

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5

THE POWER OF SELF-DEFINITION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

FINDING A VOICE: COMING TO TERMS WITH CONTRADICTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

SAFE SPACES AND FINDING A VOICE

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

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

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

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

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

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

Black Women's Relationships with One Another

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Black Women's Blues Tradition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Voices of Black Women Writers

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

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

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

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

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

CONSCIOUSNESS AS A SPHERE OF FREEDOM

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

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

The Importance of Self-Definition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Self-Valuation and Respect

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Self-Reliance and Independence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Self, Change, and Empowerment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, contemporary

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 6

BLACK WOMEN AND MOTHERHOOD

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

—June Jordan 1985, 105

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