

Gender Talk

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As members of this panel on gender identity, we would like to share with you our vision of perhaps our most challenging publishing project. We are writing a book, tentatively entitled *Gender Talk*, in which we will probe a range of complex gender issues within African-American communities as a way of illuminating some aspects of the state of Black America at the beginning of this new century. In this book project, we are asking, very simply, what would it mean to take gender seriously in our analysis of what ails Black America? We would like to begin our response by remembering Audre Lorde, who perhaps more than anyone we know taught us about the tyranny of silence and the fears we need to overcome in our collective struggles against racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. Audre Lorde also reminded us of the problem of difference within African-American communities and the courage we need to address a range of intracommunity issues despite our history of racial oppression:

Within Black communities where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect. The need for

unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a Black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people. Because of the continuous battle against racial erasure that Black women and Black men share, some Black women still refuse to recognize that we are also oppressed as women, and that sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well. It is a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear.¹

Despite Audre Lorde's call for Black women to speak, there has been an even louder call from various segments of our community to remain silent, and if we persist in naming our problems, we are often labeled race traitors. We see *Gender Talk* as yet another attempt on the part of those of us who self-identify as Black feminists to participate in race regeneration.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Anna Julia Cooper wrote an important text, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (1892), in which she provided a femi-

nist analysis of the state of Black America and in different terms and a very different cultural context probed some of the questions that preoccupy us in *Gender Talk*: What would a vision of Black community transformation look like if gender were more central to our analytic frameworks? What would it mean to make more visible, to engage in more systematic analyses of the convergence of race and gender within the African-American context? How might we begin to conceptualize race loyalty differently? Twenty-one years removed from slavery and preoccupied by the challenges of "race regeneration" after the long nightmare of slavery, Cooper was unapologetic about the urgency of analyzing our past failures and achievements, our present "difficulties and embarrassments," and our "mingled hopes and fears for the future." She boldly asserted that it was now time "to pause a moment for retrospection, introspection, and prospection."² In addition to analyzing the legacy of slavery and the racism of the white women's movement, Cooper also provided what we would now call an internal critique, an analysis of sexism within the Black community. She was particularly perturbed that "while our men seem thoroughly abreast of the times on almost every other subject, when they strike the woman question they drop back into sixteenth century logic."³

We feel it is time again to pause for retrospection and introspection, borrowing Cooper's terminology, during these difficult times, despite all the rhetoric to the contrary about how well we're faring as a community. We are mindful as well of a body of work by Black women, in the tradition of Cooper, that analyzes and debates intracommunity issues and arrives at diagnoses and solutions that are frequently at odds with the more visible, hegemonic Black male discourse about the state of Black America and what ails us. Certainly, what we are attempting to do in *Gender Talk* is not entirely new. There is the in-

sightful, though often maligned work of a group of Black feminist writers, activists, and intellectuals that began with Toni Cade's 1970 anthology, *The Black Woman*, with which our book shares a similar mission and political perspective. There is also a broad range of writing by Black women and men with differing ideological perspectives that examines gender issues within African-American communities, though these analyses and narratives are always situated within the broader context of white racism, which will be true of *Gender Talk* as well. We are referring to Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984); numerous books by bell hooks on Black feminism; Barbara Omolade's *The Rising Song of African American Women* (1994); Jill Nelson's *Straight, No Chaser* (1997); Michael Dyson's *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (1996); Orlando Patterson's *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (1998); Deborah Gray White's *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (1999); and Charles Michael Smith's *Fighting Words: Personal Essays by Black Gay Men* (1999).

As important are works that provide a gendered analysis of the civil rights movement and a more nuanced history of Black political activism in the contemporary period. Belinda Robnett's *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (1997) is in this category and analyzes, among other things, the impact of Black Power ideology and the move to more hierarchical structures within organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which adversely affected women's leadership roles after 1965. Kimberly Springer's *Still Lifting, Still Climbing* (1999) is the first collection of critical essays to examine the broad range of political

activism on the part of African-American women over the past four decades, including male-dominated Pan-African organizations. Black nationalist imperatives in the late 1960s and assertions about the need to reclaim Black manhood were accompanied by calls for Black women to "step back." Angela Davis alludes to her experiences with nationalist organizations in Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter*:

Some of the brothers came around only for staff meetings, . . . and whenever we women were involved in something important, they began to talk about "women taking over the organization"—calling it a matriarchal coup d'état. All the myths about black women surfaced. [We] were too domineering; we were trying to control everything, including the men—which meant by extension that we wanted to rob them of their manhood. By playing such a leading role in the organization, some of them insisted, we were aiding and abetting the enemy, who wanted to see Black men weak and unable to hold their own.⁴

Similarly, Elaine Brown's autobiographical *A Taste of Power* is a powerful behind-the-scenes analysis of the gender politics within the Black Panther Party.

At this juncture, we want to provide a broader historical context for *Gender Talk* by calling attention to several important moments in the history of the United States in which the collision of race and gender issues had a palpable and divisive impact on the African-American community. It is also the case that during these episodes the issue of race loyalty became a prominent feature of public discourse within Black communities. There were also profound differences between Black women and men, and among Black women, about how to deal with these incidents, particularly in the recent past when

a series of highly public and controversial events—the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill Supreme Court hearings, the Mike Tyson, O. J. Simpson, and Rev. Henry Lyons trials—forced the Black community to respond to what it perceived to be harmful airing of dirty racial linen in public. We have our memories of these debates, since we lived through them, but also articles and books that help us make sense of the range of responses within Black communities, especially about Clarence Thomas and O. J. Simpson.

Before turning to the more contentious contemporary scene, we should recall 1869 and the debate over the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which would grant Black male suffrage. This issue precipitated a major split within the women's movement and debate within the Black community as well. At the first annual meeting of the Equal Rights Association in New York in 1869, the famous debate between Frederick Douglass and white suffragists occurred over the Fifteenth Amendment, during which he argued for the greater urgency of race over gender. He believed it was the "Negro's hour," and that women's rights could wait, since linking woman suffrage to Negro suffrage at this historical juncture would seriously reduce the chances of securing the ballot for Black men, and for African Americans, Douglass reiterated, the ballot was urgent. When asked at the American Equal Rights Association Convention in New York City, May 12, 1869, whether suffrage was as urgent for Black women, he quickly responded, "Yes, yes, yes, . . . but not because she is a woman, but because she is black."⁵ Frances E.W. Harper, a prominent Black feminist and abolitionist, supported Douglass, whereas Sojourner Truth supported white suffragists, believing that if Black men got the vote, they would dominate Black women.

From our perspective at the turn of the twenty-first century, what is important is not

who was right but how we might reinterpret this historic moment. The historian Darlene Clark Hine provides a cogent analysis, a useful way of assessing the meaning of this nineteenth-century race/gender debate. She argues that given the reality of U.S. patriarchy in 1869, most Black women and men applauded the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment, but that "inauspiciously, this amendment in some ways cemented a gender breach in black culture" because it created fundamental inequalities between Black men and women with respect to their access to power. "Once black men gained the right to vote, black women had no alternative but to negotiate with and convince their male relatives to use the ballot to advance group as opposed to individual interests. . . . They worked to persuade men that their individual ballots were in reality their collective property."⁶ Hine goes on to argue that what was perhaps even more problematic as far as Black women were concerned was that this differential power base enabled Black men to determine the public agenda for the race. One consequence of this imbalance of power was that the perspectives of Black women were relegated to the back burner.

A contemporary manifestation of the political marginalization of Black women was the decision on the part of male civil rights leaders not to allow Black women to speak at the March on Washington in 1963. In her 1964 autobiography, *The Trumpet Sounds*, Anna Arnold Hedgeman describes her feelings about the male-dominant civil rights leadership and her experiences as the only woman on the planning committee for the March on Washington. When she discovered that women were not speaking on the program, she wrote a letter to the director A. Philip Randolph in which she alluded to Black women's important roles in the civil rights movement. She also argued that since the

"Big Six" civil rights leaders (Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, John Lewis, James Farmer, and Whitney Young) had consistently ignored the important contributions of women, it was even more imperative that they be allowed to speak. Despite her admonitions, however, their masculinist solution was to allow the wives of the civil rights leaders and a few other Black women to sit on the dais. Rosa Parks was presented, but didn't speak.

In Jervis Anderson's biography of Bayard Rustin, a prominent gay civil rights leader, an adviser to King, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) staffer, and the chief strategist for the march, there is a behind-the-scenes narrative about the march, which, according to Rustin, required careful negotiations and compromise among the various organizational leaders who had not previously collaborated on a national project. There is also a discussion of the "brooding feminist rebellion behind the scenes," in the words of Anderson. He also reports that Black women activists resented that no woman had been invited to deliver a major address. Daisy Bates, who was a leader in the desegregation of Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, was allowed a brief moment at the platform to introduce five "Negro women fighters for freedom"—among whom was Rosa Parks. A week before the march, Pauli Murray, a civil rights attorney and feminist activist, sent a letter to Randolph in which she expressed her disgust with the blatant sexism of the male leaders and their failure to see the connection between racial bias and gender bias:

I have been increasingly perturbed over the blatant disparity between the major role which Negro women have played and are playing at the crucial grass-roots levels of our struggle and the minor role of leadership they have been assigned in the national pol-

icy-making decisions. . . . It is indefensible to call a national March on Washington and send out a Call which contains the name of not a single woman leader. Nor can this glaring omission be glossed over by inviting several Negro women to appear on the August 28 program. The time has come to say to you quite candidly, Mr. Randolph, that "tokenism" is as offensive when applied to women as when applied to Negroes, and that I have not devoted the greater part of my adult life to the implementation of human rights to [now] condone any policy which is not inclusive.⁷

A decade later, Black women activists helped to catalyze a women's movement that would generate a sustained discourse within the African-American community about the relevance of women's liberation to Black people. Indeed, rancorous debates within the African-American community surrounding sexual politics began with the publication of Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), in which she criticized Black male sexism and the misogyny of Black liberation struggles of the sixties. Echoing Wallace, the August 27, 1979, issue of *Newsweek* chronicled a new Black struggle that underscored intraracial tensions based on gender: "It's the newest wrinkle in the black experience in America—a growing distrust, if not antagonism, between black men and women that is tearing apart marriages and fracturing personal relationships."⁸ This "wake-up call" came on the heels of Ntozake Shange's award-winning Broadway play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1976) and Wallace's polemic, *Black Macho*. The demonization of Shange and Wallace by many within the Black community (men and women) for their so-called bashing of Black men was the beginning of

an all-too-familiar (by now) assault on Black feminists for their airing of dirty linen in public.

Surely, Black sexual politics left the closet, so to speak, in the 1970s and became a highly contentious topic within African-American communities and subsequently in the national media. The issue of sexual politics was a hotly debated topic in journals such as *The Black Scholar*, *Freedomways*, and *Black Books Bulletin* and provided the catalyst for the founding of a short-lived bimonthly magazine by the sociologists Nathan and Julia Hare, *Black Male/Female Relationships*. In a talk show on Black Entertainment Television on October 17, 1991 (a few days after the Thomas/Hill hearings began), Nathan and Julia Hare instructed the largely Black audience about what they called a long, destructive history of Black women's betrayal of the race that they argued began when slave women collaborated with their white masters. Disloyalty to the race would continue, they boldly asserted, as contemporary Black women collaborated with white feminists.

The Black Scholar would provide the most extensive and sober treatment of the debate generated by Wallace's and Shange's controversial feminist writings in five very important issues that began with its April 1973 issue on Black Women's Liberation. The March/April 1979, Black Sexism Debate issue, in which the sociologist Robert Staples's controversial essay, "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists" appeared, spawned an even angrier response a month later in the May/June, issue which included Audre Lorde's angry essay, "Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface." Calling for dialogue between Black men and women, Lorde delivered a passionate plea for a serious consideration of the damaging effects of sexism in our communities:

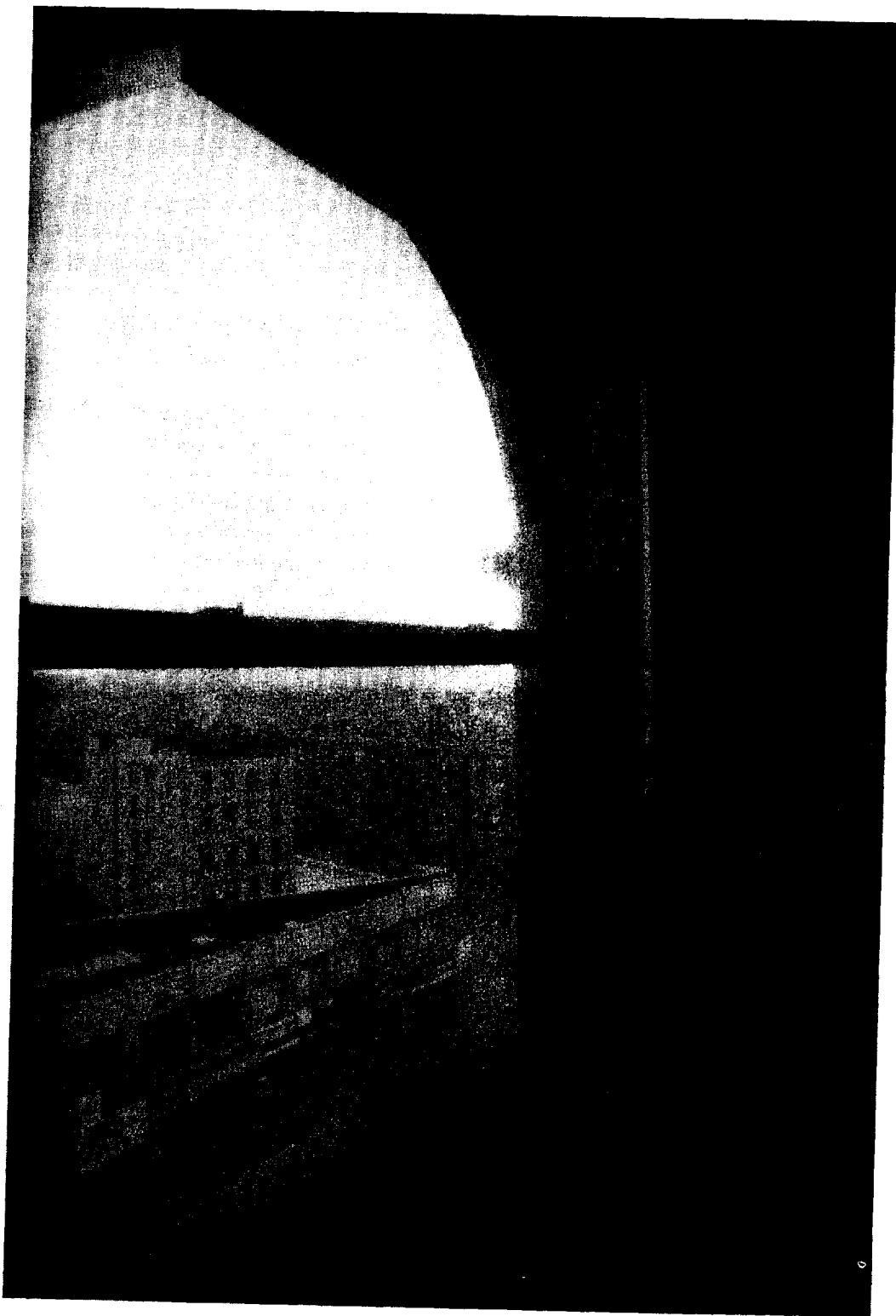


Photo by Philippe Cheng

In our work, we posit the equal importance of changing the condition of Black women and children and assert that without attention to gender matters, there can be no long-lasting solutions to many of our race problems.

Freedom and future for Blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male disease of sexism. . . . the Black male consciousness must be raised to the realization that sexism and woman-hating are critically dysfunctional to his liberation as a Black man because they arise out of the same constellation that engenders racism and homophobia. Until that consciousness is developed, Black men will view sexism and the destruction of Black women as tangential to Black liberation rather than as central to that struggle.⁹

A decade later, the controversy continued and grew more virulent; its most obvious manifestations were loud and angry litanies, especially among Black professional men, about the portrayals of Black male characters in the novels of contemporary Black women writers. Alice Walker's 1982 novel *The Color Purple* and Steven Spielberg's film adaptation sparked the most lasting and vitriolic responses. *The Same River Twice* (1996), Alice Walker's meditation on the making of the film, includes a variety of responses from the Black community, including the Coalition Against Black Exploitation and other persons who castigated the film and Walker for cele-

brating lesbianism, which was perceived to be akin to drug addiction and violence as new evils destroying the Black community. Distorting the message of a film he refused to see in his commentary on *The Color Purple*, the journalist Tony Brown, the quintessential apologist for Black men, celebrated Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X, who, he argues, "overcame the system's psychological warfare and produced healthy, non-incestuous, non-brutalizing relationships with women." Ridiculing the text's woman bonding, he sarcastically asserts, "their women never needed a 'Shug.'"¹⁰

What this brief historical context underscores is the need for us to pause again for retrospection and introspection. In the words of bell hooks,

one of the major barriers impeding our capacity as black people to collectively challenge sexism and sexist oppression is the continued equation of black liberation with the development of black patriarchy . . . our efforts to create renewed black liberation struggle are seriously impeded by the fact that in diverse black settings the assumption prevails that we need only listen to patriarchal men, that our very capacity to move forward as a people depends on strong black male leadership.¹¹

Continuing a tradition of Black feminist writing that began in the 1830s with Maria Stewart's speeches, there is a significant body of contemporary work by African-American women and men that falls under the rubric of Black feminism or womanism. This body of work is predictably smaller and less well known than the proliferation of writing in the popular Black press and in what is a growing profusion of books and articles that oversimplify the status of Black women versus Black men. There is also the very popular notion

that Black men are an endangered species, which has given the impression that all is well with Black women. The metaphor of the "endangered Black male" calls attention to a number of demographic realities; for example, one in four Black males is in some way involved with the criminal justice system; Black male-on-male homicide is the leading cause of death among young Blacks between the ages of seventeen and twenty-six. The endangered Black male metaphor, however, reinforces the myth that changing the status of Black men will single-handedly solve all the complex problems facing African-American communities. In our work, we posit the equal importance of changing the condition of Black women and children and assert that without attention to gender matters, there can be no long-lasting solutions to many of our race problems.

This is a particularly critical time for *Gender Talk*, for today there is in full swing a backlash against Black feminism and Black feminists. This backlash is alive and well in

among some Black students, female and male, strong attacks against anything that they perceive to be feminist. This includes discussions about taking a women's studies class, challenges to homophobia, or simply the need for all-female gatherings. There is a similar backlash, as well, against feminism among white students.

Today, in African-American communities, there is a great deal of anger about the so-called trashing of successful Black men. Earl Ofari Hutchinson's *The Assassination of the Black Male Image* (1994) is a good example of this kind of thinking. These accusations of "Black male bashing" have escalated as a result of the high visibility of the Thomas/Hill hearings; the Mike Tyson and O. J. Simpson trials; the court-martial of Army Sergeant Major Gene McKinney; and, most recently, the trial of Rev. Henry Lyons. It is frequently Black women who are singled out for particular scorn because of our public pronouncements and writings about the problems of sexism within Black communities and the be-

It is frequently Black women who are singled out for particular scorn because of our public pronouncements and writings about the problems of sexism within Black communities and the behavior of particular Black men. In fact, feminism itself is frequently blamed as a major source of the problems that confront Black America.

the popular press, including Black media, and is increasingly a theme in sit-coms, talk shows, and everyday conversations. A concrete example involved the demonizing of the feminist activist Angela Davis in the *Amsterdam News* because of her public criticism of the 1995 Million Man March. As we travel to college and university campuses, we hear

behavior of particular Black men. In fact, feminism itself is frequently blamed as a major source of the problems that confront Black America.

Within this woman-blaming climate, there is a proliferation of books that purport to cure what ails Black communities, much of which focuses on strengthening Black families and

male/female relationships. These heterosexist texts include rigidly prescriptive advice for "good" Black women (meaning "not feminist") who are engaged in what is considered a righteous search for a Black man. Examples of this genre are Ronn Elmore's *How to Love a Black Man* and Dene Miller's *The Sistah's Rules: Secrets for Meeting, Getting and Keeping a Good Man* (1997). Popular magazines like *Ebony* frequently include articles such as "Ten Biggest Mistakes Women Make in Relationships" (May 1998) that repeat old stereotypes about evil Black women and remind readers that "hell hath no fury like a black woman scorned." There is also the myth, yet again, of the emasculating Black woman. In one such article in the same issue of *Ebony*, Black women are chastized directly: "Whatever you care to call it—dissin', putting in check, low rating, fronting off, downing—all the names stand for the same thing, disrespect [of the Black man]."

There is no shortage in Black popular culture of blatant calls for Black women to be subservient to the wishes and demands of Black men. Shahrazad Ali's enormously popular *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding*

the Black man must "take [his] rightful place as ruler of the universe and everything in it, including the black woman."¹²

There has also been an upsurge in conservative Black nationalist antidotes for what ails us as a community, which bell hooks and other Black feminists have also observed:

Nationalist black leaders male and female, whether they be in conservative religious organizations or represent themselves as spokespersons of more radical movements for liberation, continue to suffer failures of insight that lead them to invest in the notion that patriarchy is the only possible system of social organization that can bring stability to black family life and to the race.¹³

This socially conservative strand in Black nationalist thought is characterized by a call for traditional gender roles, an emphasis on so-called family values, an embrace of patriarchy or hypermasculine constructions, and an abhorrence of gay and lesbian sexuality.

The analysis in *Gender Talk* focuses on the intersection of race and gender, not only because of their centrality in the lives of African

Americans, but also because analyses of "the race problem" have been so male-centered. For example, discussions of violence tend to focus on Black male-on-male homicide or police brutality far more than on rape or spousal abuse.

This is the case despite the fact that homicide is one of the ten leading causes of death for African-American women, the reported rape rate for Black women is almost three times that of white women, and Black rape victims have a harder time getting police and medical professionals to believe them.

In a male-dominant society, however, Black men experience gender privilege that enables them to oppress Black women at the same time that they experience the ravages of white racism and poverty.

the Blackwoman (1990) is a stark example of this misogynist genre. Simply put, the major thesis of her propaganda is that Black women are to be blamed for *all* of the problems that Black men (and by extension the Black family and the Black community) are experiencing. Since Black women are out of control,

Much of what is written about African-American communities assumes that the relative powerlessness of Black men in the society at large renders them powerless *within* their own communities as well, including their own homes. In a male-dominant society, however, Black men experience gender privilege that enables them to oppress Black women at the same time that they experience the ravages of white racism and poverty.

As we look toward the future, we suggest how we might begin to conceptualize race loyalty differently. We articulate the consequences of our discomfort as a community about seriously considering gender issues in our strategies for improving the race, and we make suggestions about how we might begin to build new Black communities. Finally, we assert that although our work focuses on African-American communities, perhaps its most useful analysis will underscore what ails us as a nation, still deeply committed to the maintenance of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. We believe that this "truth telling" about issues within Black America will also unmask the ugliness and complexity of race, gender, and class matters in the broader body politic.

Notes

1. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 119-120.
2. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (Xenia, Ohio: Aldine Printing House, 1892), pp. 26-27.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
4. Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Sex and Race in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), p. 316.
5. Philip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), p. 87.
6. Darlene Clark Hine, "'In the Kingdom of Culture': Black Women and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class," in Gerald Early, ed., *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 344.
7. Quoted in Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 259.
8. "A New Black Struggle," *Newsweek*, August 27, 1979, p. 58.
9. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, pp. 63-64.
10. Tony Brown, "Blacks Need to Love One Another," in Alice Walker, *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (New York: Scribner, 1996), pp. 224-225.
11. bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995), pp. 63-64.
12. Shahrazad Ali, *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman* (Philadelphia: Civilized Publications, 1990).
13. hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, p. 94. See also Patricia Hill Collins's cogent analysis of Black nationalist ideologies, particularly Afrocentricism, in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).