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## MAMMIES, MATRIARCHS, AND OTHER CONTROLLING IMAGES

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

TRUDIER HARRIS 1982, 4

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

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones. Hazel Carby suggests that the objective of stereotypes is "not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations" (1987, 22). These

controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.

Even when the initial conditions that foster controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only subjugate U.S. Black women but are key in maintaining intersecting oppressions (Mullings 1997, 109–30). African-American women's status as outsiders becomes the point from which other groups define their normality. Ruth Shays, a Black inner-city resident, describes how the standpoint of a subordinate group is discredited: "It will not kill people to hear the truth, but they don't like it and they would much rather hear it from one of their own than from a stranger. Now, to white people your colored person is always a stranger. Not only that, we are supposed to be dumb strangers, so we can't tell them anything!" (Gwaltney 1980, 29). As the "Others" of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging.

### THE OBJECTIFICATION OF BLACK WOMEN AS THE OTHER

Black feminist critic Barbara Christian asserts that in the United States, "the enslaved African woman became the basis for the definition of our society's Other" (1985, 160). Maintaining images of U.S. Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression. Certain basic ideas crosscut these and other forms of oppression. One such idea is binary thinking that categorizes people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another (Keller 1985, 8). For example, each term in the binaries white/black, male/female, reason/emotion, culture/nature, fact/opinion, mind/body, and subject/object gains meaning only in relation to its counterpart (Halpin 1989).

Another basic idea concerns how binary thinking shapes understandings of human difference. In such thinking, difference is defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its "other." Whites and Blacks, males and females, thought and feeling are not complementary counterparts—they are fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites. Feeling cannot be incorporated into thought or even function in conjunction with it because in binary oppositional thinking, feeling retards thought and values obscure facts.

Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. In binary thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an

object to be manipulated and controlled. Social theorist Dona Richards (1980) suggests that Western thought requires objectification, a process she describes as the "separation of the 'knowing self' from the 'known object'" (p. 72). Intense objectification is a "prerequisite for the despiritualization of the universe," Richards writes, "and through it the Western cosmos was made ready for ever increasing materialization" (p. 72). A Marxist assessment of the culture/nature binary argues that history can be seen as that in which human beings constantly objectify the natural world in order to control and exploit it (Brittan and Maynard 1984, 198). Culture is defined as the opposite of an objectified nature. If undomesticated, this wild and primitive nature might destroy more civilized culture.<sup>1</sup> Feminist scholarship points to the identification of women with nature as being central to women's subsequent objectification and conquest by men (McClintock 1995). Black studies scholarship and postcolonial theory both suggest that defining people of color as less human, animalistic, or more "natural" denies African and Asian people's subjectivity and supports the political economy of domination that characterized slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism (Torgovnick 1990; Chow 1993, 27-54; Said 1993; Bannerji 1995, 55-95).

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

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

African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these binaries converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination. The allegedly emotional, passionate nature of Black women has long been used to justify Black women's sexual exploitation. Similarly, restricting Black women's literacy, then claiming that we lack the facts for sound judgment, relegates African-American women to the inferior side of the fact/opinion binary. Denying Black women status as fully human subjects by treating us as the objectified Other within multiple binaries demonstrates the power that binary thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification wield within intersecting oppressions.

Despite its seeming permanence, this way of thinking, by fostering injustice, can also stimulate resistance. For example, U.S. Black women have long recognized the fundamental injustice of a system that routinely and from one generation to the next relegates U.S. Black women to the bottom of the social hierarchy. When faced with this structural injustice targeted toward the group, many Black women have insisted on our right to define our own reality, establish our own identities, and name our history. One significant contribution of work on domestic workers is that it documents Black women's everyday resistance to this attempted objectification.

Analyzing the particular controlling images applied to African-American women reveals the specific contours of Black women's objectification as well as the ways in which oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect. Moreover, since the images themselves are dynamic and changing, each provides a starting point for examining new forms of control that emerge in a transnational context, one where selling images has increased in importance in the global marketplace.

## CONTROLLING IMAGES AND BLACK WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

"Black women emerged from slavery firmly enshrined in the consciousness of white America as 'Mammy' and the 'bad black woman,'" contends Cheryl Gilkes (1983a, 294). The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination. Moreover, since Black and White women were both important to slavery's continuation, controlling images of Black womanhood also functioned to mask social relations that affected all women.

According to the cult of true womanhood that accompanied the traditional family ideal, "true" women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Propertied White women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues. African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images.

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

Black women intellectuals have aggressively criticized the image of African-American women as contented mammies. Literary critic Trudier Harris's (1982) volume *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* investigates prominent differences in how Black women have been portrayed by others in literature and how they portray themselves. In her work on the difficulties faced by Black women leaders, Rhetaugh Dumas (1980) describes how Black women executives are hampered by being treated as mammies and penalized if they do not appear warm and nurturing. Striking a similar chord, Barbara Omolade's (1994) description of the "mammification" of Black professional women also takes aim at the imagined Black woman mammy. But despite these works, the mammy image lives on in scholarly and popular culture. Audre Lorde's account of a shopping trip offers a powerful example of its tenacity: "I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a supermarket in . . . 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, 'Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!'" (1984, 126).<sup>2</sup>

The mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like the mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior. As the members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black mothers are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior that many are forced to exhibit in their mammified jobs. By teaching Black children their assigned place in White power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression. Ideas about mammy buttress racial hierarchies in other ways. Employing Black women in mammified occupations supports the racial superiority of White employers, encouraging middle-class White women in particular to identify more closely with the racial and class privilege afforded their fathers, husbands, and sons. In a climate where, as Patricia Williams (1995) puts it, "those blacks who do indeed rise into the middle class end up being figured

only as those who were given whatever they enjoy, and the black 'underclass' becomes those whose sole life activity is taking" (p. 61), no wonder that working-class Whites expect Black women to exhibit deferential behavior, and deeply resent those who do not. Mammy is the public face that Whites expect Black women to assume for them.

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

No matter how loved they were by their White "families," Black women domestic workers remained poor because they were economically exploited workers in a capitalist political economy. The restructured post-World War II economy, in which African-American women moved from service in private homes to jobs in the low-paid service sector and to jobs in clerical work and mammified professions, has produced similar yet differently organized economic exploitation. Historically, many White families in both the middle class and working class were able to maintain their class position because they used Black women domestic workers as a source of cheap labor (Rollins 1985; Byerly 1986). The mammy image was designed to mask this economic exploitation of social class (King 1973). Currently, while the mammy image becomes more muted as Black women move into better jobs, the basic economic exploitation where U.S. Black women either make less for the same work or work twice as hard for the same pay persists. U.S. Black women and African-American communities pay a price for this exploitation. Removing Black women's labor from African-American families and exploiting it denies Black extended family units the benefits of both decent wages and Black women's emotional labor in their homes. Moreover, as the attention to

issues of stress in Black feminist analyses of U.S. Black women's health suggest, participating in this chronically undercompensated and unrecognized labor takes its toll (White 1994, 11–14).

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

The fact that the mammy image by itself cannot control Black women's behavior is tied to the creation of the second controlling image of Black womanhood. Though a more recent phenomenon, the image of the Black matriarch fulfills similar functions in explaining Black women's placement in intersecting oppressions. Ironically, Black scholars such as William E. B. DuBois (1969) and E. Franklin Frazier (1948) described the connections among higher rates of female-headed households in African-American communities, the importance that women assume in Black family networks, and the persistence of Black poverty. However, neither scholar interpreted Black women's centrality in Black families as a cause of African-American social class status. Both saw so-called matriarchal families as an outcome of racial oppression and poverty. During the eras when DuBois and Frazier wrote, the political disenfranchisement and economic exploitation of African-Americans was so entrenched that control over Black women could be maintained without the matriarchal stereotype. But what began as a muted theme in the works of these earlier African-American scholars grew into a full-blown racialized image in the 1960s, a time of significant political and economic mobility for African-Americans. Racialization involves attaching racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group (Omi and Winant 1994). Prior to the 1960s, Black communities contained higher percentages of families maintained by single mothers than White ones, but an ideology that racialized female-headedness as one important cause of Black poverty had not emerged. Interestingly, the insertion of the Black matriarchy thesis into discussions of Black poverty came in the midst of considerable Black activism. Moreover, the public depiction of U.S. Black women as unfeminine matriarchs came at precisely the same moment that the women's movement advanced its critique of U.S. patriarchy (Gilkes 1983a, 296).

While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the "good" Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the "bad" Black mother. Introduced and widely circulated via a government report titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, the Black matriarchy thesis argued that African-American women who failed to fulfill their traditional "womanly" duties at home contributed to social problems in Black civil society (Moynihan 1965). Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers ostensibly could not properly supervise their children and thus were a major contributing factor to their children's failure at school. As overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands. These men, understandably, either deserted their partners or refused to marry the mothers of their children. From the dominant group's perspective, the matriarch represented a failed mammy, a negative stigma to be applied to African-American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant.

Black women intellectuals who study African-American families and Black motherhood typically report finding few matriarchs and even fewer mammies (Myers 1980; Sudarkasa 1981b; Dill 1988b). Instead they portray African-American mothers as complex individuals who often show tremendous strength under adverse conditions, or who become beaten down by the incessant demands of providing for their families. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play presented on Broadway written by a Black woman, Lorraine Hansberry (1959) examines the struggles of widow Lena Younger to actualize her dream of purchasing a home for her family. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, novelist Paule Marshall (1959) presents Mrs. Boyce, a Black mother negotiating a series of relationships with her husband, her daughters, the women in her community, and the work she must perform outside her home. Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974) depicts the struggle of a lesbian mother trying to balance her needs for self-actualization with the pressures of child-rearing in a homophobic community.

Like these fictional analyses, Black women's scholarship on Black single mothers also challenges the matriarchy thesis, but finds far fewer Lena Youngers or Mrs. Boyces (Ladner 1972; Brewer 1988; Jarrett 1994; Dickerson 1995a; Kaplan 1997). In her study of Black teenage mothers, Elaine Bell Kaplan (1997) learned that the reactions of mothers to their teenaged daughters' pregnancies were far from the image of the superstrong Black mother. Mothers in the new working poor felt their pregnant teenage daughters had failed them. Until their daughters' pregnancies, these mothers hoped that their daughters would do better with their lives. The mothers who came from humble beginnings and who had worked hard to achieve a modicum of middle-class respectability felt cheated when their daughters became

pregnant. Among both groups of mothers, adjusting to their daughters' pregnancies brought on much hardship.

Like the mammy, the image of the matriarch is central to intersecting oppressions of class, gender, and race. While at first glance the matriarch may appear far removed from issues in U.S. capitalist development, this image is actually important in explaining the persistence of Black social class outcomes. Assuming that Black poverty in the United States is passed on intergenerationally via the values that parents teach their children, dominant ideology suggests that Black children lack the attention and care allegedly lavished on White, middle-class children. This alleged cultural deficiency seriously retards Black children's achievement. Such a view diverts attention from political and economic inequalities that increasingly characterize global capitalism. It also suggests that anyone can rise from poverty if he or she only received good values at home. Inferior housing, underfunded schools, employment discrimination, and consumer racism all but disappear from Black women's lives. In this sanitized view of American society, those African-Americans who remain poor cause their own victimization. In this context, portraying African-American women as matriarchs allows White men and women to blame Black women for their children's failures in school and with the law, as well as Black children's subsequent poverty. Using images of bad Black mothers to explain Black economic disadvantage links gender ideology to explanations for extreme distributions of wealth that characterize American capitalism.

One source of the matriarch's failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior. Thus, labeling Black women unfeminine and too strong works to undercut U.S. Black women's assertiveness. Many U.S. Black women who find themselves maintaining families by themselves often feel that they have done something wrong. If only they were not so strong, some reason, they might have found a male partner, or their sons would not have had so much trouble with the law. This belief masks the culpability of the U.S. criminal justice system, described by Angela Davis (1997) as an "out of control punishment industry" that locks up a disproportionate number of U.S. Blacks. African-Americans are almost eight times more likely to be imprisoned than Whites (p. 267), a social policy that leaves far fewer men for Black women to marry than the proportion of White men available to White women. Moreover, not only does the image of the Black matriarch seek to regulate Black women's behavior, it also seems designed to influence White women's gendered identities. In the post-World War II era, increasing numbers of White women entered the labor market, limited their fertility, and generally challenged their proscribed roles as subordinate helpmates in their families and workplaces. In this context, the image of the Black matriarch serves as a powerful symbol for both Black and White women of what can go

wrong if White patriarchal power is challenged. Aggressive, assertive women are penalized—they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished, and are stigmatized as being unfeminine. The matriarch or overly strong Black woman has also been used to influence Black men's understandings of Black masculinity. Many Black men reject Black women as marital partners, claiming that Black women are less desirable than White ones because we are too assertive.

The image of the matriarch also supports racial oppression. Much social science research implicitly uses gender relations in African-American communities as one seeming measure of Black cultural disadvantage. For example, the Moynihan Report (1965) contends that slavery destroyed Black families by creating reversed roles for men and women. Black family structures are seen as being deviant because they challenge the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the traditional family ideal. Moreover, the absence of Black patriarchy is used as evidence for Black cultural inferiority (Collins 1989). Under scientific racism, Blacks have been construed as inferior, and their inferiority has been attributed either to biological causes or cultural differences. Thus, locating the source of cultural difference in flawed gender relations provides a powerful foundation for U.S. racism. Black women's failure to conform to the cult of true womanhood can then be identified as one fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency. Advancing ideas about Black cultural disadvantage via the matriarchal image worked to counter efforts by African-Americans who identified political and social policies as one important source of Black economic disadvantage. The image of Black women as dangerous, deviant, castrating mothers divided the Black community at a critical period in the Black liberation struggle. Such images fostered a similar reaction within women's political activism and created a wider gap between the worlds of Black and White women at an equally critical period in women's history (Gilkes 1983a).

Taken together, images of the mammy and the matriarch place African-American women in an untenable position. For Black women workers in service occupations requiring long hours and/or substantial emotional labor, becoming the ideal mammy means precious time and energy spent away from husbands and children. But being employed when Black men have difficulty finding steady work exposes African-American women to the charge that Black women emasculate Black men by failing to be submissive, dependent, "feminine" women. This image ignores gender-specific patterns of incorporation into the capitalist economy, where Black men have greater difficulty finding work but make higher wages when they do work, and Black women find work with greater ease yet earn much less. Moreover, Black women's financial contributions to Black family well-being have been cited as evidence supporting the matriarchy thesis (Moynihan 1965). Many Black

women are the sole support of their families, and labeling these women "matriarchs" erodes their self-confidence and ability to confront oppression. In essence, African-American women who must work encounter pressures to be submissive mammies in one setting, then are stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes.

A third, externally defined, controlling image of Black womanhood—that of the welfare mother—appears tied to working-class Black women's increasing access to U.S. welfare state entitlements. At its core, the image of the welfare mother constitutes a class-specific, controlling image developed for poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law. As long as poor Black women were denied social welfare benefits, there was no need for this stereotype. But when U.S. Black women gained more political power and demanded equity in access to state services, the need arose for this controlling image.

Essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery, this image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy. During slavery the breeder woman image portrayed Black women as more suitable for having children than White women. By claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this image provided justification for interference in enslaved Africans' reproductive lives. Slave owners wanted enslaved Africans to "breed" because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves. The controlling image of the breeder woman served to justify slave owners' intrusion into Black women's decisions about fertility (King 1973; Davis 1981; D. White 1985).

In the post-World War II political economy, African-Americans struggled for and gained rights denied them in former historical periods (Squires 1994). Contrary to popular belief, U.S. Black women were not "given" unearned entitlements, but instead had to struggle for rights routinely offered to other American citizens (Amott 1990; Quadagno 1994). African-Americans successfully acquired basic political and economic protections from a greatly expanded social welfare state, particularly Social Security, unemployment compensation, school feeding programs, fellowships and loans for higher education, affirmative action, voting rights, antidiscrimination legislation, child welfare programs, and the minimum wage. Despite sustained opposition by Republican administrations in the 1980s, these social welfare programs allowed many African-Americans to reject the subsistence-level, exploitative jobs held by their parents and grandparents. However, these Black citizenship rights came at a time of shrinking economic opportunities in U.S. manufacturing and agriculture. Job export, de-skilling, and increased use of illegal immigrants have all been used to replace the cheap, docile labor force that

U.S. Blacks used to be (Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Brewer 1993; Squires 1994). Until the mid-1990s, the large numbers of undereducated, unemployed African-Americans ghettoized in U.S. inner cities, most of whom were women and children, could not be forced to work. This surplus population no longer represented cheap labor but instead, from the perspective of elites, signified a costly threat to political and economic stability. African-American men increasingly became targeted by a growing punishment industry (Davis 1997). In the absence of legitimate jobs, many men worked in the informal sector, serving as low-level employees of a growing, global drug industry that introduced crack cocaine into U.S. Black neighborhoods in the 1980s. For many, becoming entangled with the punishment industry was one cost of doing business.

Controlling Black women's fertility in this political and economic context became important to elite groups. The image of the welfare mother fulfills this function by labeling as unnecessary and even dangerous to the values of the country the fertility of women who are not White and middle class. A closer look at this controlling image reveals that it shares some important features with its mammy and matriarch counterparts. Like the matriarch, the welfare mother is labeled a bad mother. But unlike the matriarch, she is not too aggressive—on the contrary, she is not aggressive enough. While the matriarch's unavailability contributed to her children's poor socialization, the welfare mother's accessibility is deemed the problem. She is portrayed as being content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work and passing on her bad values to her offspring. The image of the welfare mother represents another failed mammy, one who is unwilling to become "de mule uh de world."

The image of the welfare mother provides ideological justifications for intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class. African-Americans can be racially stereotyped as being lazy by blaming Black welfare mothers for failing to pass on the work ethic. Moreover, the welfare mother has no male authority figure to assist her. Typically portrayed as an unwed mother, she violates one cardinal tenet of White, male-dominated ideology: She is a woman alone. As a result, her treatment reinforces the dominant gender ideology positing that a woman's true worth and financial security should occur through heterosexual marriage. Finally, on average, in the post-World War II political economy, one of every three African-American families has been officially classified as poor. With such high levels of Black poverty, welfare state policies supporting poor Black mothers and their children have become increasingly expensive. Creating the controlling image of the welfare mother and stigmatizing her as the cause of her own poverty and that of African-American communities shifts the angle of vision away from structural sources of poverty and blames the victims themselves. The image of the

welfare mother thus provides ideological justification for the dominant group's interest in limiting the fertility of Black mothers who are seen as producing too many economically unproductive children (Davis 1981).

With the election of the Reagan administration in 1980, the stigmatized welfare mother evolved into the more pernicious image of the welfare queen (Lubiano 1992). To mask the effects of cuts in government spending on social welfare programs that fed children, housed working families, assisted cities in maintaining roads, bridges, and basic infrastructure, and supported other basic public services, media images increasingly identified and blamed Black women for the deterioration of U.S. interests. Thus, poor Black women simultaneously become symbols of what was deemed wrong with America and targets of social policies designed to shrink the government sector. Wahneema Lubiano describes how the image of the welfare queen links Black women with seeming declines in the quality of life:

"Welfare queen" is a phrase that describes economic dependency—the lack of a job and/or income (which equal degeneracy in the Calvinist United States); the presence of a child or children with no father and/or husband (moral deviance); and, finally, a charge on the collective U.S. treasury—a human debit. The cumulative totality, circulation, and effect of these meanings in a time of scarce resources among the working class and the lower middle class is devastatingly intense. The welfare queen represents moral aberration and an economic drain, but the figure's problematic status becomes all the more threatening once responsibility for the destruction of the American way of life is attributed to it.

(Lubiano 1992, 337–38)

In contrast to the welfare mother who draws upon the moral capital attached to American motherhood, the welfare queen constitutes a highly materialistic, domineering, and manless working-class Black woman. Relying on the public dole, Black welfare queens are content to take the hard-earned money of tax-paying Americans and remain married to the state. Thus, the welfare queen image signals efforts to use the situation of working-class Black women as a sign of the deterioration of the state.

During this same period, the welfare queen was joined by another similar yet class-specific image, that of the "Black lady" (Lubiano 1992). Because the Black lady refers to middle-class professional Black women who represent a modern version of the politics of respectability advanced by the club women (Shaw 1996), this image may not appear to be a controlling image, merely a benign one. These are the women who stayed in school, worked hard, and have achieved much. Yet the image of the Black lady builds upon prior images of Black womanhood in many ways. For one thing, this image seems to be yet

another version of the modern mammy, namely, the hardworking Black woman professional who works twice as hard as everyone else. The image of the Black lady also resembles aspects of the matriarchy thesis—Black ladies have jobs that are so all-consuming that they have no time for men or have forgotten how to treat them. Because they so routinely compete with men and are successful at it, they become less feminine. Highly educated Black ladies are deemed to be too assertive—that's why they cannot get men to marry them.

Upon first glance, Black ladies also seem far removed from charges of unearned dependency on the state that are so often leveled at working-class U.S. Black women via the welfare queen image. Yet here, too, parallels abound. Via affirmative action, Black ladies allegedly take jobs that should go to more worthy Whites, especially U.S. White men. Given a political climate in the 1980s and 1990s that reinterpreted antidiscrimination and affirmative action programs as examples of an unfair "reverse racism," no matter how highly educated or demonstrably competent Black ladies may be, their accomplishments remain questionable. Moreover, many Black men erroneously believe that Black ladies are taking jobs reserved for them. In their eyes, being Black, female, and seemingly less threatening to Whites advantages Black ladies. Wahneema Lubiano points out how images of the welfare queen and the Black lady evolved in tandem with persistent efforts to cut social welfare spending for working-class Blacks and limit affirmative action opportunities for middle-class Blacks: "Whether by virtue of not achieving and thus passing on bad culture as welfare mothers, or by virtue of managing to achieve middle-class success . . . black women are responsible for the disadvantaged status of African Americans" (Lubiano 1992, 335). Thus, when taken together, the welfare queen and the Black lady constitute class-specific versions of a matriarchy thesis whose fundamental purpose is to discredit Black women's full exercise of citizenship rights. These interconnected images leave U.S. Black women between a rock and a hard place.

A final controlling image—the jezebel, whore, or "hoochie"—is central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood. Because efforts to control Black women's sexuality lie at the heart of Black women's oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary "hoochies" represent a deviant Black female sexuality. The image of jezebel originated under slavery when Black women were portrayed as being, to use Jewelle Gomez's words, "sexually aggressive wet nurses" (Clarke et al. 1983, 99). Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women (Davis 1981; D. White 1985). Jezebel served yet another function. If Black slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, then increased fertility should be the

expected outcome. By suppressing the nurturing that African-American women might give their own children which would strengthen Black family networks, and by forcing Black women to work in the field, "wet nurse" White children, and emotionally nurture their White owners, slave owners effectively tied the controlling images of jezebel and mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery.

Rooted in the historical legacy of jezebel, the contemporary "hoochie" seems to be cut from an entirely different cloth. For one, whereas images of Black women as sexually aggressive certainly pervade popular culture overall, the image of the hoochie seems to have permeated everyday Black culture in entirely new ways. For example, 2 Live Crew's song "Hoochie Mama" takes Black women bashing to new heights. In this song, the group opens with the rallying cry "big booty hoes hop wit it!" and proceeds to list characteristics of the "hoodrat hoochie mama." The singers are quite clear about the use of such women: "I don't need no confrontation," they sing. "All I want is an ejaculation cos I like them ghetto hoochies." The misogyny in "Hoochie Mama" makes prior portrayals of jezebel seem tame. For example, 2 Live Crew's remedy for "lyin'" shows their disdain for women: "Keep runnin' ya mouth and I'ma stick my dick in it," they threaten. And for those listeners who remain confused about the difference between good and bad women, 2 Live Crew is willing to help out:

Mama just don't understand  
why I love your hoochie ass  
Sex is what I need you for  
I gotta good girl but I need a whore

In the United States, guarantees of free speech allow 2 Live Crew and similar groups to speak their minds about "hoochies" and anything else that will make them money. The issue here lies in African-American acceptance of such images. African-American men and women alike routinely do not challenge these and other portrayals of Black women as "hoochies" within Black popular culture. For example, despite the offensive nature of much of 2 Live Crew's music, some Blacks argued that such views, while unfortunate, had long been expressed in Black culture (Crenshaw 1993). Not only does such acceptance mask how such images provide financial benefits to both 2 Live Crew and White-controlled media, such tacit acceptance validates this image. The more it circulates among U.S. Blacks, the more credence it is given. The "hoochie" image certainly seems to have taken on a life of its own. For example, an informal poll of my friends, students, and colleagues revealed a complex taxonomy of "hoochies." Most agreed that one category consisted of "plain hoochie" or sexually assertive women who can be found across social

classes. Women who wear sleazy clothes to clubs and dance in a "slutty" fashion constitute "club hoochies." These women aim to attract men with money for a one-night stand. In contrast, the ambition of "gold-digging hoochies" lies in establishing a long-term relationship with a man with money. These gold-digging hoochies often aim to snare a highly paid athlete and can do so by becoming pregnant. Finally, there is the "hoochie mama" popularized by 2 Live Crew, an image that links the hoochie image to poverty. As 2 Live Crew points out, the "hoochie mama" is a "hoodrat," a "ghetto hoochie" whose main purpose is to provide them sexual favors. The fact that she is also a "mama" speaks to the numbers of Black women in poverty who are single parents whose exchange of sexual favors for money is motivated by their children's economic needs.

Within assumptions that normalize heterosexuality, the historical jezebel and her modern "hoochie" counterpart mark a series of boundaries. Heterosexuality itself is constructed via binary thinking that juxtaposes male and female sexuality, with male and female gender roles pivoting on perceptions of appropriate male and female sexual expression. Men are active, and women should be passive. In the context of U.S. society, these become racialized—White men are active, and White women should be passive. Black people and other racialized groups simultaneously stand outside these definitions of normality and mark their boundaries. In this context of a gender-specific, White, heterosexual normality, the jezebel or hoochie becomes a racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality. Normal female heterosexuality is expressed via the cult of true White womanhood, whereas deviant female heterosexuality is typified by the "hot mommas" of Black womanhood.

Within intersecting oppressions, Black women's allegedly deviant sexuality becomes constructed around jezebel's sexual desires. Jezebel may be a "pretty baby," but her actions as a "hot momma" indicate that she just can't get enough. Because jezebel or the hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it becomes a short step to imagine her as a "freak." And if she is a freak, her sexual partners become similarly stigmatized. For example, the hypermasculinity often attributed to Black men reflects beliefs about Black men's excessive sexual appetite. Ironically, jezebel's excessive sexual appetite masculinizes her because she desires sex just as a man does. Moreover, jezebel can also be masculinized and once again deemed "freaky" if she desires sex with other women. 2 Live Crew had little difficulty making this conceptual leap when they sing: "Freaky shit is what I like and I love to see two bitches dyke." In a context where feminine women are those who remain submissive yet appropriately flirtatious toward men, women whose sexual aggression resembles that of men become stigmatized.

When it comes to women's sexuality, the controlling image of jezebel and

her hoochie counterpart constitute one side of the normal/deviant binary. But broadening this binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality reveals that heterosexuality is juxtaposed to homosexuality as its oppositional, different, and inferior "other." Within this wider oppositional difference, jezebel becomes the freak on the border demarking heterosexuality from homosexuality. Her insatiable sexual desire helps define the boundaries of normal sexuality. Just across the border stand lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered women who are deemed deviant in large part because of their choices of sexual partners. As a sexual freak, jezebel has one foot over the line. On this border, the hoochie participates in a cluster of "deviant female sexualities," some associated with the materialistic ambitions where she sells sex for money, others associated with so-called deviant sexual practices such as sleeping with other women, and still others attached to "freaky" sexual practices such as engaging in oral and anal sex.

Images of sexuality associated with jezebel and the hoochie not only mark the boundaries of deviant sexualities, they weave throughout prevailing conceptualizations of the mammy, matriarch, and the Janus-faced welfare queen/Black lady. Connecting all is the common theme of Black women's sexuality. Each image transmits distinctive messages about the proper links among female sexuality, desired levels of fertility for working-class and middle-class Black women, and U.S. Black women's placement in social class and citizenship hierarchies. For example, the mammy, one of two somewhat positive figures, is a desexed individual. The mammy is typically portrayed as overweight, dark, and with characteristically African features—in brief, as an unsuitable sexual partner for White men. She is asexual and therefore is free to become a surrogate mother to the children she acquired not through her own sexuality. The mammy represents the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculinist thought. In contrast, both the matriarch and the welfare mother are sexual beings. But their sexuality is linked to their fertility, and this link forms one fundamental reason they are negative images. The matriarch represents the sexually aggressive woman, one who emasculates Black men because she will not permit them to assume roles as Black patriarchs. She refuses to be passive and thus is stigmatized. Similarly, the welfare mother represents a woman of low morals and uncontrolled sexuality, factors identified as the cause of her impoverished state. In both cases Black female control over sexuality and fertility is conceptualized as antithetical to elite White male interests. The Black lady completes the circle. Like mammy, her hard-earned, middle-class respectability is grounded in her seeming asexuality. Yet fertility is an issue here as well. Despite the fact that the middle-class Black lady is the woman deemed best suited to have children, in actuality, she remains the least likely

to do so. She is told that she can reproduce, but no one except her is especially disturbed if she does not.

Taken together, these prevailing images of Black womanhood represent elite White male interests in defining Black women's sexuality and fertility. Moreover, by meshing smoothly with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, they help justify the social practices that characterize the matrix of domination in the United States.

## CONTROLLING IMAGES AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Schools, the news media, and government agencies constitute important sites for reproducing these controlling images. Whereas schools and the scholarship produced and disseminated by their faculty historically have played an important part in generating these controlling images (Morton 1991), their current significance in reproducing these images is less often noted. Take, for example, how social science research on Black women's sexuality has been influenced by assumptions of the jezebel. Two topics, both deemed as social problems, take the lion's share—Black women's sexuality appears within AIDS research and within scholarship on adolescent pregnancy. Both reference two types of allegedly deviant sexuality with an eye toward altering Black women's behavior. In AIDS research, the focus is on risky sexual practices that might expose women, their unborn children, and their partners to HIV infection. Prostitutes and other sex workers are of special concern. The underlying reason for studying Black adolescent sexuality may lie in helping the girls, but an equally plausible stimulus lies in desires to get these girls off the public dole. Their sexuality is not that of risky sexual practices, but sexuality outside the confines of marriage. Embedding research on Black women's sexuality within social problems frameworks thus fosters its portrayal as a social problem.

The growing influence of television, radio, movies, videos, CDs, and the Internet constitutes new ways of circulating controlling images. Popular culture has become increasingly important in promoting these images, especially with new global technologies that allow U.S. popular culture to be exported throughout the world. Within this new corporate structure, the misogyny in some strands of Black hip-hop music becomes especially troubling. Much of this music is produced by a Black culture industry in which African-American artists have little say in production. On the one hand, Black rap music can be seen as a creative response to racism by Black urban youth who have been written off by U.S. society (Rose 1994; Kelley 1997, 43–77). On the other hand, images of Black women as sexually available hoochies persist in Black music videos. As "freaks," U.S. Black women can now be seen "poppin' that coochie"—yet another term by 2 Live Crew that describes butt shaking—in a global context.

Government agencies also play a part in legitimating these controlling images. Because legislative bodies and, in the case of 2 Live Crew's obscenity trial (see, e.g., Crenshaw 1993), courts determine which narratives are legitimated and which remain censored, government agencies decide which official interpretations of social reality prevail (Van Dijk 1993). The inordinate attention paid to Black adolescent pregnancy and parenting in scholarly research and the kinds of public policy initiatives that target Black girls illustrate the significance of government support for controlling images. Because assumptions of sexual hedonism are routinely applied to Black urban girls, they are more likely to be offered coercive birth control measures, such as Norplant and Depo Provera than their White, suburban, middle-class counterparts (Roberts 1997).

Confronting the controlling images forwarded by institutions external to African-American communities remains essential. But such efforts should not obscure the equally important issue of examining how African-American institutions also perpetuate these same controlling images. Although it may be painful to examine—especially in the context of a racially charged society always vigilant for signs of Black disunity—the question of how the organizations of Black civil society reproduce controlling images of Black womanhood and fail to take a stand against images developed elsewhere is equally important.

Since 1970, U.S. Black women have become increasingly vocal in criticizing sexism in Black civil society (Wallace 1978; E.F. White 1984; Cleage 1993; Crenshaw 1993). For example, Black feminist Pauline Terrelonge confronts the issue of the Black community's role in the subordination of African-American women by asking, "If there is much in the objective condition of black women that warrants the development of a black feminist consciousness, why have so many black women failed to recognize the patterns of sexism that directly impinge on their everyday lives?" (1984, 562). To answer this question, Terrelonge contends that a common view is that African-Americans have withstood the long line of abuses perpetuated against us mainly because of Black women's "fortitude, inner wisdom, and sheer ability to survive." Connected to this emphasis on the strength of Black women is the related argument that African-American women play critical roles in keeping Black families together and in supporting Black men. These activities have been important in preventing the potential annihilation of African-Americans as a "race." As a result, "many blacks regard the role of uniting all blacks to be the primary duty of the black woman, one that should supersede all other roles that she might want to perform, and certainly one that is essentially incompatible with her own individual liberation" (p. 557).

This analysis shifts our understanding of Black community organizations. Rather than seeing family, church, and Black civic organizations through a

race-only lens of resisting racism, such institutions may be better understood as complex sites where dominant ideologies are simultaneously resisted and reproduced. Black community organizations can oppose racial oppression yet perpetuate gender oppression, can challenge class exploitation yet foster heterosexism. One might ask where within Black civil society African-American women can openly challenge the hoochie image and other equally controlling images. Institutions controlled by African-Americans can be seen as contradictory sites where Black women learn skills of independence and self-reliance that enable African-American families, churches, and civic organizations to endure. But these same institutions may also be places where Black women learn to subordinate our interests as women to the allegedly greater good of the larger African-American community.

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

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

(Walker 1976, 41)

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

political struggle, with U.S. Black women central to those efforts. Historically, Black women's participation in Black Baptist and other Black churches suggests that Black women have been the backbone yet have resisted staying totally in the "background" (Gilkes 1985; Higginbotham 1993). One wonders, however, if contemporary Black churches are equipped to grapple with the new questions raised by the global circulation of the hoochie and comparable images. Denouncing "hoochies" and all they represent from the pulpit with a cautionary warning "don't be one" simply is not enough.

African-American families form another contradictory location where the controlling images of Black womanhood become negotiated. Middle-class White feminists seemingly have had few qualms in criticizing how their families perpetuate women's subordination (see, for example, Chodorow 1978). Until recently, however, because Black families have been so pathologized by the traditional family ideal, Black women have been reluctant to analyze in public the potential culpability of families in Black women's oppression. Black women thinkers have been more uniformly positive when describing Black families, and much more reluctant to criticize Black family organization than their White counterparts. As a result, Black studies emphasizes material that, although it quite rightly demonstrates the strengths of U.S. Black families in a context of intersecting oppressions, skims over problems (see, e.g., Billingsley 1992). But this emphasis on strengths has often come at a cost, and that cost has far too often been paid by African-American women. Thus, within Black feminist scholarship, we are finally hearing not only the long-hidden stories of those strong Black women (Joseph 1981; Collins 1987), but those of women whose gendered family responsibilities cause them trouble (Ritchie 1996; Kaplan 1997).

Some Black feminist activists claim that relegating Black women to more submissive, supporting roles in African-American organizations has been an obstacle to Black political empowerment. Black nationalist philosophies, in particular, have come under attack for their ideas about Black women's place in political struggle (White 1990; Lubiano 1997; Williams 1997; Collins 1998a, 155–86). In describing the 1960s nationalist movement, Pauli Murray contends that many Black men misinterpreted Black women's qualities of self-reliance and independence by tacitly accepting the matriarchy thesis. Such a stance was and is highly problematic for Black women. Murray observes, "The black militant's cry for the retrieval of black manhood suggests an acceptance of this stereotype, an association of masculinity with male dominance and a tendency to treat the values of self-reliance and independence as purely masculine traits" (1970, 89). Echoing Murray, Sheila Radford-Hill (1986) sees Black women's subordination in African-American institutions as a continuing concern. For Radford-Hill the erosion of Black women's traditional power bases in African-American communities which followed nationalist movements is

problematic in that "Black macho constituted a betrayal by black men; a psychosexual rejection of black women experienced as the capstone to our fall from cultural power. . . . Without the power to influence the purpose and direction of our collective experience, without the power to influence our culture from within, we are increasingly immobilized" (p. 168).

## COLOR, HAIR TEXTURE, AND STANDARDS OF BEAUTY

Like everyone else, African-American women come to understand the workings of intersecting oppressions without obvious teaching or conscious learning. The controlling images of Black women are not simply grafted onto existing social institutions but are so pervasive that even though the images themselves change in the popular imagination, Black women's portrayal as the Other persists. Particular meanings, stereotypes, and myths can change, but the overall ideology of domination itself seems to be an enduring feature of intersecting oppressions (Omi and Winant 1994).

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

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

(Russell 1987, 22)

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

Although most Black women typically resist being objectified as the Other, these controlling images remain powerful influences on our relationships with Whites, Black men, other racial/ethnic groups, and one another. Dealing with prevailing standards of beauty—particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture—is one specific example of how controlling images derogate African-American women. A children's rhyme often sung in Black communities proclaims:

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

Prevailing standards of beauty claim that no matter how intelligent, educated, or "beautiful" a Black woman may be, those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must "git back." Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blonde, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair.

Race, gender, and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty. Black men's blackness penalizes them. But because they are not women, valuations of their self-worth do not depend as heavily on their physical attractiveness. In contrast, part of the objectification of all women lies in evaluating how they look. Within binary thinking, White and Black women as collectivities represent two opposing poles, with Latinas, Asian-American women, and Native American women jockeying for positions in between. Judging White women by their physical appearance and attractiveness to men objectifies them. But their White skin and straight hair simultaneously privilege them in a system that elevates whiteness over blackness. In contrast, African-American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty—standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and, most painfully, one another. Regardless of any individual woman's subjective reality, this is the system of ideas that she encounters. Because controlling images are hegemonic and taken for granted, they become virtually impossible to escape.

In her Preface to *Skin Deep: Women Writing on Color, Culture and Identity*, editor Elena Featherstone suggests that contrary to popular belief, "issues of race and color are not as simple as Black and white—or Red, Yellow, or Brown and white" (1994, vi). Featherstone is right, and volumes such as hers remain necessary. Yet at the same time, colorism in the U.S. context operates the way that it does because it is deeply embedded in a distinctly American form of racism grounded in Black/White oppositional differences. Other groups "of color" must negotiate the meanings attached to their "color." All must position themselves within a continually renegotiated color hierarchy where, because they define the top and the bottom, the meanings attached to Whiteness and Blackness change much less than we think. Linked in symbiotic relationship, White and Black gain meaning only in relation to one another. However well-meaning conversations among "women of color" concerning the meaning of color in the United States may be, such conversations require an analysis of how institutionalized racism produces color hierarchies among U.S. women. Without this attention to domination, such conversations can

work to flatten bona fide differences in power among White women, Latinas, Asian-American women, Native women, and Black women. Even Featherstone recognizes the fact of Blackness, by pointing out, "color is the ultimate test of 'American-ness,' and black is the most un-American color of all" (1994, iii).

Since U.S. Black women have been most uniformly harmed by the colorism that is a by-product of U.S. racism, it is important to explore how prevailing standards of beauty affect U.S. Black women's treatment in everyday life. The long-standing attention of musicians, writers, and artists to this theme reveals African-American women's conflicted feelings concerning skin color, hair texture, and standards of beauty. In her autobiography, Maya Angelou records her painful realization that the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become white:

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

(Angelou 1969, 2)

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

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

(1972, 37)

This division of African-Americans into two categories—the "Brights" and the "Lesser Blacks"—affects dark-skinned and light-skinned women

differently. Darker women face being judged inferior and receiving the treatment afforded "too-big Negro girls with nappy hair." Institutions controlled by Whites clearly show a preference for lighter-skinned Blacks, discriminating against darker ones or against any African-Americans who appear to reject White images of beauty. Sonia Sanchez reports, "Sisters tell me . . . that when they go out for jobs they straighten their hair because if they go in with their hair natural or braided, they probably won't get the job" (Tate 1983, 141).

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

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

(Golden 1983, 25)

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

This different valuation and treatment of dark-skinned and light-skinned Black women influences the relationships among African-American women. Toni Morrison's (1970) novel *The Bluest Eye* explores this theme of the tension

that can exist among Black women grappling with the meaning of prevailing standards of beauty. Frieda, a dark-skinned, "ordinary" Black girl, struggles with the meaning of these standards. She wonders why adults always got so upset when she rejected the White dolls they gave her and why light-skinned Maureen Peal, a child her own age whose two braids hung like "lynch-ropes down her back," got the love and attention of teachers, adults, and Black boys alike. Morrison explores Frieda's attempt not to blame Maureen for the benefits her light skin and long hair afforded her as part of Frieda's growing realization that the "Thing" to fear was not Maureen herself but the "Thing" that made Maureen beautiful.

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

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

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

(Washington 1987, 421)

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

## BLACK WOMEN'S REACTIONS TO CONTROLLING IMAGES

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny eloquently expresses her perspective on Black womanhood: "Ah was born back in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dream of whut a woman oughta be and do. But nothing can't stop you from wishin! You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither" (Hurston 1937, 17). Like many

African-American women, she resisted the controlling images of "work-ox" and "brood-sow," but her status as a slave prevented her fulfilling her "dreams of what a woman oughta be and do." She saw the constraints on her own life but managed to keep the will to resist alive. Moreover, she tried to pass on that vision of freedom from controlling images to her granddaughter.

Given the ubiquitous nature of controlling images, it should not be surprising that exploring how Black women construct social realities is a recurring theme in Black feminist thought. Overall, despite the pervasiveness of controlling images, African-American women as a group have resisted these ideological justifications for our oppression (Holloway 1995). Unlike White women who "face the pitfall of being seduced into joining the oppressor under the pretense of sharing power," and for whom "there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools," Black women are offered fewer possibilities (Lorde 1984, 117-18). In this context, individual women and subgroups of women within the larger collectivity of U.S. Black women have demonstrated diverse reactions to their treatment. Understanding the contours of this heterogeneity generally, and how U.S. Black women can be better equipped to resist this negative treatment, constitutes one important task for U.S. Black feminist thought.

Historically, literature by U.S. Black women writers provides one comprehensive view of Black women's struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of derogated images of Black womanhood. Portraying the range of ways that African-American women experience internalized oppression has been a prominent theme in Black women's writing. Mary Helen Washington's (1982) discussion of the theme of the suspended woman in Black women's literature describes one dimension of Black women's internalized oppression. Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these women's lives. They are suspended in time and place; their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves are often destroyed. Pecola Breedlove, an unloved, "ugly" 11-year-old Black girl in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), internalizes the negative images of African-American women and believes that the absence of blue eyes is central to her "ugliness." Pecola cannot value her Blackness—she longs to be White so that she can escape the pain of being Black, female, poor, and a child. Her mother, Pauline Breedlove, typifies the internalization of the mammy image. Pauline Breedlove neglects her own children, preferring to lavish her concern and attention on the White charges in her care. Only by accepting this subordinate role to White children could she, as a poor Black woman, see a positive place for herself.

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

create other worlds apart from the ones that produced such painful Black female realities. Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and Mrs. Hill in *Meridian* (Walker 1976) both demonstrate an attachment to religion that allows them to ignore their daughters. Eva Medina in Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976), Merle Kibona in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), and Velma Henry in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) all experience madness as an escape from pain.

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

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

Renay's experiences typify how Black women writers explore the theme of Black women's resistance to these controlling images, a resistance typified by the emergent woman in Black women's literature. Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* (1986) describes a Black slave woman's emerging sense of power after she participates in a slave revolt, runs away, and eventually secures her own freedom. Dorine Davis, the heroine in Rosa Guy's *A Measure of Time* (1983), is raped at age 10 by her White employer, subsequently sleeps with men for money, yet retains a core of resistance. Bad things happen to Dorine, but Guy does not portray Dorine as a victim. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Toni Morrison presents the character of Claudia, a 10-year-old Black girl who, to the chagrin of grown-ups, destroys White dolls by tearing off their heads and who refuses to share her classmates' admiration of light-skinned, long-haired Maureen Peal. Claudia's growing awareness of the "Thing that made her [Maureen Peal] beautiful and us ugly" and her rejection of that Thing—racist images of Black women—represents yet another reaction to negative images of Black womanhood. Like Merle Kibona in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Vyry in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), or Meridian in Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), Claudia represents a young version of emergent Black women carving out new definitions of Black womanhood.

Independent Black women heroines populate U.S. Black women's fiction of the 1990s. Many of these Black female fictional characters express varying dimensions of the emergent woman thesis. Just as social class differences have become more prominent in Black women's controlling images overall, images of emergent women in Black women's literature also reflect social class diversity. Working-class women become emergent women by overcoming an array of hardships, many of them financial, that aim to keep them down. In Barbara Neely's novel *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) Blanche evades the law by hiding out as a domestic worker for a rich White family. Another working-class heroine is Valerie Wilson's fictional detective Tamara Hale. A single mother of a teenage son, Hale juggles issues of financial well-being and raising her son in the Newark metropolitan area. Interestingly, in both Neely and Wilson's fiction, working-class women spend little time bemoaning their unmarried, uncoupled status. Neither fictional heroine agonizes over the absence of a Black male husband or lover in their lives. In contrast, middle-class Black women become emergent women by changing their expectations about their femininity and Black men's expectations. Terry McMillan's two volumes, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), can be read as companion pieces that advise Black middle-class women how to emerge. In *Waiting to Exhale*, four Black women friends struggle with issues of having satisfying relationships with Black men. By the end of the book, two of the women have found meaningful relationships with men.

More importantly, what they have all learned is that their friendship with one another is as important as their ties to men. In McMillan's subsequent volume, *Stella*, a Black single mother who is a highly paid, successful professional, takes a trip to Jamaica by herself and meets Winston, a much younger man. By the end of the volume, Stella has shed the limitations of distinctly American controlling images, and decides that true love transcends differences of age and nationality. Whereas racism, sexism, and class exploitation do not preoccupy the emergent women created by Neely, Wilson, and McMillan, the social contexts in which these authors embed their characters are clearly structured by these oppressions.

The many documentaries and feature films where Black women appear as central characters constitute another arena where emergent Black women appear. Not only could Black women read about emergent Black women in Terry McMillan's fiction, audiences could view images of Black women trying to "exhale" and "get their groove" on the big screen. This theme of U.S. Black women coming to know themselves, and often doing so in company of other Black women, wove throughout a cluster of films whose subject matter differed dramatically. Feature films made by Black women directors, such as Julie Dash's *Daughters of Dust*, Michelle Parkerson's *Gotta Make That Journey: Sweet Honey in the Rock*, and Ayoka Chenzira's *Alma's Rainbow* all illustrate the value Black women filmmakers place on Black women's emerging self-definitions.

Emergent women may have only recently made their appearance in Black women's fiction and film, but such women have long populated everyday lived experience. In her autobiography, Lorene Carey, a working-class African-American woman who helped desegregate a prestigious New England boarding school, tells of what happens when everyday Black women decide to "turn it out":

My mother, and her mother, who had worked in a factory, and her mother, who had cleaned apartments in Manhattan, had been studying these people all their lives. . . . And I had studied them. I had studied my mother as she turned out elementary schools and department stores. I always saw it coming. Some white department-store manager would look at my mother and see no more than a modestly dressed young black woman making a tiresome complaint. He'd use that tone of voice they used when they had important work elsewhere. Uh-oh. Then he'd dismiss her with his eyes. I'd feel her body stiffen next to me, and I'd know that he'd set her off. And then it began in earnest, the turning out. She never moved back. It didn't matter how many people were in line. . . . Turning out, I learned, was not a matter of style; cold indignation worked as well as hot fury. Turning out had to do with will.

(Carey 1991, 58–59)

Emergent women have found that one way of surviving the everyday disrespect and outright assaults that accompany controlling images is to "turn it out." This is the moment when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action. As Karla Holloway says, "no one wins in that situation, but usually we feel better" (1995, 31).

## 5

### THE POWER OF SELF-DEFINITION

"In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers," asserts Black feminist poet Audre Lorde (1984, 114). This "watching" generates a dual consciousness in African-American women, one in which Black women "become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection" (p. 114), while hiding a self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups. Ella Surrey, an elderly Black woman domestic, eloquently summarizes the energy needed to maintain independent self-definitions: "We have always been the best actors in the world. . . . I think that we are much more clever than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We've always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves" (Gwaltney 1980, 238, 240).<sup>1</sup>

Behind the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on African-American women, acts of resistance, both organized and anonymous, have long existed (Davis 1981, 1989; Terborg-Penn 1986; Hine 1989; Barnett 1993). Despite the strains connected with domestic work, Judith Rollins (1985) asserts that the domestic workers she interviewed appeared to have retained a "remarkable sense of self-worth." They "skillfully deflect these psychological attacks on their personhood, their adulthood, their dignity, these attempts to lure them into accepting employers' definitions of them as inferior" (p. 212). Bonnie Thornton Dill (1988a) found that the domestic workers in her study refused to let their employers push them around. As one respondent declared: "When I went out to work . . . my mother told me, 'Don't let anybody take advantage of you. Speak up for your rights, but do the work right. If they don't give you your rights, you demand that they treat you right. And if they don't, then you quit' " (p. 41). Jacqueline Bobo (1995)