

University of Michigan-Flint

Gathering My People:
Recognizing Our Complicity

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Note from the Author

This thesis is the culmination of my academic pursuits. For me, it helps to resolve the cognitive dissonance within American history. It is a message that I desperately want to share with friends and family, one that I hope will inspire them on their own journey. Currently as a white woman, the way I walk through this world is considered the norm...even universal. My race sets the standard for my gender. As such, my identity is the standard by which anyone different from me must conform if they want to be viewed as normal or acceptable. History is written from the perspective of my ancestors and is presented as the sole version of truth. It is my view of culture, beauty, and social conduct that is held as the highest level of achievement. If/when I remain living in this cocoon. I exhibit racist tendencies and perpetuate patriarchy. These beliefs and attitudes appear in social and institutional structures that have become so standard for me that I do not even realize it. This is not the way I wish to live my life, so I must work daily to be anti-racist. Angela Davis said, “In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist.” My life is formed by my white privilege, and while I cannot solve the problem of racism, I can admit my racism and work daily to see where I cause hurt and oppression. It is my hope that, as I move along this path of awareness, I will be able to gather “my people” and work with them to be more aware and active against the structural racism in our society.

One primary way I choose to show my anti-racist attitude is by following the pattern of Black Feminist theorists who capitalize “Black” when describing a man or woman of African American heritage. I will not be doing the same for a “white” individual. This is a personal sign of solidarity on my behalf to show my recognition and acceptance of Black women as my equal. It is a way for me to show my respect and to honor their sacrifices throughout history and today.

INTRODUCTION

Conversations about racism and sexism have a history of volatility, and within America's current social and political climate it is no different. Both of these institutions are part of the social makeup of American culture and are based on the premise of one group holding a superior position over another. White individuals may not purposefully set out to behave in racist or sexist ways, but the fact is, white values, manners, and habits take precedence and priority in American culture. Evidence abounds. One example is the commercials that run in the media. The products, actors, and messages are focused on white priorities. Another is in the history of our country, which was written by Anglo-American men and therefore contains a preponderance of detail on the nation's incredible growth through their viewpoints. It is also seen in literature and conversation. If a male or female is referenced, it is assumed they are white; if not, the speaker will place a descriptor of color before the gendered term. Within the institutions of race and sex, the ranking of superiority begins with white men and ends with Black women. The Black male and white female change places depending on the agenda of the white male. For example, if his attention is on male issues, the Black male will rank higher than the white female; the reverse is true if race is the focus. This patriarchal culture began with predominately Anglo-Saxon men making themselves at home in a country that was new to them. For centuries, they were able to keep their position as the dominant presence by force and will. The point is not to create a hate-fest on white patriarchy but rather to recognize and understand it for what it has been and how it has formed our culture. White women perpetuate patriarchy by taking a position of superiority over Black women. This often comes as a surprise to white women because they are not intentionally committing offenses, and that is proof of the problem. White women can begin to learn how to be anti-racist by first becoming aware that they participate in racist attitudes as part

of institutional societal structures. Hortense J. Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" outlines the historic system of rules that has been used to modify the structure of the African American woman. Black women have been and continue to be described and referred to in coded terminology, or "markers so loaded with mythical prepossessions that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean" (Spillers 65). Publisher Don Allen explains Spillers this way: "we [Blacks] are not in control of our identity, but assigned to an infrastructure by historical placement" (Allen). Speaking nineteen years after her 1987 publication, Spillers explains that she was looking for a way to move conversations about Black women from a "raw material" mode to a current and useful conversation. She said, "There is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women. But no one wants to address them...we really are invisible people" (Spillers et al.). The histories and experiences of Black women have been largely ignored and marginalized. Patricia Bell-Scott says the message about Black women is "examined from a 'problems' framework" evidenced in the stereotyped identities like "Jezebel," "Sapphire," and "Mammy" (86). These "overdetermined nominative properties" have become placeholders in our society on which we place the problems of society. Throughout America's history, the Black woman has been the scapegoat for social ills. The grammar is different but the reason remains to place the burden for a messed up narrative on someone other than the responsible party. A perfect starting place for understanding the oppression Black women have labored under is to take a fresh look at history. By laying aside the superiority card gifted to white women by patriarchy and borrowing our sister's glasses, white women will be able to see and study history through fresh eyes. A new look at history will dismantle the myths and lies that have become part of our social and cultural fabric. Without the dominant discourse,

there is room for other narratives, like those from female slaves who reveal a different perspective on the sexuality of Black women than the prevailing Anglo-male viewpoint. From an ethos of equality, the destructive nature of patriarchy's power and control becomes obvious. The path to living in anti-racist ways becomes clearer upon the recognition and removal of stereotypes from our institutional patterns, which will allow white women to develop an identity of allyship with Black women.

Historical Patterns

The Assembly of "Jezebel." The stereotype that Black women are over sexualized has long historical roots that extend into modern times. Since the arrival of the slave traders on Africa's coast, Black female sexuality has been misrepresented as licentious, animalistic, and depraved. These misconceived ideas followed African women to America, as well as Europe, and contributed to the objectification of Black women. Theories developed in European scientific and social communities over the physical form of African women that removed their humanity. In 1810, Saartjie Baartman, a member of the Khoisan people and referred to as "Hottentot Venus," was placed on display so people could observe her large buttocks. Much speculation was made about the size of her genitalia, and after her autopsy parts of her were placed on exhibition. The *Musée de l'homme* in Paris displayed her body parts until 1974 (Parkinson). This startling behavior was done in the name of science and certainly contributed to the lower-race, animalistic, and intense sexualization theories about African people. In America, the captives became abused and oppressed chattel property for more than two hundred years. While the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution granted slaves their freedom, Black women continued to face this myth as they struggled to find their piece of life and liberty. Reconstruction and Jim Crow laws brought renewed hatred and judgment as these women worked to rebuild their

families as well as their own demoralized hearts and minds. The stereotype was woven into the fabric of society as it granted consent to men, both Black and white, to prey on Black women. A quote from Mary Church Terrell's 1898 speech at The National American Woman's Suffrage Association continues to ring true in the current century: "The immorality of colored women is a theme upon which those who know little about them or those who maliciously misrepresent them love to descant" (Terrell 65). In order to give Black women the honor and respect they deserve, it is vital to understand the history and invalidity of the myth that they are over sexualized and hence responsible for crimes committed against them.

Slave traders were mystified by the African cultures. They were on the African continent to steal people, not to understand the lives of those they captured; therefore, their understandings of the culture remained limited by their European views. Bare-breasted women performing cultural and spiritual folk dances and publicly nursing mothers were seen as scandalous and evil. There was no effort to understand the rhythms and cultural traditions of African tribes. The restricted and closed European expectations were unilaterally applied to these natives, as traders drew assumptions and created theories that would fit what they did not understand about African culture into their European worldview. Barbara Omolade says the trader

viewed the African expression of sensuality through public rites, rituals, and dances as evidence of the absence of any sexual codes of behavior, an idea that both fascinated and repelled him and also provided him with a needed rationale for the economic exploitation of African men and women (362).

By holding tight to Euro-centric views and understandings, the trader was able to justify his guilt and lust by blaming the African woman for her sensuality.

In the beginning of the slave trade, male slaves brought the most profit to trading companies. Planters would require white, immigrant females to enter into sexual relationships with Black male slaves for procreational purposes. The anti-amalgamation laws that spread through the colonies, beginning in Maryland in 1664, restricted inter-racial relationships on plantations. This increased the demand for Black female slaves. Stories abound of white onlookers who witnessed the arrival of slave ships in American harbors filled with chained and naked slaves. Entangled in their ethnocentric view, these onlookers completely missed the brutal terrorism that the Africans had just endured and mistook any relief on the captive faces as happiness at having arrived in America. The Africans had just lived through unspeakable horrors. They had been stripped naked, starved, stacked like logs, and survived under constant threat of rape and whippings, and that is only to mention the physical aggression they suffered. The psychological impacts of being naked, leered at, threatened with rape and beatings that could come at any moment and without provocation is a terror without understanding, short of personal experience. bell hooks cites historian of the slave trade Robert Shufeldt, who says, "In those days many a negress was landed upon our shores already impregnated by someone of the demonic crew that brought her over" (qtd. in *Ain't* 18). hooks states that the relief seen in the eyes of the captives was because they believed the worse was over, that their nightmare of denigration and brutalization was in the past (*Ain't* 18).

The worst was not over. The color of their skin placed Africans at the lowest position of American society; they were property and treated with the equivalency of animals. After being poked, prodded, and stared at on the auction block, they were subjected to hard labor. For females, that meant field work, domestic work, and care for their own families. Early fundamentalist teachings from the Puritans taught that women were the source of sin in the

world. Common belief was that “Sexual lust originated with her and men were merely the victims of her wanton power” (hooks, *Ain't* 29). These beliefs remained as justification for planters who raped their slaves. Young and attractive Black slaves were taken into the plantation “big” house to work for the family. A young domestic often slept in the same room as the master and mistress, which led to sexual assault becoming a common practice. In order for the master to justify his guilt over lusting after his female slaves, he would cast them as prostitutes. This was done through the use of bribes like small trinkets or promised privileges. hooks cites a young slave girl’s autobiography as she describes being in her mid-teens as “...her owner or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents” (*Ain't* 24-25). To a young girl who owned nothing but the smock she wore daily, an earned shiny favor seemed like the world, as did promised free time to spend with one’s own children or family. In time, the Puritan belief that all women were sexual temptresses shifted off of the white woman. In the nineteenth century, white women were seen as paragons of womanhood and held aloft as pure, innocent, and non-sexual. This deviation allowed white women to move beyond the sexist stereotypes restricting females while it kept Black women firmly ensconced in the role of sexual deviant deserving of any action brought against her. bell hooks forwards Angela Davis’s claim that the rape of female slaves went beyond traditional scholarly reasoning that white men were simply satisfying their sexual lust. Both women agree that the rape was an “institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women” (hooks, *Ain't* 27). This dehumanization placed Black women in a category of savage or animal that rendered them expendable. Historian Eugene Genovese, commented in *Roll, Jordan Roll* that the term “rape” applied only to white women and that there was no word that equated that action to Black women (33). White women’s bodies remained chaste and covered, while Black women

were stripped and punished in public on a daily basis. Plantation mistresses often led the charge of punishment, as they held Black women responsible for their own rapes, which were inflicted by the master of the house. Barbara Omolade writes in *Hearts of Darkness*,

The white man's division of sexual attributes of women based on race meant that he alone could claim to be sexually free; he was free to be sexually active within a society that upheld the chastity and modesty of white women as the 'repositories of white civilization.' He was free to be irresponsible about the consequences of his sexual behavior with black women within a culture that placed a great value on the family as a sacred institution protecting women, their progeny, and his property (363-4).

As Black women were stripped of their humanity and value, they literally became tools to build the infrastructure of the South.

The myth that Black women were overly sexual provided a convenient rationalization for turning female slaves into breeders. This made economic sense to the planters, since they profited from any child born to one of their slaves. hooks notes the writings of Frances Corbin from 1819, who stated, "Our principal profit depends on the increase of our slaves" (qtd. in *Ain't* 39). With profit as the main goal, forced breeding was planned and calculated by the plantation owner. Rose Williams remembered the auctioneer pointing out the fact that she was a "portly, strong wench...that [would] make a good breeder." Williams resisted the breeding plan of her master. In her words, she was told, "...dat am di massa's wishes. You am de portly gal, Rufus am de portly man. De massa wants you-uns for to bring forth portly chillun" (Minges 12). Louisa Everett was owned by Virginia planter Jim McClain. She remembered her master forcing married slaves to have sexual relations with others if he thought they would make strong

children. If there was reluctance, he would watch to be sure they consummated the relationship. He would dehumanize and humiliate the slaves further by participating or including his guests in the action as well (Minges 16). Plantation owners placed themselves and other white men above the law as they pleased themselves at the insult of their female slaves. hooks provides the example of a Virginia Methodist minister's letter from March 13, 1835 where he wrote,

Mulattoes are surer than pure negroes. Hence planters have no objection to any white man or boy having free intercourse with all the females; and it has been the case that an overseer has been encouraged to make the whole posse his harem and has been paid for the issue (qtd. in *Ain't* 40).

This history has been ignored, glossed over, and downplayed, which has endlessly demoralized and devalued Black women. The female slaves were not acting in overt sexual ways; they were acted against and used. These lived experiences are hard to read, but this recognition of reality and perspective of history is important to understanding the history of Black women in America. The ramifications of this type of treatment continued after slavery ended.

The Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery, but it did not end the myths that followed the former slaves. Following slavery, Black women were eager to set up their own households and focus on their own families, but economic pressures kept many women serving as domestics for white southerners, which kept them in danger of sexual subjugation. The early twentieth century witnessed the great migration of Black women to northern cities. Some were able to go to school to become doctors, lawyers, and teachers while others took roles as domestics. Regardless of their location or occupation, the stereotype of being overly sexual followed. They were mocked by the media and others of the dominant white society, as risk surrounded them at all times and the courts refused to listen or dispense justice. bell hooks shares the story of a young, newly-

married Black woman who was hired as a cook for a white family. When her employer made sexual advances, the young woman's husband rose in her defense only to be cursed and assaulted himself. As the employer denied the charges of the attack in a court of law, the old judge said, "This court will never take the word of a nigger against the word of a white man" (qtd. in *Ain't* 57). Looking for a way to balance the oppression that came from both their race and sex, Black women developed what Darlene Clark Hine calls the "culture of dissemblance." In a culture that refused to recognize their oppression, let alone call them equals, Black women created a cult of secrecy in which they found a space to collaborate and build their own defenses. "In the face of the pervasive stereotypes and negative estimations of sexuality of Black women, it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self" (Hine 916). The empowerment Black women found within the culture of dissemblance gave them the strength to endure the racism and sexism and still rise. They raised children, supported families, cultivated communities, supported churches and outreaches while deflecting the "stereotypes, negative images, and debilitating assumptions [that] filled the space left empty due to inadequate and erroneous information about the true contributions, capabilities, and identities of Black women" (Hine 915). To assume that Black women are overly sexual and therefore responsible for the unwanted sexual advances, attention, and rape is to represent the individual that Mary Church Terrell was speaking of 120 years ago. That individual is unwilling to learn anything about the history of Black women or is someone who wishes to spread venomous misinformation. As a society, we have become numb to the brutality and horrors of slavery. The same general stories have been repeated so many times that a disassociation has developed between the telling and the connection to a human being. In order

to better understand the history of the Black woman in America, one must read with a fresh and honest perspective.

The Assembly of the African American Mother. Within the framework of slavery, African motherhood required a great deal of fortitude and perseverance. Following long days in the field or the big house, she would sew, cook, and care for her own. Her collection of “family” was made up of anyone in need. Parents were often ripped from their children or spouses sold, so slaves made families in any way they could. It is true that Black slave women held critical leadership positions within their family groups. Marriages were not stable under the rule of slavery, because a slave could be sold or even beaten to death at the master’s whim. A plantation owner understood how important family ties were to a slave and would use the threat of separation as a vicious punishment. Overseers and owners had little respect for the marriages of their slaves. The law stated that the social status of children followed the mother, not the father. Any attempt to hold the family structure together had to come from the mother. There was little time in a female slave’s day following field or domestic work to tend to her own family, so it was vital that her authority was efficient and respected.

After breeding concerns, Black motherhood could be largely ignored by planters until the rumblings from northern abolitionists needed to be derailed. Patrick Mingos claims that the personification of Mammy was devised by white southern planters just prior to the Civil War. Her image was used as protection against the accusations of sexual abuse committed toward female slaves that came from the Northern abolitionists. Mammy became the spearhead of the campaign to prove to the North that slavery was “a positive good” which brought “cultural uplift to the female slaves” (White 61). The characterization of Mammy establishes her as overseer of

the plantation house as well as her own family. Deborah Gray White states that Mammy was the “ideal symbol of the patriarchal tradition...[helping to raise]...motherhood to sainthood” (58). Mammy’s placid countenance was an attempt to smooth over the violent and hostile environment in the South. “She preserved the social order within the enslaved community and the larger household and was a bulwark against structural change and social disorder” (Minges 6). Adult recollections of a childhood caretaker describe a romanticized individual who is a blend of drill sergeant and fairy godmother. The mythical nature of Mammy was one of an indefatigable manager of the home who loved her young charges and was devoted to the plantation owner. She was not only indispensable in the home but capable of advising on the running of the plantation. The story was told that because of Mammy’s efficient, hard work the southern woman could find leisure time and leave the toils of the home in good hands. The realities of plantation life, particularly the duties of women, were a subject of study for sociologist Harriet Martineau. Her writings are supported by many southern white women’s diaries that make clear that there was no end to the work on the plantations, and while she visited, she found no plantations run by the equivalent of a Mammy (White 51). Mammy’s caricature has been immortalized as an aging woman in her bright headscarf with very dark skin, whose plump bosom was meant for comfort. Literature, advertising, and film have represented this image well by cementing it in romantic views of the plantation South.

While the Mammy figure was projected as harmless and devoted to the master’s family, the Black woman who was committed to her own family was criticized for debasing her husband and ruling the household. Spillers uses the term “atomizing” to describe what slavery and stereotyping have done to the Black captive body. The process of parsing out individual characteristics, physical features, and cultural institutions allowed for further objectification

(Spillers 68). Barbara Omolade's version of female slave atomization is "a fragmented commodity whose feelings and choices were rarely considered: her head and her heart were separated from her back and her hands and divided from her womb and vagina" (366). With the Black woman's body reduced to parts, she becomes a "gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value" – a perfect dumping ground for social ills (Spillers 68).

Twentieth Century "Matriarch". Following emancipation, Black women invested in the call to cultural "uplift of the race." Mary Church Terrell's speech in 1898, titled "The Progress of Colored Women," made clear the agency gained just two generations removed from slavery. Black women were excelling in schools and universities; they had created multiple charitable institutions to care for the poor, aged, and orphaned; and they were business owners, doctors, dentists, and artists in various mediums. She ended her speech saying, "Seeking no favors because of their color nor charity because of their needs, they knock at the door of Justice and ask for an equal chance" (68). An equal chance was not granted; instead, the stereotypes from the past were modified, and once again, the Black woman's body became a placeholder for social ills and the site of blame for the greed and irresponsibility of society.

As Black men were given jobs of higher rank than Black women, the social and political structures between Black males and females were altered to mirror that of white patriarchy. This was a positive development for Black women, who during slavery dreamed of caring for their own homes and families. When Black men were offered decent paying jobs, women were able to achieve their dreams. Also, as the Black man had authority over his own family, he was in a better position to protect his wife and daughters against sexual violation, where previously he had no recourse. A disadvantage to this shift was the subordination of Black women as their

husbands assumed the pattern of patriarchy exemplified by white society. Under this new structure, Black women were blamed for the breakups within their families. W.E.B. DuBois wrote in the early twentieth century that differences in numbers between broken white and Black families were not varied. The problem was economics. “The Negroes...” he pointed out, “are put in a peculiarly difficult position, because the wage of the male breadwinner is below the standard, while the openings for colored women in certain lines for domestic work, and now in industries, are many” (DuBois 105). Women were pulled to the city for work, while opportunities for men were in smaller towns and rural areas; hence, families were pulled apart. DuBois’s logic was largely ignored by sociologists, who were actually the ones emasculating Black men with decrees that they were deviant and without power. Since Black women were below Black men on the patriarchal social ladder, they were twice as deviant and powerless. By separating Black men and women, these same sociologists could focus public attention on the lack of economic success held by a female-headed household. Patricia Bell-Scott points out the “sexist social science lingo,” which spoke of any breakdown between the mother and child as “maternal deprivation,” while the same situation between father and child would be addressed as “father absence.” “It should be noted that the emergence of the white male scholar in this area is directly correlated with the popularity of the Black matriarchy myth” (Bell-Scott 88-89). Whenever Black women fail to maintain the requirement of their gender, they are viewed as outside the true role of womanhood. Bell-Scott claims that women who take on economic and social roles outside of tradition in order to help their family survive should be lauded, not criticized (95). The title of matriarch is a red herring meant only to distract and misguide society from the significant input to families, society, and culture at large that Black women have made, even in the face of extreme social control by the dominant regime. The pattern of placing the fault of social disorder

upon Black women would continue throughout the twentieth century through the ever changing, socially distorted, and constructed images that misrepresented Black women.

Patrick Moynihan's report published in 1965 held the Black woman working to support her family was solely responsible for all issues surrounding Black families. In *Bottomfish Blues*, Mary Barfoot taps into the following from the Moynihan Report:

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposed a crushing burden on the Negro male....Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs. The arrangements of society facilitate such leadership and reward it (qtd. on 16).

This was history on repeat. Just as DuBois had pointed out years earlier, the Black working woman was being blamed and labeled as deviant because her support of her family broke with gender tradition and therefore challenged white patriarchy. Instead of admitting the institutional and governmental wrongs, Moynihan blamed Black women for emasculating Black males. Black women were assigned the title of "matriarch" but, as hooks points out, they did not then, nor do they now, hold the qualification of power required to fulfill the definition. "The term matriarch implies the existence of a social order in which women exercise social and political power, a state which in no way resembles the condition of black women or all women in American society" (*Ain't* 72). If the Black women Moynihan called "matriarchs" truly fit the definition, they would have been economically secure, owned property, and even held regular positions of leadership in business and government, but this was not the case. The work available to these

women was low-pay service jobs, often without a guaranteed minimum wage. Many times women worked several of these jobs that required long hours without union protection, unemployment, or worker's compensation. Instead of honoring the strength and independence required for survival exhibited by Black women, they were stereotyped as domineering and controlling. Pauli Murray points out in *The Liberation of Black Women* that there is a "tendency to treat the values of self-reliance and independence as purely masculine traits" (Murray 187). Black women were blamed when Black men could not find jobs, leaving the women as the only wage earner in the home. In America's patriarchal society, men are taught that their role is as income earners; subsequently, Black men who do not provide are unmanned. hooks suggests that assumption is not based on fact, because many men do not want to share their wages and others are unwilling to do "shit" jobs for little reward. She goes on to say it is important to "remember that the desire to provide is not an innate male instinct," evidenced by the number of men (Black and white) who refuse to pay childcare payments (*Ain't* 76-77). Black women were not, as Moynihan insisted, the root of the problem; rather, it was the tightly restricted roles of gender held by America's definition of the traditional family. African American families have a long history of embracing extended-kin groups. Stephanie Coontz claims that, instead of belittling them for not adapting to the traditional family model, praise should be given for the unique traditions that allow for role flexibility and the family variation and mutation that takes place inside of African American family structures (322).

As long as American society is willing to accept the matriarch myth and thereby cast the Black woman as a scapegoat, this cycle will continue. For the last fifty years, the

matriarchal “welfare queen” has taken the blame for everything from government cutbacks and deindustrialization to urban white flight. The “welfare queen’s” personification is one who is urban, single, poor, working class, and who is taking advantage of social welfare benefits by giving birth to many children. In her laziness, she avoids work while collecting welfare and passing her bad work ethic onto her children. Patricia Hill Collins points to one reason that the “welfare queen” is so offensive: she is a representation of the “failed mammy, one who is unwilling to become ‘de mule us de world’” (87). It is easier to stigmatize the Black woman than to recognize and admit the failure of America’s capitalistic patriarchal society, by once again holding the victims responsible for their victimization. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins cites Wahneema Lubiano: “The welfare queen represents moral aberration and an economic drain, but the figure’s problematic status becomes all the more threatening once responsibility for the destruction of the American way of life is attributed to it” (Lubiano 338). One of the quickest ways to get the American public on the same bandwagon is to highlight a threat to the American pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness narrative. By using the “welfare queen” as a red herring, governmental and corporate leaders were able to quickly gain supporters. The truth is that the situation of the “welfare queen” is a result of failed insights and inaction on behalf of government and corporate interests. The blame rests on those in authority, whose non-performance failed to forestall urban decline through protection of jobs, communities, and education. Coontz accuses city governments of not doing enough to protect already at-risk neighborhoods from continual decline. Chaos in neighborhoods caused shops to close, which led to social networks falling apart, putting schools, churches, and other community organizations at risk (327). Disruptions in public

transportation make getting to work, the grocery store, or laundromat an all-day effort. The perniciously titled “welfare queens” have been denigrated and socially abandoned. Kristin Seefeldt studied a group of women in Detroit she calls “strivers.” These women have been dealing with housing and employment segregation, and they have also been abandoned as a result of “economic and policy changes as well as political choices that have altered structures of opportunity” (3-4). They have been left to fend for themselves, by a society that believes the worst about them. They are cut off from help as their government ties them up with rules and forces them to jump through unrealistic hoops. As Brittney Cooper says, when citizens ask their leaders to fight for them, they are asking for their citizenship and humanity to be recognized (*Eloquent Rage* 86). Black women have not only been maligned but have “borne the brunt of the restructuring of the American economy and the two-decades-long war against working people’s living standards and employment security” (Coontz 337). It is a mark of resiliency and strength of character that the Black woman in the United States continues to fight against the injustice committed against her by her country. After hundreds of years of manipulation and disapprobation, the rumble of Black feminist thought grows. This growth is seen in intellectual theory, literature, music, and film. The voices are growing stronger and there is much to say.

Anger Is The Right Choice. Black women are angry. American society has a name for the angry Black woman as well, because that is how her words, feelings, and opinions can be cast aside as “her issues.” The angry Black woman is called “Sapphire,” and like the other labels, it is meant to discredit and criticize. When individuals make this claim, they do so with a dismissive

intent that indicates there is no reason to be angry and attention should not be paid to what is being said. Further, it is assumed that being angry is in the nature of Black women and it has nothing to do with anyone else. The truth is that Black women have every right to be angry, and the responsibility for that anger lies with anyone who is not a Black woman. Further, the burden to understand the reasons Black women have a right to be angry belongs with anyone who does not identify as they do. It is not their job to explain history from their point of view; rather, individuals should revisit the past, after removing their ethnocentric views. Black women have lived under the burden of lies and character assassinations since their ancestors were forcefully brought to America. As a group, they have been falsely accused of being sexually deviant and animalistic for over three hundred and fifty years. When they care for not only blood relations, but anyone in their community circle, they have been charged with emasculating the men in their lives. White women have abandoned them when it comes to race issues. Black men have abandoned them when it comes to sexism, and their own representative government has cast them as a scapegoat. In her book *Eloquent Rage*, Brittney Cooper says, “We live in a nation that does everything to induce our rage while simultaneously doing everything to deny that we have a right to feel it” (169). Anger is the right response.

Audre Lorde calls hatred the “understructure” of anger, making hatred a “societal death wish directed against us from the moment we were born Black and female in America” (*Sister Outsider* 146). That strong statement is firmed up by Lorde’s recollections from childhood when she would receive hateful stares and rough words from strangers. Her mother’s detailed warnings about her public behavior became a mantra in her head, so much so that she wondered what she had done wrong. Barbara Smith echoes a similar refrain when she says, “I often thought that there was something fundamentally wrong with me because it was obvious that I and everybody

like me was held in such contempt” (“Some Home Truths” 262). Contempt came in the form of cold eyes from white teachers, catcalls from Black men, or refusal of acknowledgment from workers in the service industry. Beyond these personal experiences with hatred is a history of lynching, church bombings, assassinations of Black leaders, and even spittle on the sweater of an elementary schoolgirl in the midst of desegregation. This hatred is woven into the foundational structure of our American culture. Lorde makes the distinction between anger and hatred by stating,

Anger- [is] a passion of displeasure that may be excessive or misplaced but not necessarily harmful. Hatred- [is] an emotional habit or attitude of mind in which aversion is coupled with ill will. Anger, used does not destroy. Hatred does (*Sister Outsider* 152).

Lorde is not excusing anger. On the contrary, when it is “focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 127). By “change,” Lorde means bringing visibility to the experiences of Black women, past and present. The violations and invisibility forced on Black women could justify hatred, but that is not the response they choose; instead, they are angry, and for good reasons. Individuals who reject this right or feel a bit frightened at its vitriol should take a new look at the world through the frame of reference of a Black woman. A good place to start might be the following excerpt from a poem by Judy Dothard Simmons. Do not just read this and go on with your life, but sit with it and pull it into your being. If you do, it will help you begin to change your views.

I see hatred
I am bathed in it, drowning in it
since almost the beginning of my life

it has been the air I breathe
the food I eat, the content of my perceptions;
the single most constant fact of my existence
is their hatred...

I am too young for my history (Simmons 9).

Simmons's history affects her whole being, yet the dominant history in our culture barely references her ancestors, and when it does, it is not faithful to their lived experiences. Hortense Spillers suggests the scars placed by word and whip upon captive bodies have become part of skin color that has relocated down through generations, making current oppressions as potent as the original offending events (Spillers 67). Black history is replete with complex issues of race, sex, and class distinctions that are layered with oppression and subjugation, and at each intersection of those elements, there is much to learn and understand. The past burdens and experiences are not the white woman's, but the social structures that continue to oppress do belong to white society. White individuals with goals of being anti-racist can begin by better understanding the history of the Black woman. Becoming familiar with the patterns of deviance the dominant culture is quick to place upon the Black woman allows one to stand in defense alongside the falsely accused and point the finger back at the structural and institutional issues that are the real problem. When difference is celebrated and not seen as deviance, there is space for equality.

Twenty-first Century

Redefining Terms. Lines can be drawn through history connecting the marginalization and objectification of Black women. American culture has created institutional structures that have

captured and manipulated the female Black body and used her dehumanized form as the dumping ground for the problems of society. This is evident from the beginning of the slave trade through reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Era, and into the twenty-first century. Bringing this conversation into the twenty-first century requires a clarification of terms. Hortense Spillers calls the modifications made to the rules of language in order to label Black women with “confounded identities” of “Jezebel,” “Sapphire,” or “Mammy” necessary in order to preserve a particular narrative. This same narrative also denies societal recognition and acceptance of the practical application of the terms “racist,” “white supremacist,” and “feminist.” These words are buried in the similarly “...bizarre axiological ground... [as they are also]...loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the... [realities and practice]...buried beneath them to come clean” (Spillers 65). In other words, even the dictionary definitions appear to support the prevailing narrative which convolutes a more practical and useful cultural understanding of the word. Just as the stereotypes of Black women have become smokescreens camouflaging the women themselves, so too have societal definitions of these descriptors clouded the realities in our culture while allowing only one narrative to be told. Re-examination of historical events, practices, and meanings can provide different views and definitions that allow for new understandings and perhaps remove the volatility they contain.

“In the post-civil rights era,” says Robin DiAngelo, “we have been taught that racists are mean people who intentionally dislike others because of their race; racists are immoral” (*White Fragility* 13). The term “racist” brings ugly images of angry people spitting on Ruby Bridges as she walks to school or Sunday morning church bombings. There are pictures of men, women, and children grinning for the camera as a lynched man’s feet dangle over their heads; few would disagree that these are “bad” people. Those abhorrent acts are immoral and define an individual

who is aware of his or her despicable behavior. The application of a good/bad binary to the term “racism” in effect allows for a dismissal of all but one definition of the word. It creates a way for individuals to remove themselves from classification and even acknowledgement of other meanings. This binary distinction is not the definition of racism at use in this paper. At use here is an understanding that racism has been woven into the structures and social patterns of our culture so tightly that white individuals are unaware of its presence. For this writing, it is important to acknowledge systems that have forwarded the “inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby [practices] the right of dominance” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 45). This dominance is represented when a white person is the subject and an author does not make that specification, yet a color descriptor will precede any other ethnicity. Another right of dominance is that it took the Voting Rights Act of 1965, in addition to the Nineteenth Amendment, to assure that all Black women’s votes would be counted. The perpetuation of Black women stereotypes is a third example of the systems used to dominate and oppress. Robin DiAngelo points to

social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need to engage...productively, and [these forces] function powerfully to hold the racial hierarchy in place. These forces include the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighborhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity (*White Fragility* 8).

Supporting these dominant patterns is the idea that whiteness holds a supreme place in our culture. The term “white supremacist” brings images of Ku Klux Klan members in hoods with burning crosses reigning terror on Black Americans to mind. Just as with the

term “racist,” that tightly constrained narrative limits the use of the word; it provides individuals with a way to dismiss the reality of “whiteness” in our society, because they would never behave in the manner of the KKK. This word incites defensiveness in individuals who do not actively behave or believe that a white person holds more value than someone from another race. Again, the creation of the good/bad binary removes the implications of white supremacy from our language. However, it is important to recognize that the systems and structures of our society promote white supremacy. Toni Morrison coined the term “race talk” to explain “the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than pressing African Americans to the lowest level of the racial hierarchy” (Morrison). Every part of our culture is saturated with white influence. The actors in film, television, and news, the products on the store shelves, even the image of beauty and fashion is dictated by white preferences. Many would point out the mere fact that white people are unaware of the pervasiveness of whiteness in the culture is its own validation.

The term “feminist” also carries a complex definition. In the American social system, where power is held by men, women who identify as feminists have often been discredited and maligned. Traditionally, feminism calls for equality between men and women in social and political environments. This definition was interpreted by white women quite differently than it was by women who were in the minority. Barbara Smith clarifies the meaning of feminism with the following all-inclusive definition:

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women; women of color, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women- as well as white, economically privileged heterosexual women.

Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement (Smith, "Racism" 49).

As the women's movement of the 1960s developed, these different viewpoints became obvious. The women's movement intersected with the Black female in a way that has left her feeling as if she is "token" member left to sit on the fringe. The movement ignored racial differences as it followed white women's search for fulfillment in the marketplace. Meanwhile, Black women have always been more concerned with basic survival skills and needs. It was not the six-figure salary or corner office they wanted but fair wages, housing, childcare, education, welfare and transportation. Once white women reached their goal of equality with white men, they turned their attentions elsewhere and stopped fighting for the needs that were important to Black women. bell hooks gives two warnings about oppression. First, just because an individual identifies as oppressed does not mean that she is no longer the oppressor at another intersection. White women sought to minimize their oppression by breaking the glass ceiling in the corporate world, but in the process, they were oppressive to Black women and their needs. White women failed to understand the injustice they left in their wake. Secondly, being strong while dealing with oppression is not equal to conquering it (*Ain't 6*). These warnings are exemplified through Betty Friedan's infamous *The Feminine Mystique*. In her book, she carries the message for white middle-class women who want out of their suburban homes and mundane chores. She does not even mention the needs of women who would be caring for the children and homes that white women left behind. Black women hold righteous anger when middle-class white women feel as if the oppression the two groups hold is equal. For middle-class white women, oppression rarely comes in the form of hunger, homelessness, joblessness, or abandonment.

Alongside the women's movement, the Civil Rights movement made progress while also ignoring the concerns of Black women. Black women were abandoned on the basis of their sex, when Black men chose to mirror the white patriarchy and alter the more egalitarian relationship they were accustomed to sharing. Instrumental Civil Rights leaders failed to understand the intersection of racism and sexism placed upon Black women. The women were told they could not support both institutions. By choosing their femininity over their race, they were selling their Black brothers out, but if they chose race, they became the myth of the emasculating matriarch. It was a losing situation for Black women. Mary Barfoot points out that Moynihan's sexist material was "borrowed A to Z from the writings of Black sociologist, E. Franklin Frazier of Howard University" (18). Black men aided white men in creating a chasm within their own race. Once that divide was made, Black men were criminalized and Black women were blamed for raising children- read, boys- who were detrimental to society. This tip of the iceberg example of abandonment by Black men is reason enough for anger. The propaganda that devalues Black womanhood is an uphill battle, especially when Black women feel as if they are fighting alone. As a result of being ignored by the women's movement and marginalized by the Civil Rights movement, a fresh group of Black women picked up theories that earlier Black feminists had started and began to expand on benefits not only for themselves, but all women.

Development of Black Feminist Theory. The pull between their sex and their race was not new for Black women: this double burden would always be theirs to carry. In the late 1800s, Anna Julia Cooper was promoting the importance of all women, while highlighting the differences between white and Black women. Francis Beale in the early 1970s "introduced the term 'double jeopardy' to describe the dual discriminations of racism and sexism" (D. King 296).

She wrote, “As blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men” (D. King 296). In her essay, “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness” Deborah King acknowledges that Beale was aware of the burdens of economic oppression but had not expanded her theory to include the additional discrimination. A few years later, Beverly Lindsay labeled one’s socio-economic class as a third jeopardy. Other oppressions continue to be added such as age, ability, heterosexuality, and homosexuality all which represent even more vulnerability. “We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us,” wrote a group of Black feminists in 1977 (The Combahee River Collective 16). Their essay, “The Combahee River Statement” became a seminal document outlining the position of Black women. In 1988, Deborah K. King expanded Beale’s double jeopardy theory into her interactive model, using the concept of multiple jeopardies. “The modifier ‘multiple’ refers not only to several, simultaneous oppressions but to the multiplicative relationships among them as well” (D. King 297). The exponential affect can be visualized in the equational form of racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by any other insecurity. It is important to keep in mind that the variables change with each individual person’s experiences. In other words, they are “dependent on the socio-historical context and the social phenomenon under consideration” (D. King 298). Hortense J. Spillers wrote “Mama’s Baby” about the same time as King was furthering Beale’s work. Spillers recalled looking for a way to “open up a conversation with feminists,” or those working for freedom for all women (Spillers et al. 300). She provided the vocabulary to link the stereotyped labels. Saidiya Hartman refers to Spiller’s work as a “prism,” as she discusses the way that descriptors of “Black” and “female” pass through the Black female body and emerge blended and inseparable. Hartman’s prism image seems to restore the

atomization of the Black female body that Spillers referenced by pulling the dispersed parts back together. Spillers was originally writing two years before Kimberlé Crenshaw would coin the phrase “intersectionality” as a way to explain the multiple social identities that simultaneously influence an individual’s life. Each burden carries its own set of mutable physical and psychological issues that are impacted by history and social phenomenon. In basic form, the model adds to King’s multiplicative modifier by highlighting each crossing. At every intersection of identities, Black women find themselves slighted, abused, and disadvantaged which totals to large amounts of oppression and anger.

Old Patterns Placed on Modern Women. This body of Black feminist theory details the foundation of oppression for Black women. The dominant narrative of stereotypes assigned to Black women’s lives is built on top of the multiple jeopardies that tell vastly different stories than the myths would have the public believe. Beneath the myth of one called “Jezebel” is a woman whose body has been objectified and reduced to nonhuman form, thus justifying indiscriminate use by slave traders, owners, or simply those looking to exert their power. She is used and abused while being mocked for her skin tone, hair, body shape, and any other distinguishing characteristics. After peeling back the layers on the myth of the matriarch, one finds a Black woman who had labored long hours for low pay and no benefits, and in spite of difficult toil, she gathers and raises her family. She too has been criticized where she should have been praised for her strength, dominance and perseverance. In the midst of these multiplicative factors, when the Black woman dares to stand against the accepted narrative, she is an angry woman named “Sapphire.” The casting of stereotypes on Black women assigns a quality of deviance. It becomes another right/wrong or good/bad binary whose rules are set by a leading

narrative. Those in power cast blame for societal problems instead of having consideration for the whole situation and acceptance of the differences. Audre Lorde said it is not the differences of sex, race, and age that keep us apart but “our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior” (*Sister Outsider* 115). Following are three examples of how our current society continues to enforce the stereotypes of Black women. In each case, the women are cast as wrong or deviant. News media and public alike fall back into the familiar casting of the Black woman in the “problem framework” instead of doing the work to understand the intersections that cross these women’s lives and create another perspective.

Serena Williams is the greatest female tennis player of all time. Male tennis greats like Roger Federer and Andy Roddick remove the “female” descriptor and call her “one of the greatest athletes of all time” (“Federer”). Filmmaker Spike Lee places Serena on the same list as Michael Jordan and Muhammed Ali as incredible athletes who have achieved great success outside of their chosen fields (Graham). This high praise gets pushed aside whenever Williams stands up against the mounting microaggressions she endures. Microaggressions are careless comments and soul-bruising jabs that are not without consequence. Both the public and sports commentators issue microaggressions with complete carelessness and possibly without any awareness. The University of Missouri School of Journalism researched 643 news articles about Williams and Angelique Kerber, both top-ranked athletes but of different color. The findings were published in “Media Microaggressions Against Female Olympic Athletes Up 40 Percent.” It was determined that there were “758 instances of microaggressions against Serena Williams, a black woman...18 microaggression against Kerber, a white woman” (“Media Microaggressions”). The racism Williams’s family has faced is well-documented. Much of it

falls into the category of blatant racism. To the comments made about the family during the 2001 tournament in Indian Wells, California, David Leonard of Washington State University adds a compilation of social media tweets that are full blown racist slams directed at Serena. Following Serena's fifth Wimbledon title Leonard said, "The racism raining down on Serena's victory parade highlights the nature of white supremacy...her career has been one marred by the politics of hate, the politics of racism and sexism." He then added, "The racism that underlies the characterizations of her as hypersexual, aggressive, and animalistic also means that when she dares to express frustrations, she's stamped with the infamous 'angry black woman' stereotype" (Desmond-Harris). Oppression marks the body, soul, and mind. In her poetry about Serena, Claudia Rankine says "...the body has memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness-all the unintimidated, unblinking, and unflappable, resilience does not erase the moments lived through" (Rankine 28).

The inference by the chair umpire at the 2018 US Open that Serena was cheating became the prism that brought all the racism and sexism into one moment. In that moment, Serena's response was echoing the Combahee River Collective; she would be the one to stand and resist the injustice. This accusation came on the heels of Serena and her team becoming aware of the increased number of times she has been drug tested in 2018 over other tennis players, male and female. There are three drug testing agencies and each has its own set of criteria and regulations that athletes must comply with; it is the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) that the Williams Team feels is targeting its player. Serena has always vocally supported the testing and has never in her twenty-three year career failed a test. The USADA's own database shows that Williams has been tested "...more than twice that of other top American women's tennis players, [and]

...more than any of the top five American male players” (Wagner). This increased and unequal testing sends a message of distrust and disrespect. As a high-level player returning to her sport following a pregnancy that involved a life-threatening recovery, an amount of determination and commitment far beyond normal capacity is required. But then, to be singled out and tested more than others by an agency you have always respected and supported is nothing short of a suspicion of cheating. Referencing the altercation between the umpire and Serena, Rutgers Professor Brittney Cooper said on National Public Radio’s *1A* program that we must look at the “broader context of her anger” (“*Allowed to Be Angry*” 00:20:14-15). To viewers, Serena was responding only to the umpire’s unclear and unequal rulings, but for Serena, it was much more than that. It was “...all the moments of disrespect, indignity, and injustice leading up to that moment,” says Cooper (“*Allowed to Be Angry*” 00:21:21-25). On the same NPR program, author Rebeca Traister joined in to add that, at that moment, Serena “was cast as a spectacle of rage that became amplified because of all the associations that have been made around Black women’s expression of anger as either cartoonish, inappropriate, dangerous, a threat and a disruption” (“*Allowed to Be Angry*” 23:20-28).

Here is where historical social structures are still dictating the behavior of Black women. Even former female tennis great Martina Navratilova missed the cues. In her op-ed piece released the following day, she said, “...the trouble began...early in the second set...” (Navratilova). What she and others missed was that the trouble began long ago and continues due to society’s refusal to accept Black women’s anger and the failure to dismantle the institutional structures that allow injustice to endure. While Navratilova missed her chance to stand in solidarity with Black women, another female tennis legend, Billie Jean King, did not. King said, “ultimately, a woman was penalized for standing up for herself. A woman faced down

sexism...she was right to speak her mind, to put a voice to the injustice” (B. King). King was joined by heads of the Women’s Tennis Association and the United States Tennis Association in reminding the public of the true champion performance that Serena displayed during the awards ceremony. Despite her disappointment and anger, she took control and redirected the energy of the crowd toward positive support of her opponent.

Another example began early in 2012, when Rachel Jeantel was talking on the phone to her friend Trayvon Martin at the time he was attacked. While visiting his father in Sanford, Florida, Martin was walking home after stopping at a convenience store. As he chatted with Jeantel, he told her that he was being followed. Shortly after, the phone went dead. It was not until the next day that Jeantel found out her friend was also dead. Sixteen months later, Rachel Jeantel sat in the witness chair at the trial for Martin’s killer. Her behavior, speech patterns, looks, and attitude were separated and highlighted by the defense attorney, media, and public. The defense attorney spoke down to her and seemed as frustrated with Rachel as she was with him. One Twitter feed said, “That fat black girl testifying in the Trayvon Marin case belongs on a plantation somewhere picking cotton” (Yancy). The result of this “atomizing,” as Hortense Spillers called it, caused a loss “...of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions” (68). Lost in this parsing out of Rachel Jeantel’s humanity was the grief of a young woman who was on the phone with her friend as he was killed. She did not want to be the last person Trayvon spoke to; she did not want to go to the funeral and look at his body; she did not want to appear in court. It seemed as if bits and pieces of Jeantel were on trial and not the actual defendant. Jeantel speaks Haitian Creole first, Spanish second, and English third. She was frequently asked to repeat her words by the court reporter and

the defense lawyer, as if the fact that they did not understand was solely because of the way she spoke and not the way they listened. This process was used by the attorney to make Jeantel appear unintelligent and confused, and it also made her angry. Brittney Cooper says, “given the hostile and combative space into which she entered, a space in which she had to fight for the integrity of her own words, combativeness seems like the most appropriate posture” (Cooper, “Dark-Skinned”). Rachel’s eye-rolling, mumbling, and at times outright sassiness can be seen in the behavior of any teen who is placed in a situation in which they do not want to be. She had been in the witness chair for six hours as the defense was actively discrediting her. Journalist Alexander Abad-Santos said, “Rachel Jeantel’s attitude is exactly what I would expect from someone from the hood who has no media training and who is fully entrenched in a hostile environment. There’s nothing wrong with it.” As she grew frustrated with the defense lawyer’s repeated attempts to paint her as a liar and manipulate her experience, this typical teen attitude was interpreted as an angry Black woman. During a tense moment of testimony when it seemed she was being ignored she asks, “Are you listening?” (qtd. in M. Smith). Jeantel had a right to be angry and to express those feelings. She was seated in the witness stand reliving the last moments of her friend’s life as the lawyer was recreating the incident to fit his required narrative. No, he was not listening. The attorney was busy crafting a narrative to support his goals and agenda.

In the third example, Christmas arrived early for Beyoncé fans in 2013. Her surprise album showed up just minutes before midnight on the 13th of December, to critical acclaim; celebrities and regular fans alike went crazy for her new songs and videos. This album celebrated and highlighted her family. She told the world the story of the love between herself and her husband, rapper Jay Z. She sang about the love for her baby girl. She celebrated her sexuality.

During the month of March 2014 on multiple occasions, newscaster Bill O'Reilly complained about her music and videos. He suggested that Beyoncé was responsible for “young girls... getting pregnant in the African American community... it's about 70 percent out of wedlock,” he claimed (Culp-Ressler). O'Reilly did not explain the source of his data. In her book, Tamara Winfrey Harris shares information from the Guttmacher Institute, citing that “the pregnancy rate among African American teenage girls has declined 56 percent between 1990 and 2010” (Harris, *The Sisters* 33). The Center for Disease Control verifies this drastic drop in teen pregnancy among all ethnicities (“2007-2015 Birth Rates”). When O'Reilly tacked on the “out of wedlock” mantra to his questionable data, he began to sound eerily similar to Patrick Moynihan's warnings that society can only operate on a patriarchal family structure. Harris also points to O'Reilly's “intimating that [Black girls] are particularly promiscuous and fertile” or possibly “a tangle of pathology” (Harris, *The Sisters* 33; Barfoot 15). Later in the month, he continued to spread his opinions as a guest on *The David Letterman Show*. He voiced concern that Beyoncé should be using her millions of dollars to do something good in the world (“Propaganda Video”). A quick internet search reveals the many charitable organizations that Beyoncé has participated in and started on her own. While O'Reilly was working to cast her as a deviant, Beyoncé was creating music and building organizations to empower women and girls in the United States and around the world. O'Reilly's persistent criticism of this twenty-first century powerful, influential female artist feels reminiscent of Barbara Omolade's reference to the way African women's expressions of their sexuality were viewed by the slave trader. In terms of the slave trader, Omolade said that the African woman's sexuality “both fascinated and repelled him and also provided him with a needed rationale for...exploitation” (362). In light of the many sexual harassment settlements Mr. O'Reilly has settled, this all reeks of a dominant

culture feeling threatened and trying to keep hold of its power. Harris wonders in her essay “All Hail the Queen?” why Madonna can freely promote her sexuality to broad acclaim: “Through a career that has included crotch-grabbing, nudity, BDSM, Marilyn Monroe fetishizing, and a 1992 book devoted to sex, Madonna has been viewed as a feminist provocateur, pushing the boundaries of acceptable femininity.” Yet, Beyoncé is not afforded the same liberty and is instead judged through the Jezebel stereotype and the prevailing narrative.

Gathering My People. These recent examples show the continuing pattern of socio-historic stereotypes that devalue and dehumanize Black women. Even today, with the large amount of Black feminist identity and theory available, the patterns of the past crowd into Black women’s lives. bell hooks proposes “that individual white women tend to be more unaware than their Black female counterparts of the way the history of racism in the United States has [created] institutionalized structures... meant to keep these two groups apart” (*Killing Rage* 218). Structures with built-in benefits for whites have created an inferior/superior framework between Black and white women. By recognizing the ingrained societal systems of privilege as the enforcers of racism, white individuals can more easily accept the same systems’ detrimental effects on people of color. Choosing to believe that others are deviant is easy because “we have all been raised in a society where [these] distortions [are] endemic within our living” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 115). In writing her essay titled “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” Lorde says that society has three options when faced with difference. First, difference can be ignored. White women have ignored the deep and clarifying body of knowledge produced by Black feminist writers. Second, difference can be copied. Copying is seen as an advantage if that difference is coming from a place or person of power. White culture has embraced Black Hip Hop artists,

hairstyles, and slang in an effort to join the popular culture. “The ability to take on and peel off the parts of Black culture that you like at will is exactly what is meant by the term ‘white privilege,’” says Cooper (*Eloquent Rage* 177). Lord’s third option is that difference can be destroyed (*Sister Outsider* 115). Casting Black women as deviant or inferior is equivalent to destroying the difference; it keeps women from uniting. As Lorde was writing this essay in 1980, Black feminists were building a platform for themselves that also provided a place for the rest of society, and especially for all women, to meet and build solidarity. White women missed their cue to work as equals. Instead, covered in their privilege, white women have ignored the significance of Black women’s history and what it has meant to their souls. They have focused on their own interpretation of equality, as they aligned themselves with white men in order to advance their careers, and they have assumed within a superior framework that they could speak on behalf of Black women. By the definitions referenced earlier in this paper, this is racism; this is white supremacy.

White women are complicit in their perpetuation of these social structures. Ellen Pence explains, “We grew up in a society permeated with the belief that white values, cultures, and lifestyle are superior, we can assume that regardless of our rejection of the concept we still act out of that socialization” (46). In the rejection of these institutional structures, the binary of good/bad and inferior/superior has also been dismissed. Viewing racism as part of the American cultural system allows for study and understanding of racial patterns in non-self-judgmental ways. One way of doing that is to maintain the privilege of “whiteness.” This privilege can be used in new ways to help curtail racism. ShiShi Rose says that white privilege is “not about being ashamed of it, it’s about using it for good because we need it to fuel change” (Rose). Inside the new perspective of how racism is woven into our social power structures, white privilege can

be used to speak in defense of those who are marginalized. Whether the marginalization comes through destructive stereotypes, forced assimilation, or unfair governmental or corporate practices, voices of privilege can stand in defense. Those individuals with white privilege can speak and act in spaces where others cannot, and when they do, they become allies. As allies, those with privilege can explain anti-racist practices and spread the work of ending racism to others with privilege. Robin DiAngelo expounds, “In a society in which race clearly matters, our race profoundly shapes us. If we want to challenge this construct, we must make an honest accounting of how it is manifest in our own lives and in the society around us” (*White Fragility* 73). This honest accounting accompanies fresh reads of history and earnest listening that will help build bridges between Black and white women. “For women to achieve equality in our society, ...we must...work together” (Yamada 69). Equality in Black feminist theory is evident through acknowledgement, respect, and freedom for all women. The intersectionality of Black feminism “goes beyond race politics in feminism, [to where] many black women share concerns of impoverished and working-class women [enhanced through] class politics” (D. King 306). This action will transfer into acknowledgement of ableism, heterosexuality, homosexuality, religion, and ethnicity, no longer separated whereby one group benefits at the detriment of another. Instead, as Audre Lorde says, “divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower” (Lorde “Master’s” 96). As equals, women can celebrate differences while rejecting the divisions that multiple intersections can cause. Without divisions, all women can be lifted up. Positive social and political change can be made that will reduce food scarcity, improve healthcare, childcare, education, charity and so much more. The unity of all women will create a voice against misplacement of blame for society’s shortcomings.

Black feminist leaders have already created a framework for addressing these challenging social and political issues. They have articulated a path toward acceptance and equality for all. It is time for Black women to take the lead since white women have struggled to see past their ethnocentric views in order to understand experiences of others. bell hooks was writing *Ain't I a Woman* in 1981, when she said, “while the recent women’s movement called attention to the fact that black women were dually victimized by racist and sexist oppression, white feminists tended to romanticize the black female experience rather than discuss the negative impact of that oppression” (6). White women are still viewing Black women’s history through a narrative of white privilege. Nearly forty years later, an incident from the 2017 Women’s March stands to remind women of the continuous work required to resist the socialized patterns that permeate our society. The many intersections involved in what seems like a quick slogan is why white women should look to Black feminist theory and leaders to spearhead the advancement and equality of all women. White women lashed out against what they viewed as non-support by the Black Lives Matter organization. White privilege clouded their view as they chimed in return, “All Lives Matter.” All humans should matter, but to quip back “All Lives Matter” is to show disrespect and disconnect to the depths of pain that Black Lives Matter entails. White women looking to be anti-racist allies should have done the work to better understand. If they had, they would have stood in support of the cause. The statement does not infer that “only” Black Lives Matter but rather that they matter “too.” This was a reminder that we are not a post-racial society, and it served as a space where Black women could gather and find some sort of sanity. Just as the cult of dissemblance was part of slave women’s lives, it still “...protect[s] the sanctity” of Black women. This space allows for “the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations” to be addressed in safety (Hines 916). It

started with Treyvon Martin, but other young men's lives were quickly added. Rather, their lives were subtracted from this earth and their killers were not held accountable. It was also a link to the past, specifically the Civil Rights Era when young Black men and women were not fairly or equally represented by the laws and institutions of this country. But to know that, white women would have to know history from a point of view other than the "stand your ground" view. Clearly, given the Black Lives Matter backlash, placing aside the cultural lens used to bring understanding to our perceptions and experiences is a difficult task. As those wishing to be anti-racist navigate new ways of viewing the world around them, there will be plenty of mistakes. bell hooks writes in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* that she is often asked how she can help white women assess their racism and still remain on decent terms with them. Her gracious reply is,

My explanation is rooted in the recognition and praise of the individual anti-racist white women...who are utterly and steadfastly committed to eradicating racism [and establishing] racial justice. As comrades in struggle, the presence and actions of these individual white women renew my faith in the power of white people to resist racism (59).

Unpacking racism and white supremacy from American culture must begin with the acknowledgement of its presence. White Americans have become comfortable living with cognitive dissonance. Our founding documents, which we fiercely defend, promise liberty, equality, and justice for everyone, yet we permit our systems to tell another story. Individuals assume there is no way for them to rise up against the banking, housing, financial, educational, and correctional institutions and demand change. But that is to forget our own original narrative. The colonists stood up to Great Britain, demanded an

equal voice, and went to great lengths to assure liberty. In the twenty-first century, it is long past time for citizens to demand justice for all. When white Americans acknowledge racism and admit the pain and suffering that the systems have caused (systems they have allowed to stand for centuries), we will be able to believe the words when we say, We hold these truths to be self-evident that all [people] are created equal.” Those who want to fight racism in themselves and in the American culture must work daily to be allies.

Tools Needed For the Work Ahead

Any white woman willing to admit her racism and white privilege has taken an important first step toward equality for all. Old habits are hard to move past, so keep in mind that acknowledging racism and white supremacy requires purging the old divisive binaries of good/bad, inferior/superior and learning new ways of viewing humanity. Writing an op-ed in the *Seattle Times*, Author Robin DiAngelo says, “Let me be clear. I don’t see myself or other whites as bad. Racism is a system that we did not create, but it’s one that we did inherit. We must take responsibility to see and challenge it both within and around us.” When racism is understood to be woven into the structures of our institutional systems, there is opportunity to help bring change. Under this new paradigm, a white woman can accept her perpetuation of a racist system and begin her work of being an anti-racist. Since it is easy to fall back into old routines without awareness, what follows are some tools for this new practice. The first is to go slowly. Care must be taken not to rush into the role of being an ally only to continue to behave in a white supremacist manner. Taking time to find and understand what a new, white racial identity looks like is an important first step. Growing up in a society that is centered on “whiteness” makes it easy to not think about what that really means. A second useful tool for an ally is education. To

be an ally with Black women is not as simple as declaring new intentions. Many racial justice writers are quick to add that this title is bestowed after evidence of change is seen. Consider the term “ally” to be a verb rather than a noun with the action of the verb taking place as much internally as externally (Utt). A third important tool is getting used to making mistakes without focusing on failure. This was not a lesson taught in our meritocracy and will take practice. Black feminists have suggestions for ways to handle the emotions of guilt and defensiveness that accompany this process. The fourth tool might be imagined to be the toolkit that holds this new anti-racist framework together. Black women have already created this framework through their consistent fight for inclusive equality and their clearly articulated Black feminist theory. They have set the example for everyone to follow and are ready to lead.

Finding a New White Racial Identity. White women can feel as if race does not exist, because their presence is universal. Diane Flinn is a managing partner of Diversity Matters, and she describes her “whiteness” in this way: “...you get to be individual...the norm...whole and not partial or hyphenated. You don’t have to make ‘adjustments’ or ‘modifications’ to know or name yourself” (“White Anti-Racism”). Whiteness is treated as if it has always been, so thinking about or developing a racial identity will likely be a new experience. This will take time and humility in addition to looking different for each individual. Finding and understanding a new white racial identity requires asking tough questions about the systems that have caused oppression. It means challenging the status quo that keeps whiteness as universal and deems the experiences of people of color as wrong, deviant, or biased. It also means taking a close look at where we have personally promoted and condoned these systems. Here is an example for tracking down the oppression of Black single mothers. These are the women who were pointed out by Moynihan as

being “so out of line with the rest of the American society, [that they] seriously retard[ed] the progress of the group as a whole...” (qtd. in Barfoot 16). According to a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016 study, individuals who spent twenty-seven weeks or more in the labor force and made up the classification of the “working poor” were represented by more women than men. Further, Black and Hispanic women are twice as likely to be counted among the working poor than white or Asian women (“A Profile Of The Working Poor”). Employment available to these groups is precarious and low-waged, often represented through seasonal and inconsistent hours that require piecing together two or more jobs. This type of employment offers little, if any, benefit. As sole breadwinner in the household and primary caregiver, they have very few options. These are women who want to work, and our institutional systems stack obstacles in their way. America claims to be a land of opportunity but that is only true for those who fit a certain mold. For anyone outside of the mainstream, the opportunities are few. When a white woman looking to be anti-racist studies this common situation through a new lens, she should ask herself what harm or contribution she has made to this social problem. One way she could have caused harm is if she voted for congressional representatives that campaigned on promises to reduce or eliminate social benefits that provide aid to many Black single mothers. Promises by certain public officials result in issues like the President’s 2019 budget proposal which “takes aim at all areas of life that impact kids: health, education, poverty, housing, nutrition assistance, and welfare” (“Fact Sheet”). Perhaps it will dawn on her that this is the first time she cared enough to put the patriarchal narrative aside and do her own research. Another way she contributes to the system is that now that she sees the connections, she does nothing to make changes. This is hard and brutal work. If individuals earnestly working to find a white racial identity are comfortable with their findings, they are not asking the right questions. Diane Finn

was asked how white women can know if they are beginning to understand how racism functions in our culture. She answered by saying when “we recognize the systemic presence of racism and how race-based oppression is allowed to continue. We ‘get it’ when we value equity, human rights and social justice” (“White Anti-Racism”). It will be worth the hard work to establish a new, white racial identity because it will form a foundation from which to continue questioning and challenging the status quo, both internally and externally, which will help white women be better allies to Black women.

Educating Yourself. Activist Dr. Brenna Demands says, “To know what it is to be white, you must also expose yourself to what it means to be not white.” There is much to learn for white women pursuing allyship. Reexamining the single narrative of American history and adding in the marginalized voices is a good beginning. A few examples of how this may be accomplished is by learning the significance behind Rosa Park’s bus boycott, listening to Zora Neale Hurston’s first-hand slave recordings on file at the Library of Congress, or reading books by Black women. When reviewing history, blogger Janee Woods suggests watching for “interplay between poverty and racial equity” and the “modern forms of race oppression and slavery.” These are complex issues that become distorted when those with power are able to minimize the minority viewpoint. It is extremely important that a white woman learning the role of an ally be ready to listen. Just listen to what Black women have to say, and remember they have experiences through multiple intersections with which white women cannot identify. It may seem that the easiest and quickest way to understand how to be an ally is to ask a Black woman to share her experiences, to ask her for a list of what should be done. This topic may be the subject most anti-racist scholars agree

upon; in unison, they would say not to ask for help in understanding racism from a Black individual. Reverend Elizabeth Rawlings described that ask this way:

If you are walking a long road, carrying your day pack alongside someone carrying an 80lb pack on their back, someone who has been on this path much longer than you and is clearly exhausted, likely injured, feet covered with blisters, do you tell them you are tired and ask if they can carry your pack too?

If white women have done the internal work of understanding their white racial identity and earnestly spent time trying to better understand the true history of the Black woman, they would recognize it is not right to ask to be educated. Unpacking systematic racism is new for most white women but the demands and trials of racism have been moving through the generations of Black women since they were first captured. This has been a burden carried for a long time. “When you ask a Black person to teach you how to be a better white person, you are scratching a wound that has been carved so deep into them that they feel the pain of it in their bones” (Metta, “When You Walk”). Asking Black women to educate white women on ways to navigate racism shows a blatant disregard for the value of their time as well as an unawareness of the pain and suffering that racism has brought to their lives. The work to be anti-racist belongs to the white woman.

Making Mistakes. Allies will make mistakes. The process of allyship is a life-long attentiveness to undoing long-held beliefs. Here, again, individuals are benefited by removing the good/bad binary from definitions of themselves and others. Without being able to accept a label of “bad” for making a mistake, it will become easier to express apologies. Jamie Utt shares the advice he was given by a professor of color. Concerning Utt’s work on becoming an ally, the professor

said, "...you are going to screw up-a lot. Be prepared for that. And when you screw up, be prepared to listen to those who you hurt, apologize with honesty and integrity, work hard to be accountable to them, and make sure you act differently going forward" (Utt). That straightforward accounting of how to navigate mistakes and offenses will be tough to follow. It leaves no room for emotional hand-wringing, guilt, or justifying on the part of the ally. It may be human nature when a mistake is made to want to explain our side of the situation in an effort to present acceptable excuses. Black feminists call this "centering," orienting the details of the situation around the oppressor. In this moment of centering, the ally slips back into a white supremacy role and begins to enforce their narrative by taking over the conversation to repeatedly explain and defend themselves. Another example of centering was expressed earlier, in the way white women quickly responded with All Lives Matter before taking the time to understand the significance of Black Lives Matter. The better approach is an apology and renewed listening to how best to support Black women's positions. As allies train themselves to recognize the racism in our society, the weight of guilt can become a hindrance to moving forward. Diane Flinn says that holding guilt can be paralyzing and keep individuals from moving past the status quo. She says that "guilt transfers the responsibility to people of color" and is yet another avenue for returning to the old habits of white supremacy (Flinn). Guilt is best dealt with during the internal development stage of finding a new white racial identity. Behind the guilt individuals hold may be a path forward to new understanding of themselves and their racial identity. The fear of making a mistake or saying something wrong can cause allies to be silent. (Keep in mind there is a distinction between listening and silence.) Author and blogger Mia McKenzie has advice for her white followers who make the mistake of going silent when her posts focus on racism. Her comments cover many important aspects of allyship;

I am not calling for ‘commentary’ from my white friends about issues of race. I am not calling for my white friends to tell me that they understand what it is like for folks of color in this country and in this world. I am not calling for my white friends to suddenly start acting like experts on these issues, or...to stop listening in order to start talking (McKenzie 44).

What she is looking for is a show of support through reading, reposting, and sharing with white friends. That is the primary role of a white woman wishing to be anti-racist.

When Black Women Lead. Black women have earned the right to lead. Despite being marginalized and demonized for centuries, they have articulated their identity and made space for all women. In addition, they have consistently advocated for improvements on behalf of women. Paula Giddings sights a 1971 Louis Harris-Virginia Slims poll where 62 percent of Black women championed “efforts to strengthen or change women’s status in society,” while only 45 percent of white women agreed. Twice the number of Black women felt unity with the work of liberation groups as compared to white women (345). In response to the recent midterm elections, Rachael Ricketts points out that “Black women voted in favor of progress- 92% versus 49% of white women.” Current Black feminist bloggers, authors, and activists are modernizing and building on the past feminist work, and in the process, they are solidifying a firm foundation to bring equity for all. Audre Lorde said, “The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference” (*Sister Outsider* 23). In the past, white feminism chose to align itself with white patriarchal power. By demanding their equality with men, they left out many women who were not after advancement but were looking for ways to survive the structural oppression that

weighed them down. Black feminist theory advances a new definition of power that recognizes every person's humanity and right to liberty, equality, and justice. Dismantling the institutional systems of oppression is necessary to level out the "societal realities that are available to white women but not black women" (Henry).

When Black women lead, issues relating to health, the wealth gap, childcare, families, adequate aid, and more will receive the required attention. Toni Bond points to the downfalls in Black women's health and safety surrounding maternity. The maternal mortality rate affects Black women most severely, and the infant mortality rate is twice that of white women (Bond). Many reasons play into these rates, but at the base is the fact that "white feminist organizations receive far more financial support than groups representing women of color" (Bond). There is an ever-widening racial wealth gap that impacts Black women and their families. Tracy Jan reports in the *Washington Post* that the "median net worth of white families...is now 10 times that of black families." The Institute for Women's Policy Research website provides data on the median weekly earnings for women between 2016 and 2017. White women's real earnings increased by 1.6 percent, while Black women's increased by only 0.4 percent ("The Gender Wage Gap"). The pattern is echoed throughout time. This is due to systems of oppression rooted in slavery and Jim Crow that are continually reframed to fit new social narratives. As white women acknowledge their racism and white supremacist worldview, they can begin to change their patterns of belief and aid in social change and equality. Recognition and acceptance of Black feminist theory will provide those seeking anti-racist frameworks a path forward.

There are many more tools available to allies. These tools are found through reading, diversifying media inputs, and listening. From the witness stand, Rachael Jeantel asked the defense attorney a question that can be asked of those seeking to be anti-racist. She asked, "Are

you listening?” Racism is not immutable. When anti-racist allies name racism for what it is, and set out to change the systems that hold it in place, it will diminish. Black women have been leading the way and can be supported by white women who are willing to admit their racism, establish a racial identity, and use their white privilege to speak in places where Black women are not yet welcomed. Writer Kali Holloway pleads, “if you are white; use the unrivaled respect bestowed upon you as a societal birthright to acknowledge and rectify” racism.

CONCLUSION

White women can learn to be allies with Black women as they understand, accept, and work to change their perpetuation of oppression through the systems that promote stereotypes and racial patterns. This requires a paradigm shift that dismisses the dominant one-sided historical narrative and instead considers not only all races, ethnicities, sexes, and abilities but the social impacts and interconnectedness of the larger picture. Spillers was right when she said, “There is not a subject that you can speak about in the modern world where you will not have to talk about African women and new world African women. But no one wants to address them...we really are invisible people” (Spillers et al.). Understanding and embracing the structural racism and white supremacy that are woven throughout daily life is critical to untangling the stereotypes that plague marginalized Black women. Each stereotype unravels when all perspectives are considered and society makes the invisible not only visible but valuable. Deeper study reveals that Black women were preyed upon, raped, and abused, as those in control twisted the realities to provide justification for their misdeeds. They blamed the victim. Motherhood for slaves was filled with tragedy and sadness, as children were taken away and families split up at the whim of the planter. As Black women tried to hold their families together they were criticized for being controlling and operating outside of the traditional gender role. Perhaps one of the most

humiliating treatments is when Black women are not allowed to express their feelings in the manner they wish. They are censured when they exhibit anger. Anger they deserve to declare. Voices, they are allowed to use, “Are you listening?” It is important to accept new definitions of racism and white supremacy as systems of oppression that have been used against Black women since they were brought as slaves to this land. Individuals should resist the binary guides of good/bad and superior/inferior when referring to racism and becoming anti-racist, because keeping them in place builds walls of divisiveness. The term “feminist” must also be rescued from disapprobation. Feminism provides the support for all women to be free and have their humanity recognized. Black feminist theory has developed the structural support to redefine what power can look like. Power to hold oppression at bay while caring for the hungry, homeless, jobless, or abandoned. There is a path forward to finding reconciliation between what we say our nation believes and what our actions show. It requires humility and openness to truth on behalf of white individuals who have, to this point, been writing the narrative. “Oh sweet America,” writes Judy Simmons, “I would help to build your pyre...if you were a simple Phoenix who would rise star-spangled, ethically balanced, [and] purified” (14).

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