# W.E.B. Du Bois Institute

# BLACKLASH

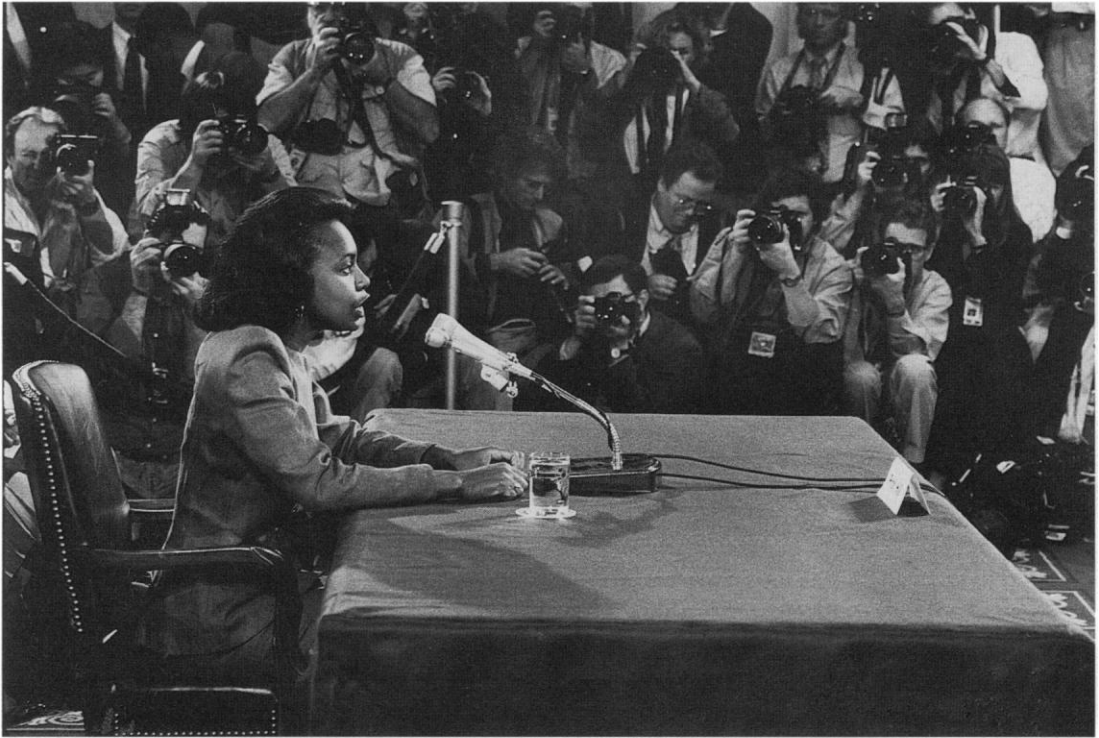*The crisis of gender relations among African Americans*

Orlando Patterson

Whatever misgivings Americans may hold about the Thomas–Hill hearings, there can be no doubt that one of their salutary effects was to bring to the forefront of national consciousness the critical issue of gender relations in modern America. They initiated a serious national examination of how men and women are to live with each other in a world where women strive to be equal in all areas of life, both at home and in the workplace.

The hearings also highlighted the extraordinary changes in the position of African Americans in American society. It was of great importance that a critical national debate was being waged in which the two leading players were blacks. As a student of slavery and its sociological consequences, I was perhaps struck by this fact with greater force than most other persons. The defining quality of slavery was the natal alienation of the slave population and its descendants. The slave, quintessentially, is one who does not belong, who, along with his or her descendants, is seen as a perpetual outsider, someone with whom the insider in no way identifies.

American society remained a slave culture long after the master slave relationship had been legally extinguished. Hence I see the civil rights movement less as a struggle for equality—that struggle is still very much with us—than as a struggle for the final abolition of slavery, for the recognition of the black as a constituent member of his or her community. In this it was mightily successful. Because of the movement, the culture of slavery is now dead, though its legacies are still very much with us.

The hearings struck me as a powerful expression of the cultural-symbolic change that had taken place in America with respect to the final acceptance of blacks as integral—even if still greatly disadvantaged—members of the society. The most intimate problems of white men and women, how they conduct their gender relations in and out of the workplace, could now be seen in terms of people who happen to be African American.

**The clash between Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas allegorized, for some, the complexities of gender relations in black America.**

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Kimberle Crenshaw claims both too little, and too much, when she asserts that "America stumbled into the place where African-American women live": too little, in that what the nation stumbled on was the contradictory and unjust place where *all* women live; too much, in that the peculiar dilemmas of black women *and men,* in their relations with each other, were never really addressed, precisely because an African-American woman had emerged as a symbol for all women, in-

cluding those white mothers, sisters, and daughters who, up to that moment, had been considered the most privileged and unproblematic persons alive.

As Karen Dugger makes clear, the intersection of race and gender does indeed "produce race-specific gender effects that generate important experiential cleavages among women," and these, in turn, produce different identities and ideological orientations, aspects of which will be our main concern below. Nonetheless, as she

and others have shown, these differences are increasingly being supplanted by the common experience of white and African-American women in the two central relations of production and reproduction.

I am not for a moment suggesting that the problems of racism are not still with us. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the very real progress that blacks have achieved in becoming full citizens of the society has generated a kind of homeostatic backlash of racism. Precisely because of this progress, there are greater opportunities for nastiness and abuse. Nonetheless, I think these hearings were a powerful symbolic confirmation of the fact that race, while still important, is of radically changing significance. However, unequally we may be treated, we are now very much a central part of this society, a permanent and essential shape in its cultural landscape, and a necessary, if turbulent, part of its national consciousness.

## Contemporary African-American feminist thought has badly obscured our understanding of gender relations

But one, however, which is still deeply problematic, As long as African Americans remained outsiders, we were forced to concentrate on the central issue of getting in and, in the process, to downplay the many problems that beset us internally. I think the time has now come to confront these problems squarely. When we do so, we find that at the top of this internal racial agenda is the crisis-ridden problem of gender relations between African-American men and women. The

hearings forced upon me, and, I hope other blacks, the need to examine this serious problem more closely.

There has, of course, been a great deal of very angry talk among blacks on the subject, but little conversation, and even less light. People have been railing at each other, both between and within genders (not to mention between groups with separate sexual orientations and feminist ideologies), as the debates surrounding Ntozake Shange's play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide* and Michele Wallace's book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* amply demonstrate. In spite of the intensity, and what bell hooks calls "the liberatory pedagogy" of contemporary African-American feminist thought, it has had, as she acknowledges, little impact on African-American political thinking. Worse, it has badly obscured our understanding of gender relations. This failure to explore and communicate is found not only in the popular discourse but in academia, reflected in the paucity of academic works directly focused on the subject of black gender relations.

One major factor accounting for the failure of communication on this most urgent of problems among African Americans is the tendency of black feminists, who dominate the discourse, to confine, and confound, the problems of gender—which concerns *both* males and females in their relations with each other—with those of women's issues, or, when relational problems are considered, to privilege the standpoint of women, on the assumption that they are always the victims of the interaction. Black men have as much at stake as black women in understanding, and resolving, the terrible crisis in their

relations. Perhaps more, for, as I hope to show, they suffer great trauma and unhappiness, and literally die horrible and premature deaths as a direct result of this crisis. When the full range of gender roles and their implied relations are considered—sons/daughters, brothers/sisters, fathers/mothers, male kinsmen/female kinsmen, husbands/wives, boyfriends/girlfriends, "mack-men"/"nasty-girls," pimps/johns/whores/studs, the lot—it is not at all clear whether any one sex can claim the dubious privilege of being the greater victim, or sharing the greater burden.

## The Double-Burden Claim: Myth, Reality, or Confusion?

It has become almost a truism in discussions of black gender relations that African-American women are uniquely oppressed with a double burden, a sociological trope that originated in 1857 with Harriet A. Jacobs, the ancestor of all modern bourgeois black feminists, when she wrote, "Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own." In today's usage, added to the burden of racism is the *double jeopardy* of mainstream gender discrimination. Following the Thomas hearings, in which an African-American woman was pitted against an African-American man, and the subsequent disquiet over the fact that at the time of the hearings (although no longer so) most Americans, white and African-American, believed Thomas's version of what had transpired, many commentators and analysts emphasized yet a third burden experienced by African-American women: that of gender prejudice and exploitation by African-American men,

which, according to Crenshaw, intersects with the traditional double burden in ways that place limits on "the means available to relate and conceptualize [our] experiences as African-American women."

I think the double burden argument, while not strictly incorrect, obscures more than it illuminates. One way of getting at the real issues is to begin by putting it to rest. This is best done by asking two questions: First, how does the double burden thesis square with the facts, especially the facts of more recent African-American male experience? Second, how do the facts relate to the admittedly serious, indeed grievous, problems of African-American male attitudes and behavior toward African-American women?

As to the facts, there can be no denying what has come to be called the feminization of poverty. There is such an abun-

## It takes two to bring a child into the world, and it is patronizing and sexist to place greater blame on African-American fathers than on mothers

dance of economic and sociological evidence that women, and children, now bear the major burden of poverty in this society that it is hardly necessary to offer further data here on the subject. However, it is equally true that this is not a peculiarly African-American problem, although it weighs disproportionately on African-American women when compared with white women and men.

Few responsible analysts hold African-American men solely responsible for this problem, although, as I shall argue later,

there is no denying their misogynistic ir-responsibility. There is now no question that single parenting by premature, "never married" women is a major correlate, and perhaps cause, of poverty and its feminization: half of all families headed by such women are in poverty, and three-quarters of poor African-American families are headed by them, in striking contrast with the improving situation of African-American families headed by married couples, who, as of 1990, are on the verge of catching up with their white counterparts (i.e., they earn $40,040 per annum compared with the white figure of $47,250, a stunning relative improvement when compared with the figures even two decades ago). Whatever the attitude of young African-American men toward parenting, the fact remains that it takes two to bring a child into the world, and it is patronizing and sexist to place greater blame on African-American fathers than on mothers for high-risk parenting. What is more, as numerous studies have shown, lower-class African-American youths, even if willing to help support their children, are in no position to do so.

It is when we compare the life chances and actual experiences of African-American men and women in recent years (and not simply median income) that we are forced to question the conventional wisdom that African-American women are somehow more destructively burdened by the system than their male counterparts. The social statistics on young African-American men are simply frightening. According to almost every indicator, they are not only far behind their white male counterparts but also significantly worse off than African-American women. They

die at a higher rate of natural causes and epidemics such as AIDS; they are far more likely to be the victims of homicide at each other's hands; and they are incarcerated, addicted, and drop out of high school—all at considerably greater rates than women. Most ominous of all, African-American men not only perform far more poorly than African-American women at all levels of the school system, but are now to be found at substantially lower, and declining levels, at the tertiary level of education so crucial for any kind of success in the wider society.

I won't cite all the dismal data, but three sets of comparative statistics are extremely telling. In 1976, 563,114 African-American women were enrolled in institutions of higher learning compared with only 469,881 African-American men, and of these, 38,336 African-American women were in graduate studies compared with 27,016 men. That disparity was already troubling enough. However, by 1984 the number of African-American men in higher education had declined to 434,515 compared with an increase in the number of African-American women to 635,370. And in that year, the number of African-American women in graduate studies was over 80 percent greater than that of African-American men: 32,873 compared with 19,961.

A second important statistic has to do with the earnings of African-American women. While their median income is still lower than that of African-American men, it is significant that African-American women get much higher returns from each increment of education than African-American men, and that African-American women with four years of col-

lege now earn more than white women. Since this educated group is perhaps the most influential in the African-American community, it is significant that they not only far outnumber African-American men but do so at increasing rates.

Finally, there is the tragic record of suicide. No other statistic is more reflective of despair and anguish, and as Emile

## If African-American women suffer the double or triple burden we so often hear about, what explains their relatively better position on important indicators when compared with African-American men?

Durkheim taught us long ago, it is also true that no data are more indicative of social disorganization and anomie. It is therefore enormously significant that young African-American men aged fifteen to twenty-four commit suicide at a rate almost five times greater than African-American women of the same age group (11.2 per 100,000 compared with 2.4 for women). As dismal as these figures are, it is likely that the situation is actually much worse, due not only to underreporting for African-American youth, which according to J. T. Gibbs and A. M. Hines may be as high as 82 percent, but to the masking effect of what Seiden calls "victim precipitated" homicide, in which young African-American men commit suicide the "macho" way by inciting violence against themselves. The gender difference, according to specialists on the subject, is due to the much greater involvement of women with, and support

from, institutions within the African-American community such as family, church, and other support networks. Indeed, African-American women have among the lowest rates of suicide of all Americans. The rate is twice as high for white women and over nine times higher for white men.

I have said enough to pose the really crucial question that concerns me, which is simply this: if African-American women continue to suffer the double or triple burden we so often hear about, how do we reconcile this with their relatively better position on these important indicators when compared with that of African-American men? Why, in particular, are African-American women now poised to assume leadership in almost all areas of the African-American communities and to outperform African-American men at middle, and upper-middle-class levels of the wider society and economy, if they have been so overwhelmingly burdened compared with men? Is the double burden thesis a myth?

In attempting to answer this question, we come the heart of the problem of gender relations between African-American men and women. I think that it is not a myth that African-American women have been more burdened than African-American men, but it is perhaps time to think again more carefully about the nature of the burdens that each gender has had to bear. Being burdened, having to work harder than others, is not, in itself, necessarily a bad thing. Americans, from the days of the Puritan founders, have always prided themselves on being hardworking; people compete with each other for the privilege of being burdened with great responsibilities and with the necessity to

work, while their companions slept, for long hours. Some burdens, in other words, we not only welcome but consider generative and empowering.

Without in any way underplaying the enormous problems that poor African-American women face, I want to suggest that it was always the case that, whereas the burdens of poor African-American men have always been oppressive, dispiriting, demoralizing, and soul-killing, those of women have always been, at least partly, generative, empowering, and humanizing.

In the first place, it should be noted that while slavery viciously undermined the two most important male gender roles, that of father and husband, it simply could not destroy the role of mother. Indeed, given the peculiar demographic demands of American slave society, that role was valued, and reinforced, by the vast majority of slaveholders. As Deborah Gray White demonstrated in her splendid study of the female slave, "giving birth was a life-affirming action. It was, ironically, an act of defiance, a signal to the slave owner that no matter how cruel and inhumane his actions, African-Americans would not be utterly subjected or destroyed." True, the slave woman was doubly burdened with the tasks of being both reproducer and worker, not to mention the "malevolence that flowed from both racism and sexism." However, with regard to her role as worker, while this was exploitative, as it was for African-American men, it is a mistake to argue, as many have done, that it entailed a defeminization of the African-American woman. In the West African cultures from which all African Americans came, women did most of the agricultural field work; hence the plan-

tation emphasis on the woman as field worker merely reinforced a preexisting pattern of work and gender roles. The opposite was true of African-American men, who experienced a sharp and utterly devastating break with preexisting patterns of work and gender roles. The recent revisionist literature, which attempts to underplay the destructive impact of slavery on male gender roles even while continuing to denounce the sociological horrors of slavery, is not just contradictory but incredible, and to a student of slavery it cannot be taken seriously.

As for the role of mother, this was an added burden that provided its own partial relief, its own special rewards, and its own opportunities. The slaveholder's emphasis on childbearing unwittingly reinforced the link with Africa, and, according to White, "many slave mothers adhered to mores that made motherhood almost sacred, mores rooted in the black woman's African past." The slave woman had the love and support of her children and was more intimately tied into her network of kinsmen than were male slaves, who had no rights whatever to their children and, in the final analysis, no authority or recognized role as fathers, sons, or providers—which is not to say that these roles were not informally pursued and defiantly sanctioned within the slave community itself. We continue to live with the consequences of this differentiated effect of slavery on gender roles, and I will return to the subject later.

Second, African-American women have always had greater access to the wider, dominant white world in their roles as domestics, nannies, nurses, and clerks. Fran Sanders has written of the African-American woman, with little exaggera-

tion, "for two hundred years it was she who initiated the dialogue between the White world and the African-American." Today, we despise the job of domestic, but it is clearly wrong to project such attitudes back into the past. In spite of its unpleasant association with slavery and the often exploitative terms of employment, what African-American and white domestics always hated was not the job itself but live-in domestic work. When done on a regular, daily basis with civilized employers and a decent wage in both kind and money, this was a modestly secure job in which the African-American woman, unlike her male counterpart in the fields or factories, "wielded an informal power that directly affected the basic human services provided within the white households," according to Jacqueline Jones.

Domestic work, and other employment in the service sector, also brought the African-American woman in direct contact with the most intimate areas of the dominant culture. This was further reinforced by another factor peculiar to women: that in America, as in most human societies, women of different status and race can, and often do, establish close relationships, whereas men, so separated, cannot or will not. The knowledge so acquired by African-American women was valuable cultural capital. This was explicitly stated by many of the domestics interviewed by Bonnie Thornnton Dill, who "saw work as an *ability* rather than a *burden*. Work was a means for attaining her goals; it provided her with the money she needed to be an independent person, *and it exposed her and her children to 'good' things—values and a style of life which she considered important*" (emphasis added).

However, I strongly suspect that this cultural capital was selectively transmitted only to daughters and not to sons. The reasons for this are complex, but it may have had to do with the expectations black mothers had of their daughters, compared with those of their sons. The less successful daughter could be expected to pursue the job of a domestic; the more successful daughter was expected to become a schoolteacher or nurse. In both cases, the cultural skills acquired from the dominant culture would be an asset. No such transmissions were considered important

## In the professional and corporate world, the intersection of race and gender actually benefits black career women

for lower-class boys, who were expected to do manual work. More research needs to be done on this subject, but there is some evidence that this pattern continues today among the lower classes.

Added to this was, of course, the greater willingness to accept black women than black men in the dominant society. White people's greater fear of black men, induced by racist-sexual attitudes and greater familiarity with black women in the course of growing up together made it much easier for black women to find jobs in clerical and, later, in professional white settings.

I think these attitudes and reinforcements still persist. Indeed, they may well be interacting with affirmative action to reinforce this traditional bias toward black women. It is not simply that firms, under pressure to meet affirmative action guide-

lines, achieve both gender and racial targets when they employ black women. Even more important, it has been found that in the professional and corporate world, the intersection of race and gender benefits the black career woman, more than it does not only black men but also white women. Because they are *black* women, corporate white men are less inclined to view them as sex objects, as women "out to get a husband," or indeed as women at all, and thus are more inclined to take them seriously as fellow professionals. The highly successful black women interviewed by Cynthia Epstein almost all agreed that being female "reduced the effect of the racial taboo" against blacks in corporate positions, and the combination of being black, female, and educated created a unique social space for them, reinforcing their self-confidence and motivation. Thus, when the feminist academic bell hooks writes of black women that it is "crucial to explore marginal locations as spaces where we can best become whatever we want to be," she is, ironically, describing that which "pleasures, delights and fulfills [the] desire" not only of the radical professional black woman but, equally, of her conservative bourgeois sisters in the interstices of the corporate structure. Alas, it is precisely in those marginal spaces that black professional men tend to get crushed.

### The Social Origins of the Crisis among Different Classes of African Americans

*The Under- and Lower Classes.* While there is a gender crisis in all classes of African Americans, we must clearly distinguish between the middle and working classes,

on the one hand, and the under- and disorganized lower classes on the other. The crisis takes different forms and has different social sources in these two broad categories of African Americans.

Socialization patterns obviously play some part in explaining the growing discrepancy in male and female achievement, especially in the self-destructive patterns of behavior among lower-class male adolescents. It defies good sense to argue, as some scholars such as E. J. Smith rather too oversensitively do, that there is no gender bias against males in the lower-class socialization process. What the statistical evidence demonstrates in regard to male child abuse in the black under- and lower classes is given strong support in the forthcoming work of Carl H. Nightingale. Based on more than six years of close participant observations, Night-

## The parenting practices of the black lower classes have become increasingly abusive

ingale takes issue with the current conventional wisdom among sociologists and social psychologists that underplays the importance of family background in explaining male youth violence in the ghetto. The problem, he correctly notes, is the overemphasis on household type as an explanatory factor. This variable, indeed, explains little, but to emphasize it is the miss the main point: that the parenting practices of the black lower classes have become increasingly abusive. "Almost without exception," he writes, "parents have seen severe punishments—like prolonged isolation from friends, beatings, and other uses of force—as the best means

mates and projecting onto them many of their unrealized ambitions. "The girl's instrumental role within the household," writes Rainwater, "is an important part of her growing sense of identity as a woman-to-be. As her ability to function effectively increases, the recognition her mother gives her in this identity becomes more and more important to her. . . . Mothers generally seem to prefer their girls, in the sense that they have closer and more taken-for-granted relationships with them." Boys, on the other hand, "live in a more anxious and ambiguous situation. . . . Their sense of solidarity with their mothers is not strong, and they do not acquire the girls' feeling that a recognized and valued identity is coming into being."

The murderous aggressiveness and self-destructive violence, the hyperkinetic posturing and violent braggadocio, and the misogynistic abuse of women and identification of manliness with impregnation and the abandonment of mothers—behavior characteristics of a disproportionate number of under- and lower-class black men, is the modernized, "cool pose" version of a brutal behavior complex going back to slavery. It is, of course, precipitated by the horribly depressed conditions of the ghetto. What's more, it is a pattern of behavior that darkly mirrors, and is legitimized by, the mainstream culture—not simply, as Paul Peterson thinks, because of declining mainstream support for familial, communal, and religious values but more paradoxically, as Nightingale brilliantly shows, precisely because of massive media exposure to the glorification of the very *traditional* mainstream values of violence (cowboys?), sexuality (Madonna?), and cut-throat greed (Wall

to educate kids in values of social responsibility and respect for parents." This tendency, he further points out, is reinforced and legitimized by the traditional, fundamentalist emphasis on not sparing the rod and spoiling the child, by law enforcement agencies, by the courts and prison system, and by primitive, mainstream law-and-order rhetoric, resulting in "parental behavior that leaves children with hurtful and even traumatic memories."

In contrast, mothers often have much warmer relations with their daughters, treating them as their friends and help-

Street?). However, this behavior complex is not new, even if in certain of the larger, more media-saturated urban ghettos it is getting worse. It is tragically, an inherited pattern, and like all behaviors transmitted from one generation to the next, it is reproduced through the processes of socialization, through the black male experience of growing up with mothers (and sporadic fathers) who are desperately overstressed, poverty stricken, and physically overburdened, and whose childrearing behavior oscillates between seductive overindulgence and brutal abuse.

The experience of lower-class men as they grow up, their chronic ambivalence

## I know of no other cultural tradition outside of the black lower class where the trope "mother fucker" is so inscribed

and predatory attitudes toward women, and the pattern of mutual cynicism and distrust between the sexes—all are given full expression in the popular culture of lower-class blacks, especially the verbal art of signifying. It is not accidental that one of the most commonly used terms in this culture, both in and out of ritual situations, is "mother-fucker." Now, while I fully agree with my colleague Henry L. Gates that undue attention has been given to the insult rituals by past interpreters, and that they constitute a form subsumed under the more general cultural style of signifying, the fact nonetheless remains that this particular expulsion is perhaps the most frequently used in the urban ghettos today, and the most distinctively black. I know of no other cultural tradi-

tion outside of the black lower class where the trope "mother-fucker" is so inscribed, not even the closely related Afro-Caribbean lower-class cultures, which have many similar insult rituals directed at the mother. Further, we have it on Gates' authority that "Your Mamma" jokes "abound in Black discourse, all the way from the field and the street to Langstron Hughes." The misogyny evident in contemporary ghetto youth sexuality and rap music has deep roots in the traditional culture, as Lawrence Levine has shown.

Consider the following:

> I was walking in the jungle
> With my dick in my hand
> I was the baddest mother fucker
> In the jungle land.
> I looked up in the tree
> And what did I see?
> Your little Black mamma
> Trying to piss on me.
> I picked up a rock
> And hit her in the cock
> And knocked that bitch
> A half a block.

One could write a whole volume of interpretation on this one verse. What, for example, is the significance of the fact that, in this, as in many other "joaning" and "dozens" rhymes, the mother has a "cock?" It is now *de rigueur* to deny that the antimaternal verbal content of the dozens of other black tropes bears any relation to problems in the actual mother-son relationship. I find this politically correct denial simply preposterous. Recognizing the cultural assumptions of Freudian theory (as Freud, incidentally, did) does not commit one to the aridity of relativism. As Peter Blos has recently pointed

out, Freud's real insight concerning the mother-son relationship was to emphasize the problem of attachment and the need to overcome it; ironically, what makes it important is less the Oedipal problem emphasized by Freud (which may well be more a Euro-American bourgeois phenomenon), and more "the need of the growing [male] child to distance himself from the central female careperson." In every culture men must find ways of resisting the pull of maternal dependency, and lower-class black youth are no exception—anymore, for example, than are privileged Japanese youth who, because of the commuting father's vanishing role and resulting excessive maternal dependence and "psychological presence," have recently taken to a pattern of juvenile delinquency with a pathological focus on mother beating as well as matricide.

What all the sociological and psychological research makes clear, is that there is no provision within the lower-class pattern of childrearing for this separation. Reference is often made to extended kinsmen and friends by those denying that there is a serious problem here, but when the ethnographies are closely examined, what we find is that even when men, including natural fathers, attempt to help, they tend to do so through their own female kinspeople. It is the father's female kin who activate and assert paternal rights, if and when these rights are claimed: in Stack's words, "Mothers expect little from the father; they just hope that he will help out. But they do expect something from his kin, especially his mother and sisters." The prevailing dogma that effective father substitutes exist in the network of support mobilized by poor black women to raise their male children is pure, Af-

rocentric myth, as is the twin dogma that father-absence does not matter anyway. Even among the stable working class, Scanzoni was unable to find these consistent father substitutes among the small minority of his respondents with single parent backgrounds: "Either the father was not there, or if a father substitute was used by the child, he participated only minimally in these particular phases of the child's socialization."

The lower-class male child then, has no assistance from, no ally within the family in his struggle to separate from the presence of his mother. The neglected clinical literature has documented the serious psychological consequences of this failure to separate, especially when it is accompanied by a neglectful or abusive mother. The case of Virgil, a troubled, anxious, five-year-old, analyzed by Dale Meers, illustrates the problem:

> He turns his aggression back on himself in a range of accidents and provoked punishments. . . . Virgil's masculinity has a profound sadistic base, and his compensating defenses have led to regressive, passive, effeminate accommodation. Virgil's dominant fears are of his painful, emerging fantasies and dreams of being a girl. Such passivity and effeminate inclinations, however, outrange his self-esteem, and his acting out appears as a chronic need to reestablish his sense of masculinity. [emphasis added]

It is now easy to see the powerful attraction of the violent street gang and "cool pose" culture for the under- and lower-class youth. The antimaternal abuse and promiscuous sexual and physical violence of the street culture acts as a belated, but savagely effective means of
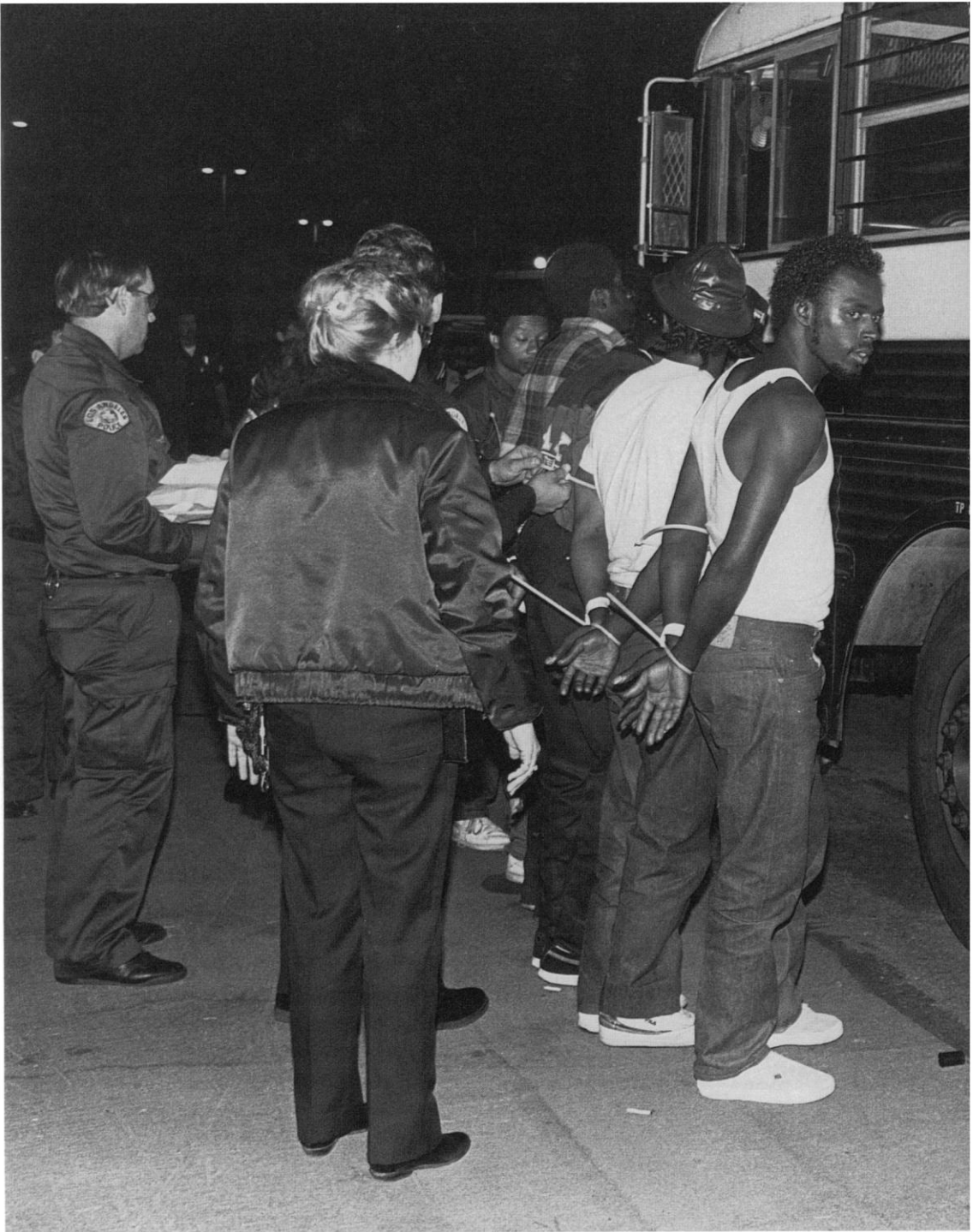
breaking with mother. The androgynous figure in the "dozens" gives expression to the mother with the "cock" who also fathers, who claims to love the son yet debases the man he will become, who nurtures and brutally disciplines. At the same time, in its antimaternal misogyny,

**The murderous aggression and self-destructive violence by a disproportionate number of lower-class black men are the modernized "cool pose" version of a brutal behavior-complex going back to slavery.**
Reuters/Bettman

it clobbers into deep repression the painful transsexual fantasies generated by the mother who is at once loved and feared, and whose psychological presence is overwhelming. The result is the "b-boy" (baad boy) masculinity that brooks no "dissing," that as Nyhlengule explains, "links gender identity with predatory violence" against women, and achieves respect through murder and suicide. The murder of fellow black youths, it should be further noted, is a pathologically gratifying way of gaining the approval of the internalized mother's debasement of "rotten, no-good, 'mother-fucking' men." And suicide is the ultimate high, especially when it is masked in the "macho" way. For in one fell swoop, it gains the respect of peers, since the victim appears to have gone down gunning; it satisfies the internal impulse to be punished, as the inner mother dictates; it compels the attention and love of the outer mother who recognizes, at last, what she has lost, even as it punishes her by the grief it is bound to cause; and, not least of all, it expresses the self-loathing, meaninglessness, frustration, worthlessness, and utter nihilism of growing up desperately poor, black, brutalized, and neglected in late twentieth-century America.

*The Working and Middle Classes.* Studies on the nonpoor segments of the black population suggest that families function well for the socialization of children and, indeed, make extraordinary sacrifices to ensure their success in the wider society. John McAdoo's study of middle- and lower-middle-class parenting styles among African Americans in the Baltimore-Washington area, for example, found relations between mothers and children to be "warm . . . loving and devoid of conflict," resulting in children with very good self-esteem. And in a major comparative study of family dynamics among black and white middle- and secure working-class families in the Chicago area, Walter Allen found few really sharp differences between the races, except that black sons generally "sensed themselves to be in greater control of their lives" than white sons. Middle- and working-class black fathers also seem to be no less effective than their white counterparts in the socialization of their children, and one study even suggests that African-American fathers behave in a manner that tends to make their daughters very independent.

## The institution of marriage is in serious trouble among all classes of black persons—especially the middle class

Adult gender relations, however, including marriage, are far more complex and problematic. In their study of 256 mainly working- and lower-middle-class African-American students at Temple University, Noel Cazenave and Rita Smith asked their respondents for their views on Wallace's assertion that there was "distrust, even hatred between Black men and women." Only 34 percent of the men and 26 percent of the women disagreed with this statement. What is more, the majority of respondents, men and women, agreed that "black women seem to have many more opportunities than black men."

African-American marriages are twice as likely to end in divorce as white marriages. The racial difference is only partly due to the greater proportion of blacks in

lower-class occupations, according to Gerald Jaynes and Robin Williams. Furthermore, there is evidence that marriages which are still intact are problematic. One major study, by Annie Barnes, reports that the majority of residents in a solidly middle-class African-American neighborhood in Atlanta described their marriages as "weak."

This all fits with what is, after all, the best evidence on what people actually think about marriage, namely, their willingness to practice it. It is hard to believe now, but, according to Robert Mare and Christopher Winship, in 1940 the proportion of black men, aged twenty-four to twenty-nine, who were married, *exceeded* that of white men in the same age-group (59 percent vs. 56 percent). By 1985–87 the proportion of married white men had declined by only four points to 52 percent, while the figure for black men had fallen to 35 percent. The decline was almost as great for black women. It has been shown by Mare and Winship that the changing employment prospect for black men can explain only 20 percent of this dramatic change, and growing school enrollment not a great deal more. As Christopher Jencks points out, if the unavailability of steady jobs was the main factor, then we ought to expect no decline in the marriage rate of mature black men with steady jobs; if anything, we might expect an increase, since their marriageability would have been greatly enhanced. Yet, we find just the opposite trend: their marriage rate fell from 75 percent to 58 percent between 1960 and 1980. Clearly then, both from what they report about their attitudes, from their unwillingness to marry, and from the fragility of their marriages when they do get married, it

must be concluded that the institution of marriage is in serious trouble among all classes of black persons—especially the middle class, where it has always had far greater economic, social, and emotional significance.

What accounts for this relatively high rate of marital instability and dissatisfaction among middle-class African Americans? Two important structural factors recently emphasized are the increased economic independence of black women and the scarcity of marriageable men. It has long been established that divorce rates increase with greater economic independence of women, and black middle-class wives have always worked to a greater degree than their white counterparts.

The large pool of "marriageable," women that middle-class black men face (the obverse of the "marriage squeeze" for women, there being, as noted in Jaynes and Williams, only 772 men for every 1000 middle-class black women not only provides a constant source of temptation for married men, but heightens the probability that when discord arises in a marriage, as it inevitably does, men will leave their current wives for other women. This tendency is intensified by the fact that so many middle-class black women not only work full time, but are likely to be earning incomes much closer to the median male income than is true of white women. What this means is that the economic cost of divorce—traditionally a major disincentive to do so—is likely to be much lower for middle-class black men than for their white counterparts. Where, for example, the typical middle-class white male loses his home and all its comforts upon divorce and must start all over again to build one, the typical black middle-class

male divorcee can usually walk straight into the welcoming home of his career-established, second wife-to-be. Black men aged thirty-five to forty-four in fact remain divorced, widowed, or separated at a substantially lower rate than black women—only 25 percent—compared with 38 percent of black women of the same age group in 1980.

In addition, researchers have found serious mismatches and contradictions in the attitudes of middle-class black men and women. While middle-class black women have, with one notable exception, the most advanced set of gender attitudes in the nation, black men tend to remain highly traditionalist, believing in male dominance ideology in familial relations. This is true in spite of the fact that they are not allowed to actualize this ideology by their spouses. Middle- and working-class black women insist on egalitarian family relations, although authority is shared separately rather than syncretically. Ironically, the stronger the commitment of the husband to male dominance ideology, the more power his spouse insists on having in the relationship. The contradiction leads to serious marital strain ending often in divorce.

Another mismatch concerns the reasons for having a relationship. Black middle-class men tend to emphasize companionship and love; black middle-class women emphasize instrumental or pragmatic factors such as financial stability and other forms of security. This is so in spite of the one oddly traditionalist element in the otherwise radical structure of black middle-class women's beliefs on gender: their unusually high valorization of mothering. Over 86 percent of African-American women claim that this is the most fulfilling thing for a woman to do. This is extraordinary in light of their skepticism about marriage and their highly instrumental attitudes toward relationships.

Black middle- and lower-) class women separate the role of mothering and nurturance from that of the conjugal relationship, possibly because of their skepticism about and low expectations of adult gender ties. I think this tragic separation has deep roots in the history of black America, as does the African-American male's commitment to male dominance, whether of the genteel or more "macho" sort.

## The Origins of the Crisis: Bringing Slavery Back In

Behind these curious sociological findings lies the deepest historical tragedy of black men and women. In explaining it we return to the centuries-long holocaust of slavery and its most devastating impact: the ethnocidal assault on gender roles and relations between black men and women.

The slavemaster, while forcing black women to be self-sufficient, attempted to reduce the black male to the role of stud and worker. To be sure, it was in the interest of the slaveholder that couples stayed together, since this not only increased the fertility rate but acted as a powerful brake on the urge to resist or run away. But slaveholders thought nothing of reducing men who were "fine and stout" to the role of "stockmen" and "breeding niggers." There was certainly strong cultural resistance from the great majority of slaves to these vile indignities, and evidence from interviews with ex-slaves, along with the demographic data analyzed by cliometricians, strongly sug-

gests that they did everything possible to maintain familial and kinship ties. The result was that the majority of household units under slavery had an adult couple present, and such couples did have an impact on the quality of life of their children. However, it must be emphasized that, where present, the man's role was always provisional, de facto, and subject to sudden rupture. Against the whites he could offer his children and spouse no protection, no security, no status, and only a precarious name and identity. While this did not lead to "matriarchy," it did enhance the status of women in relation to their men, a change already set in motion by the peculiar circumstances of socialization on the plantation under which, according to White, "most slave girls grew up believing that boys and girls were equal."

What is extraordinary about the quantitative studies of slave families and unions is that they suggest a distribution very similar to what prevails today; that is, roughly two-thirds of all family units had two parents present, exactly two-thirds of ex-slave interviewees born before 1851 were "married," and about the same proportion of children grew up in these two-adult households. Revisionist historians have concentrated on the two-thirds majority who stubbornly held on to familial and kinship ties, in this way providing a degree of stability and cultural autonomy within the overarching, will-killing horror of the slave system. However, we need to know much more about the neglected bottom third of the slave population, who were not in these more stable structures. This other group was also the concern of W. E. B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier, leading to their dual-family view of slav-

ery, a view that the revisionists attacked but that the most recent work on slavery seems to support. This, I contend, was the source of the defeated "Sambos," as well as the voluntary "breeders" and incorrigible "bad niggers" of Southern planter lore, who not only bothered the planters but made life even more difficult for the ordinary slave trying to survive. I want to suggest also that this bottom third was the historical source of the Stagger Lees and other heartless brutes of lower-class lore, and of the nihilistic underclass who have always plagued ordinary, law-abiding black folk. It is ridiculous to believe that black people came through nearly three centuries of slavery unscathed, with only the venom of white racism to worry about.

It is indeed remarkable how rapidly working and middle-class blacks overcame the worst aspects of this sustained assault on familial and gender roles, building on what they had been able to preserve during the period of the holocaust. As early as 1937, the psychologist John Dollard could write, on the basis of his detailed psycho-ethnographic studies of a typical southern town:

> It is unmistakable that middle-class Negroes have different conceptions of their roles from lower-class Negroes, and that these conceptions are nearer to the dominant American middle-class pattern. . . . However it may be among lower-class Negroes, in the life histories of the middle-class group the father plays a considerable role and the mother does not seem to play a disproportionately important one. The father seems to appear regularly as disciplinarian and as one who stresses restrictive aspects of the culture. It is very likely that families whose children emerge into the middle

*class have already a tradition and discipline which is superior to the mine run of lower-class Negroes, and, further, that the family form tends to approximate the White patriarchal type.*

In this passage we read a world of progress and effort, but we also detect the lingering shadows of the past. Black men reacted in two ways to the sociological

## The underclass male is not a Don Juan but a stud, exactly like his stock-slave ancestor. Little Sambo has become a badass dude

mutilation of slavery. There was the lower-class reaction, which Dollard clearly distinguishes and delineates in the thirties, and which is still very much with us. That reaction was to embrace, both defiantly and Tomishly, the very role the white aggressor had forced upon them. The resulting anger and self-loathing found expression inwardly in the high incidence of depression among lower-class black men, both in the rural South and the modern ghetto, and outwardly in violence against other black men as well as sexual aggression against women. Significantly, the sexual aggression against women did not stop at mere compulsive sexuality, but, as if unable to shake off the one role of value (to the master) thrust upon him during slavery, that of breeder, we find throughout the decades of the rural South, and throughout the underclass today, the vicious desire to impregnate and leave women. Dollard, so much closer to the period of slavery than we are, was in no doubt that the aggressive and "disproportionate" sexuality of the

lower-class blacks he observed and interviewed in the South was "a feature of his permissive slave culture."

The underclass male is not a Don Juan but a stud, exactly like his stock-slave ancestor. His behavior, reproduced in socialization, is a collective psychosis, a historical addiction to a collective racial trauma similar in origin to the counterphobic attraction of a drug addict to his drug, the same drug that he once deeply feared and loathed. As Kohut writes: "He cannot overcome the original fear, and so he continuously covers it up, to himself and to the judging social surrounding, by proving not only that he is not afraid of it but that, on the contrary, he loves it. Little Hans has become a jockey." The under- and lower-class black man now idealizes what once dehumanized him, internalizes what once externalized him as a mere sexual object, investing his manhood in the very thing that once emasculated him. Little Sambo has become a badass dude.

But the middle-class black did not escape unscathed, and no amount of celebration of the resilience and strength of black marriages and families is going to hide the cracks left by the seismic shocks of slavery and racial oppression. From the Dollard quote cited above, it was already obvious what one of the problems inherited from the past would be: black male dominance ideology. Where the lower-class black reacted to the trauma of the past by pathologically internalizing the perverse role assigned him with all its destructive consequences, the middle-class black reacted in two ways. One was a healthy venting of his anger against the white oppressor in social and political action, on both the individual and collective

levels, often at great risk to himself since he was always outnumbered and out-gunned. Black radicalism and the achievement of civil rights, full citizenship, and racial dignity against all odds must rank as one of the greatest episodes in the modern history of freedom.

The other kind of reaction was more problematic. In casting off the hateful gender role assigned the black man, middle-class blacks both positively and negatively identified with the white paternalistic aggressor. The more conservative, positive identification took the form of an internalization of the white oppressor's own male ideal in his relationship with white women. The middle-class black strove to outdo the "best" that the white elite men had to offer their own women. That "best" ideology, of course, was to spell trouble for black women, as it had done for Southern elite white women, for it was nothing other than the courtly tradition of genteel male dominance. The black woman was to be protected, to be cherished, to be even placed on a pedestal; the black man might, with superficial sincerity, graciously voice an attitude of equality (echoed in superficial telephone surveys), as long as women, in fact, knew and kept their place in the exercise of power both in and out of the household. This then is the origin of the attitudes we have discussed above. And as we have seen, unlike the white woman, black women refused to conform to this genteel paternalistic tradition either in their attitudes or in their behavior.

But there was also the negative assimilation of the white oppressor's gender ideal. Here, the middle-class black man angrily rejected the white gender ideal as a model, claiming that there could be nothing good in an oppressor so vile. Black men did not, however, replace the white paternalistic ideal with a counterideal of genuine gender equality, but, as bell hooks scathingly observes, equating their own domination with castration and emasculation, they came to identify freedom with manhood and sexual domination. In the process they took over the sexual metaphor of freedom from the very oppressors they claimed to be fighting, forging a bond with them; in hooks's words, "They shared the patriarchal belief that revolutionary struggle was really about the erect phallus." Potent stuff, but not entirely ill-conceived. The most militant group of black men, those belonging to the Black Muslims, openly acknowledge an extreme sexist view, and have persuaded the women who belong to their group that this is in the best interest of the race, as the extraordinary recent diatribe by Shahrazadi Ali demonstrates. But in a less overt way, and in varying degrees, some ideology of male dominance seems to prevail among many, perhaps most, middle-class black men.

Sometimes this was rationalized as part of a nationalistic ideology of "nigrescence" or Africanness, at other times as a dangerous pseudo-radical form of class unity with the lower-class brothers through a glorification of their pathological, hip-hop sexuality. This tragic embourgeoisment of lower class promiscuity was encouraged, on the one hand, by the fact that many of the leading figures in the radical movement had themselves come up from the lower classes—Eldridge Cleaver and his execrable *Soul on Ice* being the most notorious case in point—and, on the other hand, by the partly guilt-driven, partly self-interested

desire for solidarity with the most op-
pressed segments of the group by black
race leaders of middle- or solidly work-
ing-class backgrounds, who found it psy-
chologically only too easy to reject the
courtly paternalism of their own fathers.
Whatever its source, this ideology of mas-
culinity spelled even more trouble and
contradiction for middle-class black
women.

But the problems of coming to terms
with the tragic past were not confined to
black men. We also see the footprints of
the past in the contradictions of black
women's gender attitudes and behavior.
It was during the period of slavery that
the autonomic egalitarianism of the mod-
ern middle-class family, as well as the au-
tonomy of black women, was fashioned,
as Deborah White convincingly shows:

*The nature of plantation life required that
marital relationships allow slave women a large
degree of autonomy. Marriage did not bring
the traditional benefits to female slaves. As we
have seen, slave women could not depend on
their husbands for protection against whipping
or sexual exploitation. Slave couples had no
property to share, and essential needs like food,
clothing, and shelter were not provided by slave
husbands. Thus slave men could not use the
provision of subsistence goods as leverage in the
exercise of authority over women. In almost
all societies where men consistently dominate
women, their control is based on male own-
ership and distribution of property and/or con-
trol of certain cuturally valued subsistence goods.
The absence of such mechanisms in slave so-
ciety probably contributed to female slave in-
dependence from slave men.*

The unexpected valorization of mother-
ing as the most fulfilling role for a wom-
an, so out of sync with her other, highly

modern gender views, can also only be
explained in terms of the long years of
struggle during slavery and its aftermath.
The heroic commitment to the preser-
vation of the race, both culturally and so-
cially, entailed an extreme valorization of
mothering and security, independent of
any support from the dishonored posi-
tions of husband and father. Here again,
White is definitive. While slave families
"were egalitarian," she concludes, "re-
lationships between mother and child still
superseded those between husband and
wife. Slaveholder practices encouraged the
primacy of the mother-child relationship,
and in the mores of the slave community
mother-hood ranked above marriage."
And she shows too, that it was under the
impact of slavery that romance, though
cherished, as often as not gave way to
"pragmatic considerations."

It is remarkable that the set of attitudes
identified among modern middle-class
blacks by sociologists is already fully ev-
ident in the life of the proto-bourgeois,
early nineteenth-century slave, freedom-
fighter, and feminist, Harriet A. Jacobs,
who published her autobiography under
the name Linda Brent. Harriet (Linda, in
the *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*)
neither has a child for, nor sexually con-
summates her relationship with, her only
"love-dream," the free-born, "young col-
ored carpenter" who courted her, but in-
stead establishes a companionless concu-
binage of convenience with the white
attorney Samuel Tredwell Sawyer (Mr.
Sands), for whom she has two children,
expecting that there would be "security
for her children" and the ultimate "boon"
of freedom. Her epic, strong-willed
struggle for freedom, first for herself, then
for ultimately all blacks, is counterpoised
by her deep filial love for her mother-

substitute—she is "grandmother's child"—and her devotion to her children, especially her daughter, Louisa Matilda. However, although she was an intelligent, beautiful woman who must have had many suitors, it is noteworthy that Jacobs never married, even though she was freed at the age of thirty-nine and lived for another forty-five years, and that, in sharp contrast with her strong, lifelong bond with Louisa Matilda, she had only tenuous relationship with her brother Joseph and her son of the same name, both of whom were lost to the family.

## The Gendered Burden of History

This, then, is what we have inherited: a lower class with gender attitudes and behaviors that are emotionally and socially brutalizing and physically self-destructive. The posturing, pathological narcissism of "cool pose" masculinity with its predatory, antimaternal sexuality, self-healing addictions, and murderous, self-loathing displacements; the daily and nightly carnage on the streets of the inner cities; the grim statistics on child and spousal abuse, rape, poverty, illiteracy, and suicide—these are the gruesome mani-

## It is counterproductive to emphasize the "resilience" and "strength" of the black family at a time like this

festations of this historically, sociologically, and psychologically engendered tragedy.

And this: a middle class with one of the most contradictory and incompatible set of gender attitudes, both within and between the sexes, anywhere on earth.

The mismatch between the most liberated and autonomous of women and some of the most sexist and self-excusing of men, between women in search of security and men wanting indulgence; the dismal marriage market that confronts middle-class black women and the exceedingly high rate of marital discord, dissatisfaction, and dissolution they experience if and when they do get married; the anger, the excuses, the betrayals, the denials— these are the painful consequences of this tragically conflicted set of gender relations and attitudes.

In closing, let me point out that nothing I have said should be taken to imply a conservative approach to social policies. Americans of all ideological persuasions now seem to insist on a monolithic approach to the resolution of social issues. Any demand for a universal welfare state immediately provokes neoconservative rhetoric about the neglect of individual agency. On the other hand, any reference to the ways in which dysfunctional parenting and childrearing practices are generative of black poverty and self-destruction immediately elicits the black and white liberal charge of "blaming the victim."

It is time we rid ourselves of this either/or dogma. Changes are essential both on the structural and policy level, on the one hand, and, on the other, on the individual and cultural level. While both will always have to be taken into account, the level we emphasize will depend on the nature of the problem we are addressing. In regard to the problem of gender relations, there can be no doubt that change in such an intimate, complex, and ideologically fraught area of black life must emphasize behavioral factors, individual will, and cultural, moral, and at-

titudinal transformations. Needless to say, such transformations in no way assume as a model traditional bourgeois norms and ideals, which, as Edward M. Levine has pointed out, are themselves in a state of disarray. I share Na'im Akbar's skepticism of the "Eurocentric model" of gender relations, although his suggestion of a "new man" based on the "African traditional healer—herbalist, griots and psychic" is not only Afrocentric mumbo-jumbo but dangerous talk, in light of the devastating AIDS epidemic which traditional African male sexual mores have inflicted on the continent. And while it is true that whatever ultimately evolves will have to emerge from present realities of black gender and familial patterns, it is perhaps overdefensive and counterproductive to emphasize the "resilience" and "strength" of the black family and gender relations at a time such as this.

What Toni Cade wrote twenty-two years ago, drawing on the social psychology of Frantz Fanon, is still powerfully relevant today:

*Revolution begins with the self, in the self. The individual, the basic revolutionary unit, must be purged of poison and lies that assault the ego and threaten the heart, that hazard the next larger unit—the couple or pair, that jeopardize the still larger unit—the family or cell, that put the entire movement at peril.*

Black men and women of all classes have a poisoned relationship. Slavery and the system of racial oppression brewed and first injected that poison, and poverty along with racism, prolongs it. But blaming these alone will get us nowhere—not only because it is we who now inject the poison in our own misgendered souls, through the ways we bring up our children, through the ways we relate, or fail to relate, to each other, through the values we cherish and the ones we choose to spurn, but because only as individual men and women can we find the antidote to heal ourselves. We can only reclaim ourselves by first reclaiming our past, individually and collectively. And we can only do so by returning to its traumatic source and in an orphic grasp of self-liberation come to say, as the widow of Malcolm X said recently at Harvard that everything we are, and have been, is all "because of us."

If I am correct in thinking that a full recognition of this problem—and its promotion to the top of the agenda of issues for dispassionate study, public discourse, and change—has been a consequence of the Thomas–Hill hearings, it would indeed be the most significant legacy of these hearings to the communities of black people in America.