

Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood

Scholars who write about mass sexual exploitation of black women during slavery rarely discuss its political and social impact on the status of black women. In her important feminist analysis of rape, *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller neglects this issue in the section on slavery. She comments:

Rape in slavery was more than a chance tool of violence. It was an institutionalized crime, part and parcel of the white man's subjugation of a people for economic and psychological gain.

Brownmiller seemingly acknowledges the importance of discussing the rape of black women during slavery by including such a section in her book, she effectively dismisses it by emphasizing that this was history, past, over with. Her chapter is titled, "Two Studies in American Experience." And she begins with the statement:

The American experience of the slave South, which spanned two centuries, is a perfect study of rape in all its complexities for the black woman's sexual integrity was deliberately crushed in order that slavery might profitably endure.

While Brownmiller successfully impresses upon readers the fact that white men brutally assaulted black women during slavery, she minimizes the impact that oppression has had on all black women in America by placing it solely in the limited historical context of an "institutionalized crime" during slavery. In so doing she fails to see that the significance of the rape of enslaved black women was not simply that it "deliberately crushed" their sexual integrity for economic ends but that it led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans and shaped the social status of all black women once slavery ended. One has only to look at American television twenty-four hours a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society—the predominant image is that of the "fallen" woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute.

The success of sexist-racist conditioning of American people to regard black women as creatures of little worth or value is evident when politically conscious white feminists minimize sexist oppression of black women, as Brownmiller does. She does not inform readers that white men continued to sexually assault black women long after slavery ended and that such rapes were socially sanctioned. She does not make the point that a primary reason rape of black women has never received what little attention rape of white women receives is because black women have always been seen by the white public as sexually permissive, as available and eager for the sexual assaults of any man, black or white. The designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system. White women and men justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages, and in sexist terms a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped. It is difficult to believe that Brownmiller is ignorant of these realities; I can only assume she deems them unimportant.

As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first,

white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last. What this means in terms of the sexual politics of rape is that if one white woman is raped by a black man, it is seen as more important, more significant than if thousands of black women are raped by one white man. Most Americans, and that includes black people, acknowledge and accept this hierarchy; they have internalized it either consciously or unconsciously. And for this reason, all through American history, black male rape of white women has attracted much more attention and is seen as much more significant than rape of black women by either white or black men. Brownmiller further perpetuates the belief that the real danger to women of interracial sexual exploitation in American society is black male rape of white females. One of the longest chapters in her book is on this subject. It is significant that she titles her discussion of the rape of Native American women and black women by white men "a Study in American History" but titles her section of black male rape of white women "A Question of Race." In the opening paragraph to this section she writes, "Racism and sexism and the fight against both converge at the point of interracial rape, the baffling crossroads of an authentic, peculiarly American dilemma." Brownmiller fails to mention terms like "interracial rape" or "sexism" in her chapters dealing with the rape of non-white women.

A devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years. I have previously mentioned that while many concerned citizens sympathized with the sexual exploitation of black women both during slavery and afterwards, like all rape victims in patriarchal society they were seen as having lost value and worth as a result of the humiliation they endured. Annals of slavery reveal that the same abolitionist public that condemned the rape of black women regarded them as accomplices rather than victims. In her diary, the southern white woman Mary Boykin Chesnut recorded:

(March 14, 1861.) Under slavery, we live surrounded by

prostitutes, yet an abandoned woman is sent out of any decent house. Who thinks any worse of a Negro or mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name? God, forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and an inequity! Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds. My disgust sometimes is boiling over. Thank God for my country women, but alas for the men! They are probably no worse than men everywhere, but the lower the mistress, the more degraded they must be.

(April 20, 1861.) Bad books are not allowed house room except in the library under lock and key, the key is in the Master's pocket; but bad women, if they are not white and serve in a menial capacity, may swarm the house unmolested. The ostrich game is thought a Christian act. These women are no more regarded as a dangerous contingent than canary birds would be.

(Aug. 22, 1861.) I hate slavery. You say there are no more fallen women on a plantation than in London, in proportion to numbers; but what do you say to this? A magnate who runs a hideous black harem with its consequences under the same roof with his lovely white wife and his beautiful and accomplished daughters?

These diary entries indicate that Chesnut held enslaved black women responsible for their fate. Her wrath and anger is aimed at them and not at white men. Although stereotypical images of black womanhood during slavery were based on the myth that all black women were immoral and sexually loose, slave narratives and diaries of the 19th century present no evidence that they were in any way more sexually "liberated" than white women. The great majority of enslaved black women accepted the dominant culture's sexual morality and adapted it to their circumstances. Black slave girls were taught, like their white counterparts, that virtue was woman's ideal spiritual nature and virginity her ideal physical state, but knowledge of the acceptable sexual morality did not alter the reality that no social order existed to protect them from sexual exploitation.

When slavery ended, black women and men welcomed their newly acquired freedom to express their sexuality. Like the early white colonizers, newly manumitted black folks were without any social order to govern and restrain their sexual behavior and indulged themselves with proper abandon. It must have been a good feeling for the manumitted slaves to suddenly have the freedom to choose a sexual partner and to behave in whatever manner they so desired. Some manumitted black women exercised their new found sexual freedom by engaging freely in sexual relationships with black men. Whites saw the sexual activity of the manumitted female slave as further evidence to support their claim that black women were sexually loose and innately morally depraved. They chose to ignore the fact that the great majority of black women and men attempted to adapt the values and behavior patterns deemed acceptable by whites. During the years of Black Reconstruction, 1867-77, black women struggled to change negative images of black womanhood perpetuated by whites. Trying to dispel the myth that all black women were sexually loose, they emulated the conduct and mannerisms of white women. But as manumitted black women and men struggled to change stereotypical images of black female sexuality, white society resisted. Everywhere black women went, on public streets, in shops, or at their places of work, they were accosted and subjected to obscene comments and even physical abuse at the hands of white men and women. Those black women suffered most whose behavior best exemplified that of a "lady". A black woman dressed tidy and clean, carrying herself in a dignified manner, was usually the object of mud-slinging by white men who ridiculed and mocked her self-improvement efforts. They reminded her that in the eyes of the white public she would never be seen as worthy of consideration or respect.

White journalists daily ridiculed the efforts of black people to improve their image in leading magazines and newspapers. They delighted in entertaining white readers with negative stereotypes of black people. Rayford Logan examines the extent to which leading newspapers and magazines deliberately perpetuated negative myths and stereotypes about black people in his study of the period from 1877 to 1918, *The Betrayal of the*

Negro. Logan acknowledges that whites made a concerted effort to perpetuate the myth that all black women were sexually loose and immoral. He comments:

The alleged unchastity of Negro women in general was analyzed in an article in the *Atlantic*. The practice was attributed to their lack of concern for sexual purity and to the free use that white men made of them. The author added that the sexual immorality of Negro women was a deterrent to loose morals between white men and white women.

Articles of this type were aimed at maintaining separation of the races. They convinced white readers that they would not want to live as social equals with black people by arguing that contact with the loose morals of blacks (and particularly those of black women) would lead to a breakdown of all moral values. The white public justified white male sexual assault of black females by arguing that the women invited sexual abuse by their lack of morals.

Sexual exploitation of black women undermined the morale of newly manumitted black people. For it seemed to them that if they could not change negative images of black womanhood they would never be able to uplift the race as a whole. Married or single, child or woman, the black female was a likely target for white male rapists. Young black girls were admonished by concerned parents to avoid walking down isolated streets and to avoid contact with white men whenever possible. While these practices curtailed sexual exploitation, it was not eliminated because most sexual assaults occurred on jobs. A young, newly married black woman employed as cook for a white female reported that only a short period of time lapsed before she was accosted by the white husband:

I remember very well the first and last work place from which I was dismissed. I lost my place because I refused to let the madam's husband kiss me. He must have been accustomed to undue familiarity with his servants, or else he took it as a matter of course, because without any lovemaking at all, soon after I was installed as a cook, he walked up to me, threw his arms around me, and was in the act of kissing me, when I demanded to know what he

meant, and shoved him away. I was young then, and newly married, and didn't know then what has been a burden to my mind and heart ever since, that a colored woman's virtue in this part of the country has no protection. I at once went home, and told my husband about it. When my husband went to the man who had insulted me, the man cursed him, and slapped him, and—had him arrested! The police judge fined my husband \$25. I was present at the hearing and testified on oath to the insult offered me. The white man, of course, denied the charge. The old judge looked up and said, "This court will never take the word of a nigger against the word of a white man."

Black women were often coerced into sexual liaisons with white employers who would threaten to fire them unless they capitulated to sexual demands. One black woman stated:

I believe nearly all white men take, and expect to take undue liberties with their colored female servants—not only the father, but in many cases the sons also. Those servants who rebel against such familiarity must either leave or expect a mighty hard time, if they stay. By comparison those who tamely admit to these improper relations live in clover. They always have a little spending change, wear better clothes, and are able to get off from work at least once a week—and sometimes oftener. This moral debasement is not at all times unknown to the white women in these homes. I know of more than one colored woman who was openly importuned by white women to become the mistresses of their white husbands, on the grounds that they, the white wives, were afraid that, if their husbands did not associate with colored women, they would certainly do so with outside white women, and the white wives, for reasons which ought to be perfectly obvious, preferred to have their husbands do wrong with the colored women in order to keep their husbands straight.

The sexual assault of black women was so prevalent in both the North and the South after slavery ended that outraged black women and men wrote articles in newspapers and magazines pleading with the American public to take action against white and black male offenders who assaulted black women. An article published in the January 1912 issue of the *Independent* written by a black nurse pleaded for an end to sexual abuse:

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 but little more than pack horses, beasts of burden, slaves! In the distant future, it may be, centuries and centuries hence, a monument of brass or stone will be erected to the Old Black Mammies of the South, but what we need is present help, present sympathy, better wages, better hours, more protection, and a chance to breathe for once while alive as free women.

When black people urged the white public to aid them in their struggles to protect black womanhood, their appeals fell on deaf ears. So pervasive was the tendency of whites to regard all black women as sexually loose and unworthy of respect that their achievements were ignored. Even if an individual black female became a lawyer, doctor, or teacher, she was likely to be labeled a whore or prostitute by whites. All black women, irrespective of their circumstances, were lumped into the category of available sex objects. As late as the 60s, black woman playwright Lorraine Hansberry in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* included scenes that dramatized the way in which all black women are perceived by whites (and in particular white men), as available sex objects, as prostitutes. In the play a young black domestic worker says:

All right. So now you know something 'bout me you didn't know! In these streets out there, any little white boy from Long Island or Westchester sees me and leans out of his car and yells—"Hey there, hot chocolate! Say there Jezebel! Hey you—Hundred Dollar Misunderstanding! YOU! Bet you know where there's a good time tonight...."

Follow me sometimes and see if I lie. I can be coming home from eight hours on an assembly line or fourteen hours in Mrs. Halsey's kitchen. I can be all filled up that day with three hundred years of rage so that my eyes are flashing and my flesh is trembling—and the white boys in the streets, they look at me and think of sex. They look at me and that's all they think... Baby, you could be Jesus in drag—but if you're brown they're sure you're selling!

Hansberry shows that this attitude toward black women transcended class boundaries. Later in the play a chic black professional woman of middle-age speaks:

'Hey there, hot chocolate! Say there, Jezebel! YOU...! The white boys in the streets, they look at me and think of sex. They look at me and that's all they think!

Like Susan Brownmiller, most people tend to see devaluation of black womanhood as occurring only in the context of slavery. In actuality, sexual exploitation of black women continued long after slavery ended and was institutionalized by other oppressive practices. Devaluation of black womanhood after slavery ended was a conscious, deliberate effort on the part of whites to sabotage mounting black female self-confidence and self-respect. In *Black Women in White America*, Gerda Lerner discusses the "complex system of supportive mechanisms and sustaining myths" white women and men established to encourage sexual exploitation of black women and to ensure no change would occur in their social status:

One of these was the myth of the "bad" black woman. By assuming a different level of sexuality for all Blacks than that of whites and mythifying their greater sexual potency, the black woman could be made to personify sexual freedom and abandon. A myth was created that all black women were eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily "loose" in their morals and, therefore deserved none of the consideration and respect granted white women. Every black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology; therefore, to assault her and exploit her sexually was not reprehensible and carried with it none of the normal communal sanctions against such behavior. A wide range of practices reinforced this myth: the laws against intermarriage; the denial of the title "Miss" or "Mrs." to any black woman; the taboos against respectable social mixing of the races; the refusal to let black women customers try on clothing in stores before making a purchase; the assigning of single toilet facilities to both sexes of Blacks; the different legal sanction against rape, abuse of minors and other sex crimes when committed against white or black women.

Systematic devaluation of black womanhood was not simply a

direct consequence of race hatred, it was a calculated method of social control. During the reconstruction years, manumitted black people had demonstrated that given the same opportunities as whites they could excel in all areas. Their accomplishments were a direct challenge to racist notions about the inherent inferiority of dark races. In those glorious years, it seemed that black people would quickly and successfully assimilate and amalgamate into the mainstream of American culture. White people reacted to the progress of black people by attempting to return to the old social order. To maintain white supremacy they established a new social order based on apartheid. The period in American history is commonly known as the Jim Crow or "separate but equal" years, but both phrases shift attention away from the fact that separation of the races once slavery ended was a deliberate political move on the part of white supremacists. As miscegenation represented the greatest threat to white racial solidarity, a complex system of laws and social taboos was enacted to maintain separation of the races. In most states laws were enacted forbidding inter-racial marriage, but such laws did not prevent blacks and whites from uniting. Manumitted black men and white women in northern states were married in noticeable numbers. White men, who so desired, legalized relationships with ex-slave women. A report of a marriage between a white man and a black woman published in a New Orleans newspaper, the *Tribune*, carried the headlines, "The World Moves." In the article, the journalist advised other white men to "take a hint now that the law allows it legitimize their children." Inter-racial marriages between black women and white men evoked fear and rage in the white public. White male legalized sexual unions with black women and black male legalized sexual unions with white women threatened the entire foundation of apartheid. Since anti-amalgamation laws were not sufficient deterrents to inter-racial marriage, white men used psychological warfare to enforce the ideal of white supremacy. They employed two important myths to brainwash all whites against the newly manumitted blacks: the myth of the "bad," sexually loose black woman and the myth of the black male rapist. Neither myth

was based on fact.

At no time in the early part of the 20th century were any large numbers of black men raping white women or seeking illicit relationships with them. Joseph Washington, Jr.'s, study of inter-racial union, *Marriage in Black and White*, documents the fact that black men who sought relationships with white women were eager for marriage. White people were never reacting to any high incidence of inter-racial rape during reconstruction; they simply wanted to prevent inter-racial marriage. They used lynchings, castration, and other brutal punishments to prevent black men from initiating relationships with white women. They perpetuated the myth that all black men were eager to rape white women so that white females would not seek friendships with black men for fear of brutal assault. The horrific nature of violent attacks on black manhood has caused historiographers and sociologists to assume that whites feared unions between white women and black men most. In actuality, they feared legally sanctioned racial mixing on the part of the sexes of either group, but as black men were more likely to seek legal sanction through marriage of their relationships with white women, they received the brunt of attacks by white supremacists. By brainwashing white women to see black men as savage beasts, white supremacists were able to implant enough fear in the white female's psyche so that she would avoid any contact with black men.

In the case of black women and white men, inter-racial sex was both encouraged and condoned as long as it did not lead to marriage. By perpetuating the myth that all black women were incapable of fidelity and sexually loose, whites hoped to so devalue them that no white man would marry a black woman. After manumission, white men who treated black women with respect or sought to integrate a black female into respectable white society were persecuted and ostracized. During slavery, it had been a common occurrence for an upper class or middle class white man to take a black woman mistress and live openly with her without incurring much public disapproval. In *Roll, Jordan*, Roll Eugene Genovese comments:

Some prominent planters flaunted their slave mistresses

and mulatto children. David Dickson of Georgia, one of the most celebrated leaders in the movement to reform southern agriculture, lost his wife early in life, took a mistress, and accepted a measure of social disapproval to live openly with her and their children. Bennett H. Barrow of Louisiana exploded with rage over similar conduct on the part of his neighbors. His fellow planters of West Feliciana Parish were, he said, of course all opponents of the abolitionists. "Yet, the people submit to amalgamation in its worst form in this Parish. Josias Grey takes his mulatto children with him to public places, etc. and receives similar company from New Orleans..." The first mayor of Memphis, Marcus Winchester, had a beautiful quadroon mistress whom he married and took to Louisiana. His successor, Ike Rawlins, lived with a slave woman. He did not marry her but did provide handsomely for their sons. And the haughty nabobs of Natches had their own scandals. Other white observers report such relationships, displayed publicly and accepted by society with nothing worse than muttering and minor social ostracism. Several daughters of wealthy free Negroes married respectable white men.

Marriages between black women and white men could be tolerated during slavery because they were so few in number and represented no threat to the white supremacist regime. After manumission they were no longer tolerated. In the state of Kentucky, the Supreme Court was asked to judge insane a white man who desired to marry a female slave he had once owned. Once slavery ended and whites declared that no black woman regardless of her class status or skin color could ever be a "lady," it was no longer socially acceptable for a white man to have a black mistress. Instead, the institutionalized devaluation of black womanhood encouraged all white men to regard black females as whores or prostitutes. Lower class white men, who had had little sexual contact with black women during slavery, were encouraged to believe they were entitled to access to the bodies of black women. In large cities their lust for black female sex objects led to the formation of numerous houses of prostitution which supplied black bodies to meet the growing demands of white men. The myth perpetuated by whites that black women were the possessors of a heightened sexuality encouraged white male rapists and sexual exploiters. This myth

so dominated the psyches of whites that a southern white male writer asserts:

I knew all about the sexual act, but not until I was twelve years old did I know that it was performed with white women for pleasure; I had thought that only Negro women engaged in the act of love with white men just for fun, because they were the only ones with the animal desire to submit that way.

Racial integration in the latter part of the 20th century caused many barriers against inter-racial marriages to be torn down. Yet the amalgamation of the races that sociologists had predicted might take place did not occur. While black men married white women in ever-increasing numbers, large numbers of white men did not marry black women. These differences in responses were no accident. While changes in public attitudes toward black men had occurred, there had not been any change in negative images of black women. The myth that all black men were rapists had ceased to dominate the consciousness of the American public by the 70s. One explanation for the change was the growing knowledge of the way in which this myth was used by whites in power to persecute and torture black men. Once the myth was no longer accepted as absolute truth, white women who so desired could freely engage in relationships with black men and vice versa.

The success of movies like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *The Great White Hope* revealed that the white American public was not averse to acknowledging attractions between black men and white women that led to marriage. The public's acceptance of these movies indicates that it no longer feared black males and white females uniting. While the myth that all black men are rapists is no longer perpetuated by a majority of whites, they continue to promote the myth that all black women are sexually loose and they use devaluation of black womanhood as a way to discourage marriage between large numbers of white men and black women. White Americans have legally relinquished the apartheid structure that once characterized race relations but they have not given up white rule. Given that power in capitalist patriarchal America is in the hands of white men, the present obvious threat to white

solidarity is inter-marriage between white men and non-white women, and in particular black women. As whites have been much more voyeuristically, phobically interested in sexual relationships between white women and black men, the existence of rigid social taboos prohibiting white male marriage to black females is often totally ignored, yet such taboos may prove to have far greater impact on our society than taboos against black male-white female mating. The white American public that could dismiss with disinterest contemporary showings of movies like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* that depict black male marriage to a white woman on national television reacted with outrage and anger when a day time soap opera, *Days of Our Lives*, aired a program in which a respectable young white male was shown falling in love with a black female.

Taboos against white women mating with black men were maintained by white men because they were interested in limiting the sexual freedom of white women and insuring that their female "property" was not trespassed on by black men. Now that improved male-invented contraceptive devices have diminished the emphasis on female sexual purity and provided all men greater access to women's bodies, white men have shown less interest in overseeing the sexual activities of white women. In contemporary times, marriages between black men and white women are more readily accepted and occur in ever increasing numbers. Explanations as to why marriages between white women and black men are more readily accepted than marriages between white men and black women can be found in patriarchal sexual politics. Since white women represent a powerless group when not allied with powerful white men, their marriage to black men is no great threat to existing white patriarchal rule. In our patriarchal society if a wealthy white woman marries a black man she legally adopts his status. Accordingly a black woman who marries a white man adopts his status; she takes his name and their children are his heirs. Consequently, if a large majority of that small group of white men who dominate decision-making bodies in American society were to marry black women, the foundation of white rule would be threatened.

A complex system of negative myths and stereotypes daily socializes white men to regard black women as unsuitable marriage partners. In American history, white men have never sought to marry black women in as great numbers as black men have sought to marry white women. Scholars have argued that since white men have always had "free," unlimited access to the bodies of black women they have seen no need to legitimize these relationships by marriage. This argument fails to show consideration of the various factors that determine marriage suitability. Joseph Washington comments:

White men have failed to be serious in their relationships with the black woman in comparison to the seriousness of relationships between the black man and the white woman.

He offers as an explanation for this attitude white male perception of black women as "beasts," sexual savages who are unfit for marriage. Washington does not discuss the fact that white people deliberately perpetuate myths about black female bestial sexuality so as to discourage white men from seeing black women as suitable marriage partners. Whites condone inter-racial relationships between black women and white men only in the context of degrading sex. The mass media, especially television, is one way that negative images of black womanhood continue to be impressed upon all our psyches. In the daytime soap opera in which the young white man falls in love with a black female, she is depicted solely in terms of negative stereotypes. Her features are distorted by excessive make-up, a greasy type substance is used on her lips in order to make them look thicker than they are; she wears a wig and dresses in garments that cause her to seem slightly overweight. In real life the black woman in no way resembles the character she portrays on the soap, and she is the only character who is made to look radically different, whose features are grossly distorted. Without the distortions she is a healthy, attractive looking woman who in no way resembles white people's negative stereotype of black women. Significantly, the facial features of the white woman who is her rival are not altered in any way. In recent years, the most revolting image of black womanhood on

television was portrayed in a situation comedy called *Detective School*. There the black woman is constantly ridiculed for her ugliness, her bad temper, etc. White men in the show are either mocking her or attacking her physically. The white women she is contrasted with are blonde and stereotypically attractive. In other television shows the predominant image of black women is that of the sex object, prostitute, and whore, etc. The second image is that of the overweight nagging maternal figure. Even those shows that have cast black female children depict them within the framework of negative stereotypes. The little black girl on the situation comedy *What's Happening* was portrayed as a miniature Sapphire—constantly nagging and telling tales on her brother. Black women have fared no better in American film. A recent film with another image of black womanhood was *Remember My Name*, a movie that was glorifying the toughness of today's "liberated" white woman. Significantly, a measure of her toughness is that she is able to beat and brutalize a black woman who just happens to have a white boyfriend. The images of black women that are seen as positive usually are those that depict the black woman as a long-suffering, religious, maternal figure, whose most endearing characteristic is her self-sacrificing self-denial for those she loves.

Negative images of black women in television and film are not simply impressed upon the psyches of white males, they affect all Americans. Black mothers and fathers constantly complain that television lowers the self-confidence and self-esteem of black girls. Even on television commercials the black female child is rarely visible—largely because sexist-racist Americans tend to see the black male as the representative of the black race. So commercials and advertisements in magazines may portray a white female and male but feel that it is enough to have a black male to represent black people. The same logic occurs in regular television programs. On many shows there are single black male figures or single black female figures but rarely are a black woman and man together. In some instances as is often the case on *Saturday Night Live*, black men dress in female clothing and portray black women, usually mocking and ridiculing them. Whites who control media

exclude black women so as to emphasize their undesirability either as friends or sexual partners. This also promotes divisiveness between black men and black women, for white people are saying via their manipulation of black roles that they accept black men but not black women. And black women are not accepted because they are seen as a threat to the existing race-sex hierarchy.

While negative images of black womanhood are used to impress upon white men their undesirability as marriage partners, the belief that all white men desire from black women is illicit sex prevents black women from seeking such unions. Just as whites have not been interested in myths and stereotypes black people perpetuate about them, there is little discussion of the fact that the idea that all white men are eager to rape black women continues to be a widespread belief in black communities. Of course this belief was once based on the actual fact that for many years large numbers of white men could and did sexually exploit black women. The fact that this may no longer be the case has not caused black people (and in particular black men) to change their attitudes, largely because many black people are just as committed to racial solidarity as white people and they believe it can best be maintained by discouraging legalized union between white men and black women.

Black men have a vested interest in maintaining existing barriers which discourage black female-white male marriage, for it eliminates sexual competition. Just as sexist white folks used the idea that all black men were rapists to limit the sexual freedom of white women, black people employ the same tactic to control black female sexual behavior. For many years, black people warned black females to beware involvement with white men for fear such relationships would lead to exploitation and degradation of black womanhood. While there is no need to deny the historical fact that white men have sexually exploited black women, this knowledge is used by the white and black public as a psychological weapon to limit and restrain the freedom of black females. Black females who have been socialized by parents to feel threatened or even terrorized by contact with white men often have difficulty relating to white male employers, teachers, doctors, etc. There are many black women

who have as phobic a fear about white male sexuality as the fear white women have traditionally felt towards black men. Phobic fear is not a solution to the problem of sexual exploitation or rape. It is a symptom. While an awareness of male power to rape women with impunity in a patriarchal society is necessary for woman's survival, it is even more important that women realize that they can prevent such assaults and protect themselves should they occur.

In a class on Black Women I taught at the University of Southern California, black female students discussed their fear of white men and their anger and rage that white men approached them at jobs, in restaurants, hallways, or on elevators and made sexual overtures. Most women in the class agreed that to avoid these negative encounters they are never friendly with white men, ignore them, or send hostile vibrations in their direction. They also acknowledged that many aggressive sexual overtures by white men, seen as insulting and negative, were casually dismissed or even seen as positive when made by black men. Since they perceived white male sexual overtures as racist, they could not understand that the sexism motivating these acts was not that different from the sexism motivating aggressive sexual overtures of black men.

The emphasis on the white male as sexual exploiter in black communities often deflects attention away from black male sexual exploitation of black women. Many black parents who warned their daughters against the sexual overtures of white men did not warn them about black male exploiters. Since black men were seen as possible marriage candidates, it was more acceptable for them to cajole and seduce black women into potentially sexually exploitative relationships. While black parents admonished daughters not to submit to sexual assaults by white men, they were not encouraging them to reject similar approaches from black men. This is just another indication of the way in which the pervasive concern black people have about racism allows them to conveniently ignore the reality of sexist oppression. They have not been willing to acknowledge that while racism caused white men to make black women targets, it was and is sexism that causes all men to think that they can

verbally or physically assault women sexually with impunity. In the final analysis, in the case of white male sexual exploitation of black women, it is the sexism motivating these assaults that is important and not just the racial background of the men who initiate them. It was common during the sixties' black power movement for black men to overemphasize white male sexual exploitation of black womanhood as a way to explain their disapproval of inter-racial relationships involving the two groups. Often they were merely interested in controlling black females sexually. While self-proclaimed black nationalist male leaders felt that it was no contradiction of their political views to have white women companions (after all they were only exercising their right as "men" in a patriarchal society to do as they please in their private life) they were horrified, outraged, and angry with black women who accepted white male companions. There has yet to be a prominent black female political activist who has shown a marked preference for white male companions and if there were, such a relationship would not be at all acceptable to black people.

White males who desire friendships or marriage with black females often find their friendly overture rebuffed or dismissed by the woman in question. Male scholars, black and white, who have written about inter-racial marriage practices (*Marriage in Black and White, Sexual Racism, Sex and Racism in America*) fail to mention that more marriages do not take place between white men and black women because of the reluctance of black females. Black women who date or marry white men find that they cannot endure the harassment and persecution by black and white people. In some instances black men who are themselves involved in inter-racial relationships act contemptuously towards black women who exercise the same freedom of choice. They see their own behavior as acceptable because they view white women as victims, while they see white men as oppressors. So in their eyes a black woman involved with a white man is allying herself with a racist oppressor. But their tendency to see white women as innocent, as non-racist is yet another reflection of their acceptance of sexist idealization of woman. For white women have histori-

cally shown themselves to be as capable of being racist oppressors as white men. Another tactic many black men employ to explain their acceptance of inter-racial relationships with white women and their condemnation of black female-white male relations is to assert that they are exploiting white women like white men exploited black women. They evoke a false sense of avenging themselves against racism to mask their sexist exploitative feelings about white women and finally all women. The collective effort on the part of white and black people to curtail marriage and even friendship between black women and white men serves to help maintain white patriarchal rule and to support continued devaluation of black womanhood.

Systematic devaluation of black womanhood led to a downgrading of any activity black women did. Many black women attempted to shift the focus of attention away from sexuality by emphasizing their commitment to motherhood. As participants in the "cult of true womanhood" that reached its peak in early 20th century America, they endeavored to prove their value and worth by demonstrating that they were women whose lives were firmly rooted in the family. They worked diligently in service jobs to provide economically for their children, and demonstrated their love by incredible self-sacrifice. While their efforts were acknowledged by the American public, whites deliberately cast them in a negative light. They labeled hard-working, self-sacrificing black women who were concerned with creating a loving, supportive environment for their families Aunt Jemimas, Sapphires, Amazons—all negative images that were based upon existing sexist stereotypes of womanhood. In more recent years the labeling of black women matriarchs emerged as yet another attempt by the white male power structure to cast the positive contributions of black women in a negative light. All the negative stereotypes used to characterize black women were anti-woman. As sexist ideology has been accepted by black people, these negative myths and stereotypes have effectively transcended class and race boundaries and affected the way black women were perceived by members of their own race and the way they perceived themselves.

Many of the anti-black-woman stereotypes originated during slavery. Long before sociologists perpetuated theories about the existence of a black matriarchy, white male slave-owners created a body of myths to discredit the contributions of black females; one such myth was the notion that they were all masculinized sub-human creatures. Black female slaves had shown that they were capable of performing so-called "manly" labor, that they were able to endure hardship, pain, and privation but could also perform those so-called "womanly" tasks of housekeeping, cooking, and child rearing. Their ability to cope effectively in a sexist-defined "male" role threatened patriarchal myths about the nature of woman's inherent physiological difference and inferiority. By forcing black female slaves to perform the same work tasks as black male slaves, white male patriarchs were contradicting their own sexist order that claimed woman to be inferior because she lacked physical prowess. An explanation had to be provided to explain why black women were able to perform tasks that were cited by patriarchs as jobs women were incapable of performing. To explain the black female's ability to survive without the direct aid of a male and her ability to perform tasks that were culturally defined as "male" work, white males argued that black slave women were not "real" women but were masculinized sub-human creatures. It is not unlikely that white men feared that white women, witnessing the black female slave's ability to cope as effectively in the work force as men, might develop ideas about social equality between the sexes and encourage political solidarity between black and white women. Whatever the reason, black women posed so great a threat to the existing patriarchy that white men perpetuated the notion that black women possessed unusual masculine-like characteristics not common to the female species. To prove their point, they often forced black women to labor at difficult jobs while black male slaves stood idle.

The unwillingness of present-day scholars to accept as a positive step social equality between the sexes in any sphere led to the formation of the theory that a black matriarchy existed in the black family structure. Male social scientists formulated theories about the matriarchal power of black females to pro-

vide an out-of-the-ordinary explanation for the independent and decisive role black women played within the black family structure. Like their slaveowning ancestors, racist scholars acted as if black women fulfilling their role as mothers and economic providers were performing a unique action that needed a new definition even though it was not uncommon for many poor and widowed white women to perform this dual role. Yet they labeled black women matriarchs—a title that in no way accurately described the social status of black women in America. No matriarchy has ever existed in the United States.

At the very time sociologists proclaimed the existence of a matriarchal order in the black family structure, black women represented one of the largest socially and economically deprived groups in America whose status in no way resembled that of a matriarch. Political activist Angela Davis writes of the label matriarch:

The designation of the black woman as a matriarch is a cruel misnomer because it ignores the profound traumas the black woman must have experienced when she had to surrender her child-bearing to alien and predatory economic interest.

The term matriarch implies the existence of a social order in which women exercise social and political power, a state which in no way resembles the condition of black women or all women in American society. The decisions that determine the way in which black women must live their lives are made by others, usually white men. If sociologists are to casually label black women matriarchs, they should also label female children playing house and acting out the role of mother matriarchs. For in both instances, no real effective power exists that allows the females in question to control their own destiny.

In their article "Is the Black Male Castrated," Jean Bond and Pauline Perry write of the matriarchy myth:

The casting of this image of the black female in sociological bold relief is both consistent and logical in racist terms, for the so-called Black matriarch is a kind of folk character largely fashioned by whites out of half truths and lies about the involuntary conditions of black women.

The misuse of the term matriarch has led many people to identify any woman present in a household where no male resides a matriarch. Although anthropologists disagree about whether or not matriarchal societies ever really existed, an examination of available information about the supposed social structure of matriarchies proves without any doubt that the social status of the matriarch was in no way similar to that of black women in the United States. Within the matriarchal society woman was almost always economically secure. The economic situation of black women in United States has never been secure. While the average median income of employed black men has in recent years often surpassed the average median income of white females, the wages black women receive on the average remain considerably lower than that of both white females and black males. The matriarch was most often the owner of property. Since black women receive on the average low or middle incomes, only a few individuals are able to secure and hold property. Within the woman-centered society, the matriarch assumes the authoritative role in government and home life. Anthropologist Helen Diner found in her research on matriarchs that the position of the woman was like that of the man in patriarchal society. Commenting on the matriarchal role, Diner states, "If one sees her perform heavy labor while the male lounges or putters about the house, it is because he is not permitted to perform or decide important things."

Although white sociologists would have all Americans believe that the black female is often the "man of the house," this is rarely the case. Even in single-parent homes, black mothers may go so far as to delegate the responsibility of being the "man" to male children. In some single-parent homes where no male is present, it is acceptable for a visiting male friend or lover to assume a decision-making role. Few black women, even in homes where no men are present, see themselves as adopting a "male" role. Concurrently in American political life few black women exercise decision-making power. While it is true that in contemporary times more black women can be seen in the political arena than ever before in history, in proportion to the population of black women this number is

relatively small. The Joint Center for Political Studies located in Washington D.C. reported on the extent to which sexism and racism have led to under-representation of black women in government, and their study revealed:

Black females in America have more than doubled their presence among elected officials in the four years since 1969. Yet, even today, they account for only about 12% of black elected officials and are an "infinitesimally" small percentage of the elected office holders in the nation the survey revealed. The report continues by saying there are about seven million black women of voting age in the country, but they hold only 336 of the more than 520,000 elective offices in the country. Yet the total number of black women office holders today represent about 160% increase over their number four years ago.

Many features that anthropologists claim characterize matriarchal social structure resemble privileges and rights feminists are fighting to obtain. One such feature of matriarchal society was the complete control women had over their bodies. Diner asserts, "Above all the woman possessed free disposition over her body and may interrupt pregnancy whenever she wishes or prevent it all together." The inability of women in modern society to gain control over their bodies in regards to childbirth has been a primary impetus behind the women's liberation movement. Lower class women and consequently many black women have the least control over their bodies. In most states, women with enough money, (particularly upper and middle class white women), have always been able to rid themselves of unwanted pregnancies. It has been poor women, black and white, who have had the fewest opportunities to exercise control over their reproductive activities. Diner cites many other characteristics common to matriarchal societies which in no way parallel patterns of behavior common to black women. Studying the preferred sex of children in the matriarchal culture, Diner found, "Female children are preferred because they continue the family which boys cannot." Black women, like most women in patriarchal societies prefer the birth of sons, as our society esteems the male child and often ignores or berates the female child. In the female-dominated

state, domestic work was considered degrading to the woman just as it is considered beneath the male's dignity in a male-dominated society. Black women perform most of the domestic work in their own homes and in the homes of others. Marriage in the matriarchal state offered women the same privileges rewarded to men in the patriarchal state. Diner contends:

In marriage obedience is demanded of the male as was specified in the marriage contracts of ancient Egypt. He also must remain faithful, while the wife remains unencumbered. She also retains the right of divorce and repudiation.

Black women have been restricted in these areas as have most women in patriarchal societies.

As is obvious, this cursory comparison of the status of matriarchs with that of black women reveals few similarities. Although various people have written essays and articles that discredit the theory that a black matriarchy exists, the term continues to be widely used to describe the status of black women. It is readily evoked by those white people who wish to perpetuate negative images of black womanhood. At the onset of the emergence of the matriarchy myth it was used to discredit black women and men. Black women were told that they had overstepped the bonds of femininity because they worked outside the home to provide economic support for their families and that by so doing they had de-masculinized black men. Black men were told that they were weak, effeminate, and castrated because "their" women were laboring at menial jobs.

White male scholars who examined the black family by attempting to see in what ways it resembled the white family structure were confident that their data was not biased by their own personal prejudices against women assuming an active role in family decision-making. But it must be remembered that these white males were educated in an elite institutional world that excluded both black people and many white women, institutions that were both racist and sexist. Consequently, when they observed black families, they chose to see the independence, will power, and initiative of black women as an attack on the masculinity of black men. Their sexism blinded them to the

obvious positive benefits to both black men and women that occurred when black females assumed an active role in parenting. They argued that the black woman's performance of an active role in family life both as mothers and providers had deprived black men of their patriarchal status in the home. And this argument was used to explain the large numbers of female-headed households, the assumption being that black men had vacated their parenting roles because of domineering black women, whose dominance was attributed to their being economic providers while black men were unemployed.

The belief that men naturally want to provide for the economic well-being of their families and therefore feel de-masculinized if unemployment or low wages prevent them from so doing seems an out-of-place and totally false assumption in a society where men are taught to expect rewards for their provision. The structure of marriage in patriarchal society is based on a system of exchange, one in which men are traditionally taught to provide economically for women and children in exchange for sexual, housekeeping, and nurturing services. The argument that black men have been emasculated because they were not always able to assume the patriarchal role of provider is based on the assumption that black men feel that they should provide for their families and therefore feel unmanned or guilty if they cannot do so. Yet such an assumption does not appear to be based on actual fact. In many homes, black men who are employed are not eager to give money to wives and children and are even resentful that they are expected to share hard-earned low wages with others. Concurrently, despite the fact that the American capitalist economic structure forces many black men to be unemployed, there are some black men who would rather not work "shit" jobs with endless hassles and little monetary reward if they can survive without them; these men do not have doubts about their masculinity. To many of them a low paying menial job is more an attack on their masculinity than no job at all. While I do not mean to imply that there have not been large numbers of black men concerned with being providers, it is important that we remember that the desire to provide is not an innate male instinct.

Surveys of groups of women from all races and classes who attempt to get child care payments from ex-husbands would provide ample evidence of the reluctance of men to assume provider roles. It is more likely that lower-middle and middle class black men who have absorbed standard definitions of masculinity would feel that it is important to provide economically for families and consequently feel ashamed, even de-masculinized if unable to assume the provider role. But at the time of the emergence of the matriarchy myth as popular social theory, the great majority of black men were working class. And among working class men, who are by definition the recipients of low wages and who almost always have difficulty providing for families, achievement of manhood or masculine status is not determined solely on the basis of economics.

An ignorant person hearing an analysis of the black matriarchy theory might easily assume that the jobs black women were able to acquire which enabled them to be providers elevated their status above that of black men, but that was never the case. In actuality many of the service jobs black women were employed to perform forced them into daily contact with racist whites who abused and humiliated them. They may have suffered much more intensely a feeling of being de-humanized and degraded than unemployed black men who stood on street corners all day long. Being employed at a low paying job does not necessarily lead to a positive self-concept. It may very well be that unemployed black men were able to maintain a personal dignity that black women employed in service jobs were forced to surrender in their work arena. I can certainly remember lower class black men in our neighborhood commenting on the fact that some jobs were not worth doing because of the loss of one's personal dignity, whereas black women were made to feel that when survival was the crucial issue, personal dignity should be sacrificed. The black female who thought herself "too good" to do domestic work or other service jobs was often ridiculed for being uppity. Yet everyone sympathized when unemployed black men talked about their inability to accept "the man" bossing them. Sexist thinking made it acceptable for black men to refuse menial work even if

they were unable to provide for family and children. Many black men who deserted family and children were not regarded contemptuously even though such behavior on the part of black women would have been condemned.

The argument that black women were matriarchs was readily accepted by black people even though it was an image created by white males. Of all the negative stereotypes and myths that have been used to characterize black womanhood, the matriarchy label has had the greatest impact on the consciousness of many black people. The independent role black women were obliged to play both in the labor force and in the family was automatically perceived as unladylike. Negative attitudes toward working women have always existed in American society and black men were not unique in regarding black women workers with disapproval. Robert Smuts, in his general study of female workers (a study that is primarily concerned with white women), *Women and Work in America*, discussed the types of attitudes toward working women that were once the norm in American society:

In the decades before and after the turn of the century, the employment of women was a major public issue. Like the judges of the Wisconsin Court, many Americans felt that it was akin to treason for a woman to want to work. Most of the arguments advanced to support this position were based on a common conception of the nature and role of women. In physique, temperament and mentality, the argument ran, women are exquisitely specialized for their functions as mothers and guardians of the home. To employ a woman in other ways would endanger not only her essential female qualities but also her sanity, her health, and even her life. This view of woman implied a complementary view of man. As the man was deficient in the feminine ideals of "tenderness, compassion... beauty and the harmonies of grace" essential to the creation of a true home; but abundantly endowed with the masculine qualities of "energy, desire, daring, and forcible possession" necessary in the world of business, government, and war...

While this is a perfect example of racist scholarship, in that the women that Smuts is talking about entering the work force for

the first time are white women, it does provide an accurate picture of the negative attitudes toward women in the labor force.

Just as white men perceived the entry of white women into the labor force as a threat to male positions and masculinity, black men were socialized to regard the presence of black women in the labor force with similar suspicions. The matriarchy theory gave the black male a framework on which to base his condemnation of working black women. Many black men who did not feel at all personally de-masculinized absorbed sexist ideology and regarded wage-earning black women with contempt. These men claimed that the female-headed household was a direct result of the matriarchal tendencies of black women and argued that no "real" man could remain in a household where he was not the sole boss. Using this sexist logic, we can safely assume that it was never the black female having so much power in the home that alienated some black men, but that she had any power at all. Those male scholars who label a domestic worker who slaves away forty hours a week and earns enough money for food, rent, and other necessary expenses as financially independent do her a grave disservice. For most men in sexist society, being the boss is synonymous with having absolute power. In patriarchal homes men are likely to feel threatened even if women have a babysitting job that provides them extra grocery money. Black men were able to use the matriarchy myth as a psychological weapon to justify their demands that black women assume a more passive subservient role in the home.

Those men who accepted the myth that black women were matriarchs did regard black females as a threat to their personal power. Such thinking is not at all peculiar to black men. Most men in a patriarchal society fear and resent women who do not assume traditional passive roles. By shifting the responsibility for the unemployment of black men onto black women and away from themselves, white racist oppressors were able to establish a bond of solidarity with black men based on mutual sexism. White men preyed upon sexist feelings impressed upon the black male psyche from birth to socialize black men so that they would regard not all women, but specifically black

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women as the enemies of their masculinity. I have previously mentioned that historiographers who study black people's history tend to minimize the oppression of black females and concentrate their attention on black men. Despite the fact that black women are victims of sexist and racist oppression, they are usually depicted as having received more advantages than black men in American history, a fact that cannot be substantiated by historical evidence. The matriarchy myth suggested that once again black women had been granted privileges denied black men. Yet even if white people had been eager to hire black men in service jobs to work as maids and washermen, such jobs would have been refused because they would have been regarded as an assault on male dignity. White sociologists presented the matriarchy myth in such a way that it implied black women had "power" in the family and black men had none, and although these conclusions were based solely on data concerned with economic status, they fostered divisiveness between black men and women.

Some black women have been as willing to accept the matriarchy theory as have black men. They were eager to identify themselves as matriarchs because it seemed to them that black women were finally receiving acknowledgement of their contribution to the black family. Young black women interested in African history were attracted to the theory that a matriarchy existed in America because they had learned that woman-ruled societies existed in our mother land, so they claimed matriarchy as an African cultural retention. In general, many black women were proud to be labeled matriarchs because the term had many more positive implications than other labels used to characterize black womanhood. It was certainly more positive than mammy, bitch, or slut. If we were matriarchs, feelings of honor and pride would be in order, but as the social status of black women in the United States is far from being matriarchal, the motivation of white and black people who persistently label black women matriarchs must be questioned. Just as whites used the myth that all black women were sexually loose as a way to devalue black womanhood, they used the matriarchy myth to impress upon the consciousness of all

Americans that black women were masculinized, castrating, ball-busters.

Yet black women embraced the label matriarch because it allowed them to regard themselves as privileged. This merely indicates how effectively colonizers are able to distort the reality of the colonized so that they embrace concepts that actually do them more harm than good. One of the oppressive tactics white slavers used to prevent rebellions and slave uprisings was the brainwashing of slaves to believe that black people were really better taken care of as slaves than they would be as free people. Black slaves who accepted their master's picture of freedom were afraid to break the bonds of slavery. A similar tactic has been used to brainwash black women. White colonizers encourage black women, who are economically oppressed and victimized by sexism and racism, to believe that they are matriarchs, that they exercise some social and political control over their lives.

Once black women are deluded and imagine that we have power we don't really possess, the possibility that we might organize collectively to fight against sexist-racist oppression is reduced. I interviewed a black woman usually employed as a clerk who was living in near poverty, yet she continually emphasized the fact that black woman was matriarchal, powerful, in control of her life; in fact she was nearly having a nervous breakdown trying to make ends meet. Significantly, sociologists who label black women matriarchs never discussed woman's social status within the matriarchal state, for if they had, black folks would have known immediately that it in no way resembled the lot of black women. Without a doubt, the false sense of power black women are encouraged to feel allows us to think that we are not in need of social movements like a women's movement that would liberate us from sexist oppression. The sad irony is of course that black women are often most victimized by the very sexism we refuse to collectively identify as an oppressive force.

The myth of the black matriarchy helped to further perpetuate the image of black women as masculinized, domineering, amazonic creatures. The black female was depicted by whites as an Amazon because they saw her ability to endure

hardships no "lady" was supposedly capable of enduring as a sign that she possessed an animalistic sub-human strength. This belief was perfectly compatible with ideas about the nature of black womanhood that emerged during the 19th century. Like the matriarchy myth, the belief that black women were amazonic was largely based on myth and fantasy. Traditional Amazons were a collective group of women who joined together in an effort to promote female self-government. Unlike matriarchs, Amazons were interested in building societies in which the male figure would be present in only small numbers. Diner writes of Amazonic women:

Amazons deny the man, destroy the male progeny, concede no separate existence to the active principle, reabsorb it, and develop it in themselves in androgynous fashion female on the left, male on the right.... Homer developed the right feeling for the Amazons when he called them anitianeirai, which may be interpreted as "man hating" or as "mannish."

The great majority of women interviewed for this book were eager to acknowledge the feeling that the most important aspect of a woman's life was her relationship with a man. Perusal of *Essence* magazine reveals that there is almost an obsessive concern among black women with male-female relationships.

Most black women have not had the opportunity to indulge in the parasitic dependence upon the male that is expected of females and encouraged in patriarchal society. The institution of slavery forced black women to surrender any prior dependence on the male figure and obliged them to struggle for their individual survival. The social equality that characterized black sex role patterns in the work sphere under slavery did not create a situation that allowed black women to be passive. Despite sexist myths about the inherent weakness of women, black women have had to exert a certain independence of spirit because of their presence in the work force. Few black women have had a choice as to whether or not they will become workers. And participation of black women in the work force has not led to the formation of a feminist consciousness. Though many black women entered the labor force in service

areas, in agriculture, in industry, and in clerical work, most of them resented the fact that they were not being supported economically by men. In recent years, attitudes toward women entering the work force have radically changed. Many women either want to work or face the reality that they must be employed to make ends meet. The rise in middle class white women workers who enter the work force in ever increasing numbers indicates a change in attitudes toward working women. Until it was accepted that most women, black or white, would be in the capitalist work force, many black women bitterly resented the circumstances that forced them to work. It is interesting that white women were criticized and persecuted when they first entered the American work force in large numbers, but after the initial attacks ceased there was little protest. And there has been no discussion of them having become masculinized as a result of performing tasks traditionally done by men.

When white women enter the work force today it is seen as a positive step, a move toward gaining independence, while more than ever before in our history black women who enter the work force are encouraged to feel that they are taking jobs from black men or de-masculinizing them. For fear of undermining the self-confidence of black men, many young college-educated black women repress their own career aspirations. While black women are often forced by circumstances to act in assertive ways, most black women I talked with as preparation for this book believed men were superior to women and that a degree of submission to male authority was a necessary part of woman's role. The stereotypical image of the black woman as strong and powerful so dominates the consciousness of most Americans that even if a black woman is clearly conforming to sexist notions of femininity and passivity she may be characterized as tough, domineering, and strong. Much of what has been perceived by whites as an Amazonic trait in black women has been merely stoical acceptance of situations we have been powerless to change.

While the matriarchy myth and the myth of the black amazon have as their core ingredient an image of woman as active, powerful being, the stereotypical image of Aunt Jemima

depicted the black woman as passive, longsuffering, and submissive. Historian Herbert Gutman argues that there is little evidence to support the notion:

...that the typical house servant was an aged mammy who remained in her antebellum place out of loyalty to a white family or because whites had a special concern for such women.

He suggests that the black female nanny in the white household was usually a young black woman with few if any attachments of her own. Gutman does not speculate about the origins of the black mammy figure, but she too was a creature of white imagination. It is not really important that there are black women who resemble the mammy stereotype, it is important that white people created an image of black womanhood which they could tolerate that in no way resembled the great majority of black women. If as Gutman argues the "nanny" in a typical antebellum white household was young and unattached, it is significant that white people have gone to such great lengths to create just the opposite image. It is not too difficult to imagine how whites came to create the black mammy figure. Considering white male lust for the bodies of black females, it is likely that white women were not pleased with young black women working in their homes for fear that liaisons between them and their husbands might be formed, so they conjured up an image of the ideal black nanny. She was first and foremost asexual and consequently she had to be fat (preferably obese); she also had to give the impression of not being clean so she was the wearer of a greasy dirty headrag; her too tight shoes from which emerged her large feet were further confirmation of her bestial cow-like quality. Her greatest virtue was of course her love for white folk whom she willingly and passively served. The mammy image was portrayed with affection by whites because it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal black womanhood—complete submission to the will of whites. In a sense whites created in the mammy figure a black woman who embodied solely those characteristics they as colonizers wished to exploit. They saw her as the embodiment of woman as passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without

expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them. The mammy as portrayed by whites poses no threat to the existing white patriarchal social order for she totally submits to the white racist regime. Contemporary television shows continue to present black mammy figures as prototypes of acceptable black womanhood.

The counterpart to the Aunt Jemima images are the Sapphire images. As Sapphires, black women were depicted as evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful, in short all that the mammy figure was not. The Sapphire image had as its base one of the oldest negative stereotypes of woman—the image of the female as inherently evil. Christian mythology depicted woman as the source of sin and evil; racist-sexist mythology simply designated black women the epitome of female evil and sinfulness. White men could justify their de-humanization and sexual exploitation of black women by arguing that they possessed inherent evil demonic qualities. Black men could claim that they could not get along with black women because they were so evil. And white women could use the image of the evil sinful black woman to emphasize their own innocence and purity. Like the biblical figure Eve, black women became the scapegoats for misogynist men and racist women who needed to see some group of women as the embodiment of female evil. In an essay in *The Black Woman*, Perry and Bond describe Sapphire as she was and is depicted in American culture:

Movies and radio shows of the 1930's and 1940's invariably pedaled the Sapphire image of the black woman: she is depicted as iron-willed, effectual, treacherous toward and contemptible of black men, the latter being portrayed as simpering, ineffectual whipping boys. Certainly, most of us have encountered domineering Black females (and white ones too). Many of them have been unlucky in life and love and seek a bitter haven from their disappointments in fanatical self-sufficiency.

The Sapphire image was popularized by the radio and television show *Amos 'n' Andy*, in which Sapphire is the nagging, shrewish wife of Kingfish. As the title indicates, the show focused on the black male characters. Sapphire's shrewish personality was used primarily to create sympathy in viewers

for the black male lot. The Sapphire identity has been projected onto any black woman who overtly expresses bitterness, anger, and rage about her lot. Consequently, many black women repress these feelings for fear of being regarded as shrewish Sapphires. Or they embrace the Sapphire identity as a reaction to the harsh treatment of black women in society. The "evilness" of a given black woman may merely be the facade she presents to a sexist-racist world that she realizes would only exploit her if she were to appear vulnerable.

All the myths and stereotypes used to characterize black womanhood have their roots in negative anti-woman mythology. Yet they form the basis of most critical inquiry into the nature of black female experience. Many people have difficulty appreciating black women as we are because of eagerness to impose an identity upon us based on any number of negative stereotypes. Widespread efforts to continue devaluation of black womanhood make it extremely difficult and oftentimes impossible for the black female to develop a positive self-concept. For we are daily bombarded by negative images. Indeed, one strong oppressive force has been this negative stereotype and our acceptance of it as a viable role model upon which we can pattern our lives.

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