

AIN'T I A WOMAN

Black Women and Feminism

BELL HOOKS

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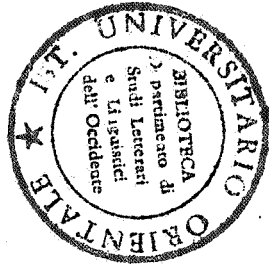
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For Rosa Bell, my mother—

who told me when I was a child that she had once
written poems—that I had inherited my love of
reading and my longing to write from her.



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Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience

In a retrospective examination of the black female slave experience, sexism looms as large as racism as an oppressive force in the lives of black women. Institutionalized sexism—that is, patriarchy—formed the base of the American social structure along with racial imperialism. Sexism was an integral part of the social and political order white colonizers brought with them from their European homelands, and it was to have a grave impact on the fate of enslaved black women. In its earliest stages, the slave trade focused primarily on the importation of laborers; the emphasis at that time was on the black male. The black female slave was not as valued as the black male slave. On the average, it cost more money to buy a male slave than a female slave. The scarcity of workers coupled with the relatively few numbers of black women in American colonies caused some white male planters to encourage, persuade, and coerce immigrant white females to engage in sexual relationships with black male slaves as a means of producing new workers. In Maryland, in the year 1664, the first anti-amalgamation law was passed; it was aimed at curtailing sexual relationships between white women and enslaved black men. One part

of the preamble of this document stated:

That whatsoever freeborn woman shall intermarry with any slave, from and after the last day of the present assembly, shall serve the masters of such slaves during the life of her husband; and that all the issue of such free born women, so married shall be slaves as their fathers were.

The most celebrated case of this time was that of Irish Nell, an indentured servant sold by Lord Baltimore to a southern planter who encouraged her to marry a black man named Butler. Lord Baltimore, on hearing of the fate of Irish Nell, was so appalled that white women were either by choice or coercion co-habiting sexually with black male slaves that he had the law repealed. The new law stated that the offspring of relationships between white women and black men would be free. As efforts on the part of outraged white men to curtail inter-racial relationships between black men and white women succeeded, the black female slave acquired a new status. Planters recognized the economic gain they could amass by breeding black slave women. The virulent attacks on slave importation also led to more emphasis on slave breeding. Unlike the offspring of relationships between black men and white women, the offspring of any black slave woman regardless of the race of her mate would be legally slaves, and therefore the property of the owner to whom the female slave belonged. As the market value of the black female slave increased, larger numbers were stolen or purchased by white slave traders.

White male observers of African culture in the 18th and 19th centuries were astounded and impressed by the African male's subjugation of the African female. They were not accustomed to a patriarchal social order that demanded not only that women accept an inferior status, but that they participate actively in the community labor force. Amanda Berry Smith, a 19th century black missionary, visited African communities and reported on the condition of African women:

The poor women of Africa, like those of India, have a hard time. As a rule, they have all the hard work to do. They have to cut and carry all the wood, carry all the water on their heads, and plant all the rice. The men and boys cut and burn

the bush, with the help of the women; but sowing the rice, and planting the cassava, the women have to do.

You will often see a great, big man walking ahead with nothing in his hand but a cutlass (as they always carry that or a spear), and a woman, his wife, coming on behind with a great big child on her back, and a load on her head.

No matter how tired she is, her lord would not think of bringing her a jar of water, to cook his supper with, or of beating the rice, no, she must do that.

The African woman schooled in the art of obedience to a higher authority by the tradition of her society was probably seen by the white male slaver as an ideal subject for slavery. As much of the work to be done in the American colonies was in the area of hoe-agriculture, it undoubtedly occurred to slavers that the African female, accustomed to performing arduous work in the fields while also performing a wide variety of tasks in the domestic household, would be very useful on the American plantation. While only a few African women were aboard the first ships bringing slaves to the new world, as the slave trade gathered momentum, females made up one-third of the human cargo aboard most ships. Because they could not effectively resist capture at the hands of thieves and kidnappers, African women became frequent targets for white male slavers. Slavers also used the capture of women important to the tribe, like the daughter of a king, as a means of luring African men into situations where they could be easily captured. Other African women were sold into slavery as punishment for breaking tribal laws. A woman found guilty of committing an act of adultery might be sold into bondage.

White male slavers did not regard the African female as a threat, so often aboard slave ships black women were stored without being shackled while black men were chained to one another. The slavers believed their own safety to be threatened by enslaved African men, but they had no such fear of the African female. The placing of African men in chains was to prevent possible uprisings. As white slavers feared resistance and retaliation at the hands of African men, they placed as much distance between themselves and black male slaves as was possible on board. It was only in relationship to the black

female slave that the white slaver could exercise freely absolute power, for he could brutalize and exploit her without fear of harmful retaliation. Black female slaves moving freely about the decks were a ready target for any white male who might choose to physically abuse and torment them. Initially every slave on board the ship was branded with a hot iron. A cat-o'-nine-tails was used by the slavers to lash those Africans that cried out in pain or resisted the torture. Women were lashed severely for crying. They were stripped of their clothing and beaten on all parts of their body. Ruth and Jacob Weldon, an African couple who experienced the horrors of the slave passage, saw "mothers with babes at their breasts basely branded and scarred, till it would seem as if the very heavens might smite the infernal tormentors with the doom they so richly merited." After the branding all slaves were stripped of any clothing. The nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability. Rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women. The threat of rape or other physical brutalization inspired terror in the psyches of displaced African females. Robert Shufeldt, an observer of the slave trade, documented the prevalence of rape on slave ships. He asserts, "In those days many a negress was landed upon our shored already impregnated by someone of the demonic crew that brought her over."

Many African women were pregnant prior to their capture or purchase. They were forced to endure pregnancy without any care given to their diet, without any exercise, and without any assistance during the labor. In their own communities African women had been accustomed to much pampering and care during pregnancy, so the barbaric nature of childbearing on the slave ship was both physically harmful and psychologically demoralizing. Annals of history record that the American slave ship Pongas carried 250 women, many of them pregnant, who were squeezed into a compartment of 16 by 18 feet. The women who survived the initial stages of pregnancy gave birth aboard ship with their bodies exposed to either the scorching sun or the freezing cold. The numbers of black women who died during childbirth or the number of stillborn children will never

be known. Black women with children on board the slave ships were ridiculed, mocked, and treated contemptuously by the slaver crew. Often the slavers brutalized children to watch the anguish of their mothers. In their personal account of life aboard a slave ship, the Weldons recounted an incident in which a child of nine months was flogged continuously for refusing to eat. When beating failed to force the child to eat, the captain ordered that the child be placed feet first into a pot of boiling water. After trying other torturous methods with no success, the captain dropped the child and caused its death. Not deriving enough satisfaction from this sadistic act, he then commanded the mother to throw the body of the child overboard. The mother refused but was beaten until she submitted.

The traumatic experiences of African women and men aboard slave ships were only the initial stages of an indoctrination process that would transform the African free human being into a slave. An important part of the slaver's job was to effectively transform the African personality aboard the ships so that it would be marketable as a "docile" slave in the American colonies. The prideful, arrogant, and independent spirit of the African people had to be broken so that they would conform to the white colonizer's notion of proper slave demeanors. Crucial in the preparation of African people for the slave market was the destruction of human dignity, the removal of names and status, the dispersement of groups so that there would exist no common language, and the removal of any overt sign of an African heritage. The methods the slaver used to de-humanize African women and men were various tortures and punishments. A slave might be severely beaten for singing a sad song. When he deemed it necessary, the slaver would slaughter a slave so as to inspire terror in the enslaved onlookers. These methods of terrorization succeeded in forcing African people to repress their awareness of themselves as free people and to adopt the slave identity imposed upon them. Slavers recorded in their log-books that they were sadistically cruel to Africans aboard the slave ships as a way of "breaking them in" or "taming" them. African females received the brunt of this mass brutalization and terrorization not only because they could be victimized via their sexuality but also because they

were more likely to work intimately with the white family than the black male. Since the slaver regarded the black woman as a marketable cook, wet nurse, housekeeper, it was crucial that she be so thoroughly terrorized that she would submit passively to the will of white master, mistress, and their children. In order to make his product saleable, the slaver had to ensure that no recalcitrant black female servant would poison a family, kill children, set fire to the house, or resist in any way. The only insurance he could provide was based on his ability to tame the slave. Undoubtedly, the slave ship experience had a tremendous psychological impact on the psyches of black women and men. So horrific was the passage from Africa to America that only those women and men who could maintain a will to live despite their oppressive conditions survived. White people who observed the African slaves as they departed from the ships on American shores noted that they seemed to be happy and joyful. They thought that the happiness of the African slaves was due to their pleasure at having arrived in a Christian land. But the slaves were only expressing relief. They believed no fate that awaited them in the American colonies could be as horrific as the slave ship experience.

Traditionally, scholars have emphasized the impact of slavery on the black male consciousness, arguing that black men, more so than black women, were the "real" victims of slavery. Sexist historians and sociologists have provided the American public with a perspective on slavery in which the most cruel and de-humanizing impact of slavery on the lives of black people was that black men were stripped of their masculinity, which they then argue resulted in the dissolution and overall disruption of any black familial structure. Scholars have argued further that by not allowing black men to assume their traditional patriarchal status, white men effectively emasculated them, reducing them to an effeminate state. Implicit in this assertion is the assumption that the worst that can happen to a man is that he be made to assume the social status of a woman. To suggest that black men were de-humanized solely as a result of not being able to be patriarchs implies that the subjugation of black women was essential to the black male's

development of a positive self-concept, an idea that only served to support a sexist social order. Enslaved black men were stripped of the patriarchal status that had characterized their social situation in Africa but they were not stripped of their masculinity. Despite all popular arguments that claim black men were figuratively castrated, throughout the history of slavery in America black men were allowed to maintain some semblance of their societally defined masculine role. In colonial times as in contemporary times, masculinity denoted possessing the attributes of strength, virility, vigor, and physical prowess. It was precisely the "masculinity" of the African male that the white slaver sought to exploit. Young, strong, healthy African males were his prime target. For it was by the sale of virile African men "would-be workers" that the white slave trader expected to receive maximum profit return on his investment. That white people recognized the "masculinity" of the black male is evident by the tasks assigned the majority of black male slaves. No annals of history record that masses of black slave men were forced to execute roles traditionally performed exclusively by women. Evidence to the contrary exists, documenting the fact that there were many tasks enslaved African men would not perform because they regarded them as "female" work. If white women and men had really been obsessed by the idea of destroying black masculinity, they could have physically castrated all black men aboard slave ships or they could easily have forced black men to assume "feminine" attire or perform so-called "feminine" tasks. White slaveholders were ambivalent in regards to their treatment of the black male, for while they exploited his masculinity, they institutionalized measures to keep that masculinity in check. Individual black men were castrated by their owners or by mobs but the purpose of such acts was usually to set an example for other male slaves so that they would not resist white authority. Even if enslaved black men had been able to maintain completely their patriarchal status in relationship to enslaved black women, it would not have made the reality of slave life any less tolerable, any less brutal, or any less de-humanizing.

Oppression of black men during slavery has been described as a de-masculinization for the same reason that vir-

tually no scholarly attention has been given to the oppression of black women during slavery. Underlying both tendencies is the sexist assumption that the experiences of men are more important than those of women and that what matters most among the experiences of men is their ability to assert themselves patriarchally. Scholars have been reluctant to discuss the oppression of black women during slavery because of an unwillingness to seriously examine the impact of sexist and racist oppression on their social status. Unfortunately this lack of interest and concern leads them to deliberately minimize the black female slave experience. Although it in no way diminishes the suffering and oppressions of enslaved black men, it is obvious that the two forces, sexism and racism, intensified and magnified the sufferings and oppressions of black women. The area that most clearly reveals the differentiation between the status of male slaves and female slaves is the work area. The black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields; the black female was exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault.

While black men were not forced to assume a role colonial American society regarded as "feminine," black women were forced to assume a "masculine" role. Black women labored in the fields alongside black men, but few if any black men labored as domestics alongside black women in the white household (with the possible exception of butlers, whose status was still higher than that of a maid). Thus, it would be much more accurate for scholars to examine the dynamics of sexist and racist oppression during slavery in light of the masculinization of the black female and not the de-masculinization of the black male. In colonial American society, privileged white women rarely worked in the fields. Occasionally, white female indentured servants were forced to work in the fields as punishment for misdeeds, but this was not a common practice. In the eyes of colonial white Americans, only debased and degraded members of the female sex labored in the fields. And any white woman forced by circumstances to work in the fields was regarded as unworthy of the title "woman." Although

enslaved African women had labored in the fields in African communities, there these tasks were seen as an extension of a woman's feminine role. Transplanted African women soon realized that they were seen as "surrogate" men by white male slavers.

On any plantation with a substantial number of female slaves, black women performed the same tasks as black men; they plowed, planted, and harvested crops. On some plantations black women worked longer hours in the fields than black men. Even though it was a widespread belief among white plantation owners that black women were often better workers than their male counterparts, only a male slave could rise to the position of driver or overseer. Given their African heritage, it was easy for enslaved black women to adapt to farm labor in the colonies. Not only was the displaced African man unaccustomed to various types of farm labor, he often saw many tasks as "feminine" and resented having to perform them. In the states where cotton was the main staple to market, harvesting of crops depended heavily on the labor of black females. Although both black women and men labored to pick the ripe cotton, it was believed that the more delicately tapered fingers of the black female made it easier for her to gather the cotton from the pod. White overseers expected black female workers to work as well if not better than their male counterparts. If a black female worker failed to accomplish the amount of work expected of her, she was punished. White men may have discriminated against black women slaves in choosing to allow only males to be drivers or overseers, but they did not discriminate in the area of punishment. Female slaves were beaten as harshly as male slaves. Observers of the slave experience claim that it was common on a plantation to see a black female stripped naked, tied to a stake, and whipped with a hard saw or club.

On large plantations not all black women labored in the fields. They worked as nurses, cooks, seamstresses, washerwomen, and as maids. The popular notion that black slaves working in the white household were automatically the recipients of preferential treatment is not always substantiated by the personal accounts of slaves. House slaves were less subjected to

the physical hardships that beset field workers, but they were more likely to suffer endless cruelty and torture because they were constantly in the presence of demanding mistresses and masters. Black females working in close contact with white mistresses were frequently abused for petty offenses. Mungo White, an ex-slave from Alabama, recalled the conditions under which his mother worked:

Her task was too hard for any one person. She had to serve as maid to Mr. White's daughter, cook for all de hands, spin and card four cuts of thread a day, and den wash. Dere was one hundred and forty-four threads to de cut. If she didn't get all dis done she got fifty lashes dat night.

House slaves complained repeatedly about the stress and strain of being constantly under the surveillance of white owners.

Racist exploitation of black women as workers either in the fields or domestic household was not as de-humanizing and demoralizing as the sexual exploitation. The sexism of colonial white male patriarchs spared black male slaves the humiliation of homosexual rape and other forms of sexual assault. While institutionalized sexism was a social system that protected black male sexuality, it (socially) legitimized sexual exploitation of black females. The female slave lived in constant awareness of her sexual vulnerability and in perpetual fear that any male, white or black, might single her out to assault and victimize. Linda Brent in the narrative of her slave experience expressed her awareness of the black female's plight:

Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and suffering, and mortifications peculiarly their own.

Those sufferings peculiar to black women were directly related to their sexuality and involved rape and other forms of sexual assault. Black female slaves were usually sexually assaulted when they were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen. One female slave autobiographer declared:

The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her masters and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her

owner or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these failed to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will.

Black female slave narratives that provide information concerning the sexual education of girls suggest that they knew little about their bodies, where babies came from, or about sexual intercourse. Few slave parents warned their daughters about the possibility of rape or helped them to prepare for such situations. The slave parents' unwillingness to openly concern themselves with the reality of sexual exploitation reflects the general colonial American attitude regarding sexuality.

Sexual exploitation of young slave girls usually occurred after they left the hut or cabin of their parents to work in the white domestic household. It was a common practice for a young slave girl to be forced to sleep in the same bedroom with a master and mistress, a situation which provided a convenient setting for sexual assault. Linda Brent recorded in her autobiography a detailed account of her white master's obsessive desire to assert his power over her by constantly threatening rape. When Linda first entered the service of her owner Dr. Flint, she was thirteen years old. He did not rape her but began to constantly torment and persecute her by verbally announcing his intentions to take her sexually. At the onset of their encounter he informed her that if she would not willingly submit, he would use force. Describing herself at fifteen, Linda wrote:

I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandment of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subjected to his will in all things...

White male slaveowners usually tried to bribe black women as preparation for sexual overtures so as to place them in the role of prostitute. As long as the white slaveowner "paid" for the sexual services of his black female slave, he felt absolved of responsibility for such acts. Given the harsh conditions of slave life, any suggestion that enslaved black women had a choice as to their sexual partner is ludicrous. Since the white male could rape the black female who did not willingly respond to his

demands, passive submission on the part of the enslaved black women cannot be seen as complicity. Those women who did not willingly respond to the sexual overture of masters and overseers were brutalized and punished. Any show of resistance on the part of enslaved females increased the determination of white owners eager to demonstrate their power. In an account of her slave experience, Ann, a young mulatto woman, documents the struggle for power enacted by white masters, overseers, whippers, and the female slave. In her case it was the paid whipper who planned prior to the whipping. When Ann remove all her clothing prior to the whipping. When Ann realized that he intended to rape her, she struggled. Her resistance angered him and he responded, "Girl, you've got to yield to me. I'll have you now; if it's only to show you that I can... You've got to be mine. I'll give you a fine calico dress and a pretty pair of ear-bobs!" Ann tells readers:

This was too much for further endurance. What! Must I give up the angel sealed honor of my life in traffic for trinkets. Where is the woman that would not have hotly resented such an insult. I turned upon him like a hungry lioness, and just as his wanton hand was about to be laid upon me, I dexterously aimed, and hurled the bottle against his left temple. With a low cry of pain he fell to the floor, and the blood oozed freely from the wound.

The paid whipper did not die from Ann's attack, so she was only punished by a prison sentence and daily floggings. Had he died she would have been tried for murder and sentenced to death.

Nineteenth century white female humanist Lydia Marie Child accurately summed up the social status of black women during slavery with the statement:

The negro woman is unprotected either by law or public opinion. She is the property of her master, and her daughters are his property. They are allowed to have no conscientious scruples, no sense of shame, no regard for the feelings of husband, or parent: they must be entirely subservient to the will of their owner on pain of being whipped as near unto death as will comport with his interest or quite to death if it suits his pleasure.

White male slaveowners wanted enslaved black women to passively accept sexual exploitation as the right and privilege of those in power. The black female slave who willingly submitted to a master's sexual advance and who received presents or payments was rewarded for her acceptance of the existing social order. Those black women who resisted sexual exploitation directly challenged the system; their refusal to submit passively to rape was a denouncement of the slaveowner's right to their persons. They were brutally punished. The political aim of this categorical rape of black women by white males was to obtain absolute allegiance and obedience to the white imperialistic order. Black activist Angela Davis has convincingly argued that the rape of black female slaves was not, as other scholars have suggested, a case of white men satisfying their sexual lust, but was in fact an institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women. Davis contends:

In confronting the black woman as adversary in a sexual contest, the master would be subjecting her to the most elemental form of terrorism distinctly suited for the female: rape. Given the already terroristic texture of plantation life, it would be as potential victim of rape that the slave woman would be most unguarded. Further, she might be most conveniently manipulated if the master contrived a random system of sorts, forcing her to pay with her body for foods, diminished severity of treatment, the safety of her children, etc.

In 1839, the book *American Slavery: As It Is* was published anonymously by white abolitionists who believed they could destroy the pro-slavery arguments by exposing in print the horrors of slave life. They relied on the accounts of white people who had observed slavery firsthand or had gained information from slaveholders and their friends. The work was compiled and collated primarily by Angelina and Sarah Grimke, two outspoken abolitionists. Because their brother had fathered children by a black female slave, they were particularly concerned about the sexual exploitation of black female slaves. For many other white female abolitionists the sole motivating force behind their anti-slavery efforts was the desire to bring an end

to sexual contact between white men and black female slaves. They were not concerned about the plight of enslaved black women, but about saving the souls of white men whom they believed had sinned against God by their acts of moral depravity. Many pro-slavery white women ultimately denounced slavery because of their outrage at the sexual barbarity of white men. They felt personally shamed and humiliated by what they termed white male adultery (which was in actuality rape). Commenting on her mistress' attitude toward the sexual exploitation of black women, Linda Brent wrote:

I was soon convinced that her emotions arose from anger and wounded pride. She felt that her marriage vows were desecrated, her dignity insulted; but she had no compassion for the poor victim of her husband's perfidy. She pitied herself as a martyr; but she was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slaves were placed.

The Grimke women sympathized with the plight of black females but Victorian social convention governing behavior did not allow them to graphically expose many of the cruel acts inflicted upon black slave women by white men. Proper decorum prevented them from speaking directly and honestly about the hidden evils of slavery. Angelina Grimke wrote:

We forbear to lift the veil of private life any higher. Let these few hints suffice to give you some idea of what is daily passing behind the curtain which has been so carefully drawn before the scenes of domestic life in slave holding America.

Had Angelina and Sarah Grimke lifted the veil of private life any higher they would have exposed not only slaveowners siring children by black women, but sadistic misogynist acts of cruelty and brutality that went far beyond seduction—to rape, to torture, and even to orgiastic murder and necrophilia.

Modern historians tend to make light of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery. In his *Daughters of the Promised Land* Page Smith writes:

Most young Southern men doubtless had their initial sexual experience with a compliant slave girl. It was not

unnatural that many of them should continue to indulge themselves after their marriages. In addition there was undoubtedly the attraction of the perverse, of the taboo, the association of darkness with pleasant wickedness, the absence of any danger to the sexual exploiter however unwelcome his attentions may have been. Moreover, there was the tradition of Negro sensuality which may well have worked to make the white wife a more restrained sexual partner. Thus when the Southern male looked to slave women for his basic sexual satisfaction, he increasingly found them there. Since there seems to be in masculine sexuality a measure of aggressiveness and even sadism, passivity and defenselessness seem often to enhance the desirability of the sexual object which was what the Negro woman was for her white masters.

The reader is encouraged by Smith to regard the brutality of white men as merely a case of "boys will be boys." Like many other historians, he paints a picture of slavery in which white men had "normal" male sexual desires that they indulged with submissive slave girls. While he acknowledges the sadism that often prompted sexual exploitation of the black female slave, he minimizes it by implying that it was an extension of "normal" male sexual expression.

The brutal treatment of enslaved black women by white men exposed the depths of male hatred of woman and woman's body. Such treatment was a direct consequence of misogynist attitudes toward women that prevailed in colonial American society. In fundamentalist Christian teaching woman was portrayed as an evil sexual temptress, the bringer of sin into the world. Sexual lust originated with her and men were merely the victims of her wanton power. Socialization of white men to regard women as their moral downfall led to the development of anti-woman sentiment. White male religious teachers taught that woman was an inherently sinful creature of the flesh whose wickedness could only be purged by the intercession of a more powerful being. Appointing themselves as the personal agents of God, they became the judges and overseers of woman's virtue. They instigated laws to govern the sexual behavior of white women, to ensure that they would not be tempted to stray from the straight and narrow path. Severe

punishments were meted out to those women who overstepped the boundaries white men defined as woman's place. The Salem Witchcraft trials were an extreme expression of patriarchal society's persecution of women. They were a message to all women that unless they remained within passive, subordinate roles they would be punished, even put to death.

The numerous laws enacted to govern sexual behavior among early American whites have caused some scholars to conclude that the movement toward sexual repression in colonial society occurred as a reaction against the sexual permissiveness of the colonizers. Andrew Sinclair comments:

The terrible liberty of isolation and the wilderness made some of the first settlers discard their European moral restraints. Cases of bestiality, according to Cotton Mather, were not unknown.... As the first missionaries of the West were told, barbarism was the first danger to the pioneers, 'They will think it no degradation to do before the woods and wild animals, what, in the presence of a cultivated social state they would blush to perpetrate.' Until a stern public opinion could govern the ethics of a scattered and immigrant society, small governments tried to do what they could to keep up the standards of civilization.

White colonizers sought to suppress sexuality because of their deep fear of sexual feelings, their belief that such feelings were sinful, and their fear of eternal damnation. Colonial white men placed the responsibility for sexual lust onto women and consequently regarded them with the same suspicion and distrust they associated with sexuality in general. Such intense fear and distrust of women bred misogynistic feeling. In the *Troublesome Helpmate*, Katherine Rogers offers an explanation for the emergence of misogynic feeling:

Of the cultural causes of misogyny, rejection of or guilt about sex is the most obvious. It leads naturally to degradation of woman as the sexual object and projection onto her of the lust and desire to seduce which a man must repress in himself. At the same time that he denigrated woman's sexual function, the preoccupation with sex resulting from the attempt to repress desire is apt to make him see her exclusively as a sexual being, more lustful than man and not spiritual at all....

Misogyny can also develop as a result of the idealization with which men have glorified women as mistresses, wives, and mothers. This has led to a natural reaction, a desire to tear down what has been raised unduly high.

Colonial white men expressed their fear and hatred of womanhood by institutionalizing sexist discrimination and sexist oppression.

In the 19th century, the growing economic prosperity of white Americans caused them to stray from the stern religious teachings that had shaped the life of the first colonizers. With the shift away from fundamentalist Christian doctrine came a change in male perceptions of women. 19th century white women were no longer portrayed as sexual temptresses; they were extolled as the "nobler half of humanity" whose duty was to elevate men's sentiments and inspire their higher impulses. The new image of white womanhood was diametrically opposed to the old image. She was depicted as goddess rather than sinner; she was virtuous, pure, innocent, not sexual and wordly. By raising the white female to a goddess-like status, white men effectively removed the stigma Christianity had placed on them. White male idealization of white women as innocent and virtuous served as an act of exorcism, which had as its purpose transforming her image and ridding her of the curse of sexuality. The message of the idealization was this: as long as white women possessed sexual feeling they would be seen as degraded immoral creatures; remove those sexual feelings and they become beings worthy of love, consideration, and respect. Once the white female was mythologized as pure and virtuous, a symbolic Virgin Mary, white men could see her as exempt from negative sexist stereotypes of the female. The price she had to pay was the suppression of natural sexual impulses. Given the strains of endless pregnancies and the hardships of childbirth, it is understandable that 19th century white women felt no great attachment to their sexuality and gladly accepted the new, glorified de-sexualized identity white men imposed upon them. Most white women eagerly absorbed sexist ideology that claimed virtuous women had no sexual impulses. So convinced were they of the necessity to hide their sexuality that they were unwilling to undress to expose sick

body parts to male physicians. A French visitor to America observed, "American women divide their whole body in two parts; from the top to the waist is the stomach; from there to the foot is ankles." On this same subject Page Smith comments:

They were too modest to let a doctor touch their bodies and they could not even bring themselves, in some instances, to describe an ailment, like one young mother with an ulcerated breast who, too prudish to speak frankly to the doctor, described her condition as a pain in the stomach.

Forcing white women to deny their physical beings was as much an expression of male hatred of woman as was regarding them as sex objects. Idealization of white women did not change the basic contempt white men felt towards them. Visitors from foreign countries often noticed the veiled hostility of white men towards white women. One visitor commented:

American men accorded their women more deference, lavished more money on them, regarded them with more respect than was accorded the women of any country. But they did not particularly like them. They did not enjoy their company; they did not find them interesting in themselves. They valued them as wives and mothers, they sentimentalized over them; they congratulated themselves on their enlightened attitude toward them. But they did not (and they do not) particularly like them.

The shift away from the image of white woman as sinful and sexual to that of white woman as virtuous lady occurred at the same time as mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women—just as the rigid sexual morality of Victorian England created a society in which the extolling of woman as mother and helpmeet occurred at the same time as the formation of a mass underworld of prostitution. As American white men idealized white womanhood, they sexually assaulted and brutalized black women. Racism was by no means the sole cause of many cruel and sadistic acts of violence perpetrated by white men against enslaved black women. The deep hatred of woman that had been embedded in the white colonizer's psyche by patriarchal ideology and anti-woman religious teachings both motivated and sanctioned white-male brutality against black women. At the onset of their arrival in the American colonies,

black women and men faced a society that was eager to impose upon the displaced African the identity of "sexual savage." As white colonizers adopted a self-righteous sexual morality for themselves, they even more eagerly labeled black people sexual heathens. Since woman was designated as the originator of sexual sin, black women were naturally seen as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust. They were labeled jezebels and sexual temptresses and accused of leading white men away from spiritual purity into sin. One white politician urged that blacks be sent back to Africa so that white men would not fornicate or commit adultery. His words were "remove this temptation from us." Although religious white women, white men, and black men argued that white men were morally responsible for sexual assaults on black women, they tended to accept the notion that men succumb to female sexual temptation. Because sexist religious doctrines had taught them that women were the seducers of men, they believed black women were not totally blameless. Frequently, they used the term "prostitution" to refer to the buying and selling of black women for sexually exploitative purposes. Since prostitutes are women and men who engage in sexual behavior for money or pay of some kind, it is a term inaccurately used when applied to enslaved black women who rarely received compensation for the use of their bodies as sexual latrines. Abolitionist women and men labeled black women "prostitutes" because they were trapped by the language of the Victorian ethos. In speaking of the mass sexual abuse of black women, noted black orator Frederick Douglass told an abolitionist audience in Rochester, New York in 1850 that "every slaveholder is the legalized keeper of a house of ill-fame." Yet his words did not begin to accurately describe the sexual exploitation of black women. Douglass informed his audience:

I hold myself ready to prove that more than a million of women, in the Southern States of this Union, are, by laws of the land, and through no fault of their own, consigned to a life of revolting prostitution; that by those laws, in many of the States, if a woman, in defense of her own innocence, shall lift her hand against the brutal aggressor, she may be lawfully put to death... It is also known that slave women,

who are nearly white, are sold in those markets, at prices which proclaim, trumpet-tongued, the accursed purposes by which they are to be devored. Youth and elegance, beauty and innocence, are exposed for sale upon the auction block; while villainous monsters stand around, with pockets lined with gold, gazing with lustful eyes upon their prospective victims.

It was difficult for abolitionists to discuss the rape of black women for fear of offending audiences, so they concentrated on the theme of prostitution. But the use of the word prostitution to describe mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by white men not only deflected attention away from the prevalence of forced sexual assault, it lent further credibility to the myth that black females were inherently wanton and therefore responsible for rape.

Contemporary sexist scholars minimize the impact of sexual exploitation of black women on the black female psyche and argue that white men used the rape of black women to further emasculate black men. Black sociologist Robert Staples asserts:

The rape of the slave woman brought home to the slave man his inability to protect his woman. Once his masculinization was undermined in this respect, he would begin to experience profound doubts about his power even to break the chains of bondage.

Staples' argument is based on the assumption that enslaved black men felt responsible for all black women and were demoralized because of their inability to act as protectors—an assumption that has not been substantiated by historical evidence. An examination of many traditional African societies' attitudes toward women reveals that African men were not taught to see themselves as the protectors of all women. They were taught to assume responsibility for the particular women of their tribe or community. The socialization of African men to see themselves as the "owners" of all black women and to regard them as property they should protect occurred after the long years of slavery and as the result of bonding on the basis of color rather than shared tribal connection or language. Prior to their adoption of white American sexist attitudes toward

women, there was no reason for enslaved African men to feel responsible for all enslaved African women. Assuredly, the sexual assault of black women had an impact on the psyches of black male slaves. It is likely that the black male slave did not feel demoralized or de-humanized because "his" women were being raped, but that he did feel terrorized by the knowledge that white men who were willing to brutalize and victimize black women and girls (who represented no great threat to their authority), might easily have no qualms about totally annihilating black men. Most black male slaves stood quietly by as white masters sexually assaulted and brutalized black women and were not compelled to act as protectors. Their first instincts were toward self-preservation. In her slave narrative, Linda Brent tells readers that black male slaves as a group did not see themselves as the protectors of black slave women. She comments:

There are some who strive to protect wives and daughters from the insults of their master; but those who have such sentiments have advantages above the general mass of slaves... Some poor creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the house to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters.

Throughout the years of slavery, individual black men rallied to the defense of black women who were important to them. Their defense of these women was not motivated by a sense of themselves as the natural protectors of all black women.

Historian Eugene Genovese discusses the sexual exploitation of enslaved black females in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, and contends:

Rape meant, by definition, rape of white women, for no such crime as rape of a black woman existed at law. Even when a black man sexually attacked a black woman, he could only be punished by his master; no way existed to bring him to trial or to convict him if so brought.

The rape of black women by black male slaves is further indication that, rather than assuming the role of protector, black men imitated the white male's behavior. Genovese concludes:

Some drivers forced the slave woman in much the same way as did some masters and overseers. It remains an open question which of those powerful white and black males forced the female slaves more often. Under the task system the driver set the day's work for each slave and had no trouble making a woman's lot miserable if she refused him. Under the more prevalent gang system, drivers could lay the whip on with impunity—if they had the power to whip at all—as many did—or they could find any number of other ways to reward and punish.

Given the barbaric nature of slave life, it is likely that black slave women allied with powerful black men who could protect them from the unwanted sexual advances of other slaves. Sexual jealousies and rivalries were a primary cause of most quarrels between black slave men.

The enslaved black woman could not look to any group of men, white or black, to protect her against sexual exploitation. Often in desperation, slave women attempted to enlist the aid of white mistresses, but these attempts usually failed. Some mistresses responded to the distress of female slaves by persecuting and tormenting them. Others encouraged the use of black women as sex objects because it allowed them respite from unwanted sexual advances. In rare cases, white mistresses who were reluctant to see sons marry and leave home pursued black maids to be sexual playmates for them. Those white women who deplored the sexual exploitation of slave women were usually reluctant to involve themselves with a slave's plight for fear of jeopardizing their own position in the domestic household. Most white women regarded black women who were the objects of their husbands' sexual assaults with hostility and rage. Having been taught by religious teachings that women were inherently sexual temptresses, mistresses often believed that the enslaved black woman was the culprit and their husbands the innocent victims. In *Once A Slave*, a book which contains a condensed body of information gleaned from slave narratives, the author Stanley Feldstein recounts an incident in which a white mistress returned home unexpectedly from an outing, opened the doors of her dressing room, and discovered her husband raping a thirteen year old slave girl. She

responded by beating the girl and locking her in a smokehouse. The girl was whipped daily for several weeks. When older slaves pleaded on the child's behalf and dared to suggest that the white master was to blame, the mistress simply replied, "She'll know better in future. After I've done with her, she'll never do the like again through ignorance." White women held black slave women responsible for rape because they had been socialized by 19th-century sexual morality to regard woman as sexual temptress. This same sexual morality was adopted by slaves. Fellow slaves often pitied the lot of sexually exploited females but did not see them as blameless victims. One female abolitionist states:

Of all who drooped and withered under the inflictions of this horrible system, the greatest sufferer was defenseless women. For the male slave, however brutally treated, there was some recourse; but for the woman slave there was neither protection nor pity.

Rape was not the only method used to terrorize and de-humanize black women. Sadistic floggings of naked black women were another method employed to strip the female slave of dignity. In the Victorian world, where white women were religiously covering every body part, black women were daily stripped of their clothing and publicly whipped. Slave-owners were well aware that it added to the degradation and humiliation of female slaves for them to be forced to appear naked before male whippers and onlookers. A Kentucky slave recalled:

The women are subjected to these punishments as rigorously as the men—not even pregnancy exempts them; in that case before binding them to the stake, a hole is made in the ground to accommodate the enlarged form of the victim.

Susan Boggs recalled:

They would have a woman stripped and clobbered if she did anything they didn't like. Perhaps if the master did not rise well, the mistress would tell the master when he came home; and she would be sent to the trader's jail to be clobbered. It is awful to think of women, of human beings, being exposed in this way.

Sadistic floggings of nude black women were socially sanctioned because they were seen as racial abuse, a master punishing a recalcitrant slave, but they were also expressions of male contempt and hatred for the female. Solomon Bradley, an ex-slave, told a journalist who interviewed him:

Yes, sir; the most shocking thing that I have seen was on the plantation of Mr. Farrarby, on the line of the railroad. I went up to his house one morning from my work for drinking water, and heard a woman screaming awfully. On going up to the fence and looking over I saw a woman stretched out, face downwards, on the ground her hands and feet being fastened to stakes. Mr. Farrarby was standing over her and striking her with a leather trace belonging to his carriage harness. As he struck her the flesh of her back and legs were raised in welts and ridges by the force of blows. Sometimes when the poor thing cried too loud from the pain Farrarby would kick her in the mouth. After he exhausted himself whipping her he sent to his house for sealing wax and a lighted candle and, melting the wax, dropped it upon the woman's lacerated back. He then got a riding whip and, standing over the woman, picked off the hardened wax by switching at it. Mr. Farrarby's grown daughters were looking at this from a window of the house through the blinds. This punishment was so terrible that I was induced to ask what offence the woman had committed and was told by her fellow servants that her only crime was in burning the edges of the waffles that she had cooked for breakfast.

It takes little imagination to comprehend the significance of one oppressed black woman being brutally tortured while the more privileged white women look passively at her plight. Incidents of this nature exposed to white women the cruelty of their husbands, fathers, and brothers and served as a warning of what might be their fate should they not maintain a passive stance. Surely, it must have occurred to white women that were enslaved black women not available to bear the brunt of such intense anti-women male aggression, they themselves might have been the victims. In most slaveholding homes, white women played as active a role in physical assaults of black women as did white men. While white women rarely physically assaulted black male slaves, they tortured and persecuted black

females. Their alliance with white men on the common ground of racism enabled them to ignore the anti-woman impulse that also motivated attacks on black women.

Breeding was another socially legitimized method of sexually exploiting black women. I mentioned earlier that white men in colonial America defined the primary function of all women to be that of breeding workers. Contemporary scholars often dismiss the breeding of slave women on the basis that it occurred on such a small scale as to not merit attention. Yet a rather convincing body of evidence exists substantiating not only the existence of slave breeding but the fact that it was a widespread and common practice. Reporting on the slave trade in the state of Virginia in 1819 Frances Corbin wrote, "Our principal profit depends on the increase of our slaves." During the early years of slavery, breeding of African women was a difficult process. In traditional African communities black women suckled their children at their breasts and weaned them at the late age of two years old. For this time period, the African woman did not engage in sexual intercourse and consequently spaced her pregnancies. This practice allowed women time to recuperate physically before starting a new pregnancy. White slaveowners could not understand the reasons slave women did not bear many children consecutively. Their response to this situation was to use threats of violence as a means of coercing slave women to reproduce. Frederick Olmstead, a southern white observer of the practice of slave breeding, made this comment:

In the states of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, as much attention is paid to the breeding and growth of negroes as to that of horses and mules. Further south, we raise them both for use and for market. Planters command their girls and women (married or unmarried) to have children; and I have known a great many girls to be sold off because they did not have children. A breeding woman is worth from one-sixth to one-fourth more than one that does not breed.

Advertisements announcing the sale of black female slaves used the terms "breeding slaves," "child-bearing woman," "breeding period," "too old to breed," to describe individual

women. Moncure Conway, the son of a Virginia slaveholder, recalled:

As a general thing, the chief pecuniary resource in the border states is the breeding of slaves; and I grieve to say that there is too much ground for the charges that general licentiousness among the slaves for the purpose of a large increase is compelled by some masters and encouraged by many. The period of maternity is hastened, the average youth of negro mothers being nearly three years earlier than that of any free race, and an old maid is utterly known among the women.

Slave women who refused to choose a man and mate with him had men forced upon them by their overseer or master. Some slaveholders preferred to breed black women with white men, as mulattoes frequently brought a higher price on the market or were easier to sell. In a letter dated March 13, 1835 a Methodist minister residing in Virginia observed:

Mulattoes are surer than pure negroes. Hence planters have no objection to any white man or boy having free intercourse with all the females; and it has been the case that an overseer has been encouraged to make the whole posse his harem and has been paid for the issue.

Barren black women suffered most under the breeding system. In a report presented to the General Anti-Slavery Convention held in London, June 1840, witnesses testified that barren black females were the victims of great physical and psychological abuse. The report stated:

Where fruitfulness is the greatest of virtues, barrenness will be regarded as worse than a misfortune, as a crime and the subjects of it will be exposed to every form of privation and affliction. Thus a deficiency, wholly beyond the slave's power becomes the occasion of inconceivable suffering.

In this same report, a North Carolina citizen repeated a story told to him by a friend about slave breeding on Carolina plantations.

One day the owner ordered the women into the barn; he then went in among them, whip in hand, and told them he meant to flog them all to death. They began immediately to cry out, 'What have I done massa? What have I done?' He

replied, 'Damn you, I will let you know what you have done; you don't breed, I have not had a young one from one of you for several months.' "

Some slave owners devised a system of rewards to induce women to breed. But such rewards were rarely commensurate with services rendered. On some plantations a woman might be given a small pig each time a child was born to her. Women were promised a new dress or a new pair of shoes at the birth of a child. A small monetary sum, from one to five dollars, might be given a slave woman at the birth of her fourth or fifth child. A few slaveowners promised freedom to black women who bore large families. A case appeared before the Virginia courts in 1761 in a dispute over a will that included a provision to free a female slave Jenny if she bore ten live children. Some enslaved women desired pregnancy, for they saw it as a means of obtaining certain advantages, the primary one being a lightening of the work load. Frances Kemble in her *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in 1838-1839* surmised:

On the birth of a child certain additions of clothing and an additional weekly ration are bestowed on the family; and these matters small as they may seem, acted as powerful inducements to creatures who have not of the restraining influence activating them which belongs to the parental relation among all other people, whether civilized or savage. Moreover, they have all of them a most distinct and perfect knowledge of their value to their owner as property; and a woman thinks, and not so much amiss that the more frequently she adds to the number of her master's livestock by bringing new slaves into the world, the more claims she will have upon his consideration and good will.

Breeding was oppressive to all fertile black slave women. Undernourished, overworked women were rarely in a physical condition that would allow for safe easy childbirth. Repeated pregnancies without proper care resulted in numerous miscarriages and death. Frances Kemble gave the following account of the condition of black women on her husband's plantation, women who considered themselves well off compared to slaves on neighboring plantations:

Fanny has had six children; all dead but one, she came to

beg to have her work in the field lightened.

Nanny has had three children; two of them are dead. She came to implore that the rule of sending them into the field three weeks after their confinement might be altered.

Leah, Caesar's wife, has had six children; three are dead.

Sophy, Lewis's wife, came to beg for some old line. She is suffering fearfully; has had ten children; five of them all dead. The principal favor she asked was a piece of meat, which I gave her.

Sally, Scipio's wife, has had two miscarriages and three children born, one of whom is dead. She came complaining of incessant pain and weakness in her back. This woman was a mulatto daughter of a slave called Sophy, by a white man of the name of Walker who visited the plantation.

Charlotte, Renty's wife, has had two miscarriages, and was with child again. She was almost crippled with rheumatism, and showed me a pair of poor swollen knees that made my heart ache. I have promised her a pair of flannel trousers, which I must forthwith set about making.

Sarah, Stephen's wife; this woman's case and history alike are deplorable. She has had four miscarriages, had brought seven children into the world, five of whom were dead, and was again with child. She complained of dreadful pains in the back, and an internal tumor which swells with the exertion of working in the fields; probably I think, it is ruptured... I suppose her constant childbearing and hard labor in the fields at the same time may have produced... temporary insanity...

I ask these questions about their children because I think the number they bear as compared with the number they rear a fair gauge of the effect of the system on their own health and that of their offspring. There was hardly one of these, as you will see by the details I have noted of their ailments, who might not have been a candidate for a bed in a hospital, and they had come to me after working all day in the fields.

Kemble admired the patience with which suffering enslaved black women endured their harsh lot, but she was not unaware of the "utter despair" that was often masked by their quiet acceptance.

Mass. sexual exploitation of enslaved black women was a direct consequence of the anti-woman sexual politics of colonial

patriarchal America. Since the black woman was not protected either by law or public opinion, she was an easy target. While racism was clearly the evil that had decreed black people would be enslaved, it was sexism that determined that the lot of the black female would be harsher, more brutal than that of the black male slave. That sexism was not limited solely to white men. The slaveowner's encouragement of mating between black women and men led to the establishment of a black slave sub-culture. Within the black slave sub-culture a similar sexual politics emerged. Initially, slave women were compelled by their masters to mate indiscriminately. It was not uncommon for a master to grant a favored black male slave the privilege of marrying a slave girl or woman of his choice, even if she was a reluctant partner. This practice was not successful. Resistance to forced mating often led to such social upheavals that most masters deemed it wiser to allow black slave women and men to choose their own partners. The couple would make others aware of their commitment by setting up a nuclear household in a vacant hut or cabin. As the displaced Africans assimilated American values, they wanted to have the ecclesiastical and civil ceremonies their masters and mistresses had; they desired public acknowledgement of their union. Although there were never any legally acknowledged marriages between slaves, they wanted the same marriage rituals their white owners enacted. On some plantations slaves carried out traditional African marriage rites—the asking of relatives for a woman's hand and the offering of a small dowry. Many white plantation owners incorporated the practice of engaged couples holding hands and jumping over a broom as a marriage ritual for slaves as it had once been a popular ritual among early American white colonizers. On a few plantations, masters allowed marriage ceremonies to be performed by an ordained minister despite the fact that the service had no legal significance. Most slaves desired a minister to perform the marriage ceremony because they observed that this was a norm of the dominant culture. Undoubtedly courtships and marriages between slaves were important because the happiness of such occasions augmented the harsh reality of slave life. In his slave narrative, Thomas Jones declared that the slave who was:

despised and trampled upon by a cruel race of unfeeling men would die in the prime of his wretched life, if he found no refuge in a dear home, where love and sympathy shall meet him from hearts made sacred to him by his own irrepensible affections and tenderesses for them.

Sex roles in the black slave sub-culture mirrored those of patriarchal white America. Within the black slave sub-culture, it was the black female who cooked for the family, cleaned the hut or cabin, nursed the sick, washed and mended the clothes, and cared for the needs of children. Black slave men regarded tasks like cooking, sewing, nursing, and even minor farm labor as woman's work. In her study of white women in the south, *The Southern Lady*, Anne Scott describes an incident in which a black slave man refused to perform a task he considered beneath his male dignity:

On a farm in a moment of crisis when the mother and all the children were ill, a Negro slave rejected in bewilderment the suggestion, that he milk the cow, on the grounds that everybody knew that to be woman's work and therefore impossible for him to undertake.

While enslaved black men were in no position to be completely accepted as patriarchal authority figures with the right to rule over women, enslaved black females did conform to existing sex-role patterns that granted men higher status than women. Frances Butler Leigh (the daughter of Fanny Kemble) noted that among slaves in the Georgia Sea Islands "the good old law of female submission to the husband's will on all points held good." Acceptance of male superiority was particularly emphasized in the religious teachings preached to slaves. Christian slave women resolutely believed that it was natural that they be subservient to men. A plantation owner from Lounders County, Mississippi, Mr. William Ervin, set up rules to govern his slaves which were based on the sex role patterns established by patriarchy. One rule read:

Each family to live in their own house. The husbands to provide fire wood and see that they are all provided for and wait on his wife. The wife to cook and wash for the husband and her children and attend to the mending of clothes. Failure on either part when proven shall and must be

corrected by words first but if not reformed to be corrected by the whip.

The practice of masters and mistresses identifying a slave woman by her husband's name (Scipio's Jane or John's Sue), indicates that whites accorded the black male slave a higher status than that of the female slave. Historian Eugene Genovese contends:

Sensible masters actually encouraged a limited sexual division of labor among their slaves and saw some advantages in strengthening the power of the male in the household.

As regards hierarchies based solely on race, the social status of black women and men was the same, but sexist differentiation caused the lot of the male to be distinguished from that of the female. A measure of social equality existed between the sexes in the area of work but nowhere else. Black women and men often performed the exact same tasks in agricultural labor, but even in that area black women could not rise to leadership positions. Outside the work arena, in day-to-day life, female slaves were treated differently from male slaves and were in some instances the subordinates of male slaves.

In an attempt to explain the impact of slavery on black sex role patterns, many contemporary scholars have concluded that the black woman was a more important figure in the slave household than the black male, and that as a result masculinity was compromised. An undue emphasis on black "masculinity" has emerged as sociologists and historians have attempted to explain the damaging effects of racist oppression on black people. Misinformation began circulating when scholars shifted the burden of responsibility away from the institution of slavery and its white supporters onto black people. As part of their effort to explain the negative impact of slavery on the black family without placing the blame or responsibility on white racism, they argued that it could be understood in the framework of black male-female sexual politics. They reasoned that as the black female's role in the slave household was more important than that of the black male, his masculinity had been compromised and consequently the fabric of the black family

structure dissolved. They identify the culprit as the domineering black woman. White racist colonizers distorted reality when they talked about the de-masculinization of black men. In actuality, there was nothing unusual about slave women assuming a dominant role in the domestic household in 19th century America. In so doing, they were merely imitating the behavior of white mistresses. The dominant role white women played in the 19th century domestic household has not led scholars to theorize about ineffectual white masculinity; quite the opposite has occurred. The 19th century is usually seen as a period in American history when white patriarchy was the stronghold of the American family. But this strong white patriarchy did not prevent 19th century white women from assuming the dominant role in the household. Nancy Cott, author of *Bonds of Womanhood*, describes the discrepancy between the patriarchal ideal that would have had white men be the supreme head of the household and the 19th century reality.

Legally and economically the husband/father controlled the family, but rhetorically the vocation of domesticity gave women the domestic sphere for their own, to control, and influence. Motherhood was proposed as the central lever with which women would bridge the world and, in practice it offered the best opportunity to women to heighten their domestic power. The authors of "domestic education" books assumed that children lived mostly in the presence of their mothers and not their fathers, even though final authority (legally and conventionally) was patriarchal.

It is safe to assume that if white women playing a dominant role in the 19th century domestic household did not lead to the de-masculinization and undermining of white male power, the enslaved black woman playing a dominant role in the slave household represented no threat to the already powerless black male. The major distinction between the familial role played by white male slaveowners and that of black male slaves within the sub-culture was that black men were denied the opportunity to act as providers for their families. According to some scholars, it was the inability of black men to adequately provide coupled with the dominant role played by black women in slave households that resulted in de-masculinization. They ignore

two realities. First, that in 19th century America emphasis on the home and family as "woman's sphere" was all pervasive, so that it was not unusual for the role played by black women to take precedence over that of black men. And the reality was that black men were able workers and providers, only white people reaped the benefits of their labor. It is ludicrous to assume that black men who labored at their various tasks from twelve to sixteen hours a day had doubts about their ability to provide—and is probably more accurate to assert that enslaved black men, rather than feeling de-masculinized, were outraged and angry that racist oppression prevented them from reaping the benefits of their labor. In keeping with the sexual politics of 19th century America, many black slave men felt very strongly that it was their duty to provide for the economic well-being of their family and they felt bitter resentment and remorse that the slave system did not enable them to fulfill this role. Feeling remorse, anger, and resentment cannot be seen as synonymous with feeling de-masculinized.

Enslaved black people accepted patriarchal definitions of male-female sex roles. They believed, as did their white owners, that woman's role entailed remaining in the domestic household, rearing children, and obeying the will of husbands. Anne Scott sums up the image of the 19th century idealized woman in the following passage:

This marvelous creation was described as a submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household. Physically weak, and 'formed for the less laborious occupations,' she depended upon male protection. To secure this protection she was endowed with the capacity to 'create a magic spell' over any man in her vicinity. She was timid and modest, beautiful and graceful, 'the most fascinating being in creation... the delight and charm of every circle she moves in.'

Part of her charm lay in her innocence.... She was capable of acute perceptions about human relationships, and was a creature of tact, discernment, sympathy, and compassion. It was her nature to be self-denying, and she was given to suffering in silence, a characteristic said to endear her to men. Less endearing, perhaps, but no less natural, was her piety and her tendency to 'restrain man's

natural vice and immorality. She was thought to be most deeply interested in the success of every scheme which curbs the passions and enforces a true morality.

The "cult of true womanhood" that emerged during the 19th century had an intense demoralizing impact on enslaved black females. They were not proud of their ability to labor alongside men in the fields and wanted more than anything for their lot to be the same as that of white women. White male slaveowners and overseers found that slave women could best be manipulated by promises of a new dress, a hair ribbon, or a parasol—anything that emphasized their femininity. So great was the slave woman's desire to appear feminine and ladylike that many chose to wear dresses to work in the fields rather than don trousers that, though more practical, were seen as masculine attire. Originally displaced African women attached no stigma to female labor in the fields but as they assimilated white American values they accepted the notion that it was debasing and degrading for women to work in the fields. As a farm laborer, the black male slave performed the same tasks he would have had to perform as a free person, but black women were well aware that it was not deemed ladylike or respectable for women to work in the fields. Henry Watson, a plantation owner in Alabama, complained to his daughter in 1865 about the black female workers on his plantation:

The women say that they never mean to do anymore outdoor work, that white men support their wives; and they mean that their husbands shall support them.

Although black female slaves often boasted of their work ability, they longed to be treated with the same regard and consideration they believed was due them as a woman's privilege in patriarchal society. Watson reported at a later date:

The female laborers are almost invariably idle—do not go into the fields but desire to play the lady and be supported by their husbands 'like the white folks do.'

The fact that enslaved black women were forced to labor as "men" and to exist independently of male protection and provision did not lead to the development of a feminist conscious-

ness. They did not advocate social equality between the sexes. Instead they bitterly resented that they were not considered "women" by the dominant culture and therefore were not the recipients of the considerations and privileges given white women. Modesty, sexual purity, innocence, and a submissive manner were the qualities associated with womanhood and femininity that enslaved black women endeavored to attain even though the conditions under which they lived continually undermined their efforts. When freedom came, black women resolved to cease their labor in the fields. White plantation owners were shocked when large numbers of black female workers refused to work in the fields once slavery ended. An examination of 1865 and 1866 plantation records caused Theodore Wilson to surmise that "the greatest loss to the labor force resulted from the decision of growing numbers of Negro women to donate their time to their homes and children." On those plantations where black women continued to labor in the fields, owners complained that they left their cabins too late in the morning and quit too early in the afternoon. White Southerners expressed amazement that it was a matter of pride among black people for men to support their wives and families. In some cases whites so resented the loss of female workers that they charged black men extra for food and shelter if their wives did not work. By completely accepting the female role as defined by patriarchy, enslaved black women embraced and upheld an oppressive sexist social order and became (along with their white sisters) both accomplices in the crimes perpetrated against women and the victims of those crimes.

Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We poor colored women wage-earners in the South are fighting a terrible battle.... On the one hand, we are assailed by white men, and, on the other hand, we are assailed by black men, who should be our natural protectors; and whether in the cook kitchen, at the washtub, over the sewing machine, behind the baby carriage, or at the ironing board, we are but little more than pack horses, beasts of burden, slaves! In the distant future, it may be, centuries and centuries hence, a monument of brass or stone will be erected to the Old Black Mammies of the South, but what we need is present help, present sympathy, better wages, better hours, more protection, and a chance to breathe for once while alive as free women.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Systematic devaluation of black womanhood was not simply a

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

was based on fact.

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

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

Some prominent planters flaunted their slave mistresses

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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