Symposium: The Unique Situation of Black Women

GETTING OFF OF BLACK WOMEN'S BACKS

Love Her or Leave Her Alone

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INTRODUCTION

In *Finding Oprah's Roots* (2007), featuring Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s search for answers to questions about Black genealogy, Gates explains that one of Oprah's grandfathers stopped his formal schooling at an early age to work on a plantation so that he could help provide an education and opportunity for his sister instead. The grandfather did this in an attempt to protect his sister so that she could escape rape and other forms of gender oppression from both White men and women. Gates's explanation reflects both the way that gender, sexuality, and race defined life in the old South and their consequences for Black life, Black relationships, and Black destinies. This personal sacrifice, in defense of Black women, was commonplace—not at all particular to Oprah Winfrey's family. In fact, John Gwaltney collected several essays of Black men and women describing similar actions in his book *Drylongso* (1981).

Similarly, when Marcyliena Morgan (2002, 2003) interviewed some thirty adult women in Mississippi in 1990, their stories were overflowing with instances of brothers and fathers, uncles and male cousins who worked and stayed at home so that their sisters could have "respectable" jobs and escape unwanted White-male advances. Morgan spoke to one woman—a teacher and later a proud community leader—who said, "You have to know about my brother" (Morgan 2002). The brother was a laborer, and the woman thought him to be the most brilliant and respectable man in the world. She explained that he gave up his dreams of an education for her.

When we consider a young man choosing to sacrifice his life ambitions for a female relative as a common occurrence and shared experience among many African American families, it puts the discussion of sexual relations and race, class, and gender into a distinctive cultural and historical perspective. Our theoretical musings about intersectionality are based simultaneously on complex lived experiences and on

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oversimplified popular expressions such as: "Can't we all just get along?" "No color lines," and "Love has no color," which in their simplicity seem to obscure the depth and breadth of African American experience. Instead, African American history is replete with examples that demonstrate the emotional complexity of race, class, and gender dynamics which are resolved through sustained relationships and painful choices rather than simple slogans.

Interracial relationships, like intraracial relationships, engage complex personal and political dynamics. However, if simplistic popular discourses about interracial relationships between White women and Black men were true, we would have to assume that Black men and Black women despise each other, that they never fall in love or make sacrifices for each other, that all Black men long for the love and kindness of submissive White women, and that all Black women live in a lonely state of perpetual rage, consumed by jealousy at losing their men to their fairer and more feminine White female competitors.

Erica Chito Childs's "Looking Behind the Stereotypes of the 'Angry Black Woman': An Exploration of Black Women's Responses to Interracial Relationships" (2005) and Michael Jeffries's "Right to be Hostile?" (2006), a critique of Childs's article, explore the stereotypes about Black women as angry and bitter, which have been embedded in contemporary discourses about Black male/White female relationships. Both authors claim to critique and contextualize the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman." However, in actuality, neither author questions the validity of the stereotype nor do they address it *as* a stereotype. Instead, they presume the "Angry Black Woman" to be an accurate depiction of Black women's character and emotional experiences and of their responses to interracial relationships.

Childs assumes that Black women are angry and attempts to "understand" them. Jeffries assumes Black women are angry and attempts to chastise and change them. In our response to Jeffries and, by association, Childs, it is the purpose of this essay to engage in a direct critique of the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman" that Childs and Jeffries accept so uncritically. We will address the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman" as cultural ideology rather than social or psychological reality, an ideology that serves to silence and dehumanize Black women by blaming them for experiences of racist sexism that affect them in personal and political ways.

In describing Oprah's history, Gates recognizes that historically many African American men have been advocates for Black women in the face of racism and sexism. Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, were among the most outspoken male advocates of women's suffrage of *any* race. As Du Bois explains in his essay "The Damnation of Women":

> I shall forgive the white South much in its final judgment day: I shall forgive its slavery, for slavery is a world-old habit; I shall forgive its fighting for a well-lost cause. . . . I shall forgive its so-called "pride of race," . . . *but one thing I shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come: its wanton and continued and persistent insulting of black womanhood* (Du Bois 1920 [2004], p. 770; emphasis added).

Black men's recognition of the suffering of Black women and their willingness to sacrifice to spare Black women has meant that some Black women have been able to be independent of both White supremacy and White men. Black men's sacrifices developed among African Americans on U.S. soil and are not typical of most societies. In fact, in many respects they are profoundly radical acts, in that they give

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Black women status at the expense of men. The exceptional quality of these acts is evident in the following observation by Michelle Rosaldo:

> Every known society recognizes and elaborates some differences between sexes, and although there are groups in which men wear skirts and women wear pants or trousers, it is everywhere the case that there are characteristic tasks, manners, and responsibilities primarily associated with women or with men. . . . But what is perhaps most striking and surprising is the fact that male, as opposed to female, activities are always recognized as predominantly important, and cultural systems give authority and value to the roles and activities of men (Rosaldo 1974, pp. 18–19).

Despite their defiance of a patriarchal norm that pervades most known social groups, Black men's sacrifices for Black women are rarely recognized as evidence of Black male chivalry, as evidence of their commitment, even devotion, to Black women, or as evidence of Black women's worthiness of being treated so lovingly.

It is evident that love, as well as expediency, serves as the foundation for the everyday heroism Black men and women have displayed in their relationships with each other. African American women and men have engaged in creative and complex kinship and gender dynamics, without which it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for them to survive. Yet Black men and Black women are depicted as pathological in every way, as separate gender groups, both in their relationships to each other, and as a culture and community. One aspect of this depiction of Black relationships as pathological is the idea that Black women have been masculinized and Black men have been feminized in relationship to each other. This view made so popular by Moynihan's 1965 report (often referred to as the "Moynihan Report") argues that Black women have become dominant to such a degree that they have emasculated, even castrated, Black men. The report alleges that Black women's pathologically overbearing strength—rather than a history of racism, classism, and sexism—is blamed for the desperate situation of the African American community. Fortunately, Black feminist scholars have made fast work of disabling this argument by noting that, in addition to absolving White America completely for the consequences of racism and slavery, it places all responsibility squarely on the shoulders of African American women (Davis 1983; Lubiano 1992; Painter 1992; Spillers 2000). Yet the incisive arguments of these scholars have not prevented the practice of blaming the strength of Black women for the failure of Black relationships and for the struggles of Black communities.

In actuality, for African Americans of both genders, interracial relationships are not simply about individuals in a multicolored bubble looking for "true love" beneath a romantic rainbow. Choosing to intermarry or not to intermarry involves love, commitment, promises, memories, and culture- and community-building that reinforce cultural knowledge. These elements, as much as, if not more than Black women's self-esteem, are at stake when one discusses interracial relationships.

The perspective described above is not merely an "old school" analysis. Rather, whether through socialization or academic study, many African Americans have complex relationships within their culture and social networks. If they are raised in largely African American communities, they are likely to understand that social and romantic relationships across race are not simply based on the economics of the mating taboo, individual differences, and opportunities for courtship (cf. Wong 2003). Intermarriage in the United States will not dismantle the nations of China, Japan, Korea, etc. Because African Americans are a minority community without a

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clear nation of origin, interracial marriage raises practical concerns regarding the endurance, independence, and uniqueness of Black communities and whether their cultural practices are in jeopardy. These are concerns raised when *any* minority community, in *any* national context, assesses the impact of romantic, sexual, and marital relationships with members of a majority community. Yet, Black women are dismissed as angry when they express these concerns. In what follows, we will address why this construction of Black femininity is perpetuated.

THE BITTER BLACK WOMAN: WHOSE STEREOTYPE IS IT?

> *My skin is brown*
> *And my manner is tough*
> *I'll kill the first mother I see*
> *'Cos my life has been too rough*
> *I'm awfully bitter these days*
> *because my parents were slaves*
> *What do they call me*
> *My name is—*
> *PEACHES!*
>
> —Nina Simone from "Four Women"

Why are Black women so angry? Why are Black women so mean? Why are Black women so hard? Why do Black women have such bad attitudes? Why are Black women such bitter, bossy bitches? The presuppositions inherent in these questions require that for anyone to answer them, they must first acknowledge the possibility of their truth, their accuracy, the undeniable reality of the "attitudinal" deficiencies of Black femininity. None of these attributes is a fair characterization of Black women. None represents the emotional complexity or even the humanity of Black women. They do, however, represent cross-cultural stereotypes of women and male notions of the "good woman."

In a dynamic lecture, psychologist and author Gail Wyatt described her response to the question "Why are you so angry?" posed so frequently to her by White interrogators at the least opportune moments. She responded by saying, "I'm not angry; I'm passionate" (Wyatt 2001). Wyatt's experience and response demonstrate not only the degree to which Black women of all educational and socioeconomic backgrounds are emotionally stereotyped as "angry," it also illustrates the degree to which those stereotypes are based on fundamental distortions and misinterpretations of Black women's *actual* emotional experience. While both Childs and Jeffries label Black women as "angry" about interracial relationships, Childs has more sympathy for the "Angry Black Woman" than does Jeffries. Childs initially claims to question the myth of the "Angry Black Woman," by conducting focus-group discussions with thirty-three women. She soon reveals that she accepts its accuracy. Instead of challenging the myth, she attempts to demonstrate compassion for the "Angry Black Woman," to understand her rage:

> Black women have been depicted as angry and oppositional to interracial relationships with little attention paid to the basis of this anger and opposition. I have addressed this void by shifting the focus away from interracial couples and instead listening to the voices of Black women (Childs 2005, p. 557).

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Had she been listening, as she claims, Childs might have discovered that none of the Black women in her study claim to be angry, and the one who does come closest is circumspect in her description, as she maintains, "It is hard not to get angry because no one values your worth as a woman" (Childs 2005, p. 554).[1] Even if this young woman succumbs to anger, it is clear that she is making efforts to resist it. Moreover, Childs documents another Black woman who discourages this anger: "Don't show you are mad . . . find a man, stop hating, and find a man who treats you well" (Childs 2005, p. 554).

In fact, Childs's discussion of the alleged "Angry Black Woman" includes direct citations of more White women than Black women expressing angry feelings in the context of interracial relationships.[2] Two of the White women, both in interracial relationships, explicitly used the word *anger* to describe *their* feelings toward Black women. Yet Childs never mentions the "Angry White Woman" in her discussion of interracial relationships.[3]

While Childs does not seriously analyze the notion of the "Angry Black Woman," Jeffries has no such patience for the possibility that Black women's anger, which he assumes is present, could be in any way justified. Instead, he instructs the "Angry Black Woman" to reclaim her power, which she seems to have carelessly misplaced, and to get over her bad attitude. However, Jeffries does offer an insightful critique of Childs's failure to question the stereotype:

> Childs's motivation for writing the piece is not to completely destroy the angry-Black-woman stereotype, but to present narratives of Black women that contextualize their frustration and disappointment (Jeffries 2006, p. 458).

Nevertheless, Jeffries subsequently replicates Childs's tactic of continuing to construct Black women as angry, utilizing the same single quotation to depict the entire group, and ignoring the woman who eschews anger. He adds classism to this stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman," arguing that "middle-class Black women in Childs's study . . . are angry that middle-class Black men occasionally choose White women as partners." This is elegantly stated but is not a far cry from Kanye West's (2005) representation of Black women as heartless, wealth-obsessed, gold diggers.

Jeffries continues by not only underscoring the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype but also accusing Black women of being narrow-minded, White-hating, and self-victimizing. Jeffries claims that the young women in Childs's article "continuously destroy and rebuild the obstacles before them" and that "her subjects are indeed vexed and constricted by the racial and gender boundaries that they both cling to and reject" (Jeffries 2006, p. 459). Consequently, while Jeffries claims to critique the Moynihan Report, he replicates its premises by blaming Black women for their own oppression, as if historical and contemporary institutional structures of racism, sexism, and classism did not exist. Jeffries's critique of Childs, while insightful, replicates Childs's failure to analyze and critique the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman."

The stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman" is often described in terms of the *Sapphire*, a name based on a loud-talking, testicle-shrinking, mean-spirited Black woman character from the *Amos 'n' Andy Show*, which was popular on radio from 1928 to the 1940s and on television in the 1950s. The show was created and initially performed by White minstrel actors, led to several films, and attracted an enormous White audience.

Black men who participate in perpetuating the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype would do well to reflect on Sapphire's role within the *Amos 'n' Andy Show*. The

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Amos 'n' Andy Show was primarily devoted to the depiction of Black masculinity. Sapphire's relentless harping on her husband, "Kingfish," served a specific cultural purpose: to showcase, support, and justify the stereotype of the "lazy, lying, hustling, hounding, fast-talking, foolish, failing, no-good Black man." Whether one attributes her bad attitude to his poor character, or vice versa, the cultural fact remains that the "Angry Black Woman" and the "No-Good Black Man" are partners in stereotype. Every time a Black man reinforces the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman," he simultaneously perpetuates the stereotype of the "No-Good Black Man." Given this unfortunate alliance, there is, culturally speaking, no woman White enough to bleach this particular image away. On the contrary, the connection between these images serves to reinforce the stereotype even when there is no "Angry Black Woman" around to blame. Stereotypes are powerful and pernicious ideological devices designed both to maintain social and cultural structures and, perhaps most importantly, to silence those whom they target, trapping them beneath a relentlessly confining and contemptuous gaze. Stereotypes do not merely tell us a how a culture "sees" a group of people; they also tell us how a culture *controls* that group, how it bullies them into submitting to or evading the representations that haunt them.

Consider, for example, two of the famous cinematic depictions of the Black Jezebel and the Black Mammy: Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones* (1954) and Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* (1936). Both women provided stunningly impressive performances. Each became the first Black woman to be nominated for an Academy Award in her respective category, Dandridge for lead actress and McDaniel for supporting actress. McDaniel went on to receive the Academy Award for her performance, becoming the first African American of either gender to ever receive that honor. Despite the fact that they occupied roles on different sides of the sexual scale, the characters of both Carmen and Mammy were mean Black women. Mammy was forever scolding Scarlett for her sluttish ways, while Carmen fought women and shamed men until she turned a good man bad, so bad that he eventually murdered her.

The stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman" is a resilient one in American society. It is both autonomous and parasitic; it easily attaches itself to the more widely discussed stereotypes of the whore and the mammy, making women who embody those stereotypes appear, if possible, even more pathological. In fact, the stereotype of the angry, mean Black woman goes unnamed not because it is insignificant, but because it is considered an essential characteristic of Black femininity *regardless* of the other stereotypical roles a Black woman may be accused of occupying. These stereotypes are more than representations; they are representations that shape realities. For example, Thomas et al. (2004) used what they call the "Stereotypical Roles for Black Women Scale" (SRBWS) to study the relationship between Black women's self-esteem and their internalization of four common stereotypes about Black women: Jezebel, Sapphire, Mammy, and Superwoman. Their research revealed a correlation between Black women's internalization of the stereotypes of Mammy and Sapphire and the low self-esteem of Black women.

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins further explores the contours of stereotypes about Black women and their impact on Black women's lives:

> Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence. . . . Portraying African American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women's oppression. . . . African-

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> American women's status as outsiders becomes the point from which other groups define their normality (Collins 1990, pp. 70–71).

There are a number of stereotypes engaged in discourses about interracial relationships between Black men and Black women. While here we are focusing on the stereotype of "The-Angry-and-Therefore-Unlovable Black Woman," it is important to recognize that stereotypes about White women and Black men are also in play. As mentioned above, stereotypes of both Black women and White women invoked by discourses about interracial relationships emerge from the ideology of the *cult of true womanhood*. In her historical analysis of the nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood, also known as the *cult of domesticity*, Barbara Welter describes it in the following terms:

> The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and her society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power (Welter 1966, p. 152).

BLACK *WOMEN* AND THE CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD

Black feminist scholars have addressed Black women's exclusion from the cult of true womanhood as central to their experience of racist and sexist oppression (Collins 1990; Davis 1983; Giddings 1984; Welter 1966). They argue that this ideology does not and was never intended to include Black women. Since they did not benefit from White patriarchy that could or would provide for and protect them, Black women experienced limited freedom to control economic and social aspects of their lives. However, as Mullings (1994) warns, "this window of freedom, narrow and equivocal as it is, poses a problem, a threat to the dominant society's rationalizations of gender hierarchy" (Mullings 1994, p. 265). They were labeled and routinely worked within the limitations of contested notions of *mammy*, *matriarch*, *castrator*, *manipulator*, and *whore*.

Black women's exclusion from the cult of true womanhood has been a source of anguish for them throughout at least the last several centuries. Consider the words of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in a section of her famous slave narrative, "The Jealous Mistress":

> I WOULD ten thousand times rather that my children should be the half-starved paupers of Ireland than to be the most pampered among the slaves of America. I would rather drudge out my life on a cotton plantation, till the grave opened to give me rest, than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress. The felon's home in a penitentiary is preferable. He may repent, and turn from the error of his ways, and so find peace; but it is not so with a favorite slave. She is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous (Jacobs 1861, p. 49).

In her narrative, Jacobs does more than document the sexual brutality of slavery. She also exposes the degree to which enslaved Black women had both internalized the gender ideology of the cult of true womanhood and have suffered as a result of their

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exclusion from it. In Jacobs's narrative it is the White woman, not the Black woman, who is jealous of an interracial relationship, who is hostile to point of psychosis, yet this depiction of White femininity in relation to Black women is rarely elevated to the level of stereotype. In this case, Jacobs's mistress is jealous of the relationship between her White male husband and Jacobs—a Black female slave—and engages in bizarrely invasive behavior in order to uncover the truth of it.

Even in the middle of the nineteenth century, the idealization of White femininity was directly exploited in ways that excluded and perpetuated the degradation of Black femininity. Black women could not meet the standard of sexual purity, which Jacobs describes as *virtue*. The exhausting labor of slavery ensured that Black women could not meet the standard of domesticity, which eschewed all women's labor outside one's own home. As the work of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) documents, piety and religious faithfulness was one standard that some Black women were able to fulfill. Hence, in addition to meeting the spiritual needs of enslaved Black women, religious faithfulness also served to protect and promote their identities as "good" women.

Despite these obstacles, Black women made every effort to assert their membership in a cult of true womanhood through what Higginbotham (1993) has famously described in terms of the "politics of respectability." The desire to assert their respectability, to be seen as "ladies" within constructs that mirrored the cult of true womanhood, became a cultural obsession for African American women, and it persists today as a significant element in the construction of Black femininity.

Black women's devotion to family, church, and chastity is central to contemporary discourses of Black femininity and Black female identity. Yet this construction fails to address the ideology of *submissiveness*. Submissiveness is the pillar of the cult of domesticity that is the least frequently discussed in engaging Black women's engagement in that gender ideology, yet it is the one used most effectively to perpetuate and sustain the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman." To its credit, Childs's essay does address the construct of submissiveness, but only in the interest of *demonstrating* the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman," rather than questioning it.

The behavioral explanations for the phenomenon of Black male/White female partnerships ultimately result in some of Childs's best analyses. Although Jeffries is correct that the subjects describe White women as "promiscuous and behaviorally submissive, eager to perform labor for Black men, sexual and other—including homework and laundry" (Jeffries 2006, p. 457), this description is a racist and sexist stereotype of White women, a stereotype that is perpetuated cross-culturally. Black men are described as shallow and obsessed with White beauty, and unwilling to meet the reasonable demands of Black women as intimate partners. White women are thought to be attracted to Black men because "Blackness symbolizes sexual prowess and danger, which casts the White partner as bold or trendy in her mate selection" (Jeffries 2006, p. 457). This questions and reflects the notions described above: "What results is a buttressing of the boundary between White and Black femininity, with White women cast as sexy, agreeable, and hip," while Black women remain "unattractive and angry."

Thus, the stereotype of the "Angry Black Woman" serves multiple functions, all of them lose-lose for Black women, who to varying degrees are provoked by the institutions of both racism and sexism. Black women who refuse to behave in a submissive manner in response to these institutions are stigmatized and punished by the stereotype. They are labeled "mannish," unfeminine, and undesirable. Black women who are afraid to be labeled by this stereotype are made to prove their

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femininity through silence and submission, hoping that this behavior feminizes them and qualifies them for male protection. However, they often find that racism and classism exclude them from this protection, and they may instead find themselves disrespected, abused, and ignored.

Black women participants in Childs's research document their frustration at this conundrum. It is perhaps unfortunate that one—and remember, only one—of the Black women participants in Childs's study used the term *angry* to describe her responses to interracial dating. However, it is clear, even in the more strident quotations of her research, that the emotional experiences of the Black women she interviewed were significantly more complex than anger. While Black women may, indeed, be angry in response to interracial relationships, they also appear to be confused, self-doubting, and profoundly and deeply hurt.

The construction of Black women as pathologically angry does not reflect an actual pathology of Black women. Instead, it reflects a number of sexist *cultural* pathologies about women in general and Black women in particular, of which we will discuss two. We have discussed the racist-sexist cultural pathology, which argues that anything that Black women do, say, express, or feel should be interpreted as an expression of our anger. As discussed above, the implication is that Black women are so simpleminded that they are not capable of any other form of emotional expression.

A second significant sexist cultural pathology is the notion that the rage of any woman is fundamentally pathological. Thus when any woman defies gendered cultural expectations by expressing anger, she is subject to censure, and when a Black woman engages in such an activity, that censure is likely to be racist as well as sexist.

As Evelyn Higginbotham details through her examination of judicial rulings, "For Black and White women, gendered identity was reconstructed and represented in very different, indeed antagonistic, racialized contexts" (Higginbotham 1993, p. 8). This is especially true in a system where the notion of the "good/normal" woman is constructed against Black women, working-class women, and other women of color.

Though all American women learn that they are expected to internalize the ideologies of the cult of true womanhood, there is no evidence that this type of discourse is natural, and not all women incorporate dominant society's norms as their everyday language ideology (Philips 2003). In her analysis of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, Sherry Ortner found that, in the stories, females "had to be *made* passive, weak, and timorous, that is, [there was] a recognition that agency in girls had to be *unmade*" (Ortner 1996, p. 9). In fact, it is the refusal to be unmade and the resistance to it that can make "gender talk" a very serious game.

As Marjorie Goodwin (1998, 2003, 2006) has demonstrated, there is a somewhat baffling difference in the socialization of language and discourse when one compares middle-class girls to lower- and working-class African American and Latina girls. While middle-class White girls tend to confirm Carol Gilligan's (1982) claim that conflict is disruptive to girls, working-class African American and Latina girls introduce conflict and uncooperative interactions that challenge one's position, and consider it a form of play. Thus White middle-class girls learn to play nice, where African American and Latina girls learn to be assertive, take and give criticism, and so on. Descriptions of women's language became stereotypical mirrors of middle-class White women as sacrificing stay-at-home moms who speak and think for their children; who choose masculinity and reject extensive interaction with the outside working world. The stereotype of middle-class White women as indiscriminate "people pleasers," concerned with harmony, being accepted, and so on, in life and in conversation, became the fodder for comedy and popular culture.

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The language ideologies of working-class women often rupture the public-private dichotomy and, with it, the rules regarding legitimate women's speech. Jeffries misses the nature of Black women's speech, and women's speech in general, and believes that Black women's discursive strategies and their talk about beauty and the body *are* about race but *are not* about the objectification of women. Black women's complex everyday recognition of the simultaneous intersection of race and gender in their lives (Collins 1990) and the complexity of their responses to these intersections are lost upon both Jeffries and Childs. Their myopic focus on Black women's rage blinds them to a broad range of issues that would have enhanced their arguments and analyses. The true insult to the women in Childs's study is not that they are depicted as angry, but that they are not depicted as anything else. This negation of their emotional complexity is not only dangerous and dehumanizing; it serves to justify racism and sexism towards Black women and to justify Black-male rejection of Black women in favor of White women. This justification does not merely occur at the expense of Black women's humanity, it also serves to obscure the complexity that genuinely informs interracial relationships between Black men and White women.

HOW DARK ARE YOUR DESIRES?

> *Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly* white.
> *I wish to be acknowledged not as* black *but as* white.
> *Now—and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged—who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love.*
> *I am loved like a white man.*
> *I am a white man.*
> *Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to total realization. . . .*
> *I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.*
> *When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.*
>
> —Frantz Fanon (1967 [1991], p. 63).

The notion that the man of color who cohabits with a White woman is also a man of "real" power is as true now as it was when Fanon published *Black Skins*, *White Masks* in 1967 and when Shakespeare wrote *Othello* in the 1600s. Significantly, the boxer Jack Johnson was incarcerated in the 1920s for dating White women. While it may be difficult to collect data on the status gained by Black men in dominant society when they partner with White women, the notion that there is indeed a benefit is widespread and entangled in masculine notions of domination and conquest. Thus a central question for Childs's and Jeffries's discussion of intermarriage concerns what Black women and men actually think of Black men and White women in interracial relationships. Today, African American and Latino performers, comedians, and singers have taken up the cause of problematizing the Black man/White woman coupling by routinely picking apart desire and power as though they were removing scabs from recurring wounds. These artists refer to White middle-class women as "White girls" where the word *White* is stressed and the vowel and retroflex in *girls* is elongated.

While participants in interracial relationships may emphasize the romantic features of those relationships, interracial relationships, like all relationships, regardless

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of participants, engage complex political contexts. While White women may fare better in contemporary incarnations of the cult of true womanhood than they did in the past, ideologies of domesticity have endured into the twenty-first century, but not without battle scars that have challenged gender roles for men and women of all races. The discourse of interracial relationships endows Black men with the power to restore White women to the nostalgic pedestal of nineteenth-century ideologies of femininity, a pedestal from which they have been hanging by a tenuous thread in many discourses of intraracial White romantic relationships. Thus we often hear that Black men are choosing White women because they are "nice, gentle, know how to treat their men, etc.," in short, because they conform to standards of femininity from more than a century in the past.

The reversal of the discourse about interracial relationships from the historical construct in which White men sexually dominated Black women to the contemporary one in which Black men sexually commune with White women has significant consequences for constructions of all the racial groups involved. In asserting their gendered authority to place White women on a pedestal of femininity, Black men in interracial relationships with White women are also asserting their right to embody a normative masculinity from which they have been historically excluded. Thus Fanon's prescient explanation of how Black men can grasp *White civilization and dignity* by grasping the *White breasts* remains valid in the twenty-first century. Through partnering with White women, Black men escape the traps of degraded masculinity and offer the possibility of fancying themselves as privileged gentlemen, White knights to their, literally, fair ladies.

The cultural potency of this position of privileged masculinity is directly related to historical stereotypes of Black masculinity, particularly what Angela Davis calls *The Myth of the Black Rapist*. Davis dissects the stereotype, explaining:

> In the history of the United States, the fraudulent rape charge stands out as one of the most formidable artifices invented by racism. The myth of the Black rapist has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justification (Davis 1983, p. 173).

In addition to documenting the history of this stereotype, Davis describes its enduring effectiveness in controlling Black communities, in general, and Black men, in particular. Today we see that myth updated and expanded to justify the machinations of the prison-industrial complex, as young Black men, in particular, are stereotyped as criminals and thugs. Given these stereotypes of hypersexual, bestial, and brutal Black masculinity, it is understandable that, for many African American men, romantic and sexual relationships with White women take on seductive political significance, as they are drenched in illusions of liberation from the past.

In being romantically and sexually involved with White women, Black men are able to prove that they are the equals of White men, equally worthy of the prizes of White masculinity: White women. Even Black men who embrace and attempt to embody the stereotype of the highly sexualized Black man obtain some ideological relief in their sexual associations with White women, demonstrating their sexual superiority to White men through the desires of White women, while simultaneously proving that they do *not* embody the myth of the Black rapist as they function as the object rather than the subject of interracial sexual desire.

This sense of liberation through interracial sexual intimacy is seductively simple. There is no need to march, protest, or demand one's rights. Indeed, one need not

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even get out of bed to vote, for the sexually sated White woman lying in bed beside the erotically empowered Black man is the symbol of his liberation from a past characterized by stereotypes that were as deadly as they were dehumanizing. In grasping the metaphorical *White breast* described by Fanon, today's Black man is promised that he is grasping not only White privilege but freedom from Black oppression as well. Eldridge Cleaver's disturbing discussion of interracial rape in *Soul on Ice* (1967 [1978]) exposes this dynamic of interracial sexual liberation. Thus, when Julius Lester (1969) wrote *Look Out Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* he was issuing a sexual as well as a political warning.

White women, as well, are involved in this fantasy of interracial sexual liberation. As Davis documents, the myth of the Black rapist was utilized not only to justify violence against Black men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it was also used to control White women. Ideologically speaking, by scaring White women into fearing the Black man said to be lurking in every dark corner of the public sphere, White women were intimidated back into the private sphere, frightened home to the safety of the kitchen and the protection of White patriarchal masculinity. Thus, White women, too, experience a form of easy political liberation from White male patriarchy in their intimacies with Black men, by asserting not only their right to sexual desire but their right to desire outside of the constraints of traditional White femininity.

Recognition of the ways that Black male/White female sexual relationships both reproduce and defy conventional race and gender roles does not negate the emotional authenticity, significance, or depth of these relationships. It does, however, serve to remind us that even the most emotionally pure romantic relationship is immersed in historical and ideological contexts that are beyond the control, and sometimes the awareness, of the lovers. Black women, in observing interracial relationships between Black men and White women have not found themselves in the position to be able to afford to ignore these historical and ideological contexts. This is, in part, because the idealization of relationships between Black men and White women has historically and ideologically been so dependent on the degradation of Black women, even when the real participants in those relationships have meant Black women no harm.

And yet, it is naïve to suggest, as Childs and Jeffries do, that Black women are wounded by fantasies of disdain that have no basis in reality, to claim that all Black men with White women are merely following their color-blind hearts. Hip-hop artist Kanye West's "Gold Digger" (2005) expresses both disgust and halfhearted respect for Black women who behave like gold diggers—the loyal Black woman often finds that when her Black man becomes successful he'll leave her for a White girl! Ironically, "Gold Digger" heavily samples Ray Charles's "I Got a Woman" (1954),[4] a song released more than fifty years earlier and which celebrates Charles's loving friendship with a Black woman, about whom he sings, "Couldn't get a better girl. No matter how hard I tried." The differences in the ways that these two songs are encoded in terms of gender reflect a disturbing historical shift in Black-male cultural discourses regarding relationships between Black men and Black women.

Kanye West and others reveal that culturally reflexive African American men have been actively engaged in critiquing themselves and each other for the problematic implications of some of their interracial romantic politics. *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (1996), a cinematic spoof of a number of Black urban dramas, features a character, "Preach," who is an Afrocentric Black militant with a not-so-secret obsession with not-so-conventionally attractive White women. Comedian Chris Rock's (1998) constant threat is that if sisters don't

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become silent and agreeable when he talks—he will get him a "White girl!" The television program *Boondocks* (2005–2006), based on the comic strip, included an episode where the grandfather threatens his grandchildren Huey and Riley to behave at a stuffy garden. The grandfather proclaims: "If I'm lucky I'll find me a White woman, with a flat booty, who will listen to my problems!"

Stereotypical representation of White women as submissive and agreeable may be considered humorous, but they raise a serious question. Black men may intermarry with White women, and White women may be presented as the ideal, but do Black women desire to be like White women?

Perhaps a better question would be: How could (dare) Black women *not* prefer to be like White women! Once again, Fanon's exploration of both identity and dialectics provides insight into this issue, because it is about both desire and romantic love. Fanon's tome engages Hegelian theories regarding desire and recognition, and such theories are useful in discussions of contemporary racial and sexual dynamics as well. Perhaps we might reframe Hegel's phrase that "self-consciousness is *Desire*" to read: "*Desire* is consciousness of the self," which we might understand to mean that desire is the emotion through which we articulate a longing for greater self-consciousness, which is often most powerfully revealed by the recognition of others.

Such an understanding explains the simultaneous politicization and personalization of Black women's interpretations of interracial relationships, because such simultaneous politicization and personalization is common to most people's interpretations of most relationships. Not all Black women question or reject interracial relationships between White women and Black men. In fact, Childs documents and then fails to interpret data provided by one such woman. However, Black women who do question such relationships are not behaving in an unusual manner. They are instead engaging in a political analysis of personal intimacy and reasonably questioning their role in complex racial and sexual configurations. This behavior is not only rational and appropriate; it is remarkably common among members of the human family whose communities are in the process of demographic or cultural transformation. If there is anything irrational in this process, it is the interpretive reduction to rage and hostility of any questions that Black women raise regarding romantic relationships in their communities.

Jeffries writes that Childs is misguided when she attacks Black interracial daters on political grounds by describing interracial dating as treason. However, he is much too literal in his understanding. To be fair, Childs should have included more background on the notion of racial treason since, in this case, race is a trope for desire and social discrimination. However, neither Jeffries nor Childs seems willing to engage references to White beauty and stereotypes and Black beauty and stereotypes as tropes for sexism and racism. Yes, mainstream American culture places White women at the top of a racialized hierarchy of feminine beauty and desire, but such an altered place is only of value according to male heterosexual power. Black women at the opposite end may seem more powerful, but their alleged power marks them as inadequately feminine. Moreover, the power is devalued as nothing more than the jealous shrieking of the "woman scorned," rather than the legitimate power of those who have meaningful authority and control.

The issues of "internalization of racism," or racial treason, raised by Jeffries and Childs are significant, as Fanon's analysis suggests. Intermarriage does not happen in a color-blind world with no social consequences. One's intent may not be to be like a White man's, but one's behavior and the dynamics of one's interpersonal relationships may still have those consequences, and they cannot be ignored. The point that the White feminine beauty standard is powerful and pervasive is well taken. Partner-

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ing with White women as the ultimate measure of the internalization of this standard is on much shakier ground. Yet the Black women in Childs's research realize this complexity. Jeffries mistakes Black women's criticism of racism and sexism, and their distrust of standards of femininity that exclude them, as Black prejudice without providing a meaningful discussion of power. Instead, he dismisses Black women's concerns about racially and sexually polarizing aesthetic hierarchies as *racist* and *unjustified*, as if Black women were succumbing to jealous imaginings that had no basis in reality, rather than calling into question several centuries of racist sexism that has dehumanized American women of all races and has repeatedly marked Black women as not only subfemale but, arguably, subhuman.

Childs falls into the "limited resources argument," and, as in most cases, the concern falls flat because it oversimplifies her analysis. Certainly the argument that raises the Black man from the endangered species category to "a god" does little to engage the historical and cultural complexity that informs almost all sexual relationships across any kind of difference. For his part, Jeffries argues that Black women's opportunities are "only limited because the group has built a story of self that constructs the resource as scarce by starting from the premise that the only suitable partners are middle-class Black men, and that by virtue of their race alone, Black women deserve middle-class Black men more than non-Black women do" (Jeffries 2006, p. 456).

As anthropologists, we find this argument so astonishingly limited as to defy commonsense knowledge of human history and culture. In most human societies, currently and historically, individuals court and marry endogamously (within their culture group) and heterosexually. In other words, in most cultures, courtship and marriage is conducted between same-race, same-ethnicity, opposite-sex individuals. Moreover, most individuals in most societies, regardless of their ethnicities or sexualities, are socialized to expect that they are entitled, or at least likely to attract, a same-race, same-ethnicity, opposite-sex romantic partner, even if their desires are not defined by endogamous and/or opposite-sex partnering. Moreover, in most cultures, most women are socialized to seek out high-status men of their same racial and/or ethnic group. African American women have defied this widespread cross-cultural expectation throughout their history. Under slavery, Black women partnered with Black men, even though most Black men did not even have the status of being considered human, much less that of economically privileged men. In the contemporary era, Black women are choosing to partner with Black men even when more economically privileged men of other races have been available to them, as Jeffries himself notes.

Thus when Jeffries accuses African American women of a kind of ethnocentric and narcissistic greediness for seeking out and even expecting to partner with African American men, he is suggesting that Black women have no right to desire or demand precisely the same kinds of relationships that most other individuals in most other cultures in the world, and certainly throughout the United States, see as reasonable expectations for themselves. Jeffries thus implies that it is not problematic that Black women receive less attention from Black men than they desire, because, according to his logic, Black women *deserve* less attention than most other human beings in most human cultures on the planet. In this sense, Jeffries's argument against the young women in Childs's research is that they desire more than they deserve, an argument that proves the legitimacy of their concerns. Jeffries elegantly provides the kind of racially and sexually problematic arguments that are used to devalue Black women socially and to subsequently silence their resistance to such negation by labeling them "angry" and "irrational."

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The irony here is that, at least in the United States, and arguably throughout the world, anger is a culturally sanctioned response to any situation of exogamous or out-group dating, regardless of the race and ethnicity of the parties involved. The common response to such couplings is, to quote Anita from *West Side Story* (1961), a cultural order to "stick with your own kind." Thus Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as much as if not more than his *Othello*, remains at the center of the American cultural imagination about interracial relationships for precisely this reason. We see its shadow on popular culture, whether we are watching the White male/Latina female couple in *West Side Story* or, forty years later, the Black male/White female couple in *Save the Last Dance* (2001). Black women who date White men are not strangers to this widespread cultural conundrum and often encounter anger from Black men and White women in response. This dynamic is rarely researched or discussed. Yet, if anecdotal evidence invites reflection, please consider the fact that the authors do not know a single Black woman who has ever been in an interracial relationship and avoided this antagonistic response. In contrast, they know numerous White women, including one of the authors, who have been warmly welcomed into predominantly Black families.

Jeffries and Childs seem to forget Emmett Till and the entire history of American lynching completely. If they recalled it, or analyzed it with the complexity that Davis (1983) accords the phenomenon, they would remember that it is *White male rage* towards interracial relationships between Black men and White women that has had the greatest and most destructive cultural, social, and political significance in American history, not the feelings of contemporary young Black women. We do not know of a single historical case in which a White woman was murdered by a Black woman for being romantically involved with or interested in a Black man. History is littered with cases in which White men have behaved with homicidal violence towards Black men who have been interested in White women, yet "White Male Rage" is never mentioned by Jeffries or Childs. This practice of widespread cultural projection reveals what is so dangerous about the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype: it holds Black women responsible for power they do not possess, power that is, in fact, being utilized in very real ways by members of other social groups who can claim emotional innocence as they hide behind, and persecute, the "Black Bitches" of our cultural imaginations.

LOVE HER OR LEAVE HER ALONE

Black women have demonstrated agency in order to survive and to protect their families and loved ones. The overwhelming majority of Black men continue to choose Black women as romantic partners, in spite of, because of, or without any reference to the agency of Black women. Yet outside of Black culture, Black women's agency has been interpreted as undesirable, and some African Americans, both male and female, have internalized this interpretation. However, the stereotyping of any woman is in opposition to the larger interest of all women, just as the stereotyping of any race is, ultimately, in opposition to the greater interest of all racial minorities.

The stereotype, for example, that White men are not attracted to Black women must also be understood within the cultural complex of desire, but from the Black woman's view. As Rachel Moran observes, "The difference in outmarriage rates for black men and women is particularly striking because most race-mixing historically took place between white men and black women" (2001, p. 104). She reasons that since these interracial contacts usually involved illicit liaisons, one would think that if

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the attraction were there, there would be more liaisons after antimiscegenation laws. Though Moran suggests that the lack of Black woman/White male partnerships is due to racialized sexual imagery of Black women, rendering them as undesirable mates, this ignores the agency of Black women who may not desire White men, even though it might make economic sense. While Chris Rock and other artists may threaten that they can choose a stereotypical White woman in lieu of a difficult Black women, significant numbers of Black women do not seem engaged by images of stereotypical White men that would enable them to claim a White woman's advantage. This lack of interest challenges both Chris Rock's comedic threats and Michael Jeffries's accusations of Black women's materialism and their alleged economic exploitation of men.

For Black women, desire concerns being seen as a woman and as culturally Black. Black and White women exist under related systems of patriarchy, where both gender and race matter, and both are socially constructed. However, while race and gender may be relevant to Black women, race may not trouble many White women. What is problematic, and may cause Black women to publicly lament interracial marriage and relationships, is that Black men know this as well. The modern talk about interracial marriage and relationships is about both a betrayal of trust and the potential challenge of restructuring Black female and male heterosexual relationships.

Black women's concerns regarding interracial relationships are not fundamentally evidence of Black women as *Angry Bitches with Bad Attitudes*. Instead, they reveal Black women's complex recognition of how intimate identity politics influence interpersonal relationships. Perhaps we would all, including Childs and Jeffries, do well to heed the advice of bad-relationship expert and superstar soul singer Mary J. Blige (2005), who writes:

> *And more and more you say I'm getting on your nerves*
> *And then you take me to the level of some bullshit*
> *You said you never had these problems from a White chick*
> *You got me twisted and twisted is just not how I get with it*
> *You need to sit down and hear it.*

Black women are not universally angry, because no group of human beings is universally angry. Black women can be kind, warm, sensitive, gentle, thoughtful, and forgiving. Every day, millions of women of African descent around the world prove the accuracy of this statement, prove it quietly, with unseen gestures and whispered words as they go about the business of leading challenging, unobtrusive, but meaningful lives that rarely attract the glare of media spotlights or the sharp tongues of patronizing, preening, pundits. And yet, without the radical kindness of Black women on every continent of this planet, even more Black children would suffer before they had the chance to grow, even more of the elderly of all races would die alone and without care, even more Black women and, yes, more Black men—and more people of all races whose lives have been touched by the kinds of Black women you never see on television or read about in academic articles—would exist with less love, grace, and meaning in their lives. We speak here of *radical kindness* because Black women have every social, political, cultural, and historical reason to be relentlessly and perpetually unkind, in the interest of their own success and survival, to abandon kindness as an unwieldy and unrewarding burden that they cannot afford to carry. But carry it they do and distribute it with great, and greatly ignored, generosity.

The Black women who have saved and sustained us are not abstractions or stereotypes. They are not happy mammies who live only to scold and satisfy others.

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They are real and complex human beings with lives, loves, and longings of their own. We know who they are. We can point fingers, recall actions and advocacies, and name names.

Until a discourse exists that recognizes both the lives of Black women and the sexist and racist stereotypes that hound them, the authors will continue to wonder not why Black women are so angry but why Black women are not *more* angry. Meanwhile, we offer this suggestion to those who would engage the contemporary African American woman and the emotional, intellectual, and political complexity that is her mantle: love her, or leave her alone.

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NOTES

1. Childs does report that Gwen, who is married to a White man, got angry with some Black girls for insulting her (Childs 2005, p. 155). However, since this is not related to the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype, it will not be addressed here.
2. Childs cites McNamara et al. (1999) and Rosenblatt et al. (1995).
3. Indeed, such a discussion would be very fruitful, particularly if one were to study White women's responses to White men who are dating Asian and Asian American women, especially considering that these relationships significantly outnumber all other configurations of interracial relationships. Yet no discussion of the "Angry White Woman" is included in Childs's essay, despite the fact that she has more data that explicitly document White women's rage and White women's stereotyping of Black women than she does of Black women's rage or of Black women's stereotyping of White women.
4. The authors thank Valeeza Ragler, an African American Studies student at Loyola Marymount University, for calling their attention to the contradiction between Kanye West's "Gold Digger" lyrics and Ray Charles's "I Got a Woman" lyrics.

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