

**How Capitalism
Underdeveloped
Black America**

**Problems in Race, Political
Economy and Society**

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SOUTH END PRESS

BOSTON, MA

CHAPTER THREE

GROUNDINGS WITH MY SISTERS: PATRIARCHY AND THE EXPLOITATION OF BLACK WOMEN.

ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! . . . I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ain't I a woman? I could work as much as any man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well—and ain't I a woman? I have borne five children and seen 'em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus hear—and ain't I a woman?

Sojourner Truth, 1852.

We are the slaves of slaves; we are exploited more ruthlessly than men.

Lucy Parsons, 1905.

I

The first two chapters of this book, which explore the history of the Black working class and subproletariat, do not examine in any great detail the largest single group within Afro-America—Black women. As noted earlier, Black women comprise a significant minority within the Black laboring population, and have for many years experienced higher rates of unemployment than their male counterparts. (See Table IV) Over one-third of all Black women are officially classified as “poor” by

the Federal government. This economic profile graphically illustrates the effects of patriarchy, racism and capitalist exploitation. But it does not begin to present the unique dimensions of the Black woman's historical experience.

Black social history, as it has been written to date, has been profoundly patriarchal. The sexist critical framework of American white history has been accepted by Black male scholars; the reconstruction of our past, the reclamation of our history from the ruins, has been an enterprise wherein women have been too long segregated. Obligatory references are generally made to those "outstanding sisters" who gave some special contribution to the liberation of the "Black man." Even these token footnotes probably do more harm than good, because they reinforce the false belief that the most oppressed victim of white racial tyranny has been *the Black man*. It is true, as chapter four will cite, that the numerical majority of those Blacks who have been lynched, executed and forced to work in penal institutions have been males. But these numbers ignore a critical reality of racism and capitalist development. From the dawn of the slave trade until today, U.S. capitalism was both racist and deeply sexist. The superexploitation of Black women became a permanent feature in American social and economic life, because sisters were assaulted simultaneously as workers, as Blacks, and as women. This triple oppression escaped Black males entirely. To understand the history of all Blacks within the Black majority, the "domestic Black periphery," special emphasis is required in documenting the particular struggles, ideals and attitudes of Black women. To do less would be to reinforce capitalist patriarchy's ideological hegemony over the future struggles of all Black working people. Black male liberationists must relearn their own history, by grounding themselves in the wisdom of their sisters.

II

During the entire slave period in the U.S. a brutal kind of equality was thrust upon both sexes. This process was dictated by the conditions of slave production within the overall process of capital accumulation in the South. Black women working in the fields on rice, sugar and cotton plantations were expected to labor at least twelve hours a day without complaint, breaking their backs just like their sons, husbands and fathers. Angela Davis has recognized that "the

slave system could not confer upon the Black man the appearance of a privileged position vis-a-vis the Black woman." Since slavery itself was authoritarianism in the extreme, with the white slaveowner exercising physical violence to maintain political hegemony, no "family provider" or Black patriarch could be allowed. "The attainment of slavery's intrinsic goals was contingent upon the fullest and most brutal utilization of the productive capacities of every man, woman and child. The Black woman was therefore wholly integrated into the productive force."¹

It must be remembered that the Afro-American slave was chattel: a thing, a privately owned commodity. Some slave masters tolerated the marriages of Blacks on their own farms or on their white neighbors' property to marry each other. But even the most "humane" master, when confronted with the inevitable economic declines that are a permanent feature of capitalism, would disrupt Black families by selling off a spouse or several children. "Here and there one can find sufficient respect for basic human rights or ample sentimentality to prevent the separation of families," John Hope Franklin indicates, "but it was not always good business to keep families together." Black women were sold separately to bring a more competitive price on the open market. Children over the age of fourteen were viewed as prime field hands, and were routinely taken from their mothers and fathers. Historians disagree on the precise number of families that were divided during slavery. One fair estimate is provided by Herbert Gutman, who describes the intersectional sale of slaves as "one of the great forced migrations in world history." 835,000 Afro-Americans were moved from the Upper South to Lower South between 1790 and 1860. Most of these persons were transported in the decades immediately before the Civil War, 575,000 slaves between 1830 and 1860. No fewer than one million Blacks were sold from 1820 to 1860, roughly one percent of the total slave population every year. Estimates of the number of Black women who were sold and thereby separated from their children, parents or husbands are, of course, difficult to assess. Gutman's work indicates that anywhere from 35 to 71 percent of marriage-age Black women who were sold in the interregional slave trade were involuntarily separated from their husbands. The public sale of young Black girls above the age of 12 who were bought to satisfy the sexual needs of white racist males was notorious. A few slavers even specialized in selling Black children between the ages of 8 to 12.²

One decisive form of oppression which befell the Black woman was slave breeding. Here again, the overwhelming majority of white male historians insist that either slave breeding did not exist or that it was rarely attempted by white planters. Usually this volatile term is employed narrowly to describe owner-coerced matings, where little actual documentation exists. However, the concept of slave breeding should be extended to mean all and any forms of slavery which, in Kenneth Stampp's definition, "indicate that slaves were reared with an eye to their marketability." Massive evidence exists illustrating that "many masters counted the fecundity of Negro women as an economic asset and encouraged them to bear children as rapidly as possible. Masters who prized prolific Negro women not only tolerated but sometimes came close to promoting sexual promiscuity among them."³ Some white owners voided Blacks' marriages if they suspected that the men or women were sterile. In their own literature, Southern whites were absolutely candid about the centrality of slave breeding to the accumulation of profits. One Mississippian declared that fecund slave women "are the most profitable to their owners of any others. . . It is remarkable the number of slaves which may be raised from one woman in the course of forty or fifty years with the proper kind of attention."⁴ Nearly every Black woman interviewed by Fannie Kemble in her 1838-1839 journal on slavery had a number of children. One woman under thirty had borne ten children and had subsequently developed a "nervous disorder, brought on by frequent childbearing." Venus, a mulatto slave "terribly crippled with rheumatism," had "eleven children, five of whom had died, and two miscarriages."⁵ U. B. Phillips observed that "one phenomenal slave mother born forty-one children, mostly of course as twins; and the records of many others ran well above a dozen each."⁶ One ingenious master, James Hammond of South Carolina, gave each of his Black slave mothers "a muslin or calico frock—but only when her newborn infant was thirteen months old." Another ordered that any Black "women with six children alive at any one time are allowed all Saturday to themselves."⁷

Many masters did not wait for the slaves themselves to reproduce in sufficient numbers, and took matters into their own hands. As property, Black women were expected to produce wealth for their owners. But as females, Black women were also constantly subjected to the physical and sexual assault of white males. As Angela Davis observed, "the integration of rape (into slavery) harks back to the feudal

'right of the first night,' the *jus primae noctis*. The feudal lord manifested and reinforced his authority to have sexual intercourse with all the females." In the context of American slavery, in the United States and elsewhere, the white man sought to reduce Black women to the lowest level of biological being. "The act of copulation, reduced by the white man to an animal-like act, would be symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the Black woman could unloose."⁸ White American historians have usually been extremely reluctant to discuss this "normal" and universal aspect of any slave order. Brazilian sociologist Gilbert Freyre discussed the issue frankly with the initial observation that "there is no slavery without sexual depravity. Depravity is the essence of such a regime." Freyre noted that "one favorite saying of the planters was: 'The most productive feature of slave property is the generative belly.'" ⁹ Brazilian whites had a casual attitude toward syphilis and gonorrhea and had no reservations about spreading their affliction into Black households. From the age of thirteen, the white boy "was subject to ridicule for not having had carnal knowledge of a woman and would be the butt of jests if he could not show the scars of syphilis on his body." Many older white men believed that the only method to cure themselves of gonorrhea was to have intercourse with a young Black virgin—"the surest means of extinguishing it in oneself." Black women who wet-nursed white infants who were already infected by their parents "thus convey(ed) from the Big House to the slave hut the blight of syphilis. It killed, blinded, deformed at will."¹⁰ Sadism and masochism were also an organic aspect of race relations, sometimes involving even small Black boys as well as females. Freyre noted that "the white lad was often initiated into the mysteries of "physical love" through sexual games of submission wherein Black youths were forced to "take a drubbing."¹¹

White males who settled the United States lacked the cultural and historic relations which characterize the evolution of Portuguese and Spanish slave societies vis-a-vis Africans. Their racism was more aggressive; their neurotic fantasies were more repressively checked by the religious heritage of Calvinism and Puritanism; their knowledge of Black culture was more limited; their desire for profits, greater. For the white male American, the Black women's vagina was his private property. Like his cotton fields, the fruit of its issue belonged to him alone. His half-white child by the Black woman was usually treated just like any other slave. Raping the Black woman was not unlike

plowing up fertile ground; the realities of plantation labor descended into the beds of the slaves' quarters, where the violent ritual of rape paralleled the harsh political realities of slave agricultural production. As Davis noted:

In its political contours, the rape of the Black woman was not exclusively an attack upon her. Indirectly, its target was also the slave community as a whole.

In launching the sexual war on the woman, the master could not only assert his sovereignty over a critically important figure of the slave community, he would also be aiming a blow against the Black man. . . . Clearly the master hoped that once the Black man was struck by his manifest inability to rescue his women from sexual assaults of the master, he would begin to experience deep-seated doubts about his ability to resist at all.¹²

Many Black women fought these repeated sexual assaults, and an untold number sacrificed their lives to retain their humanity. Many more carried the scars of their rapes, both physical and psychological, with them for the rest of their lives. The children of such coerced owner-slave unions, and the omnipresence of white rape, is indicated in part by the swelling number of mulattoes in the South before the Civil War. By 1850 there were 245,000 mulatto slaves; by 1860, 411,000 mulattoes out of an enslaved Black population of 3,900,000.¹³

For Black women, and their men, the only means to maintain their inner strength and integrity was through resistance. Black resistance assumed, first, the form of conscious, voluntary day-to-day protest: the destruction of agricultural implements, burning crops, stealing whites' personal food and property, deliberate slow-downs in the fields, and so forth. A number of Black women, far more than most Black historians have appreciated, ran away from their plantations or farms in search of freedom. Between 1736 and 1801 in Virginia alone, there were 141 documented instances of runaway African women. There was Hannah, a young woman of 19, "who when angered flashed a 'very passionate temper'"; Sarah, a "small and courageous girl of 14" who insisted in calling herself Mindingo; Milly, described by her owner as having grey eyes, "very large Breasts," and noted for being "a sly, subtle Wench, and a great Lyar." Cicley's master warned, "Beware to secure her Well, for she is very wicked and full of flattery." Only fifteen of the 141 women ran off in the company of slave men—a piece

of evidence that indicates remarkable self-reliance in a patriarchal society. Yet many white owners, blinded by their entrenched sexism, could not contemplate that Black women by themselves would thirst for liberation. In 1772, a typical master lamented about one African woman who departed with her husband, "I imagine she is entirely governed by him."¹⁴

The greatest indictment against slavery and white Southern patriarchy came from the voices of Black women. Jane Blake's *Memoirs*, written in 1897, provides all the evidence one needs to illustrate that slave breeding existed. Many slave women refused to have sex with men they did not love, and fought the sexual advances of their white owners. Blake wrote, if "all the bond women had been of the same mind, how soon the institution could have vanished from the earth, and all the misery belonging to it."¹⁵ Jane Brown's *Narrative* of 1856 asserted that virtually every slave longed for freedom, and that both freed and enslaved Blacks covertly discussed rebellion.¹⁶ Louisa Piquet was forced to become a concubine for white men. In her 1861 narrative, *Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life*, she argued that sexual exploitation of Black women constituted the core of white Southern hypocrisy. She observed that U.S. whites oppose the "heathenism of a Turkish harem. (But) is all this whit worse than what is constantly practiced, with scarce a word of unfavorable comment, in our Christian land? Our chivalrous 'southern gentlemen' beget thousands of slaves; and hundreds of children of our free white citizens are sold in the southern slave markets every year."¹⁷ When the moment of freedom arrived, Black women understood better than anyone else the *ancien regime* of rape and labor exploitation was at an end. The story of one young Black woman named Caroline Gordon, or "Caddy," bears witness:

Caddy had been sold to a man in Goodman, Mississippi. It was terrible to be sold in Mississippi. In fact, it was terrible to be sold anywhere. She had been put to work in the fields for running away again. She was hoeing a crop when she heard that General Lee surrendered . . . that meant that all the colored people were free! Caddy threw down that hoe, she marched herself up to the big house, then, she looked around and found the mistress. She went over to the mistress, she flipped up her dress and told the

white woman to do something. She said it mean and ugly: *Kiss my ass!*¹⁸

III

From the very beginning of Black political activism in the United States, Afro-American men had real difficulty in considering the "triple oppression" (race/class/sex) of Black women with any degree of seriousness. Part of the problem stemmed from the evolution of patriarchal institutions within Black civil society. Black churches in the free states were involved in a variety of reform activities, from the creation of economic enterprises to the building of a network of Black schools. But these churches were invariably dominated by Black men, who served as pastors, evangelists and deacons. Black mutual benefit societies, first started in Newport, Rhode Island and Philadelphia, gave members recreational facilities, provided families with modest economic protection in case of sickness or death, and created the foundations for Black business development. Yet the major societies were funded, directed and controlled by Black males. The Black newspapers established in the nineteenth century, including John Russwurm's *Freedom's Journal* (1827), Martin Delany's *Mystery* (1843), Frederick Douglass' *North Star* (1848) and the *Anglo-African* of New York City (1859), tended to print the antislavery speeches, manifestos and essays of articulate Black men. The Negro Convention Movement, a series of Black political conferences beginning in 1830 in Philadelphia, almost always involved only Black men.

Many Black male activists identified the cause of Black liberation with the ultimate attainment of "Black manhood." This definition of freedom was a conditioned response evoked by white patriarchy, whether the Black men of the period recognized this or not. Henry Highland Garnet's famous "Address to the Slaves of the United States," delivered at the 1843 Negro Convention specifically called upon every Black "man" to "resist aggression." "In every man's mind the good seeds of liberty are planted, and he who brings his fellow down so long, as to make him contented with a condition of slavery, commits the highest crime against God and man." Garnet's audience was reminded of the racists' transgressions upon its manhood:

See your sons murdered, and your wives, mothers and sisters doomed to prostitution. . . And worse than all, you tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embraces and defile

them before your eyes. In the name of God, we ask, are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it all run out of your veins?¹⁹

Radical newspaper editor T. Thomas Fortune condemned whites as "the most consummate masters of hypocrisy, of roguery, of insolence, and of cowardice" in an 1887 polemic. Fortune was quick to add, however, that "many imagine that we are compelled to submit and have not the manhood necessary to resent such conduct. We shall labor as one man to wage relentless opposition to all men who would degrade our manhood."²⁰ Pan-African scholar and clergyman Alexander Crummell reminded Blacks that the chief aim of civilization was the creation "of a true and lofty race of men. For manhood is the most majestic thing in God's creation."²¹ Even Frederick Douglass, the leading male proponent of women's rights in the nineteenth century, asserted in 1855 that the struggle for racial liberation meant that Blacks "must develop their manhood, and not be too modest to attempt such development."²²

Douglass was exceptional among all Black male activists in his open commitment to equality for women. Soon after his flight to freedom in the North, he identified himself with militant white and Black women in their struggle for suffrage and legal rights. In the initial issue of the *North Star*, he drew the obvious political parallels between the battles against racism and sexism, declaring that "Right is of no sex." He attended the first national women's rights convention held at Seneca Falls, New York, in July, 1848, and seconded the motion of Elizabeth Cady Stanton calling for women's voting rights. Douglass was the only male of thirty-seven men in attendance who supported women's suffrage. Douglass' advocacy for feminist causes was so well-known that both Stanton and Lucretia Mott urged women to elect him as a leader of their movement only two weeks after Seneca Falls. Susan B. Anthony notified friends to purchase the *North Star* "for announcements of women's rights gatherings." Douglass' partial break with white feminists occurred after the Civil War, when Anthony, Stanton and others opposed the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment unless it also mandated universal suffrage. Politically pragmatic, Douglass urged his followers to support the winning of Black male voting rights first. By 1869, the Equal Rights Association split, and many white feminists began to gravitate toward racist slogans to support their own cause.²³

The struggle to destroy slavery, and the economic and political battles of Reconstruction, coincided with the entrenchment of patriarchal relations within the Black community. The rough equality of labor imposed by the brutalities of the slave regime did not extend into the slaves' quarters. Black men universally "regarded tasks like cooking, sewing, nursing, and even minor farm labor as woman's work," according to Bell Hooks. Black women after slavery seldom demanded social equality between themselves and their men. "Instead, they bitterly resented that they were not considered 'women' by the dominant culture. . ." ²⁴ With the establishment of sharecropping, the majority of Black women farm laborers and farmers ceased work in the fields, and retreated into the kitchens and homes of their families. They expected, as a point of honor and as an element of freedom, that they would be supported by their husbands, fathers and brothers. "White plantation owners were shocked when large numbers of Black female workers refused to work in the fields." ²⁵ Statistically this is illustrated by Census figures from 1890. Slightly less than half of all Black women between the ages of 15 to 24 years were employed in 1890; about half were domestic workers, and the remainder were field hands or farmers. Less than 40 percent of all Black women between the ages of 25 to 64 were workers, compared to 97-98 percent of all Black males. Of course, fewer white women were gainfully employed than Black women. Only 14 percent of all white women 10 years old and over were in the 1890 workforce, and the percentage dropped to 10 percent and below after age 35. (See Table VIII) Denied the right to work outside the home, the majority of Black women were expected to fulfill the "traditional" role of "mother" by giving birth to as many children as physically possible. For Black married women born between 1861 and 1865, the average number of children born to them by 1910 was 6.2. (See Table IX)

Although the Victorian era was inhospitable to intelligent and politically active females, a number of Black women succeeded in overcoming the institutional barriers of white and Black patriarchy. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper established herself as the nineteenth century's most popular Black poet/activist. Born in Baltimore of free parents in 1824, she became involved in the Underground Railroad, the illegal network by which slaves were channelled North. In September, 1854, the Maine Anti-Slavery Society recognized her talents as an orator and hired her to speak across New England. In 1857-1858 she

worked for the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, speaking two or three times each day for the cause of Black freedom, attracting "large, enthusiastic audiences." In 1860 she married a Black Ohio farmer, Fenton Harper, and retired for several years to have a child. Within five months of her husband's death in 1864, Harper was again on the lecture circuit, speaking in support of the war effort. From 1865 until 1871 Harper travelled throughout the Southern United States at her own expense, living on meager donations, speaking endlessly "at Sunday schools, day schools, churches, town meetings, in homes and village squares," usually talking twice daily. During these years she also authored several popularly acclaimed books of poetry and wrote articles for the press. In the 1870s she became Assistant Superintendent of the YMCA school in Philadelphia, and was elected national officer in the National Council of Women and the National Association of Colored Women. Until her death in 1911, Harper was a noted advocate of women's suffrage, equal rights and Black freedom. ²⁶

Sojourner Truth was, probably only second to Douglass, the outstanding orator of Black liberation during the mid-century. Born as "Isabella" in Ulster County, New York in 1797, she was one of twelve slave children who were sold away from their parents. Married at an early age, she gave birth to five children before she was freed; one of her sons was sold by her owner to an Alabama slavemaster. In 1843, she began to speak out on her personal ordeal as a slave at abolitionist gatherings, and assumed the name Sojourner Truth. During the Civil War Sojourner lived and worked in the "contraband" camps of Washington, D.C., teaching former slaves. She aided Black women "to protect their children against white Maryland raiders who sought to kidnap them and sell them into slavery." ²⁷ Appointed to work with the Freedman's hospital in Washington, she led the struggle to bar Jim Crow public transportation in the capital. In the late 1860s, Sojourner returned to the lecture circuit, speaking out in favor of a massive relocation of Black families from the South into the Great Plains states. In her view, no Black political solution was possible without a general reallocation of land. In 1879, Sojourner joined the wave of "Exodusters" who fled the post-Reconstruction era South and settled in Kansas City. Unlike most Black male leaders, she urged her people to buy land and to develop a sufficient economic base from which to wage their various struggles for social and political justice. One of the central tragedies of this period is that so few Black politicians listened seriously

to Sojourner's ideas on Black economic development. Their ingrained sexism made it impossible, perhaps, for Black men to internalize the agenda of an eighty-two year old Black woman.

Two of the most progressive Black activists during the post-Reconstruction period of political accommodation were Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell. Wells was born in 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi and was educated at Rust College and Fisk University. Arriving in Memphis in the early 1880s, she soon acquired the reputation as the Black South's most militant journalist. Purchasing partial ownership in the Memphis *Free Speech and Headlight*, she used the press in a campaign against Southern lynchings. In a controversial editorial, she observed that "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lies that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction, or a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women." Wells' documentary on the near genocidal violence against Blacks, *United States Atrocities* (1893), is a valuable precursor to the works of William Patterson and Sidney Willhelm six decades later.²⁸ Mary Church Terrell was the daughter of Robert R. Church of Memphis, a Southern Black real estate millionaire and political leader. Educated at Oberlin College, she taught at Wilberforce before settling in Washington, D.C. and, in 1891, marrying Robert H. Terrell, a lawyer and the principal of the District's M. Street High School. Mary Terrell was appointed a member of the Washington, D.C. Board of Education, and quickly became a leading critic of Booker T. Washington—the Black politician whom her husband closely supported. In fact, she created such a furor that one of the Tuskegeean's hacks penned a *New York Age* editorial declaring bitterly that "some one ought to muzzle Mary Church Terrell. What we now want as a race, is less agitators and more constructors." Terrell joined the NAACP and was promptly elected vice president of the Washington branch. In later years, Terrell became politically quite conservative, serving as director of the Republican National Committee's campaign to reach Black women voters on the East coast in 1920 and 1932. However, despite her support for Hoover and the Republican Party, Terrell continued to fight racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws until her death.²⁹

The first half of the twentieth century produced a new generation of creative and intellectually prolific Black women in education and the

arts. Jessie Redmond Fauset, born in 1886, became famous both as the translator of Black poetry from the French West Indies, and for her novels *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1929), and *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931). Georgia Douglass Johnson was perhaps the most popular Black poet between Paul Laurence Dunbar and the rise of the Harlem Renaissance bards of the 1920s. Novelist Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) examined the "innumerable social problems of young Negro women in their efforts to struggle upward both in America and in Europe."³⁰ Meta Warrick Fuller became renowned as a brilliant and innovative sculptor; Laura Wheeler Waring gained fame as a painter. Actresses Ida Anderson, Edna Thomas and Laura Bowman performed to rave reviews in Harlem's all-Black Lafayette Players' group during the 1920s. Among the most creative Black minds in aesthetics during the Great Depression was unquestionably Zora Neale Hurston—cultural anthropologist, novelist, essayist and folklorist. In a brief period of twelve years she authored seven important novels. In education and politics, Black women were ably represented by Mary McLeod Bethune. Founder of Cookman College in 1905, she became a master fund raiser and proponent of higher education for young Black women. During the 1930s Bethune was named Director of the Division of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration. In 1945 she was one of several Blacks named as members of the United States delegation at the creation of the United Nations in April, 1945, in San Francisco.³¹

The decades after 1900 until the 1940s also produced gradual changes within both the employment patterns of Black women and in the size of Black families. More Black women were in the labor force than there were immediately after slavery: about 47 percent during the prime working ages of 20 to 54. Roughly twice the percentage of Black women were gainfully employed in 1930 as were white women (39 percent vs. 20 percent). (See Table VIII) By 1940, Black married women averaged only 2.3 children, the lowest number ever recorded for Blacks by the U.S. Census. Most married women were waiting longer to have their children, and between 22 to 29 percent of middle aged Black women were not bearing any children at all. The number of children ever born per married Black woman was reduced during this time by 53 percent. (See Table X) Black families during World War II were still slightly larger than those of whites, but as the Black woman acquired greater opportunities for post-secondary education, the

number of her children dropped sharply. In 1940, married nonwhite women with one to three years of college training averaged only 1.7 children. With four or more years of college, nonwhite women had only 1.2 children—both figures that were below those for white college trained women. (See Table XI) More frequently than ever before, Black women were leaving the kitchens and earning their own wages in the labor force. Black women appeared no longer as “auxilliarities” or marginal participants in Black educational, social and political life. The leading figures of Bethune, Terrell, Hurston and others provided abundant role models for young Black girls to abandon the yoke of subordination and sexual subservience.

During these years, among Black men, W.E.B. DuBois largely filled the role of Douglass as the chief proponent of women’s equality. DuBois’ commitment to women’s rights began as early as 1887, when as editor of the *Fisk Herald* he predicted that “the Age of Woman is surely dawning.”³² In his essays in the *Crisis* and other periodicals, DuBois emphasized that the struggle for Black freedom must inevitably include the demand for “the emancipation of women.”³³ Constantly he chided Blacks for exhibiting any form of favoritism toward males over females. When one reader of the *Crisis* reported the birth of a girl, DuBois suggested “the ancient idea that boys are intrinsically and naturally better than girls is a relic of barbarism that dies a hard death . . . Be glad it’s a girl and make life wider and safer and more equal in burden for all girls because of this one.”³⁴ The patriarchal attitudes of politicians was a particularly favorite topic for this Black scholar. “Every statesman who yells about Children, Church and Kitchen,” he declared in January, 1934, “ought to be made to bear twins, to listen to as many sermons as we have, and to wash dishes and diapers for at least ten years.”³⁵ In 1912 DuBois drafted a pamphlet entitled *Disfranchisement*, published by the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which advanced women’s right to vote as a necessary precondition to the realization of democracy.³⁶ In states where universal enfranchisement was on the ballot, DuBois encouraged Black men to cast their support behind the women’s rights movement. “Is there a single argument for the right of men to vote, that does not apply to the votes for women, and particularly for black women?”³⁷ Although he was friendly toward feminist causes, DuBois would not hesitate to criticize the racism found within the white women’s political movement. In several *Crisis* articles, he condemned some leaders of the “Suffering

Suffragettes” who advocated that white women, and not Blacks, should be allowed to vote.³⁸ Despite these differences, DuBois enthusiastically supported the moves of women from the kitchens into the factory and business world. In March, 1941, he pointed with pride that many more Black women were in the labor force than white women. In January, 1947, he urged Black husbands to “share housework” and to shoulder the burdens of child-rearing equally.³⁹ For half a century, he reminded Black men that “the hope of the Negro rests on its intelligent and incorruptible womanhood.”⁴⁰

In contrast with DuBois, however, many Black men were disturbed with the evolutionary transformation in sex roles and the creation of political, educational and economic opportunities for Black women. Marcus Garvey’s political approach toward Black women’s issues was a curious mixture of romanticism, sexism and race nationalism. In the 1923 edition of the *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, the Jamaican militant suggested that women were necessary yet contradictory beings: “She makes one happy, then miserable. You are to her kind, then unkind. Constant yet inconstant. Thus we have WOMAN. No real man can do without her.”⁴¹ Like the Black activists of the nineteenth century, Garvey identified Black struggle with the attainment of manhood, the realization of a kind of masses’ macho. He warned his followers, “There is always a turning point in the destiny of every race, every nation, of all peoples and we have come now to the turning point of the Negro, where we have changed from the old cringing weakling, and transformed into full-grown men, demanding our portion as MEN.”⁴² In his *Blackman* journal, he cautioned affluent Black women not to marry white men, and urged Black men not to “insult our womanhood” by having sexual relations with whites.⁴³ Garvey was profoundly concerned with statistics that showed a declining number of children in Black households. “By a decreasing birth rate and an increasing death rate,” he warned in October, 1925, “it means the death of your race—the suicide of your race.”⁴⁴ In 1934, Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association issued a resolution condemning birth control for Blacks. “Any attempt to interfere with the natural function of life is a rebellion against the conceived purpose of divinity in making man a part of his spiritual self,” the sexist manifesto declared. “The theory of birth control . . . interfered with the course of nature and with the purpose of the God in whom we believe.”⁴⁵ Simultaneously, DuBois authored a stirring statement endorsing

planned parenthood in *Birth Control Review*, and invited Margaret Sanger, a "birth-control pioneer," to contribute to the pages of the *Crisis*.⁴⁶

From the 1930s to the 1950s, a number of Black men raised serious questions pertaining to the declining birth rate among Black women. University of Chicago pathologist Julian Lewis argued in 1945 that "the survival of the black race in the United States was dependent upon "a high birth rate." In subsequent articles, Lewis attacked the Planned Parenthood Federation for attempting to "improve the quality of the human race at the cost of numbers." Blacks who condoned birth control were sponsoring "race suicide."⁴⁷ Some Blacks noted with apprehension that some states had sanctioned castrations and vasectomies on prison inmates and patients in mental hospitals in the 1890s, and suggested that racists now might be using birth control as a legal means to reduce the Black population. These fears were reinforced when a Mississippi state legislator introduced a bill in 1958 which would "provide for mandatory sterilization after a woman on welfare (had) given birth to a certain number of illegitimate children." By 1964 the Mississippi house ratified a law that "stipulated that any person who became the parent of a second out-of-wedlock child would be guilty of a felony punishable by a sentence of one to three years in the state penitentiary. A subsequent conviction would be punishable by three to five years in prison. However, a convicted parent had the option of submitting to sterilization in lieu of imprisonment."⁴⁸ White Republicans and Democrats alike, particularly in the South, proposed punitive sterilization for Black welfare mothers. These same male politicians had no reservations, however, in denying legal abortions or contraceptive information to Black (or white) teenage girls and women.

Conservative Black nationalist formations often surpassed white reactionaries in their opposition to birth control. An extreme case is provided by the Nation of Islam. Patriarch Elijah Muhammad informed Black followers that their women were unprepared for the "tricks the devils are using to instill the idea of a false birth control in their clinics and hospitals." Black women were created by God to serve their husbands and sons. "The woman is man's field to produce his nation," Elijah Muhammad observed. The Nation of Islam's ministers frequently attacked Black women and men who supported freedom of choice regarding birth control. Minister Louis Farrakhan wrote in a Black woman's publication, *Essence*, that "when the black woman kills

her unborn child, she is murdering the advancement of her nation." One *Muhammad Speaks* article declared that population control was a covert tactic in the general "war against the nonwhite people." Muslim woman Shirley Hazziez wrote in *Muhammad Speaks* that every Black woman should reject the pill as a "deadly poison," and that "Allah was able to feed and care for black infants." Birth control was, for the Black woman, "death for my babies and race."⁴⁹

Well before the Civil Rights Movement, a not-so-subtle reaction began to form within Black civil society which reinforced patriarchal relations between men and women. The Depression and war years produced within the popular culture the figure of Sapphire: a Black woman who was "evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful." The Sapphire stereotype was utilized by white males, who "could justify their dehumanization and sexual exploitation of black women," and by Black males, who could reasonably "claim that they could not get along with black women because they were so evil." Black patriarchal society employed Sapphire to explain away any Black woman who exhibited tendencies of strength that were designated for males only.⁵⁰ Furthermore, as greater numbers of Black women left agricultural work for domestic service employment, many Black men leaped to the illogical conclusion that white males "favored black women over black men" in all levels of the job market. As Hooks observed, "white people did not perceive black women engaging in service jobs as performing significant work that deserved adequate economic reward. They saw domestic service jobs performed by black women as being merely an extension of the 'natural' female role and considered such jobs valueless." Unemployed Black men, desperate for work, perceived their wives' ability to gain employment an assault on their own manhood. At another level, Black women who adopted patriarchal perspectives "saw the black male who did not eagerly assume the breadwinner role as selfish, lazy, and irresponsible, or in white male sociological terms, 'emasculated'."⁵¹ These cultural, social and economic forces combined after 1945 to produce the conditions for a fundamental reaction.

Within the U.S. economy, this reaction was apparent in civilian labor force participation rates between 1945 and 1960. During the early 1940s, tens of thousands of Black women went into jobs previously held by men. By the end of World War II, almost half of all Black women (46 percent) were employed full-time, compared to only 31 percent of all white women. Fifty-one to 53 percent of Black women

between the ages of 25 and 54 were wage earners. Sixty percent of the Black women were employed as private household workers, 7 percent were blue-collar laborers, and 16 percent were farmers or farm laborers. Fifteen years later, the percentage of Black women workers outside the home had increased by only 2 percent, while white women workers increased by 6 percent. Only 22 percent of all nonwhite teenage women who were actively in the job market could find work in 1960, compared to 30 percent for white female teenagers. By 1965, Black females with an eighth-grade education or less had a labor force participation rate of only 38 percent.⁵² Black men encouraged their wives and daughters to settle back, to return to the kitchen: the role of the husband was that of provider, and the task of wives was to produce offspring. After 1945, the birth rates for Black women climbed sharply. The percentage of all Black married women between the ages of 20 and 24 years who had two to four children increased from 34 percent in 1940 to 51 percent in 1960; in that same age group, those women with five or more children grew from 2 percent to 7 percent. The percentage of all Black married women between the ages of 25 and 29 who had five or more children doubled in two decades, from 11 percent in 1940 to 22 percent in 1960. Overall the number of children born per married Black woman increased from 2.3 percent in 1940 to 2.8 percent in 1960. (See Table X) Even outside of marriage, the number of Black children born during this period increased dramatically. The rate of childbirths for nonmarried nonwhite women per thousand, for women between ages 25 and 29, increased from 32.5 in 1940 to 171.8 in 1960. Black fertility rates, which declined from 3.56 in 1920 to 2.62 in 1940, rebounded to 3.58 in 1950 and reached 4.54 by 1960.⁵³ No Black female could become a real woman, in short, unless she had a child. Work outside the home should be a secondary goal. Black unmarried teenage girls could become women by bearing children "for the race."

IV

Sudden changes in the consciousness of oppressed people are often reflected in their poetry: the sexual and racial conflicts of the 1960s provided new directions for Black Americans in the arts. Occasionally, both Black liberation and patriarchal themes were woven together by the new Black women poets. Nikki Giovanni asked all Black men and women alike to develop their "manhood":

Can you kill
 Can you piss on a blond head
 Can you cut if off
 Can you kill . . .
 Can you splatter their brains in the street
 Can you lure them to bed to kill them . . .
 Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK
 Learn to kill niggers
 Learn to be Black men.⁵⁴

In "Beautiful Black Men," written in 1968, Giovanni praised "those beautiful beautiful outasight black men with their afros . . ." Her "brand new pleasure" was observing her men "running numbers, watching for their whores, preaching in churches," and "winking at me" in their "tight tight pants that hug what I like to hug."⁵⁵ Other Black women embraced the image of the Black man as the urban guerilla, and created love poetry that expressed simultaneously their fertility and sensuality for their men:

My old man
 tells me i'm
 so full of sweet
 pussy he can
 smell me coming.
 maybe i shd
 bottle it and
 sell it
 when he goes.⁵⁶

Along more traditional romantic lines, poet Alice Lovelace's "Wedding Song" informs her husband-to-be: "You are my man/The part I've sought that makes me whole . . . we'll raise bubbling black babies/swathed in black culture."⁵⁷ Carolyn Rogers' "For Some Black Men" counsels her brothers to recognize the inherent dependency and submissiveness of sisters: "Woman is softness, warm of warmth, need from need."⁵⁸

Among some Black women intellectuals, there was at one point a curious inversion of the "pedestal phenomenon," the cultural dynamic wherein white males had symbolically elevated white women to the heights of aesthetic and social predominance. These sisters not only acknowledged the innate or biological leadership of Black men, but

literally placed their faith, their ontological existence, within the hegemonic corpus of the Black male. Romanticists were usually the worst offenders. Poet Ann DuCille's "Lady in Waiting" combined the African mythology of the cultural nationalists with the sexist acceptance of the woman-as-womb:

In dreams without sleep
I lie inside myself
waiting to be born . . .
I am a princess
goddess of the Nile
Nubian daughter of Nefertiti . . .
unsung
yet tuned in time
to take the milk of man
between my thighs.⁵⁹

Other Black women poets who reflected critically about their own "integrationist contradictions" sang high hosannas to the Black militant men who had delivered them from their former political beliefs. Lucille Clifton's "apology (to the panthers)" is reminiscent of a Catholic chant, evoking one's spiritual weaknesses before the holy altar, requesting absolution for the remission of sins:

i was obedient
but brothers i thank you
for these mannish days.
. . . brothers
i thank you
i praise you
i grieve my whiteful ways.⁶⁰

Most Black men accepted these *mea culpas* in stride. "The role of the black woman in the black liberation is an important one and cannot be forgotten," Black sociologist Robert Staples wrote in 1970. "From her womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time."⁶¹ Thus, the Black woman's most significant factor to contribute to the Movement, in short, was her uterus.

But behind these glowing exultations of the Black man there remained the bitter embers of sexual oppression and subordination. Half-hidden even during Black Power's hey-day, but becoming ever more dominant into the 1970s, were the contradictory stirrings of a

Black feminist criticism. Often these expressions began in the form of an attack on all "brothers" who chose to have sexual relations with white females. Sonia Sanchez's "to all brothers" is a clear warning:

yeah.
they hang you up
those grey chicks
parading their tight asses
in front of you.
Some will say out right
baby I want
to ball you
while smoother ones
will integrate your
blackness
yeah.
brother
this sister knows
and waits.⁶²

And in her finest work, "Woman Poem," Giovanni illustrates the basic exploitation of Black women within a patriarchal and racist social order:

a sex object if you're pretty
and no love
or love and no sex if you're fat
get back fat black woman be a mother
grandmother strong thing but not woman
manseeker dick eater sweat getter
fuck needing love seeking woman.⁶³

Poet/playwright Ntozake Shange, author of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, was one of the first major writers to examine the problems of abortion, alienation between Black women and men, and the hostilities between Black women over males.

she been there for years wid this dude
 but he needed a change and well, she wd manage
 nothin gonna last forever/
 but i hesitated cuz she seemed so fragile
 i wax fulla vitality and gall
 'get ridda that bitch or leave me alone'
 he did.
 i ignored all that talk bout the woman who tried to
 burn herself alive/waznt none of my business
 what some weak bitch did to herself.⁶⁴

The obvious contradictions relating the issues of race and gender within these and other poems were, of course, a product of the turbulent politics of the period. The Civil Rights Movement had begun coming unglued by 1964, with the successful desegregation of Southern civil society. Young Black women and men, the vanguard of freedom fighters in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), rejected integration as "subterfuge for the maintenance of white supremacy."⁶⁵ Black nationalism as a cultural and political expression was seized by substantial elements of the Black petty bourgeoisie and working class. Across the country, hundreds of new political and educational institutions were created that were developed within the specious theoretical framework of Black Power. Yet remarkably few Black activists elevated the question of sexism to the level of primacy, within their practical political activities or in their intellectual work. Patriarchy had been historically more compatible with most Black nationalist groupings than among cultural pluralists or even integrationists. As a result, it is not surprising that the actual practice of Black militants did precious little to overturn the rampant sexism within Black life.

The fountainhead of contemporary Black nationalism, Malcolm X, was likewise not immune from this dynamic. For many young Black militants, both in the streets and the universities, Malcolm symbolized the best that Black humanity had produced. Black actor Ossie Davis eulogized Malcolm at his funeral, declaring that he "was our manhood . . . our own black shining Prince—who didn't hesitate to die, because he loved us so."⁶⁶ Though Malcolm's views on Black women changed considerably for the better throughout his

life, like so many other male leaders, he usually thought of politics as a preserve for men only; sisters were an invaluable but secondary factor in the race war. Even today, any serious criticism of Malcolm's views is akin to traitorous behavior in most Black activist circles. But it serves Malcolm's memory poorly if we simply reify the entire body of his ideas and actions without a detailed and serious analysis of his own contradictions. As Bell Hooks observes, "it is impossible to read his autobiography without becoming aware of the hatred and contempt he felt toward women for much of his life."⁶⁷ At one point in his discussions with Alex Haley, the Black novelist/journalist, Malcolm admitted that "you never can fully trust any woman":

I've got the only one I ever met whom I would trust seventy-five percent. I've told her that. . . . Too many men (have been) destroyed by their wives, or their women. Whatever else a woman is, I don't care who the woman is, it starts with her being vain. I'll prove it . . . You think of the hardest-looking, meanest-acting woman you know, one of those women who never smiles. Well, every day you see that woman you look her right in the eyes and tell her 'I think you're beautiful,' and you watch what happens. The first day she may curse you out, the second day, too—but you watch, you keep on, after a while one day she's going to start smiling just as soon as you come in sight.⁶⁸

Malcolm X was not the only, and certainly not the worst of the Black Power leaders with respect to the issue of gender. For Stokely Carmichael, leader of SNCC in 1966, young Black men had to assert themselves as males—politically, and sexually. "Every Negro is a potential black man," Carmichael taught nascent activists.⁶⁹ Black militants cultivated a righteous contempt for white women as a *sine qua non* of activist practice. When whites asked Carmichael if integration meant interracial marriage, he replied that "the white woman is not the queen of the world, she is not the Virgin Mary, she can be made like any other woman."⁷⁰ The revolutionary responsibilities of sisters in the cause of Black liberation were somewhat different. In a speech given at

Morgan State on January 28, 1967, Carmichael outlined his thoughts on Black women:

Girls, are you ready? Obviously it is your responsibility to begin to define the criteria for black people concerning their beauty. You are running around with your Nadinola cream. The black campuses of this country are becoming infested with wigs and Mustangs and you are to blame for it. You are to blame for it. What is your responsibility to your fellow black brothers? So that you can become a social worker or so that you can kick down a door in the middle of the night to look for a pair of shoes? Is that what you come to college for? . . . Is it so that you can just get over? Do you not know that your black mothers scrubbed floors so you can get here—and the minute you get out, you turn your back on them?⁷¹

Like the Garveyites, many later-day nationalists vigorously opposed contraceptives, abortions and planned parenthood measures. In 1970, Brenda Hyson, a female leader of the Black Panthers, attacked a New York state law which made legal abortions available to Black and poor women. The “oppressive ruling class will use this law to kill off Blacks and other opposed people before they are born,” Hyson warned. Voluntary abortions would lead to forced sterilization. Black women had a political responsibility to oppose “legalized murder” and forced “family planning in the guise of pills and coils.” The *Black News*, a nationalist publication based in Brooklyn, described birth control for sisters as “deceptive genocide” in one 1971 essay. Black women were too frequently “duped into having unnecessary hysterectomies and surgical sterilization.” For the survival of “the Black man,” Black women would have to put away all forms of contraceptives—even the traditional and most unreliable device, the condom. “The hidden meaning of the Trojan,” *Black News* declared, “was to emasculate the Black man by convincing him that he should throw away his living sperm into the white man’s rubber contraption rather than to put it into his woman’s fertile womb.”⁷² Haki Madhubuti, director of Chicago’s Black Nationalist Institute of Positive Studies, argued that “the entire white system is geared toward the total destruction of the *Black man first*—mentally, physically and spiritually. If the Black man is not allowed to take care of and build his family, where is the Black woman?” Zero population growth campaigns and liberal abortion laws would destroy the Black race.⁷³

No single Black activist was more profoundly sexist than the celebrated ex-convict/writer of the Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver. His infamous and bizarre expositions against Black women, gays, and others need no recounting here.⁷⁴ What is most important about Cleaver’s writing is that it falls squarely into the century-old tradition of viewing Black liberation first and last as the effort to assert one’s manhood, in the sense of patriarchal hegemony exhibited by the old planter class. In a pathetic passage, Cleaver contemplates the impact of white racism upon the Black male:

Across the naked abyss of negated masculinity, of four hundred years minus my Balls, we face each other today, my Queen. I feel a deep, terrifying hurt, the pain of humiliation of the vanquished warrior. For four hundred years I have been unable to look squarely into your eyes . . . Instead of inciting the slaves to rebellion with eloquent oratory, I soothed their hurt and eloquently sang the Blues! Instead of hurling my life with contempt into the face of my Tormentor, I shed your precious blood! My spirit was unwilling and my flesh was weak. . . . Divested of my Balls, (I) walked the earth with my mind locked in Cold Storage. I would kill a black man or woman quicker than I’d smash a fly, while for the white man I would pick a thousand pounds of cotton a day.⁷⁵

From this standpoint, the white master had succeeded in erecting a barrier between all Black men and women. Cleaver’s conclusion was to mimic the worst features of white patriarchy. “We shall have our manhood,” he vowed. “We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it.” This struggle for freedom did not involve Black women, since by their gender, they already possessed what Cleaver dubbed “pussy power.”⁷⁶

Robert Staples merits special commentary at this juncture, for few Black sociologists writing about the Black woman have been more consistently wrong than he has. Writing on the “Mystique of Black Sexuality” in 1967, Staples gave his views on the “guilt-free attitude towards the sex act” among sisters. In a totally bankrupt interpretation of slavery historiography, Staples insisted first that “the women of Africa were brought to this country to service the lust of the white master class.” Black men were unable to shield their women from “the carnal desires” of white males. Because virtually every Black woman experienced rape, “the worth of virginity” lost all its value. “What good

was it to value something one was not allowed to have?" Staples reasoned. "As a consequence the deeply rooted feelings of guilt about sex never became entrenched in the psyche of Black women as they did in her white counterpart . . . Black women receive more satisfaction in marriage and are more aggressive partners during coitus than white women." Ergo, the collective rapes of Black women were, in retrospect, a liberating force which allowed sisters to "at least salvage the spirit of eros for their own."⁷⁷ Black women were judged to have become slightly too aggressive, by Staples, as a result.

Further reflecting on the Black woman in a later publication, Staples writes: "Many black females assume that a male with an athletic build possesses large sex organs, which will guarantee them sexual pleasure." The term Staples employed to describe this process is surely a classic in the history of Black sociology: "the masculinization of female mate selection standards." "For those of us who are not built like athletes," he admitted, "this is a most disheartening trend." Describing the social phenomenon of "tipping out," or Black extramarital sex, the Black sociologist's fear of cuckoldry is plainly visible:

The independence of the black female leads her to sexual dalliance whenever things do not go right or she feels the desire to 'make it' with another male. This practice has become quasi-institutionalized . . . Sexual dalliance must, however, be discreet so as not to damage the male ego. It is most common among black females attending college some miles away from their boyfriends and in the lower class.⁷⁸

Regrettably, the historical legacy of racial and sexual oppression has also led some Black women to defend patriarchal definitions of manhood. In her 1968 essay in the *Liberator*, Black writer Gail Stokes denounced all Black men who were unable or unwilling to assume the role of provider and family patriarch. Stokes equated manhood with the economic function of "bringing home the bacon":

Of course you will say, "How can I love you and want to be with you when I come home and you're looking like a slob? Why, white women never open the door for their husbands the way you black bitches do." I should guess not, you ignorant man. Why should they be in such a state when they've got maids like me to do everything for them? There is no screaming at the kids for her, no standing over the hot stove; everything is done for her, and

whether her man loves her or not, he provides . . . provides . . . do you hear that, nigger? PROVIDES!⁷⁹

The material base that provided the impetus for such statements was the unprecedented proliferation of Black female one-parent households and growing Black unemployment. The percentage of Black families with no husband present increased from 21.7 percent in 1960 to 34.6 percent in 1973. The percentage of Black children who lived with both of their parents declined from 75 percent in 1960 to 54 percent by 1975. Single female-parent households within the Black community tended to become younger, with 42 percent of such homes having Black female householders between the ages of 14 and 34 years in 1975. Less than half of all Black women were married in 1975. As unemployment rates for nonwhite married men increased by 332 percent between 1969 and 1975, even Black households with two parents found it more difficult to provide the basic necessities of life. Black women who viewed themselves and their children through the prism of patriarchy could draw the conclusion that their male counterparts—unemployed, underemployed, or sometimes absent from home for indefinite periods of time—were somehow less than real men. The vicious cycle of sexism, fostered by white exploiters of the Black community, would be perpetuated in the actual social practices and relations between Black women and men.⁸⁰

As the contemporary women's movement gained impetus during the early 1970s, Black intellectuals and activists were forced to confront the rampant sexist traditions within their own community and underlying their own theoretical practice. At the outset, the majority of Blacks who wrote on feminism were decidedly hostile. In one widely read 1971 essay published in *Ebony* magazine, Helen King denounced "women's lib" as a white petty bourgeois fad that had little or nothing to do with the interests of Black women.⁸¹ In the *Black Scholar*, Elizabeth Hood charged that white feminists had opportunistically usurped issues such as affirmative action from Blacks. "It can be argued that women's liberation not only attached itself to the black movement," Hood explained, "but did so with only marginal concern for black women and black liberation, and functional concern for the rights of white women." Any coalition between Black and white women was unlikely because both groups had been socialized to perceive each other as the "enemy."⁸² Staples' view on the women's movement was

decidedly antagonistic and betrayed a pathetic inability to grasp the essential character of the economic reforms feminists proposed that would have benefited poor and working class Black women. First, he suggested that "female liberation" was tantamount to a "hatred of men." Second, any discussion of the "sex-role antagonisms extant in the black community will only sow the seed of disunity and hinder the liberation struggle." Black women must tolerate, for the time being, any sexist behavior of their brothers and the patriarchal institutions developed by nationalists. "One must be cognizant of the need to avoid a diffusion of energy devoted to the liberation struggle lest it dilute the over-all effectiveness of the movement," Staples warned. "Black women cannot be free *qua* women until all blacks attain their liberation."⁸³

Perhaps the most "eloquent" assault against "white feminism" was written by Linda LaRue in 1970. Unlike other critics of the women's movement, LaRue attempted to put forward a clear theoretical argument against feminism. In her view, the basic dynamics of sexual exploitation were concretely different and secondary in nature to those of white racism. "Blacks are *oppressed*, and that means unreasonably, cruelly and harshly fettered by white authority. White women . . . are only *suppressed*," contrasted LaRue, "and that means checked, restrained, excluded from conscious and overt activity." For LaRue, it was a farce for Black women to align themselves with white women—a social group who benefited materially from white supremacy:

With few exceptions, the American white woman has had a better opportunity to live a free and fulfilling life. . . than any other group in the United States, with the exception of her white husband. Thus, any attempt to analogize black oppression with the plight of the American white woman has the validity of comparing the neck of a hanging man with the hands of an amateur mountain climber with rope burns. . . Is there any logical comparison between the oppression of the black woman on welfare who has difficulty feeding her children and the discontent of the suburban mother who has the luxury to protest the washing of the dishes on which her family's full meal was consumed.

LaRue's analysis rested solely on two other basic points. White women were, after all, white, and there was no reason to assume that they would be less racist or "more open-minded than their male counterparts." With millions of white housewives moving into the

labor force, Black women and men would be forced inevitably to compete with them. "The black labor force, never fully employed and always representing a substantial percentage of the unemployed . . . will now be driven into greater unemployment as white women converge at every level on an already dwindling job market."⁸⁴ What is interesting about LaRue and other Black critics of feminism was their perception that all white women were inside the "middle class." Statistically, the majority of women who depended on food stamps were, and are, white; the majority of women living in Federally-subsidized public housing were, and are, white. The poverty and educational backwardness of white female householders in the Appalachian hills of Kentucky is often worse than that of the South Bronx. There exists, in short, a unity of political and economic interests between women across the color line that LaRue and others failed to recognize. Furthermore, LaRue's economic analysis was premised on the incorrect belief that all white women benefited materially from the continuation of racism—a view which is not substantially supported by economic data. (See Chapter I)

At the founding convention of the Congress of African People, held in Atlanta in September, 1970, over 2,700 delegates gathered to chart the development of new Black social, political and economic institutions. One major feature at the convention included a series of workshops relating to Black women. Coordinator Bibi Amina Baraka set the tone for the sisters' dialogue, by first quoting West Coast cultural nationalist Maulana Ron Karenga: "What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can't be feminine without being submissive." Baraka stated that Black females had to internalize "submitting to (their) natural roles" by studying their attitudes toward their "man, house, and children." Sisters needed to take cooking classes, learn to create tasty recipes, and improve their personal hygiene.⁸⁵ In her paper on the Black family, Akiba ya Elimu suggested that Black males were the natural leaders of the Black community in all social, cultural and political relations. "He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wiser" than that of Black women.⁸⁶ Kasisi Washao summarized the proceedings with a few appropriately sexist remarks. The Black family was "like an organ and the woman's function must be to inspire her man, to educate the children, and participate in social

development. The man must provide security. . . ." Black women fortunate enough to have a man in their lives should "be humble and loving, appreciative, and resourceful, faithful, respectful and understanding . . . to provide continuous inspiration" for their husbands.⁸⁷

Nationalists were aware of the climbing rate of Black single parent households and the economic pressures that fractured many of the relations between Black females and males. Madhubuti's *Enemies: The Clash of Races*, started from the assumption that "the destruction of the Black family was a crucial move in laying the ground for the destruction and total enslavement of Black people in America." If this destruction was a *fait accompli*, what evolved in the manner of social relations and male/female institutions among Blacks?

Madhubuti claimed that the most serious immediate effect of contemporary racism for Black women "depends upon and revolves around how they are able to effectively solve the problem of no men in their lives." The options available for Black women were unpleasant. Going "without Black men," sexual abstinence, was "unnatural and against life." Lesbianism, according to Madhubuti, "has only recently become popular among some Black women as a compensating move toward fulfilling their sexual desires, possible as a result of not having comfortable and non-frustrating relationships with a Black man." Homosexual activity among women was abnormal, "for it does not generate reproduction . . . with the opposite sex." The most dangerous option, of course, was the prospect of Black women/white men's sexual relationships. When "white men are pushed on Black women or if white men become the accepted option for Black women . . . there is a very serious consequence in terms of Black genocide." Miscegenation was a white supremacist/integrationist plot because the white man would eventually "control the reproductive process of Black women, which goes hand in hand with the physical destruction of Black men and Black families." The fourth option, prostitution, meant that the Black single woman would obtain some security by "(becoming) the property of her pimp." Within the Black community prostitution "is rampant not only for financial means but as (an acceptable) social norm" for Black females. The Black pimp was a kind of "semi-hero" for some, although the entire process "continues to degrade Black women . . . (who) end up as dead property. . ." The final option was in keeping with the African heritage of polygyny—the "quality of sharing" Black males by groups of Black females. Where a brother could

economically support more than one household, and satisfy the sexual, emotional and social needs of more than one Black woman at once, such sharing agreements could be achieved for the mutual benefit of all. Sharing would "create a climate and conditions" wherein Black women would willingly permit "their men" to engage in extramarital sex and Black family-building, "while at the same time not damaging existing relationships."⁸⁸

Even outside the boundaries of cultural nationalism, Black political activities did little to challenge institutional sexism. The continuing patterns of Black patriarchy were evident within electoral politics in the 1960s and 1970s. A few Black women politicians gained national prominence after the Civil Rights Movement, including Yvonne Burke of California, Barbara Jordan of Houston, Shirley Chisholm of New York City, and Cardiss Collins of Chicago. The percentage of Black women holding elective office increased 522 percent between 1969 and 1976. Of 508 Black delegates and alternates who participated in the 1976 Democratic National Convention, 310 were women. This "success" in challenging patriarchy was more apparent than real, however. Only 22.2 percent of all Black Federal elected officials and 13.5 percent of all Black state representatives were Black women. Black women comprised only 9.5 percent of all Afro-American judges, and 11 percent of all county officials. 80.5 percent of all Black women who were elected officials in 1976 served either at the municipal level or on boards of education. Despite the formation of the National Association of Black Women Legislators by Tennessee politician Hannah Atkins, and the activities of Nellis Saunders' National Black Women's Leadership Caucus, the effective participation of Black women in electoral politics still grossly underrepresented the potential weight of Black women nationally and regionally.⁸⁹ Both integrationist and nationalist-oriented Black men had little to say concretely about the exploitation of Black women by their own institutions. In theory and practice, the Black protest movement was compromised and gutted by its inability to confront squarely the reality of patriarchy. Black leadership—in the workplace, in street demonstrations, in electoral politics and in the bedroom—was the province of Black men.

By the mid-1970s, a number of women emerged within the Black Movement who advocated key political and economic reforms suggested first by the feminist movement. Many, although by no means all, were also identified as socialists. Angela Davis' essays in the *Black*

Scholar, her deep commitment to an antisexist and antiracist politics, were profoundly influential for many Black women. Cathy Sedgewick and Reba Williams, young Black women who were also members of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, advocated Black support for the Equal Rights Amendment as a necessary and progressive reform which aided women of all races. Advocacy of feminism, they argued, aided and enriched the struggle for Black liberation. For Black women who were pessimistic about the viability of joint political work with white feminists, they pointed out that the real political and economic advances acquired by women of color involved in the women's movement more than made up for the very real problems and personal contradictions evident among certain petty bourgeois white women's "leaders."⁹⁰

Many of the theoretical gains achieved by Black feminists within the Black Movement and community were briefly compromised with the publication of Michele Wallace's controversial diatribe, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. Wallace emerged as a female version of Eldridge Cleaver, praised by *Ms.* magazine, the central publication of white liberal feminists, and exalted by pseudofeminist/racists such as Susan Brownmiller. Her vulgar polemic combined historical truth with crude fiction, racial mythology with a neo-Freudian, psycho-sexual analysis of Black politics. "Come 1966, the Black man had two pressing tasks before him: a white woman in every bed and a Black woman under every foot," she pronounced. Wallace viewed the entire history of Black Power as "nothing more nor less than the Black man's struggle to attain his presumably lost 'manhood'":

To most of us Black Power meant wooly heads, big Black fists and stern Black faces, gargantuan omnipotent Black male organs, big Black rifles and foot-long combat boots, tight pants over young muscular asses, dashikis, and broad brown chests; Black men looting and rioting in the streets . . . [Stokely Carmichael] was a Black spokesman unlike any other that had come before him. He was a Black man with an erect phallus, and he was pushing it up in America's face.⁹¹

Wallace contended that virtually every Black male leader of the 1960s accepted and perpetuated the idea of Black Macho, the notion that all political and social power was somehow sexual, and that the possession of a penis was the symbol of revolution. "Black Macho allowed for only the most primitive notion of women—women as possessions, women as

the spoils of war, leaving Black women with no resale value," Wallace charged. "The Black woman was a symbol of defeat, and therefore of little use to the revolution except as the performer of drudgery (not unlike her role in slavery)." The Black man was a pathetic failure, and "when [he] went as far as the adoration of his own genitals could carry him, his revolution stopped."⁹² The obvious criticism of Wallace's work begins with her crude acceptance of Cleaver and the most blatantly sexist spokespersons of Black liberation as representative of all Black males. But the dilemma for genuine progressives was that her book served absolutely no purpose in facilitating an urgent dialogue between Black women and men on the very real and pressing questions of patriarchy within their community. *Black Macho* raised at its core several historically valid issues, but due to its distorted and acrid context, it actually reinforced sexism and a hostility towards feminism among many Blacks.

V

The emergence of a militant Black feminism since the mid-1970s, which has since continued and deepened in organizational character, is the product of the convergence of several specific social and economic factors. As illustrated previously, the actual practice of the Black Power Movement was the perpetuation of the structures of patriarchy, under the guise of "Blackness." With the passage of affirmative action legislation, many Black males drew the conclusion that Black women were now taking away newly-won middle income jobs from them. The vulgarly sexist thesis was based on the belief that Black women were indeed submissive, or less threatening to the white, male power apparatus than Black males. Their lack of a penis, in short, was an automatic ticket to employment and job advancement during economically austere times.

Black women knew better than men that the dynamics of sexist exploitation were not altered by bourgeois legislation: Black women remained at the very bottom of the income ladder within the U.S. social order. According to the 1979 Census statistics, for example, 68,000 Black males and only 8,000 Black females earned salaries between \$30,000 to \$35,000. 46,000 Black men and 6,000 Black women collected annual wages between \$35,000 to \$50,000 in 1979. 14,000 Black men and 2,000 Black women received wages between \$50,000-

\$75,000. Within the highest income levels, in excess of \$75,000, there were 548,000 white men and 4,000 Black men. Less than 500 Black women were in this category. The illusion that Black women, even within the so-called middle class, had achieved parity or had exceeded Black men's earnings was not simply false, but a gross reversal of economic reality. Black female unemployment rates were generally higher than those of Black men, especially for all blue collar workers, clerical workers and sales personnel.⁹³

Responding to this chasm between Black liberation rhetoric and the harsh realities of Black women's existence, progressive Black female activists fought back. They helped to provide the political base for the fight to acquit Joanne Little, a North Carolina Black woman who was accused of murdering her jailer when he sexually assaulted her.⁹⁴ They helped to rally a majority of the national Black community in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment.⁹⁵ Progressive Black women in Boston formed the Combahee River Collective in 1974, to begin bringing together Black women who were "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" and who viewed as their "particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking."⁹⁶

They criticized white feminists who tended to ignore Black women's fears about forced sterilizations and who emphasized only abortion rights. Black female activist veterans of SNCC recalled with some bitterness that a few of the white women who now championed feminism and gave lip-service to antiracist politics had eagerly slept with Black male leaders and saddled Black women with the Movement's "shit work" a decade before. Lorraine Bethel's "What Chou Mean We, White Girl? Or, The Cullud Lesbian Feminist Declaration of Independence," spoke for thousands of Black women who view themselves as the historic victims of suppression by males (white and Black) and white females:

I bought a sweater at a yard sale from a white-skinned (as opposed to Anglo-Saxon) woman. When wearing it I am struck by the smell—it reeks of a soft, privileged life without stress, sweat, or struggle. When wearing it I often think to myself, this sweater smells of a comfort, a way of being in the world I have never known in my life, and never will. . . It is moments/infinities of conscious pain like these that make me want to cry/kill/roll my

eyes suck my teeth hand on my hip scream at so-called radical white lesbians/feminists "WHAT CHOU MEAN WE, WHITE GIRL?"⁹⁷

The final history of the systematic exploitation of Black women in capitalist America will not be written by whites, or by Black men, no matter how sympathetic they might be to the struggle against racism and patriarchy. Historically, Black women have carried the greatest burden in the battle for democracy in this country.

Women have been the foundation of Black culture and society, yet their contributions have been generally ignored, or relegated to second class status by most Black male activists, historians and social scientists. They felt the sting of the lash upon their backs in Georgia's cotton fields; they knew the pain of losing children from lack of decent medical care; they felt the hot sun beating down upon their foreheads as they walked to work as maids in whites' homes; they fought to preserve their humanity from white and/or Black men's sexual abuse. The underdevelopment of Black America will end only when Black men begin to seriously challenge and uproot the patriarchal assumptions and institutions which still dominate Black civil and political society. In the words of Michele Barrett, the oppression of all women "is entrenched in the structure of capitalism. Just as we cannot conceive of women's liberation under the oppression of capitalism so we cannot conceive of a socialism whose principles of equality, freedom and dignity are vitiated by the familiar iniquities of gender."⁹⁸ Similarly, no road toward the ultimate emancipation of the U.S. Black working class exists outside of a concomitant struggle, in theory and in practice, to destroy every vestige of sexual oppression within the Black community.