culture of resistance (Terborg-Penn 1986; Dodson and Gilkes 1987) that is both Afrocentric and feminist challenges two prevailing interpretations of the consciousness of oppressed groups. One approach claims that subordinate groups identify with the powerful and have no valid independent interpretation of their own oppression. The second assumes the oppressed are less human than their rulers, and are therefore less capable of interpreting their own experiences (Rollins 1985; Scott 1985). Both approaches see any independent consciousness expressed by oppressed groups as being either not of their own making or inferior to that of the dominant group. More important, both explanations suggest that the alleged lack of political activism on the part of oppressed groups stems from their flawed consciousness of their own subordination.

4. Even though I will continue to use the term *Afrocentric feminist thought* interchangeably with the phrase *Black feminist thought*, I think they are conceptually distinct.

5. Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987) also views women's concrete, everyday world as stimulating theory. But the everyday she examines is individual, a situation reflecting in part the isolation of white, middle-class women. In contrast, I contend that the collective values in Afrocentric communities, when combined with the working-class experiences of the majority of Black women, provide a collective as well as an individual concrete.

6. See Harold Cruse's (1967) analysis of the Black intellectual tradition and John Child's (1984) discussion of the desired relationship of Black intellectuals to African-American culture. Childs argues against a relationship wherein "the people recede. They become merely the raw energy which the intellectuals must reshape, refine, and give voice to. A temptation for these intellectuals is to see themselves as the core formative force through which cultures comes into conscious existence and through which it is returned, now complete, to the people" (p. 69). Like Childs, I suggest that the role of Black women intellectuals is to "illuminate the very intricacy and strength of the peoples' thought" (p. 87).

7. My use of the term *humanist* grows from an Afrocentric historical context distinct from that criticized by Western feminists. I use the term to tap an Afrocentric humanism as cited by West (1977–78), Asante (1987) and Turner (1984) and as part of the Black theological tradition (Mitchell and Lewter 1986; Cannon 1988). See Harris (1981) for a discussion of the humanist tradition in the works of three Black women writers. See Richards (1990) for a discussion of African-American spirituality, a key dimension of Afrocentric humanism. Novelist Margaret Walker offers one of the clearest discussions of Black humanism. Walker claims: "I think it is more important now to emphasize humanism in a technological age than ever before, because it is only in terms of humanism that society can redeem itself. I believe that mankind is only one race—the human race. There are many strands in the family of man—many races. The world has yet to learn to appreciate the deep reservoirs of humanism in all races, and particularly in the Black race" (Rowell 1975, 12).

Part Two

CORE THEMES IN BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Chapter 3

WORK, FAMILY, AND BLACK WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

> Honey, de white man is the de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.
>
> —Zora Neale Hurston 1937, 16

With these words Nanny, an elderly African-American woman in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, explains Black women's "place" to her young, impressionable granddaughter. Nanny knows that being treated as "mules uh de world" lies at the heart of Black women's oppression. As mill worker Corine Cannon observes, "your work, and this goes for white people and black, is what you are . . . your work is your life" (Byerly 1986, 156).

One core theme in Black feminist thought consists of analyzing Black women's work, especially Black women's labor market victimization as "mules." As dehumanized objects, mules are living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery. Fully human women are less easily exploited. Documenting Black women's labor market status in order to see the general patterns of race and gender inequality is one primary area of analysis (Wallace 1980; Higginbotham 1983, 1985; Glenn 1985;

Jones 1985). This research is supplemented by studies of Black women's positions in specific occupational niches, such as the attention devoted to Black women domestic workers (Dill 1980, 1988a; Rollins 1985), and during specific historical eras, such as slavery (Jones 1985; D. White 1985) and the urbanizing South (Clark-Lewis 1985). This emerging scholarship provides convincing evidence for Maria Stewart's deft claim that "let our girls possess whatever amiable qualities of soul they may . . . it is impossible for scarce an individual of them to rise above the condition of servants" (Richardson 1987, 46).

More recent scholarship supplements this initial emphasis on oppression by presenting African-American women as constrained but often empowered figures, even in extremely difficult labor market settings (Terborg-Penn 1985). Black women's organizational roles in unions (Lerner 1972; Sacks 1988) and Black women's characteristic forms of everyday resistance (Rollins 1985; Byerly 1986; Dill 1988a) are also receiving increased attention.

Black women intellectuals demonstrate a sustained effort to examine the connections between race and gender oppression in analyzing Black women's work in capitalist political economies (Davis 1981; Higginbotham 1983; Mullings 1986b; Collins 1986a; Brewer 1988). African-American women certainly are not the only group taking this position (see, e.g., Brittan and Maynard 1984; Glenn 1985), but they have consistently done so the longest. While the concept of the interlocking nature of oppression is proposed as a premise, efforts at untangling the nature of the relationships themselves typically yield uneven outcomes (King 1988). As a result, we have a better sense of what these relationships are *not* than of what they are in a political economy of domination.[1]

Research on Black women's unpaid labor within extended families remains less fully developed in Black feminist thought than does that on Black women's paid work. By emphasizing Black women's contributions to Black family well-being, such as keeping families together and teaching children survival skills (Martin and Martin 1978; McCray 1980; Davis 1981), such scholarship suggests that Black women see their unpaid domestic work more as a form of resistance to oppression than as a form of exploitation by men. Less attention is given to ways that Black women's domestic labor is exploited within African-American families, an omission that obscures investigations of families as contradictory locations that simultaneously confine yet allow Black women to develop cultures of resistance.

Afrocentric feminist analyses of Black women's work investigate both the interlocking nature of Black women's oppression in the paid labor market and the dialectical nature of Black women's unpaid family labor. Such analyses stimulate a better appreciation of the powerful and complex interplay between Black women's position as "de mule uh de world" and patterns of capitalist development, racial oppression, and gender subordination.

Afrocentric feminist analyses of Black women's work also promise to shed some light on ongoing debates concerning social class. Black women's experiences have not been adequately explained by the two primary models of social class. In the status attainment model, class sorts out positions in society along a continuum of economic success and social prestige. Social classes become relative rankings and people engage in relative amounts of ascending or descending the ladder of social class. In the class conflict model, class divides society into two or more groups each of which has vested class interests and contends for control of society. Social classes are defined by the social relations of domination and subordination, usually economic and political, and social class always requires a power relation (Vanneman and Cannon 1987).

Neither status attainment nor class conflict models adequately explain Black women's experiences with social class. Status attainment research has relied heavily on occupational prestige of traditionally male jobs. Women's social class position was thought to derive from that of their fathers and husbands. But the higher rates of Black male unemployment, the racial discrimination that has crowded all African-Americans into a narrow set of occupations, and the existence of household arrangements other than two-parent nuclear families among African-Americans have all combined to make status attainment models less suitable for explaining Black social class dynamics. Moreover, the emphasis on *paid* labor and the exclusion of *unpaid* domestic labor have severely limited the ability of status attainment models to explain Black women's social class experiences.

Conflict models have also failed to capture the intersection of race and gender in explaining Black women's social class location. By focusing on paid labor, they too obscure the full range of Black women's work. Moreover, the type of paid work that has long preoccupied conflict theorists—namely, industrial factory jobs, especially unionized jobs—is problematic. African-American women have traditionally worked in agricultural labor or as domestic workers, two occupations resistant to unionization. The result is that Black women's paid work has been neglected in class conflict models.

Placing Black women's work and family experiences at the center of analysis suggests a view of social class other than that offered by status attainment or conflict models. Moreover, understanding the intersection of work and family in Black women's lives is key to clarifying the overarching political economy of domination. Black women's work remains a

fundamental location where the dialectical relationship of oppression and activism occurs.

FAMILY AND WORK: CHALLENGING THE DEFINITIONS

Racially segmented labor markets, gender ideologies in both segmented labor markets and family units, and the overarching capitalist class structure in which Black women's specific race, gender, and social class positions are embedded all structure Black women's work. And yet traditional social science research assesses African-American women's experiences in families using the normative yardstick developed from the experiences of middle-class American and European nuclear families (Billingsley 1968; Ladner 1972; Johnson 1981; Brewer 1988). Three elements of this approach are especially problematic for African-American families. First, this model posits a dichotomous split between the public sphere of economic and political discourse and the private sphere of family and household responsibilities. Contrasting a public political economy to a private, noneconomic and apolitical domestic sphere creates a distinction between the paid labor of the public sphere and the unpaid labor of the domestic sphere. Work and family emerge as separate, discreet spheres, with paid work done outside the household deemed more valuable than unpaid work performed for families. Within the public sphere gradations of pay correspond with differences of status, prestige, and power. For the private sphere, household residency and the family are treated as synonymous. The normative family becomes defined as a heterosexual couple who live together with their dependent children in a self-contained, economically independent household.

Second, under this model the public sphere of political and economic discourse is reserved for men as a "male" domain, leaving the private domestic sphere of family a "female" domain. In spite of claims that the two spheres are separate but equal, in capitalist settings the "female" sphere of family has long been subordinated to the "male" sphere of paid work and political authority. Gender roles are tied to the dichotomous constructions of these two basic societal institutions: men work and women take care of families.

Finally, this public/private dichotomy separating the family/household from the paid labor market shapes sex-segregated gender roles within the private sphere of the family. The archetypal white, middle-class nuclear family divides family life into two oppositional spheres: the "male" sphere of economic providing and the "female" sphere of affective nurturing. This normative family household ideally consists of a working father who earns enough to allow his spouse and dependent children to withdraw from the paid labor force. As head of the household, the father presides over the intimate, private affairs of his own sphere of influence. Guided by the moral influence of the mother, the household/family serves as a haven from the pressures and demands of the impersonal, public sector. All members of the household/family should be glad to retreat from the impersonal public sphere to the warm, supportive environment of "home" (Dill 1988b; Mullings 1986a, 1986b).

Black women's experiences and those of other women of color have never fit this model (Higginbotham 1983; Glenn 1985; Mullings 1986b). Rather than trying to explain why Black women's work and family patterns deviate from the alleged norm, a more fruitful approach lies in challenging the very constructs of work and family themselves. Because household and kin arrangements vary tremendously cross-culturally, the family as described earlier is not a universal institution but is better seen as arising only in particular political and economic contexts (Collier et al. 1982; Oppong 1982; Rapp 1982). Sociologist Rose Brewer (1988) points out that "the nuclear family imperative is rooted in upper-class, white patriarchal prerogatives that are unevenly shared across race and class lines" (p. 332). Because the construct of family/household emerged with the growth of the modern state and is rooted in assumptions about discrete public and private spheres, nuclear families characterized by sex-segregated gender roles are less likely to be found in African-American communities, where political life is radically different.

The family life of poor people challenges these assumptions about universal nuclear family forms because poor families do not exhibit the radical split equating private with home and public with work (Rapp 1982, 179). In order to survive, the family network must share the costs of providing for children. Privatization is less likely when survival depends on rapid circulation of limited resources. African-American families exhibit these fluid public/private boundaries because racial oppression has impoverished disproportionate numbers of Black families (Stack 1974). But they also invoke the Afrocentric worldview that offers alternative definitions of family and community (Surdarkasa 1981a, 1981b).

Like family, work is a highly contested category. In the following discussion of the distinction between work and measures of self, May Madison, a participant in John Gwaltney's study of inner-city African-Americans, alludes to the difference between work as an instrumental activity and work as something for self:

> One very important difference between white people and black people is that white people think you *are* your work. . . . Now, a black person has

> more sense than that because he knows that what I am doing doesn't have anything to do with what I want to do or what I do when I am doing for myself. Now, black people think that my work is just what I have to do to get what I want. (Gwaltney 1980, 174)

Ms. Madison's perspective deconstructs definitions of work that grant white men more status and human worth because they are employed in better-paid occupations. She recognizes that work is a contested construct and that evaluating individual worth by the type of work performed is a questionable practice in systems based on race and gender inequality within segmented labor markets.

Work might be better conceptualized by examining the range of work that Black women actually perform. Work as alienated labor can be economically exploitative, physically demanding, and intellectually deadening—the type of work long associated with Black women's status as "mule." Alienated labor can be either paid, as was the case of domestic service, or unpaid, as was Black women's work under slavery or as is some work within families. But work can also be empowering and creative, even if it is physically challenging and appears to be demeaning. Exploitative wages that Black women were allowed to keep and use for their own benefit or work done out of love for the members of one's family can represent work that is empowering and/or creative. Again, this type of work can be either paid or unpaid.

What is the connection between Black women's work both in the labor market and in African-American family networks? Addressing this question for four key historical periods in Black political economy uses the lens of Black women's work to further an Afrocentric feminist analysis of social class and oppression.

THE PROCESS OF ENSLAVEMENT

Historically African-American families have had a different relationship to capitalist political economies than have middle-class, white families (Cox 1948; Davis 1981; Hogan 1984). This difference provides a context for understanding Black women's work in kin networks and in the wider political economy (Mullings 1986b).

During the transition from competitive to industrial capitalism which characterized the early nineteenth century, white urban middle-class families adopted self-contained nuclear household units. In contrast, the majority of African-American families were enslaved. These families had great difficulty maintaining private households in public spheres controlled by

white slaveowners. Enslaved Africans were property (Burnham 1987), and they resisted the dehumanizing effects of slavery by recreating African notions of family as extended kin units (Webber 1978; Sobel 1979). Blood lines carefully monitored in West Africa were replaced by a notion of "blood" whereby enslaved Africans thought of themselves as part of an extended family/community consisting of their Black "brothers" and "sisters" (Gutman 1976). The entire slave community/family stood in opposition to the public sphere of a capitalist political economy controlled by elite white men. For Black women the domestic sphere encompassed a broad range of kin and community relations beyond the nuclear family household. The line separating the Black community from whites served as a more accurate boundary delineating public and private spheres for African-Americans than that separating Black households from the surrounding Black community.

Before enslavement, African women combined work and family without seeing a conflict between the two. In West African societies women routinely joined child care with their contributions to precapitalist political economies (Schildkrout 1983; Ware 1983). In agricultural societies dependent on female farmers, children accompanied their mothers to the fields. Women entrepreneurs took their children with them when conducting business in the marketplace. When old enough, children contributed to family-based production by caring for siblings, running errands, and generally helping out. Working did not detract from West African women's mothering. Instead, being economically productive and contributing to the family-based economy was an integral part of motherhood (Sudarkasa 1981a).

For enslaved African women in the United States, this basic relationship linking work and motherhood was retained, but with two fundamental changes. First, whereas African women worked on behalf of their families and children, enslaved African-American women's labor benefited their owners. Second, the nature of work performed was altered. Women did not retain authority over their time, technology, work mates, or type or amount of work they performed. In essence, the fundamental shift in women's work meant that West African women were forced to serve as economically exploited, politically powerless units of labor.

Gender roles were similarly shaped under slavery. Black women generally performed the same work as men. This enabled them to continue West African traditions whereby women were not limited to devalued domestic labor (Davis 1981; Jones 1985; D. White 1985). This similarity of work coupled with the harshness of racial oppression for all African-Americans suggests that a general equality existed between Black men and women (Webber 1978; Davis 1981).

Unlike African political economies, where women's labor benefited their lineage group and their children, under slavery neither men nor women got to keep what they produced. Slavery also established the racial division of labor whereby African-Americans were relegated to dirty, manual, nonintellectual jobs. As Maria Stewart pointed out, "the Americans have practiced nothing but head-work these 200 years, and we have done their drudgery. And is it not high time for us to imitate their examples, and practice head-work too, and keep what we have got, and get what we can?" (Richardson 1987, 38). In spite of slavery's burdens, African-Americans did not perceive work as the problem but, rather, the exploitation inherent in the work they performed. A saying among enslaved Africans, "it's a poor dog that won't wag its own tail," alludes to popular perceptions among Blacks that whites were lazy and did not value work as much as African-Americans themselves.

Black women's work affected the organization of child care. Perceptions of motherhood and child care as an occupation in the home comparable to male occupations in the public sector popularized by the cult of domesticity never became widespread among the majority of African-American women (Mullings 1986b). Instead, women organized communal child care arrangements such that a few women were responsible for caring for all children too young to work and women as a group felt accountable for one another's children (D. White 1985).

African-American women's experiences as mothers have been shaped by the dominant group's efforts to harness Black women's sexuality and fertility to a system of capitalist exploitation. Efforts to control Black women's reproduction were important to the maintenance of the race, class, and gender inequality characterizing the slave order in at least three ways. First, the biological notions of race underpinning the racial subordination of the slave system required so-called racial purity in order to be effective. Since children followed the condition of their mothers, children born of enslaved Black women were slaves. Forbidding Black men to have sexual relations with white women eliminated the possibility that children of African descent would be born to white mothers. Motherhood and racism were symbolically intertwined, and controlling the sexuality and fertility of both African-American and white women was essential in reproducing notions of "race" as a social and cultural entity (King 1973; Hoch 1979; Mosse 1985).

Second, motherhood as an institution occupies a special place in transmitting values to children about their proper place. On one hand, a mother can foster her children's oppression if she teaches them to believe in their own inferiority. As noted African-American educator Carter G. Woodson contends, "if you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry

about his actions" (1933, 84). On the other hand, the relationship between mothers and children can serve as a private sphere in which cultures of resistance and everyday forms of resistance are learned (Caulfield 1974; Scott 1985). When Black slave mothers taught their children to trust their own self-definitions and value themselves, they offered a powerful tool for resisting oppression.

Finally, controlling Black women's reproduction was essential to the creation and perpetuation of capitalist class relations. Slavery benefited certain segments of the population by economically exploiting others. As Black feminist intellectual Frances Ellen Watkins Harper argued, "How can we pamper our appetites upon luxuries drawn from reluctant fingers. Oh, could slavery exist long if it did not sit on a commercial throne?" (Sterling 1984, 160). Under such a system in which the control of property is fundamental, enslaved African women were valuable commodities. Slaveowners controlled Black women's labor and commodified Black women's bodies as units of capital. Moreover, as mothers, Black women's fertility produced the children who increased their owners' property and labor force (Davis 1981; Burnham 1987).

Efforts to control Black women's sexuality were tied directly to slaveowners' efforts to increase the fertility of their female slaves. Historian Deborah Gray White (1985) claims that "slave masters wanted adolescent girls to have children, and to this end they practiced a passive, though insidious kind of breeding" (p. 98). Techniques such as assigning pregnant women lighter workloads, giving pregnant women more attention and rations, and rewarding prolific women with bonuses were all employed to increase Black women's fertility. Punitive measures were also used. Infertile women could expect to be treated "like barren sows and be passed from one unsuspecting buyer to the next" (D. White 1985, 101).

The relative security that often accompanied motherhood served to reinforce its importance. Childbearing was a way for enslaved Black women to anchor themselves in a given location for an extended period and maintain enduring relationships with husbands, family, and friends. Given the short life expectancy of slave women—33.6 years—and the high mortality rates of Black children—from 1850 to 1860 fewer than two of three Black children survived to the age of ten—the enslaved woman's ability to bear many healthy children was often the critical element in the length and stability of slave marriages (Giddings 1984). Similarly, the refusal of women to bear children and cases of Black infanticide can be interpreted as acts of resistance (Hine and Wittenstein 1981).

Deborah Gray White contends that slaveholders' efforts to increase fertility elevated motherhood over marriage and fostered the continued

centrality of women in African-American family networks:

> Relationships between mother and child . . . superseded those between husband and wife. Slaveholder practice encouraged the primacy of the mother-child relationship, and in the mores of the slave community motherhood ranked above marriage. . . . Women in their roles as mothers were the central figures in the nuclear slave family. (1985, 159)

Black women's centrality in Black family networks should not be confused with matriarchal or female-dominated family units (Collins 1989). The conceptual assumption of the matriarchy thesis is that someone must "rule" the household in order for it to function effectively. Neither Black men nor Black women ruled Black family networks (Davis 1981; Burnham 1987). Rather, African-Americans' relationship to the slave political economy made it unlikely that either patriarchal or matriarchal domination could take root.

THE TRANSITION TO "FREE" LABOR

For African-Americans the period between emancipation and subsequent migrations to southern and northern cities was characterized by two distinct models of community. Each offered a different version of the connections between work and family. Within dominant white society the model of community reflected capitalist market economies of competitive, industrial, and monopoly capitalism (Baran and Sweezy 1966; Braverman 1974). Firmly rooted in an exchange-based marketplace with its accompanying assumptions of rational economic decision making and white male control of the marketplace, this model of community stresses the rights of individuals to make decisions in their own self-interest, regardless of the impact on the larger society. Composed of a collection of unequal individuals who compete for greater shares of money as the medium of exchange, this model of community legitimates relations of domination either by denying they exist or by treating them as inevitable but unimportant (Hartsock 1983b).

While enslaved, African-Americans paradoxically were central to yet existed largely outside the market economy and its version of community. Upon emancipation, Blacks became wage laborers and were thrust into these exchange relationships in which individual gain was placed ahead of collective good. Anna Julia Cooper describes this larger setting in which African-Americans found themselves as the Accumulative Period, and challenged its basic assumptions about community and women's role in it:

> At the most trying time of what we have called the Accumulative Period, when internecine war, originated through man's love of gain and his determination to subordinate national interests and black men's rights alike to the considerations of personal profit and loss, was drenching our country with its own best blood, who shall recount the name and fame of the women on both sides of the senseless strife. (Cooper 1892, 128)

Cooper's ideas are key in that they not only link racism, economic exploitation after emancipation, and the violence needed to maintain both, but they clearly label the public sphere and its community as a male-defined arena. By asking, "who shall recount the name and fame of the women?" she questions the role of gender in structuring women's subordination generally, and Black women's work and family roles in particular.

During this period, revitalized political and economic oppression of African-Americans in the South influenced Black actions and ideas about family and community. Notions such as equating family with extended family, of treating community as family, and of seeing dealings with whites as elements of public discourse and dealings with Blacks as part of family business endured. As a result, African-American definitions of community were distinct from public, market-driven, exchange-based community models. Whether adhered to as a remnant of the African past or responding to the exigencies of political and economic disenfranchisement in the post-Reconstruction South, Black communities as places of collective effort and will stood in contrast to the public, market-driven, exchange-based dominant political economy in which they were situated (Bethel 1981).

For African-American women the issue was less one of economic equality with husbands and more the adequacy of overall family income. Denying Black men a family wage meant that women continued working and that motherhood as a privatized, female "occupation" never predominated in the African-American communities (Dill 1988b). Communal child care within extended families continued (Martin and Martin 1978; Jones 1985). Segregation fostered rigid boundaries between African-Americans and whites such that the public/private oppositional dichotomy characterizing racial discourse hardened while fluid boundaries among Black households in the Black family/community continued. Within African-American communities social-class-specific gender ideology developed during this period (Higginbotham 1989).

For at least 75 years after emancipation, the vast majority of Black families worked in southern agriculture (Jones 1985). Black women's work in the public, male-defined sphere of exchange relations took two types. The majority of Black women worked in the fields, with the male head of the extended family unit receiving the wages earned by the family unit. Such

work was hard and exhausting and represented little change from the work done by enslaved African-American women. Sara Brooks began full-time work in the fields at age 11 and remembers, "we never was lazy cause we used to really work. We used to work like mens. Oh, fight sometime, fuss sometime, but worked on" (Simonsen 1986, 39).

The other primary occupation for Black women's wage labor was domestic work. Young Black girls were prepared by their families for domestic work. An 87-year-old North Carolina woman remembers her training: "No girl I know wasn't trained for work out by ten. You washed, watched, and whipped somebody the day you stopped crawling. From the time a girl can stand, she's being made to work" (Clark-Lewis 1985, 7). Such work was low paid and exposed Black girls and women to the constant threat of sexual harassment. One African-American woman describes the lack of protection for Black women domestic workers in the South: "I remember . . . I lost my place because I refused to let the madam's husband kiss me. . . . When my husband went to the man who had insulted me, the man cursed him, and slapped him, and—had him arrested!" (Lerner 1972, 155–56). Even though she testified in court, her husband was fined $25 and was told by the presiding judge, "this court will never take the word of a nigger against the word of a white man" (p. 156).

The sexual harassment of African-American women by white men contributed to images of Black women as fair game for all men. The difficulty of the environment prompted one southern Black woman to remonstrate:

> We poor colored women wage-earners in the South are fighting a terrible battle. . . . On the one hand, we are assailed by white men, and on the other hand, we are assailed by black men, who should be our natural protectors; and, whether in the cook kitchen, at the washtub, over the sewing machine, behind the baby carriage, or at the ironing board, we are little more than pack horses, beasts of burden, slaves! (Lerner 1972, 157)

African-American women who were the wives and daughters of able-bodied men withdrew from both field labor and domestic service in order to concentrate on domestic duties in their own homes. In doing so they were "severely criticized by whites for removing themselves from field labor because they were seen to be aspiring to a model of womanhood that was inappropriate to them" (Dill 1988b, 422). Black women wanted to withdraw from the labor force, not to duplicate middle-class white women's cult of domesticity but, rather, to strengthen the political and economic position of their families. Their actions can be seen as a sustained effort to remove themselves from the exploited labor force in order to return the value of their labor to their families and to find relief from the sexual harassment they endured in the marketplace. While many women tried to leave the paid labor force, the limited opportunities available to African-American men made it virtually impossible for the majority of Black families to survive on Black male wages alone. Even though she was offered work only as a maid, Elsa Barkley Brown's college-educated mother was fortunate. From Brown's standpoint, her mother's "decision to be a wife and mother first in a world which defined Black women in so many other ways, the decision to make her family the most important priority, was an act of resistance" (1986, 11). Far too many Black women could not make this choice—they continued to work, and their work profoundly affected African-American family life, communities, and the women themselves (Bethel 1981; Jones 1985).

URBANIZATION AND DOMESTIC WORK

Black women's move to southern and northern cities in the early 1900s continued virtually unabated until after World War II. Migration stimulated substantial shifts in Black women's labor market activities as well as changes in African-American family patterns and community organization. While racial segregation delimited African-American from white physical space, gender relations within Black communities delimited female from male space. Male space included the streets, barber shops, and pool halls: female arenas consisted of households and churches. "Women, who blurred the physical boundaries of gender, did so at the jeopardy of respectability within their communities" (Higginbotham 1989, 59).

Black women migrants encountered urban labor markets segmented along lines of race and gender (Gordon et al. 1982). For the vast majority of African-American women, urbanization meant migration out of agricultural work and into domestic work. In 1910, 38.5 percent of all employed Black women were domestic workers. By 1940 that number had risen to 59.9 percent (Higginbotham 1983).

Black women's confinement in domestic service has attracted the attention of Black women intellectuals who have investigated key dimensions of this special occupational niche. Unlike the life histories of the countless enslaved and emancipated Black women who worked in the fields, Black feminist research on Black domestic workers allows a closer view both of how African-American women perceived their work and of the actions they undertook to resist its exploitative and dehumanizing aspects.

One benefit of urbanization was that it allowed Black domestic workers to shift the conditions of their work from that of live-in servant to day work.

A common migration pattern was for Black girls to train for domestic work in the South by doing chores and taking care of siblings and then go to cities of the North around age ten to assist working relatives (Clark-Lewis 1985). At first girls might take care of their relatives' children. Although it often took years to accomplish, young women eventually found employment in day work. Moving to a larger marketplace where domestics could leave employers when demands were inappropriate allowed African-American women to make the transition from live-in to day work. One 83-year-old respondent in Elizabeth Clark-Lewis's study recounts how she viewed this shift as a move toward better working conditions: "The living-in jobs just kept you running; never stopped. Day or night you'd be getting something for somebody. You'd serve them. It was never a minute's peace. . . . But when I went out days on my jobs, I'd get my work done and be gone. I guess that's it. This work had a end" (Clark-Lewis 1985, 1).

While an improvement, the shift to day work maintained some of the more negative features of the employer/employee relationship. In spite of their removal from the particular form control took in the South, domestic workers in northern cities were economically exploited even under the best of circumstances. At its worst, domestic work approximated conditions the women left behind in the South. Florence Rice describes how the 1930s New York City "Bronx slave market" operated, where women stood in an assigned spot and waited for employers to drive by and offer them day work: "I always remember my domestic days. Some of the women, when they didn't want to pay, they'd accuse you of stealing. . . . It was like intimidation" (Lerner 1972, 275). Although sexual harassment was less pervasive, it too remained a problem. Ms. Rice remembers another male employer who "picked me up and said his wife was ill and then when I got there his wife wasn't there and he wanted to have an affair" (p. 275).

Judith Rollins (1985) contends that what makes domestic work more "profoundly exploitative than other comparable occupations" is the precise element that makes it unique: the personal relationship between employer and employee. Rollins reports that employers do not rank work performance as their highest priority in evaluating domestic workers. Rather, the "personality of the worker and the kinds of relationships employers were able to establish with them were as or more important considerations" (p. 156).

Deference mattered, and those women who were submissive or who most successfully played the role of obedient servant were most highly valued by their employers, regardless of the quality of the work performed. When domestic worker Hannah Nelson reports, "most people who have worked in service have to learn to talk at great length about nothing," she identified the roles domestics must play in order to satisfy their employers' perceptions of a good Black domestic. She continues, "I never have been very good at that, so I don't speak, normally. . . . Some people I have worked for think I am slow-witted because I talk very little on the job" (Gwaltney 1980, 6).

Employers used a variety of means to structure domestic work's power relationship and solicit the deference behavior they desired in their domestic employees. Techniques of linguistic deference included addressing domestics by their first names, calling them "girls," and requiring that the domestic call the employer "Ma'am." Employers routinely questioned domestics about their lifestyle, questions they would hesitate to ask members of their own social circle. Gifts of used clothing and other household items highlighted the economic inequality separating domestic and employer. Employers used domestics as confidantes, another behavior that reinforced the notion that domestics were outsiders (Rollins 1985).

Physical markers reinforced the deference relationship. One technique was to require that domestics wear uniforms. One respondent in Clark-Lewis's study explains why her employers liked uniforms: "Them uniforms just seemed to make them know you was theirs. Some say you wore them to show different jobs you was doing. This in grey, other serving in black. But mostly them things just showed you was always at they beck and call. Really that's all them things means!" (Clark-Lewis 1985, 16). The use of space was also a major device in structuring deference behaviors. Domestics were confined to one area of the house, usually the kitchen, and were expected to make themselves invisible when caught in other areas of the house by members of the employer's family. Judith Rollins recounts her reactions to being objectified in this fashion, to being treated as invisible while her employers had a conversation around her:

> It was this aspect of servitude I found to be one of the strongest affronts to my dignity as a human being. To Mrs. Thomas and her son, I became invisible; their conversation was private with me, the black servant, in the room as it would have been with no one in the room. . . . These gestures of ignoring my presence were not, I think, intended as insults; they were expressions of the employers' ability to annihilate the humanness and even, at times, the very existence of me, a servant and a black woman. (Rollins 1985, 209)

Some African-American women were fortunate enough to locate work in manufacturing. In the South, Black women entered tobacco factories, cotton mills, and flour manufacturing. Some of the dirtiest jobs in these industries were offered to African-American women. In the cotton mills Black women were employed as common laborers in the yards, as waste gatherers and as scrubbers of machinery (Glenn 1985). With northern migration, some

Black women entered factory employment, primarily in steam laundries and the rest in unmechanized jobs as sweepers, cleaners, and rag pickers. Regardless of their location, African-American women faced discrimination (Terborg-Penn 1985). For example, Luanna Cooper, an employee for the Winston Leaf Tobacco Storage company, describes her reactions to the effort to organize segregated unions in her plant: "They're trying to have jimcrow unions. But I'm telling you jimcrow unions aren't good. They wanted me to join. I told them: 'I get jimcrow free. I won't pay for that' " (Lerner 1972, 268).

The shift to day work among domestic workers and the incorporation of some Black women into the manufacturing sector paralleled changes in African-American family and community structures. Even though the hours were long and the pay low in the majority of occupations held by Black women, they did have more time to devote to their families and communities than that available to live-in domestic workers. During the first wave of urbanization, African-Americans recreated the types of communities they had known in their southern rural communities (Gutman 1976). De facto segregation in housing and in the labor market meant that African-Americans continued to live in self-contained communities even after migration to northern cities. As a result, the public/private split separating Black communities from what were frequently hostile white neighborhoods remained a salient feature framing Black women's work and family relationships. The cooperative networks among African-American women which were created under slavery and sustained in the rural South endured. Black women domestic workers who rode buses together shared vital information essential to their survival as domestic workers and, on occasion, attempted unionization (Terborg-Penn 1985). Neighbors took care of one anothers' children, and churches typically formed the core of many Black women's community activities (Clark-Lewis 1985; Dill 1988a)

BLACK WOMEN'S WORK AND THE POST-WORLD WAR II POLITICAL ECONOMY

As long as African-Americans lived in self-contained, segregated communities, Afrocentric notions of family and community endured. In the midtwentieth century the post–World War II period brought a shift in this relationship between work and family (Collins 1986a; Brewer 1988).

Dramatic changes in the post–World War II political economy of African-American communities have been stimulated by several factors. One is the restructuring of urban labor markets which has accompanied trends such as job export to nonunionized American locations and foreign markets, job

deskilling, the shift from manufacturing to service occupations, and job creation in suburban communities (Baran and Sweezy 1966; Braverman 1974; Gordon et al. 1982; Wilson 1987). Another is the increasing economic marginalization of African-Americans in urban economies, as evidenced in Black unemployment rates double those of whites, and by the increasing dependence of Black households on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (Hogan 1984; Wilson 1987). Changing attitudes in wider society toward the normative nuclear family as expressed in higher divorce rates, more single-parent households, and a rising number of out-of-wedlock births for all groups in the society represent yet another factor (Burnham 1985; Collins 1986a; Claude 1986; Wilson 1987; Brewer 1988).

As a result of these factors, the Black community has become more stratified by social class.[2] A comfortable yet vulnerable Black middle class and a sizable working class segmented by the ability to find steady, well-paying work have emerged. Best estimates place between 25 and 30 percent of African-American families in the middle class (Pinkney 1984, 102). This leaves approximately 70 to 75 percent of African-Americans in the working class. The one-third of African-Americans identified as living below the official poverty line represents the most economically marginalized segment of the Black working class. Each social class has a distinctive relationship to the advanced capitalist welfare state. These relationships frame the changing nature of work and family for African-American women.

These dramatic changes in how racial inequality has been structured should not obscure the overall stability of racial oppression. In 1987 the median Black family income of $18,100 represented 56 percent of the median white family income of $32,270 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1989). In 1985 approximately one of every three African-Americans lived below the official poverty line, as compared with one of every ten whites (U.S. Department of Commerce 1986). These measures of inequality remain constant in spite of emerging social class differences.

Historically the classic pattern of employment for African-American men and women has been higher-paying yet less secure work for Black men as contrasted with lower-paying, more plentiful work for Black women. For example, Black men employed in low-skilled manufacturing occupations typically receive higher wages than their wives working in domestic service. But Black men are more vulnerable to layoffs, and although they make higher wages, few guarantees exist that their wages will be consistently available to their families. In contrast, Black women receive substantially lower wages but can count on receiving them. This classic pattern of exploitation, differentiated by gender, has often been misrepresented in arguments suggesting that Black women or Black men have a labor market "advantage" over the other. What these approaches fail to realize is that

both African-American women and men have been disadvantaged in the labor market, with gender differences in employment structuring distinctive patterns of economic vulnerability.

Increased access to managerial and professional positions enabled sizable numbers of African-American individuals and families to move into the middle class. In the post–World War II political economy, owners of capital and labor, the two groups originally forwarded in class conflict theories, have been joined by a new middle class. Members of the new middle class work for owners of productive property just as blue-collar workers do, but they earn generous incomes and enjoy substantial prestige. This new middle class is not merely an arbitrary range along a status scale—it is a genuine class with interests in opposition to the working class (Vanneman and Cannon 1987).

The emerging Black middle class occupies a contradictory location in the American political economy. As is the case for their white counterparts, being middle class requires Black professionals and managers to enter into specific social relations with owners of capital and with workers. In particular, the middle class dominates labor and is itself subordinate to capital. It is this simultaneous dominance and subordination that puts it in the "middle" (Vanneman and Cannon 1987, 57). Like owners, it exercises economic control. Professionals and managers also exercise political controls over the conditions of their own work and that of workers. Finally, members of the new middle class exercise ideological control of knowledge: they are the planners of work and framers of society's ideas.

On all three dimensions of middle-class power—economic, political, and ideological—the Black middle class differs from its white counterpart. Persistent racial discrimination means that Black middle-class families are less economically secure than members of the white middle class (Pinkney 1984). Members of the Black middle class, most of whom became middle class through social mobility from working-class origins, may express more ambivalence concerning their function as controllers of working-class Blacks. While some aspire to manage working-class Blacks, others aim to liberate them from racial oppression and poverty. Similarly, though many middle-class Blacks defend the ideological constructions of the dominant group, others, such as many Black feminist intellectuals, use their minds to challenge race, gender, and class ideologies.

When the traditional gender differences in Black employment patterns are combined with the economic, political, and ideological vulnerability of the Black middle class caused by race, some interesting patterns emerge for African-American women. Black women and men both share the employment vulnerability of being more excluded that whites from these occupations. Fewer Black men have such positions, but when they do get them they acquire higher-paying, higher-status positions. In contrast, greater numbers of Black women than men work in professional and managerial positions, but in lower-paying, lower-status occupations.

For Black women, most of whom are not born into the Black middle class but who have recently arrived in it through social class mobility, dealing with the demands of work and family can be unsettling (Dumas 1980). Consider the case of Leanita McClain, a Black woman journalist raised in segregated Chicago public housing who eventually became a feature writer for a major Chicago newspaper (McClaurin-Allen 1989). In a widely cited piece entitled "The Middle-Class Black's Burden," Ms. McClain laments, "I am not comfortably middle class; I am uncomfortably middle class. I have made it, but where?" (Page 1986, 13). A substantial source of Ms. McClain's frustration stemmed from her marginal status in a range of settings. She notes, "my life abounds in incongruities. . . . Sometimes when I wait at the bus stop with my attaché case, I meet my aunt getting off the bus with other cleaning ladies on their way to do my neighbor's floors" (p.13). No wonder Ms. McClain felt compelled to say, "I am a member of the black middle class who has had it with being patted on the head by white hands and slapped in the face by black hands for my success" (p. 12).

Black women's employment patterns may have significant effects on Black middle-class families especially single-parent households. The smaller number of Black men than Black women in professional and managerial positions represents one important issue facing Black heterosexual women interested in intraracial marriage. This sex ratio imbalance may contribute to an increase in female-headed households among middle-class Black women. Given that separated and divorced Black women professionals are much less likely to remarry than their white counterparts, higher rates of separation and divorce may become a special problem for married Black women professionals. Other factors may also influence the growth of single-parent households among Black professional women. One issue concerns whether African-American women will choose to become mothers when faced with the absence of a suitable marital partner. Another factor is the likely decline in marriages between Black women in professional and managerial jobs and Black men in other segments of the labor market. Another factor may be an increasing tendency by both Black heterosexual women and Black lesbians to head their own households and create alternative family arrangements.

Black working-class families are similarly affected by changing employment patterns. Black women are heavily concentrated in clerical work (50.1 percent), whereas Black men are clustered in factory work (43.2 percent). One of every four African-American women and men in this sector is a skilled crafts worker. The projected patterns of growth for these occupational categories are quite different. Factory work is declining, a

trend that is especially problematic for Black men. In contrast, Black women clerical workers are in a growing occupational area.

Studies examining the interaction of race and gender in structuring the work experiences of working-class Black women are sorely needed. Clerical work and other administrative support positions often involve deference relationships reminiscent of Judith Rollins's (1985) study of Black domestic workers. Consider Alice Walker's experiences when trying to visit Dessie Woods, a Black woman incarcerated in the Georgia penal system for defending herself against a white rapist. Walker describes her arrival at the prison, where she was turned away, not by white male guards, but by a Black woman very much like herself:

> We look at each other hard. And I "recognize" her, too. She is very black and her neck is stiff and her countenance has been softened by the blows. All day long, while her children are supported by earnings here, she sits isolated in this tiny glass entranceway, surrounded by white people who have hired her, as they always have, to do their dirty work for them. It is no accident that she is in this prison, too. (Walker 1988, 23).

The disappearance of well-paying manufacturing jobs for Black working-class men suggests that the dual-income, working-class family is becoming less of an option for young African-Americans. The alternative open to past generations of Blacks—intact marriages based on reasonably steady, adequately paid jobs for Black men and reliable yet lesser-paid jobs for Black women—is less available in the advanced capitalist welfare state.

While Black working-class women, especially those in clerical work, are more likely to find steady employment, the income of Black working-class wives cannot compensate for the loss of Black men's incomes. Black working-class families may experience an increase in female-headed households, but for very different reasons from those stimulating a similar trend in the Black middle class. Aggravated by Black men's inability to find well-paying work, rates of separation and divorce may increase, or young Blacks may not be able to marry in the first place. For many Black working-class families, the economic vulnerability of Black men is one fundamental factor spurring increasing poverty among Black working-class women (Burnham 1985; Claude 1986).

Low-income Black families form the economically marginalized, vulnerable segment of the Black working class. Labor market trends as well as changes in federal policies toward the poor have affected this group (Zinn 1989). Ironically, occupational gender differences between Black women and Black men are becoming less pronounced among poor African-Americans. In 1980, 32 percent of Black women and 29 percent

of Black men worked in jobs characterized by low wages, job instability, and poor working conditions. These jobs are growing rapidly, with an increasing need for cooks, waitresses, waiters, laundry workers, health aides, and domestic servants to service the needs of affluent middle-class families. While plentiful, many of these jobs are in neighborhoods far from the inner-city communities where poor Black women live. Moreover, few of these jobs offer the wages, stability, or advancement potential of disappearing manufacturing jobs.

The work performed by employed poor Black women parallels their traditional duties in domestic service. In contrast to prior eras, when domestic service was confined to private households, contemporary cooking, cleaning, and child care has been routinized and decentralized in the growing service industry of fast food, cleaning services, and day care centers. Black women perform similar work, but in different settings. The location may have changed, but the treatment of Black women parallels relationships of domination reminiscent of private domestic work. Mabel Lincoln, an inner-city resident, describes how the world looks to her as a working woman:

> If you are a woman slinging somebody else's hash and busting somebody else's suds or doing whatsoever you might do to keep yourself from being a tramp or a willing slave, you will be called out of your name and asked out of your clothes. In this world most people will take whatever they think you can give. It don't matter whether they want it or not, whether they need it or not, or how wrong it is for them to ask for it. (Gwaltney 1980, 68)

Many Black women turn to the informal labor market and to government transfer payments to avoid being called out of their names and asked out of their clothes. In 1980 approximately one-half of all Black women age 16 and over were not in the formal labor force. School attendance, child care responsibilities, retirement, and poor health are all factors affecting nonworking women (McGhee 1984). A considerable proportion supported themselves through varying combinations of low-wage jobs and government transfer payments such as Social Security and Aid to Families with Dependent Children, payments that reduced their dependence on the informal economy.

The employment vulnerability of working-class African-Americans in the post–World War II political economy, the relative employment equality of poor Black women and men, and the gender-specific patterns of dependence on the informal economy all have substantial implications for low-income Black family patterns. One effect has been the growth of female-headed households. That such households are increasing in

low-income Black communities (Pinkney [1984] suggests that as much as 70 percent of low-income Black households are headed by women) is commonly accepted. But the more alarming trend is the increasing poverty of African-American women and children living in such households. In 1985, 50 percent of Black families headed by women were below the official poverty line (U.S. Department of Commerce 1986). The situation is more extreme for young African-American women. In 1986, 86 percent of families headed by Black women between the ages of 15 and 24 lived below the poverty line (Simms 1988).

It is important to distinguish explanations of the growing poverty of Black women which stress their preexisting social class position under advanced capitalism (see, for example, Blumberg and Garcia [1977] and Steady [1981, 1987]), from explanations such as "feminization of poverty" analyses prominent in feminist thought.[3] As Linda Burnham (1985) point out, "while poverty has not been 'feminized,' it is true that increasing numbers of working class and minority women are sinking into impoverishment. This is a subtle but crucial distinction" (p. 18). Growing poverty among Black women is attributable less to being a divorce away from poverty and more to the "transformation of the economy and conservative social policies leading to a dismantling of the welfare state" (Ladner 1986, 14). Effects of welfare policies on poor Black women are especially troublesome (Valentine 1981; Pearce 1983; Zinn 1989).

The increase in unmarried Black adolescent parents is only one indication of the effects that changes in the broader political economy are having on work and family patterns of poor Black women. Rates of adolescent pregnancy are actually *decreasing* among young Black women. The real change has been a parallel decrease in marital rates of Black adolescents, a decision linked directly to perceived opportunities to support and sustain an independent household (Simms 1988). A sizable proportion of Black female-headed households are created by unmarried adolescent mothers. This decline in marital rates, a post–World War II trend that accelerated after 1960, is part of changes in African-American community structures overall (Wilson 1987). The communal child care networks of the slave era, the extended family arrangements of the rural South, the importance of grandmothers in child care, and even the recreation of Black community structures during the first wave of urbanization appear to be eroding for poor Black women. These shifts portend major problems for African-American women and point to a continuation of Black women's oppression, but structured through new institutional arrangements.

The effects of these changes are convincingly demonstrated in a replication study conducted by Ladner and Gourdine (1984) of *Tomorrow's Tomorrow*, Joyce Ladner's (1972) ground-breaking study of Black women adolescents. The earlier study examined poor Black teenaged women's values toward motherhood and Black womanhood. The women in the original study encountered the common experiences of urban poverty—they became mothers quite young, lived in substandard housing, attended inferior schools, and generally had to grow up quickly in order to survive. But in spite of the harshness of their environments, the girls in the earlier sample still "had high hopes and dreams that their futures would be positive and productive" (Ladner and Gourdine 1984, 24).

The findings from the replication study are quite different. Ladner and Gourdine maintain that "the assessments the teenagers and their mothers made of the socioeconomic conditions and their futures are harsher and bleaker than a similar population a generation ago" (p. 24). In talking with young grandmothers, all of whom looked older than they were even though the majority were in their 30s and the youngest was age 29, Ladner and Gourdine found that all became single parents through divorce or never being married. The strong Black mothers of prior generations of Black women were not in evidence. Instead, Ladner and Gourdine found that the grandmothers complained about their own unmet emotional and social needs. They appeared to feel "powerless in coping with the demands made by their children. They comment frequently that their children show them no respect, do not listen to their advice, and place little value on their role as parents" (p.23).

Unlike prior eras when Black women's work as "mules uh de world" more uniformly structured Black women's oppression, social class differences increasingly distinguish Black women's experiences with race and gender oppression in the post–World War II era. All African-American women encounter the common theme of having our work and family experiences shaped by the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression. But this commonality is experienced differently by middle-class women such as Leanita McClain and by working-class women such as Mabel Lincoln. Even more ominous are the potentially negative relationships that might develop among Black women of different social classes because of these changes. In prior eras the precarious political and social position of the small numbers of middle-class Black women encouraged them to work on behalf of "race uplift" and fostered racial solidarity among all African-American women. Will middle-class Black women continue to value racial solidarity with their working-class sisters, especially those in poverty, or will they use their newly acquired positions to perpetuate inequalities of social class? Large numbers of poor Black women working as cooks, laundry workers, and in other service occupations serve not only white middle-class individuals but Black ones as well. Countless others living in inner-city neighborhoods are isolated and encounter few

middle-class Black women in their daily lives. How will these poor Black women view their more privileged sisters?

There has never been a uniformity of experience among African-American women, and there is less uniformity today. What remains as a challenge to Black feminist scholars is to rearticulate these new and emerging patterns of institutional oppression that differentially affect middle-class and working-class Black women. If this does not occur, each group may in fact become instrumental in fostering the other's oppression.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Spelman (1982) rejects additive approaches to conceptualizing oppression: "An additive analysis treats the oppression of a black woman in a sexist and racist society as if it were a *further* burden than her oppression in a sexist but non-racist society, when, in fact, it is a *different* burden" (p. 43). Similarly, Brittan and Maynard (1984) argue that separate oppressions cannot be merged under one "grand theory of oppression." Omi and Winant (1986) warn against the tendency to subsume one type of oppression under another—for example, of seeing everything as stemming from class structure. For an incisive discussion of multiple jeopardy as an alternative model, see King (1988).

2. The definition of social class that I use in this section derives from class conflict models, especially those based in labor market segmentation theory (Braverman 1974; Gordon et al. 1982; Vanneman and Cannon 1987). For an extended discussion of labor market segmentation and Black social class structure, see Collins (1986a).

3. Linda Burnham (1985) suggests that the "idea that poverty is being 'feminized' presents a highly distorted picture of the general dynamics that are at the source of poverty in the U.S." (p. 14). By taking an additive approach to oppression, such approaches view poverty as a female problem that is quantitatively intensified for Black women. But as part of a racial group that has experienced traditional racial oppression, the social class patterns of Black women are quite distinct from those of white women. This class difference is key to understanding the statistical disparity between white and Black women, and Black women's poverty is not simply an additional measure of women's oppression. Claude (1986), equally critical of the feminization of poverty thesis, points out that Black female-headed households are not newly poor and that the origins of poverty for white women are profoundly different from those for Black women.

Chapter 4

MAMMIES, MATRIARCHS, AND OTHER CONTROLLING IMAGES

> Called Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself.
>
> —Trudier Harris 1982, 4

Race, class, and gender oppression could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence. As Cheryl Gilkes contends, "Black women's assertiveness and their use of every expression of racism to launch multiple assaults against the entire fabric of inequality have been a consistent, multifaceted threat to the status quo. As punishment, Black women have been assaulted with a variety of negative images" (1983a, 294). Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought.

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, these controlling images of Black womanhood take on special meaning because the authority to

define these symbols is a major instrument of power. In order to exercise power, elite white men and their representatives must be in a position to manipulate appropriate symbols concerning Black women. They may do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or they may create new ones relevant to their needs (Patterson 1982). Hazel Carby suggests that the objective of stereotypes is "not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations" (1987, 22). These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life.

Even when the political and economic conditions that originally generated controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only keep Black women oppressed but are key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression. The status of African-American women as outsiders or strangers becomes the point from which other groups define their normality. Ruth Shays, a Black inner-city resident, describes how the standpoint of a subordinate group is discredited: "It will not kill people to hear the truth, but they don't like it and they would much rather hear it from one of their own than from a stranger. Now, to white people your colored person is always a stranger. Not only that, we are supposed to be dumb strangers, so we can't tell them anything!" (Gwaltney 1980, 29). As the "Others" of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging.

THE OBJECTIFICATION OF BLACK WOMEN AS THE OTHER

Black feminist critic Barbara Christian asserts that in America, "the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society's *Other*" (1985, 160). Maintaining images of Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression.

Certain basic ideas crosscut all three systems. Claimed by Black feminist theorist Bell Hooks to be "the central ideological component of all systems of domination in Western society," one such idea is either/or dichotomous thinking (1984, 29). Either/or dichotomous thinking categorizes people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another (Keller 1985, 8). For example, the terms in the dichotomies black/white (Richards 1980; Irele 1983), male/female (Eisenstein 1983), reason/emotion (Hoschschild 1975; Halpin 1989), culture/nature (Asante 1987), fact/opinion (Westkott

1979; Bellah 1983), mind/body (Spelman 1982), and subject/object (Halpin 1989) gain meaning only in *relation* to their counterparts.

Another basic idea concerns the relationship between notions of differences in either/or dichotomous thinking and objectification. In either/or dichotomous thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its "other." Whites and Blacks, males and females, thought and feeling are not complementary counterparts—they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites. Feeling cannot be incorporated into thought or even function in conjunction with it because in either/or dichotomous thinking, feeling retards thought, values obscure facts, and judgment clouds knowledge.

Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. In either/or dichotomous thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled. Social theorist Dona Richards (1980) suggests that Western thought requires objectification, a process she describes as the "separation of the 'knowing self' from the 'known object' " (p. 72). Intense objectification is a "prerequisite for the despiritualization of the universe," notes Richards, "and through it the Western cosmos was made ready for ever increasing materialization" (p. 72). A Marxist assessment of the culture/nature dichotomy argues that history can be seen as one in which human beings constantly objectify the natural world in order to control and exploit it (Brittan and Maynard 1984, 198). Culture is defined as the opposite of an objectified nature that, if left alone, would destroy culture.[1] Feminist scholars point to the identification of women with nature as being central to women's subsequent objectification by men as sex objects (Eisenstein 1983). Black scholars contend that defining people of color as less human, animalistic, or more "natural" denies African and Asian people's subjectivity and supports a political economy of domination (Asante 1987).

Domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group. "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history," asserts Bell Hooks (1989, 42). "As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (p. 42). The treatment afforded Black women domestic workers exemplifies the many forms that objectification can take. Making Black women work as if they were animals or "mules uh de world" represents one form of objectification. Deference rituals such as calling Black domestic workers "girls" and by their first names enable employers to treat their employees like children, as less capable human beings. Objectification can be so severe that the Other simply disappears,

as was the case when Judith Rollins's employer treated her as if she were invisible by conducting a conversation while ignoring Rollins's presence in the room. But in spite of these pressures, Black women have insisted on our right to define our own reality, establish our own identities, and name our history. One significant contribution of work by Judith Rollins (1985), Bonnie Thornton Dill (1980, 1988a), Elizabeth Clark-Lewis (1985), and others is that they document Black women's everyday resistance to this attempted objectification.

Finally, because oppositional dichotomies rarely represent different but equal relationships, they are inherently unstable. Tension is resolved by subordinating one half of the dichotomy to the other. Thus whites rule Blacks, men dominate women, reason is thought superior to emotion in ascertaining truth, facts supersede opinion in evaluating knowledge, and subjects rule objects. The foundations of a complex social hierarchy become grounded in the interwoven concepts of either/or dichotomous thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification. With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression.

African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these dichotomies converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination. The allegedly emotional, passionate nature of Black women has long been used to justify Black women's sexual exploitation. Similarly, restricting Black women's literacy, then claiming that we lack the facts for sound judgment, relegates African-American women to the inferior side of the fact/opinion dichotomy. Denying Black women status as fully human subjects by treating us as the objectified Other in a range of such dichotomies demonstrates the power that dichotomous either/or thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification wield in maintaining interlocking systems of oppression. Analyzing the specific, externally defined, controlling images applied to African-American women both reveals the specific contours of Black women's objectification and offers a clearer view of how systems of race, gender, and class oppression actually interlock.

CONTROLLING IMAGES AND BLACK WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

"Black women emerged from slavery firmly enshrined in the consciousness of white America as 'Mammy' and the 'bad black woman,' " contends Cheryl Gilkes (1983a, 294). The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered

the creation of four interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination. Given that both Black and white women were important to slavery's continuation, the prevailing ideology functioned to mask contradictions in social relations affecting all women. According to the cult of true womanhood, "true" women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Elite white women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues. African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images. The sexual ideology of the period as is the case today "confirmed the differing material circumstances of these two groups of women . . . by balancing opposing definitions of womanhood and motherhood, each dependent on the other for its existence" (Carby 1987, 25).

The first controlling image applied to African-American women is that of the mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white "family," the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination.

Black women intellectuals have aggressively deconstructed the image of African-American women as contented mammies by challenging traditional views of Black women domestics (Dill 1980, 1988a; Clark-Lewis 1985; Rollins 1985). Literary critic Trudier Harris's (1982) volume *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature* investigates prominent differences in how Black women have been portrayed by others in literature and how they portray themselves. In her work on the difficulties faced by Black women leaders, Rhetaugh Dumas (1980) describes how Black women executives are hampered by being treated as mammies and penalized if they do not appear warm and nurturing. But despite these works, the mammy image lives on in scholarly and popular culture. Audre Lorde's account of a shopping trip offers a powerful example of its tenacity: "I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket in . . . 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, 'Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!' " (1984, 126).[2]

The mammy image is central to interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Since efforts to control African-American family

life require perpetuating the symbolic structures of racial oppression, the mammy image is important because it aims to shape Black women's behavior as mothers. As the members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black women are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior many are forced to exhibit in mammy roles. By teaching Black children their assigned place in white power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression. In addition, employing mammies buttresses the racial superiority of white women employers and weds them more closely to their fathers, husbands, and sons as sources of elite white male power (Rollins 1985).

The mammy image also serves a symbolic function in maintaining gender oppression. Black feminist critic Barbara Christian argues that images of Black womanhood serve as a reservoir for the fears of Western culture, "a dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritan society could not confront" (1985, 2). Juxtaposed against the image of white women promulgated through the cult of true womanhood, the mammy image as the Other symbolizes the oppositional difference of mind/body and culture/nature thought to distinguish Black women from everyone else. Christian comments on the mammy's gender significance: "All the functions of mammy are magnificently physical. They involve the body as sensuous, as funky, the part of woman that white southern America was profoundly afraid of. Mammy, then, harmless in her position of slave, unable because of her all-giving nature to do harm, is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female" (1985, 2). The mammy image buttresses the ideology of the cult of true womanhood, one in which sexuality and fertility are severed. "Good" white mothers are expected to deny their female sexuality and devote their attention to the moral development of their offspring. In contrast, the mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface devoted to the development of a white family.

No matter how loved they were by their white "families," Black women domestic workers remained poor because they were economically exploited. The restructured post–World War II economy in which African-American women moved from service in private homes to jobs in the low-paid service sector has produced comparable economic exploitation. Removing Black women's labor from African-American families and exploiting it denies Black extended family units the benefits of either decent wages or Black women's unpaid labor in their homes. Moreover, many white families in both the middle class and working class are able to maintain their class position because they have long used Black women as a source of cheap

labor (Rollins 1985; Byerly 1986). The mammy image is designed to mask this economic exploitation of social class (King 1973).

For reasons of economic survival, African-American women may play the mammy role in paid work settings. But within African-American communities these same women often teach their own children something quite different. Bonnie Thornton Dill's (1980) work on child-rearing patterns among Black domestics shows that while the participants in her study showed deference behavior at work, they discouraged their children from believing that they should be deferent to whites and encouraged their children to avoid domestic work. Barbara Christian's analysis of the mammy in Black slave narratives reveals that, "unlike the white southern image of mammy, she is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all content with her lot" (1985, 5).

The fact that the mammy image cannot control Black women's behavior as mothers is tied to the creation of the second controlling image of Black womanhood. Though a more recent phenomenon, the image of the Black matriarch fulfills similar functions in explaining Black women's placement in interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Ironically, Black scholars such as William E. B. DuBois (1969) and E. Franklin Frazier (1948) described the connections among higher rates of female-headed households in African-American communities, the importance that women assume in Black family networks, and the persistence of Black poverty. However, neither scholar interpreted Black women's centrality in Black families as a *cause* of African-American social class status. Both saw so-called matriarchal families as an *outcome* of racial oppression and poverty. During the eras when Dubois and Frazier wrote, the oppression of African-Americans was so total that control was maintained without the controlling image of matriarch. But what began as a muted theme in the works of these earlier Black scholars grew into a full-blown racialized image in the 1960s, a time of significant political and economic mobility for African-Americans. Racialization involves attaching racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group (Omi and Winant 1986). Prior to the 1960s, female-headed households were certainly higher in African-American communities, but an ideology racializing female-headedness as a causal feature of Black poverty had not emerged. Moreover, "the public depiction of Black women as unfeminine, castrating matriarchs came at precisely the same moment that the feminist movement was advancing its public critique of American patriarchy" (Gilkes 1983a, 296).

While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in white homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the "good" Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the

"bad" Black mother. The modern Black matriarchy thesis contends that African-American women fail to fulfill their traditional "womanly" duties (Moynihan 1965). Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly cannot properly supervise their children and are a major contributing factor to their children's school failure. As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculate their lovers and husbands. These men, understandably, either desert their partners or refuse to marry the mothers of their children. From an elite white male standpoint, the matriarch is essentially a failed mammy, a negative stigma applied to those African-American women who dared to violate the image of the submissive, hard-working servant.

Black women intellectuals examining the role of women in African-American families discover few matriarchs and even fewer mammies (Hale 1980; Myers 1980; Sudarkasa 1981b; Dill 1988b). Instead they portray African-American mothers as complex individuals who often show tremendous strength under adverse conditions. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play presented on Broadway written by a Black woman, Lorraine Hansberry (1959) examines the struggles of widow Lena Younger to actualize her dream of purchasing a home for her family. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, novelist Paule Marshall (1959) presents Mrs. Boyce, a Black mother negotiating a series of relationships with her husband, her daughters, the women in her community, and the work she must perform outside her home. Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974) depicts the struggle of a lesbian mother trying to balance her needs for self-actualization with the pressures of child-rearing in a homophobic community. Like these fictional analyses, Black women's scholarship on Black single mothers also challenges the matriarchy thesis (Ladner 1972; McCray 1980; Lord 1984; McAdoo 1985; Brewer 1988).

Like the mammy, the image of the matriarch is central to interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows the dominant group to blame Black women for the success or failure of Black children. Assuming that Black poverty is passed on intergenerationally via value transmission in families, an elite white male standpoint suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on white, middle-class children and that this deficiency seriously retards Black children's achievement. Such a view diverts attention from the political and economic inequality affecting Black mothers and children and suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. Those African-Americans who remain poor are blamed for their own victimization. Using Black women's performance as mothers to explain Black economic subordination links gender ideology to explanations of class subordination.

The source of the matriarch's failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior. In the post–World War II era, increasing numbers of white women entered the labor market, limited their fertility, and generally challenged their proscribed roles in white patriarchal institutions. The image of the Black matriarch emerged at that time as a powerful symbol for both Black and white women of what can go wrong if white patriarchal power is challenged. Aggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine.

The image of the matriarch also supports racial oppression. Much social science research implicitly uses gender relations in African-American communities as one putative measure of Black cultural disadvantage. For example, the Moynihan Report (1965) contends that slavery destroyed Black families by creating reversed roles for men and women. Black family structures are seen as being deviant because they challenge the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the construct of the ideal "family." Moreover, the absence of Black patriarchy is used as evidence for Black cultural inferiority (Collins 1989). Black women's failure to conform to the cult of true womanhood can then be identified as one fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency. Cheryl Gilkes posits that the emergence of the matriarchal image occurred as a counterideology to efforts by African-Americans and women who were confronting interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression: "The image of dangerous Black women who were also deviant castrating mothers divided the Black community at a critical period in the Black liberation struggle and created a wider gap between the worlds of Black and white women at a critical period in women's history" (1983a, 297).

Taken together, images of the mammy and the matriarch place African-American women in an untenable position. For Black women workers in domestic work and other occupations requiring long hours and/or substantial emotional labor, becoming the ideal mammy means precious time and energy spent away from husbands and children. But being employed when Black men have difficulty finding steady work exposes African-American women to the charge that Black women emasculate Black men by failing to be submissive, dependent, "feminine" women. Moreover, Black women's financial contributions to Black family well-being have also been cited as evidence supporting the matriarchy thesis (Moynihan 1965). Many Black women are the sole support of their families, and labeling these women "matriarchs" erodes their self-confidence and ability to confront oppression. In essence, African-American women who must work are labeled mammies, then are stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes.

A third, externally defined, controlling image of Black womanhood—that of the welfare mother—appears tied to Black women's increasing dependence on the post–World War II welfare state. Essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery, this image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy.

During slavery the breeder woman image portrayed Black women as more suitable for having children than white women. By claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this objectification of Black women as the Other provided justification for interference in the reproductive rights of enslaved Africans. Slaveowners wanted enslaved Africans to "breed" because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves. The externally defined, controlling image of the breeder woman served to justify slaveowner intrusion into Black women's decisions about fertility (King 1973; Davis 1981).

The post–World War II political economy has offered African-Americans rights not available in former historical periods (Fusfeld and Bates 1984; Wilson 1987). African-Americans have successfully acquired basic political and economic protections from a greatly expanded welfare state, particularly Social Security, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, unemployment compensation, affirmative action, voting rights, antidiscrimination legislation, and the minimum wage. In spite of sustained opposition by Republican administrations in the 1980s, these programs allow many African-Americans to reject the subsistence-level, exploitative jobs held by their parents and grandparents. Job export, deskilling, and increased use of illegal immigrants have all been used to replace the loss of cheap, docile Black labor (Braverman 1974; Gordon et al. 1982; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983). The large numbers of undereducated, unemployed African-Americans, most of whom are women and children, who inhabit inner cities cannot be forced to work. From the standpoint of the dominant group, they no longer represent cheap labor but instead signify a costly threat to political and economic stability.

Controlling Black women's fertility in such a political economy becomes important. The image of the welfare mother fulfills this function by labeling as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country the fertility of women who are not white and middle class. A closer look at this controlling image reveals that it shares some important features with its mammy and matriarch counterparts. Like the matriarch, the welfare mother is labeled a bad mother. But unlike the matriarch, she is not too aggressive—on the contrary, she is not aggressive enough. While the matriarch's unavailability contributed to

her children's poor socialization, the welfare mother's accessibility is deemed the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring. The image of the welfare mother represents another failed mammy, one who is unwilling to become "de mule uh de world."

The image of the welfare mother provides ideological justifications for interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. African-Americans can be racially stereotyped as being lazy by blaming Black welfare mothers for failing to pass on the work ethic. Moreover, the welfare mother has no male authority figure to assist her. Typically portrayed as an unwed mother, she violates one cardinal tenet of Eurocentric masculinist thought: she is a woman alone. As a result, her treatment reinforces the dominant gender ideology positing that a woman's true worth and financial security should occur through heterosexual marriage. Finally, in the post–World War II political economy, one of every three African-American families is officially classified as poor. With such high levels of Black poverty, welfare state policies supporting poor Black mothers and their children have become increasingly expensive. Creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty and that of African-American communities shifts the angle of vision away from structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves. The image of the welfare mother thus provides ideological justification for the dominant group's interest in limiting the fertility of Black mothers who are seen as producing too many economically unproductive children (Davis 1981).

The fourth controlling image—the Jezebel, whore, or sexually aggressive woman—is central in this nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression. The image of Jezebel originated under slavery when Black women were portrayed as being, to use Jewelle Gomez's words, "sexually aggressive wet nurses" (Clarke et al. 1983, 99). Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women (Davis 1981; Hooks 1981; D. White 1985). Yet Jezebel served another function. If Black slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, then increased fertility should be the expected outcome. By suppressing the nurturing that African-American women might give their own children which would strengthen Black family networks, and by forcing Black women to work in the field or "wet nurse" white children, slaveowners effectively tied the controlling images of Jezebel and Mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery.

The fourth image of the sexually denigrated Black woman is the foundation underlying elite white male conceptualizations of the mammy, matriarch, and welfare mother. Connecting all three is the common theme of Black women's sexuality. Each image transmits clear messages about the proper links among female sexuality, fertility, and Black women's roles in the political economy. For example, the mammy, the only somewhat positive figure, is a desexed individual. The mammy is typically portrayed as overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features—in brief, as an unsuitable sexual partner for white men. She is asexual and therefore is free to become a surrogate mother to the children she acquired not through her own sexuality. The mammy represents the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculinist thought. In contrast, both the matriarch and the welfare mother are sexual beings. But their sexuality is linked to their fertility, and this link forms one fundamental reason they are negative images. The matriarch represents the sexually aggressive woman, one who emasculates Black men because she will not permit them to assume roles as Black patriarchs. She refuses to be passive and thus is stigmatized. Similarly, the welfare mother represents a woman of low morals and uncontrolled sexuality, factors identified as the cause of her impoverished state. In both cases Black female control over sexuality and fertility is conceptualized as antithetical to elite white male interests.

Taken together, these four prevailing interpretations of Black womanhood form a nexus of elite white male interpretations of Black female sexuality and fertility. Moreover, by meshing smoothly with systems of race, class, and gender oppression, they provide effective ideological justifications for racial oppression, the politics of gender subordination, and the economic exploitation inherent in capitalist economies.

CONTROLLING IMAGES IN EVERYDAY LIFE: COLOR, HAIR TEXTURE, AND STANDARDS OF BEAUTY

Like everyone else, African-American women learn the meaning of race, gender, and social class without obvious teaching or conscious learning. The controlling images of Black women are not simply grafted onto existing social institutions but are so pervasive that even though the images themselves change in the popular imagination, Black women's portrayal as the Other persists. Particular meanings, stereotypes, and myths can change, but the overall ideology of domination itself seems to be an enduring feature of interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression (Omi and Winant 1986, 63).

African-American women encounter this ideology through a range of unquestioned, daily experiences. But when the contradictions between Black women's self-definitions and everyday treatment are heightened, controlling images become increasingly visible. Karen Russell, the daughter of basketball great Bill Russell, describes how racial stereotypes affect her:

> How am I supposed to react to well-meaning, good, liberal white people who say things like: "You know, Karen, I don't understand what all the fuss is about. You're one of my good friends, and I never think of you as black." Implicit in such a remark is, "I think of you as white," or perhaps just, "I don't think of your race at all." (Russell 1987, 22).

Ms. Russell was perceptive enough to see that remarks intended to compliment her actually insulted African-Americans. As the Others, African-Americans are assigned all of the negative characteristics opposite and inferior to those reserved for whites. By claiming that Ms. Russell is not really "black," her friends unintentionally validate this system of racial meanings and encourage her to internalize those images.

Although Black women typically resist being objectified as the Other, these controlling images remain powerful influences on our relationships with whites, Black men, and one another. Dealing with issues of beauty—particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture—is one concrete example of how controlling images denigrate African-American women. A children's rhyme often sung in Black communities proclaims:

> Now, if you're white you're all right,
> If you're brown, stick around,
> But if you're black, Git back! Git back! Git back!

Externally defined standards of beauty long applied to African-American women claim that no matter how intelligent, educated, or "beautiful" a Black woman may be, those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must "git back." Blue-eyed, blond, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with classical African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair.

Race, gender, and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Judging white women by their physical appearance and attractiveness to men objectifies them. But their white skin and straight hair privilege them in a system in which part of the basic definition of whiteness is its superiority to blackness. Black men's blackness penalizes them. But because they are men, their self-definitions are not as heavily dependent on

their physical attractiveness as those of all women. But African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to externally defined standards of beauty—standards applied to us by white men, white women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another.

Exploring how externally defined standards of beauty affect Black women's self-images, our relationships with one another, and our relationships with Black men has been one recurring theme in Black feminist thought.[3] The long-standing attention of musicians, writers, and artists to this theme reveals African-American women's deep feelings concerning skin color, hair texture, and standards of beauty. In her autobiography, Maya Angelou records her painful realization that the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become white:

> Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? . . . Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother . . . had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair. (Angelou 1969, 2).

Gwendolyn Brooks also explores the meaning of skin color and hair texture for Black women. During Brooks's childhood, having African features was so universally denigrated that she writes, "when I was a child, it did not occur to me even once, that the black in which I was encased . . . would be considered, one day, beautiful" (Brooks 1972, 37). Early on Brooks learned that a clear pecking order existed among African-Americans, one based on one's closeness to whiteness. As a member of the "Lesser Blacks," those farthest from white, Brooks saw first-hand the difference in treatment of her group and the "Brights":

> One of the first "world"-truths revealed to me when I at last became a member of SCHOOL was that, to be socially successful, a little girl must be Bright (of skin). It was better if your hair was curly, too—or at least Good Grade (Good Grade implied, usually, no involvement with the Hot Comb)—but Bright you marvelously *needed* to be. (1972, 37)

This division of African-Americans into two categories—the "Brights" and the "Lesser Blacks"—affects dark-skinned and light-skinned women differently. Darker women face being judged inferior and receiving the treatment afforded "too-big Negro girls with nappy hair." Institutions controlled by whites clearly show a preference for lighter-skinned Blacks,

discriminating against darker ones or against any African-Americans who appear to reject white images of beauty. Sonia Sanchez reports, "sisters tell me today that when they go out for jobs they straighten their hair because if they go in with their hair natural or braided, they probably won't get the job" (Tate 1983, 141).

Sometimes the pain most deeply felt is the pain that Black women inflict on one another. Marita Golden's mother told her not to play in the sun because "you gonna have to get a light husband anyway, for the sake of your children" (1983, 24). In *Color*, a short film exploring the impact of skin color on Black women's lives, the dark-skinned character's mother tries to get her to sit still for the hot comb, asking "don't you want your hair flowing like your friend Rebecca's?" We see the sadness of a young Black girl sitting in a kitchen, holding her ears so they won't get burned by the hot comb that will straighten her hair. Her mother cannot make her beautiful, only "presentable" for church. Marita Golden's description of a Black beauty salon depicts the internalized oppression that some African-American women feel about African features:

> Between customers, twirling in her chair, white-stockinged legs crossed, my beautician lamented to the hairdresser in the next stall, "I sure hope that Gloria Johnson don't come in here asking for me today. I swear 'fore God her hair is this long." She snapped her fingers to indicate the length. Contempt riding her words, she lit a cigarette and finished, "Barely enough to wash, let alone press and curl." (Golden 1983, 25)

African-American women who are members of the "Brights" fare little better, for they too receive special treatment because of their skin color and hair texture. Harriet Jacobs, an enslaved light-skinned woman, was sexually haarassed because she was "beautiful," for a Black woman. Her straight hair and fair skin, her appearance as a dusky white woman, made her physically attractive to white men. But the fact that she was Black, and thus part of a group of sexually denigrated women, made her available to white men as no group of white women had been. In describing her situation, Jacobs notes, "if God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (Washington 1987, 17).

This difference in treatment of dark-skinned and light-skinned Black women creates issues in relationships among African-American women. Toni Morrison's (1970) novel *The Bluest Eye* explores this theme of the tension that can exist among Black women grappling with the meaning of externally defined standards of beauty. Frieda, a dark-skinned, "ordinary" Black girl, struggles with the meaning of these standards. She wonders

why adults always got so upset when she rejected the white dolls they gave her and why light-skinned Maureen Peal, a child her own age whose two braids hung like "lynch-ropes down her back," got the love and attention of teachers, adults, and Black boys alike. Morrison explores Freida's attempt not to blame Maureen for the benefits her light skin and long hair afforded her as part of Freida's growing realization that the "Thing" to fear was not Maureen herself but the "Thing" that made Maureen beautiful.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1953) captures the anger and frustration experienced by dark-skinned women in dealing with the differential treatment they and their lighter-skinned sisters receive. In her novel *Maud Martha*, the dark-skinned heroine ponders actions she could take against a red-headed Black woman whom her husband found so attractive. "I could," considered Maud Martha, "go over there and scratch her upsweep down. I could spit on her back. I could scream. 'Listen,' I could scream, 'I'm making a baby for this man and I mean to do it in peace.' " (Washington 1987, 422). But Maud Martha rejects these actions, reasoning "if the root was sour what business did she have up there hacking at a leaf?"

This "sour root" also creates issues in relationships between African-American women and men. Maude Martha explains:

> It's my color that makes him mad. I try to shut my eyes to that, but it's no good. What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping. (Washington 1987, 421)

Her husband's attraction to light-skinned women hurt Maude Martha because his inability to "jump away up high" over the wall of color limited his ability to see her for who she truly was.

ISSUES MERITING FURTHER ATTENTION IN BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Black Women's Reactions to Controlling Images

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny eloquently expresses her standpoint on Black womanhood: "Ah was born back in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dream of whut a woman oughta be and do. But nothing can't stop you from wishin! You can't beat nobody down so low

till you can rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither" (Hurston 1937, 17). Like many African-American women, she resisted the controlling images of "work-ox" and "brood-sow," but her status as a slave prevented her fulfilling her "dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do." She saw the constraints on her own life but managed to keep the will to resist alive. Moreover, she tried to pass on that vision of freedom from controlling images to her granddaughter.

Despite the pervasiveness of controlling images, African-American women have resisted these ideological justifications for our oppression (Gilkes 1983b). Unlike white women who "face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power," and for whom "there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools," Black women are offered no such possibility (Lorde 1984, 117–18). One theme that merits continued analysis in Black feminist thought—especially by Black feminist sociologists, historians, and psychologists—concerns documenting and explaining Black women's diverse reactions to being objectified as the Other.

Literature by Black women writers provides the most comprehensive view of Black women's struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of denigrated images of Black womanhood. Portraying the range of ways that African-American women experience internalized oppression is a prominent theme in Black women's writing. Mary Helen Washington's (1982) discussion of the theme of the suspended woman in Black women's literature describes one dimension of Black women's internalized oppression. Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these women's lives. They are suspended in time and place: their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves are often destroyed. Pecola Breedlove, an unloved, "ugly" eleven-year-old Black girl in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), internalizes the denigrated images of African-American women and believes that the absence of blue eyes is central to her "ugliness." Pecola cannot value her Blackness—she longs to be white so that she can escape the pain of being Black, female, poor, and a child. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, typifies the internalization of the mammy image. Pauline Breedlove neglects her own children, preferring to lavish her concern and attention on the white charges in her care. Only by accepting this subordinate role to white children could she, as a poor Black woman, see a positive place for herself.

Black women writers have chronicled other forms of Black women's attempts to escape from a world predicated upon denigrated images of Black womanhood. Fictional African-American women characters use drugs, alcohol, excessive religion, and even retreat into madness in an

attempt to create other worlds apart from the ones that produced such painful Black female realities. Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and Mrs. Hill in *Meridian* (Walker 1976) both demonstrate an attachment to religion that allows them to ignore their daughters. Eva Medina in Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976), Merle Kibona in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1976), and Velma Henry in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) all experience madness as an escape from pain.

Denial is another characteristic response to the controlling images of Black womanhood and their accompanying conditions. By claiming that they are not like the rest, some African-American women reject connections to other Black women and demand special treatment for themselves. Mary Helen Washington (1982) refers to these characters as assimilated women. They are more aware of their condition than are suspended women, but in spite of their greater potential for shaping their lives, they still feel thwarted because they see themselves as misplaced by time and circumstances. Light-skinned, middle class Cleo, a key figure in Dorothy West's novel *The Living is Easy* (1948), typifies this response. In one scene strong-willed Cleo hustles her daughter past a playground filled with the children of newly arrived southern Blacks, observing that "she wouldn't want her child to go to school with those niggers." Cleo clings to her social class position, one that she sees as separating her from other African-Americans, and tries to muffle the negative status attached to her Blackness by emphasizing her allegedly superior class position. Even though Cleo is more acceptable to the white world, the price she pays for her acceptance is the negation of her racial identity and separation from the sustenance that such an identity might offer.

Black women writers not only portray the range of responses that individual African-American women express concerning their objectification as the Other: they also document the process of personal growth toward positive self-definitions. The personal growth experienced by Renay, the heroine in Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974), illustrates the process of rejecting externally defined controlling images of Black womanhood. Shockley initially presents Renay as a suspended woman who is trapped in a heterosexual marriage to an abusive husband and who tries to deny her feelings for other women. Renay retreats into music and alcohol as temporary spaces where she can escape having her difference—in this case, her Blackness and lesbianism—judged as inferior and deviant. After taking a white woman lover, Renay is initially quite happy, but she grows to realize that she has replaced one set of controlling images—namely, those she experienced with her abusive husband—with another. She leaves her lover to pursue her own self-definition. By the novel's end Renay has begun

to resist all external definitions of herself that stem from controlling images applied to Blacks, women, and lesbians.

Renay's experiences typify how Black women writers explore the theme of Black women's resistance to these denigrated images, a resistance typified by the emergent woman in Black women's literature. Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* (1986) describes a Black slave woman's emerging sense of power after she participates in a slave revolt, runs away, and eventually secures her own freedom. Dorine Davis, the heroine in Rosa Guy's *A Measure of Time* (1983), is raped at age ten by her white employer, subsequently sleeps with men for money, yet retains a core of resistance. Bad things happen to Dorine, but Guy does not portray Dorine as a victim. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison presents the character of Claudia, a ten-year-old Black girl who, to the chagrin of grownups, destroys white dolls by tearing off their heads and who refuses to share her classmates' admiration of light-skinned, long-haired Maureen Peal. Claudia's growing awareness of the "Thing that made her [Maureen Peal] beautiful and us ugly" and her rejection of that Thing—racist images of Black women—represents yet another reaction to negative images of Black womanhood. Like Merle Kibona in Paule Marshall's *The Timeless Place, the Chosen People*, Vyry in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), or Meridian in Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Claudia represents a young version of emergent Black women carving out new definitions of Black womanhood.

Institutional Sites for Transmitting Controlling Images

Schools, the media, corporations, and government agencies are essential sites for transmitting ideologies objectifying Black woman as the Other. These institutions are not controlled by African-Americans and are clearly the source of and ultimate beneficiaries of these externally defined controlling images.

Confronting the controlling images forwarded by institutions external to African-American communities should continue as a fundamental concern of Black feminist thought. But this effort should not obscure the equally important issue of examining how African-American institutions also perpetuate notions of Black women as the Other. Although it may be painful to examine—especially in the context of a racially charged society always vigilant for signs of African-American disunity—the question of the role of Black institutions as transmitters of controlling images of Black womanhood merits investigation.

Some Black women are becoming increasingly vocal in describing what they see as sexism in African-American communities (Wallace 1978; Hooks

1981; White 1984). Black feminist Pauline Terrelonge is one of the few Black women who has directly confronted the issue of the Black community's role in the subordination of Black women. Terrelonge asks, "if there is much in the objective condition of black women that warrants the development of a black feminist consciousness, why have so many black women failed to recognize the patterns of sexism that directly impinge on their everyday lives? (1984, 562). To answer this question, Terrelonge contends that a common view within African-American communities is that African-Americans have withstood the long line of abuses perpetuated against us mainly because of Black women's "fortitude, inner wisdom, and sheer ability to survive." Connected to this emphasis on the moral, spiritual, and emotional strength of Black women is the related argument that African-American women play critical roles in keeping Black families together and in supporting Black men. These activities have been important in offsetting the potential annihilation of African-Americans as a "race." As a result, "many blacks regard the role of uniting all blacks to be the primary duty of the black woman, one that should supersede all other roles that she might want to perform, and certainly one that is essentially incompatible with her own individual liberation" (p. 557).

Institutions controlled by African-Americans can be seen as contradictory locations where Black women learn skills of independence and self-reliance which enable African-American families, churches, and civic organizations to endure. But these same institutions may also be locations where Black women learn to subordinate our interests as women to the allegedly greater good of the larger African-American community. Some Black feminist activists claim that relegating Black women to more submissive, supporting roles in African-American organizations has been an obstacle to Black political empowerment. In describing the 1960s nationalist movement, Pauli Murray contends that many Black men misinterpreted Black women's qualities of self-reliance and independence by tacitly accepting the matriarchy thesis. Such a stance was and is highly problematic for Black women. Murray observes, "the black militant's cry for the retrieval of black manhood suggests an acceptance of this stereotype, an association of masculinity with male dominance and a tendency to treat the values of self-reliance and independence as purely masculine traits" (1970, 89).

Sheila Radford-Hill (1986) sees Black women's subordination in African-American institutions as a continuing concern. For Radford-Hill the erosion of Black women's traditional power bases in African-American communities which followed nationalist movements is problematic in that "Black macho constituted a betrayal by black men; a psychosexual rejection of black women experienced as the capstone to our fall from cultural power. . . . Without the power to influence the purpose and direction of our collective experience, without the power to influence our culture from within, we are increasingly immobilized, unable to integrate self and role identities" (p. 168).

Evelyn Brooks (1983) and Jacquelyn Grant (1982) identify the church as one key institution whose centrality to Black community development may have come at the expense of many of the African-American women who constitute the bulk of its membership. Grant asserts, "it is often said that women are the 'backbone' of the church. On the surface, this may appear to be a compliment. . . . It has become apparent to me that most of the ministers who use this term are referring to location rather than function. What they really mean is that women are in the 'background' and should be kept there" (1982, 141).

In their goal of dispelling the myths about African-American women and making Black women acceptable to wider society, some historically Black colleges may also foster Black women's subordination. In *Meridian* Alice Walker describes an elite college for Black women where "most of the students—timid, imitative, bright enough but never daring, were being ushered nearer to Ladyhood every day" (1976, 39). Confined to campus, Meridian, the heroine, had to leave to find the ordinary Black people who exhibited all of the qualities that her elite institution wished to eliminate. Walker's description of the fence surrounding the campus symbolizes how perpetuating the cult of true womanhood was stultifying for Black students. But it also describes the problems African-American institutions create for Black women when they embrace externally defined controlling images:

> The fence that surrounded the campus was hardly noticeable from the street and appeared, from the outside, to be more of an attempt at ornamentation than an effort to contain or exclude. Only the students who lived on campus learned, often painfully, that the beauty of a fence is no guarantee that it will not keep one penned in as securely as one that is ugly. (Walker 1976, 41)

African-American families form another potential location where the objectification of Black women as the Other occurs. Whereas white feminists have actively explored how white, middle-class families perpetuate their subordination (see, for example, Chodorow 1978; Chodorow and Contratto 1982), Black women intellectuals have been less vocal. How do African-American women experience internalized oppression in our families? What is the role of fathers and mothers in this process? We are finally hearing the long hidden stories of those strong Black women whose families truly model cultures of resistance and teach their daughters how to resist (Joseph 1981; Collins 1987). But, with the exception of Black

women's fiction, stories expressing the full pain of those Black girls whose mothers, fathers, and significant others told them they were ugly, stupid, or generally undesirable remain largely untold. "It is not that black women have not been and are not strong," maintains Bell Hooks. "It is simply that this is only a part of our story, a dimension, just as the suffering is another dimension—one that has been most unnoticed and unattended to" (1989, 153).

Constructing an Afrocentric Feminist Aesthetic for Beauty

Developing much-needed redefinitions of beauty must involve the critical first step of learning to see African-American women who have classical African features as being capable of beauty. Lorraine Hansberry describes this need for a changed consciousness about African-American women's beauty:

> Sometimes in this country maybe just walking down a Southside street . . . Or maybe suddenly up in a Harlem window . . . Or maybe in a flash turning the page of one of those picture books from the South you will see it—*Beauty* . . . stark and full. . . . No *part* of this—but rather Africa, simply Africa. These thighs and arms and flying winged cheekbones, these hallowed eyes—without negation or apology. *A classical people demand a classical art.* (Hansberry 1969, 106)

But proclaiming Black women "beautiful" and white women "ugly" merely replaces one set of controlling images with another and fails to challenge how Eurocentric masculinist aesthetics foster an ideology of domination. Current standards require either/or dichotomous thinking: in order for one individual to be judged beautiful, another individual—the Other—must be deemed ugly. Accepting this underlying assumption avoids a more basic question concerning the connections among controlling images, either/or dichotomous thinking, and unequal power relationships among groups. Creating an alternative feminist aesthetic involves deconstructing and rejecting existing standards of ornamental beauty that objectify women and judge us by our physical appearance. Such an aesthetic would also reject standards of beauty that commodify women by measuring various quantities of beauty that women broker in the marital marketplace.

African-American women can draw on traditional Afrocentric aesthetics (Gayle 1971; Walton 1971) that potentially free women from standards of ornamental beauty.[4] Though such aesthetics are present in music (Sidran 1971; Cone 1972), dance (Asante 1990), and language (Smitherman 1977; Kochman 1981), quiltmaking offers a suggestive model for an Afrocentric

feminist aesthetic (Brown 1989). African-American women quiltmakers do not seem interested in a uniform color scheme but use several methods of playing with colors to create unpredictability and movement (Wahlman and Scully 1983 in Brown 1989, 922). For example, a strong color may be juxtaposed with another strong color, or with a weak one. Contrast is used to structure or organize. Overall, the symmetry in African-American quilts does not come from uniformity as it does in Euro-American quilts. Rather, symmetry comes through diversity. Nikki Giovanni points out that quilts are traditionally formed from scraps. "Quilters teach there is no such thing as waste," she observes, "only that for which we currently see no purpose" (1988, 89). In describing Alice Walker's reaction to a quilt done by an anonymous Black woman, Barbara Christian notes that Walker "brings together . . . the theme of the black woman's creativity, her transformation, despite opposition, of the bits and pieces allowed to her by society into a work of functional beauty" (Christian 1985, 86).

This dual emphasis on beauty occurring via individual uniqueness juxtaposed in a community setting and on the importance of creating functional beauty from the scraps of everyday life offers a powerful alternative to Eurocentric aesthetics. The Afrocentric notions of diversity in community and functional beauty potentially heal many of the oppositional dichotomies inherent in Western social thought. From an Afrocentric perspective, women's beauty is not based solely on physical criteria because mind, spirit, and body are not conceptualized as separate, oppositional spheres. Instead, all are central in aesthetic assessments of individuals and their creations. Beauty is functional in that it has no meaning independent of the group. Deviating from the group "norm" is not rewarded as "beauty." Instead, participating in the group and being a functioning individual who strives for harmony is key to assessing an individual's beauty (Asante 1987). Moreover, participation is not based on conformity but instead is seen as individual uniqueness that enhances the overall "beauty" of the group. Using such criteria, no individual is inherently beautiful because beauty is not a state of being. Instead beauty is always defined in a context as a state of becoming. All African-American women as well as all humans become capable of beauty.

NOTES

1. Dona Richards (1980) offers an insightful analysis of the relationship between Christianity's contributions to an ideology of domination and the culture/nature dichotomy. She notes that European Christianity is predicated on a worldview that sustains the exploitation of nature: "Christian thought provides a view of man, nature, and the

universe which supports not only the ascendancy of science, but of the technical order, individualism, and relentless progress. Emphasis within this world view is placed on humanity's dominance over *all* other beings, which become 'objects' in an 'objectified' universe. There is no emphasis on an awe-inspiring God or cosmos. Being 'made in God's image,' given the European ethos, translates into 'acting *as* God,' recreating the universe. Humanity is separated from nature" (p. 69).

2. Brittan and Maynard (1984) note that ideology (1) is common sense and obvious; (2) appears natural, inevitable, and universal; (3) shapes lived experience and behavior; (4) is sedimented in people's consciousness; and (5) consists of a system of ideas embedded in the social system as a whole. This example captures all dimensions of how racism and sexism function ideologically. The status of Black woman as servant is so "common sense" that even a child knows it. That the child saw a Black female child as a baby maid speaks to the naturalization dimension and to the persistence of controlling images in individual consciousness and the social system overall.

3. While Black women intellectuals have described how these standards affect Black women's relationships, less attention has been given to how skin color, hair texture, and other types of physical markers are used in maintaining systems of oppression. Hair texture and skin color may intersect with gender in structuring systems of oppression. In his exhaustive cross-cultural analysis of slavery, Orlando Patterson notes that dominant groups usually perform elaborate rituals on their subordinates. Shearing of hair is a key part of rituals of domination cross-culturally. But Patterson points out, "it was not so much color differences as differences in hair type that become critical as a mark of servility in the Americas" (1982, 61). To explain this pattern, Patterson contends that hair provides a clearer and more powerful badge of status. Differences between whites and Blacks were sharper in hair quality than in color and persist much longer with miscegenation. Patterson notes, "Hair type rapidly became the real symbolic badge of slavery, although like many powerful symbols, it was disguised . . . by the linguistic device of using the term 'black,' which nominally threw the emphasis to color" (p. 61).

4. Studies of African art and culture indicate that behavior, individuals, and creations deemed "beautiful" from an Afrocentric perspective are valued for qualities other than their appearance and their value in an exchange-based marketplace (Gayle 1971; Asante 1990). For example, the Yoruba assess everything aesthetically, from the taste of food and the qualities of dress to the deportment of a woman or man. Beauty is seen in the mean—in something not too tall or short, not too beautiful (overhandsome people turn out to be skeletons in disguise in many folktales) or too ugly. Moreover, the Yoruba appreciate freshness and improvisation in the arts (Thompson 1983).

Chapter 5

THE POWER OF SELF-DEFINITION

"In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers," asserts Black feminist poet Audre Lorde (1984, 114). This "watching" generates a dual consciousness in African-American women, one in which Black women "become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection" (p. 114), while hiding a self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups. Ella Surrey, an elderly Black woman domestic, eloquently summarizes the energy needed to maintain independent self-definitions: "We have always been the best actors in the world. . . . I think that we are much more clever than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We've always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves" (Gwaltney 1980, 238, 240).

Behind the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on African-American women, acts of resistance, both organized and anonymous, have long existed (Davis 1981, 1989; Hine and Wittenstein 1981; Terborg-Penn 1986; Hine 1989). In spite of the strains connected with domestic work, Judith Rollins (1985) asserts that the domestic workers she interviewed appeared to have retained a "remarkable sense of self-worth." They "skillfully deflect these psychological attacks on their personhood, their adulthood, their dignity, these attempts to lure them into accepting employers' definitions of them as inferior" (p. 212). Bonnie Thornton Dill (1988a) found that the domestic

workers in her study refused to let their employers push them around. As one respondent declared: "When I went out to work . . . my mother told me, 'Don't let anybody take advantage of you. Speak up for your rights, but do the work right. If they don't give you your rights, you demand that they treat you right. And if they don't, then you quit' " (p. 41). At the turn of the century, a period of heightened racial repression, educator Fannie Barrier Williams viewed the African-American woman not as a defenseless victim but as a strong-willed resister: "As meanly as she is thought of; hindered as she is in all directions, she is always doing something of merit and credit that is not expected of her" (Williams 1905, 151). Williams saw the Black woman as "irrepressible. She is insulted, but she holds up her head; she is scorned, but she proudly demands respect. . . .The most interesting girl of this country is the colored girl" (p. 151).

Resisting by doing something that "is not expected" could not have occurred without Black women's long-standing rejection of mammies, matriarchs, and other controlling images. This tradition of resistance suggests that a distinctive, collective Black women's consciousness exists. Such a consciousness was present in Maria Stewart's 1831 speech advising the "daughters of Africa" to "awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties" (Richardson 1987, 30). Such a consciousness is present in the worldview of Johnny Mae Fields, a mill worker from North Carolina possessing few opportunities to resist. Ms. Fields wryly announces, "if they tell me something and I know I ain't going to do it, I don't tell them. I just go on and don't do it" (Byerly 1986, 141).

Silence is not to be interpreted as submission in this tradition of a self-defined Black women's consciousness. In 1925 author Marita Bonner cogently described how consciousness remained the one sphere of freedom available to her in the stifling confines of both her Black middle-class world and a racist white society:

> So—being a woman—you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty. But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha—who brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing. . . . Motionless on the outside. But inside? (Bonner 1987, 7)

Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women's consciousness, the "inside" ideas that allow

Black women to cope with and, in most cases, transcend the confines of race, class, and gender oppression. How have African-American women as a group found the strength to oppose our objectification as "de mule uh de world?" How do we account for the voices of resistance of Audre Lorde, Ella Surrey, Maria Stewart, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Marita Bonner? What foundation sustained Sojourner Truth so that she could ask, "ain't I a woman?" The voices of these African-American women are not those of victims but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, articulated Black women's standpoint exist, but its presence has been essential to Black women's survival.

"A system of oppression," claims Black feminist activist Pauli Murray, "draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness" (1987, 106). Black women's ideas and actions force a rethinking of the concept of hegemony, the notion that Black women's objectification as the Other is so complete that we become willing participants in our own oppression. Most African-American women simply do not define ourselves as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women. The ideology of domination in which these controlling images are embedded is much less cohesive or uniform than imagined.

African-American women encounter these controlling images, not as disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas that should provide meaning in our daily lives (Scott 1985). Black women's work and family experiences create the conditions whereby the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible. Seeing the contradictions in the ideologies opens them up for demystification. Just as Sojourner Truth deconstructed the term *woman* by using her own concrete experiences to challenge it, so in a variety of ways do everyday African-American women do the same thing. That fewer Maria Stewarts, Sojourner Truths, Ella Surreys, or Johnny Mae Fieldses are heard from is less a statement about the existence of Black women's ideas than it is a reflection of the suppression of ideas that do exist. As Nancy White, an inner-city resident points out, "I like to say what I think. But I don't do that much because most people don't care what I think" (Gwaltney 1980, 156). Like Marita Bonner, far too many Black women remain motionless on the outside . . . but inside?

FINDING A VOICE: COMING TO TERMS WITH CONTRADICTIONS

"To be able to use the range of one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a recurring struggle in the tradition of [Black women]

writers" maintains Black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian (1985, 172). African-American women have certainly expressed our individual voices. Black women have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers, and as a consequence of an Afrocentric expectation that both men and women participate in the public sphere, Black women communicate more nearly as equals with Black men (Stanback 1985). But despite this tradition, the overarching theme of finding a voice to express a self-defined Black women's standpoint remains a core theme in Black feminist thought.

Why this theme of self-definition should preoccupy African-American women is not surprising. Black women's lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other. The struggle of living two lives, one for "them and one for ourselves" (Gwaltney 1980, 240) creates a peculiar tension to extract the definition of one's true self from the treatment afforded the denigrated categories in which all Black women are placed.

Much of the best of Black feminist thought reflects this effort to find a self-defined voice and express a fully articulated Afrocentric feminist standpoint. Audre Lorde observes that "within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (1984, 42). Lorde also points out that the "visibility which makes us most vulnerable"—that accompanying being black—"is that which is also the source of our greatest strength" (p. 42). The category of "Black woman" makes all Black women especially visible and open to the objectification afforded Black women as a category. This group treatment renders each Black woman invisible as a fully human individual. But paradoxically, being treated as an invisible Other gives Black women a peculiar angle of vision, the outsider-within stance that has served so many African-American women intellectuals as a source of tremendous strength.

Resolving contradictions of this magnitude takes considerable inner strength. In describing the development of her own racial identity, Pauli Murray remembers: "My own self-esteem was elusive and difficult to sustain. I was not entirely free from the prevalent idea that I must prove myself worthy of the rights that white individuals took for granted. This psychological conditioning along with fear had reduced my capacity for resistance to racial injustice" (1987, 106). Murray's quest was for constructed knowledge (Belenky et al. 1986), a type of knowledge essential to resolving contradictions. To learn to speak in a "unique and authentic

voice, women must 'jump outside' the frames and systems authorities provide and create their own frame" (p. 134). Unlike white women's images attached to the cult of true womanhood, the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance if Black women are to have any positive self-images. For Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to reject controlling images and integrate knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women's survival.[1]

SAFE SPACES AND FINDING A VOICE

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within that social space where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance. Extended families, churches, and African-American community organizations are important locations where safe discourse potentially can occur. Sondra O'Neale describes the workings of this Black women's space: "Beyond the mask, in the ghetto of the black women's community, in her family, and, more important, in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions—sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy . . . —by doing the things that 'normal' black women do" (1986, 139). This space is not only safe—it forms a prime location for resisting objectification as the Other. In this space Black women "observe the feminine images of the 'larger' culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community" (O'Neale 1986, 139). By advancing Black women's empowerment through self-definition, the safe spaces housing this culture of resistance help Black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only outside Black communities but within African-American institutions.

These institutional sites where Black women construct independent self-definitions reflect the dialectical nature of oppression and activism. Institutions controlled by the dominant group such as schools, the media, literature, and popular culture are the initial source of externally defined, controlling images. African-American women have traditionally used Black families and community institutions as places where they could develop a Black women's culture of resistance. But African-American institutions such as churches and extended families can also perpetuate this dominant ideology. The resulting reality is much more complex than

one of an external white society objectifying Black women as the Other with a unified Black community staunchly challenging these external assaults through its "culture of resistance." Instead, African-American women find themselves in a web of cross-cutting relationships, each presenting varying combinations of controlling images and Black women's self-definitions.

Historian Darlene Clark Hine suggests that the complexity of these institutional arrangements has profoundly affected Black women's consciousness and its articulation in a self-defined standpoint:

> Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variation, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, an openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own. (1989, 915)

What have been the primary focal points where Black women's consciousness has been nurtured and where African-American women have spoken freely in order to articulate a self-defined standpoint?

Black Women's Relationships with One Another

Black women's efforts to find a voice have occurred in at least three safe spaces. One location involves Black women's relationships with one another. In some cases, such as friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings among individuals. In others, as was the case during slavery (D. White 1985), in Black churches (Gilkes 1985), or in Black women's organizations (Gilkes 1982; Giddings 1988), more formal organizational ties have nurtured powerful Black women's communities. As mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends to one another, African-American women affirm one another (Myers 1980).

The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women (Joseph 1981; Collins 1987). Mothers and mother figures emerge as central figures in autobiographies such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Bebe Moore Campbell's

Sweet Summer (1989), and Mamie Garvin Fields and Karen Fields's *Lemon Swamp and Other Places* (1983). Alice Walker attributes the trust she has in herself to her mother. Walker "never doubted her powers of judgment because her mother assumed that they were sound; she never questioned her right to follow her intellectual bent, because her mother implicitly entitled her to it" (Washington 1984, 145). By giving her daughter a library card, Walker's mother knew the value of a free mind.

In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist. Black women's fiction, such as Toni Cade Bambara's short story "The Johnson Girls" (1981) and Toni Morrison's novels *Sula* (1974), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and *Beloved* (1987), is the primary location where Black women's friendships are taken seriously. In a dialogue with four other Black women, Evelyne Hammond describes this special relationship that Black women can have with one another: "I think most of the time you have to be there to experience it. When I am with other black women I always laugh. I think our humor comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world" (Clarke et al. 1983, 114).

This shared recognition often operates among African-American women who do not know one another but who see the need to value Black womanhood. Marita Golden describes her efforts in 1968 to attend a college which was "nestled . . . in the comfortable upper reaches of northwest Washington, surrounded by . . . the manicured, sprawling lawns of the city's upper class." To enter this world, Golden caught the bus downtown with "black women domestic workers who rode to the end of the line to clean house for young and middle-aged white matrons." Golden describes her fellow travelers' reaction to her acquiring a college education:

> They gazed proudly at me, nodding at the books in my lap. . . . I accepted their encouragement and hated America for never allowing them to be selfish or greedy, to feel the steel-hard bite of ambition. . . . They had parlayed their anger, brilliantly shaped it into a soft armor of survival. The spirit of those women sat with me in every class I took. (Golden 1983, 21)

My decision to pursue my doctorate was stimulated by a similar experience. In 1978 I offered a seminar as part of a national summer institute for teachers and other school personnel. After my Chicago workshop, an older Black woman participant whispered to me, "Honey, I'm real proud of you. Some folks don't want to see you up there [in the

front of the classroom] but you belong there. Go back to school and get your Ph.D. and then they won't be able to tell you nothing!" In talking with other Black women, I have discovered that many of us have had similar experiences.

This issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is an important one, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women's lives (Hooks 1989).[2] Audre Lorde describes the importance of voice in self-affirmation: "Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (1984, 42). One can write for a nameless, faceless audience, but the act of using one's voice requires a listener. For African-American women the listener most able to move beyond the invisibility created by objectification as the Other in order to see and hear the fully human Black woman is another Black woman. This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then who will?

While social science research on Black women's relationships remains scarce, Black women writers have recognized their importance. Mary Helen Washington points out that one distinguishing feature of Black women's literature is that it is about African-American women. Women talk to one another, and "their friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being" (1987, xxi). This emphasis on Black women's relationships is so striking that novelist Gayl Jones suggests that women writers select different themes from those of their male counterparts. In the work of many Black male writers, the significant relationships are those that involve confrontation with individuals outside the family and community. But among Black women writers, relationships within family and community, between men and women, and among women are treated as complex and significant (Tate 1983, 92).

Black women writers have explored themes such as the difficulties inherent in affirming Black women in a society that denigrates African-American women (Claudia's use of her relationship with her sister in searching for positive Black women's images in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*); of how Black women's relationships can support and renew (the relationship between Celie and Shug in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*); or how such relationships can control and repress (Audre Lorde's relationship with her mother in *Zami* [1982]). Perhaps Ntozake Shange best summarizes the importance that Black women can have for one another in resisting oppressive conditions. Shange gives the following reason for why she writes: "When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation

of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves" (in Tate 1983, 162).

The Black Women's Blues Tradition

African-American music as art has provided a second location where Black women have found a voice. "Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge," suggests Angela Davis (1989, 200). Davis contends that the dominant group failed to grasp the social function of music in general and particularly the central role music played in all aspects of life in West African society. As a result, "Black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom" (1989, 201). Spirituals, blues, jazz, and the progressive raps of the 1980s all form part of a "continuum of struggle which is at once aesthetic and political" (p. 201).

Afrocentric communication maintains the integrity of the individual and his or her personal voice, but does so in the context of group activity (Smitherman 1977; Kochman 1981; Asante 1987; Cannon 1988; Brown 1989). In music one effect of this oral mode of discourse is that individuality, rather than being stifled by group activity or being equated with specialization, actually flourishes in a group context (Sidran 1971).[3] "There's something about music that is so penetrating that your soul gets the message. No matter what trouble comes to a person, music can help him face it," claims Mahalia Jackson (1985, 454). "A song must do something for me as well as for the people that hear it. I can't sing a song that doesn't have a message. If it doesn't have the strength it can't lift you" (p. 446).

The blues tradition is an essential part of African-American music.[4] Blues singer Alberta Hunter explains the importance of the blues as a way of dealing with pain: "To me, the blues are almost religious . . . almost sacred—when we sing the blues, we're singing out of our own hearts . . . our feelings" (Harrison 1978, 63). Black people's ability to cope with and even transcend trouble without ignoring it means that it will not destroy us (Cone 1972).

Traditionally, blues assumed a similar function in African-American oral culture as that played by print media for white, visually based culture. Blues was not just entertainment—it was a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of Black life in America. Sherley Anne Williams contends that "the blues records of each decade explain something about the philosophical basis of our lives as black people. If we don't understand that as so-called intellectuals, then we

don't really understand anything about ourselves" (in Tate 1983, 208). For African-American women, blues seemed to be everywhere. Mahalia Jackson describes its pervasiveness during her childhood in New Orleans: "The famous white singers like Caruso—you might hear them when you went by a white folk's house, but in a colored house you heard blues. You couldn't help but hear blues—all through the thin partitions of the houses—through the open windows—up and down the street in the colored neighborhoods—everybody played it real loud" (1985, 447).

Black women have been central in maintaining, transforming, and recreating the blues tradition of African-American culture (Harrison 1978, 1988; Russell 1982). Michele Russell asserts that "blues, first and last, are a familiar idiom for Black women, even a staple of life" (1982, 130). Blues has occupied a special place in Black women's music as a site of the expression of Black women's self-definitions. The blues singer strives to create an atmosphere in which analysis can take place, and yet this atmosphere is intensely personal and individualistic. When Black women sing the blues, we sing our own personalized, individualistic blues while simultaneously expressing the collective blues of African-American women.

Michele Russell's (1982) analysis of five Black women blues singers' music demonstrates how the texts of blues singers can be seen as expressions of a Black women's standpoint. Russell claims that the works of Bessie Smith, Bessie Jackson, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Esther Phillips help Black women "own their past, present, and future." To Russell, these women are primary because "the content of their message, combined with the form of their delivery, make them so" (p. 130).

The music of the classic blues singers of the 1920s—almost exclusively women—marks the early written record of this dimension of Afrocentric oral culture. The songs themselves were originally sung in small communities, where boundaries distinguishing singer from audience, call from response, and thought from action were fluid and permeable. These records were made exclusively for the "race market" of African-Americans. Because literacy was not possible for large numbers of Black women, these recordings represented the first permanent documents expressing a Black women's standpoint accessible to Black women in diverse communities. The songs can be seen as poetry, as expressions of ordinary Black women rearticulated through the Afrocentric oral tradition.

The lyrics sung by many of the Black women blues singers challenge the externally defined controlling images used to justify Black women's objectification as the Other. The songs of Ma Rainey, dubbed "Queen of the Blues" and the first major female blues singer to be extensively recorded, validate the Black feminist intellectual tradition. In contrast

to the ingenues of most white popular music of the same period, Ma Rainey and her contemporaries sing of mature, sexual women (Lieb 1981). For example, Sara Martin's "Mean Tight Mama" rejects the cult of true womanhood and its confining images of beauty:

> Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk
> Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear no clothes of silk
> But the cow that's black and ugly has often got the sweetest milk.
> (Harrison 1978, 69)

Bessie Smith's "Get It, Bring It, and Put It Right Here"—like the words of Maria Stewart—advises Black women to possess the spirit of independence. She sings to her man:

> I've had a man for fifteen years, give him his room and his board
> Once he was like a Cadillac, now he's like an old worn-out Ford.
> He never brought me a lousy dime, and put it in my hand
> Oh, there'll be some changes from now on, according to my plan.
> He's got to get it, bring it, and put it right here
> Or else he's gonna keep it out there.
> If he must steal it, beg it, or borrow it somewhere
> Long as he gets it, I don't care. (Russell 1982, 133)

Sometimes the texts of Black women blues singers take overtly political forms. Billie Holiday recorded "Strange Fruit" in 1939 during a decade rife with racial unrest:

> Southern trees bear a strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root
> Black body swinging in the Southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
> Pastoral scene of the gallant South, the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
> Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh, and the sudden smell of burning flesh!
> Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck, for the rain to gather, for the wind to suck, for the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
> Here is a strange and bitter crop. (*Billie Holiday Anthology* 1976, 111).

Through her powerful rendition of these lyrics, Billie Holiday demonstrated a direct connection to the antilynching political activism of Ida B. Wells and other better-known Black feminists.

The emergence of professional songwriters modified the very close and personal relationship among Black women blues singers, their songs, and

the Afrocentric group tradition on which all depended for the act of creation and which the act of creation affirms and extends (Williams 1979). Commodification of the blues and its transformation into marketable crossover music has virtually stripped it of its close ties to the African-American oral tradition. Thus the expression of a Black women's voice in the oral blues tradition is being supplemented and may be supplanted by a growing Black women's voice in a third location, the space created by Black women writers.[5]

The Voices of Black Women Writers

During the summer of 1944, recent law school graduate Pauli Murray returned to her California apartment and found the following anonymous note from the "South Crocker Street Property Owner's Association" tacked to her door: "We . . . wish to inform you the flat you now occupy . . . is restricted to the white or Caucasian race only. . . . We intend to uphold these restrictions, therefore we ask that you vacate the above mentioned flat . . . within seven days" (1987, 253). Murray's response was to write. She remembers: "I was learning that creative expression is an integral part of the equipment needed in the service of a compelling cause; it is another form of activism. Words poured from my typewriter" (p. 255).

Increased literacy among African-Americans has provided new opportunities for Black women to transform former institutional sites of domination such as scholarship and literature into institutional sites of resistance. Trudier Harris (1988) suggests that a community of Black women writers has emerged since 1970, one in which African-American women engage in dialogue among one another in order to explore formerly taboo subjects. Black feminist literary criticism is documenting the intellectual and personal space created for African-American women in this emerging body of ideas (Washington 1980, 1982; Tate 1983; Evans 1984; Christian 1985; McDowell 1985; Pryse and Spillers 1985; O'Neale 1986). Especially noteworthy are the ways in which this emerging community of Black women writers builds on former themes and approaches of the Black women's blues tradition (Williams 1979) and of earlier Black women writers (Cannon 1988). Also key are the new themes raised by contemporary Black women writers. For example, Trudier Harris (1988) contends that a variety of taboos are violated in contemporary Black women's literature, among them the taboos that Black women were not allowed to leave their children, have interracial affairs, have lesbian relationships, be the victims of incest, or generally escape the confining image of "long-suffering commitment to Black people." In all, the emerging work of this growing

community potentially offers another safe space where Black women can articulate a self-defined standpoint.

Not everyone agrees that Black women writers are using the full range of their voices to create safe spaces. In discussing the potential for systems of domination to harness the creative potential of Black music, Angela Davis observes, "some of the superstars of popular-musical culture today are unquestionably musical genuises, but they have distorted the Black music tradition by brilliantly developing its form while ignoring its content of struggle and freedom" (1989, 208). Black literary critic Sondra O'Neale suggests that a similar process may be affecting Black women's writing. "Where are the Angela Davises, Ida B. Wellses, and Daisy Bateses of black feminist literature?" she asks (1986, 144). O'Neale contends that one of the tasks of the Black woman critic is to assess whether contemporary Black women's literature reveals those strengths that have furthered Black women's survival. "Lamentably," O'Neale points out, "we are still seeing the black women in roles that the prevailing cultural manipulators ascribe to her—always on the fringes of society, always alone" (p. 153).

The specialized thought of contemporary Black feminist writers and scholars should be able to draw on the long-standing Afrocentric tradition of struggle in order to produce "progressive art." As Angela Davis observes, "progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately it can propel people toward social emancipation" (1989, 200). This type of art is emancipatory because it fuses thought, feeling, and action and helps its participants see their world differently and act to change it. Traditionally, everyday thought expressed in Black women's music approximated this definition of *progressive*. It remains to be seen whether the specialized thought generated by contemporary Black feminist thinkers in very different institutional locations is capable of creating safe spaces that will carry African-American women even further.

CONSCIOUSNESS AS A SPHERE OF FREEDOM

Taken together, Black women's relationships with one another, the Black women's blues tradition, and the emerging influence of Black women writers coalesce to offer an alternative worldview to that embedded in institutional locations of domination. These three sites offer safe spaces that nurture the everyday and specialized thought of African-American women and where Black women intellectuals can absorb ideas and experiences for the task of rearticulating Black women's experiences and

infusing them with new meaning. More important, these new meanings offer African-American women potentially powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black womanhood. Far from being a secondary concern in bringing about social change, challenging controlling images and replacing them with a Black women's standpoint is an essential component in resisting systems of race, gender, and class oppression (Thompson-Cager 1989). What are some of the fundamental themes developed in these safe spaces?

The Importance of Self-Definition

"Black groups digging on white philosophies ought to consider the source. Know who's playing the music before you dance," cautions poet Nikki Giovanni (1971, 126). Her advice is especially germane for African-American women. Giovanni suggests: "We Black women are the single group in the West intact. And anybody can see we're pretty shaky. We are . . . the only group that derives its identity from itself. I think it's been rather unconscious but we measure ourselves by ourselves, and I think that's a practice we can ill afford to lose" (1971, 144). Black women's survival is at stake, and creating self-definitions reflecting an independent Afrocentric feminist consciousness is an essential part of that survival.

The issue of the journey from internalized oppression to the "free mind" of a self-defined, Afrocentric feminist consciousness is a prominent theme in the works of Black women writers. Author Alexis DeVeaux notes that there is a "great exploration of the self in women's work. It's the self in relationship with an intimate other, with the community, the nation and the world" (in Tate 1983, 54). Far from being a narcissistic or trivial concern, this placement of self at the center of analysis is critical for understanding a host of other relationships. DeVeaux continues, "you have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups" (p. 54).

Black women have also stressed the importance of self-definition as part of the journey from victimization to a free mind in their blues. Sherley Anne Williams's analysis of the affirmation of self in the blues make a critical contribution in understanding the blues as a Black women's text. In discussing the blues roots of Black literature, Williams notes, "the assertion of individuality and the implied assertion—as action, not mere verbal statement—of self is an important dimension of the blues" (1979, 130).

The assertion of self usually comes at the end of a song, after the description or analysis of the troublesome situation. This affirmation of

self is often the only solution to that problem or situation. Nina Simone's (1985) classic blues song "Four Women" illustrates this use of the blues to affirm self. Simone sings of three Black women whose experiences typify controlling images—Aunt Sarah, the mule, whose back is bent from a lifetime of hard work; Sweet Thing, the Black prostitute who will belong to anyone who has money to buy; and Saphronia, the mulatto whose Black mother was raped late one night. Simone explores Black women's objectification as the Other by invoking the pain these three women actually feel. But Peaches, the fourth woman, is an especially powerful figure, because Peaches is angry. "I'm awfully bitter these days," Peaches cries out, "because my parents were slaves." These words and the feelings they invoke demonstrate her growing awareness and self-definition of the situation she encountered and offer to the listener, not sadness and remorse, but an anger that leads to action. This is the type of individuality Williams means—not that of talk but self-definitions that foster action.

While the theme of the journey also appears in the work of Black men, African-American women writers and musicians explore this journey toward freedom in ways that are characteristically female (Thompson-Cager 1989). Black women's journeys, though at times embracing political and social issues, basically take personal and psychological forms and rarely reflect the freedom of movement of Black men who hop "trains," "hit the road," or in other ways physically travel in order to find that elusive sphere of freedom from racial oppression. Instead, Black women's journeys often involve "the transformation of silence into language and action" (Lorde 1984, 40). Typically tied to children and/or community, fictional Black women characters search for self-definition within close geographical boundaries. Even though physical limitations confine the Black heroine's quest to a specific area, "forming complex personal relationships adds depth to her identity quest in lieu of geographical breadth" (Tate 1983, xxi). In their search for self-definition and the power of a free mind, Black heroines may remain "motionless on the outside . . . but inside?"

Given the physical limitations on Black women's mobility, the conceptualization of self that is part of Black women's self-definitions is distinctive. Self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community—as Paule Marshall describes it, "the ability to recognize one's continuity with the larger community" (Washington 1984, 159). By being accountable to others, African-American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves. Sonia Sanchez points to this version of self by stating, "we must move past always focusing on the 'personal self' because there's a larger self. There's a 'self' of black people" (Tate 1983, 134). Rather than defining self in opposition

to others, the connectedness among individuals provides Black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions.[6]

This journey toward self-definition has political significance. As Mary Helen Washington observes, Black women who struggle to "forge an identity larger than the one society would force upon them . . . are aware and conscious, and that very consciousness is potent" (1980, xv). Identity is not the goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition. In this process Black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Peaches's statement, "I'm awfully bitter these days because my parents were slaves," illustrates this transformation.

The journey toward self-definition offers a powerful challenge to the externally defined, controlling images of African-American women. Replacing negative images with positive ones can be equally problematic if the function of stereotypes as controlling images remains unrecognized. John Gwaltney's (1980) interview with Nancy White, a 73-year-old Black woman, suggests that ordinary Black women can be acutely aware of the power of these controlling images. To Nancy White the difference between the controlling images applied to African-American and white women are those of degree, not of kind:

> My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain't gon' treat neither one like he was dealing with a person. (p. 148)

Although both groups are objectified, albeit in different ways, the function of the images is to dehumanize and control both groups. Seen in this light, it makes little sense in the long run for Black women to exchange one set of controlling images for another even if positive stereotypes bring better treatment in the short run.

The insistence on Black female self-definition reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image—namely, refuting the Black matriarchy thesis— to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself. By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the

authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects.

Self-Valuation and Respect

While self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting externally defined, controlling images of Black womanhood, the theme of Black women's self-valuation addresses the actual content of these self-definitions. Through relationships with one another, music, and literature, African-American women create self-valuations that challenge externally defined notions of Black womanhood.

Many of the controlling images applied to African-American women are actually distorted renderings of those aspects of our behavior that threaten existing power arrangements (Gilkes 1983a; D. White 1985). For example, strong mothers are threatening because they contradict elite white male definitions of femininity. To ridicule strong, assertive Black mothers by labeling them matriarchs reflects an effort to control a dimension of Black women's behavior that threatens the status quo. African-American women who value those aspects of Black womanhood that are stereotyped, ridiculed, and maligned in scholarship and the popular media challenge some of the basic ideas inherent in an ideology of domination.

The significance of self-valuation is illustrated through the emphasis that Black feminist thinkers place on respect. In a society in which no one is obligated to respect African-American women, we have long admonished one another to have self-respect and to demand the respect of others. Black women's voices from a variety of sources resonate with this demand for respect. Katie G. Cannon (1988) suggests that Black womanist ethics embraces three basic dimensions of "invisible dignity," "quiet grace," and "unstated courage," all qualities essential for self-valuation and self-respect. Black feminist critic Claudia Tate (1983) reports that the issue of self-esteem is so primary in the writing of Black women that it deserves special attention. Tate claims that what the writers seem to be saying is that "women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves" (p. xxiii). Her analysis is certainly borne out in Alice Walker's comments to an audience of women. Walker cautioned, "please remember, especially in these times of group-think and the right-on chorus, that no person is your friend (or kin) who demands your silence, or denies your right to grow and be perceived as fully blossomed as you were intended. Or who belittles in any fashion the gifts you labor so to bring into the world" (Walker

1983, 36). The right to be Black *and* female *and* respected pervades everyday conversations among African-American women. In describing the importance self-respect has for her, elderly domestic worker Sara Brooks notes, "I may not have as much as you, I may not have the education you got, but still, if I conduct myself as a decent person, I'm just as good as anybody" (Simonsen 1986, 132).

Respect from others—especially from Black men—is a recurring theme in Black women's writing. In describing the things a woman wants out of life, middle-class Marita Bonner lists "a career as fixed and as calmly brilliant as the North Star. The one real thing that money buys. Time . . . And of course, a husband you can look up to without looking down on yourself" (Bonner 1987, 3). Black women's belief in respect also emerges in the works of a variety of Black women blues singers. Perhaps the best-known popular statement of Black women's demand for self-respect and that of others is found in Aretha Franklin's (1967) rendition of the Otis Redding song "Respect." Aretha sings to her man:

> What you want? Baby I got it.
> What you need? You know I got it.
> All I'm asking for is a little respect when you come home.

Even though the lyrics can be sung by anyone, they take on special meaning when sung by Aretha in the way that she sings them. On one level the song functions as a metaphor for the condition of African-Americans in a racist society. But Aretha's being a Black woman enables the song to tap a deeper meaning. Within the blues tradition, the listening audience of African-American women assumes "we" Black women, even though Aretha as the blues singer sings "I." Sherley Anne Williams describes the power of Aretha's blues: "Aretha was right on time, but there was also something about the way Aretha characterized respect as something given with force and great effort and cost. And when she even went so far as to spell the word 'respect,' we just knew that this sister wasn't playing around about getting Respect and keeping it" (Williams 1979, 124).

June Jordan suggests that this emphasis on respect is tied to a distinctive Black feminist politic. For Jordan, a "morally defensible Black feminism" is verified in the ways Black women present ourselves to others, and in the ways in which Black women treat people different from ourselves. While self-respect is essential, respect for others is key. "As a Black feminist," claims Jordan, "I cannot be expected to respect what somebody else calls self-love if that concept of self-love requires my suicide to any degree" (1981, 144).

Self-Reliance and Independence

In her 1831 essay Black feminist thinker Maria Stewart not only encouraged Black women's self-definition and self-valuations but linked Black women's self-reliance with issues of survival:

> We have never had an opportunity of displaying our talents; therefore the world thinks we know nothing. . . . Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you? Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted: Sue for your rights and privileges. . . . You can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not. (Richardson 1987, 38)

Whether by choice or circumstance, African-American women have "possessed the spirit of independence," have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity (Steady 1987). These beliefs apparently find wide support among African-American women. For example, when asked what they admired about their mothers, the women in Gloria Joseph's (1981) study of the Black mother/daughter relationship recounted their mothers' independence and ability to provide in the face of difficulties. Participants in Lena Wright Myers's (1980) study of Black women's coping skills respected women who were resourceful and self-reliant. Black women's autobiographies, such as Shirley Chisholm's *Unbought and Unbossed* (1970) and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), typify Black women's self-valuation of self-reliance. As elderly domestic worker Nancy White cogently explains, "most black women can be their own boss, so that's what they be" (Gwaltney 1980, 149).

The works of prominent Black women blues singers also counsel the importance of self-reliance and independence for African-American women. In her classic ballad "God Bless the Child That Got His Own," Billie Holiday sings:

> The strong gets more, while the weak ones fade,
> Empty pockets don't ever make the grade;
> Mama may have, Papa may have,
> But God bless the child that got his own!
> (*Billie Holiday Anthology* 1976, 12)

In this mournful song Billie Holiday offers an insightful analysis of the need for autonomy and self-reliance. "Money, you got lots of friends, crowdin' 'round the door," she proclaims. But "when you're gone and spendin' ends they don't come no more." In these passages Holiday admonishes Black

women to become financially independent because having one's "own" allows women to choose their relationships. In "Tain't Nobody's Business if I Do," Holiday offers a vision of the type of freedom Black women will have if we become self-reliant and independent:

> If I should take a notion, to jump into the ocean,
> If I dislike my lover and leave him for another,
> If I go to church on Sunday then cabaret on Monday,
> If I should get the feeling to dance upon the ceilin'.
> Tain't nobody's business if I do! (*Billie Holiday Anthology* 1976, 119)

The linking of economic self-sufficiency as one critical dimension of self-reliance with the demand for respect permeates Black feminist thought. For example, in "Respect" when Aretha sings, "your kisses sweeter than honey, but guess what, so is my money," she demands respect on the basis of her economic self-reliance. Perhaps this connection between respect, self-reliance, and assertiveness is best summarized by Nancy White, who declares, "there is a very few black women that their husbands can pocketbook to death because we can do for ourselves and will do so in a minute!" (Gwaltney 1980, 149).

Self, Change, and Empowerment

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 1984, 112). In this passage Audre Lorde explores how independent self-definitions empower Black women to bring about social change. By struggling for a self-defined Afrocentric feminist consciousness that rejects the "master's" images, African-American women change ourselves. This changed consciousness in turn is a fundamental factor in empowering Black women to change the conditions of our lives.

Nikki Giovanni illuminates these connections among self, change, and empowerment. She admonishes that people are rarely powerless, no matter how stringent the restrictions on our lives: "We've got to live in the real world. If we don't like the world we're living in, change it. And if we can't change it, we change ourselves. We can do something" (in Tate 1983, 68). Giovanni recognizes that effective change occurs through action. The multiple strategies of resistance that Black women have employed, such as withdrawing from postemancipation agricultural work in order to return their labor to their families, ostensibly conforming to the deference rituals of domestic work, protesting male bias in African-American

organizations, or creating the progressive art of Black women's blues all represent physical actions to bring about change. Here is the connected self and the empowerment that comes from change in the context of community.

But change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman's consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is also empowering. If a Black woman is forced to remain "motionless on the outside," she can always develop the "inside" of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. Becoming empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act, is essential. In Black women's literature

> this type of change . . . occurs because the heroine recognizes, and more importantly respects her inability to alter a situation. . . . This is not to imply that she is completely circumscribed by her limitations. On the contrary, she learns to exceed former boundaries but only as a direct result of knowing where they lie. In this regard, she teaches her readers a great deal about constructing a meaningful life in the midst of chaos and contingencies, armed with nothing more than her intellect and emotions. (Tate 1983, xxiv)

In this passage Claudia Tate demonstrates the significance of rearticulation. But rearticulation does not mean reconciling Afrocentric feminist ethics and values with opposing Eurocentric masculinist ones. Instead, as Chezia Thompson-Cager contends, rearticulation "confronts them in the tradition of 'naming as power' by revealing them very carefully" (1989, 590). Naming daily life by putting language to everyday experience infuses it with the new meaning of an Afrocentric feminist consciousness and becomes a way of transcending the limitations of race, gender, and class subordination.

Black women's literature contains many examples of how Black women are empowered by a changed consciousness. Barbara Christian maintains that the heroines of 1940s Black women's literature, such as Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Cleo Judson in Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy* (1948), are defeated not only by social reality but by their "lack of self-knowledge." In contrast, the heroines from the 1950s to the present represent a significant shift toward self-knowledge as a sphere of freedom. Christian dates the shift from Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953) and claims, "because Maud Martha constructs her own standards, she manages to transform that 'little life' into so much more despite the limits set on her. . . . [she] emerges neither crushed nor triumphant" (1985, 176).

No matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, contemporary

African-American women writers place the power to save the self within the self (Harris 1988). Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself. An individual woman may use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice. Like Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, some women write themselves free. Sexually, physically, and emotionally abused, Celie writes letters to God when no one else will listen. The act of acquiring a voice through writing, of breaking silence with language, eventually moves her to the action of talking with others. Other women talk themselves free. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie tells her story to a good friend, a prime example of the rearticulation process essential for Black feminist thought (Hurston 1937). Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls* (1975) also captures this journey toward self-definition, self-valuation, and an empowered self. At the end of the play the women gather around one woman who shares the pain she experienced at seeing her children killed. They listen until she says "I found God in myself and I loved her fiercely." These words, expressing her ability to define herself as worthwhile, draw them together. They touch one another as part of a Black women's community that heals the member in pain, but only after she has taken the first step of wanting to be healed, of wanting to make the journey toward finding the voice of empowerment.

Persistence is a fundamental requirement of this journey from silence to language to action. Black women's blues contains numerous messages to Black women to keep on pushing despite the difficulties. When Sweet Honey in the Rock (1985) sing the traditional African-American song "We'll Understand It Better By and By," they sing of hope in times of trouble. When Aretha Franklin (1967) sings that change has been a "long time comin' " but that she knows her "change is gonna come," she acknowledges the difficulties of the present and holds out hope for the future, but only for those who persist. These songs tap deep roots in African-American women. The message is to continue the connectedness of self with others, to persist through the responsibilities of hard times, because understanding and change will come.

Black women's persistence is fostered by the strong belief that to be Black and female is valuable and worthy of respect. In a song "A Change Is Gonna Come," Aretha Franklin (1967) expresses this feeling of enduring in spite of the odds. She sings that there were times that she thought that she would not last for long. She sings of how it has been an "uphill journey all the way" to find the strength to carry on. But in spite of the difficulties, Aretha "knows" that "a change is gonna come."

Actions to bring about change, whether the struggle for an Afrocentric feminist consciousness or the persistence needed for institutional transformation, empower African-American women. Because our actions change the world from one in which we merely exist to one over which we have some control, they enable us to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amenable to change. By persisting in the journey toward self-definition we are changed, and this change empowers us. Perhaps this is why so many African-American women have managed to persist and "make a way out of no way." Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition.

NOTES

1. Belenky et al. (1986) suggest that achieving constructed knowledge requires self-reflection about and distancing from familiar situations, whether psychological and/or physical. For Black women intellectuals, being outsiders within may provide the distance from and angle of vision on the familiar that can be used to "find a voice" or create constructed knowledge. Belenky et al. describe this process as affecting individuals. I suggest that a similar argument can be applied to Black women as a group.

2. Belenky et al. (1986) report that women repeatedly use the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development: "The tendency for women to ground their epistemological premises in metaphors suggesting speaking and listening is at odds with the visual metaphors (such as equating knowledge with illumination, knowing with seeing, and truth with light) that scientists and philosophers most often use to express their sense of mind" (p. 16). This emphasis on voice in women's culture parallels the importance of oral communication in African-American culture (Sidran 1971; Smitherman 1977).

3. Sidran (1971) suggests that to get one's own "sound" is a key part of vocalized Black music. Black theologian James Cone has also written about Black music as carrier of the values of African-American culture. Cone notes that Black music is "unity music. It unites the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and the despair of black people. . . . Black music is unifying because it confronts the individual with the truth of black existence and affirms that black being is possible only in a communal context. Black music is functional. Its purposes and aims are directly related to the consciousness of the black community" (1972, 5). Note the both/and orientation of Cone's description, an analysis rejecting the either/or dichotomous thinking of Western societies. Moreover, Cone's discussion of functionality reinforces the discussion of functional beauty presented in Chapter 4.

4. Black women have participated in all forms of Black music but have been especially central in vocal music such as spirituals, gospel, and the blues (Jackson 1981). I focus on the blues because of its association with the Black women's secular tradition. Though a more recent phenomenon, gospel music is also "a Black feminine musical tradition" (Jackson 1981). With roots in the urban Black folk church, the text of gospel songs could also be examined.

5. Another emerging location for Black women's voice is in the works of African-American women filmmakers. Julie Dash's *Illusions* and *Diary of an African Nun*, Michelle Parkerson's *Gotta Make That Journey: Sweet Honey in the Rock*, Ayoka Chenzira's satiric

Hair Piece, and Kathleen Collins's *Losing Ground* all explore different facets of Black women's reality. For information on Black women filmmakers, see Campbell (1983). More general information on Black women in film can be found in Mapp (1973).

6. Afrocentric scholars have examined this conceptualization of the self in African and African-American communities. See Smitherman (1977), Asante (1987), Myers (1988), and Brown (1989). For feminist analyses of women's development of self as a distinctive process, see especially Evelyn Keller's (1985) discussion of dynamic autonomy and how it relates to relationships of domination, and Benhabib and Cornell's (1987) discussion of the unencumbered self.

Chapter 6

BLACK WOMEN AND MOTHERHOOD

> Just yesterday I stood for a few minutes at the top of the stairs leading to a white doctor's office in a white neighborhood. I watched one Black woman after another trudge to the corner, where she then waited to catch the bus home. These were Black women still cleaning somebody else's house or Black women still caring for somebody else's sick or elderly, before they came back to the frequently thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families. And I felt angry and I felt ashamed. And I felt, once again, the kindling heat of my hope that we, the daughters of these Black women, will honor their sacrifice by giving them thanks. We will undertake, with pride, every transcendent dream of freedom made possible by the humility of their love.
>
> —June Jordan 1985, 105

June Jordan's words poignantly express the need for Black feminists to honor our mothers' sacrifice by developing an Afrocentric feminist analysis of Black motherhood. Until recently analyses of Black motherhood have largely been the province of men, both white and Black, and male assumptions about Black women as mothers have prevailed. Black mothers have been accused of failing to discipline their children, of emasculating their sons, of defeminizing their daughters, and of retarding their children's academic achievement (Wade-Gayles 1980). Citing high rates of divorce, female-headed households, and out-of-wedlock births, white male scholars and their representatives claim that African-American