7 BLACK WOMEN'S LOVE RELATIONSHIPS

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Sethe tells her friend Paul D how she felt after escaping from slavery:

> It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean? (Morrison 1987, 162)

By distorting Sethe's ability to love her children "proper," slavery annexed Sethe's power as energy for its own ends. Her words touch a deep chord in Paul D, for he too remembers how slavery felt. His unspoken response to Sethe expresses the mechanisms used by systems of domination such as slavery in harnessing potential sources of power in a subordinated group:

> So you protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own; lay down with head twisted in order to see the loved one over the rim of the trench before you slept. Stole shy glances at her between the trees at chain-up. Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn't do. A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well, now, *that* was freedom. (Morrison 1987, 162)

Sethe and Paul D's words suggest that in order to perpetuate itself, slavery corrupts and distorts those sources of power within oppressed groups that provide energy for change. To them, freedom from slavery meant not only the absence of capricious masters and endless work but regaining the power to "love any-

thing you chose." Both Sethe and Paul D understood how slavery inhibited their ability to have "a big love," whether for children, for friends, for each other, or for principles such as justice. Both saw that systems of oppression often succeed because they control the "permission for desire"—in other words, they harness the power of deep feelings to the exigencies of domination.

This type of power that flows from "a big love" flies in the face of Western epistemologies that often see emotions and rationality as different and competing concerns (Collins 1998a, 243–45). Described by Black feminist poet Audre Lorde (1984) as the power of the erotic, deep feelings that arouse people to action constitute an important source of power. In her groundbreaking essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde explores this fundamental link between deep feelings and power and provides a road map for an oppositional sexual politics:

> There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information in our lives. (Lorde 1984, 53)

For Lorde sexuality is a component of the erotic as a source of power in women. Lorde's notion is one of power as energy, as something people possess that must be annexed in order for larger systems of oppression to function.[1]

Lorde suggests that this erotic power resides in women, but men too can experience these deep feelings. Divergent expressions of deep feelings may lie less in biologically based gender differences than in social structures that associate this type of passion with femininity and weakness. Sadly, within capitalist marketplace relations, this erotic power is so often sexualized that not only is it routinely misunderstood, but the strength of deeply felt love is even feared.

African-American women's experiences with pornography, prostitution, and rape demonstrate how erotic power becomes commodified and exploited by social institutions. Equally important is how Black women hold fast to this source of individual empowerment and use it in crafting fully human love relationships. When people "protect themselves and love small" by seeing certain groups of people as worthy of love and deeming others less deserving, potential sources of power as energy that can flow from love relationships are attenuated. But when people reject the world offered by intersecting oppressions, the power as energy that can flow from a range of love relationships becomes possible.

All love relationships potentially tap the energy associated with deep feelings, but not all love relationships are the same. Such relationships can be arranged on a continuum from caring yet asexual love relationships, to sexual-

ized love relationships—those where deep feelings find sexual expression—to those that reflect the "just sex" commodity relations of the capitalist marketplace.

This chapter examines selected Black women's love relationships that tap deep feelings, whether or not they find sexual expression. The deep love that African-American women feel for our parents, children, and siblings constitute spiritual, deeply felt love relationships that are not considered sexual. Conversely, love relationships that encompass sexual expression constitute sexualized love relationships. Loving friendships of all sorts remain arrayed in between, with some of the most contested relationships occurring when people do not know where to draw the sexual line. In some cases, sexuality itself clouds the boundaries. For example, for many heterosexual Black men and Black women, dominant constructions of Black male and Black female sexuality often limit the ability to form nonsexualized, loving friendships. In other cases, loving a forbidden other becomes the source of contention. Love across the color line, where individuals of different "races" fall in love, or across social class categories muddy the waters between asexual friendships and sexualized love relationships. In still other cases, the fear lies in loving too deeply elements of oneself found in the other. As Black lesbians point out, much homophobia expressed by heterosexual African-American women stems from the fear that their love of Black women might find sexual expression.

The intersecting oppressions that produce systems of domination such as slavery aim to thwart the power as energy available to subordinate groups. The sexual politics that constrains Black womanhood constitutes an effective system of domination because it intrudes on people's daily lives at the point of consciousness. Exactly how do the sexual politics of Black womanhood influence Black women's interpersonal love relationships? More important, how might an increased understanding of these relationships enable African-American women to tap sources of power as energy and thus become more empowered?

Black Women, Black Men, and the Love and Trouble Tradition

In her groundbreaking essay, "On the Issue of Roles," Toni Cade Bambara remarks, "Now it doesn't take any particular expertise to observe that one of the most characteristic features of our community is the antagonism between our men and our women" (Bambara 1970a, 106). Exploring the tensions between African-American men and women has been a long-standing theme in U.S. Black feminist thought. In an 1833 speech, Maria Stewart boldly challenged what she saw as Black men's lackluster response to racism: "Talk, without effort, is nothing; you are abundantly capable, gentlemen, of making yourselves men of distinction; and this gross neglect, on your part, causes my blood to boil within me" (Richardson 1987, 58). Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and other classic

Black women blues singers offer rich advice to Black women on how to deal with unfaithful and unreliable men (Harrison 1978, 1988; Russell 1982; Davis 1998). More recently, Black women's troubles with Black men have generated anger and, from that anger, self-reflection: "We have been and are angry sometimes," suggests Bonnie Daniels, "not for what men have done, but for what we've allowed ourselves to become, again and again in my past, in my mother's past, in my centuries of womanhood passed over, for the 'sake' of men, whose manhood we've helped undermine" (1979, 62).

Juxtaposed against this tradition of trouble is another long-standing theme—namely, the great love Black women feel for Black men. African-American slave narratives contain countless examples of newly emancipated Black women who spent years trying to locate their lost children, spouses, fathers, and other male loved ones (Gutman 1976). Black women writers express love for their sons and fears about their futures (Angelou 1969; Golden 1995). Love poems written to Black men permeate Black women's poetry. Black women's music is similarly replete with songs about sexualized love. Whether the playful voice of Alberta Hunter proclaiming that her "man is a handy man," the mournful cries of Billie Holiday singing "My Man," the sadness Nina Simone evokes in "I Loves You Porgy" at being forced to leave her man, or the powerful voice of Jennifer Holliday, who cries out, "You're gonna love me," Black vocalists identify Black women's relationships with Black men as a source of strength, support, and sustenance (Harrison 1978, 1988; Russell 1982). As U.S. Black feminists point out, many Black women reject feminism because they see it as being antifamily and against Black men. They do not want to give up men—they want Black men to change. Black activist Fannie Lou Hamer succinctly captures what a good love relationship between a Black woman and man can be: "You know, I'm not hung up on this about liberating myself from the black man, I'm not going to try that thing. I got a black husband, six feet three, two hundred and forty pounds, with a 14 shoe, that I don't want to be liberated from" (Lerner 1972, 612).

African-American women have long commented on this "love and trouble" tradition in Black women's relationships with Black men. Novelist Gayl Jones explains: "The relationships between the men and the women I'm dealing with are blues relationships. So they're out of a tradition of 'love and trouble.' . . . Blues talks about the simultaneity of good and bad, as feeling, as something felt. . . . Blues acknowledges all different kinds of feelings at once" (Harper 1979, 360). Both the tensions between African-American women and men and the strong attachment that we feel for one another represent a rejection of binary thinking and an acceptance of the both/and conceptual stance in Black feminist thought.

Understanding this love and trouble tradition requires assessing the influence of heterosexist, Eurocentric gender ideology—particularly ideas about men and women advanced by the traditional family ideal—on African-American women and men. Definitions of appropriate gender behavior for Black women,

Black men, and members of other racial/ethnic groups not only affect social institutions such as schools and labor markets, they also shape daily interactions. Analyses claiming that African-Americans would be just like Whites if offered comparable opportunities implicitly support prevailing sexual politics. Such thinking offers hegemonic gender ideologies of White masculinity and White femininity as models for African-Americans to emulate. Similarly, those proclaiming that Black men experience a more severe form of racial oppression than Black women routinely counsel African-American women to subjugate our needs to those of Black men (see, e.g., Staples 1979). However, advising Black women to unquestioningly support sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other forms of sexism done by U.S. Black men buttresses a form of sexual politics that differently controls everyone. As Audre Lorde queries, "If society ascribes roles to black men which they are not allowed to fulfill, is it black women who must bend and alter our lives to compensate, or is it society that needs changing?" (1984, 61). Bonnie Daniels provides an answer: "I've learned . . . that being less than what I am capable of being to boost someone else's ego *does not help either of us* for real" (1979, 61).

Black women intellectuals directly challenge not only the derogation of African-American women within prevailing sexual politics—for example, the controlling images of mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel—but often base this rejection on a more general critique of Eurocentric heterosexism itself. Sojourner Truth's 1851 query, "I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?" confronts the premises of the cult of true womanhood that "real" women were fragile and ornamental. Toni Cade Bambara contends that Eurocentric understandings of gender derived from White, middle-class experience are not only troublesome for African-Americans but damaging: "I have always, I think, opposed the stereotypical definitions of 'masculine' and 'feminine,' . . . because I always found the either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about—and what revolution for self is all about—the whole person" (Bambara 1970a, 101).

As many U.S. Black feminist activists point out, the sexual politics of Black womanhood limits the development of transformative social justice projects within Black civil society. Black activist Frances Beale identifies the negative effects that sexism within the Black community had on Black political activism in the 1960s:

> Unfortunately, there seems to be some confusion in the Movement today as to who has been oppressing whom. Since the advent of Black power, the Black male has exerted a more prominent leadership role in our struggle for justice in this country. He sees the system for what it really is for the most part, but where he rejects its values and mores on many issues, when it comes to women, he seems to take his guidelines from the pages of the *Ladies' Home Journal.* (Beale 1970, 92)

Mainstream social science also seems overly preoccupied with Black men's issues. Sociologist William Julius Wilson's (1987; 1996) groundbreaking work on joblessness and poverty among U.S. Blacks pays more attention to men's issues than women's. From Black conservatism to Black nationalism, regardless of Black political perspective, an implicit male bias persists. The inordinate emphasis placed on providing more Black male role models for Black boys in contemporary Black political theory and practice often occurs by neglecting the needs of girls. This masculinist bias spurred two Black feminist thinkers to observe: "The struggle is defined as one to reclaim and redefine Black manhood. Ironically, this is also the point at which the politics and positions of some cultural nationalists, liberals and right-wing conservatives seem to converge" (Ransby and Matthews, 1993, 60).

While some African-American women criticize the sexual politics that accompanies intersecting oppressions, even fewer have directly challenged Black men who accept prevailing notions of both Black and White masculinity (Wallace 1978). Until the watershed event of Anita Hill's 1992 public testimony against Clarence Thomas, the blues tradition provided the most consistent and long-standing text of Black women who demand that Black men "change their ways." Both then and now, songs often encourage Black men to define new types of relationships. In "Do Right Woman—Do Right Man," when Aretha Franklin (1967) sings that a woman is only human and is not a plaything but is flesh and blood just like a man, she echoes Sojourner Truth's claim that women and men are equally human. Aretha sings about knowing that she's living in a "man's world" but she encourages her man not to "prove" that he's a man by using or abusing her. As long as she and her man are together, she wants him to show some "respect" for her. Her position is clear—if he wants a "do right, all night woman," he's got to be a "do right, all night man." Aretha challenges African-American men to reject the prevailing sexual politics that posit "it's a man's world" in order to be a "do right man." By showing Black women respect and being an "all night" man—one who is faithful, financially reliable, and sexually expressive—Black men can have a relationship with a "do right woman."

Within the corpus of their works, some Black women hip-hop artists echo Aretha's challenge. In her song "Unity," Queen Latifah asks for a man who knows how to respect a woman. For those who need more details, Salt 'n' Pepa's anthem "Whatta Man" on *Very Necessary* (1993) identifies the qualities of a "mighty good man." Recognizing that "good men are hard to find," the song aspires to "give respect to the men who made a difference." The list of qualities is clear. A good man is one who makes a woman laugh, does not run around with other women, has a good body, is a good lover, can hold a decent conversation, and "spends time with his kids when he can." He always has his woman's "back" when she needs him, and he's "never disrespectful 'cause his momma taught him that."

Many Black men have not taken kindly to these requests. Black men's

response to the publications of Black women writers illustrate these reactions. Apparently forgetting the norms of racial solidarity that they long expected Black women to show for Black men's achievements, many men resented the success of Black women's writers. Explaining this situation, Black literary critic Calvin Hernton describes how this antagonistic posture stems from Black men's acceptance of prevailing sexual politics:

> Too often Black men have a philosophy of manhood that relegates women to the back burner. Therefore it is perceived as an offense for black women to struggle on their own, let alone achieve something independently. Thus, no matter how original, beautiful, and formidable the works of black women writers might be, black men become "offended" if such works bear the slightest criticism of them, or if the women receive recognition from other women, especially from the white literary establishment. They do not behave as though something of value has been added to the annals of black literature. Rather, they behave as though something has been subtracted, not only from the literature, but from the entire race, and specifically, from *them*. (Hernton 1985, 6)

Whereas some men merely grumble at no longer having their perceived needs always come first, other men interpret Black women's success as a direct attack on them. If the sexual politics that foster these reactions remain unexamined, as Lisa Jones succinctly states, the potential damage done to both Black women and Black men is great: "Between rappers turning 'ho' into a national chant and [the movie *Waiting to*] *Exhale* telling African Americans that our real problem is the shortage of brothers who are both well hung and well paid, I'm getting to think that all we can offer each other as black women and men is genitalia and the paycheck" (Jones 1994, 267).

Avoiding being reduced to the "genitalia and the paycheck" requires developing a comprehensive analysis of how prevailing sexual politics influences Black heterosexual love relationships. In developing this analysis, however, it is equally important to keep in mind the analytical distinction between the interpersonal domain of power where men and women as individuals interact, and how broader overarching structures of power operate to encourage these individual outcomes. For example, womanist thinker Geneva Smitherman maintains this distinction when pressed to describe some Black men's treatment of Black women. In responding to claims that Black men are sexist, she contends, "This is not to argue that Black men don't display sexist attitudes. Of course. Such attitudes are in the very fiber of American society; they have infected us all—including women. However, the practice of patriarchy, the subordination of women—and men—requires power, on a grand scale, and control over the nation's institutions. Sorry, but the Brothers ain't there" (Smitherman 1996, 105). Black men may not be in corporate boardrooms, and thus cannot be blamed for actions aimed at protecting the privileges associated with White masculinity (Ferber 1998). But at

the same time the "Brothers" most certainly are in Black women's homes. They *can* be held accountable, no matter how badly treated they may be under racial oppression, for how they treat Black women, children, and each other.

The antagonism that many African-American women and men feel and express toward one another reflects the contradictions characterizing Black masculinity and Black femininity within prevailing U.S. sexual politics. Racialized heterosexism objectifies both Black men and Black women. Thus, when African-American men see Black women as little more than mammies, matriarchs, or "hoochies," or even if they insist on placing African-American women on the same queenly pedestal reserved for White women, they objectify not only Black women but themselves (Gardner 1980). Conversely, when Black women demand of their partners, "Show me the money," they not only reduce Black men to a measure of their financial worth, but reinscribe controlling images of themselves as materialistic "bitches." The challenge lies in disrupting Eurocentric scripts of Black masculinity and Black femininity, not just to receive better treatment for oneself, but to undermine and change prevailing sexual politics.

In her article "Sensuous Sapphires: A Study of the Social Construction of Black Female Sexuality," Annecka Marshall (1994) explores how Black women perceived the controlling images applied to them and how they negotiated those images in shaping their sexual selves. The women in her study saw the limitations of Eurocentric scripts of Black femininity concerning sexuality, and reported diverse strategies in dealing with them. While some women reject all of the stereotypes, they see no way of avoiding them. Some feel that they must choose between being seen as asexual mothers or hypersexual whores. Others recognize the power that being seen as "sensuous sapphires" has in how others see them, and try to exempt themselves from the category. By claiming that it's the other Black women who are "sapphires," not them, they may receive individual relief, but they leave the images themselves intact. Marshall also reports a range of coping strategies where women aim to challenge the very foundations of the images themselves.

Until recently, many heterosexual Black men have remained either unable to challenge controlling images of Black masculinity or have been unwilling to try.[2] Sadly, believing in dominant notions of Black masculinity and Black femininity, they engage in controlling behaviors that often go unrecognized as such. U.S. Black men encounter contradictory expectations concerning Black manhood. On the one hand, Black men have been constructed as sexually violent rapists, as brutes, and as irresponsible boys who fail to marry the mothers of their children and financially support their children. Whereas Black men under slavery knew that they were not these things, their powerlessness denied them the trappings of manhood as defined by White propertied men. Emancipation brought with it Black male outrage at the treatment of Black women under slavery. A good deal of Black male energy went into protecting Black women from both economic and sexual exploitation. Given this history, efforts by Black men to protect Black

women become valued. Many Black women want protection. Sonsyrea Tate, who was raised within the Nation of Islam, ultimately rejected the strict gender norms that routinely elevated boys above girls. But Tate also describes how protected she felt within the Nation: "While I was growing up, the Fruit of Islam, the security unit of the Nation of Islam, had made me, a small black child, feel safer than I felt at any other time in America" (Tate 1997, 4–5).

Barbara Omolade argues that "protecting black women was the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy" (1994, 13). If Omolade is correct, then this important choice to protect Black women, for many men, became harnessed to ideologies of Black masculinity in such a way that Black manhood became dependent on Black women's willingness to accept protection. Within this version of masculinity, a slippery slope emerges between *protecting* Black women and *controlling* them. This control is often masked, all in defense of widespread beliefs that Black men must be in charge in order to regain their lost manhood. As Paula Giddings points out, "It is men, not women, who control the sociosexual and professional relationships in the black community. Among other notions that must be dispensed with is the weak male/strong female patriarchal paradigm that clouds so much of our thinking about ourselves" (Giddings 1992, 463).

This general climate fosters a situation where some Black women feel that they must subordinate their needs to those of Black men in order to help Black men regain and retain their manhood. Yet at the same time, Black women's daily struggles for survival encourage patterns of self-reliance and self-valuation that benefit not just Black women, but men and children as well. As Barbara Omolade points out, "A black woman could not be completely controlled and defined by her own men, for she had already learned to manage and resist the advances of white men" (1994, 16). Tensions characterizing Black women's necessary self-reliance joined with our bona fide need for protection, as well as those characterizing Black men's desire to protect Black women juxtaposed to their admiration and resentment of Black women's assertiveness and independence, result in a complicated love and trouble tradition.

Failure to challenge an overall climate that not only defines Black masculinity in terms of Black men's ability to "own" and "control" their women, and Black femininity in terms of Black women's ability to help U.S. Black men feel like men, can foster African-American women's abuse. Black men who feel that they cannot be men unless they are in charge can be highly threatened by assertive Black women, especially those in their own households. In *The Color Purple,* Alice Walker's portrayal of Mister, a Black man who abuses his wife, Celie, explores the coexistence of love and trouble in African-American communities generally, and in Black men specifically:

> At the root of the denial of easily observable and heavily documented sexist brutality in the black community—the assertion that black men don't act like Mister, and if they do, they're justified by the pressure they're

> under as black men in a white society—is our deep, painful refusal to accept the fact that we are not only descendants of slaves, but we are also the descendants of slave *owners*. And that just as we have had to struggle to rid ourselves of slavish behaviors we must as ruthlessly eradicate any desire to be mistress or "master." (1989, 80)

Those Black men who wish to become "master" by fulfilling traditional definitions of masculinity—White, prosperous, and in charge—and who are blocked from doing so can become dangerous to those closest to them (Asbury 1987).

Rethinking relationships such as these has garnered increasing attention in Black feminist thought (E. White 1985). Refusing to reduce Black men's abuse to individualistic, psychological flaws, Black feminist analyses are characterized by careful attention to how intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality provide the backdrop for Black heterosexual love relationships (White 1985). Angela Davis contends, "We cannot grasp the true nature of sexual assault without situating it within its larger sociopolitical context" (1989, 37). Author Gayl Jones concurs: "It's important for me to clarify . . . relationships in *situation*, rather than to have some theory of the way men are with women" (Harper 1979, 356). In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove is a study in emotional abuse. Morrison portrays the internalized oppression that can affect a child who experiences daily assaults on her sense of self. Pecola's family is the immediate source of her pain, but Morrison also exposes the role of the larger community in condoning Pecola's victimization. In her choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide,* Ntozake Shange (1975) creates the character Beau Willie Brown, a man who abuses his lover, Crystal, and who kills their two young children. Rather than blaming Beau Willie Brown as the source of Crystal's oppression, Shange considers how the situation of "no air"—in this case, the lack of opportunities for both individuals—stifles the humanity of both Crystal and Beau Willie Brown.

Investigating the problems caused by abusive Black men often exposes Black women intellectuals to criticism. Alice Walker's treatment of male violence in works such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *The Color Purple* (1982) attracted censure. Even though Ntozake Shange's choreopoem is about Black women, one criticism leveled at her work is its purportedly negative portrayal of Black men (Staples 1979). Particularly troubling to some critics is the depiction of Beau Willie Brown. In an interview, Claudia Tate asked Ntozake Shange, "Why did you have to tell about Beau Willie Brown?" In this question Tate invokes the bond of family secrecy that often pervades dysfunctional families because she wants to know why Shange violated the African-American community's collective family "secret." Shange's answer is revealing: "I refuse to be a part of this conspiracy of silence. I will not do it. So that's why I wrote about Beau Willie Brown. I'm tired of living lies" (Tate 1983, 158–59).

This "conspiracy of silence" about Black men's physical and emotional abuse of Black women parallels Black women's silences about the politics of sexuality

in general. Both silences stem from a larger system of legitimated, routinized violence targeted toward Black women and, via silence, both work to reinscribe social hierarchies (Richie 1996; Collins 1998d). Because hegemonic ideologies make everyday violence against Black women appear so routine, some women perceive neither themselves nor those around them as victims. Sara Brooks's husband first assaulted her when she was pregnant, once threw her out of a window, and often called her his "Goddam knock box." Despite his excessive violence, she considered his behavior routine: "If I tried to talk to him he'd hit me so hard with his hands till I'd see stars. Slap me, and what he slap me for, I don't know. . . . My husband would slap me and then go off to his woman's house. That's the way life was" (Simonsen 1986, 162). Ostensibly positive images of Black women make some women more likely to accept domestic violence as routine (E. White 1985). Many African-American women have had to exhibit independence and self-reliance to ensure their own survival and that of their loved ones. But this image of the self-reliant Black woman can be troublesome for women in violent relationships. When an abused woman like Sara Brooks believes that "strength and independence are expected of her, she may be more reluctant to call attention to her situation, feeling that she should be able to handle it on her own; she may deny the seriousness of her situation" (Asbury 1987, 101).

Abused women, particularly those bearing the invisible scars of emotional abuse, are often silenced by the image of the "superstrong" Black woman (Richie 1996). But according to Audre Lorde, sexual violence against Black women is "a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear" (1984, 120). To Lorde, such violence is exacerbated by racism and powerlessness such that "violence against Black women and children often becomes a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured. But these woman-hating acts are rarely discussed as crimes against Black women" (p. 120). By making visible the pain the survivors feel, Black feminist intellectuals like Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and Ntozake Shange challenge the alleged "rationality" of this particular system of control and rearticulate it as violence.

One of the best Black feminist analyses of domestic violence is found in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). In the following passage Hurston recounts how Tea Cake responded to a threat that another man would win the affections of Janie:

> Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. "Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man," Sop-de-Bottom told him. "Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither. Take some uh dese ol' rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn't tell you ever hit 'em. . . . Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don't even holler. She jus' cries, eh Tea Cake?" (Hurston 1937, 121)

Hurston's work can be read as a Black feminist analysis of the sexualized violence that many Black women encounter in their deepest love relationships. Tea Cake and Sop-de-Bottom see women as commodities, property that they can whip to "reassure their possession." Janie is not a person; she is objectified as something owned by Tea Cake. Even if a man loves a woman, as is clearly the case of Tea Cake and Janie, the threat of competition from another male is enough to develop an "awful fear" that Janie will choose another man and thus deem him less manly than his competitors. Whipping Janie reassured Tea Cake that she was his. The conversation between the two men is also revealing. Images of color and beauty pervade their conversation. Sop-de-Bottom is envious because he can "see every place" that Tea Cake hit her and that she was passive and did not resist like the rest of the "rusty black women." Tea Cake and Sop-de-Bottom have accepted Eurocentric gender ideology concerning masculinity and femininity and have used force to maintain it. Furthermore, Janie's transgression was the potential to become unfaithful, the possibility to be sexually promiscuous, to become a whore. Finally, the violence occurs in an intimate relationship where love is present. This incident shows the process by which power as domination—in this case gender oppression structured through Eurocentric gender ideology and class oppression reflected in the objectification and commodification of Janie—has managed to annex the basic power of the erotic in Janie and Tea Cake's relationship. Tea Cake does not want to beat Janie, but he does because he *feels*, not thinks, he must.[3] Their relationship represents the linking of sexuality and power, the potential for domination within sexualized love relationships, and the potential for using the erotic, their love for each other, as a catalyst for change.

Black Women Alone

Many Black women want loving sexual relationships with Black men, but instead end up alone. Black men may be the closest to Black women, and thus receive the lion's share of the blame for all the daily ways that Black women are caused to feel less worthy, yet this societal judgment and rejection of Black women permeates the entire culture. As Karla Holloway points out, "the tragic loneliness black women consistently face as we stand before judgmental others—sometimes white, but sometimes black; sometimes male, but sometimes female—demands that we have some wisdom, experience, and some passion with which to combat this abuse" (1995, 38). For African-American women, rejection by Whites is one thing—rejection by Black men is entirely another. In coping with the loneliness of not finding Black male partners, "wisdom, experience, and some passion" become important weapons.

This aloneness, the sense that one is at the bottom of the scale of desirability, fosters divergent reactions among African-American women. Many continue to

express hope that one day they will be married to a good Black man and go on with their lives. Some pour their energies into Black motherhood, a respected and important part of Black civil society. Black single mothers are not as looked down upon in Black civil society, because most African-American women know that Black men are hard to find. The intensity of their ties with their children meshes with long-standing belief systems that value motherhood. However, despite the importance of this choice, for many, it can substitute for the lack of steady, sexualized love relationships in their lives. The character of Gloria in Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) typifies this choice of giving up hope that one will ever be lovable enough to find Salt 'n' Pepa's (1993) "mighty good man." Gloria pours all of her energies into raising her son. She cooks for him, gains weight, and never dates for fear of compromising the respectability she has carved out within the stigma attached to unmarried Black mothers. Yet Gloria confronts a crisis when her son becomes sexually active and is old enough to leave home. He is becoming a man and can no longer be "her man." MacMillan provides a storybook resolution to Gloria's situation. A widower moves in across the street, becomes captivated with Gloria, and helps her learn to love herself as a sexual being. Real life is rarely this forgiving.

Dealing with the reality that Black men reject them leads other Black women to become devoted to careers. Eventually, these women become the middle-class, respectable, often childless Black ladies that Wahneema Lubiano (1992) argues Anita Hill symbolizes. Despite the often remarkable achievement of middle-class Black women, the pain many experience on the way to middle-class respectability, while masked by achievement, is no less real. Gloria Wade-Gayles describes the anger and frustration of the Black women college students in her classes when they realize the breadth of rejection. Many of her students spend all four years of their college lives without a single romantic relationship, Wade-Gayles observes. Conversations about this loneliness reveal the anger, sadness, and sorrow that many young Black women feel when living through rejection of this magnitude. In a nutshell, Black men pick non-Black women over them, and for many, it hurts. Wade-Gayles reaches back into her own experiences to try to understand this situation: "The pain we experience as black teenagers follows many of us into adulthood, and, if we are professional black women, it follows with a vengeance. As a colleague in an eastern school explained our situation, 'Black men don't want us as mates because we are independent; white men, because we are black'" (Wade-Gayles 1996, 106)

In this context, heterosexual Black women become competitors, most searching for the elusive Black male, with many resenting the White women who naively claim them. These efforts to grapple with societal rejection that emerge from these sexual politics cut across age and class. As Wade-Gayles points out, "Teenagers know about athletes and entertainers; we know about politicians and scholars. Teenagers see faces; we see symbols that, in our opinion, spin the image of white women to the rhythm of symphonic chords" (Wade-Gayles 1996, 106–107).

In this context of what is perceived as widespread rejection by Black men, often in favor of White women, African-American women's relationships with Whites take on a certain intensity. On the one hand, antagonism can characterize relationships between Black and White women, especially those who appear blissfully unaware of the sexual politics that privileges White skin. Despite claims of shared sisterhood, heterosexual women remain competitors in a competition that many White women do not even know they have entered. "White men use different forms of enforcing oppression of white women and of women of Color," argues Chicana scholar Aida Hurtado. "As a consequence, these groups of women have different political responses and skills, and at times these differences cause the two groups to clash" (1989, 843). On the other hand, given the culpability of White men in creating and maintaining these sexual politics, Black women remain reluctant to love White men. Constrained by social norms that deem us unworthy of White men and norms of Black civil society that identify Black women who cross the color line as traitors to the race, many Black women remain alone.

This speaks to the double standard within Black civil society concerning interracial, heterosexual love relationships. For Black women the historical relationship with White men has been one of legal but not sexual rejection: Propertied White men have exploited, objectified, and refused to marry African-American women and have held out trappings of power to their poorer brothers who endorse this ideology. The relationships between Black women and White men have long been constrained by the legacy of Black women's sexual abuse by White men and the unresolved tensions this creates. Traditionally, freedom for Black women has meant freedom *from* White men, not the freedom to choose White men as lovers and friends. Black women who have willingly chosen White male friends and lovers have been severely chastised in African-American communities for selling out the "race." Or they are accused of being like prostitutes, demeaning themselves by willingly using White men for their own financial or social gain.

Given the history of sexual abuse of Black women by White men, individual Black women who choose White partners become reminders of a difficult history for Black women as a collectivity. Such individual liaisons aggravate a collective sore spot because they recall historical master/slave relationships. Any sexual encounters between two parties where one has so much control over the other could never be fully consensual, even if the slave appeared to agree. Structural power differences of this magnitude limit the subordinate's power to give free consent or refusal. Controlling images such as jezebel are created to mask just this power differential and provide the illusion of consent. At the same time, even under slavery, to characterize interracial sex purely in terms of the victimization of Black women would be a distortion, because such depictions strip Black women of agency. Many Black women successfully resisted sexual assault while others cut bargains with their masters. More difficult to deal with, however, is the

fact that even within these power differentials, genuine affection characterized some sexual relationships between Black women and White men (d'Emilio and Freedman 1988, 100–104).

This history of sexual abuse contributes to a contemporary double standard where Black women who date and marry White men are often accused of losing their Black identity. Within this context, Black women who do engage in relationships with White men encounter Black community norms that question their commitment to Blackness. A 20-year-old student participant in Annecka Marshall's (1994) study of how British Black women construct sexuality describes her own experiences with "mixed race" relationships as positive. But she also recognizes the double standard that is often applied to crossing the color line: "It's more acceptable in the Black community for Black men to go out with white women than for Black women to go out with white men. It's all about control and power. A Black man is seen as the one who controls the relationship and so his 'race' isn't being downtrodden and trampled. But if a Black women does the same thing she is being submissive" (p. 119).

Relationships among U.S. Black women and U.S. White women demonstrate a similar complexity. Because White men have not married Black women, in large part due to laws against miscegenation designed to render the children of unions between White men and Black women propertyless (d'Emilio and Freedman 1988, 106), few delusions of enjoying the privileges attached to White male power have existed among Black women. In contrast, White women have been offered a share of White male power, but at the cost of participating in their own subordination. "Sometimes I really feel more sorrier for the white woman than I feel for ourselves because she been caught up in this thing, caught up feeling very special," observes Fannie Lou Hamer (Lerner 1972, 610). Thus even though "white women, as a group, are subordinated through seduction, women of Color, as a group, through rejection" (Hurtado 1989, 844), many White women appear unwilling to relinquish the benefits they accrue. This is the view of Tina, a Black woman in Minneapolis, whose White coworker routinely shared the details of her many sexual liaisons with Black men. Unconvinced that her coworker could be so ignorant of Black women's issues in finding men to date and marry, Tina rejected the view that White women are "racial innocents." She asked, "What stake would she have in dismantling a pecking order of femininity that puts her at the top?" (Jones 1994, 255).

This historical legacy of rejection and seduction frames relationships between Black and White women. Black women often express anger and bitterness against White women for their history of excusing the transgressions of their sons, husbands, and fathers. In her diary a slaveholder described White women's widespread predilection to ignore White men's actions:

> Under slavery, we live surrounded by prostitutes. . . . Who thinks any worse of a negro or mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name? God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system. . . . Like the patriarchs of old,

> our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think drop from the clouds. (Lerner 1972, 51)

If White women under slavery could ignore transgressions of this magnitude, contemporary White women can more easily do the same.

For many African-American women, far too few White women are willing to acknowledge—let alone challenge—the actions of White men because they have benefited from them. Fannie Lou Hamer analyzes White women's culpability in Black women's subordination: "You've been caught up in this thing because, you know, you worked my grandmother, and after that you worked my mother, and then finally you got hold of me. And you really thought . . . you thought that you was *more* because you was a woman, and especially a white woman, you had this kind of angel feeling that you were untouchable" (Lerner 1972, 610). White women's inability to acknowledge how racism privileges them reflects the relationship that they have to White male power. "I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege," argues feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh, "just as males are taught not to recognize male privilege" (1988, 1). McIntosh describes her own struggles with learning to see how she had been privileged: "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (p. 1).

One manifestation of White women's privilege is the seeming naiveté many heterosexual White women have concerning how Black women perceive White women's sexualized love relationships with Black men. In *Dessa Rose,* Nathan, a Black slave, and Rufel, a White woman on whose land they both live, have sexual relations. Even though Dessa, a Black woman, is not romantically attracted to Nathan, she deeply resents his behavior:

> White folks had taken everything in the world from me except my baby and my life and they had tried to take them. And to see him, who had helped to save me, had friended with me through so much of it, laying up, wallowing in what had hurt me so—I didn't feel that nothing I could say would tell him what that pain was like. And I didn't feel like it was on me to splain why he shouldn't be messing with no white woman; I thought it was on him to say why he was doing it. (Williams 1986, 186)

Like many African-American women, Dessa sees Black male admiration for White women as a rejection of her. She asks, "Had he really wanted me to be like Mistress, I wondered, like Miz Ruint, that doughy skin and slippery hair? Was *that* what they wanted?" (Williams 1986, 199).

The numbers of U.S. Black men who "want" White women has risen since the 1960s, in the context of two developments. For one, the elimination of de

jure (but not de facto) racial segregation has brought Blacks and Whites in close contact in schools and job sites, often as equals. In particular, the laws against miscegenation that forbade interracial marriage passed by Southern states during the 1860s were abolished. When it comes to Black men and White women, legally at least, the *Driving Miss Daisy* days are done. At the same time, changes in sexual attitudes challenged long-standing arrangements where, according to Paula Giddings, "sex was the principle around which wholesale segregation and discrimination was organized with the ultimate objective of preventing intermarriage. The sexual revolution . . . separated sexuality from reproduction, and so diluted the ideas about purity—moral, racial, and physical" (Giddings 1995, 424). These changing social conditions allowed Black male desire for White women as well as White female desire for Black men to be expressed without the censure afforded Nathan and Rufel's relationship.

The birth of biracial or mixed-race children speaks to the reality of these sexualized love relationships between Black men and White women. Historically, mixed-race children were accepted into a segregated Black civil society because everyone knew that such children should not be held accountable for the circumstances of their conception and birth. More often though, biracial and mixed-race children were the offspring of Black mothers and, as such, participated in Black civil society much as their mothers did. Currently, however, the birth of biracial and mixed-race children to so many White mothers raises new questions for African-American women. Even in the face of rejection by Black men that leaves so many without partners, ironically, Black women remain called upon to accept and love the mixed-race children born to their brothers, friends, and relatives. By being the Black mothers that these children do not have, these women are expected to help raise biracial children who at the same time often represent tangible reminders of their own rejection.

Currently, much more is known about how White women negotiate these new relationships with their biracial children than we do about either Black men's participation in being a parent to these children or the Black women who are so often called upon to help White mothers raise them. What does appear in accounts of children are reports of how important their Black relatives can be in helping them understand and cope with racism (see, e.g., Jones 1994).

Biracial Black women who recognize these contradictions struggle with this situation. On the one hand, the biracial girlchild's White mother positions her closer to Whiteness, and this physical beauty often makes her more attractive to many Black men. But on the other, she joins the ranks of Black women and thus inherits the history of rejection. In her essay titled "Mamas White," Lisa Jones describes her reactions to seeing White female and Black male couples and thus taps some of the complexities that accompany these new relationships: "Clearly I was saying that these duos tangle up my emotions; I look at them as a child of an interracial marriage, but also as a black woman who has witnessed the market value put on white femininity" (Jones 1994, 30). Rejecting yet another form

of seduction, the seeming benefits of a mixed-race identity as a haven within a society that derogates Blackness, Jones recognizes the difficulties if not impossibility of stepping outside racial categories by pretending that they simply don't apply. Putting brackets around the term "Black woman" and pointing out its socially constructed nature does not erase the fact of living as a Black woman and all that entails. By simultaneously problematizing and accepting these relationships, Jones points the way toward a new analysis.

No matter how much in love Black men and White women may be, such couples will continue to attract Black women's attention. Gloria Wade-Gayles describes the power that the reality of these couples has for many African-American women:

> We see them, and we feel abandoned. We feel abandoned because we have been abandoned in so many ways, by so many people, and for so many centuries. We are the group of women furthest removed from the concept of beauty and femininity which invades every spot on the planet, and, as a result, we are taught not to like ourselves, or, as my student said, not to believe that we can ever do enough or be enough to be loved and desired. The truth is we experience a pain unique to us as a group when black men marry white women and even when they don't. It is a pain our mothers knew and their mothers before them. A pain passed on from generation to generation because the circumstances that create the pain have remained unchanged (Wade-Gayles 1996, 110).

Moving through this pain requires more than blaming White women for allegedly taking Black men, or Black men for rejecting us. It demands changing the "circumstances that create the pain."

Black Women and Erotic Autonomy

Changing the circumstances that create the pain requires developing an analysis of Black women's deep love relationships of all sorts. As Evelynn Hammonds points out, "mirroring as a way of negating a legacy of silence needs to be explored in much greater depth than it has been to date by black feminist theorists" (1997, 179). Karla Holloway suggests that one important first step occurs at an "essential moment when black women must acknowledge the powerful impact of our physical appearance. How we look is a factor in what happens to us" (1995, 36). Holloway argues that via constructions of Black women's sexuality, systems of oppression hold up distorted mirrors of a "public image" through which Black women learn to view ourselves. Holloway counsels Black women to disable "mirrored reflection of a prejudicial gaze" via a "reflexive, self-mediated vision of our bodies" (45). When Black women learn to hold up new "mirrors" to one another that enable us to see and love one another for who we really are, new possibilities for empowerment via deep love can emerge.

Theoretically, this sounds good, but practically, Black women learning to provide mirrors for one another that enable us to love one another comes face to face with the possible eroticization of such love. When it comes to issues of sexuality, mirroring reveals how the sharing required to support and love one another can find erotic expression. If sexuality constitutes a dimension of expressed love, then, for many Black women, loving Black women means loving them sexually. This recognition that loving oneself and loving Black women may find erotic or sexual expression can be threatening. The stigmatization of lesbian relationships seems designed to contain this threat.

In this sense, Black lesbian relationships are not only threatening to intersecting systems of oppression, they can be highly threatening to heterosexual African-American women's already assaulted sense of self. Certainly the homophobia expressed by many Black heterosexual women is influenced, in part, by accepting societal beliefs about lesbians. For Black women who have already been labeled the Other by virtue of race and gender, the threat of being labeled a lesbian can have a chilling effect on Black women's ideas and on our relationships with one another. In speculating about why so many competent Black women writers and reviewers have avoided examining lesbianism, Ann Allen Shockley suggests that "the fear of being labeled a Lesbian, whether they were one or not" (1983, 84), has been a major deterrent.

The issues, however, may go much deeper. "I think the reason that Black women are so homophobic," suggests Barbara Smith, "is that attraction-repulsion thing. They have to speak out vociferously against lesbianism because if they don't they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women" (Smith and Smith 1981, 124). Shockley agrees: "Most black women feared and abhorred Lesbians more than rape—perhaps because of the fear bred from their deep inward potentiality for Lesbianism" (1974, 31–32). In the same sense that men who accept Eurocentric notions of masculinity fear and deny the dimensions of themselves that they associate with femininity—for example, interpreting male expressiveness as being weak and unmanly (Hoch 1979)—avowedly heterosexual Black women may suppress their own strong feelings for other Black women for fear of being stigmatized as lesbians. Similarly, in the way that male domination of women embodies men's fears about their own masculinity, Black heterosexual women's treatment of Black lesbians reflects fears that all African-American women are essentially the same. Yet, as Audre Lorde points out, "in the same way that the existence of the self-defined Black woman is no threat to the self-defined Black man, the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way" (1984, 49).

Black lesbian relationships pose little threat to "self-defined" Black men and women secure in their sexualities. But loving relationships among Black women do pose a tremendous threat to systems of intersecting oppressions. How dare these women love one another in a context that deems Black women as a collec-

tivity so unlovable and devalued? The treatment of Black lesbians reveals how the sexual expression of all Black women becomes regulated within intersecting systems of oppression. As a specific site of intersectionality, Black lesbian relationships constitute relationships among the ultimate Other. Black lesbians are not White, male, or heterosexual and generally are not affluent. As such they represent the antithesis of Audre Lorde's "mythical norm" and become the standard by which other groups measure their own so-called normality and self-worth. Sexual politics functions smoothly only if sexual nonconformity is kept invisible or is punished if it becomes visible. "By being sexually independent of men, lesbians, by their very existence, call into question society's definition of woman at its deepest level," observes Barbara Christian (1985, 199). Visible Black lesbians challenge the mythical norm that the best people are White, male, rich, and heterosexual. In doing so lesbians generate anxiety, discomfort, and a challenge to the dominant group's control of power and sexuality on the interpersonal level (Vance 1984).

For African-American women, taking seriously the idea of generating loving "mirrors" for one another requires taking on all of the "isms" that keep Black women down, including heterosexism. It means moving beyond the stigmatization of Black heterosexual women as jezebels—the sexual deviants *inside* an assumed heterosexuality—and of Black lesbians, whose homosexuality labels them sexual deviants *outside* heterosexuality. In crafting such an argument, Evelynn Hammonds is one of many who argues for a "different level of engagement between black heterosexual and black lesbian women as the basis for the development of a black feminist praxis that articulates the ways in which invisibility, otherness, and stigma are produced and re-produced on black women's bodies" (Hammonds 1997, 181–82). Examining these connections in order to explore what M. Jacqui Alexander (1997) describes as *erotic autonomy* may provide space to think and do something new.

Alexander suggests that women's sexual agency or erotic autonomy has been threatening to a series of social institutions. In particular, the prostitute and the lesbian have historically functioned as the major symbols of threat. Both sets of women reject the heterosexual nuclear family upon which so many social institutions rely for meaning. As a result, "the categories lesbian and prostitute now function together . . . as outlaw, operating outside the boundaries of law and, therefore, poised to be disciplined and punished within it" (Alexander 1997, 65). Alexander examines how this erotic autonomy becomes suppressed within the Bahamian state. Yet her arguments contain important insights for U.S. Black women where the need exists to develop an erotic autonomy that does three things.

First, it must help U.S. Black women reject the dual stigma applied to Black heterosexual women as "hoochies" and to Black lesbians as sexual deviants. Recognizing how heterosexual and lesbian sexualities are both stigmatized within an overarching heterosexism and how this dual stigmatization has long been

important in shoring up intersecting oppressions should help identify practices within Black civil society that are harmful to Black women as a collectivity. Evelynn Hammonds suggests that within the historical legacy of silences concerning Black women's sexuality, certain expressions of Black female sexuality will be rendered as dangerous, for individuals and for the group. Within this logic, a culture of dissemblance that counsels a self-imposed silence concerning Black women's sexuality makes it acceptable for some heterosexual Black women to cast both openly sensual heterosexual Black women and Black lesbians as "traitors" to the race. This censure operates in much the same way as Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas did. The continuation of a culture of dissemblance explains why Black heterosexual women who take control of their sexuality in public are often censured. When they sing of Black women's sensuality and erotic desires in public, the Black blues women of the 1920s and hip-hop group Salt 'N' Pepa's music both become cast as inappropriate public expressions of Black female sexuality. This culture of dissemblance might also explain why Black lesbians, "whose 'deviant' sexuality is framed within an already existing deviant sexuality—have been wary of embracing the status of 'traitor,' and the potential loss of community such an embrace engenders" (Hammonds 1997, 181).

A second component of moving toward erotic autonomy involves redefining beauty in ways that include Black women. New understandings of beauty would necessarily alter the types of mirrors held up to Black women to judge Black women's beauty. Redefining beauty requires learning to see African-American women who have Black African features as being capable of beauty. Proclaiming Black women "beautiful" and White women "ugly" merely replaces one set of controlling images with another and fails to challenge Eurocentric masculinist aesthetics. This is simply binary thinking in reverse: In order for one individual to be judged beautiful, another individual—the Other—must be deemed ugly. Dessa Rose's view of Miz Ruint as having "doughy skin and slippery hair" illustrates one Black woman's attempt to protect herself from a derogated Blackness by reversing the categories of beauty. Creating an alternative Black feminist aesthetic involves, instead, rejecting binary thinking altogether.

In this endeavor, African-American women can draw on African-derived aesthetics (Gayle 1971; Walton 1971) that potentially free women from standards of ornamental beauty.[4] Though such aesthetics are present in music (Sidran 1971; Cone 1972), dance (Asante 1990), and language (Smitherman 1977; Kochman 1981), quilt making offers a suggestive model for a Black feminist aesthetic that might move Black women and others toward erotic autonomy. African-American women quilt makers do not seem interested in a uniform color scheme but use several methods of playing with colors to create unpredictability and movement (Wahlman and Scully 1983 in Brown 1989, 922). For example, a strong color may be juxtaposed with another strong color, or with a weak one. Contrast is used to structure or organize. Overall, the symmetry in

African-American quilts does not come from uniformity as it does in Euro-American quilts. Rather, symmetry comes through diversity. Nikki Giovanni points out that quilts are traditionally formed from scraps. "Quilters teach there is no such thing as waste," she observes, "only that for which we currently see no purpose" (1988, 89).

This dual emphasis on beauty occurring via individual uniqueness juxtaposed in a community setting and on the importance of creating functional beauty from the scraps of everyday life offers a powerful alternative to Eurocentric aesthetics. African-derived notions of diversity in community and functional beauty potentially heal many of the binaries that underlie Western social thought. From African-influenced perspectives, women's beauty is not based solely on physical criteria because mind, spirit, and body are not conceptualized as separate, oppositional spheres. Instead, all are central in aesthetic assessments of individuals and their creations. Beauty is functional in that it has no meaning independent of the group. Deviating from the group "norm" is not rewarded as "beauty." Instead, participating in the group and being a functioning individual who strives for harmony is key to assessing an individual's beauty (Asante 1987). Moreover, participation is not based on conformity but instead is seen as individual uniqueness that enhances the overall "beauty" of the group. With such criteria, no individual is inherently beautiful because beauty is not a state of being. Instead beauty is a state of becoming. Just as all African-American women as well as all humans become capable of beauty, all can move toward erotic autonomy.

A final component of developing African-American women's erotic autonomy requires finding ways to stress that African-American women learn to see expressing love for one another as fundamental to resisting oppression. This component politicizes love and reclaims it from the individualized and trivialized place that it now occupies. Self-defined and publicly expressed Black women's love relationships, whether such relationships find sexual expression or not, constitute resistance. If members of the group on the bottom love one another and affirm one another's worth, then the entire system that assigns that group to the bottom becomes suspect.

Many Black women understand the power that maternal love has had in empowering them as individuals. Yet this power of deep love remains circumscribed in biological motherhood, biological sisterhood, sorority ties, and other similar socially approved relationships. As the next two chapters explore, this legitimated maternal love has spurred many Black women into more activist arenas and can be seen as an important dimension of U.S. Black feminism. Broadening the spectrum of Black women's loving relationships with one another, including those that find sexual expression, may move Black womanhood closer to reclaiming the power of deep love.

Love and Empowerment

"In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change" (Lorde 1984, 53). The ability of social practices such as pornography, prostitution, and rape to distort the private domain of Black women's love relationships with Black men, with Whites, and with one another typifies this process. The parallels between distortions of deep human feelings in racial oppression and of the distortions of the erotic in sexual oppression are striking. Analysts of the interpersonal dynamics of racism point out that Whites fear in Blacks those qualities they project onto Blacks that they most fear in themselves. By labeling Blacks as sexually animalistic and by dominating Blacks, Whites aim to repress these dimensions of their own inner being. When men dominate women and accuse them of being sexually passive, the act of domination, from pressured sexual intercourse to rape, reduces male anxiety about male impotence, the ultimate sexual passivity (Hoch 1979). Similarly, the suppression of gays and lesbians symbolizes the repression of strong feelings for members of one's own gender, feelings U.S. culture has sexualized and stigmatized within heterosexism. All of these emotions—the fact that Whites know that Blacks are human, the fact that men love women, and the fact that women have deep feelings for one another—must be distorted on the emotional level of the erotic in order for oppressive systems to endure. Sexuality in the individual, interpersonal domain of power becomes annexed by intersecting oppressions in the structural domain of power in order to ensure the smooth operation of domination.

Recognizing that corrupting and distorting basic feelings human beings have for one another lies at the heart of multiple systems of oppression opens up new possibilities for transformation and change. June Jordan (1981) explores this connection between embracing feeling and human empowerment: "As I think about anyone or any thing—whether history or literature or my father or political organizations or a poem or a film—as I seek to evaluate the potentiality, the life-supportive commitment/possibilities of anyone or any thing, the decisive question is, always, *where is the love?*" (p. 141).

Jordan's question touches a deep nerve in African-American social and ethical thought. In her work *Black Womanist Ethics,* Katie G. Cannon (1988) suggests that love, community, and justice are deeply intertwined in African-American ethics. Cannon examines the work of two prominent Black male theorists—Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.—and concludes that their ideas represent core values from which Black women draw strength. According to Thurman, love is the basis of community, and community is the arena for moral agency. Only love of self, love between individuals, and love of God can shape, empower, and sustain social change. Martin Luther King, Jr., gives greater significance in his ethics to the relationship of love and justice, suggesting that love is

active, dynamic, and determined and generates the motive and drive for justice. For both Thurman and King, everything moves toward community and the expression of love within the context of community. It is this version of love and community, argues Cannon, that stimulates a distinctive Black womanist ethics.

For June Jordan love begins with self-love and self-respect, actions that propel African-American women toward the self-determination and political activism essential for social justice. By grappling with this simple yet profound question, "Where is the love?" Black women resist multiple types of oppression. This question encourages all groups embedded in systems of domination to move toward a place where, as Toni Morrison's Paul D expresses it, "You could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well, now, *that* was freedom" (1987, 162).